

An OPUS book

# The Modern American Novel

Malcolm Bradbury

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Two bodies of modern literature seem to me to have come to the real verge: the Russian and the American. . . . The furthest frenzies of French modernism or futurism have not yet reached the pitch of extreme consciousness that Poe, Melville, Hawthorne, Whitman reached. The Europeans were all *trying* to be extreme. The great Americans I mention just were it. Which is why the world has funkcd them, and funks them today.

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## Preface and Acknowledgements

This book covers the American novel from the 1890s, when western fiction saw the first stirrings of the tendency we have come to call 'modernism', to the immediate present, when the talk is of a successor movement we are coming to call 'postmodernism'. Between the two comes a story of enormous development and change, not only in the nature of American fiction but in its importance on the global map of fiction. It is a process not easy to record, since it is made up not just of those larger patterns of movement and counter-movement, influence and reaction, which constitute the history of any serious literary form. Modernity in fiction has taken many shapes and arisen from many artistic conflicts: this is one of the themes of this book. But another is the central role that American writing has played in any adequate conception of the modern novel. That high judgement is itself a modern one – in the 1890s American fiction was still regarded as an offshoot of British fiction; major figures like Herman Melville died in neglect during the decade; a novelist like Henry James preferred to work in England to have access to art's cosmopolitanism. Not until the 1920s did a generation of writers emerge in America – the generation of Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Faulkner, and Dos Passos – whose work seemed to have world impact, creating both a usable present and a sense of a usable past; not until 1930 did the Nobel Prize for Literature go to an American novelist, Sinclair Lewis, with Theodore Dreiser as close contender.

By that time, however, it had come to seem that an old prophecy was fulfilling itself. In 1820 Sydney Smith had asked, in the *Edinburgh Review*, 'Who reads an American book?' Melville was later to reply that one day everyone would, and that, moreover, that book would be a new sort of book, the product of a new nation. It was a prophecy still being asserted in the twentieth century: 'And so I say one can have at any moment in one's life all of English

literature inside you and behind you and you do not know if there is going to be any more of it. However very likely there is, there is at any rate going to be more American literature. Very likely.<sup>1</sup> This is (who else?) Gertrude Stein in 1934, claiming American writing as the truly twentieth-century writing: English writers, she said, had the nineteenth century, when they 'had and told', but the twentieth looked like being one 'too many for them'. By the 1930s, American fiction was thriving and exerting a powerful international influence – on the French novel, for example; by the 1950s it was American fiction that seemed to govern the direction of the contemporary novel. Behind all this there was, of course, a shift in the political as well as the cultural balance of power and superpower; as Gore Vidal once said, writers in powerful countries often win far more attention than they deserve. But it is also true that power, influence, and historical modernity express themselves within the texture of writing; and the fact is that the contemporary influence of American novels reflects an extraordinary range and quality of talent, a force of creation, and a historical intervention which merit close attention. It is also true that fiction from powerful countries frequently manifests an internationalism, a cosmopolitan awareness, arising from its cultural contacts; and this cosmopolitanism accounts for much of the interest of contemporary American fiction.

In the 1950s and before, it was conventional to emphasize the distinctiveness of American fiction, and to stress its degree of separateness from the European tradition. As Richard Chase suggested in a notable study, the reason for the relative neglect of nineteenth-century American fiction was that it diverged from the pre-eminently social and moral direction of European fiction, evolving its own tradition of 'romance', concerning itself less with society and custom than with the natural, the metaphysical, the noumenal. It was, said Leslie Fiedler, eminently a 'gothic' fiction; it displayed, said R. W. B. Lewis, a new world fable of prelapsarian man beginning again, the new Adam in the new Eden, existing not in history but mythical space; and other critics enlarged on these distinctions.<sup>2</sup> Since then, however, criticism has grown more

<sup>1</sup> Gertrude Stein, 'What is English Literature?' (1934), reprinted in Gertrude Stein, *Look At Me Now and Here I Am: Writings and Lectures, 1911–45*, ed. Patricia Meyerowitz (1971).

<sup>2</sup> Richard Chase, *The American Novel and Its Tradition* (1957); Leslie A. Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel* (1960, 1967); R. W. B. Lewis, *The American*

comparative, more concerned with the novel as a form; and this has reminded us that the main movements of the American novel have roughly paralleled the general development of the novel in the west. There have been special American weights and emphases: on transcendental romance in the early nineteenth century; on naturalism in the 1890s and the early twentieth century; on spatial and expressionistic modernism in the 1920s. But what has been crucial is that in American hands the novel has been deeply invigorated as a modern form, and has undergone some of its most striking modern recoveries.

All of which suggests the emphasis of this book, which is written with the comparative perspective much in mind. We may still regard the modern American novel as predominantly a product of the culture out of which it is created, as deriving from a distinct history, ideology, landscape, and cast of mind; we may also regard it as a central and flourishing instance of the novel as a living modern genre. I have sought here to balance the two: to take, so to speak, an approach that comes from American Studies, which attempts to see literature in the context of American history, and relate it to one that comes from comparative literature, which looks at the international relation of literary forms. I am concerned with the modern history of American culture; I am also concerned with the broad evolution of the modern novel as a species. I have told the story in both historical and formal stages, beginning with the radical naturalism and the subjective impressionism of the 1890s, considering the collision of naturalist realism and modernism in the 1910s and 1920s, the attempt to recover proletarian naturalism in the 1930s, and thence to the complex formal directions that have marked and continue to mark the post-war era. I have sought at the same time to look in some detail at individual authors; in case my selectivity seems too great, I have offered at the end of the book a fuller list of the modern American novelists whose work seems to me most significant.<sup>3</sup> I hope this book can be read as a critical record of the achievement of

*Adam: Innocence, Tragedy and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century* (1955); Marius Bewley, *The Eccentric Design: Form in the Classic American Novel* (1959); Richard Poirier, *A World Elsewhere: The Place of Style in American Literature* (1966, 1967); Tony Tanner, *City of Words: American Fiction 1950-1970* (1971).

<sup>3</sup> For much fuller coverage of individual authors, and a vaster map, see volume III, *United States and Latin America*, in *The Penguin Companion to Literature*, ed. Malcolm Bradbury, Eric Mottram, and Jean Franco (1971).

American fiction since the turning-point of the 1890s; I also hope it may contribute to our understanding of the modern novel in general.

There are various acknowledgements to be made. I have drawn somewhat on articles I have previously written: in chapters 1 and 2 on "'Years of the Modern': The Rise of Realism and Naturalism", in volume VIII, *American Literature to 1900*, and 'The American Risorgimento: The Coming of the New Arts', written with David Corker, in volume IX, *American Literature since 1900*, both in the *Sphere History of Literature in the English Language*, ed. Marcus Cunliffe (London: Sphere Books, 1975); in chapter 4, on 'Style of Life, Style of Art and the American Novelist in the 1920s', in *The American Novel and the Nineteen Twenties*, ed. Malcolm Bradbury and David Palmer (Stratford-upon-Avon Studies 13; London: Edward Arnold, 1971); for chapter 6 on 'The Novel' in volume III, 1945-1965, of *The Twentieth Century Mind*, ed. C. B. Cox and A. E. Dyson (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1972). Though the borrowings are light, acknowledgements to these editors and publishers are due. I am especially indebted to Catharine Carver for her wise and sensitive editing of these critical fictions. For much help and provocation in thinking about the novel in general, the American novel in particular, I am indebted to many colleagues, students, and friends, notably to Christopher Bigsby, Ellman Crasnow, Guido Almansi, David Lodge, John Fletcher, Jonathan Raban, Haideh Daragahi, Lawrence Levine, Ihab Hassan, Marc Chenetier, Lorna Sage, David Corker and Mas'ud Zaverzadeh, as to the University of East Anglia for much assistance.

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# 1 Naturalism and Impressionism: The 1890s

I'm not in a very good mood with 'America' myself. It seems to be the most grotesquely illogical thing under the sun; and I suppose I love it less because it won't let me love it more. I should hardly like to trust pen and ink with all the audacity of my social ideas; but after fifty years of optimistic content with 'civilization' and its ability to come out all right in the end, I now abhor it, and feel that it is coming out all wrong in the end, unless it bases itself anew on a real equality. Meanwhile I wear a fur-lined coat, and live on all the luxury my money can buy.

W. D. Howells, letter to Henry James, 1888

His mind took a mechanical but firm impression, so that afterward everything was pictured and explained to him, save why he himself was there.

Stephen Crane, *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895)

## I

In 1893 the American historian Henry Adams, sitting down amid the machinery on display at the World's Columbian Exposition, held in the bursting new skyscraper city of Chicago, felt himself to be confronted by a whole new set of powers. The late-nineteenth-century American wonders could be seen outside: Chicago itself, a village of 250 inhabitants in 1833, was now America's second city, railhead of the plains, hogbutcher of the world, its population over a million. Two American motions met here, the westering motion towards the frontier, the urbanizing motion towards the city; not only European immigrants but migrants off the land, pushed off their homesteads by recurrent agricultural depression, mechanization, and mortgages flooded into Chicago's factories, stockyards, and ghettos and intensified its social problems. The signs of mechanical development and innovation were everywhere apparent; indeed it was the technological marvels on display, with so much else, at the

Exposition that made Adams sit down in what he called 'helpless reflection', and consider the processes driving American culture, the culture of a nation that seemed to many the image of the modernizing future. 'Chicago', Adams wrote in his ironic, self-doubting, third-person autobiography, *The Education of Henry Adams* (1907) 'asked in 1893 for the first time the question of whether the American people knew where they were driving. . . . Chicago was the first expression of American thought as a unity.' In Adams's view, a new process of history was evolving, with America at its centre; new theories – based on laws of accelerating forces, exponential development, the process of entropy – were needed to explain it. And this process overwhelmed not only the past but past world-views and forms of education, including – hence the irony of his title – Henry Adams's own.

Apocalyptic feelings and rising pessimism about the direction of history were common enough in the west as the turn of the century approached. They were accelerated by the Darwinian legacy, which threatened alike religion and humanism, engendered greater concern with science and social management, and intensified the sense of victimization before dominant processes. Such feelings were particularly strong in the United States, where modernizing was accelerating, technological evolution advancing, and social stress rising at an unprecedented rate. At the same time there were great new excitements. The United States had come to being as a nation little more than a century before; now it was outstripping Great Britain and Germany combined in industrial production, and its new frontiers were technology and the city itself. Pessimism and optimism combined in Adams's response to what he came to call the new 'multiverse': *The Education of Henry Adams*, a novel-like work of extraordinary images, alienation, and self-effacement, displays a deep sense of historical displacement, and is a remarkable endeavour to bridge the space between the world's augmenting scientific and material energy and the capacities, or incapacities, of the human mind to master and unify the processes it had itself released. Adams's point was that changes in the historical process generated pressure on consciousness, that new forms of education were needed to grasp the conditions of contemporary life. As science and Darwin threatened the old teleological order, and socialism the lore of liberal individualism, so psychology and behaviourism were challenging the solidity of the social and the moral self. The structures of expression,

the arts of consciousness, were put under extreme strain; the tone shapes the anxious formal structure of Adams's book. It was part of a general epistemological and aesthetic upheaval in all the artistic forms, reshaping not just their subject-matter but their very mode of composition. The last years of the century generated new styles, forms, and movements in the arts, much as they did new technologies and scientific and social theories.

Appropriately, writers too came to the Chicago Exposition, like Hamlin Garland, one of a new generation of scientific realists (he called himself a 'veritist') who were now beginning to dominate the novel. In the changing new society, the old cultured patriciate of the East Coast was fading; Garland saw himself as a modern populist and determinist, reaching towards new geographical as well as literary frontiers, and he looked to the Middle West and West for a new American writing, observing the contrast between the America of plain and prairie and that of technology, unplanned capitalism, new science, and skyscrapers. He thus expressed many of the new notes emerging in the novel – a form which, in America as in Europe, had been steadily moving towards increased realism and naturalism. From the upheavals of 1848 onward, European fiction had been growing ever more representational and attentive to commonplace contemporary life; in America too the symbolist or transcendental romance of Poe, Hawthorne, and Melville had given way to a realism of democratic scepticism, concern with social problems, and fascination with the ordinary life of the expanding continent. 'Is it true? – true to the motives, the impulses, the principles that shape the life of actual men and women?' asked the novelist William Dean Howells, active importer of European realist ideas. For such ideas were, he stressed, essentially democratic and American, and they turned the writer towards the local and the familiar: the evolution of the novel was 'first the provincial, then the national, then the universal'. And, since the Civil War, realism of this kind had prospered in many guises – in the local-colour realism of Edward Eggleston's *A Hoosier Schoolmaster* (1871), or Sarah Orne Jewett's *The Country of the Pointed Firs* (1896); in the novel of progressive social indignation, like Henry Adams's own *Democracy* (1880) or Garland's own *A Spoil of Office* (1892); in the Western vernacular of writers like Bret Harte and Mark Twain.

But now, in Europe and America, even the novel of realism was in question, as old realistic ideas of individualism came under pressure

from new world-views. Fiction was becoming less the expression of a common reality all could recognize, more a response to the uncommon realities and systems that lay behind modern life and called for revelation. New modes of discourse, more scientific and systematic, drawn from sociology and biology, suggested the displacement of the individual from the centre of the universe; new formal techniques, more aesthetic and subjective, drawn from a new aesthetics, emphasized the importance of form and impression. Adams in Chicago saw a world of new powers; Garland, speaking in the same place, saw the need for a progressive new form of the novel. In both men, we can see the old ideas and ideals of nineteenth-century thought and art coming into question, and a grasping, in the transitional and *fin de siècle* mood, of those new notions of man and consciousness, those new structures of artistic expression that would transform the twentieth-century novel.

## II

As the 1890s started, three novelists dominated American fiction in reputation and influence. All had started their work in or just after the Civil War; all represented different aspects of the realist tradition; and all now seemed to enter an artistic crisis in the new atmosphere of the end of the century. Mark Twain, America's most powerful novelist, had begun as a frontier writer, his vernacular prose insistently mocking the genteel pressures, the formal styles and ideals of 'civilization'. His major novels were written on the East Coast after the war, but they explore the world of the frontier West before it. His main subjects were the Mississippi Valley in that river's key years as the central American artery, and then the movement west – themes that carried enormous moral force, for they evoked the innocent morality of a life beyond social rule and genteel convention. The central book was *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884), according to Hemingway the book with which American fiction started – a fundamental myth of self-creating American freedom, a vernacular vision of spontaneous open morality won on a river raft despite the enslaving pressures of life beyond. But Twain wrote too of post-war America, in a mixture of violent satire (*The Gilded Age*, 1873, with Charles Dudley Warner) and celebration of American technological potential. The ambivalent tone is summed up in *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889),

which displaces a Hartford, Connecticut, machine-shop superintendent back in time to that late-Victorian wonderland, sixth-century Camelot, to bring to its world of feudalism, monarchy, and slavery the modern American blessings – democracy, technology, know-how, advertising. But the book ends in horrifying irony: Hank's machinery outruns its creator and murderously destroys all life with a mechanical holocaust, in a dark predictive image of modernity. That darkening vision spread through Twain's work of the 1890s and, though often explained as the result of personal crises, it clearly also derived from the intellectual crisis of the age – his growing doubt about the power of 'innocent' morality, his reading in the new texts of determinism. *Pudd'nhead Wilson* (1894) reverts to the classic subject-matter, Mississippi Valley life before the Civil War, but sees it now through the eyes of 1890s pessimism and determinism: an old story-book fable of two children of different backgrounds exchanged in the cradle is turned into a plot of devastating ironies. One child is white and 'free', the other 'black' and a slave; Twain develops the plot to question all notions of freedom, showing that his characters are all slaves to something, to heredity or environment, and cannot assert an independent identity or sustain a moral intent. And that bitter irony dominates the yet bleaker works that follow: *The Man Who Corrupted Hadleyburg* (1900), the philosophical tract *What Is Man?* (1906), the unfinished *The Mysterious Stranger* (posthumous, 1916).

'I have lost my pride in [Man] & can't write gaily nor praisefully about him anymore,' Twain wrote in 1899 to William Dean Howells, another Midwesterner who had penetrated the East Coast citadel by becoming editor of the *Atlantic Monthly*; there he urged his case for an egalitarian American realism which dealt with the 'smiling aspects' of American life. Howells became, indeed, the exemplary American realist, producing something like a novel a year, from morally acute, photographically precise works dealing with what he called 'the life of small things' to Utopian romances. To a degree rare in American fiction, his characters were members of family and community, living out ordinary lives amid the contingency and moral pressure of place, time, and custom. His best-known book, *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885), deals with a simple Boston paint manufacturer who rises in the post-Civil War industrial boom, but is drawn into corruption. Scruples intervene, and his social and business success alike collapse; but his social fall is his

moral rise, a contribution to society's ethical economy. Increasingly, though, Howells's work, like Twain's, revealed a deep ambiguity in its treatment of commercial, corporate, technological America. Thus Lapham's 'virtue' is rooted in his pre-Civil War ethic of agrarian individualism and simplicity; and his failure in the America of trusts and corporatism suggests what powerful pressures threatened Howells's world of domestic decency. Like Twain, then, Howells grew pessimistic, especially after the condemnation of the Haymarket Riot anarchists in 1886. In 1889 he moved from Boston, the old literary capital, to New York City, reflecting this in a new kind of novel, *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (1890), about New York as the modern technological city where social goodwill is collapsing, strife and strikes split the classes, and the form of the novel as he had used it is itself seen under threat. The task of writing about the new world is hence handed on to his character Kendricks, who claims that 'the great American novel, if true, must be incredible'. Howells saw his mode of social realism declining, supported the younger naturalists, and wrote of his despair to the third survivor of realism, Henry James.

James was the most cosmopolitan of the realists, and had moved to realism's fountainhead, in Europe. Earlier, James's expatriation had seemed to Howells an evasion of realism's task, an escape to Europe's 'romance'. In fact James's choice of milieu arose from his need for a dense social order that would set art into motion; and his 'romance' was managed through a realist perception refined by contact with Flaubert, Turgenev, George Eliot. His classic requirement became 'solidity of specification', meaning not a reportorial but a registrative view of art. Art's task was not to record but to *make* life; reality was a constructed, not a recorded, thing; it was in the inherent tension of the novel between empiricism and idealism, realism and romance, naturalism's 'magnificent treadmill of the pigeon-holed and documented' and romance's 'balloon of experience', that the form found itself. This was James's quest of the 1870s and 1880s; but by the beginning of the 1890s he too was beginning to feel under pressure, and he replied to Howells's pessimism with his own. 'I *have* felt, for a long time past,' he wrote in 1895, 'that I have fallen on evil days – every sign or symbol of being in the least *wanted*, anywhere by anyone, having so utterly failed.' Again, his crisis was partly personal, but it was also philosophical and aesthetic; however, for all his doubts, James responded to the aesthetic trans-

formations of the 1890s, and made an extraordinary and innovative recovery. By the time of this letter he was already on a new path that would lead, with *The Spoils of Poynton* and *What Maisie Knew* in 1897, to the remarkable work of his late phase – work in which consciousness severs itself from the world's materiality, changing the entire grammar of fiction. By the century's turn, James was ready, in his essay 'The Future of Fiction', to suggest that the novel might reach a new level of self-realization: 'It has arrived, in truth, the novel, late at self-consciousness, but it has done its utmost ever since to make up for lost opportunities,' he noted, pointing, undoubtedly, to the new achievements that had grown in Europe and America during the nineteenth century's last decade.

### III

In America, these ferments are most visible in the work of the remarkable new generation of writers who began to emerge in the 1890s and took on strong character as a generation – partly because they shared aesthetic theories and preoccupations, partly because they shared the tutelage of Howells, partly because most had brief careers and early deaths. Often presented by the critics as strongly American, working, as Alfred Kazin put it, 'on native grounds', they were in fact much influenced by European theories of naturalism – above all those of Emile Zola, who in 1879 had set down his theory of the naturalist novel in *Le Roman expérimental*. For Zola, the word 'experimental' had scientific analogies; the novelist's task was to undertake a social or scientific study, recording facts, styles and systems of behaviour, living conditions, the workings of institutions, and deducing the underlying processes of environmental, genetic, and historical-evolutionary development. Naturalism was thus realism scientized, systematized, taken finally beyond realist principles of fidelity to common experience or of humanistic exploring of individual lives within the social and moral web of existence.

In fact naturalism was, by the 1890s, beginning to decline in Europe, disturbed by new decadent, impressionist, aesthetic tendencies that seemed in tune with contemporary psychology. However in the United States, where technological systems seemed to prevail, evolutionary hopes were strong, the laws of social struggle were apparent, and social Darwinism was a popular creed, it acquired a special dominance. Another reason for the appeal of naturalism, with

its scientific, often ironic world-view, was the fascination of the new American cityscape itself. For if the novelist was analogous to the sociologist, so was he to the journalist, the hard-boiled city room reporter or the crusading investigator of social facts, the man who walked in the city, observed, explored, exposed, the man who had been there, in the place of experience – the ghetto, the stockyard, the apartment block, the battlefield, the social jungle. He was like the new photographer, with his hand-held camera, catching sudden vignettes of life. But he was also like the modern painter, preoccupied with shades and acts of perception, the blur and impression of fleeting modern urban reality, the strange angles of vision needed to take in the world of manifold contrasts. Indeed the analogy with painting drew the American naturalist novelists back towards the problems of form and subjectivity which also haunted the 1890s; the tense relation between art and life, impressionism and naturalism, became a dominant theme in the writing and criticism of the most impressive writers of the decade.

These young writers had been bred amid the transitions which ran so powerfully through nineteenth-century American society, making past accountings of experience seem incomplete. Thus Hamlin Garland had been born on the economically depressed prairie, in the 'middle border' area of Wisconsin, Iowa, South Dakota, moved to Boston to immerse himself in new social, political, and economic theories, turning to evolutionary thought to explain the bleak world he had left behind him, then returned to Chicago and the West around 1893. Frank Norris was born in Chicago itself, where a new school of urban sociologists was exploring the hard world of immigrant conflict and social deprivation, and where a similar school of urban novelists would follow. He had bohemian leanings, went to Paris as an art student, and returned with Zola's novels to Berkeley, in California, another new centre of literary activity. And it was a similar bohemian revolt that led Stephen Crane to break with the genteel morality of his religious background – he was born in New Jersey, the son of a Methodist minister – and move to New York, to the 'mean streets' of the Bowery and the Tenderloin, aiming both to report the facts and refine his aesthetic sensibilities. For these writers, confronting a new American social experience, naturalism offered a view which questioned the conviction that man was a conscious and rational creature, that happiness is secured by virtuous behaviour, that the landscape of familiar experience offered all the



moral pointers men needed. With this view, they could observe mass and mechanism, touch on unexplored areas of society, the life of working people, the problems of cities, the operations of social and genetic patterns. Their writing drew on the new 'brute fact' of American life; hence their insistence that literature derived from life rather than form. They turned to consciously modern settings – the shock city, the West, the ghettos, depressed homesteads, the skyscrapers, corporations and department stores – and period themes – the split between culture and materiality, idealism and underlying economic and sexual drives. Naturalism thus became a way of dealing with the fact of a modern America largely unexplored by genteel awareness; but it was also a formal obsession, part of the decade's aesthetic self-consciousness, not merely – as Zola himself emphasized – a reporting system, but an artistic movement.

A conflict between the passion to get at life and the pursuit of form can lead to a dualistic vision. Strikingly, for a generation ostensibly given over to 'life', most of these writers produced works of aesthetic speculation. Norris, in his essays in *The Responsibilities of the Novelist* (1903), urged that art yield to life, 'the honest rough-and-tumble, Anglo-Saxon knockabout that for us means life'; he equally emphasized his 'naturalist' sources and stressed that naturalism was not a mode of report but of romance, requiring scale, exaggeration, and symbolic motifs. Hamlin Garland displayed a similar tension in the essays of his aptly titled *Crumbling Idols* (1894), where he defined his own tendency, 'veritism', as a reaction both against 'romance' and against Zola's sexual explicitness and lack of idealism. Veritism was a form of local realism, dealing with the near-by and the probable; but it also was a form of 'impressionism', a formal response 'based on the moment of experience, actively felt and immediately expressed'. Stephen Crane, a greater artist if a weaker theorist, was obsessed with similar problems. Behind his stories and his one great novel, *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895), the naturalist pieties are evident. In the presentation copies of *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* (1893), his first published fiction, printed at his own expense, he wrote that it tried to show 'that environment is a tremendous thing in the world and frequently shapes lives regardless'. His settings were the classic ones of naturalism: the big city, the battlefield, man exposed and adrift in a nature that is 'indifferent, flatly indifferent', as he puts it in his fine story 'The Open Boat' (1897). Crane wrote with persistent naturalist assumptions about the failure