

# STEPHEN CRANE

BY CARL VAN DOREN

MODERN American literature may be said, accurately enough, to have begun with Stephen Crane thirty years ago. Its beginnings were far from clamorous and were at first very little noted. The nation in 1893 had the tariff, the panic, and the Columbian Exposition to think about. Among men of letters the elder classics were all dead but Holmes, who was chirping his valedictories in Boston; Mark Twain, Howells, Henry James, past middle age, had established their reputations on safe ground; the monthly magazines set the prevailing tone in literature—picturesque, kindly, and discreet. It is true that the sardonic Adams brothers were already at their work, but they, like the sons of Noah, concerned themselves with ancestral peccadilloes. It is true, too, that the poems of Emily Dickinson, posthumously issued, glittered like fireflies in the poetic twilight, but they were to have no heirs except Crane's ironic verses in their own century. Crane, breaking sharply with current literary modes, took the most contemporary life for his material and made himself heard before the decade ended.

Though "Maggie: A Girl of the Streets," appeared almost surreptitiously and by the public was altogether overlooked, it proved to Howells, at least, that Crane was a writer who had sprung into life fully armed. He had indeed gone through no formal training either as writer or as reader. So far as he had a profession, it was reporting for the newspapers; so far as he had literary models, they were odd volumes of Tolstoy and Flaubert which he had picked up. What was at once original and mature in Crane was his habit of thinking.

He called himself a man of sense, and deserved his title. For him the orthodox, the respectable, or the classical did not exist, or at any rate had no binding authority. He imagined the world as a ship which some god had fashioned carefully and then had heedlessly allowed to escape his jurisdiction,

So that, forever rudderless, it went upon the seas  
Going ridiculous voyages,  
Making quaint progress,  
Turning as with serious purpose  
Before stupid winds.  
And there were many in the sky  
Who laughed at this thing.

The state of mankind in such a world could not seem to Crane entirely glorious. Its orthodoxies and respectabilities were, he felt, only so much cotton in which it liked to pack itself; and its classical—that is, traditional—ways of representing itself in art, often mere frozen gestures. Too unschooled and too impatient to look for the reality behind accepted forms of manners or of art, Crane was too honest to pretend that he saw it there. If he could not see life face to face, he did not particularly care to see it at all. He had, therefore, to study it below or above the conventional levels; in the slums, on the battle-field, along the routes of difficult adventure. Reality for him, to be reality at all, had to be immediate and intense.

Both "Maggie" and its companion novel "George's Mother" illustrate this attitude. In the one a girl of the old Bowery neighborhood, driven from home by the drunken brutality of her mother, seeks refuge with a lover, loses him to a more practised woman, and drowns herself. In the other a young workingman of the same neighborhood, the last of five sons, falls in with

a gang of toughs, loses his job, and breaks his mother's heart. For either of these stories the earlier nineties could have furnished Crane a formula by which he might have exhibited Maggie's career as edifying and George's as sentimental, taming the narratives by genteel expurgation and rounding them out with moral disquisition. When Crane went into the slums he did not go slumming. He would not condescend to his material. He reproduced the speech of his characters as exactly as his ability and the regulations of the Postoffice permitted him. He did not in the least mind that the savagery of some of his incidents would be sure to shock some of his readers. His method was as direct as his attitude. Without any parade of structure, without any of the pedantry of the well-made novel, he arranged his episodes on the simplest thread. Detail by detail, he caught hold of actuality as firmly as he could, and set it forth without regard to any possible censure except that which his own conscience would bring against him if he were less than honest. Then he left the rest to the ironical perception of any man of sense who might chance upon his books.

By a paradox which is a rule of art, Crane thus achieved, in his way, the effects which he had appeared to be neglecting, and wrote novels which are, in their way, classics, though minor classics. Certainly the moral tendency is indisputable. No girl ever ran away from home as a result of reading "Maggie"; no son ever forgot his parents as a result of reading "George's Mother." The fact that it seems ridiculous to point out the moral tendency of such stories shows how far Crane lifted them, as he has helped teach later novelists to lift their stories, out of the low plane of domestic sentimentalism, with its emphasis on petty virtues and vices, to the plane of the classics, with their emphasis on the major vices of meanness and cruelty and the major virtues of justice and magnanimity. In something of the same fashion he lifted his stories from the plane of art on which the guide-post is important or

necessary to the plane on which wisdom is communicated immediately, by example not by precept, and the reader, having lived something and not merely learned it, is less likely to forget. To his contemporaries Crane seemed heartless when he plunged into forbidden depths and brought up dreadful things which he showed the world without apology or comment. A less conventional taste perceives that it would have been more heartless, as it would have been less artful, for him to intrude his doctrines into the presence of Maggie's or of George's mother's tragedy. Here are certain veritable happenings, the books insist. What is to be thought, the books tacitly inquire, about the world in which such horrors happen?

Crane's procedure was not essentially different with his masterpiece, "The Red Badge of Courage." Less by Tolstoy or by Zola, a recent biographer points out, than by something much more native, Crane was led to his handling of war. Ever since Appomattox there had of course been going on a literary attempt to make the Civil War out an epic conflict, with all the appurtenances of pomp and heroism. But side by side with that had run a popular memory of it, not enshrined in books, which former soldiers exchanged in the vernacular and repeated, no doubt often tediously, to any others who would listen. In this popular memory Crane found his material. For his protagonist he chose an ordinary recruit, fresh from an inland farm, and carried him through his first experience of actual fighting. As the recruit naturally has no notion of the general plan of battle, he has to obey commands that he does not understand, that he resents, that he hates. His excited senses color the occasion, even the landscape. He suffers agonies of fatigue and almost a catastrophe of fear before he becomes acclimated to his adventure. Perhaps he seems unusually imaginative, but he is presented without too much subtlety. He speaks a convincing boyish dialect. His sensations are limited to something like his spiritual capacity. Though he is a pawn

of war, he is also a microcosm. When Crane later saw a battle he found that he had been accurate in his account, not because he had studied military strategy but because he had placed the centre of the affair where it belongs, in the experience of the individual soldier.

If "The Red Badge" afforded Crane a happy opportunity to bring his ideas to bear upon a matter which he thought had long been swaddled in heroic nonsense, so did it afford him a happy opportunity to exercise his art. The soldier is a lens through which a whole battle may be seen, a sensorium upon which all its details may be registered. But, being in the fear of death, he is not a mere transparent lens, a mere passive sensorium. The battle takes a kind of mad shape within his consciousness as the tangled items of it stream through him. Since the action of the narrative is all laid in his excited mind, it has no excuse for ever being perfunctory or languid. All is immediate, all is intense. This gives the excuse for an occasional heightening of the language nearly to the pitch of poetry, as here: "As he listened to the din from the hillside, to a deep pulsating thunder that came from afar to the left, and to the lesser clamors which came from many directions, it occurred to him that they were fighting, too, over there, and over there, and over there. Heretofore he had supposed that all the battle was directly under his nose. As he gazed around him the youth felt a flash of astonishment at the pure, blue sky and the sun gleaming on the trees and fields. It was surprising that Nature had gone tranquilly on with her golden process in the midst of so much devilment." And yet the thrill of the narrative does not arise from the language, so rarely and so delicately is it elevated. It arises from a certain air of integrity which the whole novel owes to the closeness with which the action is imagined and the candor with which it is represented. Once more Crane, disregarding the heroic and throwing the grand style overboard, had been justified, and had taken a long step in the direction

which American literature was to travel for a generation.

Not merely American literature. In England where, says H. G. Wells, "The Red Badge" came as "a record of an intensity beyond all precedent," Crane seemed "the first expression of the opening mind of a new period." By comparison Henry James looked a little tenuous, Kipling a little metallic, Stevenson a little soft. Joseph Conrad, significantly, was among Crane's particular admirations and admirers. Without Conrad's brooding vision and his ground swells of rhythm, the younger man had something of the same concentration upon vivid moments. But the influence of Crane in England, as in America, was toward brilliance, toward impressionism. After the success which "The Red Badge" brought him he flashed brightly across many scenes. He went as a journalist to the Southwest and to Mexico; he tried to go filibustering to Cuba. He who had never witnessed a battle was asked, on the strength of his book, to be a war correspondent, in Greece and in the Caribbean. He moved back and forth between New York and London, always in the cleverest company. Scandal endowed him with a legendary eminence in wild oats which he would have been too busy to sow even if he had been disposed. In these circumstances, he tended to have better fortune with short stories than with novels. By some queer turn of irony the author of "The Open Boat", "The Monster", "The Blue Hotel" has been left out of the canon which the queer experts in the short story have gradually evolved, but of late his mastery of the form is coming to be more and more admitted. He could, as in "The Open Boat", tell a straight story of adventure with breathless ferocity. He could, as in "The Monster", expose the stupidity of public opinion in a cramped province. He could, as in "The Blue Hotel", show fate working blindly and causelessly in the muddled lives of men. At other times he was full of comedy. And always he was spare, pungent, intense.

He had Melville's bold combination of largeness and humor, with a pungency of phrase which is Crane's alone. Thus, for example, he gives an episode of the perilous voyage in "The Open Boat": "Canton flannel gulls flew near and far. Sometimes they sat down on the sea, near patches of brown seaweed that rolled on the waves with a movement like carpets on a line in a gale. The birds sat comfortably in groups, and they were envied by some in the dingy, for the wrath of the sea was no more to them than it was to a covey of prairie chickens a thousand miles inland. Often they came very close and stared at the men with black bead-like eyes. At these times they were uncanny and sinister in their unblinking scrutiny, and the men hooted angrily at them, telling them to be gone. One came, and evidently decided to alight on the top of the captain's head. The bird flew parallel to the boat and did not circle, but made short sidelong jumps in the air in chicken-fashion. His black eyes were wistfully fixed upon the captain's head. 'Ugly brute', said the oiler to the bird, 'You look as if you were made with a jack-knife'. The cook and the correspondent swore darkly at the creature. The captain naturally wished to knock it away with the end of the heavy painter; but he did not dare do it because anything resembling an emphatic gesture would have capsized this freighted boat, and so with his open hand, the captain gently and carefully waved the gull away. After it had been discouraged from the pursuit the captain breathed easier on account of his hair." Without a touch of heroic language Crane here immensely heightens the scene by making it, though death crowds upon it, somehow droll. At such passages the drama grows breathless.

The demand for intensity in fiction, of course, goes in and out of fashion. Some other, calmer age may regard Crane as hectic. He occupies, however, a temperate position between the writers who seem flat and the writers who seem to have carried impressionism to a dizzy verge. Crane is never obscure. The first of the imagists, he never becomes jagged in his manner, nor sacrifices movement to the elaboration of striking detail. To call him a journalist of genius helps to define him, but there still remains the problem of his haunting charm. That charm springs, in large measure, from his free, courageous mind. Lucidity like his is poetry. Even when he is journalistically crude and incorrect, as he often is, he reveals an intelligence working acutely upon its observations. He has therefore the smallest possible burden of nonsense to carry with him. He does not worry himself with insoluble mysteries, such as the duties of the cosmic whole to the finite individual.

A man said to the universe:  
 "Sir, I exist!"  
 "However," replied the universe,  
 "The fact had not created in me  
 A sense of obligation."

Thus jauntily Crane can dismiss the larger metaphysics. He works within a tangible area. And when his intelligence has brought him close to his material he feels for it the desire of a lover. That he sees life under the light of irony does not diminish his passion but increases it. Are these characters, these situations, these comic or tragic consequences, after all, only the brief concerns of fate? Doubtless. But they have importance for the ephemeral creatures who are involved in them. And they have pattern and color for the unduped yet affectionate spectator.

# FOUR GENERATIONS

BY RUTH SUCKOW

“**M**OVE just a little closer together—the little girl more toward the centre—that’s good. Now I think we’ll get it.”

The photographer dived once more under the black cloth.

“Stand back, ma,” a husky voice said. “You’ll be in the picture.”

Aunt Em stepped hastily back with a panicky look. Mercy, she didn’t want to show! She hadn’t had time to get her dress changed yet, had come right out of the kitchen where she was baking pies to see the photograph taken. She was in her old dark blue kitchen dress and had her hair just wadded up until she could get time to comb it. It didn’t give her much time for dressing up, having all this crowd to cook for.

The boys, and Uncle Chris, standing away back on the edges, grinned appreciatively. Fred whispered to Clarence, “Laugh if ma’d got in it.” The way she had jumped back, and her unconsciousness of the ends sticking up from her little wad of hair delighted the boys. When they looked at each other, a little remembering glint came into their eyes.

There was quite a crowd of onlookers. Aunt Em. Uncle Chris in his good trousers, and his shirt sleeves, his sunburned face dark brown above the white collar that Aunt Em had made him put on because of Charlie’s. Uncle Gus and Aunt Sophie Spfierschlage had come over to dinner, and stood back against the white house wall, Aunt Sophie mountainous in her checked gingham. The boys, of course, and Bernie Schuldt who was working for Chris; and another fellow who had come to look at

some hogs and who was standing there, conscious of his old overalls and torn straw hat, mumbling, “Well, didn’t know I was gona find anything like this goin’ on.” . . . Charlie’s wife, Ella, had been given a chair where she could have a good view of the proceedings. She tried to smile and wave her handkerchief when little Phyllis looked around at her. Then she put the handkerchief to her eyes, lifting up her glasses with their narrow light shell rims, still smiling a little painfully. She had to think from how far Katherine had come. . . .

Aunt Em and Aunt Sophie were whispering, “Aint it a shame Edna couldn’t get over! They coulda took one of Chris and her and Marine and Merle, with Grandpa, too. . . . That little one looks awful cute, don’t she? . . . Well, what takes him so long? Grandpa won’t sit there much longer. I should think they coulda had it taken by this time a’ready.”

They all watched the group on the lawn. They had decided that the snowball bushes would “make a nice background.” The blossoms were gone, but the leaves were dark green, and thick. What a day for taking a picture! It would be so much better out here than in the house. Katherine had made them take it right after dinner, so that little Phyllis would not be late for her nap—nothing must ever interfere with that child’s nap. It was the brightest, hottest time of day. The tall orange summer lilies seemed to open and shimmer in the heat. Things were so green—the country lawn with its thick grass, the heavy foliage of the maple trees against the blue summery sky of July. The thin varnished supports of the camera stand glittered yellow and