

DAVID HALLIBURTON

The Color of the Sky

A Study of Stephen Crane

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Introduction

In the preface he wrote for Thomas Beer's biography of Crane, Joseph Conrad recalls a visit from his young American friend when to both men life was being, to use a phrase from "The Open Boat" that was a favorite of Conrad's, "barbarously abrupt." The crucial exchange between the two on that occasion, though familiar to Crane specialists, is worth retelling since it raises issues central to the present study.

After a longish silence, in which we both could have felt how uncertain was the issue of life envisaged as a deadly adventure in which we were both engaged like two men trying to keep afloat in a small boat, I said suddenly across the width of the mantelpiece:

"None of them knew the colour of the sky."

He raised himself sharply. The words had struck him as familiar, though I believe he failed to place them at first. "Don't you know that quotation?" I asked. (These words form the opening sentence of his tale.) The startled expression passed off his face. "Oh, yes," he said quietly, and lay down again. Truth to say, it was a time when neither he nor I had the leisure to look up idly at the sky. The waves just then were too barbarously abrupt.¹

The veteran sailor's own knowledge of dangers at sea might have been enough to make him appreciate the appropriateness of Crane's comment. But his reaction says more than that. All the while that he was needling Crane with references to "barbarously abrupt" this and "barbarously abrupt" that, Conrad was storing the longer phrase for a suitable occasion, which is to say that the statement had general power for him; it represented a veracity, a wisdom, applicable in any number of circumstances other than exposure at sea. The fact that both men were facing difficulties at the time of Crane's visit was such a circumstance, hence Conrad's utterance. The range of application was wider still, however: "It opens with a phrase that anybody could have uttered, but which, in relation to what is to follow, acquires the poignancy of a meaning almost universal."² Conrad's recitation of the sentence is itself unexpected, and

Crane is accordingly surprised. Crane is always being surprised, for his is a world of wonder, a state of feeling that has taken on a peculiarly American flavor:

From the start 'wonder' was put to much more far-ranging uses in American writing than in any other literature. The American writer faced different problems and had different needs, and 'wonder' became a key strategy where in Europe it tended to remain one idea among others. . . . The second consideration is this. The stance of wonder has *remained* a preferred way of dealing with experience and confronting existence among American writers.³ [Italics in original.]

Many passages in Crane testify to a felt wonder, which Tony Tanner associates with naïveté and youthfulness; the sketch of the Greek dancer, to be discussed below, is one such passage. Rather than pursue this theme explicitly, the present study, assuming its presence, attends to particular effects that derive from the state (and to its counterpart, a state of detachment or coolness that is equally characteristic) and to the techniques employed (ranging from scannable prose rhythms to dithyrambs of the sublime) in expressing them.

One needs to be naïve, in any case, about naïveté, at least where Crane is concerned. In years he was never anything but young, and youthful characters frequently occupy his pages. Henry Fleming is a youth, Maggie is first seen as a girl, and "babes" abound – Conrad said the only times he heard Crane laugh were when the latter was with the former's baby. But if Crane's eye retains a certain innocence, he speaks from the beginning with the tongue of experience. At an age when most writers are struggling with influences or snatching at novelties for the sake of novelties, Crane crafts an unmistakable style. Not less remarkably, while still in his twenty-first year he begins the recasting process that produces a series of styles or at least very distinctly marked stylistic patterns, all unmistakably his own, but each, in notable respects, different from the others. The breezy cleverness of the hunting and fishing sketches is the first style, which Crane, in a much-quoted letter, describes himself as having renounced in 1892. Then come other styles hard to tie to strict chronology (for the boundaries are necessarily approximate, and elements of one enter another). Besides the early "clever" style, we find in the slum novels a blaring, highly percussive sort of ragtime; in *The Red Badge of Courage* a to-and-fro rhythm that gives the novel both a balladlike air and an epic cadence; in the newspaper reports a mélange of streetwise descriptiveness, dramatic miniatures, and mood-inducing changes of pace; in the romantic novels more mélange, with a dose of the old cleverness thrown in to leaven the self-conscious, quasi-parodic narrative movement; in the major tales a masterful style-of-all-work that ranges far and wide but is always under

control, moving in stately dignity without the least loss in intensity; in "The Monster" a chastened, more matter-of-fact style closer to the Howells norm – though with colorful moments – that in large part carries over into *Tales of Whilomville*, where it mixes with authorial self-awareness, a large element of lightness, and sharp-tongued irony; in the late war reports a quality that in feeling, diction, and tone more nearly satisfies criteria for the sublime than one might have thought likely (its counterpart being the plain, all-business style that usually surrounds it in these works); in *The O'Ruddy* a lively, workmanlike quality full of gallop and a gusto that even Hazlitt could applaud; while in the poetry a repertoire of techniques larger and more diverse than some readers have been prepared to recognize combines with an arsenal of philosophical and metaphysical ideas to forge a poetic style remarkable not so much for texture and finesse as for economy and power. It should be added that two other strains weave in and out of these patterns, one being parody, which is especially conspicuous early on, and dialect, which also starts early but lasts on into *The O'Ruddy*.⁴

Like Crane's styles, his famous irony, which waits in the wings when it is not on stage and which supplies much stylistic energy, also smacks of much longer seasoning than it in fact enjoyed: The kind of overview that usually comes, if it comes at all, with long time, appeared to come to Crane virtually *ab ovo*. He seemed always to be ahead of himself:

Before his community could impose its standards upon him, before his mother, widowed when he was nine, could impose her Methodism on him, before his friends could explain the terms on which the gang played, Stephen Crane had developed a set of responses that anticipated the reality. These responses were formed in great part from the shreds and patches of the conventions being imposed upon him: His anti-Methodism assumed gods, angels, and sinful men; his rejection of the boys' world led to his studious proficiency at baseball and his rigor in captaining the corps at his military preparatory school. But these were strengthened by an inner consciousness that told him that whatever was accepted was suspect; that there was an inside story behind every public history.⁵

Many readers took *Maggie* for a rendering of New York life based on Crane's intimate knowledge of that city; but that knowledge came later, during his days as a reporter. Before experiencing war, Crane wrote such a convincing war novel that a veteran officer distinctly recalled Crane's serving with him in the Union Army. Similarly, "The Reluctant Voyagers" describes men stranded offshore by chance before being safely plucked from the sea; only later did Crane himself become stranded in like manner, thus living the experience that would become "The Open Boat." If such now-familiar facts surprise on first encounter, so does the

acuity of Crane's artistic intelligence and of his no less precocious sensibility. His knack for applying that intelligence and that sensibility by anticipation suggests a capacity for extrapolating from types. Having sampled conflict in baseball and military life on the parade ground, and having discerned the patterns followed by storytelling veterans and historians, he can "predict" what a certain war in general, and one war in particular, must have been like. Sartre predicts the life of Jean Genet in much the same way, slyly showing how the prediction comes true. Kenneth Burke's version of the technique is "prophesying after the event," an interpretative strategy in which the reader first ascertains the essence or principle of the object in question, then, to test the formulation, derives the object from the principle.⁶

At least in part Crane's typological imagination, which also prompts him to use the word *type* with great frequency, is a legacy of the American Protestant tradition, and in particular Puritanism, with its disposition for figural types symbolizing the design of deity. From a more secular side of the matter Crane's formative years as a reporter could only have reinforced whatever native disposition he had for nosing out all manner of typicalities – of qualities, form, meaning, structure, character, attitude – in the pageant of American life. One sense of the noun, while not necessarily religious in nature, has more affinity than other senses with the typological tendencies of the early American imagination: "That by which something is symbolized or figured; anything having a symbolical signification . . ." (*OED* 1, 1470): "But at length emerged this fact – the Porto Rican, taking him as a symbolized figure, a type, was glad, glad that the Spaniards had gone . . ." (IX, 177); "He was become a philosopher, a type of the wise man who can eat but three meals a day . . ." (VIII, 297).

Three other senses, all emerging in Crane's century, attest to a desire for a terminology to meet changing needs, a terminology that could discriminate among proliferating forms and patterns by some sort of classification. In "It was essential that I should make my battle a type and name no names . . ." (*Letters*, 84) the sense is "a pattern or model after which something is made" (*OED* 5. *transf.*, 1843). What is paradigmatic in the pattern gets embodied, as it were, in "the old English type of chair" (VIII, 87), meaning "a typical example or instance" (*OED* 7. *transf.*, 1842). When, five years later, Emerson makes Goethe "the type of culture," he coins a new sense, "A person or thing that exemplifies the ideal qualities or characteristics of a kind or order; a perfect example or specimen of something" (*OED* 7. *b spec.*), which Crane takes up by remarking "It should be a well-known fact that . . . the engine-driver is the finest type of man that is grown" (VIII, 746).

These, then, are a few, almost randomly selected examples of why Crane has received so much attention and why continuing attention is warranted. Like other authors securely berthed in the canon, but in his own way, Crane is both benefactor and beneficiary: Benefactor not only because of particular works he has contributed to the canon, but because his writings register his own era in a unique way even as they uniquely anticipate the era that follows; beneficiary because, having gone through a slump in scholarly attention, recalling those experienced by Poe and Melville – though one that was less protracted and less pronounced – Crane has received the acknowledgment from the scholarly community and from the general public that other established writers of his time gave freely from the start. These writers include Conrad, William Dean Howells, Hamlin Garland, H. G. Wells, Edward Garnett, Harold Frederic, Henry James, and Ford Madox Ford, who testifies to having heard James say repeatedly of Crane, “He has great, great genius.”⁷ “Genius” testimonials, indeed, compose a kind of subgenre within the critical literature on Crane. The present study may be regarded as such a testimonial insofar as it succeeds in further elucidating Crane’s accomplishments, a generalization that applies to most of its predecessors in the field. But “proving” that a writer is gifted or a work major is notoriously difficult, which is why critics who try to do so, such as Yvor Winters and F. R. Leavis, bank on the reader’s readiness to accept force of assertion and apposite quotations as an adequate basis for judgment. Notwithstanding that the former critic was an important influence on its author, this book concentrates instead on textual particulars both in themselves and in the way they aggregate to form larger and more general patterns of intelligibility. “God lives in detail,” says an old German saying, reminding the interpreter that large meanings are mediated by little ones, and vice versa. The type of meaning at issue here is the type Burke calls poetic, as distinguished from semantic meaning. We employ semantic meaning when we point to a chair and state that the thing being pointed at is a chair, whereas poetic meaning occurs when someone exclaims, “Ho, ho! a chair!” The exclamation is stronger in feeling than the bare statement; it indicates more than the figure points to, hence it means more. Thoreau employs the same distinction when he remarks that “The volatile truth of our words should continually betray the inadequacy of the residual statement.”⁸ That volatile truth differs in nature from residual statement is shown by the fact that the latter, or semantic meaning, operates on an either-or principle, according to which “New York City is in Iowa” is false because it is not true. But by the criterion of poetic meaning New York City can indeed be in Iowa:

Has one ever stood, for instance, in some little outlying town, on the edge of the wilderness, and watched a train go by? Has one perhaps suddenly felt that the train, and its tracks, were a kind of arm of the city, reaching out across the continent, quite as though it were simply Broadway itself extended? It is in such a sense that New York City can be found all over the country – and I submit that one would miss very important meanings, meanings that have much to do with the conduct of our inhabitants, were he to proceed here by the either-or kind of test.

“New York City is in Iowa” is “poetically” true. As a true metaphor, it provides valid insight. To have ruled it out, by strict semantic authority, would have been vandalism.⁹

Crane’s creation of works replete with meaning, expressing a singular vision in a singular style, does more to account for his elevation to his present status than the fact that he “is frequently spoken of as the most legendary figure in American letters since Edgar Allan Poe.”¹⁰ Indeed, the legends about Crane, by concentrating on the flashier aspects of his turbulent life, many have diverted attention away from the substance of his writings. In any event, Edwin H. Cady accurately characterizes Crane’s current standing when he observes that “what was twenty years ago something like a frontier, sparsely and unevenly inhabited, uncertainly developed, has been largely occupied. Crane is now an established, major American author, a specialty, a ‘field’ with a gigantic CEAA Edition and a secondary bibliography so large it has called forth half a dozen surveys of itself.”¹¹

For the largest concern to be addressed in the following pages there may be no better name than the human condition, to borrow the phrase of a writer peculiarly akin to Crane not only in temperament but in his way of regarding the changing worldly scene. Montaigne writes:

The world is but a perennial see-saw. All things in it are incessantly on the swing, the earth, the rocks of the Caucasus, the Egyptian pyramids, both with the common movement and their own particular movement. Even fixedness is nothing but sluggish motion . . . I do not portray the thing in itself [*être*]. I portray the passage.

And finally: “every man carries within the entire form of the human condition.”¹² The first statement catches the verve of Crane’s temperament, which is ever on the move, now shifting as the world shifts, or shifting independently, now trying one perspective only to swap it for another. It may be objected that this is simply a trait of modernity, which it is; but on this score Crane is “more modern” than others: His kinetic energy never stops flowing, its direction and tempo being itself subject to change, interruption, and resumption. We have it on the authority of another French writer that in this respect Crane is quintessentially Ameri-

can. "The whole life of an American," says De Tocqueville, "is passed like a game of chance, a revolutionary crisis, or a battle."¹³

The second statement by Montaigne relates back to the phenomenon of the type. In each individual human being Crane, like Montaigne, sees all other human beings collectively, so that anyone's experience is precisely everyone's experience. Hence the things Crane hears from a series of individual veterans forms a composite representation of an army, saying in effect what the army might say if it could speak with a single voice. It should be added that Crane, like Montaigne, understands the human condition not as something discrete but as a nexus of relations connecting it with the nonhuman realm of animals, the natural landscape, and the cosmos.

Two major themes that emerge from this background are the same two Toynbee discovers at the heart of civilization: "Social injustice has been one of the two specific diseases of civilization since the earliest date to which our surviving records go back. Its other specific disease has been war."¹⁴ The first disease spreads its contagion through *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*, *George's Mother*, "The Monster," and a number of sketches and reports, including "An Experiment in Misery," "An Experiment in Luxury," and "The Men in the Storm"; it appears as well in several poems, and takes the form in *Tales of Whilomville* of the unfairness with which children treat each other. The second disease runs its long course from *The Red Badge of Courage* through the stories in *The Little Regiment*, *Wounds in the Rain*, the Spitzbergen tales, and *Great Battles of the World* to several poems in *War Is Kind* as well as in *Black Riders*, the tales of the Wyoming Valley, and dispatches on the Spanish-American and Greco-Turkish war, not to mention Crane's projected novel on the American Revolution. If war is broadened to embrace any conflict as such, then there is almost nothing in Crane that would not qualify as pertinent.

If Crane's characters are individuals, they are individuals in a community, a phenomenon always of interest for Crane, but especially when it is in crisis, is just forming, or is breaking up. The relatively spontaneous and emotional nature of such formations derives from a social impulse that takes the form, in American life, of association. Building on De Tocqueville, who may be credited with first pointing out the importance of association in this country, Johann Huizinga observes:

Just as with individuals, the social impulse displays itself in America principally in a primitive form, that is, as a spontaneous and strongly emotional combination of forces for a concrete goal, with a pronounced need for secret forms and a far-reaching readiness to place personal energies without reservation at the service of the goal of the association, in brief, in the formation of a club or the foundation of a fraternal order.

We have an involuntary tendency to assume that the sense of social organization is directly governed by objective interests. But it is a question whether the history of civilization does not have to take another primary factor into account at least as much – the concentration of common activity for the sake of the effect of fellowship, or to express it less barbarously the enthusiasm and the energy which arise from the powerful feeling of striving together for any goal whatever.¹⁵

In a later section of the book I will take up the question of Crane's aesthetics of war, which derives from such spontaneous striving, an aesthetics that includes what I will call the military sublime.

Some of Crane's best moments occur when opportunities arise for a fraternity that is more than contingent association. This is conspicuously the case in "The Open Boat," where Crane states the truths of experience that "the ethics of their condition" do not allow the characters to express; while a more apocalyptic moment of fraternity occurs in "When a people reach the top of a hill" and the "Blue Battalions" poem, where the visionary impulse in Crane takes center stage.

On the whole, however, the question of community in Crane's writings is both problematic and complex. His individualist heritage may be said to put him, on the one hand, at a certain distance from the association he desires to find or form, an association that would be, ideally, a genuine fraternity. The solitary strain in Puritanism, which in *Pilgrim's Progress* sanctions Christian's abandonment of his family to save his own soul, the Methodist acceptance of individual conversion, late nineteenth-century competitiveness and social segmentation – all of these factors may have weighed against finding a viable social order representing the authentic interests both of the individual and of the community. On the other hand, the same factors point in a different direction when read from a different angle. For the Puritan heritage is collectivist as well as individualist: The New Israel of New England is by definition a covenant community;¹⁶ Methodism was an important agency in the Great Awakening of the eighteenth century, a group phenomenon by any standard; and if the late nineteenth century had little to show in the way of exemplary solidarity, it at least had its visionaries, such as the Howells of *The Traveller from Altruria* or the Frederick Law Olmstead who crusaded for parks and recreational facilities to reduce urban isolation and distrust.¹⁷ It was Crane's good fortune, in any case, to find community when chance and character and circumstance converged in the seminal experience leading to "The Open Boat."

Despite his admiration for Tolstoy, Crane in his tales of war does not deal with armies in Tolstoy's way. The object of Crane's desire is an ideal, a military fraternal order or society of warriors that would replace *homo oeconomicus*, along the lines suggested by Brooks Adams. Such an

order is incompatible with the scale and anonymity of an army, hence Crane's emphasis on the smaller unit – the regiment, for example, or the squad, or, as in "The Upturned Face," a pair of comrades. This emphasis, combined with a continuing concern for the individual character and a willingness to shift at any time to an omniscient or even a cosmic overview, makes for a complex perspectivism, to adopt a term that characterizes a notable pattern in nineteenth-century American letters.

It was the practice of the romantic historians of nineteenth-century America to devise scenes that are at once visual shows and moral dramas. The scenes exploit contrasts; they invoke a sense of grandeur; and they appeal strongly to the eye. W. H. Prescott finds such an object in the Mexican temple, which plays a central role in his *Conquest of Mexico*; John Lothrop Motley finds such a figure – or rather, forms one – by personifying the human capacity for challenges: "Through the mists of adversity, a human figure may dilate into proportions which are colossal and deceptive."¹⁸ Prescott's use of the temple may serve to exemplify the practice of the artist whose perspectives are in some sort inspired by things or events, while Motley's invention of a figure may serve to exemplify the practice of the artist whose perspectives depend more upon self-inspiration or the mediation of cultural tradition. The author of "The Story of a Year," published the month before Lee's surrender at Appomattox, is an artist of this type. Before leaving for military duty, the hero and his sweetheart climb to a height from which they enjoy the following perspective:

As Ford looked at the clouds, it seemed to him that their imagery was all of war, their great uneven masses were marshalled into the semblance of a battle. There were columns charging and columns flying and standards floating, – tatters of the reflected purple; and great captains on colossal horses, and a rolling canopy of cannon-smoke and fire and blood The tumult of the clouds increased; it was hard to believe them inanimate. You might have fancied them an army of gigantic souls playing at football with the sun.¹⁹

Henry James had previously established, in the story, an authorial position like the one Crane might have assumed, describing Ford's appearance and explaining how it might be interpreted by a "spectator." When James's character then becomes *himself* the spectator, as in the passage just quoted, he assumes the second of the two roles – that of the character as *subject* of perspectives – which, as in Crane, is the complement of the previous representation.

The narrator of Ambrose Bierce's Civil War tale "The Mirage" is riding ahead of some advancing troops when he beholds

. . . a truly terrifying spectacle. Immediately in front . . . was a long line of the most formidable looking monsters that the imagination ever conceived. They were taller than trees. In them the elements of nature

seemed so fantastically and discordantly confused and blended, compounded, too, with architectural and mechanical details, that they partook of the triple character of animals, houses and machines Among them, on them, beneath, in and a part of them, were figures and fragments of figures of gigantic men. *All were inextricably interblended and superimposed.*²⁰ [Italics in original.]

To this classic grotesque vision the soldiers respond with emotion. But the narrator's reaction is more like the reaction one might expect from a man who, like Bierce, had done cartographic work in the Civil War, surveying, measuring, judging from afar:

The mirage had in effect contracted the entire space between us and the train to a pistol-shot in breadth, and had made a background for its horrible picture by lifting into view Heaven knows how great an extent of country below our horizon. Does refraction account for all this? To this day I cannot without vexation remember the childish astonishment that prevented me from observing the really interesting features of the spectacle and kept my eyes fixed with a foolish distension on a lot of distorted mules, teamsters and wagons.²¹

The fiction has entered what is for Bierce a typical perspectival phase: We are now over here with the author, quietly interested, while the terror is safely back there in time. It is a moment of judgment made possible by the safety of distance.

Compare this with the version of a classic grotesque Crane offers in a newspaper sketch of 1892:

Two Italians . . . recently descended upon the town. With them came a terrible creature, in an impossible apparel, and with a tambourine. He, or she, wore a dress which would take a geometrical phenomenon to describe. He, or she, wore orange stockings, with a bunch of muscle in the calf. The rest of his, or her, apparel was a chromatic delirium of red, black, green, pink, blue, yellow, purple, white, and other shades and colors not known Beneath were those grotesque legs: above, was a face. The grin of the successful midnight assassin and the smile of the coquette were commingled upon it. When he, or she, with his, or her, retinue of Italians, emerged upon the first hotel veranda, there was a panic. Brave men shrank Since then, he, or she, has become a well-known figure on the streets. People are beginning to get used to it, and he, or she, is not mobbed, as one might expect him, or her, to be. (VIII, 513-14)²²

The language is freighted with feeling: *impossible, delirium, fantastic*. Yet the object remains at a remove: There is no attempt, for example, to sympathize with the creature. Nor does the locus in question desire to resolve the question of the creature's identity. *Locus* here and in the pages that follow is meant to be a more flexible term than point of view or

standpoint. By convention these terms are sited in individual characters, James being the master of such siting, which is also sighting, if you will, because the individual character is the place from which everything is seen. But the place from which we see in Crane's writings is anywhere and everywhere, now a character, now a group, now a "somewhere" from which an indeterminate voice – if it is a voice – says things only the author would know, but does not seem to be the author's. A later discussion of an early tale will clarify the matter.

If not knowing the color of the sky is a matter of great earnest in an open boat, it is a matter of great jest in the Greek dancer sketch. It is not that the questions about "what it is" are genuinely ontological, or even that they are genuinely questions. Rather, the pretended inability to know licenses a certain freedom, a freedom to play, for example, with the taboo subject of hermaphroditism. That this play does not go further suggests how one always has to stop at "the point of reticence,"²³ to borrow Arthur Waugh's *Yellow Book* phrase. (The force of that reticence helps to explain why Crane never wrote his projected novel about a male prostitute.) Such constraint may result, as in the portrait of the Greek dancer, in a "surface" treatment. But the surface is often sufficient for the purposes that perspectivism has in view. Between it and its object there exists a zone in which limited knowledge – the knowledge of appearance – becomes a virtue; a zone in which attention can probe, then pull back, advancing and then retreating, even as Henry and his fellows do on the field of battle. Here is a locus fascinated by what is "other" but determined to maintain such otherness in a state of comparative mystery. As a result the writing seems pervaded by a kind of radical indeterminacy, as though the author feared that a premature commitment to anything too *particular* would prevent him from being sufficiently *general*.

The amount of energy in any artistic economy is finite. The cost of indulgence here is abstinence there. Or to paraphrase Virginia Woolf: In order to do something significant, there are a lot of things one must decide not to do. The cost of Crane's desire to see much is sometimes a willingness to know little, or to be ambiguous about what he does know. The question of knowledge, or more precisely of its relation to experience, nonetheless remains central to the artistic economy to which I have referred. In *The Red Badge of Courage* there are 350 examples of words connected with visual perception, such as *perceive*, *observe*, and *discover*, and more than 200 of words such as *seem*, *appear*, and *exhibit*.²⁴

As to ambiguity, a certain degree of it may attend any perspectivism, which is not to imply that perspectives cannot also be strong and clear, Crane having provided many of the latter. It is just that the perspectivist, within the constraints of language and genre and tradition, ~~wants to~~