Reflections on Stephen Crane

Donna Campbell
Washington State University

Like a lot of people, I was first introduced to Crane in a high school English class, but since the book was *The Red Badge of Courage*, and hence about war, I paid little attention. I did not care about war or about Henry Fleming at that point; I cared about characters named Tess Durbeyfield and Carrie Meeber, after finding Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* and Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* in a bin of marked-down books, books so cheap that the covers fell off and scattered the green newsprint pages until I rubber-banded them back together for a second reading. We were taught that Stephen Crane had an important place in literature because he used *symbolism*, a term dear to my teacher's heart. She explained that “The red sun was pasted in the sky like a wafer” referred to a communion wafer, whereas I, as an inveterate reader of Victorian fiction and the language of sealing wax and correspondence, thought a wafer was simply something used to seal a letter. But reading *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* for the first time revealed an entirely different Stephen Crane. Here was Maggie Johnson, a character worthy to stand beside Tess and Carrie, a girl whose environment stacked the cards against her in some almost unbearable ways yet who tried as best she could to escape her fate and to create meaning and beauty from the life she'd been given. This kind of courage interested me as Henry Fleming's never had, as in this passage from chapter 6:

1. “She spent some of her week’s pay in the purchase of flowered cretonne for a lambrequin. She made it with infinite care and hung it to the slightly-careening mantle, over the stove, in the kitchen.”

At this point, the reader has already seen the wholesale destruction of furniture, not to mention family life, in the Johnson household. Maggie's creation of order here, her impulse toward beauty, is heartbreaking because it's a gesture of hope, and hope in such a place is also defiance against a universe that does not permit hope to exist. Crane knows this, and we know it, and yet we hope along with Maggie that this time will be different, that the lambrequin will stand and that Pete will notice it. Of course, he doesn't; instead he “[flourishes] his clothes and then vanish[es], without having glanced at the lambrequin,” which is smashed in a few days by the “heavy hand” of her mother. The destruction of Maggie’s innocence by these two monsters
of self-absorption, which the episode foreshadows, renders the rest of
the events in Maggie’s life inevitable, yet Maggie continues to make the
gesture and to reach out to a world that consistently rebuffs her. Like
Tess’s letter to Angel Clare or Emily Dickinson’s letter to “the world /
that never wrote to me,” Maggie’s gestures never reach anyone who
can respond to all that she can offer. Of course, neither do the Swede’s
gestures toward community:

2. “The Easterner reflected again. ‘I didn’t see anything wrong at all,’
he said at last slowly.”

Crane’s control of style comes through in this seemingly minor
quotation from “The Blue Hotel.” Like a painting using anamorphosis
or trompe l’oeil techniques, the story reveals itself only to the spectator
willing to approach it from a different perspective. The anamorphic
mirror that reveals the second view here is the Easterner’s revelation
of Johnnie’s cheating near the end of the story. On a first reading, the
Easterner’s statement seems of a piece with his quiet, rather deliber­
ate actions throughout; he consistently sees himself as a peacemaker,
repeating “What’s the good of a fight over a game of cards?” in section
5. Yet what his guilt-stricken admission to Bill, the Cowboy, shows, and
this statement confirms, is that his deliberate action helped to cause the
Swede’s death. Notice how Crane drags out the Easterner’s statement
by using extra, even unnecessary words: he reflects again, after denying
once already that Johnnie was at fault. He sees nothing wrong at all. He
speaks at last and slowly. Surely one adverb or adverbial phrase would
do, if this sentence were as inconsequential as it appears. But it’s not:
what the reader sees the second time through is that the Easterner is
lying, slowly and deliberately; he knows that Johnnie cheated and does
not want to be involved. The Easterner is astute enough to recognize
that the Swede thinks he’s in the violent setting of a dime novel, but
however deluded the Swede may be in his fear, the Easterner shares
in it—enough, at least, to deny the Swede the comradeship that might
be his salvation. Through the use of style and an almost imperceptible
repetition, Crane provides us with the clues that we’re too impatient
to see—until he gives us the key at the end of the story. Sometimes,
however, he provides us with the key more directly:

3. “When it occurs to a man that nature does not regard him as impor-
tant, and that she feels she would not maim the universe by disposing
of him, he at first wishes to throw bricks at the temple, and he hates
deeply the fact that there are no bricks and no temples.”
This quotation from "The Open Boat" reframes and summarizes the men's thoughts about being dragged away from nibbling at the "sacred cheese of life." It sounds at first like one of Crane's poems written out in prose form, but it represents a different side of the author: the aphoristic Crane. Since Crane's work is unique, it's possible to forget that he is of the generation that read Oscar Wilde and George Bernard Shaw, but his aphorisms, like theirs, serve not only to identify him as a man of his time but to place him in a modern tradition of ironic distancing. Crane also uses the technique of aphorism as a means of shifting perspective, often through ironically undercutting the material surrounding the statement. For example, in "The Mexican Lower Classes," he prefaces a series of unflattering observations with an aphoristic disclaimer: "It perhaps might be said—if any one dared—that the most worthless literature of the world has been that which has been written by the men of one nation concerning the men of another." In his mock-aphoristic mode, Crane undercut his pretenses before critics can do so, occasionally venturing into a humor with which he is too rarely credited, as in this passage from "A Man and Some Others": "It is sometimes taught that men do the furious and desperate thing from an emotion that is as even and placed as the thoughts of a village clergyman on Sunday afternoon. Usually, however, it is to be believed that a panther is at the time born in the heart, and the subject does not resemble a man picking mulberries." Like Mark Twain, Crane follows a pattern in his aphorisms: the more lofty and ornate the diction in the first part of the statement, the more thoroughly the statement will be undercut with concrete language at the end, a pattern that frequently holds true in his poetry as well:

4. "The puff of a coat imprisoning air. / A face kissing the water-death / A weary slow sway of a lost hand / And the sea, the moving sea, the sea. / God is cold."

Most of Crane's best poetry memorably mixes abstract ideas and concrete details, usually mocking the former through the deft employment of the latter. "A man adrift on a slim spar" begins with the concrete, builds to a consideration of the abstract, impersonal "The Hand" that controls the man's fate, notes "A pale hand sliding from a polished spar," and concludes with concrete details of the stanza quoted above. The contrast between the power of "The Hand" and the powerlessness of the lower-case "hand" helplessly losing its grip anchors the poem. Both upper- and lower-case hands are in constant movement, but it is the images of the sea and the man that persist in
memory, especially in Crane’s use of sounds: the “puff of a coat,” the “weary slow sway” of the lost hand. For me, this passage echoes two earlier poems: Whitman’s “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking,” with its vision of the sea as an angry muttering mother whose language recalls Crane’s “growl after growl of crest”; and Matthew Arnold’s “To Marguerite,” with its lament that “we mortal millions live alone.” Arnold’s poem ends with these lines:

Who renders vain their deep desire?
A God, a God their severance ruled;
And bade betwixt their shores to be
The unplumb’d, salt, estranging sea.”

Arnold’s cold God suggests Crane’s, and the repetition in Crane’s last line recalls the language of Arnold’s poem. It seems almost overkill to cap the simplicity of “the sea, the moving sea, the sea” with the refrain “God is cold.” Yet as Crane reminds us, art is necessarily an imperfect process, an unceasing battle with the self:

5. “He seemed engaged in some kind of a duel. His hair disheveled, his eyes gleaming, he was in a deadly scuffle. In the sketch was the landscape of heavy blue, as if seen through powder smoke, and all the skies burned red. There was in these notes a sinister quality of hopelessness, eloquent of a defeat, as if the scene represented the last hour on a field of disastrous battle.”

This scene from The Third Violet shows Hawker painting a scene suspiciously reminiscent of The Red Badge of Courage, with its red sky and gunpowder-blue landscape. It is just one example of Crane’s humor in the novel, the sort of ironic self-reference that energizes the work despite its flaws. Hawker’s disheveled hair makes him faintly comical, but the seriousness of his approach to art makes the reader respect him despite the general haplessness of his courtship of Grace Fanhall. What Hawker attacks with his artist’s weapons of canvas and brush is “a possession of his mind, and he did it fiercely, mercilessly, formidable.” Whether this possession is sentimentality, or idealism, or simply the imperfect self is never stated, for the point is already clear: the human being may be ridiculous, Crane seems to say, but the artist is not, and, in the long term, it is the artist and his work that count.