



STEPHEN CRANE'S ARTISTRY



Frank Bergon

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PREFACE

It should be a well-known fact that, all over the world, the engine-driver is the finest type of man that is grown. He is the pick of the earth. He is altogether more worthy than the soldier and better than the men who move on the sea in ships. He is not paid too much, nor do his glories weight his brow, but for outright performance carried on constantly, coolly, and without elation by a temperate, honest, clear-minded man he is the further point. And so the lone human at his station in a cab, guarding money, lives and the honor of the road, is a beautiful sight. The whole thing is aesthetic.

THE SCOTCH EXPRESS

This book is concerned with Stephen Crane's habit of imagination as it declares itself throughout his work—that personal quality of awareness which informs his work and makes it uniquely his own. Some of the best recent literary criticism has tried to locate and discover general ways of talking about this aspect of art, an aspect which has been referred to metaphorically as a writer's unique "signature," "presence," "personal voltage," and "performance." We are here concerned with how a writer reveals himself regardless of particular choices of subject and theme, or the varied philosophies, formal properties, and stylistic oddities that may differ from work to work. We are looking for the "voltage," as Seán O'Faoláin says, which "does something to the material. It lights it up; it burns it

up; it makes it fume in the memory as an aroma or essence." ¹ It is what draws us back to a writer in anticipation of renewed pleasure even when we already can easily paraphrase his "story," "theme," and "ideas." In Crane's case it is related to a peculiar mode of perception and projection which determines the expressive vitality of his work.

So much of Crane's fiction and poetry is composed of sudden and unusual, almost spectral, scenes, gestures, characters, sensations, and perceptions; the reader's immediate realization is that the result—if anything at all—is, as J. C. Levenson properly called it, "realism with a difference." ² The recognition of this unearthly, hauntingly apparitional aspect of Crane's writing has led commentators, including Hemingway, to speak of Crane's art in terms of dreams and dream images. As John Berryman points out, there is also a curious transmigration as "Mountains, trees, dogs, men, horses, and boats flash in and out of each other's identities." ³ Crane specifically underscores his intended effects when he describes characters with such phrases as the "spectral soldier" ⁴ or as having "something of the quality of an apparition" (V, 53). But it is primarily his autonomic imagery that (to place H. L. Mencken's phrase about Crane in a new context) strikes the reader like a "flash of lightning out of a clear winter sky." ⁵ The cumulative result of these images, characters, and scenes is that a reading of Crane is "so like a spectral dissolution, that a witness could have wondered if he dreamed."

This last quotation is borrowed not from a critic but from a Crane story, "The Clan of No-Name" (VI, 122), and it is only one of the many instances in which Crane serves as his own best commentator. He often refers to the creative effort at work in his stories, and these references are usually more to the point than the aesthetic remarks gleaned from his letters and reported conversations. In this particular case, Crane's phrase illuminates a negative "apparitional" quality in his work. Joseph Conrad described a common reaction to Crane when he said, "I could not explain why he disappoints me—why my enthusiasm withers as soon as I close the book. While one reads, of course he is not to be questioned. He is master of his reader to the very last line—then—apparently for no reason at

all—he seems to let go his hold.”⁶ The criticism is not totally unjust, but it does stop short if it lacks Conrad’s thoughtful hesitation, “It just occurs to me that it is perhaps my own self that is slippery. I don’t know.”

But it is crucial to know, as nearly as possible, which are Crane’s failings and which are those of his readers. If there is little that is conventionally solid in Crane’s fiction—if there is no strong representation of a coherent vision, no logical accumulation of some patterned movement that lingers in the mind after the work is read—then the reader is hard pressed to wonder whether these astonishing performances deserve the attention and respect we reserve for the most fully realized art. But as I hope to show, some of Crane’s elusiveness may be due to our own failings as readers, trapped into seeing only what our critical terminology allows us to see. Conrad’s remarks, I think, accurately point to Crane’s formal deficiencies without damaging his particular triumphs. It seems to me that the self-imposed limitations of Crane’s art bear the precise responsibility for his simultaneous success and failure.

As early as 1896, Frank Norris directed readers to Crane’s special “habit and aptitude for making phrases. . . . In ordinary hands the tale of Maggie would be ‘twice-told.’ ”⁷ Much criticism, despite its token acknowledgment of Norris’s observation, continues to specialize in abstracts of *what* happens in a novel such as *Maggie*, rather than beginning with the *manner* in which Crane says things happen. One result of this method is that “moral” or “ontological” crises rise in importance; and as Crane’s characters are censured for their moral obtuseness and their lack of perception, readers project their own moralism onto Crane. For example, it is now fashionable (and correct) to point out that the subject of *Maggie* cannot be Maggie herself; her story is central to only about half of the novel’s nineteen chapters. No longer is there much value in citing Crane’s famous inscription to Hamlin Garland about making “room in Heaven for all sorts of souls (notably an occasional street girl)” (*Letters*, p. 14). Maggie, along with Crane’s social criticism, becomes secondary to what is now considered the novel’s main concern. Attention shifts to Pete, Jimmie, and Mrs. Johnson, and a new Crane remark is put to work: “the root of Bowery life is a sort of coward-

ice" (*Letters*, p. 133). We now learn that *Maggie* exposes "the loud and offensive falsity of weaklings not brave enough to face up to the dishonesty of their own actions." ⁸ The statement is not untrue, but it is insufficient.

And it is smug. Even to begin talking about Crane in social and moral terms is to make assumptions that his art calls into question. Crane's talent was to go over the wall to that side of experience where the spirit is quick to panic, where standards and values by which we think we live are no longer stable or even appropriate. To sit back in judgment of a Bowery world which "has become a meaningless round of temporary gratifications by hypocrites too stupid and too dishonest even to desire an escape from the cycle of their own moral cowardice" ⁹ is to miss that aspect of *Maggie* which keeps a commonplace novel alive—those moments when Crane approaches what was to grace his art at its best, those moments when the tale confuses, humbles, and implicates both the reader and the teller of the tale himself. The opening chapter of *Maggie* draws us into a realm of experience where normal frames of reference are immediately shaken. It is closer to hell than war, and equally other-worldly. We become trapped between repulsion and fascination, in a state of uncertainty. Not only are we in a strange world, but in that world we become strangers to ourselves. This is what is shocking about the first chapter of *Maggie*, and what produces the novel's "shock value." For a commentary on this book, it would seem better to turn to another Crane story rather than to the letter in which he speaks of the cowardice of Bowery life. In "An Experiment in Misery," a young man has gone through the same kind of shock as the reader of *Maggie* may feel.

"Well," said the friend, "did you discover his [the tramp's] point of view?"

"I don't know that I did," replied the young man, "but at any rate I think mine own has undergone a considerable alteration." [VIII, 863]

To apprehend how Crane effects this alteration of perspective and its subsequent—if only momentary—alteration of sensibility is to move close to that distinguishing habit of imagination which informs his best work. His virtue as a writer lies in the full attention

given to the scene or mood at hand, no matter how it relates to common conceptions of experience. His is an effort to treat seriously and significantly every selected detail until that detail, or the scene of which it is part, blossoms into a thing strange and new, often at the expense of a larger design or even of the dominant subject. He writes until one of those "short, terse epigrams struck off in the heat of composition,"¹⁰ or a turn of phrase, or a surrealist image, or even a striking word within a sentence, produces the desired aura of strangeness necessary to bend the reader's angle of vision. The reader now looks upon reality metamorphosed, a world in which tents can spring up "like strange plants" and campfires can dot the night "like red, peculiar blossoms" (RB, 212). For Crane the "real thing"¹¹ often seems not to be somewhere awaiting his discovery but rather a creation of his imagination, wrenched into existence. This activity and its effect are the main concern of this book, for it is this aspect of Crane's artistry that seems most often to astonish us into a search for words to describe his peculiar authority as a writer. Even Henry James, at times, could only say over and over again. "He has great, great genius."¹²

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VOICES OF PERCEPTION: CRANE'S PROSE STYLE

*It was like a blow in the chest to the
wide-eyed volunteer. It revealed to him
a point of view.* DEATH AND THE CHILD

No American writer of fiction before the twentieth century forged a closer stylistic approximation of immediate sensory and perceptual experience than did Stephen Crane. Whether consciously or unconsciously, Crane made a point of presenting the emotional qualities of those sensations and perceptions, and as if this were not enough, it seems that he also expected his prose to go beyond description and to excite immediate emotional response. These tasks were assigned to prose that was seemingly of the greatest verbal and syntactic simplicity. The result, however, was a complex welter of narrative voices. Crane wished his fiction to be a "substitute for nature" (*Letters*, p. 31) or reality, a fiction that rendered the components of experience with a local intensity and yet with enough perspective so that those components might be measured from a large, indifferent, and often nonhuman point of view. Ironically, though he worked to "approach the nearest to nature and truth" (*Letters*, p. 31), he wrote in a way that still strikes readers as contrived and unnatural. A close look at his prose led A. J. Liebling to observe that "Crane did not 'reproduce the immediacies of battle'; he made a patterned, a rhetorical, war such as never existed."¹ But that rhetorical war became an experience in itself, a substitute experience

perhaps, but nevertheless an experience fashioned as a paradigm of the original. A paradox of Crane's writing, then, is that while he manipulated language for the sake of faithfully rendering experience in its immediacy, his peculiar arrangement of words often stylized experience and imparted to it a curious aesthetic distance. His words and their arrangement—the literary display of Crane's personality—remain so forcibly peculiar that his prose style is normally viewed as one of the most idiosyncratic of the nineteenth century.

John Berryman suggests that there are three basic variations, or "norms," of Crane's narrative style.² The first norm is "flexible, swift, abrupt, and nervous," which describes the prose written after Crane's so-called clever period. It is essentially the prose of *The Red Badge of Courage*. Though it is impossible to know exactly what Berryman meant by these impressionistic epithets, one can discriminate in Crane's prose certain procedures and effects which match common conceptions of the words. The flexibility of *The Red Badge* is evident when compared with the stiffness of Crane's first novel, *Maggie*, in which most of the ironic effects are inherent in the drama or easily achieved through mixed diction. Variations of the narrative voice do occur in *Maggie*, but usually only after long intervals (the first major change in voice occurs after chapter 3) and never in the extreme fashion that they do in his war novel. While Crane usually *reports* the perceptions and dim thoughts of his Bowery characters, he more often *presents* those of Henry Fleming. The fundamental difference in effect between these methods of narration is that while the narrator (or observer) of *Maggie* is not obtrusive, he is more often present than is the narrator of *The Red Badge*. In the war novel, rendition for the most part supplants narration, and the range of observation moves from the scenic to immediate perception and thought. The speed with which Crane moves from one subject to another is certainly "swift"; effects or visualizations are accomplished quickly and abandoned as soon as they are realized. But it is the sudden and often illogical transitions between effects or subjects that point to the most important traits of this prose, its "nervousness" and "abruptness." Usually paragraphs are as brusque as the sentences which form them. The words and their

arrangement correspond to their most general subject, which—to borrow a line from "The Upturned Face"—"had its origin in that part of the mind which is first moved by the singing of the nerves" (VI, 298). At times, brief paragraphs, composed of one or two sentences, rapidly present successive sensations, appearances, and fantasies; at other times they duplicate the uncontrolled turnings, the "thousand details of color and form" (RB, 224) impressed upon an agitated mind; and in these turnings, the normal structure of language breaks down. Often, however, each paragraph has its own logic once a new point of departure is established. The suddenness of a transition is occasionally reinforced by an unexpected word or image in the opening sentence: "The guns squatted in a row like savage chiefs" (RB, 228). The thematic words, "guns" and "chiefs," trigger the development to follow: "They argued with abrupt violence. It was a grim pow-wow." Development continues until the arbitrarily invented theme is exhausted, in this case in the next sentence, "Their busy servants ran hither and thither." If Crane did not also use "hither and thither" in the opening sentences of other paragraphs, those words might reflect the slackening imagination which produced them; as it is, they indicate the slackening theme. Then a new beginning and subject take over: "A small procession of wounded men were [sic] going drearily toward the rear." The procession, too, is transformed: "It was a flow of blood from the torn body of the brigade." And, again, the paragraph abruptly ends. An implicit cause-and-effect relationship, however, has been established between these seemingly disconnected paragraphs, and both are absorbed in an overriding theme, the savagery of battle.

This style invites a qualifying epithet, "shortwinded." It also might be called "claustrophobic," for the point of view is mostly Henry's, or else it is restricted to a close-up view of the boy himself ("Into the youth's eyes there came a look that one can see in the orbs of a jaded horse"; RB, 230). Less often, the narrative presents what could be called the regiment's point of view. Only the actual sentences of the novel are out of the boy's reach; the memories and associations from which they are drawn ("savage chiefs," "grim pow-wow") are within the realm of his past experiences or fantasies, likely components of a young boy's consciousness.

Later, as Crane experimented with observations less restricted to a limited consciousness, his style opened toward Berryman's second norm, the "supple majesty of 'The Open Boat.'" Though unexpected figurative language continues to spark the prose, the figures are often not only thematically resonant but integral to a developing occasion. For example, the sentence in "The Open Boat," "It was less to him than the breaking of a pencil's point" (V, 85) is more than just a cute statement. It appropriately expresses the correspondent's former indifference to an imaginary soldier's plight. In addition, the action of the image also shares the time reference established by the entire paragraph—youthful schooldays, when the breaking of pencils and the reading of sentimental poems occur with similar regularity and elicit similar responses. In general the prose of the second norm is more flexible, less abrupt than the first. The relentless intensity of *The Red Badge*, maintained by sheer willful invention, is replaced by a prose that achieves intensity through contrast and modulation, and is marked by the increased use of statements totally devoid of exaggerated emotion or physical sensation.

The third norm is "much more closed, circumstantial and 'normal' in feeling and syntax" than the second. Understandably, it is the style of "The Monster," where the primary frame of reference is not the sea or war but society. The prose adapts to the type of information it provides; and from the reader's point of view, the chief purpose of the prose is again one of narration as well as stimulation.

These variations of Crane's style are neither strictly chronological nor mutually exclusive. The boy who, in 1892, wrote, "They regarded the little man with eyes that made wheels revolve in his soul" (VIII, 241), became the man who, in 1897, wrote, "the Swede fizzed like a fire-wheel" (V, 154). The general shift from mannered to plain prose represents, in certain instances, a mastery of craft, an economy of statement, and a variation in point of view rather than a profound change of intention. There is little doubt of the shared evocative and thematic intentions of these passages from works published in 1895 and 1900, respectively:

The ranks opened covertly to avoid the corpse. The invulnerable dead man forced a way for himself. The youth looked keenly at the ashen face. The wind raised the tawny beard. It moved as if a hand were stroking it. He vaguely desired to walk around and around the body and stare; the impulse of the living to try to read in dead eyes the answer to the Question. [RB, 217]

"Yes," he said, "we'd better see . . . what he's got." He dropped to his knees and approached his hands to the body of the dead officer. But his hands wavered over the buttons of the tunic. The first button was brick-red with drying blood, and he did not seem to dare to touch it.

"Go on," said the adjutant hoarsely.

Lean stretched his wooden hand, and his fingers fumbled blood-stained buttons. . . . At last he arose with a ghastly face. He had gathered a watch, a whistle, a pipe, a tobacco pouch, a handkerchief, a little case of cards and papers. He looked at the adjutant. There was a silence. The adjutant was feeling that he had been a coward to make Lean do all the grizzly business. [VI, 297-98]

The selection from *The Red Badge* gives a hint—if only a hint—of the excesses of the early style, while the passage from "The Upturned Face" hints at the occasional flagging in Crane's later style when the language of a mentality familiar to the reader replaces the invented tropes of a sensibility remote from the reader's own.³ But both passages present a product of Crane's skill that transcends the excesses and impoverishments of his styles.

Fiction such as this, which is immediate, concentrated, vivid, and intense, is everywhere evident in Crane's work; supportive examples can be drawn at random from any of his three "norms." Much of this style, of course, was really the style of the times. Even if Caroline Gordon is only half correct in saying, "Since Stephen Crane's time, all serious writers have concentrated on the effort of rendering individual scenes more vividly,"⁴ her reference to "Crane's time" must still remind us that his prose techniques were not his alone. In fact, verbal procedures used by Crane, such as "Inversions, odd conjunctions of words, syntax set awry, these were all devices James employed to bring his prose—composed as it was of ordinary diction—alive."⁵

What, then, was Crane's, and Crane's alone? For one thing, there was his distinctive use of these devices. But more importantly, as should become clear, the linguistic effects of these devices coincided naturally with the interpretive processes of his imagination. In general, as fictional effects in Crane's time became concentrated, individual words and phrases rose in importance; diction was simplified and made concrete; syntax followed suit, and as it too became simpler, it fell apart. Harold Martin and Richard Bridgman have both shown that this change in American prose was neither sudden nor arbitrary.⁶ The gradual incorporation of everyday speech into literary language affected more than the diction of prose. As Bridgman shows, stylization of the colloquial resulted in "a) stress on the individual verbal unit, b) a resulting fragmentation of syntax, and c) the use of repetition to bind and unify."⁷ All three characteristics are evident in Crane's Bowery dialect:

"Dere she stands, . . . Dere she stands! Lookut her! Ain' she a dindy? An' she was so good as to come home t'her mudder, she was! Ain' she a beaut'? Ain' she a dindy?" [I, 64]

Even the more subtle development of these characteristics of speech, as found in Crane's narrative passages, is not unique to him. Indeed, the phenomenon has a long history; Aristotle observed that "Art is cleverly concealed when the speaker chooses his words from ordinary language and puts them together like Euripides, who was the first to show the way."⁸ For the moment, the achievement of other American writers' colloquial style is not central to the discussion of how or why Crane bent language to suit his own needs. Negative definitions of his purpose appear in his fiction as comments on the public's reluctance to accept, or art's failure to provide, the "real thing." In *George's Mother* he describes an avenue's "deep bluish tint which is so widely condemned when it is put into pictures" (I, 115). The protagonist of "One Dash—Horses," while escaping from Mexican bandits, "remembered all the tales of such races for life, and he thought them badly written" (V, 22). In rejecting literary styles which Crane identified with the false and badly written, he most noticeably abandons long, complex sentences possessing clear transitions. Perhaps he rejected these

connections, within and between sentences, because they present extended opportunities for commentary, moralisms, and interpretations, and they place a verbal screen between the reader and the occasion of interest. Directness of expression, however, risks boring the reader with its willful limitation of syntactical forms and vocabulary. It has to make up for what it lacks in variety, mass, and movement, with intensity. Repetition is often the result, as in this paragraph from "A Dark Brown Dog," in which "dog" and "child" and their respective personal and possessive pronouns appear fifteen times:

He stopped opposite the child, and the two regarded each other. The dog hesitated for a moment, but presently he made some little advances with his tail. The child put out his hand and called him. In an apologetic manner the dog came close, and the two had an interchange of friendly pappings and waggles. The dog became more enthusiastic with each moment of the interview, until with his gleeful caperings he threatened to overturn the child. Whereupon the child lifted his hand and struck the dog a blow upon the head. [VIII, 52-53]

Words are repeated, however, for the sake of sustained focus and accuracy. "Repetition may be bad," Mark Twain said, "but surely inexactness is worse."⁹

The passage is from an early story, but if the educated diction is excised, the bones of Crane's late, austere style can be seen. The lulling repetitions of words and sentence structures, together with the polite diction, heighten the surprise of the unexpected blow in the last sentence. Surprise, a staple of Crane's prose, is achieved in other ways as well:

At a distance there were occasional appearances of swift-moving men, horses, batteries, flags, and, with the crashing of infantry volleys were heard, often, wild and frenzied cheers. [VI, 49]

This single sentence contains several of the verbal procedures characteristic of Crane's prose. Though sometimes awkward, these procedures are still the ones responsible for Crane's surprising "pictures" and for his way of upsetting the concepts of causality inherent in more conventional prose. Inversions often bring into immediate relief a noun or series of nouns which impress the pictorial