

Ivo Vidan

Forms of Fortuity in the Short Fiction of Stephen Crane

Donald B. Gibson concludes his overview of Stephen Crane's work with the estimation that Crane is "our greatest minor author".¹ An interesting opinion, which can be justified by the fact that the body of good writing by Crane is rather small and that it forms only a minor part of all his output. What there is of it, however, belongs to the best in American literature. If there were more on the level of *The Red Badge of Courage*, or "The Open Boat" and "The Blue Hotel", it would be difficult to call Crane minor in any sense. On the other hand, the narrow scope within which he develops his themes and the restrictions implied in his method, the concentrated excellencies of his verbal imagination, these put him into a different category from that of the sprawling giants of his own time, like Dreiser and Norris. The best of Crane belongs with the better Hemingway; he is a "leaver-out" like Fitzgerald, rather than a "putter-in"² like Wolfe; that is the good Crane, let us repeat, the one which belongs to living literature.

It is perhaps easier to perceive how good Crane really is when we do not consider his work side by side with the greatest American fiction. It is true, his best stories will stand up nicely in the company of the very best by Hawthorne and Melville and, with the exception of Hemingway, there is nothing in 20th century American short fiction to match them. Faulkner's stories acquire their depth only from the total Yoknapatawpha background, and for autonomous wholes which deserve the title of greatness we have

¹ *The Fiction of Stephen Crane*, Carbondale and Edwardsville, London and Amsterdam, 1968, p. 151.

² Cf. Andrew Turnbull: *Scott Fitzgerald*, New York, 1962, p. 309.

to look at half a dozen of his full-scale novels. Conversely, the leanness of the unramified outline of *The Red Badge of Courage* prevents Crane's work from being regarded as one of the fundamental achievements of the American imagination.

To appreciate Crane we have to sample writing like that found in *The Red Badge of Courage* in the context of a John W. de Forest, whose *Miss Ravenel's Conversion* (1867) is the major near-contemporary novel of the American Civil War, though it remains largely unknown in a world which was swamped instead by latter-day historical »epics« like *Gone With the Wind*. De Forest was a sound and progressive thinking realist with his heart in the right place and a gift for observing human contacts. Yet his writing, in spite of some memorable descriptions of war scenes — the military hospital comes to mind first — is not distinguished, and his psychology schematic compared to that of the realists of Europe. No European literature however produced anything like the sparseness of vision conjoined with the fresh and vivid texture of Crane's one major Civil War episode. Dealing with that same conflict, to some extent in comparable terms, there is of course Ambrose Bierce, merciless in his exposure of softheaded enthusiasm through his presentation of the cruel coincidences, the sickening details and the awful grotesqueness of killing. Yet his apparent amorality is not only a matter of tone. His vision has been corrupted into sensationalism for its own sake, and his repetitive theme of the shooting and hanging of spies has ultimately suppressed any wider perspective of Civil War battlefields that he may have had. Compared to Bierce, Crane is a veritable Tolstoy.

The story, the imagery, even the clumsiness of phrasing in *The Red Badge of Courage*, all express the perception of a passive, receptive being. They denote a view of man's condition in a world he never made and in which he can only provisionally accommodate himself, but which he can never assume control over. One might call this framework of method and philosophy naturalistic, but that hardly helps to denote the specific quality of Crane's vision, the uniqueness of the way in which — given the framework of the resisting density of nature encompassed by an empty sky — he dramatizes the problem of human action. This brings him closer to existentialism than to the schools of Zola, or Garland or Dreiser. It would however be an arbitrary classification which tore Crane out of an obviously historical context and placed him in one founded on a specific philosophy of man,

distant from Crane (1871—1900) in time and extraneous to the atmosphere which gave him what intellectual sustenance he was willing to absorb.³ Yet unlike the writers of his generation, he concentrates on the bordering line between condition and act, a situation which before the 20th century was not really examined in fiction. More particularly, that situation tends to be one in which a man, related to other persons threatened by a similar predicament, confronts his annihilation. He may be imperilled by nature, by a visible energy, or by impersonal bullets, by unprovoked and unexpected hostility, sometimes accompanied by a visualization of death.

This seems to be the theme which is most authentically Crane's own theme, absent from his earliest, more ordinarily naturalistic stories. Throughout most of his writing span, and starting with *The Red Badge of Courage*, Crane is fond of placing his characters in conditions of warfare. At first he connects them with the Civil War, or with the Far Western man-hunt environment. His experience as war correspondent in the Greco-Turkish war, and later in Cuba — where he not only saw the Americans and Spaniards, but also learned of Cuban insurgents, as well as their opponents, the pro-Spanish native guerillas — gave him new material full of particularities concerning tactics, the use of arms, and behaviour in battle. He was not just an onlooker from the safety of a hiding place, but exposed himself to the enemy almost as if trying to attract bullets. Some of his experience was by no means vicarious. According to John Berryman "it is almost certain that Crane tried to be killed, and it is probable that he consciously tried to".⁴ Why? His works and the written documents about him are open to various interpretations, and Berryman himself is interesting, but inconclusive. Crane's certainly was an intense life which he allowed to burn away, living it fully in writing, travelling, enjoying love and lust and luxury: "Brevity is an element that enters importantly into all pleasures, of life, and this is what makes pleasure sad; and so there is no pleasure but only sadness".⁵

³ Bruce L. Grenburg (in "Metaphysics of Despair in Stephen Crane's "Blue Hotel", *Modern Fiction Studies*, XIV, 2, Summer 1968, 203—13) sees Crane concerned with "man's despair and sense of radical alienation in terms of a defunct Christian God" (p. 203). This framework is valid, though it does not entail any specific readings of the works themselves, and Grenburg's own interpretation of "The Blue Hotel" strikes one as unnecessarily schematic and far-fetched.

⁴ John Berryman: *Stephen Crane*, New York, 1950, p. 218.

⁵ Stephen Crane: *Letters*, ed. by R. W. Stallman and Lillian Glikes. New York, 1960, p. 132.

What a message to a woman whom he had — at twenty-five — only just and excitingly met, and with whom he then stayed for the rest of the four years that were still his to live!

A substantial part of his writings consists of sketches and straightforward reporting, and does not belong to the field of fiction. As for the stories, many of them are basically descriptive presentations of violent episodes without any attempt by the author to give them artistic shape or pattern; essentially the stuff of journalism even if sometimes there is no precise specification of the events referred to and the names of the particular environments are left out. Sometimes, indeed, they are very circumstantial factual accounts, the human poignancy of which gives them substance, if not enduring form. A good case in point is "God Rest Ye, Merry Gentlemen" (1899)⁶ a fairly long piece about the first experiences of a group of newspaper reporters in the Cuban war, ending with the death of one of them. Interestingly enough, another American writer who engaged in war reportage in a Greco-Turkish conflict and was attracted to Cuba, admittedly in its more peaceful days, Ernest Hemingway, also has a story with the same title, dealing also with a bloody incident at Christmas time — though not in war — and the narrator in the story is also a journalist!

The stories which have an inner organization and a purposeful connotative verbal form are few in number, and are widely known and often anthologized. But then there are several stories which do not attain that level of universal significance throughout, yet include passages and situations that link them with the very best that there is of Crane's. It seems that Crane himself did not quite distinguish matter heightened to a level of general urgency and insight from a more desultory account of the surface of things and occurrences. This can be true within an interconnected group of stories. "The Kicking Twelfth" (1900), the first of the four tales about a regiment of the imaginary Spitzbergen army, begins effectively enough in a satiric tone, directed against official vainglory, which however soon peters out. This and two other stories, "The Shrapnel of Their Friends" and "And If He Wills, We Must Die" (both 1900), remain rather straightforward accounts of groups of men adjusting themselves to the condition of fighting and indeed dying. Yet the fourth story, "The Upturned Face" (1900), one of Crane's shortest pieces, is unexpect-

⁶ The years in brackets throughout this essay are those of publication.

edly a masterpiece; not a thorough exploration, but a brief suggestion of the human condition, implying a profundity of feeling and an elementary, instinctive fellowship.

While a company is answering the enemy's shooting, Timothy Lean and a superior officer are preparing to bury the body of their comrade. The company is about to withdraw and the body must not be left exposed. Lean feels odd emptying his dead friend's pockets of such earthly possessions as "a watch, a whistle, a pipe, a tobacco-pouch, a handkerchief, a little case of cards and papers".⁷ Both he and the adjutant are clumsy at manipulating the corpse and reluctant to touch it where it is not covered. They often look at each other embarrassed by the situation, yet they even improvise a little burial service while the shooting goes on. Lean is uneasy because the corpse's face is turned up, and as the grave is being filled, he feels that it is terribly important that the shovels should be emptied over the feet first. He is relieved when this is what is actually done by a private who is there with them. Timothy himself takes over from him when the private gets wounded and he and the other soldier present run for shelter. Finally the dead man's face has to be covered, and Timothy, watched by the pale adjutant, swings the shovel. "It went forward in a pendulum curve. When the earth landed it made a sound — plop".

This deliberate anticlimax is in tune with the cool, plain narration in which human activity and feeling are tense with the unexpressed purpose of suppressing an outburst of accumulating hysteria. In the most precarious of circumstances, the burial as a ritual of community and fellowship, extending beyond the moment of death, is an act of courage; and inevitably it is selfconscious and clumsy in performance. This is how their little "service", spoken by the adjutant, ends:

O God, have mercy — "

O God, have mercy — " said Lean.

"Mercy," repeated the adjutant in a quick failure.

"Mercy," said Lean. And then he was moved by some violence of feeling for he turned upon his two men and tigerishly said, "Throw the dirt in."

The fire of the Rostina sharpshooters was accurate and continuous.

⁷ The text of Crane's stories is quoted from The University of Virginia Edition of the Works of Stephen Crane, published by the University Press of Virginia, Charlottesville, vol. V (*Tales of Adventure*, 1970 — "The Blue Hotel", "Death and the Child", "Five White Mice", "The Open Boat") and VI (*Tales of War*, 1970 — "A Mystery of Heroism", "The Price of the Harness", "The Upturned Face"), both edited by Fredson Bowers.

This switch from the sacred to the basic, the material, to earth, the element out of which Adam was made, is effected here by Lean's use of a pejorative word. This provides a kind of shock, which "The Open Boat", a story essentially so similar, never achieves. The symbolism of the face, looking at the men who always watch each other, is parallel to that of the dead soldier in *The Red Badge of Courage*. But the men involved in the dignified act of sacramental solidarity in the face of their own death, intimate a new quality in Crane, an awareness carried further than in "The Open Boat", and comparable to that of the later Hemingway, after 1936, and yet free from Hemingway's weakening sentimentality.

Most of Crane's other stories, even those which are still worth knowing as part of a living *oeuvre*, fall much below that mark. This is so even when a story is quite successful, like "Death and the Child" (1898). Peza, a foreign journalist of Greek origin, visits the front line in the Greco-Turkish war. He is obviously impressed by the tough matter-of-factness with which the soldiers accept their exposure to the enemy's shots and the occasional dead among themselves, and how they carry on with their minor preoccupations. His patriotic sentiment gets the better of him:

Peza asserted, in Greek, that he wished above everything to battle for the fatherland. The officer nodded; with a smile he pointed to some dead men covered with blankets, from which were thrust upturned dusty shoes.

"Yes, I know, I know," cried Peza. He thought the officer was poetically alluding to the danger.

"No," said the officer at once. "I mean cartridges — a bandoleer. Take a bandoleer from one of them."

Peza went cautiously toward a body. He moved a hand toward a corner of a blanket. There he hesitated, stuck, as if his arm had turned to plaster. Hearing a rustle behind him, he spun quickly. Three soldiers of the close rank in the trench were regarding him. The officer came again, and tapped him on the shoulder. "Have you any tobacco?" Peza looked at him in bewilderment. His hand was still extended toward the blanket which covered the dead soldier. "Yes," he said, "I have some tobacco." He gave the officer his pouch. As if in compensation, the other directed a soldier to strip the bandoleer from the corpse. Peza, having crossed the long cartridge-belt on his breast, felt that the dead man had flung his two arms around him.

A soldier with a polite nod and smile, gave Peza a rifle, a relic of another dead man. Thus he felt, besides the clutch of a corpse about his neck, that the rifle was as unhumanly horrible as a snake that lives in a tomb. He heard at his ear something that was in effect like the voices of those two dead men, their low voices speaking to him of bloody death, mutilation. The bandoleer gripped him tighter; he wished to raise his hands to his throat, like a man who is choking. The rifle was clumsy; upon his palms he felt the movement of the sluggish currents of a serpent's life; it was crawling and frightful.

All about him were these peasants, with their interested countenances, gibbering of the fight. From time to time a soldier cried out in semi-humorous lamentations descriptive of his thirst. One bearded man sat munching a great bit of hard bread. Fat, greasy, squat, he was like an idol made of tallow. Peza felt dimly that there was a distinction between this man and a young student who could write sonnets and play the piano quite weil. This old blockhead was coolly gnawing at the bread, while he, Peza, was being throttled by a dead man's arms.

He looked behind him, and saw that a head, by some chance, had been uncovered from its blanket. Two liquid-like eyes were staring into his face. The head was turned a little sideways as if to get better opportunity for the scrutiny. Peza could feel himself blanch; he was being drawn and drawn by these dead men slowly, firmly down as to some mystic's chamber under the earth where they could walk, dreadful figures, swollen and bloodmarked. He was bidden; they had commanded him; he was going, going, going.

When the man in the new white helmet bolted for the rear, many of the soldiers in the trench thought that he had been struck. But those who had been nearest to him knew better. Otherwise they would have heard the silken, sliding, tender noise of the bullet, and the thud of its impact. They bawled after him curses, and also outbursts of self-congratulation and vanity. Despite the prominence of the cowardly part, they were enabled to see in this exhibition a fine comment upon their own fortitude. The other soldiers thought that Peza had been wounded somewhere in the neck, because as he ran he was tearing madly at the bandoleer; the dead man's arms. The soldier with the bread paused in his eating and cynically remarked upon the speed of the runaway.

An officer's voice was suddenly heard calling out the calculation of the distance to the enemy, the readjustment of the sights. There was a stirring rattle along the line. The men turned their eyes to the front. Other trenches beneath them to the right were already heavily in action. The smoke was lifting toward the blue sky. The soldier with the bread placed it carefully on a bit of paper beside him as he turned to kneel in the trench.

For the soldiers here there is no tension, no polarity at all between facts of ordinary living, like bread or tobacco (the content of the dead man's pockets in "The Upturned Face"), and the dumb nothingness of death. They take the finality of being killed in their stride, as it were, but in Peza it engenders a horror, which is underlined by his feeling of being physically involved by the corpses, embraced by the dead owner of the cartridges which he has taken on his breast. He feels the spell of a nauseous sliminess, which should not be automatically identified with Sartre's more conscious one, and yet, the rifle becomes a sluggish, crawling serpent which, even if one should feel the connotations of sexual fear to be irrelevant here, evokes the shades of guilt inherent now in the paradise of Peza's former innocence. Also, the false god of war, "like an idol made of tallow" is there in the form of "a bearded man... fat, greasy, squat...". These, then, dominate Peza's awareness of existence after the collapse of his theatrical

sentiments under the smiles of the officer and the soldier who responded to his gesture by offering him the harness of a dead man's bandoleer. It is ultimately the quality behind the frightening glare that transfixes Peza: the two liquid-like eyes of a killed man staring into his face. (In "The Upturned Face", contrary to what happens in the forest scene in *The Red Badge of Courage*, the dead man's face is that of a friend, and so its dead eyes are never mentioned). The eyes command Peza: "he was going, going, going". This suggests Peza's flight, as it is confirmed in a cinematic change of perspective in the next paragraph. He is now seen by the soldiers who calculate the speed of his cowardly run, while an officer prompts the calculation for artillery action. As if some kind of sacred service were beginning: the smoke rises to the sky, bread is put down and the soldier kneels. The soldiers, peasants — as Peza observed — can be seen as one and the same vital and resilient force, which at the beginning of the story Peza is seen pitying in the form of fleeing villagers. Their vanity while seeing Peza flee is a negative parallel to his earlier romanticising advertising of his own patriotic sentiments. The pattern is as dense as in the richest episodes of Crane's best works, and provides a many-sided image of man's attitude in an extreme situation presented with balance and detachment.

In the short final section of the story we see Peza again, dragging himself up a hill-side and landing at the feet of a small child, apparently abandoned by his parents. The child in surprise asks the silent Peza: "Are you a man?" The explicit symbolism of this emblem mars the effect produced by the gripping and subtly ironic, more fully orchestrated presentation of Peza's earlier experience with death.

"The Price of the Harness" (1898) is a quiet account of a regiment's progress into battle in Cuba, occasionally centering on four soldiers. One of them, Nolan, feels that this is "one of those dread and lurid situations which in a nation's history stand out in crimson letters, becoming tales of blood to stir generation after generation. And he was in it and unharmed. If he lived through the battle, he would be a hero of the desperate fight at — and here he wondered for a second what fate would be pleased to bestow as a name for this battle".

When he is wounded, Nolan is not aware of his state, and his conversation with his friends imminently leading to the moment of death is poignant in the interplay of the innocent's nettled and rough friendliness and the embarrassed fumbling of those who know they are talking to a dying man:

The sparse line of men in blue shirts and dirty slouch hats swept on up the hill. He decided to shut his eyes for a moment because he felt very dreamy and peaceful. It seemed only a minute before he heard a voice say, "There he is". Grierson and Watkins had come to look for him. He searched their faces at once and keenly, for he had a thought that the line might be driven down the hill and leave him in Spanish hands. But he saw that everything was secure, and he prepared no questions.

"Nolan," said Grierson clumsily, "do you know me?"

The man on the ground smiled softly. "Of course I know you, you chowder-faced monkey. Why wouldn't I know you?"

Watkins knelt beside him. "Were did they plug you, boy?"

Nolan was somewhat dubious. "It ain't much, I don't think, but it's somewhere there". He laid a finger on the pit of his stomach. They lifted his shirt and then privately they exchanged a glance of horror.

"Does it hurt, Jimmie?" said Grierson, hoarsely.

"No," said Nolan, "it don't hurt any, but I feel sort of dead -to-the-world and numb all over. I don't thing it's very bad."

"Oh, it's all right," said Watkin.

"What I need is a drink," said Nolan, grinning at them. "I'm chilly — lyin' on this damp ground."

"It ain't very damp, Jimmie," said Grierson.

"Well, it is damp," said Nolan, with sudden irritability. "I can feel it. I'm wet, I tell you — wet through — just from lyin' here."

They answered hastily. "Yes, that's so, Jimmie. It is damp. That's so."

"Just put your hand under my back and see how wet the ground is," he said.

"No," they answered. "That's all right, Jimmie. We know it's wet."

"Well, put your hand under and see," he cried, stubbornly.

"Oh, never mind, Jimmie."

"No," he said, in a temper. "See for yourself." Grierson seemed to be afraid of Nolan's agitation, and so he slipped a hand under the prostrate man, and presently withdrew it covered with blood. "Yes", he said, hiding his hand carefully from Nolan's eyes, "you were right, Jimmie."

"Of corse I was", said Nolan, contentedly closing his eyes. "This hillside holds water like a swamp." After a moment he said, "Guess I ought to know. I'm flat here on it, and you fellers are standing up."

He did not know he was dying. He thought he was holding an argument on the condition of the turf.

This is followed by a brief scene in one of the fever tents. It is dominated by the voices of men who attempt to stall despair by communicating, while intimations of a deceptively idyllic environment penetrate from outside.

"Thereafter there was silence in the fever tent, save for the noise made by a man over in a corner, a kind of man always found in an American crowd, a heroic, implacable comedian and patriot, of a humor that has bitterness and ferocity and love in it, and he was wringing from the situation a grim meaning by singing "The Star-Spangled Banner" with all the ardor which could be procured from his fever-stricken body.

"Billie," called Martin in a low voice, "where's Jimmie Nolan?"

"He's dead," said Grierson.

A triangle of raw gold light shone on a side of the tent. Somewhere in the valley an engine's bell was ringing, and it sounded of peace and home as if it hung on a cow's neck.

"An' where's Ike Watkins?"

"Well, he ain't dead, but he got shot through the lungs. They say he ain't got much show."

Through the clouded odors of sickness and medicine rang the dauntless voice of the man in the corner:

"... Long may it wave..."⁸

There is a strong element of fortuity ruling over this story, though the author does not indulge in speculation about it. Yet he seems to be saying that this is a world in which man's chance is indeterminable: who will be hit, and how deadly, is a matter of coincidence, encounter, gamble. At the time Crane wrote stories of this kind, Thomas Hardy had just created a series of novels enfolding a complete fictional world permeated by this same theme, and was to bring out volumes of poetry reverberating with feeling engendered by a similar awareness. Crane's own »The Blue Hotel« explores it within a narrower scope, but as thoroughly as has ever been done in literature.

Like that greater story, "The Five White Mice" (1898) shows people at game. Dice are thrown in the opening scene, while the barman is mixing a cocktail, but the interesting portion of the story occurs later, associated with this gambling only by the common theme of chance. The sober New York Kid is walking in the street with his two tipsy friends. One of these accepts a totally unprovoked challenge to fight from a Mexican who happens to be passing by. The three Americans are facing three Mexicans now, and the New Yorker, contemplating the situation, "suddenly decided that he was going to be killed", He starts to envisage the manner in which he will be buried. Some seconds later, somehow, "he suddenly knew that it was possible to draw his own revolver and by a swift manoeuver face down all three Mexicans. If he was quick enough he would probably be victor. If any hitch occurred in

⁸ The last line, which sentimentalizes the "grim meaning" of the end of the story, occurs in the version published in the *Cosmopolitan* in December 1898. In the same month *Blackwood's Magazine* published the story with slight differences in the text, and omits "... Long may it wave...". The first edition of the story in a book, the collection *Wounds in the Rain* (1899), is a reprint of the *Blackwood's* version. Professor Bowers uses the *Cosmopolitan* version as his basis for the University of Virginia edition, but admits some eclecticism, as the *Blackwood's* text is closer to Crane's punctuation habits (see Vol. VI, p. CVIII).

the draw he would undoubtedly be dead with his friends. It was a new game". The haunting lines of a gambler's slogan return to his mind:

Oh, five white mice of chance,
Shirts of wool and corduroy pants,
Gold and wine, women and sin,
All for you if you let me come in —
Into the house of chance.

He worries about whether he will be able to pull out the revolver without some »singular providence« causing him to lose his grip or entangling the weapon in the tails of his coat. "Some of the eels of despair lay wet and cold against his back". Yet, "at the supreme moment the revolver came forth as if it were greased and it arose like a feather". The Mexicans are dismayed and withdraw, while the Kid "was bursting with rage because these men had not previously confided to him that they were vulnerable". The story ends by the drunk friends trying to unravel the coil of circumstances which had luckily caused the Kid to remain sober that evening. "The Five White Mice" is hardly a very good story nor, except for the occasional startling phrase connecting it with the best pages of Crane's elsewhere, a consummate piece of writing. However it suggests how interesting Crane could attempt to be — to show courage arising in a moment uncontrolled by consciousness, that very borderline of action which cannot be connected with any immediate cause.

A similar situation — facing death and stalling it by the right kind of action — is brought about at the end of "The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky" (1898), one of Crane's best written stories. Every word almost, every small event, even when apparently unconnected with the larger movements, seem to be functional and to drive the story to its climactic finale: the encounter of crazy, trigger-happy Scratchy Wilson with Jack Porter, the sheriff who is shyly bringing his new wife to his home town, where he is greatly respected. It hinges on the one unforeseeable act of the sheriff and on Scratchy Wilson's equally unforeseeable reaction; and yet it has the unassailable logic of a psychologically cogent instance of social history, besides being a well-proportioned anecdote parodying to some extent the standard Western tale. Too rarely does Crane rise to this level of competent narration. Compared to this story, "Twelve o'Clock" (1898), a combination of motifs from "The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky", "The Five White Mice" and "The Blue Hotel", falls completely flat. In fact, Crane is incapable of exploring the moment of action in the face of

danger by dramatizing it in terms of a lived idea or of a crisis of emotion. This is what flaws *The Red Badge of Courage*, where the hero is presented on one level of awareness through most of the book, and on another level through that part, which deals with his behaviour in battle.⁹ In the early story "A Mystery of Heroism" (1895), the soldier Collins runs, unnecessarily, as he well knows, out of stubbornness towards his laughing comrades, to drink and to bring water to his company while the hillside is under enemy fire. Later authors might have seen Collins's feat as a free, unconditional act, inexplicable, though fitting into their vision of a world of contingency. In Crane it is just an anecdotal account of a mere oddity.

Two details towards the end of the story are however characteristic of Crane's most interesting concerns. Just before returning to his company, Collins, almost against his will gives water to a dying officer. On his arrival back two "genial, skylarking young lieutenants" play over the bucket and knock it over before anyone has had a chance to drink. The one event shows Crane's unassuming efforts to relate the actions of his characters in the "great carnival of woe" — as in "Death and the Child" he calls a battle — to other human beings, even if these motions rarely deflect disaster; the other says yet again that the outcome of even the greatest *bravado* is trivial in a world that is beyond effective human control. William Bysshe Stein offers an interesting comment on the final sentence of the story ("The bucket lay on the ground empty"): "The rhetorical isolation of the last word is Crane's measure of the significance of man's engagement to purpose in the scheme of this existence".¹⁰

Though praised by Conrad, "One Dash — Horses"¹¹ and "A Man and Some Others"¹² are not very striking in terms of incident or of dramatizing the human predicament on a level beyond that of the immediate context. In "An Episode of War" (1899) a lieutenant is hit in the arm as he is dividing his company's coffee. The anguish of the wounded man as he returns behind the line, remains unexpressed, and the story, representative of Crane's senseless world of disconnected

⁹ See "The Red Badge of Courage — a Study in Bad Faith" by the present writer, in *Studia Romanica et Anglica Zagrabiensia*, No 33—36 (1972-3), p. 93—112.

¹⁰ "Stephen Crane's *Homo Absurdus*", *Bucknell Review*, VIII, 1958—59, p. 188.

¹¹ "Stephen Crane", in *Notes on Life and Letters*, London, 1949, p. 52.

¹² Stephen Crane: *Letters*, ed. *sit.*, p. 155.

experiences, is not, as his important works are, integrated by a personal vision. Nor is there authentic moral urgency in the story "The Veteran", in which the names of Henry Fleming and Jim Conklin from *The Red Badge of Courage*, recur, and which is supposed to show the less than amiable soldier of the novel in his old age dying heroically in a fire. The connection between the two episodes is arbitrary, without conveying insight into the drama of choice and commitment which purports to lie beneath it. Sometimes Crane tries to use even more elaborate patterns, as in "The Clan of No-Name" (1899), where in the external story a woman sacrifices the memory of her lover for the sake of a safe marriage, and in the central story we see the man being killed in Cuba. This kind of compositional complication does not however make the telling less perfunctory.

It appears, then, that a number of Crane's short stories adumbrate the theme of free behaviour in the face of death, but that few of them fully satisfy. Frequently they are badly constructed, the narration is often pedestrian, the drama, where it actually happens, tends to be arbitrarily manipulated. One short story, "The Upturned Face", achieves a level of genuine universality and satisfies even very high standards in the art of short fiction. Another, "The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky" is architecturally perfect, perhaps uniquely so in all of Crane's output that relies on some kind of plot, though the culmination does not really soar beyond that of a skillful anecdote. In several more stories there are poignant situations and passages testifying to Crane's genuine preoccupation with the image of man, his conduct under extreme duress; others again seem to be offshoots from Crane's first major imaginative effort, in *The Red Badge of Courage*. His earlier stories coped with the problem of environment without allowing such drama to arise; many of his late stories situated in Whilomville explore a new theme, the handling of social relationships within a small town community — a theme most disturbingly developed in "The Monster", a piece which current pressures make more painful to read than ever before.

Still, the implications of the universal human condition, its tests and limitations, are Crane's most significant theme. All the stories that have been scrutinized here, even when their subject matter is still in the orbit of *The Red Badge of Courage*, can be viewed as groping towards the fulness of statement in "The Open Boat" and "The Blue Hotel". The two works, very different in tone and technique from each other, are both more perfect within their limits than the flawed *The*

Red Badge of Courage, where the theme had been first developed (1895), at greater length and with a stress on psychological elaboration.

II

The very first sentence of "The Open Boat" (1897), famous for the wealth of connotation within the short directness of its statement, encompasses a breadth of perspective rarely achieved in literature and probably nowhere else by Crane. His stories begin in a very matter-of-fact way, though the opening of "Maggie"¹³ contains perhaps sympathetic irony, that of "The Blue Hotel"¹⁴ suggests a pointless grotesqueness, thematically relevant, and the first sentence of *The Red Badge of Courage*,¹⁵ with its deliberate pathetic fallacy, is in terms of an observer's view of a theater of human action set up by nature itself. But "None of them knew the color of the sky" implies more than any other beginning. It is a dramatic *in medias res* with a multilevelled meaning. Is it that the men are engaged in their work for survival, so that they cannot avert their eyes from the sea, or that their ignorance is metaphysical? If both, as the use of poetic language expects us to understand, is it the immediate-realistic, or the atemporal-spiritual meaning upon which our reading should center? The continuation of the passage is descriptive. Yet each section of that image of the threatening sea amplifies the moral, universal meaning which we have been aware of from the starting point.

What is more, the two terms of the relationship stated in the initial sentence, "they" and "the sky", define the two perspectives through the interplay of which the story is brought to us. The narrative viewpoint shifts from the individual men whose subjectively coloured vision is acquired during an extreme effort to keep their boat from capsizing *and* to direct it towards the safety of firm land, to a distant presence voiced in a tone of detachment, its omniscience limited, often expressed by a suggestion of appearance rather than of fact, through speculation, qualifying adverbs, ostensible questioning, occasionally again conveyed in the generalized truths

¹³ "A very little boy stood upon a heap of gravel for the honor of Rum Alley".

¹⁴ "The Palace Hotel at Fort Romper was painted a light blue, a shade that is on the legs of a kind of heron, causing the bird to declare its position against any background".

¹⁵ "The cold passed reluctantly from the earth, and the retiring fogs revealed an army stretched out on the hills, resting".

formulated by a seasoned and experienced observer. The two points of view, that of a character in the story and that of the narrative voice, can come together and even blend for a moment, as they do in the course of this passage:

"The boat was headed for the beach. The correspondent wondered if none ever ascended the tall wind-tower, and if then they never looked seaward. This tower was a giant, standing with its back to the plight of the ants. It represented in a degree, to the correspondent, the serenity of nature amid the struggles of the individual — nature in the wind, and nature in the vision of men. She did not seem cruel to him then, nor beneficent, nor treacherous, nor wise. But she was indifferent, flatly indifferent. It is, perhaps, plausible that a man in this situation, impressed with the unconcern of the universe, should see the innumerable flaws of this life and have them taste wickedly in his mind and wish for another chance."

The tower "was a giant" to the correspondent, to whom, "it represented . . . the serenity of nature", nature which "did not seem cruel to him then", etc. The next sentence, however, says: "But she was indifferent, flatly indifferent". This statement is both part of the correspondent's continued reasoning and an assertion of the impersonal narrator, who then continues to speculate on what is plausible for a man in the correspondent's situation, "impressed with the unconcern of the universe" — this unconcern, again, belonging both to the correspondent's realization and to the narrator's omniscience: a fact of metaphysical import which, surely, is meant both to govern our reading and to make us identify intellectually with the correspondent.

This interplay of points of view is certainly the product of a double urge of the author to convey the lived moment and at the same time to affirm the wisdom of a thought-out view of the world. Such a procedure is not infrequent in literature, and sometimes, as in Conrad's "Youth", written shortly after "The Open Boat" was published,¹⁶ both perspectives can be suggested in the voice of one, personalized narrator. In Crane, however, it does not seem to occur elsewhere. His lesser stories contain information unabsorbed by style or vision, and, again, fully realized moments, hallucinatory or humanly poignant. Mostly, however, the perspective is narrowed down to the horizon of the characters to whom things happen. When in a story

¹⁶ In *Modern Language Notes*, vol. 73, 1958, pp. 100—102. Guy Owen Jr. lists a few probable borrowings from Crane's story in "Youth", and suggests that "reading the 'Open Boat' may have led Conrad to consider his own experience aboard a sinking vessel as the subject for a story, and that in shaping the raw material of his experience he recalled a few details from Crane's story . . .". As for Conrad's interest in "the Open Boat" see Stephen Crane: *Letters*, loc. cit., *Notes on Life and Letters*, loc. cit. and in particular Conrad's *Last Essays*, New York, 1926, pp. 102—103.

which allows its symbolism to be inferred from the particularized situation, a maxim or an observation of general purport is uttered in the voice of the narration, the reader is shocked out of his mimetic illusion. There is just one such sentence in "The Upturned Face". A sharply observed detail is being related with great precision: "The wounded man scrambled hastily for the top of the ridge without devoting any glances to the direction from whence the bullets came and the other man followed at an equal pace but he was different in that he looked back anxiously three times". This is followed by the sentence: "This is merely the way — often — of the hit and the unhit". The presence of this statement, intrinsically admirable, is perhaps the one flaw in Crane's great story, for it unnecessarily, if for a moment, disturbs the involving effect of Lean's existential experience. A similar shock is produced by two passages in "The Blue Hotel", of which more anon, but there the external perspective that breaks in is deliberate and functional.

In "The Open Boat" the two perspectives meet unobtrusively and fuse into a generalized view of the world. The dramatic effort of the four men in the boat is seen both as a situation in itself and as an instance of something of wide purport. We know what the correspondent thinks, we can sympathize with the easily discernible feelings of the captain whose ship has sunk, and we see all four from without, tossed about by the natural, cosmic powers of wind and sea, against the wider background of day, night, and the stars. And moreover, sometimes we are taken into the impersonalized confidence of the omniscient teller: we know that the men have worked under the mistaken expectation that they are approaching shelter. This puts our interest in the story at a higher level: we not only witness the anxiousness of these men, engaged within the situation, we also watch the total situation itself. When however the interest of the story can be enhanced by our ignorance, we are left within the limited horizons of the men in the boat. We do not know, any more than they do, who the people on the shore are and what they mean by their gestures; they are pointless, comic, frantic, if they are not accompanied in our vision by some practical purpose.

"... Well, that must be the life-boat. They drag them along shore on a wagon."

"That's the life-boat, sure."

"No, by — , it's — it's an omnibus."

"I tell you it's a life-boat."

"It is not! It's an omnibus. I can see it plain. See? One of these big hotel omnibuses."

"By thunder, you're right. It's an omnibus, sure as fate. What do you suppose they are doing with an omnibus? Maybe they are going around collecting the life-crew, hey?"

"That's it, likely. Look! There's a fellow waving a little black flag. He's standing on the steps of the omnibus. There come those two fellows. Now they're all talking together. Look at the fellow with the flag. Maybe he ain't waving it!"

"That ain't a flag, is it? That's his coat. Why, certainly, that's his coat."

"So it is; it's his coat. He's taken it off and is waving it around his head. But would you look at him swing it!"

"Oh, say, there isn't any life-saving station there. That's just a winter-resort hotel omnibus that has brought over some of the boarders to see us drown."

"What's that idiot with the coat mean? What's he signaling, anyhow?"

"It looks as if he were trying to tell us to go north. There must be a life-saving station up there."

"No; he thinks we're fishing. Just giving us a merry hand. See? Ah, there, Willie!"

"Well, I wish I could make something out of those signals. What do you suppose he means?"

"He don't mean anything. He's just playing."

"Well, if he'd just signal us to try the surf again, or to go to sea and wait, or go north, or go south, or go to hell, there would be some reason in it. But look at him! He just stands there and keeps his coat revolving like a wheel. The ass!"

"There come more people."

"Now there's quite a mob. Look! Isn't that a boat?"

"Where? Oh, I see where you mean. No, that's no boat."

"That fellow is still waving his coat."

"He must think we like to see him do that. Why don't he quit it? It don't mean anything."

Perhaps too metaphysical a meaning ought not to be read into this scene of incomprehension between men; after all, the reasons for it are natural. It nevertheless reminds one strikingly of a passage in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, which reads like an analogy to Crane's scene:

At certain moments of lucidity, the mechanical aspect of their gestures, their meaningless pantomime makes silly everything that surrounds them. A man is talking on the telephone behind a glass partition; you cannot hear him, but you see his incomprehensible dumb show: you wonder why he is alive.¹⁷

The difference is that Crane presents men in exceptional circumstances and that the break in communication makes them feel, to adapt Camus' next sentence, a "discomfort in the face of man's own humanity, this incalculable tumble before the image of what we are". Whereas Camus instead uses the word "inhumanity" in this sentence and identifies the discomfort with Sartre's "nausea" and his own concept of the

¹⁷ Albert Camus: *The Myth of Sisyphus*, New York, 1955, p. 11.

absurd. To each of Crane's shipwrecked, on the other hand, "absurd" is the indecision of "this old ninny-woman, Fate", her mismanagement of "men's fortunes": can she mean to drown him, does she dare, can she drown him?

"Absurd" then is the word used by Crane's persona, and a generation reared in the literary atmosphere of existential awareness cannot help seeing in the story an adumbration of mid-twentieth century concerns. It was a Victorian poet though who wrote that

... we are here as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and fight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night.

The apparent vanity of individual attempts, the subordination of purposeful endeavour to what seem to be freaks of an impersonal Fate, the impossibility of planning and prediction in a world of contingencies, and the self-defeating attempts at understanding it — if these commonplace notions belonging, in modern times, to a century-long range of philosophical attitudes can still excite the imagination, it is thanks to the ways in which they have been dramatically expressed by artists. A work like Crane's story offers a ruling image of a naturalistic world-view, of realistic literary convention, of a pattern of existentialist concepts, of archetypal imagery upsurging from the subconscious. The wonder of art is that "The Open Boat" is at the same time almost straight autobiography, perhaps because the author kept to a simple outline of events, subordinating inessential particularities to the basic concerns of the people involved.

The image of the lonely boat, full of shipwrecked men, exposed to the natural elements and struggling, in isolation from the rest of mankind, to reach the shore, is in itself emblematic. The very idioms "being in the same boat" and not being allowed to "rock the boat" are suggestive of its universal meaning that could easily be put to allegorical use. It is a mark of Crane's excellence that one never feels the story to be the mere husk of an idea and that no single framework of ideas will exhaust its significance to the reader — nor will one exclude others.

As in *The Red Badge of Courage*, the sequence of events in the story falls within a simple pattern, admittedly more significant in the longer work, yet similar in outline: In the novel there is a pattern of approach towards the enemy — withdrawal — and second approach, ending in a breakthrough; in the story the boat comes close to the shore, returns to the open, draws close again, for the men to put in a final costly

effort before the goal is reached. There is no plot in either case, no unexpected interaction of narrative trends or an individualized chain of events which would give the story qualities of potential myth.¹⁸ It also lacks circumstantial description of particularized place and character. Basically it is an image of one of man's extreme situations, set into an eternal, always equally topical and recognizable milieu. From whatever kind of ship they may be coming, the men row and bail out the boat in the manner in which this has always been done; the mention of hotels and coffee pots on the shore almost disrupts the generalized inevitability that conveys the fullness of a universal condition. It is not, as the stories examined above are, a study of man's attitude as he is facing imminent death, but of man emeshed in circumstances which can bring death about. This indirectness is a greater challenge to the author, because it could have deflected the story from what is fundamental. The more so as all that happens in the realm of natural change seems to be a matter of chance.

Thus "The Open Boat" does not subscribe to an optimistic view of the world, yet it is not pessimistic. Man cannot promise himself too much, but in his anguish he is not condemned in advance. He cannot neutralize chance or block it out, but he can intervene through purposeful and concentrated action. The men in the story are not subject to psychological scrutiny as the young hero of *The Red Badge of Courage* is, that is except in his moment of full commitment. Yet nothing that they do is gratuitous as the behaviour of the men in "The Blue Hotel" will be. It is as if Crane deliberately decided for once to present men acting responsibly to the best of their ability: and the thought that he was drawing upon actual experience in doing so is bracing. Yet, it has been said that Crane, by giving credit to man's resilience and ability for concerted effort, is being romantic in "The Open Boat", and it is pleasant to remember that his story inspired another autobiographical account full of romantic feeling, expressing a youthful joy in life that transpires through all the hard work of sailors battling against an insidious sequence of bad luck, namely Conrad's "Youth".

¹⁸ I do not mean myth in the anthropological sense, but "a particular kind of story which has a value in it self — a value independent from its embodiment in any literary work". Stories with mythic quality convey an "awe inspiring experience, which we feel to be numinous", and can be invented by individuals in fully civilized periods. See C. S. Lewis: *An Experiment in Criticism*, Cambridge, England, 1965, pp. 40—44.

Crane conveys his scene as a poet, but is perfectly in control of his feelings: "A singular disadvantage of the sea lies in the fact that after successfully surmounting one wave, you discover that there is another behind it just as important and just as nervously anxious to do something effective in the way of swamping boats". The consciously hostile sea in this sentence is not meant to illustrate the doctrine of naturalism, but to dramatize the experience of the characters with sympathetic irony. Similarly when later the correspondent jumps from the boat, an act which eventually brings the survivors into the freedom of safety: "The coldness of the water was sad; it was tragic. This fact was somehow mixed and confused with his opinion of his own situation that it seemed almost a proper reason for tears. The water was cold". The banality of the last sentence deliberately understates the importance of the correspondent's leap.

The author's narrative strategy is to suggest a disjunction between human beings and the natural universe, that is neither malevolent, benevolent or indifferent to man, but rather an unpredictable medium of man's existence. In it man has to devise his survival from one contingent moment to another. At the end of the day men on shore feel that they can now "be interpreters" — but their interpretation is an open matter even when the story has ended. In their crisis they felt a need for ritual, but the utterance of fear repeated three times on each of the three different occasions in the story, is made in the "name of the seven mad gods who rule the sea". The exclamation strongly suggests the metathesis "mad gods" — "mad dogs"; the number seven is remindful of pagan fable conventions; and, though it is supposed to express the silent thought of each of the men, it functions in the text as a collective imprecation in which, if there is any yielding to despair, it is overwhelmed by anger and protest against the unknowable, irrational power.

As for the reflections of the men, there was a great deal of rage in them. Perchance they might be formulated thus: "If I am going to be drowned — if I am going to be drowned — if I am going to be drowned, why, in the name of the seven mad gods who rule the sea, was I allowed to come thus far and contemplate sand and trees?"

On the first two of the three occasions that these reflections are quoted in the story, they are followed by a sentence indicating a certain frivolity on the part of the author, perhaps to connote puzzlement and the lack of any spiritual principle of guidance: »Was I brought here merely to have my

nose dragged away as I was about to nibble the sacred cheese of life?" It is the meaninglessness of whatever is ultimately going to happen to them, that makes the men, in the words of one of Crane's best poems,¹⁹ "adrift on a slim spar", under "A reeling, drunken sky and no sky", feel that "God is cold". Or, as in another poem²⁰

To the sailor, wrecked,
The sea was dead grey walls
Superlative in vacancy.

In its continuation this poem speaks also of "the grim hatred of nature", but this particular idea does not seem to dominate "The Open Boat". Like those of Hardy, Crane's utterances on the malevolence or indifference of nature were not always the same; and that "The Open Boat" is so meaningful to the modern reader is partly due to the fact that the nature discovered in it is never, except in a tone of irony, presented anthropomorphically.

Man is never "defeated" by nature, but his success is jeopardized by chance, and his struggle to live is inevitably curtailed at some point. But no general rule can be culled either from life or from literature. In the story one of the four men is drowned. It happens to be the most neutrally presented of the characters, and it is unwise to see him as a villain meeting with retribution for lack of solidarity with his fellows, as one critic suggests.²¹ It could have been any of the four, whether the one who reveals most awareness, the journalist, or the captain, or the slightly amusing cook. Nor does it seem to have any significance that the victim, Billie the oiler, happens to be the only character whose name is mentioned. The story could also have ended with the death of any two, or with the survival of only one, or with the drowning of all. The point of the story is that the world is unaccountable and that the only thing man can do is to put up a fight. He is a sentient being, even rational within limits, so he stands a chance. The story does not estimate how high that chance is. It is not a parable, nor an uplifting tract. If the reading of it is invigorating, this is thanks to the quality of Crane's dynamic texture and to a fair openness to any possible turn of events within the story.

¹⁹ *The Poems of Stephen Crane*, ed. by Joseph Katz, New York, 1966, p. 129.

²⁰ *ibid.*, p. 84.

²¹ Eric Salomon: *Stephen Crane, From Parody to Realism*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1966, pp. 173—175.

Compared with "The Open Boat", the brave effort of old man Hemingway in *The Old Man and the Sea* seems contrived in stressing the larger than life resilience and unperturbed peace of Santiago. The story of the big catch has the firm outline of a mythic story²² that is not found in Crane's. This however does not imply a value judgement. The boyish insistence on the technicalities of the fisherman's craft are obtrusive and pedagogic compared to the more integrated if often denser reference in the descriptions of sea activities in an author like Conrad. Hemingway's descriptions, however, deflect the reader's attention from the experience of a natural milieu upon themselves.

The solitary friendship between Santiago and the boy really saddens in drawing attention upon the fragility of life and upon the merely passive presence of the sympathetically minded community of which the two are part. In Conrad on the other hand one witnesses the interrelationships within a hierarchically structured but functioning social organization. This is professionally assumed by the narrator, who spells out its ethical significance. Both the practical functioning and the realization of it are among the finest achievements in Crane's story too, where we are told that "the subtle brotherhood . . . established on the seas" is silently felt but not mentioned by all the men, and the most reflective among them, the only one who is not a professional seaman, "knew even at the time (that this comradeship) was the best experience of his life. But no one said that it was so. No one mentioned it". Though it permeates the story it is never transformed into Conradian rhetoric. It therefore the more easily becomes part of that liberating freshness which "The Open Boat", when considered in the context of modern literature, radiates even today.

The significance of Crane's serene openness in the story can perhaps best be perceived when one compares "The Open Boat" to *The Red Badge of Courage*. The extreme situation suggested does not get absorbed, as in the earlier novel, into an individualized insight into one consciousness, the one indisputably central to the situation. In "The Open Boat" the situation is therefore even more inclusive than the one presented in the larger work. It also dramatizes interrelated human action more closely, while avoiding that flaw of dichotomy, the existence of two separate levels of awareness created by the fact that chapters 17. to 23. of the novel do not include analyses of the young hero's mind. The moral inadequacy which arises from this and which is slurred over by the author

²² See note 18.

at the end of the book, has no cause to appear in "The Open Boat", which all in all may perhaps be considered the most perfect of Crane's great works.

"The Blue Hotel" however brings to our attention some new and disconcerting qualities, meaningful to today's reader, which make it stand on the opposite flank of *The Red Badge of Courage* from "The Open Boat", yet with equal right. That story offers complementary interpretations of life and of itself as we switch from one, provisional ending to a further, but alternative one. In both versions it is more sceptical about man than "The Open Boat", and its very form allows a larger play-ground to the contingency of living than "The Open Boat's" simple, clear, and bold curve of effort and achievement.

III

"The Blue Hotel" (1898) differs from Crane's other stories which have man's confrontation of death for their theme, Admittedly, the main character is haunted by an awareness of the possibility of death, and indeed suddenly dies in a moment of careless behaviour. Yet this story is distinguished from the others by being on one level a gross joke, albeit a carefully plotted one, with apparent irrelevancies leading to a bizzare bloody, perhaps horrifying climax — like Bierce's — through a twist, a sting in the tail, technically reminiscent of O. Henry. On another level it is an illustration of a metaphysical problem — of chance, fate, determinacy — which places the human possibility of planning and performing, of action within the framework of destiny, under a question mark.

The story of the choleric Swede who arriving at the blue painted Palace hotel outside a small town in Nebraska, feels that he will be murdered there, quarrels, wins a fight and leaves — only to be killed almost accidentally in a saloon, is supported by a number of grotesque effects. The very colour of the house that stands alone in the windy plain indicates a conspicuous irrelevance that cannot be forgotten throughout the story. The narrative tone is self-effacing, and except for two prominent, probably deliberate instances of inconsistency, hardly ever swerves from an account of externalities. The dialogues and descriptions are lively and realistic, full of wonderfully observed details characteristic of human nature, such as the attempts of Scully the hotel keeper to soothe the panicking Swede. It pretends simply to be a story of interacting human beings — and it is; except that on this level alone the story

has no meaning. That it parodies by a denial, and subsequently by an unexpected, somewhat qualified restoration of the Wild West myth, similar in manner to what happens in "The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky", is important but of no central value. Entirely non-allegorical, it is through its relationship to an idea, the exemplification of an issue in the intellectual climate of the 1890's, that it achieves the significance that it has as an adumbration of modern literature.

It is therefore a mistake to read the story as if it were really an account of human destiny brought about by psychologically consistent behaviour and implying moral judgment. Such a reading is possible, but pointless. It is difficult to imagine why the "shaky and quick-eyed Swede, with a great shining cheap valise" should come to Fort Romper, if he is obsessed by the pathological fear from which he apparently suffers. But once he is there, the changes in his mood can be justified in terms of realistic development. In the beginning he may be seen simply as scared by what he had heard of the West: "Gentlemen, do not disturb yourselves. I will leave this house. I will go away because" — He accused them dramatically with his glance. "Because I do not want to be killed". Scully manages to quiet him if not to reassure him; and under the influence of Scully's whiskey he becomes loud and overbearing. After a successful fight with Scully's son Johnnie, whom he had accused of cheating at cards, he leaves and, in the saloon in town and after more whiskey, he bullies the local gambler into stabbing him.

The cause for this final action is determined by the Swede's initial premonition that he will be killed in the Blue Hotel. The irony of the story is that he turns out to be wrong. He does end by being killed — elsewhere, and not in the room in which he had prophesied. In order to prevent his apprehension from coming true he wants to leave Scully's front-room. He actually leaves it, but later, and not as a direct consequence of his fear. He first has his fight with Johnnie, with all the onlookers taking sides against him, the cowboy actually shouting "Kill him!". And in a devious way Johnnie, who gets beaten, does indeed kill him, because, as everyone dislikes him, the Swede leaves the hotel and goes to town.

Had he left as soon as he had his first misgivings, gone to the saloon and been killed there — as he is later — the incident would merely have been an enactment of the well-known "appointment in Samarra" plot,²³ unprepared by the

²³ The epitaph, from W. Somerset Maugham, to John O'Hara's popular novel.

new buoyancy of the Swede's mood to which the behaviour of all the men in the blue hotel had contributed. The point is that through a contingency the result is ultimately the same, but as a consequence of an entirely new chain of motivation unpredicted by the Swede.

To bring moral judgments to bear on the characters in this story, to see the ultimate consequence as dependent on human failure to understand and sympathise and on lack of responsibility, seems to be out of place.²⁴ This would tally with the reading of the story as a realistic study of fear and of social *mores*, though the Swede, in his inaccessibility to genuine human contacts, is difficult for the reader to sympathize with and belongs to a different class of fictional characters from the others. Anyhow, the plot is too ingenuous, the connection between cause and consequence too elaborate and tenuous to justify the stress on ethical concerns. Instead, it is the chain of circumstances itself that the author imposes upon our attention. These indeed have their logic, but the logical line is one of many possible ones; the necessity which we seem to recognize behind it is gratuitous. To apply to "The Blue Hotel" a realistic standard of judgment is almost as if we took Camus's *L'Étranger* to be an anecdote, a *fait divers* taken from ordinary living, to be judged in the way in which we might talk of a set of relationships in a Maupassant novel. What is missing is the connection between facts and patterns of ideas on the one hand and the presuppositions of social living on the other. In Crane's story the established connection between events, the insistence upon identifying the impulses and the cogwheels which bring about the event, is just as much a construction. In both works our lack of orientation is very similar. It is only that in Crane the reader tries to sum up the totality of the personal details that have taken place, and in Camus's novel he is supposed to participate in the narrator-hero's perception of details fragmented from the current of circumstances. In both cases the reader is aware of a gap between the general and the particular, which is not felt in realistic fiction, yet which is the source of our feeling of absurdity as we read both these widely different works.

In "The Blue Hotel" the very motif of the card game which is part of the causal machinery contributes to the theme of chance — of the gradual building up and working out of an

²⁴ Cf., e.g., Joseph N. Satterwhite: "Stephen Crane's *The Blue Hotel*: a Failure of Understanding", *Modern Fiction Studies*, II, Winter 1956—57, pp. 238—41; Max Westerbrook: "Stephen Crane's Social Ethic", *American Quarterly*, XIV, Winter 1962, esp. pp. 593—95; Marston La France: *A Reading of Stephen Crane*, Oxford, 1971. p. 232.

unforeseeable pattern that brings the Swede's life to its end. The people involved, in spite of all the lifelike details never excelled elsewhere in Crane, do not function as full personalities. They are players in a game. This is not true only of those in the hotel. In the other world, in the saloon, four men also sit at a table and they drink, losing, it might be argued, the power of reasoning foresight. At the turning point of the story, the quarrel which makes the Swede leave one place and go to the other, the cards are thrown on the floor, the "fat and painted kings and queens" are trampled over, and later the cards are twice lifted by a swirling wind and are dashed against the wall. The symbol of disrupted cardplaying and "disrespect" for an established order, and the parallelism of circumstance between the earlier and the later setting, offer the story a certain order. Without it such a chain of events would be too difficult to perceive at a glance and would hence be unsatisfactory. The artistic secret of the story lies in the fact that everything, even apparent irrelevancies, contributes to heighten the writing. In the saloon the Swede importunes the four man around a table — one of whom functions as a counterpart to Johnnie. The man whom he singles out and catches by the throat happens to be a professional gambler — but before the incident occurs we have had almost a page-long description of the gambler's professional ethics in choosing victims and of his delicate personal manners, as well as the model life he leads in his virtuous family circle. For the final outcome — the fact that the gambler kills the Swede who attacked him — these details are of no importance. Their function is only to add incongruity to the human set-up against which the unfortunate Swede humps, and to amuse by doing so. The exceptional, paradoxical character of the gambler is yet another coincidence. Thus another relevant irrelevance is added to the mass of oddities that strike one throughout the story.

The section in which the Swede's fateful conflict with the gambler takes place contains the only two conspicuous generalized musings on the nature of the universe in the story, and in these two places the neutral and cautious impersonal narration suddenly assumes a superior tone openly proclaiming judgment over man. The first of these passages — on the Swede's walk through the storm — could have run simply as follows: "He might have been in a deserted village. We picture the world as thick with conquering and elate humanity, but here, with the bugles of the tempest pealing, it was hard to imagine a peopled earth. However, the Swede found a saloon." Such a passage would not have stood out from the rest of the

story. Instead, before the last sentence in this quotation, the following is inserted: "One viewed the existence of man then as a marvel, and conceded a glamour of wonder to these lice which were caused to cling to a whirling, fire-smote, ice-locked, disease-stricken, space-lost bulb. The conceit of man was explained by this storm to be the very engine of life. One was a coxcomb not to die in it".

Warner Berthoff maintains that the whole passage is not there for the sake of the naturalist doctrine, but in order to bring into more brilliant focus the occasion that is soon to lead to the theatrical climax of the story.²⁵ Later, the killing of the Swede is described as follows: "There was a great tumult, and then was seen a long blade in the hand of the gambler. It shot forward, and a human body, *this citadel of virtue, wisdom, power* was pierced as easily as if it had been a melon". The words which we have put in italics, easily detached from the rest of the sentence, are again a gratuitous comment, perhaps deliberately heavy-handed in its irony, just like the misanthropic sentences on the "conceit of man" which have been pointed out above. The author who wrote *The Red Badge of Courage* could have certainly been more consistent in the tone of the new story, had he chosen to be so. Yet the inconsistencies, like the grotesquely facetious symbolism of the dreadful legend on the cash machine under which the Swede's corpse is lying — perhaps like Caesar's under the statue of Pompey? — "This registers the amount of your purchase", are almost certainly deliberate. Their very presence, appropriate but stylistically incongruous, seems to underline the absurdity as well as the clumsy rightness of fate, which can be seen as either a set of indeterminate coincidences or as the working out of an impenetrable determinism. They do not however add anything essential to the meaning of the story. Because of them the dramatic statement which the story as such is, reads almost as an illustration of the idea of man's absurdity.

This point, and fittingly within its own limits, could have been the end of the story. The Swede could have been seen as the engineer of his own fate, an inner impulse having made him undergo the oscillations of his behaviour at the hotel, and bringing him from there to the saloon. This on a more general level would make man himself unaccountable, and his destiny, which he carries with him, an unfathomable but real force. The Swede's prophecy concerning his own death, even if not quite correct in details, would appear as a dark intuitive ut-

²⁵ *The Ferment of Realism: American Literature 1884—1919*, New York, 1965, p. 228.

terance the more impressive for the parallelism of the circumstances in the hotel and in the saloon.

In an additional short section of the story, however, from the conversation between the naive cowboy and the more experienced, taciturn Easterner, we learn a fact that in the course of the narration had never been disclosed: Johnnie had actually cheated. Another deceiver, the reader must imply, is the narrator himself, in the best tradition of the convention-breaking story-telling from Cervantes to Norman Mailer. He led us to believe, from the Swede's earlier behaviour, that the Swede's accusation of Johnnie was the phantasy of an unhealthy mind. At that stage of the story, the Easterner's behaviour, it now turns out, was paltry, in a way in which he, till that point the intellectual norm and the most reliably decent among the characters in the story, would have never been expected by the reader to behave. Although, as he now admits, he actually saw Johnnie cheating, he did not do anything to prevent the fight by revealing the truth and doing so to mitigate the Swede's subsequent reactions. The narrator withholds the truth from the reader by insisting on one aspect of the Easterner's reaction to the fight — his nervousness about it. Only subsequently are we able to interpret this correctly: the Easterner was uneasy and loathed the fight not just because of his pacifism, but of his feeling of guilt. This kind of authorial cheating is worthy of Agatha Christie, who misleads her reader in a similar kind of game and for a similar purpose. In both cases, a full account of the characters as psychologically cogent and socially responsible creatures is withheld for the purpose of a different structural pattern, such as — for Christie — the detective story. In "The Blue Hotel" the question explicitly debated at the end is: who is guilty for the Swede's death? Ostensibly this is a moral problem, in fact however it suggests the different possibilities of interpreting sequences of events — in other words: the fortunes of individuals and the vagaries of history.

"We, five of us, have collaborated in the murder of this Swede", says the Easterner to the cowboy. "Usually there are from a dozen to forty women really involved in every murder, but in this case it seems to be only five men — you, I, Johnnie, old Scully, and that fool of an unfortunate gambler came merely as a culmination, the apex of a human movement, and gets all the punishment".

The women of course are a joke on the part of the author, not of the Easterner, alluding to the *cherchez la femme* theory, but he left out two other persons involved in the situation.

One is the bartender, though his "sin" is one of omission, for according to the cowboy he ought to have knocked the Swede on the head in time; the other is the Swede himself. By not mentioning him, the Easterner implies that man is not responsible for himself; things happen to him. If we took this view seriously we would have to criticize the Easterner's belief that anyone is morally responsible at all, for everybody could be seen as the passive tool of some determining power. In fact he feels the opposite: "I refused to stand up and be a man. I let the Swede fight it out alone . . . We are all in it! . . . Every sin is the result of a collaboration". Each individual contributes to the way things work out; things are not predestinated. Only looking backward can one realize the pattern determining the outcome. Though ironically, he agrees with the cowboy that "a thousand things might have happened". There is no room in this theory for premonitions like the Swede's, and the Easterner does not mention it. Crane overdetermines our acceptance of the Easterner's humanistic determinism: it may be close to the way he, the author, sees things,²⁶ but the circumstances displayed in the story are more inclusive.

For one thing, there is the cowboy's instinctive protestation of his innocence. As the typical man in the street he disclaims all involvement and responsibility. His is an unprincipled pragmatism: other people, like the bartender whom he mentions, should have done this or that. A third view is implied in the story as it develops up to the Swede's death: man carries his own destiny, of which he may even be dimly aware, but it works itself out through an unforeseeable number of circumstances. Since these cannot be recognized or controlled, one either has to reckon with a mysterious determining power or see the Swede's story as a quirk of chance. But whether one subscribes to mystic determinism or to indeterminism, morally they amount to the same: man is unaccountable and cannot be tied down to any responsibility.

The mechanics behind all these logical inferences is necessarily boring; more exciting is the manner in which within Crane's fiction the various attitudes impose themselves complementing and transcending each other as they are being displayed.

Without the last section, the story does not seem to rise beyond the level of a positivistic acceptance of the basic

²⁶ Donald B. Gibson's careful reading of the story insists that "nothing would indicate a disparity between the attitudes expressed by the Easterner and Crane's attitudes" (*op. cit.*, p. 108) but this seems to me to narrow down the game-like implications of the plot — which comprises the confrontation of its own commentators!

truism of naturalist philosophy. Man's irrational drives carry him into situations that accomplish his fate, whether that fate is determined in advance or not: or rather, the fate is an aspect of the drive. Within such a view, whether Johnnie actually cheated or not is of no significance. The story, if it ended at that point, would function as a self-sufficient literary entity, with a respectable, if not great literary kinship.

The more brilliant and very modern, appears to be Crane's awareness of the possibilities of manipulating the ultimate effects of the story, essentially different from the adroit scoring of points by O. Henry or Somerset Maugham. By making the first ending provisional, to be transcended by the second, the author does not simply allow a possible drift of affairs to continue automatically. His further effects are produced literally through an aberation from the established rules of the game, those of the author himself and of Johnnie, while everyone involved, whether he recognizes it or not, contributes his part to the production of unforeseen events. The underlying philosophy dramatically transcends the self-imposed limits of naturalism as a world view, but it would be mistaken to read moralistic implications into it.

Both the Easterner's and the cowboy's opinions have their moral implications if we interpret them as propositions on the nature of the world. Within the story the Easterner's claim is a justified warning that human action is morally relevant even in a world in which each man's contribution becomes part of an intricate web of circumstances, the outcome of which cannot be foreseen. At the same time, the story should be recognized as a series of narrative sleights-of-hand that hardly impose much moral weight. This includes the off-putting way in which the Swede is presented, as against all the other individuals in the story. The cowboy's final disclaimer makes it even less serious. It allows a human, if disingenuous and not very authoritative profession of innocence to be set up against it. This kind of open ending will later be adopted by Hemingway and, though not taken over from Crane, by Lawrence. The moral argument is left unresolved. The final statement in the story thus dialectically involves the reader without being didactic and without bullying him into accepting opinions or attitudes.

It introduces a more dynamic and all-embracing image of man's position in the world, one produced by his own fortuitous activity and inertia as part of general human inter-

action, different from that of any version of naturalist doctrine. In a different tone and through a literary technique that undercuts the poetic harmonizing of points of view which creates the impact of "The Open Boat", "The Blue Hotel" reaches a similar position to the one of that story. So indeed does *The Red Badge of Courage*. But there the concentration of the narrative upon one man undergoing the trials and temptations of an extreme situation did not succeed in avoiding a technical dichotomy which involves some moral obtuseness. "The Open Boat" and "The Blue Hotel", within their more limited narrative scope, are more successfully homogeneous and more consistent in their metaphysical implications.

All the three works, with the best pages of Crane's minor fiction, show up the contiguities in which man's existence takes place, as well as his need for self-illusion, his recourse to pettiness and self-regard, yet including also man's endeavour to act with understanding, whatever the final effect. The universe cannot be grasped and controlled, but modern art is a continuous attempt to order its elements to a degree. The story of "The Clan of No-Name" Crane preceded by an epitaph, analogous to the story itself by its loose form with the introductory and final sections in a different key from the rest. It sums up the mystery to which he directed his own efforts:

Unwind my riddle.
Cruel as hawks the hours fly;
Wounded men seldom come home to die;
The hard waves see an arm flung high;
Scorn hits strong because of a lie;
Yet there exists a mystic tie.
Unwind my riddle.

A mysterious coincidence makes the imagery of lines 3, 4, 5, correspond to the themes of Crane's three major works. The affirmation of a "tie" suggests Crane's multiform creativeness in poetic imagery and narrative strategy, and it dispels the nihilism implied in his insights concerning the human condition. Writers after Crane continue to explore the range of his approaches to it, which he has traced in the three main works. Very early the inheritance of *The Red Badge of Courage* and "The Open Boat" was creatively used by Conrad; "The

Blue Hotel" seems to have found an adaption in Hemingway's "The Killers",²⁷ thus leading beyond the half-century into the riddle of Harold Pinter's *Dumb Waiter*.

²⁷ For parallels between Crane and Hemingway see Philip Young: *Ernest Hemingway: A Reconsideration*. University Park Pa., and London, 1966, po. 191—96; J. A. Ward: "The Blue Hotels and The Killers", *The CEA Critic*, XXI, September 1959, 1, pp. 7—8.