A STUDY OF THE POETRY OF STEPHEN CRANE

by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Criticism, after all, is not to legislate but to raise the dead.

--- Sir Walter Raleigh

INTRODUCTION

When we consider the versatility of one of America's most notable writers--Stephen Crane--the question arises as to whether or not he would have received any recognition for his poetry if he had not also won a prominent place as a prose writer. If we could, only temporarily, sweep from our minds all the memories of The Red Badge of Courage it might be possible to read his poetry with some degree of objectivity. Yet, perhaps it would be possible to obtain the proper perspective of his poetry if we could follow the judicial method of the ancient Egyptians, who conducted their trials in a darkened courtroom so that, the pleaders, witnesses and defendants being all unseen, the judges could not be moved in their judgment by sympathy for, or knowledge of, the people concerned.

Usually, we cannot (either fortunately or unfortunately) pass over the title page of a book of poetry without looking at the name of the poet, nor can we turn our previous experience of a memorable novel ON and OFF with a switch; instead, we are fallible creatures, and when we first see the name of Stephen Crane on a volume of poetry we are naturally inclined to recall the crisp, stark words contained in his The Red Badge of Courage. The novel is notable for an excellency of expression; and, indeed, it becomes a dramatic poem if we extend a certain latitude to our use of terms.

If Crane had never written a single line of poetry he would still be referred to as a poet in the same sense that James and Conrad were poets. His prose writings depend, to a large extent, on symbolic imagery; in most instances, it is the deeply imbedded imagery which determines the

meaning of his novels. Consequently, one is surprised to find that his poetry does not have the sweeping melody of his best prose. Instead, his poetry is primarily made up of concise, almost colorless expression; yet, as contradictory as it may seem, his prose remains immitigably poetic. The most relevant distinction which bears on this seemingly ambiguous condition has been suggested by T. S. Eliot, who, in reference to his own work, has said that "In one's prose reflexions one may be legitimately occupied with ideals, whereas in the writing of verse one can only deal with actuality."[1]

It is the actuality and the sincerity of expression which stirs Crane's Black Riders into swift movement. The ideas in his verse, it seems, were often more important to him than the music of poetry--enough so that ideas usually take precedence over all else. However, although the melody of his verse is frequently sacrificed for clarity of thought, the seriousness of content can occasionally compensate for the lack of rhythm. There are also instances in which ideas, feeling, and uniqueness of expression are completely balanced.

Crane is remembered primarily for his novels, but his poetry, although it is comparatively unknown in our time, was of major importance to him. In several letters to close friends, Crane said that he preferred his poetry to his fiction, and he expressed the belief that his small volume of verse, The Black Riders, was of greater value and had a much wider range of thought than his most distinguished novel, The Red Badge of Courage. During his last years, Crane urged a friend in France to publish his verses. He wrote: "My dearest wish is to see these simples

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[1]F. O. Matthiessen, The Achievement of T. S. Eliot (New York: Oxford University Press, 1947), p. 99.

translated into French. Some of my other books have received German and French translations but, let alone translations, the British public nor even my own American public will not look at The Black Riders. Thus my letter to you is in the nature of an appeal. I wish the distinction of appearing just for a moment to the minds of a few of your great and wise artistic public."[2]

The purpose of this paper is an attempt to determine the value of Crane's poetry; and the questions which seem most important to me in a study of Crane's poetry are: What has the poet attempted to do?, and then, Has he succeeded? Consequently, this essay is an attempt to show how Crane's poetry came into existence, to suggest the intentions which underlie his verse, and finally to determine whether he succeeded or failed as a poet.

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[2]Robert Wooster Stallman, editor, Stephen Crane: An Omnibus (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1952), p. 667. (This letter was written on Nov. 11, 1897, and was addressed to M. Henry D. Davroy.)

CHAPTER I

THE SHAPING SPIRIT

In an attempt to determine Stephen Crane's poetic ability, to indicate the origin and course of his poetry, as well as to understand his intentions, it is important to consider where he got the experience of life which was transformed into his poetry.

Personal experience for Crane was the essence of all art; and, true to his intentions, he used up his short existence in the desire to go everywhere and to experience everything. Moreover, his poems, like many of his short stories, were a reflection of his personal experience; and, despite the richness of his expression, he believed that the value of any literary work depended on the personal honesty of the writer, whose chief purpose was to write entirely for the sake of the subject, to concentrate on content and to consider literary form and language embellishment as of secondary importance.

Shortly before his death, Crane told a friend: "You can never do anything good aesthetically . . . unless it has at one time meant something important to you."[1] His sense of unpretentious honesty was, at times, almost naive, but it led to some of his greatest achievements as a novelist and poet. In a letter to the editor of Leslie's Weekly, he wrote:

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[1]Robert Wooster Stallman, "Stephen Crane: A Revaluation," Critiques and Essays on Modern Fiction, edited by John W. Aldridge (New York: Roanald Press Company, 1952), p. 247.

> . . . It seems a pity that art should be a child of pain, and yet I think it is. Of course we have fine writers who are prosperous and contented, but in my opinion their work would be greater if this were not so. It lacks the sting it would have if written under the spur of a great need. . . . I suppose I ought to be thankful to "The Red Badge," but I am much fonder of my little book of poems, "The Black Riders." The reason, perhaps, is that it was a more ambitious effort. My aim was to comprehend in it the thoughts I have had about life in general, while "The Red Badge" is a mere episode in life, an amplification.[2]

Crane believed that most literary works would be greater if they were "written under the spur of a great need," and it was in this sense that he thought The Black Riders superior to The Red Badge of Courage, because his poetry, as he said, was an attempt "to comprehend" his thoughts "about life in general." The "great need" which is evidenced in Crane's poetry was of the utmost importance to him, but the reader, on first acquaintance with his poetry, often feels that his ironic verses are nothing more than a sort of youthful, and somewhat Byronic, gesture of revolt. But his poems are alive and fresh because of the deep sincerity and artful expression which went into them.

His poetry, as he said, was an attempt to comprehend his thoughts "about life in general." Yet we must remember that Crane wrote The Black Riders when he was twenty-one, and that the predominant theme of these verses is the almost universal experience of conflict between ideals and reality, which faces all thoughtful human beings when they pass from the idealistic realm of adolescence into the early and often painfully realistic state of maturity.

The Black Riders contains the serious thoughts of a young and

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[2]Robert Wooster Stallman, editor, Stephen Crane: An Omnibus (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1952), p. 628, citing J. Herbert Welch, "The Personality and Work of Stephen Crane," Leslie's Weekly, May 28, 1896.

occasionally gifted poet; thoughts which reflect the intense struggle of almost every sensitive youth to reconstruct a new morality, a new set of ideals to take the place of those which crumbled away in the presence of reality. The Black Riders, however, is not mere youthful efflorescence--there is, instead, a wisdom in these verses which far surpassed Crane's years. But, at the same time, his verses do exemplify the conflicts of young manhood, and they give us an added experience of life which is not unlike the struggle of early maturity as found in Studs Lonigan and The Last Puritan.

The seeds of Crane's poetry were nurtured by the stress placed upon his emotions in early childhood, and the ambivalent feelings he experienced in his transition from adolescence to manhood were responsible for the development within him of a poet. The sub-conscious storehouse of his spontaneous poetic expression had a perfect forcing ground in the impressionable period of his adolescence, which was spent in the parsonage, and the pent-up memories of his childhood ultimately found expression in The Black Riders, which was a deliberate rebellion against the devout, shut-in atmosphere of his childhood home.

Early recollections often determine the pattern in which an artist's creative impulses are finally expressed, and the thematic material of his work frequently does not run counter to the significant course of his life in its origins and in its simplest expression. It is often impossible, however, to understand the precise relationship between a poet's work and life--and there are few analogies which are self-evident. But the meanings of a poet's early memories, whether they are accurate or inaccurate in respect to facts, are of value in that they represent his individualistic judgment and, to some extent, indicate

roughly the outline of his creative energy. Consequently, in so far as biographical criticism will illuminate Crane's poetry, it is important to consider briefly the facts of his life which have a direct bearing on the origin of his poetic expression.

What kind of a man wrote The Black Riders, War is Kind, and Three Poems? A deeply religious young man, whose sharp, bitter verses horrified the people of his own time.

Stephen Crane, the fourteenth child of a Methodist pastor, was born in Newark, New Jersey on November 1, 1871. Less than twenty-nine years later, on June 5, 1900, at three in the morning, Crane died of tuberculosis in Badenweiler, Germany. On June 28th his body was returned to New York and on the following day interred at Evergreen Cemetery, Hillside, New Jersey.

Stephen Crane, sometime during his short life, developed a certain degree of hostility toward orthodox religion, and the experience was so deeply imbued in his way of thinking that the "great need" of expressing his religious ideas may have been an act of purgation for him. But what was the nature of the experience which later found expression in The Black Riders? We can begin wherever we choose, but all the aspects of his short existence will lead us in the same direction--towards the one motive around which his poetry was built.

Stephen Crane's parents, the Reverend Mr. Jonathan Crane and Mary (Helen Peck) Crane, were intelligent and kindly, but they were as different as a lamb and a lion. Reverend Crane was a tolerant Methodist minister, and his son Stephen said that he was "so simple and good that I often think he didn't know much of anything about humanity. Will, one of my brothers, gave me a toy gun and I tried to shoot a cow with it over at Middletown

when father was preaching there and that upset him wonderfully. He liked all kinds of animals and never drove a horse faster than two yards an hour even if some Christian was dying elsewhere."[3]

Thomas Beer, Stephen Crane's first biographer, said that Jonathan Crane was a honest, worthy, and perceptive man.

> Jonathan Crane came of Presbyterian stock but it appears that, as an undergraduate of Princeton, he was disturbed about a point in Presbyterian dogma: did the souls of unbaptized infants go to hell? It seemed hardly just. Methodism offered an escape from the problem and gave his controversial abilities fuller scope. He delighted in argument but argument must be kept within the bounds of breeding. Once some cruder Christian flung at him in debate, "Brother Crane never forgets that he is a gentleman!" and Jonathan Crane retorted, "Why should I, sir?"
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> He wrote a good, severe prose and some of his ideas remain interesting. He had, like Somerset Maugham, deep doubts as to the intentions of missionaries. The word must be spread but "by all means the candidates for the post of missionary should be strictly examined as to their motives in undertaking these duties. We have grave reports of some who domineer and oppress these childish intellects committed to their care and it can not be doubted that some of our brethren seek to exhalt their own stations and that some are more interested to clothe the naked bodies of the heathen than to enlighten their minds." And he had doubts about the sanctity of small towns: "I am much more concerned that we should live truthfully and kindly here than that we should be busy condemning the luxuries and sins of New York City." And he had doubts about the Christian Temperance Union League when four ladies from Ohio came to consult his wife on the subject in 1873: "Mrs. Crane is much impressed by this project. I do not think it exactly practical . . . but they mean very well. . . ."[4]

Reverend Crane was a noted speaker, and his intelligent, witty expression delighted his congregation. They suggested that his sermons be published, and it was the reading of these sermons which occupied the last days of Stephen Crane's existence. Stephen was much like his father

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[3]John Berryman, Stephen Crane (New York: William Sloane Associates, 1950), p. 8.

[4]Thomas Beer, Stephen Crane (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1923), pp. 36-37.

in his expression of personal honesty, his tenderness, and his sympathetic understanding of children and horses.

Stephen, or little Stevie as he was called, was only nine years old when his father died, but he remembered his father as being kind and humble in his relations with others. Reverend Crane's last actions were truly indicative of his character: "Jonathan Crane had worked long and hard. He had once been president of the Pennington Seminary and was fond of boys who, he said, 'should be handled with great kindness and care as they often have notions about justice in conduct far beyond their years.' So he was much distressed when a lad named nothing less than Samuel Weller wrote from Newark to say that he had been discharged from the shop of a good Methodist for denying hell. The old man took his daughter Agnes down to Newark and hunted other work for Samuel Weller, caught cold on the way back to Port Jervis and died suddenly, having preached the day before."[5]

During the remaining years of his childhood Stephen was in the care of his mother; and he later wrote, "After my father died, mother lived in and for religion. We had little money. Mother wrote articles for Methodist papers. . . . Every August she went down to Ocean Grove and reported proceedings at the Methodist holy show."[6] Although Crane's later rebellion was in defiance of his early training, he never felt that his mother was entirely responsible. He said: "My brother Will used to try to argue with her on religious subjects such as hell but he always gave it up. Don't understand that mother was mean or bitter but it hurt her that any of us should be slipping from Grace and giving up eternal

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[5] Ibid., p. 41.

[6] Stallman, op. cit., p. 692.

damnation or salvation or those things. You could argue just as well with a wave."[7]

In a letter to Joseph O'Conner, Crane wrote: "Upon my mother's side everybody as soon as he could walk, became a Methodist clergyman--of the old ambling-nag, saddlebag, exhorting kind. My father was a Methodist minister, author of numerous works of theology, and an editor of various periodicals of the church. He was a graduate of Princeton, and he was a great, fine simple mind."[8]

Crane's memory of his father was precious to him, and he never forgot the frightening circumstances of the funeral: "We tell kids that heaven is just across the gaping grave and all that bosh and then we scare them to glue with flowers and white sheets and hymns. We ought to be crucified for it! . . . I have forgotten nothing about this, not a damned iota, not a shred."[9]

Helen Crane, Stephen Crane's niece, was familiar with her uncle's early development, and she was with him during his last days. Maggie was written in her home, and it was in this period, just before Crane wrote The Black Riders, that she refers to in her article, "My Uncle, Stephen Crane."

> For he was by this time in full rebellion against the traditions on which he had been nourished and reared. His mother's memory was dear to him, he had nothing dearer, and although he never questioned her ways when he was outside the family portals, he did marvel always that such an intellectual

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[7]Loc. cit.

[8]Stallman, op. cit., p. 690, citing the Rochester Post-Express, April 18, 1900. (Crane's letter was addressed to Joseph O'Conner, the editor of a column entitled "Literary Notes." The letter appeared in several newspapers and periodicals after the author's death.)

[9]Berryman, op. cit., p. 12.

> woman, a university graduate, and capable of being a regular contributor to magazines and newspapers, could have wrapped herself so completely in the "vacuous, futile, psalm-singing that passed for worship" in those days.[10]

Mrs. Crane's religion was, evidently, much more ardent and limited in scope than that of her husband, and her son Stephen, at the age of fourteen, was well versed in many phases of sin which were nowhere to be found in the Bible. He knew these to be the views of his mother, and he therefore believed them to be those of his Creator. He came to associate something vaguely awful with any conduct of which his mother disapproved. But, at about the age of twenty, he tried to separate myth from actuality, and it was a childhood myth which he felt a "great need" to dispel. Yet he believed that most people were too complacent to make this distinction, and that the distorted illusion was like a dark cloud which separated man from his Creator. In the naiveté of his youth, he saw all others as the dupes and slaves of prejudice, while he, he alone had broken free. He felt that he must discard the superficial manner of religion, and these thoughts stayed in his mind until they were sorted, sifted, and finally moulded into unique expression.

The spiritual upheaval of Crane's early years was much more intense than the usual form of adolescent rebellion. The religious atmosphere of the Crane home was considerably more devout than most, and young Stephen, with his somewhat nervous sensitivity, was exceptionally responsive to impressions. And, no doubt, there was the conventional sort of child-baiting, which magnified the horror of divine revenge.

As a child, Crane was taken by his mother to one of the frequent religious gatherings at Ocean Grove, New Jersey. It was the first time

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[10]Helen R. Crane, "My Uncle, Stephen Crane," The American Mercury, XXXI, January 1934, p. 25.

he had seen the ocean, and he had a dream he never forgot--of black riders on black horses charging at him from the long surf up the shore. He awoke screaming, night after night, only to be scolded by his mother. Many years later the experience was put into words.

> Black riders came from the sea.
> There was clang and clang of spear and shield,
> And clash and clash of hoof and heel,
> Wild shouts and the wave of hair
> In the rush upon the wind:
> Thus the ride of Sin.
>
> (Black Riders, I)

Crane was evidently overwhelmed by maternal authority; and there was little air for him to breathe in so restricted an atmosphere. Before Jonathan Crane died, Stephen had the protective power and love of his parents. But after his father died he became disillusioned with the childish belief of parental importance and omnipotence. Death betrayed his belief, and this belief, he felt must be replaced by a more dependable force. Later, rebellion against parental rule occurred, and the aggressive tendencies of his youth were directed against the authority of his childhood home, and there was, subsequently, a wish to supplant his earlier beliefs. This was perhaps the basis of his conflict--a conflict which is at the center of his poetry.

Crane's wish to relieve the anxieties of his childhood was conditioned, to some extent, by allegiance to the enthusiastic hope for science which was prevalent during the eighteen-nineties. There were those who thought that it was heretical to cast suspicion upon science, while others thought it was blasphemous to question any of the tenets of religion. Science, however, began to capture the loyalty of many who had once depended on religion. Yet both religion and science, although they were somewhat uncomfortable neighbors, offered relief from suffering and

postponement of death. But the rewards of each were of a different nature. These ideas troubled Crane. He believed that religion should not be an escape from life, and he once wrote a friend: "I am not very friendly to Christianity as seen around town."[11] He believed that religion ought to signify a real determination to face reality without illusion and without fear. But his experience proved otherwise. He was caught in a metaphysical crux: he believed that man is the hapless prey, the potential victim of external forces; and his verses voiced the philosophy of primitive man crying out against the evils of the universe like an antagonized, helpless child.

Crane's faith was incompatible with his experience about the reality of the world, and, in short, he was utterly disillusioned. Yet, despite the opposition of his beliefs, he had a great need for religious faith to combat the sufferings inflicted by the outside world. His metaphysical fear evolved from a realistic comparison of man's own insignificance with the vastness, the power, and the cruel indifference of the universe.

His actions, thoughts, and much of his work reveal a deliberate rebellion against his early training. The result--a grim and deep seated pessimism. For Crane, life appeared to be nothing more than a horrible desert, and he felt irremediably lost. Religious despair was deeply ingrained in his way of thinking, and it was the source of his renunciation of life. For as William James rightly says, "Pessimism is essentially a religious disease. In the form of it to which you are most liable, it consists in nothing but a religious demand to which there comes

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[11] Beer, op. cit., p. 140.

no normal religious reply."[12] The remorse of Crane's "doubting faith" was, however, transformed into sincere, penetrating, and impersonal expression which distinguishes his verse from the typical forms of youthful awareness.

His spontaneous poetic expression was unusual; but when we consider that his early impressions and ideas had been deeply imbedded in his mind for many years, and--despite the confused order of experience--they were crystallized when he turned to them some years later and wrote The Black Riders. In this respect, T. S. Eliot has said: "The poet's mind is in fact a receptacle for seizing and storing up numberless feelings, phrases, images, which remain there until all the particles which can unite to form a new compound are present together."[13]

In such circumstances, criticism is best employed by determining the origin of Crane's poetry, by understanding his intentions, by suggesting how his poetry ought to be read, and finally by deciding when and why he succeeded or failed as a poet.

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[12]William James, "Is Life Worth Living?" Essays on Faith and Morals (New York: Longmans, Green and Company, 1943), pp. 8-9.

[13]T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," Selected Essays 1917-1932 (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1932), p. 8.

CHAPTER II

THE THEMES OF CRANE'S POETRY

Before we can get at "the poetry" in Crane's poems, it is necessary to understand the organic form of the ideas which he used, because it is virtually impossible to determine the quality of his expression until there is some understanding of what he was trying to express; and we cannot examine the unique expression of his poetry without a consideration of the ideas which give his expression meaning.

There is little reason to suggest that Crane was a considerable thinker, but his feeling for the significance of great ideas was indeed philosophical. We do not examine his ideas with a view to calling them great philosophy, but only in order to determine the origin of their being, to see how they were made into poetry, and to understand that the ideas in his poems are only a part of his poetic expression.

Crane's first volume of verse, The Black Riders and Other Lines, was written in 1893, shortly after or during the composition of his novel, The Red Badge of Courage. Crane took his poems to Hamlin Garland; and Garland, after Crane's death, related how Crane "drew" off his poems.

> One day late in March he (Crane) arrived, reeking as usual with stale cigarette smoke, with a roll of manuscript in the side pocket of his long, shabby, gray ulster.
>
> "What have you there?" I asked, pointing accusingly at his conspicuous burden. "It looks like poetry."
>
> He smiled sheepishly. "It is."
>
> "Your own?"
>
> "Yes."
>
> "Let me see it!" I commanded, much amused by his guilty expression. Handing the roll to me with a boyish gesture, he turned away with pretended indifference, to my brother. Upon unrolling the manuscript, I found it to be a sheaf of poems

written in blue ink upon single sheets of legal cap paper, each poem without blot or correction, almost without punctuation, all beautifully legible, exact and orderly in arrangement. They were as easy to read as print and as I rapidly ran through them I was astounded by their power. I could not believe that they were the work of the pale, laconic youth before me. They were at once quaintly humorous and audacious, unrhymed and almost without rhythm, but the figures employed with masterly brevity were colossal. They suggested some of the French translations of Japanese verses, at other times they carried the sting and compression of Emily Dickinson's verse and the savage philosophy of Olive Shriner, and yet they were not imitative.

"Have you any more?" I asked after I had come to the end of the roll.

"I have four or five up here," he replied, pointing toward his temple, "all in a little row," he quaintly added. "That's the way they come--in little rows, all ready to be put down on paper. I wrote nine yesterday. I wanted to write some more last night but those 'Indians' wouldn't let me do it. They howled so loud over the other lines that they nearly cracked my ears. You see we all live in the same box," he explained with sour candor, "and I've no place to write except in the general squabble. They think my verses are funny. They make a circus of me."

[He was living at this time with a group of artists or art students ("Indians" he called them), in the Art Students League building on East Twenty-third Street.]

I was greatly interested in his statement that the verses were composed in his mind all ready to be drawn off. "Do you mean to say that these lines are arranged in your head, complete in every detail?"

"Yes, I could do one right now."

"Very well. Take a seat at my desk and do one for me." Thereupon with my pen he wrote steadily, composedly, without a moment's hesitation, one of his most powerful poems. It flowed from his pen like oil, but when I examined it, I found it not only without blot or erasure, but perfectly correct in punctuation. I can not be sure of the poem but I think it was the one which begins:

God fashioned the ship of the world carefully

and goes on to tell how "a wrong called," God turned His head and this ship without rudder slipped down the ways, and as a result has ever since wandered helplessly, going foolish journeys, doubling on its tract, aimlessly drifting through the universe. It appealed to me with enormous force at the moment. Coming from this hungry, seedy boy, written in my commonplace little study on a sunlit winter morning without premediation - so he said - it wrought upon me with magical power. I understood a part of the incredulity of "Those Indians" who could not take their fellow "Indian" seriously. He declared that it had never been on paper before and that he had not consciously arranged its words in his mind. He just knew in a general way that it was there to be drawn off.

> After he went away I read the poems aloud to my brother, pausing to exclaim over their ironic humor, their brevity, their originality of phrases. "What has the fellow been reading? If they are wholly the work of this unaccountable boy, America has produced another genius as singular as Poe," I concluded.
>
> I confess that I took these lines very seriously. I hastened to show them to my most scholarly friends in order to detect the source of their inspiration. They remained original. I could not say that Crane had imitated any other writer.
>
> He continued for some weeks to "precipitate" others but in diminishing flow. I recall that he came into Herne's dressing room at the theater one night to tell me that he had drawn off the very last one. "That place in my brain is empty," he said, but the poem he showed me was not a cull - it was tremendous in its effect on Herne as well as on me.
>
> Later, much later, he wrote to say that he had gained the power to "turn the poetic spout on or off," but my interest in his verse was momentarily weakened by another and still more amazing demonstration of his subconscious endowment.[14]

The Black Riders was sold to Copeland and Day of Boston in 1894, but was not published until the following year. The delay arose from a moral difficulty on the part of the publishers. In a letter to Copeland and Day, dated September 9, 1894, Crane wrote:

> Dear Sirs:
>
> We disagree on a multitude of points. In the first place I should absolutely refuse to have my poems printed without many of those which you just as absolutely mark "No." It seems to me that you cut all the ethical sense out of the book. All the anarchy, perhaps. It is the anarchy which I particularly insist upon. From the poems which you keep you could produce what might be termed a "nice little volume of verse by Stephen Crane," but for me there would be no satisfaction. The ones which refer to God, I believe you condemn altogether. I am obliged to have them in when my book is printed. There are some which I believe unworthy of print. These I herewith enclose. As for the others, I cannot give them up - in the book.
>
> In the second matter, you wish I would write a few score more. It is utterly impossible to me. We would be obliged to come to an agreement upon those that are written.

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[14] Hamlin Garland, Roadside Meetings (New York: Macmillan Company, 1930), pp. 193-195.

If my position is impossible to you, I would not be offended at the sending of all the retained lines to the enclosed address. I beg to express my indebtedness to you and remain

Yours sincerely,

Stephen Crane[15]

The Black Riders was published in the spring of 1895 and was dedicated to Hamlin Garland.

Although Crane's early experiences are implicitly reflected in his attitude toward life, in his belief about the nature of the world, and in his choice of themes, his point of view in his poetry is not that of an introspective soul, anxious to lay bare the inner world of his emotions. His poetry undoubtedly sprang out of his suffering. He was perhaps unaware of the disillusionment upon which it was built, yet there was an attempt to express the crisis impersonally, to assume a mask as far as possible, so as to give his personal convictions a much more meaningful and universal application. But even when he attempts to squeeze all of the personal references out of his convictions, they still underlie the poems, and are implied in the actions and thoughts of his unidentified characters, who are in an unknown land at an unspecified time in history. If we are to understand the actions of these anonymous figures (which are as bleak and disturbing as Kafka's), we need to know something of the philosophical climate of the world that they inhabit.

In Crane's poetry there is one major theme, one center of meaning out of which almost all of his poetical ideas originate. This theme, which was deeply rooted and nurtured with strong personal convictions,

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[15]Stallman, op. cit., p. 602, citing the Literary Observer, 2 (June - July, 1934), 57.

is the paradox and dilemma of religion in the modern world. The paradox of the American variety of religion was observed by Crane, as a child, in the diverse concepts of God which were held by his parents. This experience was later given a much wider and impersonal range of application, and it was, so Crane thought, the central motif in the tragedy of modern Christianity.

Crane believed that the different concepts of God which were held by his mother and father were the essential difference between the visible and the invisible Christian, the difference between the distorted view of God and the God of man's inner thoughts. The tragedy of Christianity, so he believed, was that it had abandoned its main tenets. In a world where Christianity had compromised with base materialism, where God was fashioned out of the cruelty of man's own tyranny, where primitive Christianity was squeezed dry in the hands of proud, visible Christians, there was no place for inner humility or a benevolent view of God. Yet--

> In heaven,
> Some little blades of grass
> Stood before God.
> "What did you do?"
> Then all save one of the little blades
> Began eagerly to relate
> The merit of their lives.
> This one stayed a small way behind,
> Ashamed.
> Presently, God said,
> "And what did you do?"
> The little blade answered, "O my lord,
> Memory is bitter to me,
> For, if I did good deeds,
> I know not of them."
> Then God, in all His splendour,
> Arose from His throne.
> "O best little blade of grass!" He said.
> (Black Riders, XVIII)

The structure and the central idea of the poem is patterned after the parable of the Pharisee and the Publican:

Two men went up into the temple
to pray; the one a Pharisee, and
the other a publican.

The Pharisee stood and prayed thus
with himself, God, I thank thee
that I am not as other men are,
extortioners, unjust, adulters, or
even as this publican.
I fast twice in the week, I give
tithes of all that I possess.

And the publican, standing afar off,
would not lift up so much as his
eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his
breast, saying, God be merciful to
me a sinner.

I tell you, this man went down to
his house justified rather than the
other: for every one that exalteth
himself shall be abased; and he that
humbleth himself shall be exalted.

(St. Luke 18:10-14)

In heaven,
Some little blades of grass
Stood before God.

"What did you do?"
Then all save one of the little
blades
Began eagerly to relate
The merits of their lives.

This one stayed a small way
behind,
Ashamed.
Presently, God said,
"And what did you do?"
The little blade answered, "O
my lord,
Memory is bitter to me,
For, if I did good deeds,
I know not of them."

Then God, in all His splendour,
Arose from His throne.
"O best little blade of
grass!" He said.

(Black Riders, XVIII)

The figurative language of these lines is part of the mythological framework upon which almost all of Crane's ideas are built. But the idea of humility, which is directly stated with child-like tenderness and simplicity, is not nearly as important as the condition of humility which is implied in the metaphorical language: "In heaven,/ Some little blades of grass/ Stood before God." All men, in moments of vainglory, are concerned with the accumulation of meritorious deeds, which are often motivated by personal pride. It is like the attainment of a certain number of points in a game. But when the earthly game is over man stands before God, not as a proud man with a certified list of good works, but as

a nonentity, like a single blade of grass which cannot be identified among the other blades of grass grouped in great profusion.

Crane was torn between the opposing concepts of God as held by his father and mother. And this conflict developed into a much more inclusive struggle for him. It exemplified, so he believed, the modern dilemma and paradox of God. Is God a combination of love and wrath--is He a benevolent Deity or a cruel tyrant?

A god in wrath
Was beating a man;
He cuffed him loudly
With thunderous blows
That rang and rolled over the earth.
All people came running.
The man screamed and struggled,
And bit madly at the feet of the god.
The people cried,
"Ah, what a wicked man!"
And -
"Ah, what a redoubtable god!"
(Black Riders, XIX)

These two poems (XVIII and XIX) were, obviously, placed together for the purpose of contrast, and the contrast is clear to the extent of being pointed. The somewhat oversimplified distinction which the two poems make between a true and a false view of God is evident in poem XVIII, where the poet refers to God with a capital "G" and "His" with a capital "H"; but in the following poem (XIX) the poet uses the small letter g throughout in speaking of God.

In the latter poem (XIX) there is a suggestion of primitive man's god--a god (not unlike Thor) signifying his dissatisfaction "With thunderous blows/ That rang and rolled over the earth." The tyranny of this man-made god is sanctioned, but the real tyranny is within man. There is an ardent desire to judge other men: "Ah, what a wicked man!" The poem strikes at the smugness of many visible Christians, who are

ready to judge others according to forms and codes which they themselves adhere to only from habit. And there is an almost sadistic desire to witness the ill-fortune of other men and to attribute the cause of misfortune to wickedness (as in the case of Job): "All people came running."[16] The poem, however, comes to a climax with the use of the satiric word redoubtable.

The contrasting ideas of poems XVIII and XIX become more specific:

> A man went before a strange God--
> The God of many men, sadly wise,
> And the Deity thundered loudly,
> Fat with rage, and puffing,
> "Kneel, mortal, and cringe
> And grovel and do homage
> To My Particularly Sublime Majesty."
>
> The man fled.
>
> Then the man went to another God--
> The God of his inner thoughts.
> And this one looked at him
> With soft eyes
> Lit with infinite comprehension,
> And said, "My poor child!"
> (Black Riders, LI)

The false god, says the poet, is "a strange God," but it is, nevertheless, "The God of many men." Christianity's tragedy, then, is that it is no longer what it was originally meant to be--an individual relationship, based on love, between man and God. Instead, man has gradually substituted his own fear and anger for love and understanding in his vision

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[16]The same mood of human delight in misery and misfortune is found in Crane's sketch, "A Street Scene in New York," which describes the morbid curiosity of a crowd witnessing a man having a fit: "Others still continued to stare after the vanished ambulance and its burden as if they had been cheated, as if the curtain had been rung down on a tragedy that was but half completed; and this impenetrable blanket intervening between a sufferer and their curiosity seemed to make them feel an injustice." Wilson Follett, editor, The Works of Stephen Crane, Vol. XI, p. 194.

of God. Brutal torturings in hell have been substituted for examples of God's understanding, and a God of love has been transformed into a monster who tears quivering souls to pieces with gory ritual.

As a young man, Crane was angered (as the sensitive youth often is) with the ceremony, the outward forms and appearances of Christianity. Such things, he believed, were a popular misinterpretation of the original meaning of Christianity. Christianity had become pagan; it had yielded its main points, and man, like a bewildered infant, was trying to spell God with the wrong blocks. Crane believed that this transition had come about because the church and its false prophets had succeeded in abolishing Christianity; and, ironically enough, this had been done in the name of Christianity:

> Two or three angels
> Came near to the earth.
> They saw a fat church.
> Little black streams of people
> Came and went in continually.
> And the angels were puzzled
> To know why the people went thus,
> And why they stayed so long within.
> (Black Riders, XXXII)

The church had departed from the essential teachings of Christ, and Crane believed that the church had become a travesty of Christianity--was void of all its original significance, had become a mere custom, a social rite. The struggle for superiority among the churches had completed the death of Christianity. Creeds had made a mockery of God:

> I stood upon a highway,
> And, behold, there came
> Many strange peddlers.
> To me each one made gestures,
> Holding forth little images, saying,
> "This is my pattern of God.
> Now this is the God I prefer."

But I said, "Hence!
Leave me with mine own
And take you yours away;
I can't buy of your patterns of God,
The little gods you may rightly prefer."
(Black Riders, XXXIV)

Christianity was perverted. Quasi-religious man had turned Christianity into a weird comedy. The real enemies of Christianity, however, were not the skeptics but the complacent, visible Christians who were bringing about the end of Christianity. Since almost everyone had become a Christian, the essence of Christianity had been reduced to mediocrity--it had become a watered-down, pabulum-like morality without any particular significance. Each creed had pulled out a single part of the original teachings of Christ to dogmatize, and had proudly concluded that it was in exclusive possession of the truth. Man had so distorted the real meaning of Christianity that God was no longer an active force--He was dead in the minds of men:

God lay dead in heaven;
Angels sang the hymn of the end;
Purple winds went moaning,
Their wings drip-dripping
With blood
That fell upon the earth.
It, groaning thing,
Turned black and sank.
Then from the far caverns
Of dead sins
Came monsters, livid with desire.
They fought,
Wrangled over the earth,
A morsel.
But of all sadness this was sad--
A woman's arms tried to shield
The head of a sleeping man
From the jaws of the final beast.
(Black Riders, LXVII)

God is dead and man is guided by the black assassin. But man, without the grace of God, is but a monster, "livid with desire." The last vestige of true Christianity is gone, and men "fought,/ Wrangled over the earth,/ a morsel."

In The Black Riders Crane presents the cosmic drama between God and man at its climax. Here belief and disbelief in an orthodox view of God clash most violently. Crane's benevolent view of God, emphasizing God's love and mercy, was at odds with the hostile Deity of Puritan Calvinism. A religion of fear was, in fact, inconceivable to Crane, and he was unable to entertain the idea that it is essential and inevitable that God should bestow misfortune upon those whom He created and loved. His most bitter lines express the antinomy between Christ's teachings and the message of the prophets of the Old Testament.

> "And the sins of the fathers shall be visited upon the heads of the children, even unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me."
>
> Well, then, I hate Thee, unrighteous picture;
> Wicked image, I hate Thee;
> So, strike with Thy vengeance
> The heads of those little men
> Who come blindly.
> It will be a brave thing.
> (Black Riders, XII)

Crane's venomous attacks, however, were not directed against God but against conventional ideas of God--a vision of God which he thought was nothing more than an "unrighteous picture," or a "wicked image." His concept of God was intensely personal; because of Jesus' teachings about God, in which all the crudities of an impersonal Yahweh are banished, he thought God should be more like a solicitous parent, revealing personal interest, complete love, and complete consciousness of purpose. But this

view of God was the very antithesis of the widespread Calvinist concept of God, a concept which Crane abhorred:

> Blustering God,
> Stamping across the sky
> With loud swagger,
> I fear you not.
> No, though from Your highest heaven
> You plunge Your spear at my heart,
> I fear You not.
> No, not if the blow
> Is as the lightening blasting a tree.
> I fear You not, puffing braggart. . .
>
> Withal, there is One whom I fear;
> I fear to see grief upon that face. . .
> (Black Riders, LIII)

Calvinism, which was perhaps the most dominant influence on nineteenth century Protestant thought, was modeled more on the legalism of the Old Testament than on the condolence of the New Testament; and it was in many respects a return to a much older religion, the religion of those Mosaic laws which emphasized the unconditional sovereignty of the tribal deity Yahweh. The tribal deity was jealous and irascible; He was endowed with the human quality of anger, and His horrible wrath was often revealed in the frightening voice of the storms.

> The livid lightnings flashed in the clouds;
> The leaden thunders crashed.
> A worshipper raised his arm.
> "Hearken! hearken! The voice of God!"
>
> "Not so," said a man.
>
> "The voice of God whispers in the heart
> So softly
> That the soul pauses,
> Making no noise,
> And strives for these melodies,
> Distant, sighing, like faintest breath,
> And all the being is still to hear."
> (Black Riders, XXXIX)

The speaker of the poem rejects the tribal deity whose indignation is manifest in the storms, and he reverts to a Christian God whose tenderness is revealed in complete serenity. But the distinction between a God of wrath and a God of love is effective as poetry because of the poet's skillful contrast of sounds, a contrast which is parallel with the poem's theme of the opposing concepts of God. Moreover, the theme of the poem does not remain in the realm of the commonplace. It is mingled with a carnival of sounds which arouse associations of irreconcilable opposites: fear and serenity, anger and love.

The "livid lightnings flashed" and the "leaden thunders crashed." This is the grim voice of the tribal deity, whose absolute power emphasizes the complete helplessness of man. But the voice of the God of love is of a different tone; it is soft and melodious.

> The voice of God whispers in the heart
> So softly
> That the soul pauses,
> Making no noise,
> And strives for these melodies,
> Distant, sighing, like faintest breath,
> And all the being is still to hear.

As a poetic expression of religious experience, these lines are successful, primarily, because they are independent of the extraneous matter which is so characteristic of religious verse. The lines embody a simple expression of a religious experience in which there is no religious dogma, no display of asceticism, and no persuasive dialectics. The expression stops short of mysticism, and there is, instead, a certain reality about the experience; the soft sound of the words conveys the feeling of perfect motionlessness and complete rest.

Perhaps a closer look at the latter half of the poem will indicate how the poet achieved the quiet, evancescent movement, the verbal music,

the vivid and smooth progression of ideas, sounds, and associations which produce a simple yet effectively moving impression of a religious experience:

	God	Man
(1)	The voice of God whispers	in the heart
(2)	So softly	
(3)		That the soul pauses,
(4)		Making no noise,
(5)		And strives for
	these melodies,	
(6)	Distant, sighing, like faintest breath,	
(7)		And all the being is still to hear.

The ultimate effect is secured by the use of brief and exact words, and in these simple words there is an imbedded richness of meaning which suggests amicable stillness: "the soul pauses,/ Making no noise,/ . . .And all the being is still to hear." And the telescoping of the images in the second stanza ("these melodies,/ Distant, sighing, like faintest breath,") provides a vivid contrast, in sound, with the rumbling of the storm in the first stanza: "The livid lightnings flashed," and "The leaden thunders crashed." But the lines cannot be paraphrased into logical prose, and any attempt to reduce the experience (both poetical and religious) to a prose statement destroys the effect; and the effect, which evolves from an exacting use of words, is the important verbal fascination which the poet adds to an experience which is common to an immense number of his fellow human beings.

The appeal to a God of love is implicit in Crane's verse, and the sentiment, though often of a questioning nature, is somewhat similar in tone and meaning to George Herbert's poem on Discipline:

> Throw away thy rod,
> Throw away thy wrath:
> O my God,
> Take the gentle path. . .
>
> Then let wrath remove;
> Love will do the deed:
> For with love
> Stonie hearts will bleed. . .
>
> Throw away thy rod;
> Though man frailties hath;
> Thou art God:
> Throw away thy wrath.

For Crane, a religion of fear was completely impossible. It was like the philosophy of primitive man or the helpless child, a philosophy based on a system of reward and punishment which was independent of the Christian idea of love. For Crane, an act of sincere love and kindness to another was a reward in itself, here and now; it could not be motivated by a fear of future punishment or by a promise of future reward.

With primitive and naive man it is above all fear that evokes religious notions, and a God of wrath is a being whose care he hopes to benefit from and whose punishment he fears. Yet, although a personal God of love was manifest in Christ's simple teachings, Christianity had distorted the teachings and had reverted to a religion of fear. "Men have never much deserved Christ and Buddha," Crane wrote, "because they went to work and changed the teachings of generosity into a teaching of roars and threats."[17]

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[17]Beer, op. cit., p. 225.

Once there came a man
Who said,
"Range me all men of the world in rows,"
And instantly
There was terrific clamour among the people
Against being ranged in rows.
There was a loud quarrel, world-wide.
It endured for ages;
And blood was shed
By those who would not stand in rows.
And by those who pined to stand in rows.
Eventually, the man went to death, weeping.
And those who stayed in bloody scuffle
Knew not the great simplicity.
(Black Riders, V)

Christ brought spiritual justice and equality into the world, and man was equal unto the angels. But "those who stayed in bloody scuffle/ Knew not the great simplicity." Instead, Christ's teachings had been perverted into a complex formula, and "simplicity" was sorely overlooked in an age of ornamental religion. But after the simple teachings of Christ were revived, it was not long until they were smothered in a blanket of dogma, and they soon became so filled with superstitions that little likeness existed between Christianity and the insight of the founder.

There was a great cathedral.
To solemn songs,
A white procession
Moved toward the altar.
The chief man there
Was erect, and bore himself proudly.
Yet some could see him cringe,
As in a place of danger,
Throwing frightened glances into the air,
A-start at threatening faces of the past.
(Black Riders, LXIII)

Christianity versus Christ is one of Crane's most persistent themes. This is a somewhat commonplace idea in our time, but Crane's method and point of view in presenting the theme are strangely different. There is no appeal to militant zeal or sentiment. Instead, most of his religious verse is an ironic observation of what the false prophets and churches have made of Christianity. But behind this mask of indignant and merciless irony there is a deeply felt resistance to the continuing betrayal, and it is likely that the irony of his bitter words hurt nobody as much as himself.

Crane felt the burden of earthly existence much more intensely and strongly than most other men, since he was unable to reconcile his metaphysical hopes and fears. There was no simple and easy solution, and his unorthodox belief was never entirely free of difficulties. He was aware of the dilemma of reconciling the existence of natural evil with the existence of an all-good and all-powerful Deity, and the crucial point in his religious thought is found in his separation of God and Nature. The hostile forces of nature could not, so he thought, be the work of the loving Father who speaks so softly to the inner being of man. Crane did believe in God; perhaps he could not accept God's world, and this created within him a deep sense of cosmic loneliness.

God fashioned the ship of the world carefully.
With the infinite skill of an All-Master
Made He the hull and the sails,
Held He the rudder
Erect stood He, scanning His work proudly.
Then--at fateful time--a wrong called,
And God turned, heeding.
Lo, the ship, at this opportunity, slipped slyly,
Making cunning noiseless travel down the ways.

So that, for ever 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.
(Black Riders, VI)

The poem embodies a vision of a defeated God whose invention has suddenly got out of hand. It does not doubt God's intentions, but it does question His omnipotence. Crane, unlike many of his contemporaries, could not accept the pleasant maxims of his day. Perhaps he felt sure that "God's in his heaven," yet because of his animosity towards nature, he did not believe that "All's right with the world." Indeed, the problem of natural evil arises in every rational mind when the widespread tendency to believe in the goodness of God is challenged by the fact that man and the world of nature is not entirely perfect. The world includes suffering, error, and imperfection: consequently, there is ample reason for questioning the workmanship of a loving and omnipotent Spirit. Either God wills to remove the evil and is not able, or God does not will to remove it. By accepting the former as a solution to the problem of evil, Crane could feel that God was not indifferent to man's suffering. Like Hardy, Crane believed that God, assuming the role of cosmic artisan, was

Mighty to build and blend
But impotent to tend. . .
(From Hardy's poem "Nature's Questioning")

Perhaps the belief that God's power is limited is too simple a solution to the question. But Crane could never accept Job's conclusion about evil. He could not understand why God's work should be beyond the

limits of human understanding, nor could he feel that it was completely just for man to have to tremble in terror before the inexplicable forces of nature.

Harvey Wickham, one of Crane's friends, said that Crane "had, poor genius, the insane idea that the world might be regulated by justice."[18] Moreover, his intense and naïve sense of justice increased his bitterness against a world in which injustice was tolerated; he had a deep compassion for the victims of injustice--especially for those who were ensnared in the perplexing web of traditional concepts of good and evil.

Behold, the grave of a wicked man,
And near it, a stern spirit.

There came a drooping maid with violets,
But the spirit grasped her arm.
"No flowers for him," he said.
The maid wept:
"Ah, I loved him."
But the spirit, grim and frowning:
"No flowers for him."

Now, this is it--
If the spirit was just,
Why did the maid weep?
(Black Riders, XXV)

The question that is raised in this elliptical drama is parallel with one of the major inquiries in the Book of Job: "Does God pervert judgment? or doth the Almighty pervert justice?" In another section from Job there is a passage which may have served as a model and also as an inspirational point of departure for Crane's poem.

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[18]Harvey Wickham, "Stephen Crane at College," The American Mercury, VII, March 1926, p. 294.

> This is a portion of a wicked man with God,
> and the heritage of oppressors; which they
> shall receive of the Almighty. If his children
> be multiplied, it is for the sword: and his off-
> spring shall not be satisfied with bread. Those
> that remain of him shall be buried in death: and
> his widows shall not weep.
> (Job 27: 13-15)

Crane rejected the ideas about God he had been taught as a child. He would have liked to believe optimistic theories that might lead to a feeling of inner security, but he was not easily beguiled. Nevertheless, he found no comfort in his inability to accept the current ideas of God. He would have liked to have banished the "doubting" element of his simple faith, but because of his honesty he could not glibly enter into a game of pretense for the sake of inner peace.

> I stood musing in a black world,
> Not knowing where to direct my feet.
> And I saw the quick stream of men
> Pouring ceaselessly,
> Filled with eager faces,
> A torrent of desire.
> I called to them,
> "Where do you go? what do you see?"
> A thousand voices called to me.
> A thousand fingers pointed.
> "Look! look! There!
>
> I know not of it.
> But, lo! in the far sky shone a radiance
> Ineffable, divine--
> A vision painted upon a pall;
> And sometimes it was,
> And sometimes it was not.
> I hesitated.
> Then from the stream
> Came roaring voices,
> Impatient:
> "Look! look! There!"

So again I saw,
And leaped, unhesitant,
And struggled and fumed
With outspread clutching fingers.
The hard hills tore my flesh;
The ways bit my feet.
At last I looked again.
No radiance in the far sky,
Ineffable, divine;
No vision painted upon a pall;
And always my eyes ached for the light.
Then I cried in despair,
"I see nothing! Oh, where do I go?"
The torrent turned again its faces:
"Look! look! There!"

And at the blindness of my spirit
They screamed,
"Fool! fool! fool!"
(Black Riders, XLIX)

This is the epitome of The Black Riders, and the poet, in his striving for reconcilation with God, cannot pretend to see the indivisible; he is tormented by his longing for belief, and his active quest is a symbolic dissent against the spiritual hypocrisy of his time, against the passive, blind, and complacent mockers who hide behind their shallow brand of religion and shout "Fool! fool! fool!" at the miserable human being who is honestly examining his conscience.

Crane had a deep sense of justice and honesty, and he felt that these were the foundation of life itself. In a letter to Joseph O'Conner, he wrote:

> The one thing that deeply pleases me in my literary life--brief and inglorious as it is--is the fact that men of sense believe me to be sincere. . .I do the best that is in me, without regard to cheers or damnation. . .I understand that a man is born into the world with his own pair of eyes, and he is not at all responsible for his vision--he is merely responsible for his quality of personal honesty. To keep close to this personal honesty is my supreme ambition. There is a sublime egotism in talking of honesty. I, however, do not say that I am honest. I merely say that I am as nearly

honest as a weak mental machinery will allow. This aim in life struck me as being the only thing worth while. A man is sure to fail at it, but there is something in the failure.[19]

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In 1899, four years after the publication of The Black Riders, Crane's second volume of verse, War is Kind and Other Lines, appeared. The themes of the poems in this volume differ considerably from the earlier work. Crane's feud with the tribal deity was over, and his principal concern in War is Kind was to present little dramatic incidents which display the incongruity of moral similitude, and to question (somewhat ironically) the accepted principles of the American social system.

The poems in his second book of verse are less bitter and more mature than those of the earlier volume. The earlier pessimism was modified and gradually evolved into a mild stoicism, but the poet retained some of his doubts about the malignant forces of nature. With Arnold, he felt that "Nature and man can never be fast friends." Nature, he thought, is a blind, irresponsible force, a force that man could both admire and fear, but one with which he could feel no real affinity.

A man said to the universe:
"Sir, I exist!"
"However," replied the universe,
"The fact has not created in me
A sense of obligation."
(War is Kind, XXI)

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[19]Stallman, op. cit., pp. 679-680, citing the Rochester Post Express, April 18, 1900, p. 4.

Crane's contact with the universe was often swift and bleak. He had seen the devastating results of a drought in the southwest; he had been in a Nebraska blizzard with the temperature at eighteen below; he had seen the forces of nature at work when he covered two wars as a newspaper correspondent; and he had been shipwrecked off the coast of Florida and then had been adrift at open sea in a ten foot dinghy for some forty hours. He had experienced both the horror and the beauty of nature. But in his most impressive experiences he had witnessed nature at its worst, and in his poems we see Nature in a dual role: it can enhance man's existence with its beauty, but it can also threaten man with extinction.

To the maiden
The sea was blue meadow,
Alive with little froth-people
Singing.

To the sailor, wrecked,
The sea was dead grey walls
Superlative in vacancy,
Upon which nevertheless at fateful time
Was written
The grim hatred of nature.
(War is Kind, III)

With a bare minimum of details Crane could present a complete scene and convey its spirit with a piercing exactness. Consider, for example, the accuracy of statement in the second and third line of each of the two stanzas. For the maiden the sea appeared to be like "blue meadow/ Alive with little froth-people," but for the shipwrecked sailor it was like "dead grey walls/ Superlative in vacancy."

The expression ("Superlative in vacancy") is imbued with a feeling of despair and loneliness; it evokes a feeling somewhat similar to the

one produced by a line from Wallace Stevens' "The Comedian as the Letter C": Crispin looks at the sea and feels "washed away by magnitude." Crane's three word expression is, indeed, a strange combination of words, but it conveys perfectly the imaginative state intended by the poem.

Crane's ambivalent feelings toward Nature were never resolved in his plea for human suffering. And although he was always concerned with his idea of the peculiar alliance between God and Nature, he never lost sight of the contemporary scene. He had a compassionate understanding of the submerged victims of society. With his acute perception of the social crisis and follies of his time, he believed that moral evil was far more serious than natural evil, and that the worst of human suffering was caused more by the social structure than by the forces of nature.

In several of his poems he assumed the role of critic and satirist; and, as a social critic of the nineties, his ideas were conditioned by an age in which puritan morality was frequently linked with worldly success, and in which it was often assumed that the accumulation of wealth had a moral as well as a material significance. John D. Rockefeller, the American symbol of success, had even asserted that God had given him his riches.[20]

It was the era of the fabulous millionaire: John Pierpont Morgan, Edward Henry Harriman, Philip D. Armour, Henry Edwards Huntington, George M. Pullman, Jay Gould, Andrew Carnegie, James Hill, and Cornelius Vanderbilt. The businessman and the financier enjoyed baronial powers; they were the merchant princes and the "Napoleons of finance" who, if not always within the bounds of the law, moral or otherwise, were

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[20]John T. Flynn, God's Gold: John D. Rockefeller and His Times (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1932), p. 401.

intensely colorful in their display of unrestrained individualism. It was the last of the Gilded Age, and there was a quest after sudden riches in which purely mercenary operations were combined with a righteous and "rugged" individualism. But there were those like Crane who questioned the morality of the ruthless businessman, the leading personage in this lusty and excitable nation.

> The successful man has thrust himself
> Through the water of the years,
> Reeking wet with mistakes--
> Bloody mistakes;
> Slimed with victories over the lesser,
> A figure thankful on the shore of money.
> Then, with the bones of fools
> He buys a silken banner
> Limned with his triumphant face;
> With the skins of wise men
> He buys the trival bows of all.
> Flesh painted with marrow
> Contributes a coverlet,
> A coverlet for his contented slumber.
> In guiltless ignorance, in ignorant guilt,
> He delivered his secrets to the riven multitude.
> "Thus I defended: Thus I wrought."
> Complacent, smiling,
> He stands heavily on the dead.
> Erect on a pillar of skulls
> He declaims his trampling of babes;
> Smirking, fat, dripping,
> He makes speech in guiltless ignorance,
> Innocence.
>
> (War is Kind, XVII)

Crane was a born iconoclast, and his criticism of American materialism and corruption during the late Gilded Age was characterized by an audacious mockery; but beneath his cynicism there was an awareness of those who were the victims of the "successful man." Yet, the "successful man," with all of his animal-like greed and fatuous stupidity, is also pathetic in a repugnant way. He is a corpulent dollar-chaser, a guileless opportunist, and his brutal, yet innocent, exploitation of

others is something of a heroic spectacle.[21] He is a clownish sort of figure who guards his treasure with pious dignity, but he is also a carnivorous creature who maintains his existence by feeding upon the "lesser." His actions, however, are sanctioned in an age in which the survival of the fittest takes on a moral connotation.

Crane was often amazed at the American belief that success was measured in terms of dollars and cents, and that money most often determined the hierarchy of human values.

> The impact of the dollar upon the heart
> Smiles warm red light,
> Sweeping from the hearth rosily upon the white table,
> With the hanging cool velvet shadows
> Moving softly upon the door.
>
> The impact of a million dollars
> Is a crash of flunkeys,
> And yawning emblems of Persia
> Cheeked against oak, France and a sabre,
> The outcry of old beauty
> Whored by pimping merchants
> To submission before wine and chatter.
> Silly rich peasants stamp the carpets of men,
> Dead men who dreamed fragrance and light
> Into their woof, their lives;
> The rug of an honest bear
> Under the feet of a cryptic slave
> Who speaks always of baubles,
> Forgetting state, multitude, work, and state,
> Champing and mouthing of hats,
> Making ratful squeaks of hats,
> Hats.
>
> (War is Kind, XX)

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[21] In the New York Tribune, for August, 1892, Crane wrote: "The bona fide Asbury Parker is a man to whom a dollar, when held close to his eye, often shuts out any impression he may have had that other people possess rights. He is apt to consider that men and women, especially city men and women, were created to be mulcted by him. Hence the tan-colored, sunbeaten honesty in the faces of the members of the Junior Order of United American Mechanics is expected to have a very staggering effect upon them." Reprinted in Robert Wooster Stallman, Stephen Crane: An Omnibus (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1952), pp. 21-22.

In these closely clipped lines the mode of expression is overwhelmingly sarcastic. And beneath the intense energy there is a liberation of ideas through irony. The caricature of a millionaire hat-merchant (probably based, I believe, on the combined practices of J. B. Stetson, J. P. Morgan and others[22]) cuts deep into the social and moral

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[22] John Batterson Stetson (1830-1906); hat manufacturer and philanthropist. John Pierpont Morgan (1837-1913); American banker and financier. Matthew Josephson, in his book The Robber Barons, says that "Morgan was known to be 'imperiously proud,' rude and lonely, intensely undemocratic toward his fellows, and was equal to throwing articles of food or clothing at his servants when they nodded and forgot his wants. Endowed with 'gorgeous, Renaissance tastes,' the master of the yacht Corsair loved to surround himself as much with men and women of physical beauty as with the plunder of ages of culture. Flouting opinion, he appeared in public before newspaper reporters with one of his favorites, and lived openly with another, according to one of his recent biographers, Mr. John Winkler. Yet this man who brooked no interference with his private pleasures or financial undertakings, and who sinned much by his own lights, derived a genuine satisfaction from religious devotion of the most ritualistic category. Leaving his office at 23 Wall Street upon afternoons, he would go to kneel in St. George's Church, and sing hour upon hour his favorite hymns played by his favorite organist. And when he brought trophies to propitiate the Lord they were gifts of barbaric extravagance, vastest of all the contemporary religious monuments of the time such as that of $5,000,000 for the erection of St. John the Divine.

"Pierpont Morgan soon became the great lay figure of the Episcopal Church of his day; when conventions were held, he appeared as a deputy from New York, bearing all the important visiting prelates, divines and lay guests in a private 'palace car' on one of his railroads to the convention city, and entertaining them upon the most lavish scale in a private house which he rented. But most of all Pierpont Morgan was thrilled by the splendors of Rome during his foreign tours; the pomp, the marble spaces, the gilt and tapestry of the Vatican and of St. Peter's awed him. He would have bought the Sistine Chapel if it were for sale." Matthew Josephson, The Robber Barons; The Great American Capitalists 1861-1901 (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1934), pp. 319-320.

A similar portrait could be drawn in respect to the career of E. W. Scripps, the newspaper publisher, and also other notable figures of the period. Perhaps the most appropriate model for the poem was William Randolph Hearst. Crane had worked as a reporter on Hearst's New York Journal, and he was aware of Hearst's unscrupulous ways as a publisher. Crane probably did not have any one person in mind, only a combination of men who had certain habits and ways of thinking in common.

structure of the nineties, and we see that the prestige, the achievement, and the social value of money were often as great as its purchasing power.

Yet it was all so superficial. The pretentious millionaires were "silly rich peasants" who collected art objects, not becuase they understood, enjoyed, or appreciated them, but because it was an impressive method of advertising one's income, one's success. It was "The outcry of old beauty/ Whored by pimping merchants/ To submission before wine and chatter."

Crane's judgments about his fellow men are, however, something other than venomous insults. He had a sense of pity for the suffering of all mankind, yet he felt that much of the suffering was due to the ignorance and viciousness of human nature. And he understood the sinister hypocrisy which fostered the union of militant Christianity and unfettered commercialism. Of course, the wealthy American had often responded commendably to the needs of those who were suffering from dire poverty. But it was not always a benevolent gesture. It was often a decision either of giving to the government or of giving to charity. Since the millionaires detested a strong central government, which would curb some of their activities (this was before the enforcement of the Sherman Anti-Trust Law in 1899 and 1902), and would abolish some of the suffering of the people through an increased income tax on big business, they were somewhat embarrassed by their grotesque wealth; and they responded magnificently to the pleas of charity and they believed, rather innocently, that their gifts would insure their passage to the more comfortable regions of the Great Beyond. And although many contributed generously to charity and were responsible for the building of many

beautiful churches, there was, in many instances, a marked distinction between motive and action, between ends and means. This attitude of falsely motivated charity is savagely characterized in one of the poems from Crane's earlier volume.

> Charity, thou art a lie,
> A toy of women,
> A pleasure of certain men.
> In the presence of justice,
> Lo, the walls of the temple
> Are visible
> Through thy form of sudden shadows.
> (Black Riders, XVI)

American wealth on display offended Crane's deepest instincts; he was not content merely to repeat the agreeable and complacent ideas which were implicit in the pretty American poetry of the nineties. He wanted to get at the real issues. And in his social poems, which are phrased in so sharp a fashion, we see a first-rate mind's protest against the sort of pious Christianity which served as a disguise for the modern worship of Mammon.

And Crane had his doubts about the popular interpretation of the works of Darwin and Huxley. He disliked the evolutionary teachings, not because of their biological significance, but because many were reading into them a sort of moral approval of brash materialism and social injustice.

> The trees in the garden rained flowers.
> Children ran there joyously.
> They gathered the flowers
> Each to himself.
> Now there were some
> Who gathered great heaps--
> Having opportunity and skill--
> Until, behold, only chance blossoms
> Remained for the feeble.

Then a little spindling tutor
Ran importantly to the father, crying:
"Pray, come hither!
See this unjust thing in your garden!"
But when the father had surveyed,
He admonished the tutor:
"No so, small sage!
This thing is just.
For, look you,
Are not they who possess the flowers
Stronger, bolder, shrewder
Than they who have none?
Why should the strong--
The beautiful strong--
Why should they not have the flowers?"
Upon reflection, the tutor bowed to the ground,
"My lord," he said,
"The stars are displaced
By this towering wisdom."
(War is Kind, XXVI)

Crane's fury against injustice was of a social and metaphysical nature. It was never of a political cast. He once said that he "was a Socialist for two weeks but when a couple of Socialists assured me I had no right to think differently from any other Socialist and then quarrelled with each other about what Socialism meant, I ran away." It was the growing money culture that Crane detested, a culture void of kindness to the less fortunate, a culture in which the accumulation of money was a measure of morality.

The degree in which the giants of business and finance had won the general consent of the public was reflected in the press, a press which they, for the most part, controlled and eventually transformed into one of the largest of all business enterprises of the late nineteenth century. And this development was accompanied by the transformation of the newspaper from a public trust to a big business, a business which often found it necessary to magnify insignificant events so as to maintain circulation and thus increase the number of incoming dollars. It was the beginning of

an era in which journalism was being vulgarized, an era in which the newspaper publishers discovered that the public's fondness for scandal and morbid curiosity about sex and crime had a commercial value, an era of "yellow journalism" which

> . . . was inaugurated in 1895 when young William Randolph Hearst purchased the fast failing New York Journal, and straightway entered upon a titanic struggle with Joseph Pulitzer for what one British critic called the "primacy of the sewer." Hearst employed sensational devices like hugh headlines and shocking pictures to appeal to the masses, many of whom were immigrants whose imperfect knowledge of English was flattered by bisyllabic, five word Hearstian sentences.
>
> The yellow journals are generally credited (or discredited) with having inflamed the public mind to a point where a peaceful settlement with Spain in 1898 was impossible. They snooped, stooped, and scooped to conquer. They screamed for war: when there was no sensational news they invented it; when the government failed to act, they acted. Hearst managed to emblazon the sensational De Lome letter on his front pages, and his agents spirited the Cuban girl, Evangelina Cisneros, from a Spanish prison.[23]

In the midst of the battle between Pulitzer and Hearst, Crane was working as a correspondent for both the New York World and the New York Journal (and had been a reporter for various other newspapers including the New York Press, New York Evening World, New York Tribune, New York Herald, New York Times, Detroit Free Press, Westminster Gazette, Bacheller Syndicate, and the Syracuse dailies). He covered the war between Greece and Turkey in 1897 for Hearst's New York Journal,[24] and the

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[23]Thomas A. Bailey, The Man in the Street; The Impact of American Public Opinion on Foreign Policy (New York: Macmillan Company, 1948), p. 308.

[24]Crane once said: "I see no difference between the /New York/ Journal and Hammerstein's roof garden. You get the blonde with the tin can in her gullet and the comic speaker and the song about mother's wayward boy in both shows." John Tebbel, The Life and Good Times of William Randolph Hearst (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1952), p. 79.

following year he reported the Spanish-American War[25] for Pulitzer's New York World. He was never a successful journalist, partly because of his impressionistic reporting, with his repeated use of the personal but honest "I," and partly because of the fact that his inner sense of honesty would not permit him to prostitute his integrity.

> A newspaper is a collection of half-injustices
> Which, bawled by boys from mile to mile,
> Spreads its curious opinion
> To a million merciful and sneering men,
> While families cuddle the joys of the fireside
> When spurred by tale of dire lone agony.
> A newspaper is a court
> Where every one is kindly and unfairly tried
> By a squalor of honest men.
> A newspaper is a market
> Where wisdom sells its freedom
> And melons are crowned by the crowd.
> A newspaper is a game
> Where his error scores the player victory
> While another's skill wins death.
> A newspaper is a symbol:
> It is feckless life's chronicle,
> A collection of loud tales
> Concentrating eternal stupidities,
> That in remote ages lived unhaltered,
> Roaming through a fenceless world.
> (War is Kind, XII)

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[25]Shortly before the outbreak of hostilities both Pulitzer and Hearst did their utmost to fan the flames of war so as to send the circulation of their papers soaring upward. Hearst sent Frederic Remington, the famous illustrator, to Cuba to send back sketches of the conflict which Hearst was doing his best to instigate. After a few weeks Remington wished to return, and the following interchange of cablegrams is said to have taken place:

"Hearst, Journal, New York: EVERYTHING IS QUIET. THERE IS NO TROUBLE HERE. THERE WILL BE NO WAR. WISH TO RETURN. Remington."

"Remington, Havana: PLEASE REMAIN. YOU FURNISH THE PICTURES AND I'LL FURNISH THE WAR. Hearst."

Frank Luther Mott, American Journalism; A History of Newspapers in the United States through 260 Years: 1690 to 1950. (New York: Macmillan Company, 1950), p. 529.

This poem might well have been written by Carl Sandburg, or Schopenhauer,[26] or Jefferson.[27] A newspaper is a "court/ Where everyone is kindly and unfairly tried/ By a squalor of honest men." And the readers are equally guilty in that they feed the thousand-tongued monster; they uncritically absorb, ardently demand, and secretively delight in the newspaper's "tale of dire long agony." One cannot survive without the other. And as Crane wrote in The Blue Hotel: "Every sin is a result of collaboration."

Aside from Crane's major poetic themes of religion and morality there remains considerable variety. The majority of his verse is succinct and sardonic, yet some of his random observations, chiefly the

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[26]"The NEWSPAPER is the second-hand in the clock of history; and it is not only made of baser metal than those which point to the minute and the hour, but it seldom goes right.

The so-called leading article is the chorus to the drama of passing events.

Exaggeration of every kind is as essential in journalism as it is to the dramatic art; for the object of journalism is to make events go as far as possible. Thus it is that all journalists are, in the very nature of their calling, alarmists; and this is their way of giving interest to what they write. Herein they are like little dogs; if anything stirs, they immediately set up a shrill bark.

Therefore, let us carefully regulate the attention to be paid to this trumpet of danger, so that it may not disturb our digestion. Let us recognize that a newspaper is at best a magnifying-glass, and very often merely a shadow on the wall."

T. Bailey Saunders, trans., Complete Essays of Schopenhauer (New York: Wiley Book Company, 1942), IV, pp. 60-61.

[27]"Advertisements contain the only truths to be relied on in a newspaper." (Letter to Nathaniel Macon, 1819.)

"The man who never looks into a newspaper is better informed than he who reads them, inasmuch as he who knows nothing is nearer the truth than he whose mind is filled with falsehoods and errors." (Letter to John Norwell, 1807.)

Frank L. Mott, Jefferson and the Press (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1943), pp. 55-61, citing Writings of Jefferson, Vol. XI, pp. 222-226, Vol. XII, pp. 259-260.

the animistic verses (dealing with mountains, trees, and the sea), and especially the love poems, display an unusual charm:

> Ay, workman, make me a dream,
> A dream for my love.
> Cunningly weave sunlight,
> Breezes, and flowers.
> Let it be of the cloth of meadows.
> And--good workman--
> And let there be a man walking thereon.
> (War is Kind, XXIV)

In the best of the love poems (Black Riders: X, XXI, XXIII, XLI; War is Kind: VI, XXIV, and sections from the long poem "Intrigue") there is an expression of sincere tenderness, always poised and restrained, which never lapses into the exaggerated sentimentality so typical of the love poetry of the nineties. Crane always tried to avoid sentimentality; and, in making a conscious effort to do so, some of his love poems were often victims of the opposite extreme. In a few of the love poems we sense the same sort of virulence which is implicit in his central theme. The lover and his beloved often feel that they have been elected to be condemned for reasons which they never discover.

The poems in this group (which will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter) are better poetry than Crane's incidental experiments on other phases of love, and one feels that the overwhelming role of fate, which manipulates the lives of the lovers, has a much wider implication of significant meaning than the delightful, but easily forgotten, lines on the more fanciful aspects of love. The compelling point of emphasis is not on the experience of love, but on the tragic obstacles which prevent the fulfillment of love and life itself; and it produces a universal feeling of stoical disillusionment, a form of disillusionment in which traditional self-pity is supplanted by self-realization of one's limita-

tions in the struggle against circumstance. And despite a rational and healthy understanding of human restrictions and limitations, the nameless man of the poems feels that life has somehow passed him by, even though there has been a determined struggle to achieve the ends of ordinary human existence. And with an understanding of this view it is perhaps evident why Crane was much more concerned with those phases of love which provided an additional example of tragic life, an example which extended the development of the ideas in his central theme.

3

In the foregoing sections the subject matter of Crane's poetry has been of primary importance; critical evaluations were held to a minimum, since the primary purpose was to understand Crane's intentions, to determine the nature of the cultural climate which influenced the ideas in his verse, and to indicate roughly the origin and course of his poetry. It has seemed important to consider these factors and to try to understand Crane's point of view before an attempt was made to determine the method, the validity, and the value of what was being said within the limits of his poetry.

There is much more variety of ideas in Crane's verse than I have considered here. Only the most prevalent themes have been discussed, the themes which compose the greater bulk of his impressions.

Once when Crane was asked about his poetry he said, "Some of the pills were pretty darned dumb, but I meant what I said."[28] And on several occasions he expressed the belief that his poetry was more important to

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[28]Berryman, op. cit., p. 119.

him than his prose. He wrote: "My aim was to comprehend in it the thoughts I have had about life in general."[29] But despite Crane's comments we should not treat the ideas in his poetry as if they were his undeviating convictions, nor should we (now that an effort has been made to understand his intentions) fall prey to the natural tendency of over-emphasizing the arrangement of his themes and then innocently attempting to transform them into a systematic form of philosophy.

Although his poems cannot be fitted into a concise formula, there is a rough outline of a pattern which has many interfused parts; and his poems, to a certain degree, do reflect his beliefs, especially since these were held with such deep convictions. But it is much more important to understand the manner in which his thoughts were merged in his poetry, to determine the validity of his poetic ideas, and to indicate whether or not his poetry has anything to say to the contemporary reader. It is these questions, rather than the construction of a "poetic philosophy," which are significant.

Crane's poems produce unusual effects and have a rather odd appearance, but they are extremely conventional as to theme: God, Nature, Love, and several incidental poems of social criticism. The religious poems, dealing with the interpretation of Christ, the anti-Christ elements within organized Christianity, and the problem of fate, occupy the larger section of Crane's verse; and it is from this center that his other poems originate.

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[29]Crane's Letters: to the editor of Leslie's Weekly (1895); to John Northern Hilliard (1897) as reprinted in Robert Wooster Stallman, editor, Stephen Crane; An Omnibus, p. 628, p. p. 673.

The struggle of the spirit: this is Crane's theme, a theme which he, at times, varied with some skill, but one which he was obsessed with and could not always completely control. Most of the religious poems have behind them and within them a frightened reaction to the universe. They show less restraint, and there is a continual readiness to reveal personal fear of existence. And even though there is often a sardonic insight which evolves from these poems, the reader is almost always consciously aware of the striving of the spirit with which the poet is so intensely concerned, his fight against the order of things, his unresolved struggle between conflicting moral forces. (If Crane had lived during the seventeenth century, no doubt, he would have been a metaphysical poet.[30]) In many of the poems in this group the frightened form of a man is standing against a bleak background, and we feel that he is a frightened, Promethean figure who is crying out against injustice.

In some of his short, laconic lines Crane sounds like the preacher of Ecclesiastes: although he does not doubt the existence of God, it is seemingly impossible for him to discover a rational system in nature, to discover a just plan for human life. The ways of God are incomprehensible to human intelligence; at times, Crane feels that God has no concern for man and his suffering.

> I returned, and saw under the sun, that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favour to men of skill; but time and chance happeneth to them all.
> (Ecclesiastes, 9:11)

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[30]Suggested to me by Mr. Robie Macauley.

Evil befalls both the just and the unjust; and fate, not justice, rules the world. And truth is but an evasive shadow:

> Then I beheld all the work of God, that a man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun: because though a man labour to seek it out, yet he shall not find it; yea farther; though a wise man think to know it, yet shall he not be able to find it.
>
> (Ecclesiastes, 8:17)

The wayfarer,
Perceiving the pathway to truth,
Was struck with astonishment.
It was thickly grown with weeds.
"Ha," he said,
I see that none has passed here
In a long time."
Later he saw that each weed
Was a singular knife.
"Well," he mumbled at last,
"Doubtless there are other roads."
(War is Kind, XIII)

"Truth," said a traveller,
"Is a breath, a wind,
A shadow, a phantom;
Long have I pursued it,
But never have I touched
The hem of its garment."
(Black Riders, XXVIII)

Attempts have been made to link the content of Crane's work with the naturalism of the Garland, Norris, and Howells variety.[31] But there is little evidence to support this view in either his prose or his poetry.[32] Instead, there was an earnest plea on his part for restoring man to an adequate and secure place in the universe, a plea for the help

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[31] Carl Van Doren, The American Novel; 1789-1939 (New York: Macmillan, 1946), pp. 225-244.

[32] Maggie is usually, although erroneously, considered to be a naturalistic novel with an implicit emphasis on environment. But the real cause, so Crane said, was that "the root of Bowery life is a sort of cowardice."
Berryman, op. cit., p. 54.

of a supernatural leader, a Father who will assume responsibility for man. But because of Crane's stoical skepticism and his resigned willingness to look steadily at both good and evil, his poems horrified many of the readers of his own time, and have, for the most part, been misinterpreted in our own time. But Crane was not in any respect the "village atheist." He developed his own religion, and although some of his ideas are often nothing more than adolescent excursions in speculative thinking, there are many insights in his poems that reveal his unusual moral and metaphysical perceptiveness.

The best of his poems fill us with wonder, primarily because there is a successful balance between acute perception and authentic feeling, and these, in turn, are admirably condensed into an apt phrase, a memorable line. But all of his poetry is not so pleasing. Perhaps some degree of mediocrity might be overlooked in the light of his better verse, but to exercise this sort of judgment is to carry affability too far. Some of Crane's poems are definitely pale, lifeless, and meagre in both thought and expression. With the exception of the imagistic pieces and some of the love poems, his verses are intensely disturbing; they are imbued with a mood of desperate anxiety which sometimes fascinates one, sometimes makes one uncomfortable about the complacency of one's own thinking. And there is frequently a feeling of desolation produced by Crane's poetry which, often to our amazement, is somewhat similar to the blend of abandonment and frugality produced by the crisis of modern thought and voiced by some of our contemporary poets.

But beneath the surface of Crane's lesser poems we too often see the emergence of his temperament; too many of his poems are frankly autobiographical. His poetry was obviously the result of a tortured sensi-

bility, and perhaps he purged his emotions by recording them; but even though there was an attempt to disguise the process with a veil of irony, we are often aware that Crane is too much on the scene in his poems. Perhaps his poetry helped to make him feel free, for in discarding the superfluous baggage which weighed down the real essence of Christianity, he subconsciously discarded the memory of his moral bondage in the parsonage. This is most clearly seen in his defiance of religious ostentation. Rebellion, of course, is often an admirable quality, but if it is not accompanied with reason and genius it most often falls flat; and in some of Crane's verse there are instances which indicate that he had not reached a level of maturity competent to deal with the situation at hand. He was often the victim of a fashionable sort of pessimism which frequently affects young poets. Naturally there is something awe-inspiring to the young mind about the cosmic struggle, and something especially fascinating about cosmic woe. There is a boyish sort of pleasure in being drunk with melancholy and despair; it appears to be more profound than a rational conciliation with the universe, and it falls short of the tragic mark because there is an incomplete understanding of life as tragedy. But it is this naivetĕ or weakness (if we can call it that) which gives authentic feeling and sincerity of purpose to Crane's interpretation of life--his process of personal awakening.

The remorse of his "doubting faith" evidently caused him some personal discomfort, and it is likely that he did not fully realize the bitter disillusionment on which his poetry was built. Many of the ideas which are reflected in his poetry personify the painful sting of early awareness; and we should understand that the struggle between ideals and actuality, which presents itself to all reflective human beings, is a

tremendous experience whether it occurs at the age of twenty-five or forty-five or sixty-five. Perhaps he did not always hit the center of ideas, but at the same time he succeeded in his intense and sincere effort to get at the enigma of the religious struggle and thus touched and communicated, with some degree of artistic skill, the deepest elements in his nature.

Crane's discontent was conditioned to some extent by his hatred of the shallow optimism, the sentimentality, and the affected and evasive core of thinking so characteristic of the late nineteenth century in America. He detested all types of pretense and vanity (he once lost a front tooth for asserting that Tennyson's poems were "swill"[33]), and like Pound, he felt that

> The age demanded an image
> Of its accelerated grimace.
> (From "Hugh Selwyn Mauberly")

In his notebook there is a sentence from Emerson which probably had some effect on his poetic precociousness: "Congratulate yourself if you have done something strange and extravagant and have broken the monotony of a decorous age."[34] Crane felt the need of saying things in a new way; he wished to tear away the heavy, superfluous words which were suffocating the essence of things said. He felt that he must condense his expression and get at the reality of persons and objects with the use of penetrating and acutely accurate words. He once said that Ford Madox Ford's verse was "ruined" by going out of the way, "in the pre-Raphaelite manner, to

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[33] Ibid., p. 15.

[34] Ibid., p. 268.

drag in rhymes which made longueurs and diluted the sense."[35] (Once, after a remarkable exhibition of gunplay, Crane told Ford: "That's what you want to do instead of interring yourself amongst pre-Raphaelite pleonasms. . . ."[36])

The period between 1890 and 1900 was a highly unproductive age in American letters; and, with a few exceptions, the poets of the period supplied the public's demand for prosaic greeting-card poetry. It was an era of romanticism, and any objection to middle-class thinking, any dismissal of affable myths, and any insight into the more sordid aspects of life were distracting. "I cannot see," wrote Crane, "why people hate ugliness in art. Ugliness is just a manner of treatment. The scene of Hamlet and his mother and old Polonius behind the curtain is ugly, if you heard it in a police court. Hamlet treats his mother like a drunken carter and his words when he has killed Polonius are disgusting. But who cares?"[37]

Crane's critical non-conformism was an early point of departure from the fair-weather poetry of the late nineteenth century. It anticipated an age of criticism in American poetry which has perhaps reached its peak in our time. But Crane's departure was not a mechanical dissent. It was sincere, fresh, and lively; and it was essentially a ground-breaking process for many of the good modern poems written between 1912 and 1922. Of course, Crane's ideas and method of writing poetry would not have seemed so explosive half a century later, but in his own time they did. It is rather difficult for us to actually

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[35]Ford Madox Ford, "Stephen Crane," American Mercury, XXXVI, January, 1936, p. 39.

[36]Loc. cit.

[37]Berryman, op. cit., p. 21.

understand Crane's pioneer work in modern poetry, because we are living in an age in which this type of poetry has been explored by many and, in some cases, carried to a high point of perfection. But Crane's poems were outrageously modern in his own time, primarily because he tried to render a vision of reality in his verse; and he did so at a time when people were not accustomed, or were not willing to listen, to a criticism of their follies, especially when the ideas were presented in so cryptic a manner by an unknown and opinionated young man whose views were often satiric and ironic. Crane brought his subject matter into modern focus with his emotionally restrained method, a method which most often achieves its effect through irony. And although some of his lines are poetically barbarous, we still admire their nervous and slashing force.

Clarity of thought and simplicity of means were Crane's first concern in writing poetry. There is a marked difference between his poetry and prose: there is none of the rhetoric in his poetry that we find in his prose, none of the mannered style that is so characteristic of his short stories. His poetry was intensely and savagely honest; and, with his furious and desperate sincerity, he tried to get at the essence of ideas without explanation or extension. Subtlety was never one of his traits. He tried to tell the truth about the way he thought about life, and he always fought against the deception of the easy answer. Occasionally we can see in his verse the faint glitter of the reality grasped; and although he frequently repeats old ideas, he often makes them sound new.

Some of the value of Crane's poetry lies in its uncompromising honesty, in its modernity, and in its economical directness; and we can

still find a certain freshness about these verses written in the nineties. They violate all the established rules of poetry and concentrate instead on the basic issues of life.

The temperamental cast of Crane's ideas has some affinity with that of Hardy, Housman, Robinson, and Jeffers. But his ideas are also paradoxical--like a combination of the dark side of Thomson ("City of Dreadful Night") and the joyous side of Thompson ("Hound of Heaven"). There was, it would seem, an attempt on Crane's part to construct a misanthropic world, to expose the sham and hypocrisy, to see what lies beneath appearances, and to reveal both the agony and the solemnity which accompanies the struggle of the spirit. This is the center of the ideas in his verse, ideas which almost always take precedence over all else. He occasionally combined depth of thought with a brilliance of method, yet he seldom made an effort to complete a poem within any organized form, since he was much more concerned with the thing said than with the manner in which it was said. Yet, oddly enough, it is not the weight of Crane's ideas but the freshness of his language, his selection of the exact word which personifies a feeling that we had never been able to identify, and his acute compression of moods which perhaps please the reader most. And we shall find that an understanding of his poetic style is the direct result of a clear insight into the nature of his themes, since his style is the inevitable consequence of his ideas.

CHAPTER III

CRANE THE POET

Ideas or beliefs alone never arbitarily make up the essence of poetry; they embody the many-colored sentiments which the words stand for, but the words also produce emotive reactions of varying degrees, depending upon the color, the tone, and the visual impression created by the poet's arrangement and ordering of language. But the two characteristics are not separate in the poetic sense. Indeed, the poet's ability consists in combining these ingredients into the proper union of thought and feeling--sense and sound.

A good poem is like a perfectly formed diamond which glitters and fascinates. Yet if we proceed beyond this passive state and begin to question the source of our enchantment, we become critical. But somehow the idea of "being critical" has harsh connotations. It is often thought that a critical approach to a poem destroys our original enjoyment. But that is not the case! Instead, in an attempt to determine the cause of the poem's magical influence, we actually increase our understanding, pleasure and appreciation of the work; and consequently we vastly transcend the passive enjoyment of our original, blind fascination. It is very pleasing to be charmed by an excellent poem, but it is even more satisfying to understand by what means we have come under the spell of the poem; however, it cannot be completely understood or enjoyed unless the reader experiences all of its formal details, unless he allows the movement and pattern of the poem to exercise its full reign of imaginative power.

Critical neglect of the achievement of language is particularly acute in the case of Crane's poetry. Some of his worst poems are included in poetry anthologies and textbooks. They are the short, cryptic verses which, it would seem, were selected mainly because they were short. The anthologists usually proceed to mention Crane's historical importance in prefiguring the Imagist movement, and there are a few remarks about his novels. The anthologists, obviously, have been satisfied to follow the practice of their predecessors rather than actually reading all of Crane's poetry before a selection is made.

The usual anthology selections of Crane's lines are those which are infused with sardonic humor and culminate in acid epigrams.

I saw a man pursuing the horizon;
Round and round they sped.
I was disturbed at this;
I accosted the man.
"It is futile," I said,
"You can never—"

"You lie," he cried,
And ran on.
(Black Riders, XXIV)

If there is a witness to my little life,
To my tiny throes and struggles,
He sees a fool;
And it is not fine for gods to menace fools.
(Black Riders, XIII)

A man feared that he might find an assassin;
Another that he might find a victim.
One was more wise than the other.
(Black Riders, LVI)

(This tightly compressed comment is a concise statement of the essence of Crane's "The Blue Hotel.")

You say that you are holy,
And that
Because I have not seen you sin.
Ay, but there are those
Who see you sin, my friend.
(Black Riders, L)

I was in the darkness;
I could not see my words
Nor the wishes of my heart,
Then suddenly there was a great light--

"Let me into the darkness again."
(Black Riders, XLIV)

Love walked alone.
The rocks cut her tender feet,
And the brambles tore her fair limbs.
There came a companion to her,
But, alas, he was no help,
For his name was heart's pain.
(Black Riders, XLI)

I stood upon a high place,
And saw, below, many devils
Running, leaping,
And carousing in sin.
One looked up, grinning,
And said, "Comrade! Brother!"
(Black Riders, IX)

Some of the anthology pieces are nothing less than extreme exhibitionism. They are built upon a single ironic statement which is immediately reversed, and, in turn, an unusual effect is produced by a sort of blitzkrieg or lightning-like shock contained in the last line: the diabolical clown, often devilishly clever, springs out of his box to surprise and perhaps to delight. But the whole procedure seems so obvious and insignificant, and without the shock-treatment the poem might have been all right.

The worst of Crane's verse--those poems in which there is a marked tendency to exploit and shock--show the effect of his early newspaper training. This is most clearly seen in his first book of verse, in which he revealed his uncontrollable contempt for pretense and smugness. It seems that he wished to go beyond outward appearances, to tear off the veil of man's superficial piety and to penetrate the blackness, the selfishness, and the bitterness hidden therein. And in many instances we can see the poetic potentiality of his phrasing, or the ingenuity of an idea that might have developed into a good poem if only the ironic twist had been omitted. Yet most such poems come from his first volume of verse, and in his later poetry the trick-method effect is less evident. As time went on, he became more conscious of his use of language and of his treatment of ideas, and did not depend on journalistic devices.

But there is an uneven quality about the bulk of Crane's verse. Although many of his poems are obviously sincere, although they are really meant to be poetry, there is, nevertheless, a sense of abruptness about some of his verse. But other poems are lively and varied, and there is much in his two small volumes of poetry that is exciting and enjoyable. Many anthologists have been concerned primarily with Crane's clever epigrams, and have overlooked the discipline, the vitality, and the economy of his language. In his better verse there is a sort of inspired brilliance in his creation of fresh speech rhythms. One of the most finished poems in this group is a hymn of both hope and despair.

A slant of sun on dull brown walls,
A forgotten sky of bashful blue.

Toward God a mighty hymn,
A song of collisions and cries,
Rumbling wheels, hoof-beats, bells,
Welcomes, farewells, love-calls, final moans,

Voices of joy, idiocy, warning, despair,
The unknown appeals of brutes,
The chanting of flowers,
The screams of cut trees,
The senseless babble of hens and wise men--
A cluttered incoherency that says at the stars:
"O God, save us!"

(War is Kind, XIV)

There is a peculiar charm and sadness, a sort of biblical majesty about these lines. The drumming syllables echo the "cluttered incoherency" of man's appeal; and yet the disconnected images are blended into a fluid pattern which gives the poem a precise movement, a richness all its own. One almost feels the sweeping movement: "Rumbling wheels, hoof-beats, bells,/ Welcomes, farewells, love calls, final moans./ Voices of joy, idiocy, warning, despair./ The unknown appeals of brutes./ The chanting of flowers,/ The screams of cut trees. . . ."

We feel the sonority of these lines, and our imagination is awakened by the rhythm, by the terse cadence of a melody uncommon in free verse. In these lines brilliant craftsmanship is combined with genuine imagination--light touches of color, an effective use of assonance, an extraordinary sensitivity in respect to the exactness and weight of words help make the poem a fresh creation in a style of its own, a style which seems to the reader natural and spontaneous.

Crane had a gift for turning language into something radiant and surprising--like a soap bubble that floats along and bursts before we have had a chance to see the full splendor of its skein-like hues. We take a hurried glance at the faint outline of the sparse but impressive colors--colors delineated with a precision that reminds us of the rapid, light lines of a Japanese painting.

Places among the stars,
Soft gardens near the sun,
Keep your distant beauty;
Shed no beams upon my weak heart.
Since she is here
In a place of blackness,
Not your golden days
Nor your silver nights
Can call me to you.
Since she is here
In a place of blackness,
Here I stay and wait.
(Black Riders, XXIII)

This is a good example of Crane's impressionistic technique. The lines are implicitly poetic, seem natural and effortless as breathing. And the clear visual images have a sort of pastoral serenity about them: "Places among the stars,/ Keep your distant beauty;/ Shed no beams upon my weak heart." The lines are tightly controlled in rhythm and construction, and the lyrical note of this song[38] has an exactitude of feeling which lingers long after we have seen the printed words.

It is a strange, symbolic, make-believe drama, emerged into a black and white pattern that has a natural use of color symbols, symbols which evolve from the "golden days" and "silver nights" contrasted with the "place of blackness." The "silver nights" recall the image of the first line: "Places among the stars," and the "golden days" are like "Soft gardens near the sun." And we are more concerned with the "distant beauty" forsaken by the speaker of the poem than we are with his deep love and loyalty, or indeed, the fate of his beloved. The poet knows that we can have but little sympathy with one whom we know so little

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[38]These lines have been set to music by Roland Farley: Places Among the Stars; Song for High or Medium Voice, by Roland Farley. Poem by Stephen Crane. New York: New Music Press, 1933.

about. We know nothing about her except that she is "In a place of blackness," and we do not know whether her lover is with her or not. And even more strange is his statement: "Here I stay and wait." Why is he waiting? Aren't they together? "Since she is here/ In a place of blackness,/ Here I stay and wait." Is this like the lover who waits outside of a prison in which his beloved is condemned for life? Perhaps. And herein is the uniqueness of the poem. For as Arthur Symons once said: "To name is to destroy, to suggest is to create."[39] It is the indefinite yet suggestive imagery, the faint outline of a dramatic situation, and the almost macabre strangeness that provide us with a vivid experience.

Some of Crane's impressionistic lines have the appearance of being a sort of automatic dream poetry. The lines seem to be spontaneous, and there is apparently no conscious attempt on the part of the poet to talk of the things of this world. There is an imbedded acuteness about Crane's dream poetry, a visual acuteness which proceeds from the poet's light touches of delicate suggestiveness.

> There was, before me,
> Mile upon mile
> Of snow, ice, burning sand.
> And yet I could look beyond all this,
> To a place of infinite beauty;
> And I could see the loveliness of her
> Who walked in the shade of the trees.
> When I gazed,
> All was lost
> But this place of beauty and her.
> When I gazed,
> And in my gazing, desired,
> Then came again
> Mile upon mile
> Of snow, ice, burning sand.
> (Black Riders, XXI)

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[39]Arthur Symons, The Symbolist Movement in Literature (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1919), p. 8.

It is often said that Crane's lines anticipated the imagist movement of the next century. But his poetry does not fall strictly within the limits of imagism--it is far too various for any such arbitrary classification. Some of his poems, however, those which most nearly resemble the imagistic poems of our own century, are often artistically successful, and it is surprising to find that many of the tenets of imagism describe the characteristics of Crane's fragments quite closely.

> The major objectives of the 1912-1914 Imagist movement were: (1) to use the language of common speech, but to employ always the exact word--not the nearly exact; (2) to avoid all cliche expressions; (3) to create new rhythms as the expression of a new mood--and not to copy old rhythms which merely echo old moods; (4) to allow absolute freedom in the choice of subject, since the imagists believed passionately in the artistic value of modern life; (5) to present an image (that is to be concrete, firm, definite in their pictures--harsh in outline); (6) to strive always for concentration which, they were convinced, was the very essence of poetry; (7) to suggest rather than to offer complete statements.[40]

Even Crane's unsuccessful imagist poems have an amazing lyric quality, but the missing ingredient, as in most imagist poetry, is the pattern of thought. They sometimes do nothing more than create a mood; frequently, they do not refer to anything more specific than a generalized experience. Yet, although they are not first-class poetry, they are significant experiments, distinguished fragments, delightful exercises in language. An example of Crane's skill is this passage in which love is compared to the voyage of a ship:

> I explain the silvered passing of a ship at night,
> The sweep of each sad lost wave,
> The dwindling boom of the steel thing's striving,

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[40] William Flint Thrall and Addison Hibbard, A Handbook to Literature (New York: Odyssey Press, 1936), p. 208, citing Amy Lowell's Tendency in Modern American Poetry, (1917).

The little cry of a man to a man,
A shadow falling across the greyer night,
And the sinking of the small star;
Then the waste, the far waste of waters,
And the soft lashing of black waves
For long and in loneliness. . .
(From War is Kind, VI)

These lines--in which there is a distinct feeling for the exactness of words--have a steady forward movement and a sense of driving swiftness and fluidity that carry one along with "the steel thing's striving." And there is such a vivid feeling in the poet's description of the waves:

The sweep of each sad lost wave. . .

Then the waste, the far waste of waters,
And the soft lashing of black waves
For long and in loneliness.

That some of Crane's poems look somewhat like those of the Imagists seems to me merely a freakish accident. I don't believe Crane "influenced" or "prefigured the imagist movement," because, with the exception of Pound and Sandburg, the Imagist poets never mentioned Crane and seem not to have known his poetry. Crane's "imagist" poetry came into existence when his impressionistic technique was carried over from prose into poetry. Many of the readers of his poetry must have noticed how the images of his prose are tightly compressed in his poetry.

Crane's successful impressionistic poems differ from most imagist poetry in that they attempt to say something; they are not merely a word-bag crammed full of sentiments, sounds, and odors, with all sorts of feelings, sensations, and emotions sticking out in every direction. For Crane's images have a specific purpose within the body of his poetry; they are never just an adornment of style. They convey an idea as well

as a sentiment. And they are successful because Crane, as a novelist and short story writer, knew how to inject enough of a dramatic element into his poetry--his poems are never simply a bundle of images. (Crane, of course, had one distinct advantage: he was not hampered by the limitation of those "rules" of which the Imagists were so conscious.) Crane had an extraordinary feeling for words; it was not the kind of sensitivity that is developed by diligent study, but the kind that comes in a natural way. Crane had an instinctive way of finding the right word, like Garland's comment that Crane, a sort of boy wonder, "sprung into life fully armed."

In thumbing through Crane's slim volume of collected verse, we are continually amazed, delighted, and frightened. On one page we find a pleasant impressionistic poem; the next is a poetic parable that has the charm of Hebrew poetry, or an outrageously modern poem of social protest. And occasionally we turn the page and find a poem which looks like a recently discovered prehistoric tablet, a tablet with the words of an ancient chant:

> Once I saw mountains angry,
> And ranged in battle-front.
> Against them stood a little man;
> Ay, he was no bigger than my finger.
> I laughed, and spoke to one near me,
> "Will he prevail?"
> "Surely," replied the other;
> "His grandfathers beat them many times."
> Then did I see much virtue in grandfathers--
> At least, for the little man
> Who stood against the mountains.
> (Black Riders, XXII)

Crane's lines could have been written in almost any age; there is no point of location, no landmarks, no indication of time, no use of words which might give some indication of the period, no decoration. There is only the use of plain speech, speech that is savagely blunt,

nakedly bare, and often offensively bleak. There was no attempt to make the situation real in terms of description. Such a poem is, primarily, dramatic; there is a real attempt to present a situation in its immediacy. Crane was not concerned with depicting a background for the incidents in his poems, nor was he interested in describing his nameless characters. But he was deeply concerned with the creation of dramatic movement within his poems; and it is the ability to create an active situation with a minimum of words, to convey the feeling that something is actually happening, to transmit the force and power of what is being said which actually provides his verse with a keen, rapid, dramatic movement.

Throughout Crane's verse we are amazed at the poet's strange preoccupation with animals and nature, and there is a half-frightened and half-admirable attitude toward both. One of his oddest, most erratic, fragments is one in which the massive power of the physical imagery carries one along with it. It is as if someone had suddenly grabbed you and said:

> On the horizon the peaks assembled;
> And as I looked,
> The march of the mountains began.
> As they marched, they sang,
> "Ay! we come! we come!"
> (Black Riders, XXXVII)

These simple lines, at first, are only strange. But if they are read several times, one begins to get the feel of these jagged lines: the poem is a painting in which a feeling of mystery and grandeur is immediately conveyed, regardless of whether we understand the underlying idea of the poem. We feel and see the elegant stiffness, the impressive and dramatic spectacle of the sharply defined peaks on the horizon. They

are distinctly graceful, like floating rifts in the sky. And as we continue to view the beauty and splendor of the jagged crests we begin to see the gradual formation of horizontal movement. We feel the strength and grace of the massive pattern, and at once, as if we had suddenly been awakened, we are also aware of its severe and tender brutality. The "assembled" peaks have the potential motion of struggle and battle. They are at the same time magnificent and terrifying; and beneath the magisterial movement we detect the vast terror and force of this beautiful prodigy of the earth, drawn in rigid military profile against the sky, in readiness for marching forward.

Crane's nature poems are often rather bitter, especially in comparison with most such poetry, in which we find nothing in the world of nature but delight and gaiety. We are not accustomed to see such deceptively simple and penetrating translations from reality. But Crane seldom wrote of nature in one mode without at least implying the other. He was attracted by the ironic double-view, the contradictory inner phase of existence, and he was almost always consistent in his observations. Yet it is not the depth of his understanding of the ironies of life but the ingenuity of his expression that we remember most.

> If I should cast off this tattered coat,
> And go free into the mighty sky;
> If I should find nothing there
> But a vast blue,
> Echoless, ignorant--
> What then?
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> (Black Riders, LXVI)

These lines, like many of the poems in The Black Riders and War is Kind, bear out Crane's fondness for the writing of Ecclesiastes.

> Who knoweth the spirit of man goeth upward, and
> the spirit of the beast that goeth downward to the earth?
> (Ecclesiastes 6:21)

> For who can tell a man what shall be after him
> under the sun?
> (Ecclesiastes 6:12)

However, what Crane adds to this thought is a vivid and distinct feeling that is brilliantly compressed in language, and this feeling is created by the key expressions: "cast off", "tattered coat",[41] and "a vast blue,/ Echoless, ignorant—."

Crane's image of man's body as a "tattered coat" which can be "cast off" seems to imply that some sort of immortality is possible. But then there follows a conflict of feeling resulting from his description of the sky as "mighty" and "vast," and at the same time as "Echoless" and "ignorant." We might reasonably infer that the "mighty sky" and the "vast blue" are expressions which we commonly associate with a power beyond itself or as a manifestation of a divine being. But this idea is modified considerably when we encounter the other description of the sky as "echoless" and "ignorant." These words carry a feeling of loneliness and emptiness with them. Both descriptions of the sky are as accurate as we can expect but there is an opposition of meaning in the connotation of the two sets of words, a sort of sultry suspense. The realization of the idea crystalizes in the short, heavily loaded line: "What then?" The climax is a natural one; however, it is an expression of honest emotion which accompanies the universal question of the sum of

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[41] The "tattered man" occupies a conspicuous role in The Red Badge, and the "tattered coat" image was probably carried over from the prose to the poetry, since The Red Badge and The Black Riders were written during the same period.

life. And the dual nature of the lines reveals the urgent desire to believe--no one thinks about God, religion, and immortality so much as the man who is struggling with belief.

This feeling of child-like fear and disillusionment permeates almost all of Crane's verse, yet it is never carried to the point of complete bitterness or despair. There is always a tender note of warmth mingled with the fright and terror. Crane was deeply involved in the crisis of his time, and his poetry reveals, to a great extent, the moral hysteria of the 1890's. Crane could accept neither the conventional practice of American religion nor the unlimited confidence of the advocates of Darwin.

Compassion and fright, dramatic movement, directness of expression, and exact, penetrating language are all combined into the trademark that is stamped on Crane's better verse. Beneath this trademark the essence of Crane's ideas is romantic without being sentimental, ironic without being cynical. One is a balance for the other, but we are never quite sure which one is an attempt to compensate for, to shield, the other. It is the opposition of feeling and thought which gives his lines their meaning. And this duality seems to add up to the fact that Crane was, above all, a romantic ironist: inner contradiction, compassion, anger, fear, and humility all culminate in the conflicts of the human heart in Crane's verse, and the lines are uttered in a muted tone of helpless anxiety.

One of the poems that Crane may have valued most, since he chose the title of his first book of verse from its opening lines, is a poem which sets in motion the strange aura of feeling, the tender and terrifying intensity of his vision of the immediate present:

Black riders came from the sea.
There was clang and clang of spear and shield,
And clash and clash of hoof and heel,
Wild shouts and the wave of hair
In the rush upon the wind:
Thus the ride of Sin.

(Black Riders, I)

The mysterious and boisterous riders, armed with spear and shield, spring forth like an apparition, and the climax to the strange, yet vivid, incident is withheld until the final line: "Thus the ride of Sin."

The first five lines of the poem, by an unusual combination of color, sound, and motion, create an atmosphere of weird anxiety. The black riders are of a mysterious origin. They "came from the sea," and they descend upon us like a band of wild Arabs. And in their charge "There was clang and clang of spear and shield,/ And clash and clash of hoof and heel." In these lines there is a distinct rhythm which imitates the thundering cadence of the galloping horses. In the next two lines there is a gradual increase of motion: "Wild shouts and the wave of hair/ In the rush upon the wind." The horses have picked up speed in the fury of the charge.

The lines of the poem are brief and concise, but they are heavy with emphasis. The emotional impression created by the poem is derived from the most general association of the word "sin," and on rereading the poem we find that the connotations of the words describing the riders (sinister, gloomy, hostile, noisy, wild, lusty, violent) make the poem more meaningful, since there is an unexpected implication beneath the appearance of the simple lines.

It is likely that the emblematic quality and style of these lines may have been derived from Crane's intimate knowledge of the Bible, especially from the word symbols of the Old Testament.

Thus saith the Lord,
Behold, a people cometh from the north country,
And a great nation shall be raised from the sides of the earth.

They shall lay hold on bow and spear;
They are cruel, and have no mercy
Their voice roareth like the sea;
And they ride upon horses,
Set in array as men for war against thee,
O daughter of Zion.
(Jeremiah 6:22, 23)

Hast thou given the horse strength?
Hast thou clothed his neck with thunder?

Canst thou make him afraid as a grasshopper?
The glory of his nostrils is terrible.

He paweth in the valley, and rejoiceth in his strength:
He goeth on to meet the armed men.

He mocketh at fear, and is not affrighted;
Neither turneth he back from the sword.

The quiver rattleth against him,
The glittering spear and shield.

He swalloweth the ground with fierceness and rage:
Neither believeth he that it is the sound of the trumpet.

He saith among the trumpets, Ha, ha;
And he smelleth the battle afar off,
The thunder of the captains, and the shouting.
(Job 39:19-25)

Crane, in his life and work, was continually attracted by both the horror and excitement of violence. There is a peculiar sort of anxiety which pervades his fiction and poetry, an inner tension that proceeds from his attempt to reveal the opposed forces of body and spirit, of animal instinct and human compassion: the lure of danger, the smell of death, the understanding of cowardice and bravery, the pity, the sensation, the awe, and the dismay of struggle are all combined in Crane's strange fear of, and fascination with, human strife. He wrote of the suffering and heroism of battle, and he actually knew what it was

like to be under fire. He felt that man in conflict, either in war or in the ordinary pursuit of life, is entangled in a kind of indefensible psychological error. And out of his understanding of the human capacity for both love and destruction came one of the most terrifying of war poems.

Do not weep, maiden, for war is kind.
Because your lover threw wild hands toward the sky
And the affrighted steed ran on alone,
Do not weep.
War is kind.

Hoarse, booming drums of the regiment,
Little souls who thirst for fight,
These men were born to drill and die.
The unexplained glory flies above them,
Great is the battle-god, great, and his kingdom—
A field where a thousand corpses lie.

Do not weep, babe, for war is kind.
Because your father tumbled in the yellow trenches,
Raged at his breast, gulped and died,
Do not weep.
War is kind.

Swift blazing flag of the regiment,
Eagle with crest of red and gold,
These men were born to drill and die.
Point for them the virtue of slaughter,
Make plain to them the excellence of killing
And a field where a thousand corpses lie.

Mother whose heart hung humble as a button
On the bright splendid shroud of your son,
Do not weep.
War is kind.

(War is Kind, I)

The vivid picture of war, joined to the satiric comment of the speaker of the poem, is brutually meaningful. It is in the manner of Dean Swift. The vitality and impact it conveys arises out of the terse ambiguity of the lines: "Do not weep/ War is kind." The poem is free from both romantic illusion and angry protest. And only by being sardonic, almost to the point of repulsion, could the poet reveal clearly

the actual hideousness of war. If the poem had merely made an appeal to our humane feelings by depicting the horror of war (as so often in the poetry of Sassoon) it would not have had the same emotional chill that penetrates and makes one flinch.

The young soldiers died before they knew what life was all about, and their death came as a part of both greatness and weakness.

> Hoarse, booming drums of the regiment,
> Little souls who thirst for fight,
> These men were born to drill and die.
> The unexplained glory flies above them,
> Great is the battle-god, great, and his kingdom--
> A field where a thousand corpses lie.

The plea, without sentiment or personal indignation, transcends the tragedy and stirs us, because we have been approached in a rather unusual way. The poet has startled us by entering the back door of our emotions, and we are annoyed at the intrusion. But the poet "should rejoice," says Emerson, "if he has taught us to despise his song, if he has so moved us as to lift us,—to open the eye of the intellect to see farther and better."

Then we feel the depth of emotion and anguish concealed in the "unexplained glory" of war, and we hear the cold harmonies which accompany the swift figures in their parade of death: the lover who "threw wild hands toward the sky/ And the affrighted steed ran on alone," the father who "tumbled in the yellow trenches,/ Raged at his breast, gulped and died." Then the poem takes on a new feeling of warmth and tenderness in the brilliant lines:

> Mother whose heart hung humble as a button
> On the bright splendid shroud of your son,
> Do not weep.
> War is kind.

This poem, with its impact of emotions thrown against each other, is one of Crane's most skillful achievements in verse, and it takes its place among the best short poems of war.

Several of Crane's poems were found in 1928 in Jacksonville, Florida. They were discovered among a collection of Crane's papers that had been given to a friend by the poet's wife, Cora Crane. They are usually called the "Three Poems." The best of the group is one which described the agony of a man adrift on a spar--a man awaiting death.

A man adrift on a slim spar
A horizon smaller than the rim of a bottle
Tented waves rearing lashy dark points
The near whine of froth in circles.
God is cold.

The incessant raise and swing of the sea
And growl after growl of crest
The sinkings, green, seething, endless
The upheaval half-completed.
God is cold.

The seas are in the hollow of the Hand;
Oceans may be turned to a spray
Raining down through the stars
Because of a gesture of pity toward a babe.
Oceans may become grey ashes,
Die with a long moan and a roar
Amid the tumult of the fishes
And the cries of the ships,
Because the hand beckons the mice.
A horizon smaller than a doomed assassin's cap,
Inky, surging tumults
A reeling, drunken sky and no sky
A pale hand sliding from a polished spar.
God is cold.

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.

This poem, which is in many ways similar to Crane's "The Open Boat," has a frightening solemnity about it. The picture of the sea here is an unusual one: the sea as it looks to the eyes of one who is

struggling for his life. The lines "A man adrift on a slim spar/ A horizon smaller than the rim of a bottle" imply the circumstances leading up to the situation of the poem: the man has been shipwrecked, probably as a result of a storm. To him the horizon appears to be "smaller than the rim of a bottle." Here the horizon, which is barely visible above the surface of the water, the man adrift on the slim spar, and the image of the rim of a bottle all have a somewhat similar shape: we think of each as having a small, round, and somewhat raised effect upon the water. But the image "smaller than the rim of a bottle" has a double implication; it contains a distinct association as well as a description. It is a means of accurately describing the horizon; and, also, the word "bottle" carries with it a sense of foreboding, a suggestion of the perennial insignificance and dim hope which accompanies a message set adrift in a bottle. The comparison is less to the object compared than to the mood and character with which it is associated.

The last three lines of the first stanza (Tented waves rearing lashy dark points/ The near whine of froth in circles./ God is cold.) describe the appearance of the waves as the man on the spar sees them, and it implies his attitude toward them, also. It is not a description of the motion of the waves as seen by one standing safely on shore, but an account of how the waves look to a man who is holding on to a slim spar for dear life. For him the "tented waves" seem to be "rearing" up like a wild animal that is about to trample him to death, and the "dark points" of the waves are lashing his body with their fury. And he hears the immediate closeness of the beast-like sea: "The near whine of froth in circles." The words "rearing," "whine," and "froth" are an extended metaphor, an implied comparison of the waves to a wild animal.

The refrain ("God is cold") is more of a symbol than a literal statement. It is a kind of verbal gesture that personifies the actual coldness of the sea, the icy blast of the waves that are lashing the man's body. The words are an ominous refrain that is both actual and symbolic. By placing God, the agent of the man's fate, in direct relation to the incident, the poem thereby develops a meaningful statement that is both gesture and symbol.

In the second stanza we continue to view the sea through the eyes of the man on the spar, but there is a shift in time from the events of the first stanza. The sound of the words in the second stanza imitates the continuous motion of the sea; and, like the man on the spar, we too hear and see and feel the full monotony of the moving sea.

> The incessant raise and swing of the sea
> And growl after growl of crest
> The sinkings, green, seething, endless
> The upheaval half-completed.
> God is cold.

The man on the spar is experiencing the near madness of the endless movement of the waves as they pursue each other. And the continual "growl after growl of crest" suggests that for him the sea is like a hungry monster or wild animal waiting for its prey. The imagery here continues and reinforces the animal imagery of the first stanza.

The sea is never quiet and its movement is never finished, and for the man on the spar it is like a frenzy of hysteria: "The upheaval half-completed." While the first stanza of the poem indicates the physical effect the sea has on the man, the second stanza implies the maddening mental effect that the motion of the sea has on him; and, as a "cue," this prepares the reader for the delirious vision or dream of the third stanza:

The seas are in the hollow of the Hand;
Oceans may be turned to a spray
Raining down through the stars
Because of a gesture of pity toward a babe.
Oceans may become grey ashes,
Die with a long moan and a roar
Amid the tumult of the fishes
And the cries of the ships,
Because the hand beckons the mice,
A horizon smaller than a doomed assassin's cap,
Inky, surging tumults
A reeling, drunken sky and no sky
A pale hand sliding from a polished spar.
God is cold.

The first nine lines of this stanza describe, in language the imagery of which is reminiscent of that of the Bible, the strange thoughts of the man on the spar (or, perhaps, of the poet). God holds the sea in the hollow of His hand; He has complete power over them. "Because of a gesture of pity," He may turn the oceans into a spray. Or He may make the oceans disappear, "die with a long moan and a roar." The expression "a gesture of pity" is ironic in that it is both compasionate and sarcastic.

This is an odd vision, but it is also a very natural one for a half-crazed man who has suffered much and who has practically no hope for survival. It is quite natural that, in his state of mind, he would imagine the sea being turned to a spray or the ocean disappearing because of God's pity. The vision is derived from an emotional state, and it tells us more about the man and his condition than about the object of his perception. However, the vision does indicate other associations: "Because of a gesture of pity toward a babe" or "Because the hand beckons the mice." But what happens? Isn't the man even as important as the babe or the mice? This increases the tension of the poem by particularizing the man's fear as revealed in his subconscious plea for

mercy: "God is cold."

Then the poem returns to the immediate scene of the man on the spar. Now the horizon appears to be "smaller than a doomed assassin's cap." The violence of this image has an ironical and decorous appropriateness. It prepares the reader for the man's death, now very near. Because of the man's exhaustion and delirium, everything appears to be rolling furiously: "Inky, surging tumults." And in his dizziness he looks up and sees "a reeling, drunken sky and no sky." Then when there is no will or strength left for struggle, the poem shows us

A pale hand sliding from a polished spar.

The mounting tension of the poem comes to a climax. But even though it is the natural consequence of events, it is somehow not at all what we had expected. Suddenly, the terror and violence of the scene is over.

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.

These are perhaps the most brilliant lines Crane ever wrote. The remarkable thing about them is the skillful indirection of statement, what is actually being communicated without being said. The drowning man does not struggle or heave his last breath with a gasp, or does he die with the customary bubbling groan. Instead, there is a willing and persuasive quietness about his death.

The puff of a coat imprisoning air:
A face kissing the water-death

And then—with a kind of motion picture technique--we see his last gesture through the camera as it catches the quiet significance of the incident without comment.

A weary slow sway of a lost hand

The long, heavy sounds of weariness are heard in the line, and it is as if he were falling into a sound sleep as he slowly sinks into the depths of the sea. There is a calmness and unruffled tranquillity below the raging surface waters: there is no growl of the crests, or upheaval of the waves, or whine of froth--all is quiet, as in sleep. But above, in the long furrow of the surface waters, there is the severe and quiet music, almost a hymn, that accompanies the death of the unknown man.

And the sea, the moving sea, the sea.

It is a horrible event, and yet somehow it isn't. There is a feeling of tragic calm, of relieved anxiety, underlying the experience. The reader is an eye-witness to the unknown man's struggle against the sea, but when he finally goes to his death there is a certain ease and tranquil release. It is as if we had seen a cat slowly torture the life out of a captured bird; when the bird finally rolls over on its side and dies, we are glad it is over.

The words of the poem have actually communicated the living essence of the scene. We hear and feel the movement of the sea; and, through the power of Crane's words, we actually experience some of the agony of the man on the spar. The tense expressions ("the near whine of froth", "The upheaval half-completed"), the spasm of movement ("the sinkings, green, seething, endless", "inky, surging tumults"), and the accuracy of his language ("Tented waves rearing lashy dark points", "A reeling drunken sky and no sky") create the actual motion and spirit of the incident. And what we remember most about the poem is its hard core of language, the words that put into motion all the symbols and death-images throughout the poem: "whine," "upheaval," "ashes," "moan," "beckons," "cries," "doomed," "pale," "imprisoning," "water-death,"

"weary," "lost," and "cold." The arrangement of the words, and particularly their mode of association, creates a feeling of ironic veracity, a mixture of pity and terror and peacefulness which is embodied in a poem that is difficult to forget. It is a vivid moment of human life, masterfully seized and brilliantly created.

2

The sixty-eight poems that make up The Black Riders were Crane's first attempt at writing poetry, and the amazing thing about his poetic talent is the fact that it came to full fruition so quickly. His mind unfolded rapidly and he somehow got hold of the right words in his first attempt. He was never much of a technician, but he had a natural feeling for the rhythm of language and a sensitive way of selecting words and arranging them in a unique way. Several stylistic methods are characteristic of almost all of his poetry. First, there is the implicit influence of the Bible, the simple accuracy and dramatic emphasis of prophecy:

> Mistakes and virtues will be trampled deep.
> A church and a thief shall fall together.
> A sword will come at the bidding of the eyeless,
> The God-led, turning only to beckon,
> Swing a creed like a censer
> At the head of the new batallions,
> Blue battalions. . .
> (From War is Kind, XXVII)

There is something of the mystery and tension of the book of Revelations in these lines. And in much of Crane's poetry, as in Hebrew literature, there is a dramatic economy of words, purposeful omission of details, reliance upon the pictorial value and weight of a single word, frequent use of the question, the various forms of parallelism:

Yes, I have a thousand tongues,
And nine and ninety-nine lie.
Though I strive to use the one,
It will make no melody at my will,
But is dead in my mouth.
(Black Riders, IV)

The exposition of Crane's ideas is clear and economic; like Biblical verse, his poems often have the ostensible form of prose. His style is smooth and masculine, and never florid. It is a symbolic style. As in the Hebrew tradition, practically all of the dramatic incidents of his poems deal with representative types: "Once there came a man," "I encountered a sage," "There were many who went in huddled procession," "A learned man came to me once," "I saw a man pursuing the horizon," "Behold, the grave of a wicked man," "A youth in apparel that glittered," "Forth went the candid man," "The wayfarer," "The successful man has thrust himself," "A man adrift on a slim spar." Most of Crane's poems are dramatic parables, and many of them look as if they had been written by some of the early Hebrew poets. Often there is a strange combination: a weird, primitive, child-like tenderness--

"It was wrong to do this," said the angel.
"You should live like a flower,
Holding malice like a puppy,
Waging war like a lambkin."

"Not so," quoth the man
Who had no fear of spirits;
"It is only wrong for angels
Who can live like the flowers,
Holding malice like the puppies,
Waging war like the lambkins."
(Black Riders, LIV)

or

Once, I knew a fine song
--It is true, believe me--
It was all of birds,
And I held them in a basket;

When I opened the wicket,
Heavens! they all flew away.
I cried, "Come back, little thoughts!"
But they only laughed.
They flew on
Until they were as sand
Thrown between me and the sky.
(Black Riders, LXV)

The literary devices of the Bible, irony, and the use of color are the most distinct characteristics of Crane's verse. In many of his poems there is a skillful and forceful use of color:

The sea was blue meadow

. . . . . .

A white melody in the silence

. . . . . .

A slant of sun on dull brown walls,
A forgotten sky of bashful blue.

. . . . . .

There is a crimson clash of war.

. . . . . .

There is wealth of golden sand
And pillars, coral red;
Two white fish stand guard at his bier.

. . . . . .

Grey heavy clouds muffled the valleys

. . . . . .

The impact of a dollar upon the heart
Smiles warm red light
Sweeping from the hearth rosily upon the white table,
With the hanging cool velvet shadows
Moving softly upon the door

. . . . . .

Each small gleam was a voice,
A latern voice—
In little songs of carmine, violet, green, gold.
A chorus of colours came over the water;
The wondrous leaf-shadow no longer wavered,
No pines crooned on the hills,
The blue night was elsewhere a silence,
When the chorus of colours came over the water,
Little songs of carmine, violet, green, gold.

Several critics of Crane's poetry have suggested that his method of writing verse was derived from those of Whitman and Emily Dickinson. John Berryman, in his Stephen Crane, writes:

> The notion of writing irregularly Crane probably got from Whitman; possibly the notion of very short-line poems came to him after hearing Howells read Emily Dickinson; W. E. Henley's free verse may have affected him, the English Bible certainly did.[42]

And Robert W. Stallman, in his Stephen Crane, An Omnibus, says:

> Half the poems in Black Riders are epigrammatic parables; several of these have close affinity with the parable poems of Ambrose Bierce and his epigrams in The Devil's Dictionary. In Olive Schreiner's Dreams, poetic parables of savage philosophy, Garland spotted another source. Black Riders and War is Kind have a family kinship with the free verse of W. E. Henley, Emily Dickinson, and Walt Whitman. Crane was talked about as a second Walt Whitman; the Nation for October 24, 1895, said that the poems were at once Whitman condensed and Dickinson expanded. As formless as Whitman, "these 'lines' are in other respects the antipodes of his; while Whitman dilutes mercilessly, Crane condenses almost as formidably." The influence of Dickinson has recently been denied, but there are several points of relationship. Both poets express unorthodox sentiments, use metephor, and delight in paradox. An idea is glanced at from two points of view and then left there undeveloped. Occasionally you hear a Dickinson ghost rime, as in "success or calamity/ Would attend all in equality." Crane's lines are pithy and short like Dickinson's, though more irregular.[43]

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[42] Berryman, op. cit., p. 274.

[43] Stallman, op. cit., p. 568.

Crane's poems, however, do not look or sound like those of Whitman or Dickinson. Yet it is true that Crane, like Whitman, sometimes used a long irregular line; however, although Crane was probably familiar with Whitman's verse, I suspect that he disliked Whitman's temperamental optimism and his bursts of exuberance. Dickinson, Whitman, and Crane are alike only in the respect that they all found it impossible to write poetry within the decorous literary conventions of the late nineteenth century tradition. They were all groping their way toward a new technique of expression. But the likeness ends here, because each of them found a different poetic method to achieve this end. Perhaps Crane's poetry is compared with that of Whitman and Dickinson because by 1895, when Whitman and Dickinson were the two big names in American poetry, the reviewers were all Whitman- and Dickinson-wise, and naturally compared Crane's verse to theirs. But it is unfortunate that the critics have also taken over this view; Whitman, Dickinson, and Crane are worlds apart in their methods of writing poetry.

Crane's methods were his own, and he wrote his "lines" as if no other poet had ever existed. And his strange, original method had an influence on later poets. One of Crane's earliest admirers was Ezra Pound, and occasionally there is a line or poem from Pound's early work that shows Crane's influence.

Meditatio
When I carefully consider the curious habits of dogs
I am compelled to conclude
That man is the superior animal.

When I consider the curious habits of man
I confess, my friend, I am puzzled.
(Ezra Pound, Selected Poems, p. 34)

"Think as I think," said a man,
"Or you are abominably wicked;
You are a toad."

And after I had thought of it,
I said, "I will, then, be a toad."
(Black Riders, XLVII)

Another poet who admired Crane's verse was Carl Sandburg, whose tribute to Crane was paid in the poem "Letters to Dead Imagists":

Stevie Crane:
War is kind and we never knew the kindness of war till you came;
Nor the black riders and clashes of spear and shield out of sea,
Nor the mumblings and shots that rise from dreams on call.
(From Carl Sandburg's Chicago Poems)

Crane's greatest influence, both as a poet and a novelist, was exercised upon Ernest Hemingway. In Hemingway's first book Three Stories and Ten Poems the Crane imprint is seen throughout, and in the January 1923 issue of Poetry magazine the Hemingway poems are almost an exact copy of the tone and method of The Black Riders.

Ultimately

He tried to spit out the truth;
Dry mouthed at first,
He drooled and slobbered in the end;
Truth dribbling his chin.

Crane's influence as a poet was not of major importance; it is evident, however, that his verse was a part of the ground-breaking process of the modern American poetry of this century.

3

There is a tendency to feel that we overestimate Crane's value as a poet because of his reputation as a novelist. Yet one should consider that The Black Riders was written and published in 1895, before any of Crane's prose works had appeared under his own name. (Maggie: A Girl of the Streets: A Story of New York was published in 1893, at the author's expense, under the pseudonym "Johnston Smith," and it was not until 1896 that the book appeared in regular binding and with Crane's name.) When The Black Riders appeared Crane was unknown, but his poems did not go unnoticed. William Dean Howells, in Harpers Weekly, said: "Mr. Stephen Crane has done the most striking thing of the year in his little book of 'lines' called the Black Riders. . . ."[44] And Harry Thurston Peck, in the Bookman, wrote:

> On the whole, Mr. Crane's work has traces of Entartung, but he is by no means a decadent, but rather a bold--sometimes too bold--original, and powerful writer of eccentric verse, skeptical, pessimistic, often cynical; and one who stimulates thought because he himself thinks. It is no exaggeration to say that the small volume that bears his name is the most notable contribution to literature to which the present year has given birth.[45]

But Crane has never become respectable as a poet, and his poetry has never received the critical attention that it deserves. Still his poems have never lacked readers. The Black Riders went into three printings during the first year of publication, and the Collected Poems, which were first published in 1930, have since gone into five printings. But what is the compelling thing about Crane's verse? What attraction

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[44] Harper's Weekly, XL, 79 (January 25, 1896).

[45] Bookman, I, 254 (May, 1895).

does his poetry have?

Crane's poems flowed out in a continuous stream, and we are almost always aware of this. They have the appearance of spontaneity; they never sound as if they had been composed in a forced or contrived way. They are direct and sagacious, and there is a certain equivocalness about them. And they are so incredible that we often wonder how he gets away with these queer little lines. The strange attitude and mood does something. The short, salient words jostle each other until they finally explode under the pressure of severe compression.

The ability to write successful verse epigrams is rare; and it is strange that Crane's, in spite of their being so erratic and unorthodox are so quotable.

> In the desert
> I saw a creature, naked, bestial,
> Who, squatting upon the ground,
> Held his heart in his hands,
> And ate of it.
> I said, "Is it good,friend?"
> "It is bitter--bitter," he answered;
> "But I like it
> Because it is bitter,
> And because it is my heart."
> (Black Riders, III)

Then, he walks away with the cleverness of a swindler and with the dignity of a prophet. You are never quite sure whether it is wisdom, humor, or irony.

Crane's poems get away to a fast start, are all motion; the swift, quick-witted jolt of the words makes the poem look as if it had been wrenched out of the ground roots and all. Many of his epigrams are fables requiring attention, and we are not always sure how they do it. But we do feel that the poet had the ability "to get the better of words"

in a way all his own and that he had the power to create strange two-sided little poetic dramas in a fresh and forceful manner.

Many of Crane's poems are good, a few are excellent. His best poems, I believe, are:

Black Riders

"The Black Riders," I
"The Blades of Grass," XVIII
"The Mountains," XXII
"Places Among the Stars," XXIII
"The March of the Mountains," XXXVII
"The Voice of God," XXXIX

War is Kind

"War is Kind," I
"The Sea," III
"The Silvered Passing of a Ship," VI
"A Newspaper," XII
"A Hymn," XIV
"The Successful Man," XVII
"The Impact of a Dollar," XX

Three Poems

"A Man on a Spar," I

Crane's poetry did not have the great range and scope of his prose. But his importance as a poet lies in the fact that he helped to bring vigor and freshness to the language of American poetry; the poets of this century can recognize in him an independence of mind and method much like their own. Crane might have failed as a poet if he had not been driven by a powerful sense of inner conviction. But his poetry is successful in that it conveys the ideas and mood and feeling that he wished to express; and the reader always feels that his short, direct lines are deeply sincere and uniquely spontaneous.

Most of the poems in the Black Riders and War is Kind are strange; they have a weird, dark atmosphere, produced by strong words and flashes of ideas. But for Crane they were hard, painful poems. And we are almost always aware that his poetry is not at all like his prose; the poems are real, they had been experienced and thought about. And his poetry, unlike his prose, seems to catch something of the deep tone of Crane himself: his verse is a sort of an accounting of his soul because he did his best to say what he meant, to put on paper the ideas that had long troubled his mind. In this respect, there is often something about Crane's verse that reminds me of Kafka, Poe, Baudelaire, and D. H. Lawrence.

Crane's poetry still remains largely unknown to the readers familiar with his prose and is known only slightly through anthologies, even though they are the best poems written in America during the nineties. Although Crane's poetry is not in a class with that of Dickinson, Whitman, Robinson, and Frost, I believe that it is not too far behind. His poems are good because Crane never lost sight of what really mattered: the fact that poetry is made of words, and that the epigrams and the strange little stories of his poems must have something to say. His mind moved in a direction that perhaps seemed strange to his generation, but it was a direction that was to be the central mode and method of the poets of the next century. Crane helped to open the gate of modern American poetry. Perhaps he was not unconscious of the new quality that emerged from his poetry, but it was not a method that he went about deliberately, either. It is unfortunate that Crane died so young; it is likely that he had many more good poems to write.

The hard, sharp edges of Crane's lines leave a clear mark on our memory. They are odd, skillful, and fascinating; and--like all good poetry--they provide the reader with a vivid experience. And it seems to me this is what matters most. As for my opinions, with Crane, I can say: "My judgment in the case is not worth burning straw, but I give it as portentously as if kingdoms toppled while awaiting it under anxious skies."

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