

H.I.V.E.

THE OVERLORD PROTOCOL

MARK WALDEN

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STEPHEN CRANE'S ARTISTRY



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For Sarah, for Megan, forever



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Also by Mark Walden

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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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PROLOGUE

THE SHOCK WAVE FROM THE EXPLOSION THREW OTTO TUMBLING OUT OF CONTROL THROUGH THE AIR. HE COULD HEAR HIS OWN QUICK, PANICKY BREATHING, SUDDENLY LOUD WITHIN THE CONFINES OF THE HELMET. THE STARS IN THE NIGHT SKY SPUN PAST CRAZILY, HUGE PIECES OF BURNING DEBRIS WHISTLING PAST HIS FALLING BODY, CLOSE ENOUGH TO TOUCH. HE THOUGHT BACK TO HIS TRAINING AND TRIED TO CONTROL HIS TUMBLING BODY, ATTEMPTING TO BREAK OUT OF THE CHAOTIC SPIN THAT HE FOUND HIMSELF IN AS HE FELL. SLOWLY HE BROUGHT THE TUMBLING UNDER CONTROL, AND NOW HE WAS JUST FALLING, ALBEIT IN A SLIGHTLY MORE CONTROLLED WAY. HE GLANCED AT THE PALE GREEN NUMBERS FLICKERING ACROSS THE HEAD-UP DISPLAY IN HIS HELMET. HE WAS FALLING TOO FAST; HE NEEDED TO SLOW HIS DESCENT OR HE'D NEVER MAKE IT. HE SPREAD HIS ARMS AND LEGS, HIS BODY ACTING AS AN AIR BRAKE, REDUCING HIS SPEED.

“Twenty thousand feet,” a soft electronic voice chimed in his ear. “Descent velocity beyond acceptable parameters.”

All that Otto could see below was blackness. He knew

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that the target was down there somewhere, but without any lights or visible landmarks to orient himself by, he just had to hope that the GPS numbers on his visor display were correct and that he could use them to find the drop zone accurately.

“Fifteen thousand feet,” the voice said, just as calmly as before. Otto couldn’t help it: His brain worked too quickly sometimes, and it immediately translated the time between the announcements into an accurate calculation of the speed at which he was falling. Still too fast.

He didn’t know if anyone else had survived the explosion; it was too dark to see if he was falling alone. It wasn’t just the frigid air temperature at this altitude that sent a shiver running down his spine. He could very well be alone out here, and he doubted that he could successfully complete the mission solo.

“Ten thousand feet.”

As the voice calmly reported the terrifying speed of his descent, Otto started to feel a slight sense of panic. There was still no sign of the target; the numbers on the display all looked right, but there was no visual reference to support them. Suddenly a green crosshair popped up in the middle of Otto’s visor. The onboard navigation systems had determined that that was the drop target; Otto just had to pray that they were right. If the instruments’ careful calibration had been at all affected by the chaotic events of

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the past few minutes—if the targeting was out by even a few feet—then he really was approaching a very, very terminal velocity.

“Five thousand feet.”

The crosshair was growing larger and larger. Otto made tiny corrections to his body’s position, trying to keep the crosshair centered; he couldn’t afford to miss by even the tiniest degree. The wind continued to roar past his body, almost seeming to suck him toward the ground.

“Four thousand feet.”

Otto was in the final stages of his descent now. All of his recently acquired knowledge about making a jump like this seemed very detached from the actual terrifying experience.

“Three thousand feet.”

The target stayed centered in the head-up display, getting larger with every passing instant. The plan had to work, Otto thought to himself; there was no other option. What he was doing was by any reasonable measure insane, but there was no way Otto was going to let whoever was responsible for the events of the past twenty-four hours get away with it.

“Two thousand feet.”

Somewhere below was the man responsible.

“One thousand feet.”

Somewhere below was the man Otto had to find.

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"Five hundred feet."

Somewhere below was the man who had murdered Wing.

"Four hundred, three hundred, two hundred, one hundred . . ."

Otto closed his eyes.

"Zero."

CHAPTER 1

TWO WEEKS EARLIER

NERO STRODE DOWN THE STREET TOWARD THE OPERA HOUSE. HE DID NOT LIKE LEAVING THE SCHOOL UNATTENDED AND WAS EVEN LESS FOND OF THE REGULAR MEETINGS OF G.L.O.V.E.'S RULING COUNCIL. BUT HE UNDERSTOOD THAT THEY WERE A NECESSARY EVIL. NUMBER ONE HAD ISSUED HIS USUAL INVITATION TO THE WORLD'S ELITE VILLAINS FOR ONE OF THEIR SEMIREGULAR COUNCILS, AND HE KNEW THAT IT COULD BE A FATAL MISTAKE TO NOT ATTEND WITHOUT A SPECTACULARLY GOOD REASON. AS HE APPROACHED THE HUGE BUILDING, HE TURNED AWAY FROM THE MAIN ENTRANCE AND HEADED TOWARD A NARROW ALLEY THAT LED DOWN ONE SIDE. HE NOTED WITH AMUSEMENT THAT EVEN THE BACK ALLEYS OF VIENNA WERE SCRUPULOUSLY MAINTAINED. AS HE HEADED TOWARD THE THEATER'S STAGE DOOR.

The man behind the desk just inside the door looked up from his morning newspaper as Nero entered.

"I'm sorry, sir, but only performers and production staff are allowed beyond this point," the elderly

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doorman said, one hand reaching beneath the desk.

"That's quite all right," Nero replied, noting the subtle change in the man's posture. "I'm here for the audition."

"Audition, sir?" the doorman replied, his eyes narrowing.

"Yes, I believe that the auditions for the new production of *Faust* are taking place today, and I would hate to miss them."

The doorman's hand came back out from under the desk as his previously guarded expression broke into a slight smile.

"Of course, sir, the rest of the performers are already here. If you would just follow me." The doorman rose to his feet and gestured for Nero to follow him along the corridor and into the gloomy expanse of the backstage area. Nero noted with interest the props and scenery that were crammed into every nook and cranny, relics of performances past.

The old man continued to lead him through the twisting maze of discarded sets, until eventually he stopped in front of a dusty scenery flat painted with a depiction of a rusty iron portcullis. He slid the canvas-covered board to one side to reveal a solid-looking wooden door in the wall behind. He unlocked the door and stood aside.

"There you are, sir; they're waiting for you just inside," he said.

Nero opened the door and entered a small, steel-lined

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elevator with no visible controls. The door shut behind him, and a soft computerized voice filled the room.

“Please remain stationary while identity confirmation takes place,” the voice instructed. There was a brief flash of bright white light, and Nero had to blink hard to clear the spots that were suddenly swimming in his field of vision.

“Retinal scan complete; welcome, Dr. Nero,” the voice continued, and Nero felt the elevator begin to descend.

Nero often found himself wondering on these occasions just how many of these secret facilities G.L.O.V.E. maintained around the world. He knew that he had never attended a council meeting in the same location twice. He wondered if perhaps they were used just a single time and then demolished. Certainly it would be absurdly wasteful to use such a facility only once, but money was one thing that G.L.O.V.E. had never been short of.

The elevator doors slid silently open, and Nero stepped into a steel-lined corridor, which led to a large pair of frosted-glass doors a short distance ahead. Engraved in the glass was the fist-and-shattered-globe symbol of G.L.O.V.E., the Global League of Villainous Enterprises.

Nero walked down the corridor, the sound of his footsteps echoing off the brushed-metal walls. The glass doors hissed apart to admit him as he approached, and suddenly he could hear several familiar voices engaged in animated conversation. One voice rose above the others.