

**Fragmented Spectatorship and Artistic
Beholding in
*The Red Badge of Courage***

John Kerkering
Loyola University Chicago

The word “behold” appears just once in *The Red Badge of Courage*, at the end of chapter 3: “Awakening from his trance of observation [the youth] turned and beheld the loud soldier” (28). The novel’s preferred terms for the act of beholding include observing, looking, gazing, seeing, and spectatorship (variants of which occur six times). But “beholding,” I will show, gets us to the crucial aesthetic issue of encountering art, as that issue has been provocatively discussed by critics Michael Fried and Walter Benn Michaels. Following their lead, I treat spectatorship in the novel as an allegory for artistic beholding—beholding an object, and more specifically, an art object. In reading the novel’s scenes of spectatorship allegorically—as scenes of artistic beholding—I am following the lead of Michael Fried in particular, whose well-known analysis of Crane’s “literary impressionism” treats many scenes in Crane’s oeuvre as figures for the “scene of writing” (1987, 117-18). My concern with *The Red Badge of Courage* in particular is to treat its instances of fragmented spectatorship as scenes of beholding and thus as scenes of art’s production and consumption more broadly.¹ My argument will be not only that we can and should read this fragmented spectatorship allegorically, as having implications for beholding artworks, but also that in doing so we get additional evidence, beyond that advanced by John Fagg in his 2009 study *On the Cusp: Stephen Crane, George Bellows, and Modernism*, for seeing Crane as a transitional figure to modernism, with its fundamental interest in, and anxiety about, how art objects are beheld. The overall argument, then, is that *The Red Badge of Courage* can and should be read as a heretofore-disguised aesthetic treatise exploring the nature and implications of artistic beholding.

In a footnote to his 2015 book *The Beauty of a Social Problem* Walter Benn Michaels summarizes how Michael Fried has recast our view of *The Red Badge of Courage*: “thinking of himself as trying above all to represent Civil War battles . . .

he [Crane] was really making visible . . . writing, not fighting” (189n2). Michaels’s phrase “writing, not fighting” gets to the core claim of Fried’s argument about Crane, an argument first set out twice in the 1980s and reprised just last year in Fried’s *What Was Literary Impressionism?* (14-16). In all of these locations Fried claims that Crane presents us with scenes of writing disguised as scenes of something else, like—in *The Red Badge of Courage*—fighting; we can see through the disguise if we interpret various thematic features as figurations of the writing scene itself and its process. When we do so (i.e., read for scenes of writing), Fried argues, we see not what Crane was conjuring in his imagination (fighting) but rather what he was beholding as he was marking out those imagined scenes, the smooth flow of ink across a decreasingly blank white page (writing). In this recasting (“writing, not fighting”) we get not Crane’s imagination but his immediate line of sight as paramount: Crane becomes not a visionary or “seer” but a viewer or “see-er,” a beholder, himself, of words—indeed, ink marks—on a page.

What I want to argue is that Fried’s insistence on what Michaels calls “writing, not fighting”—the insistence on what Crane beholds rather than what Crane imagines—has implications for the fragmentation that we see in spectatorship in the novel. By spectatorship’s fragmentation I mean the novel’s multiple points of view, its many acts of viewing, and its frequent references to vision. Examples of this perspectival fragmentation include Henry Fleming’s own vacillations between self-aggrandizement and self-contempt, the narrator’s practice of referring to Henry and his fellow soldiers by epithets (e.g., “the youth” and “the tattered man”) rather than the proper names employed by the soldiers themselves, the related practice of distinguishing the sophisticated language of the narrative’s exposition (including the narrator’s rendering of Henry’s inner thoughts) from the casual dialect and slang of the soldiers’ dialogue among themselves, the gap between Henry’s knowledge of his flight from battle and his concealment of that flight from his comrades (and the associated irony that his “red badge of courage” is indeed no such thing), and finally the contrast between scenes where Henry has become so immersed in battle as to have lost all perspective on its dangers and scenes

in which Henry views events from a seemingly disinterested distance, a view similar to that of his commanders.

To me, this fragmentation of spectatorship suggests that Crane isn't just thinking about what he himself beholds ("writing, not fighting"), as Fried argues, but that he's thinking about beholding more generally. On the one hand, such a claim isn't new; it's what critics have in mind when they call Crane an impressionist, which critics have been doing for over a century now, perhaps most notably in James Nagel's *Stephen Crane and Literary Impressionism* (1980) and, perhaps most recently, last year in Fried's *What Was Literary Impressionism?* (2018). On the other hand, my argument is different from the impressionist claim because what I'm suggesting that Crane is beholding, and wants us to behold, is art—or rather, the coming into being of art objects, of representation. This is indeed the larger implication of Fried's scenes of writing: when we think about the writing Crane was beholding (and not the fighting he was imagining), we encounter, Fried argues (along with Michaels), a question about writing's ontology: is it writing, or is it just ink marks on a page? Crane writes so slowly and deliberately that he beholds the one become the other; he beholds himself carry out the project of making ink become representation, which is the project central to the scene of writing.

This idea of a project at the scene of writing turns out to be crucial for Michaels, since in his thinking, as we shall see, it relates to the threshold conditions for representation being representation at all, and thus for art being art. For Michaels, representation's emergence out of mere matter occasions a terminological distinction that he, crucially, gets from Fried—from Fried's much earlier writings (from the 1960s) about much later works (also from the 1960s). This is the distinction in the title of Fried's 1967 essay "Art and Objecthood." In that essay's terms, "art" is representation—where the project to become more than mere matter has been undertaken and has succeeded (think of Crane's writing becoming about fighting); by contrast, objecthood is the mere matter that doesn't pursue the project of becoming representation (here think of Crane's writing continuing to be just ink on a page). What Crane is beholding, then, when he slowly and methodically writes about fighting is, in these terms, objecthood becoming art. There is, crucially, a drama to this, a narrative arc that gets acted out with every word

Crane writes. This narrative arc is what Fried has in mind in his psychoanalytic account of what Crane must repress: Crane is repressing the narrative arc's potential to reverse itself, with writing erupting from the page as mere matter, art devolving into mere objecthood.

This terminological distinction between art and objecthood gets more complicated, however, because there is another distinction at play on top of this, for Fried as well as for Michaels, a distinction that doesn't easily or neatly map onto the first distinction between art and objecthood. This is the distinction between absorption and theatricality, which is the title of another of Fried's works, this time a book from 1980. Absorption and theatricality are probably best understood, as Jennifer Ashton has recently suggested (226), in terms of a distinction made familiar to literary critics by John Stuart Mill in his 1833 essay "What is Poetry?" There, Mill famously observes, eloquence is *heard*; poetry is *overheard*. Poetry's lyric speakers, because of their absorption in themselves, don't seem to be trying to solicit our attention, so they are absorbed, not theatrical; whereas eloquence, because it does seem to be soliciting our attention rather than being absorbed in itself alone, is intrinsically theatrical. In other words, there can't be poetic theatricality, because poetic speech is oriented inward, not outward; likewise, there can't be eloquent absorption because eloquence is theatrically soliciting our attention.

Now, for Michaels, it turns out that neither art nor objecthood has a lock on either absorption (Mill's poetry) or theatricality (Mill's eloquence). To clarify how these terms intersect, then, let's consider how they might help us characterize what Crane beholds in the scene of writing. (See Figure 1 at the end of this article.) Crane's writing as mere mark, or object, could be theatrical (since he's trying to impress people with his neat penmanship, with his writing's objecthood; see quadrant four in Figure 1). Or, his writing as mere mark could be seen as absorptive (because its project is to make us look through the penmanship or writing itself to see fighting, which means the penmanship isn't soliciting our attention, isn't theatrical, but is rather suppressing its objecthood to enable representation, to enable fighting to come forth from the writing; see quadrant three in Figure 1). Similarly, Crane's writing as representation, as a depiction of fighting, could be understood as absorptive

(because it is like a modern art object for Fried: Henry Fleming is oblivious to us as he ponders his potential for fight or flight; see quadrant one in Figure 1). Or, finally, Crane's writing as representation, as a depiction of fighting, could be understood as theatrical (because Crane wants to make us see, wants to have an effect on us, like the impressionist does—making fighting vivid for readers; see quadrant two in Figure 1).

Now, the question becomes whether and to what extent does this proliferation of terminology and distinctions help illuminate Crane's novel, *The Red Badge of Courage*. My contention is that it does; Crane, I contend, is navigating among these various positions in the many instances of fragmented spectatorship—or what I'm calling "beholding"—within the novel. If this is correct, then he is experimenting with the various coordinates that are of importance to Fried and Michaels, making him a transitional figure into more recent debates about modernism.

To explore this further in *The Red Badge of Courage*, let us consider the famous scene in chapter seven when Henry Fleming, wandering in the woods, approaches a "chapel" space made of "arching boughs": "Near the threshold he stopped, horror-stricken at the sight of a thing. He was being looked at by a dead man" (49). This is a passage Fried mentions as a scene of writing because the ants crawling across the dead soldier's upturned face figure writing, but for us this exchange of beholding is an opportunity to apply Fried's art-historical terminology in a different way. In the allegorical mode of reading that I've been exploring, the "dead man" becomes a representation framed by the "chapel" and its "threshold," and Henry is its beholder. Now, on the one hand, the corpse is "a thing," so it is a mere object, and it thus corresponds to the term "objecthood" of Fried's art/objecthood distinction. On the other hand, the corpse refers indexically to the Union soldier who once inhabited this body and uniform, so it is a representation of that Union soldier; this explains the youth's "horror-stricken" response to it in particular (a response not elicited, for instance, by the tree—a mere object—against which the corpse is seated). This gives us two ways of thinking about the corpse, as mere thing or as indexical representation, and these two options should be sorted, I contend, between the objecthood quadrants (for the thing) and the art quadrants (for

the Union soldier indexed by the corpse).

But more than just a corpse, we have here a corpse that is itself engaged in “looking”: Henry “was being looked at by a dead man. . . . The eyes [were] staring at the youth” (49). The question then arises, is this staring theatrical or absorptive? Direct eye contact typically constitutes theatricality, and that kind of direct engagement is part of the horror of it for Henry. But the eye contact can’t be intended by this “thing” or corpse, so it is not in fact soliciting Henry’s attention and is therefore fully absorbed—as if asleep and about to awaken. It is possible, then, to see this situation of Henry being stared at by the dead soldier as either theatricality or absorption. What results from this analysis is that this “chapel” scene’s featured act of beholding can be assigned to any one of the four available quadrants in Figure 1.

But another part of my point is that the scene also narrows our choices among these quadrants. This narrowing becomes apparent in Henry’s fearful reaction to the corpse:

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 toward the thing. He feared that if he turned his back the body might spring up and stealthily pursue him. . . . At last he burst the bonds which had fastened him to the spot and fled, unheeding the underbrush. (50)

Now, how does Henry’s response shed light on how to assign the act of beholding the dead Union soldier to a quadrant? I think his response puts his beholding in quadrant two (in the upper right): Henry sees the corpse as a theatrical representation, and it is his impression that we get, so we have here a thematization of impressionism. But this isn’t the whole story, because spectatorship or beholding in this novel is, as I have said, fragmented, so there’s another line of sight

on this scenario, the narrator's and, by extension, our own. The narrator gives us a closing vision that Henry doesn't see; here are the final sentences of the chapter: "The trees about the portal of the chapel moved soughingly in the soft wind. A sad silence was upon the little guarding edifice." This notion of a "guarding edifice" seems to place the "chapel" in the category less of a theatrical frame and more of an absorbed tomb, nature's version of a mausoleum. This way of putting things—in terms of indifference to beholders, of absorption rather than theatricality—shifts us from quadrant two, impressionism, to quadrant one, modernism. What can we conclude from this shift from impressionism to modernism? I suggest that while Henry is an impressionist observer, solicited by the object, we are modernist ones, ignored by the object. The novel is thus envisioning (if I may put it that way) both an impressionist standpoint and a modernist one, and this juxtaposition makes it a transitional text from impressionism to modernism.

Let us examine this point further by considering another example from the novel, this time the injury that Henry presents (or rather, misrepresents) as a combat wound. Recall that Henry is struck on the head by a rifle butt swung desperately at him by a retreating Union soldier, so Henry isn't actually injured by enemy fire. Once he returns to his regiment, however, he leads his fellow soldiers to believe that the injury to his head was caused by a bullet grazing him, and as a result, this injury becomes his "red badge of courage." This is, of course, a misrepresentation on Henry's part: the injury is an index of a rifle butt swung by a Union soldier rather than an index of a bullet fired by a Confederate soldier. While this could be seen as another instance of Fried's scene of writing, with the rifle butt as a pen writing on Henry's body, my point is that the injury is seen by Henry's comrades, so it becomes, like the corpse in the "chapel," an object of beholding. Again applying our quadrant analysis, we can see how the bump is either a mere "thing" of flesh and blood or an indexical representation of the thing that caused the injury (the rifle butt, not the bullet). So again we have a division along the axis of mere objecthood and art. Along the axis of absorption and theatricality we likewise have a choice to make: on the one hand, Henry is soliciting and receiving attention to his injury insofar as it is interpreted by his comrades as a battle wound; this makes it theatrical: "I got shot.

In th' head," Henry says to Wilson (79). On the other hand, the person responsible for this mark, the retreating Union soldier who hit Henry with his rifle butt, while he wanted to have an impact—literally—on Henry's head, had no intention of having an impact on anyone else, so as an index of that rifle butt, Henry's wound is not theatrical but, rather, absorptive: it is, to borrow Mill's terms, overheard, like poetry, rather than heard, like eloquence. While the blow to the head spoke eloquently to Henry, and was thus theatrical, it was not intended to produce a wound that would, in turn, speak to anyone else; thus it is absorptive.

Now, in treating Henry's wound as unintended and thus absorptive, I am leaning heavily on Michaels's account of photography and, in particular, his account of the role of the photographer in answering the question whether photography is absorptive or theatrical. In *The Beauty of a Social Problem* Michaels, writing about Roland Barthes's view of photographs, states that for Barthes "the indexicality of the photograph—its status as a trace of what was there—is identified with the critique of the photographer's intentionality—his inability to control what the photograph shows" (14). In the case of the photograph, that control belongs instead to a "photochemical/electronic marking process" of light striking a reactive surface; in the case of Henry's wound, similarly, the control belongs not to the Union soldier who struck Henry but to the physiology of the circulatory system pumping Henry's blood, which itself causes bleeding and swelling. A mere accident, like a falling tree branch, could cause the same physiological result, without intention. In both cases, then—the case of Barthes's photographer and the Union soldier who struck Henry—responsibility for the marks produced can be assigned elsewhere. This, Michaels argues of the photograph, allows it to be seen as not intended and thus not theatrical, but rather absorptive, and it is this same absorptive status that I'm attributing to Henry's wound. The wound is thus both theatrical—insofar as Henry uses it to impress his comrades—and absorptive—in that—as we readers know—its production as representation wasn't the intention of the Union soldier who struck Henry.

Here again, then, as was the case of the corpse in the "chapel," we see all four quadrants represented, and this again supports the conclusion that impressionism and modernism

are co-present here, thus bolstering the claim I'm making about Crane as a transitional figure into modernism. But wait. One might challenge this conclusion in the following way: in producing this absorptive account of Henry's "red badge," I, following Michaels on Barthes on photography, reduced it to physiological effects of the circulatory system, which is the same, in fact, as the account I gave of it as mere objecthood (rather than art): "the bump," I said, "is . . . a mere 'thing' of flesh and blood." How can the red badge be assigned to two different quadrants—both quadrant one and quadrant four—on the same grounds: that it is a mere thing of flesh and blood? Doesn't this make these two quadrants effectively collapse upon each other? Indeed, this question could be extended to the previous example of the dead soldier in the "chapel": isn't the modernist absorption that we see—and that Henry doesn't—due to the fact that the corpse is just a "thing," something not in fact laid to rest in a human-made "chapel" (as the figurative language suggests) but instead just found where the soldier happened to die? What's the difference, in other words, between the lack of intention that signals absorption and the lack of intention of mere objecthood—of a mere corpse or a mere wound?

This, it turns out, is precisely the question that Michaels is trying to raise in his account of Barthes on photography in *The Beauty of a Social Problem*, and it is this coincidence between the red badge in Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage* and the photograph in Michaels's *The Beauty of a Social Problem* that I ultimately wish to underscore here. As Michaels writes, the relationship between absorption and theatricality becomes, for Barthes, "dialectical: [Barthes] turns the antitheatrical into pure theatricality; [he] turns what Fried called absorption into what was supposed to be its opposite, literalism [i.e. objecthood]" (16). This collapse of categories applies not only, Michaels argues, to absorption and theatricality but also to art and objecthood: "The real point of [Barthes's analysis] is thus that it turns the photograph from a representation—something made by someone to produce certain effects—into an object—something that may produce any number of effects or none at all, depending on the beholder" (17). For instance, one soldier may be horrified by the wound, another sympathetic, another nauseated, etc. Henry, in turn, recasts this object as

a representation—as a bullet graze, and others interpret it as such, so it turns back into a (mis)representation, but the larger point still applies here: it's not that the red badge of courage (or, for that matter, the dead Union soldier in the "chapel") can correspond to any one of the four quadrants, making the novel transitional; it's that the red badge and the dead Union soldier raise questions about the very integrity of those four quadrants as distinct quadrants and thus raise questions about the ontology of art more broadly, questions that Michaels, in particular, identifies as the challenge raised to modernism by postmodernism.²

There is more to be said about the details of Michaels's account, but my overall point in linking Henry's wound to Michaels's discussion of the postmodern and photography has been to suggest that Henry's red badge of courage—and by extension, the novel that bears that title—is participating in the kind of interrogation of artistic beholding that recent writers like Michaels, following Fried, have attributed to much later examinations of the ontology of art. Thus Henry's wound, and the novel named for it, warrants attention as a site of thoughtful analysis of artistic production and consumption. The novel is not just about writing, rather than fighting; it is about—because it challenges us to think critically about—the very conditions of possibility of artistic beholding.

Notes

1. While Fried identifies several “scenes of writing” early in *The Red Badge of Courage*, he stops short of attributing a concern with them to the novel in its entirety: “*The Red Badge* as a whole cannot be understood as an allegory of Crane’s enterprise; it makes no sense to try to discern in Fleming’s experiences in his first battle an overarching figure for a literary practice or indeed for a conflict of practices” (1987, 127).

2. It should be noted that Michaels’s own discussion of Henry Fleming’s wound in “Promises of American Life” links it to a Realist (rather than Modernist or Postmodernist) program that Michaels calls “the Realist production of visibility” (346).

Figure 1.

| | ABSORPTION (Mill: “Poetry is <i>overheard</i> ”) | THEATRICALITY (Mill: “Eloquence is <i>heard</i> ”) |
|------------|---|--|
| ART | Representation aspiring to the “supreme fiction” of autonomy from beholders (Fried: Modernism) | Representation aspiring to have an experiential impact on beholders (Impressionism) |
| OBJECTHOOD | ↑* ↗* “Project” to “repress” (hand)writing’s materiality in order to make legible →* representation out of mere matter 3 | “What neat handwriting you have!” or “Cool font!” (Fried: Literalism; Michaels: Postmodernism) 4 |

* This quadrant’s content is always unstable insofar as its “project” either succeeds (in which case it enters quadrant one or two) or fails (in which case it enters quadrant four).

Figure 1.

Works Cited

- Ashton, Jennifer. "Poetry of the Twenty-First Century: The First Decade." *The Cambridge Companion to American Poetry Since 1945*. Ed. Jennifer Ashton. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2013, 216-30.
- Crane, Stephen. *The Red Badge of Courage*. *The Red Badge of Courage and Other Stories*. New York: Penguin, 2005.
- Fagg, John. *On the Cusp: Stephen Crane, George Bellows, and Modernism*. Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama P, 2009.
- Fried, Michael. *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1980.
- _____. "Art and Objecthood." *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1998, 148-72.
- _____. *Realism, Writing, Disfiguration: On Thomas Eakins and Stephen Crane*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1987.
- _____. *What Was Literary Impressionism?* Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2018.
- Michaels, Walter Benn. *The Beauty of a Social Problem: Photography, Autonomy, Economy*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2015.
- _____. "Promises of American Life: 1880-1920." In *The Cambridge History of American Literature*. Ed. Sacvan Bercovitch. Vol. 3: Prose Writing, 1860-1920. New York: Cambridge UP, 2005, 285-410.
- Nagel, James. *Stephen Crane and Literary Impressionism*. University Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 1980.