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The Modernity of Stephen Crane's Poetry: A Centennial Tribute

Walter Sutton

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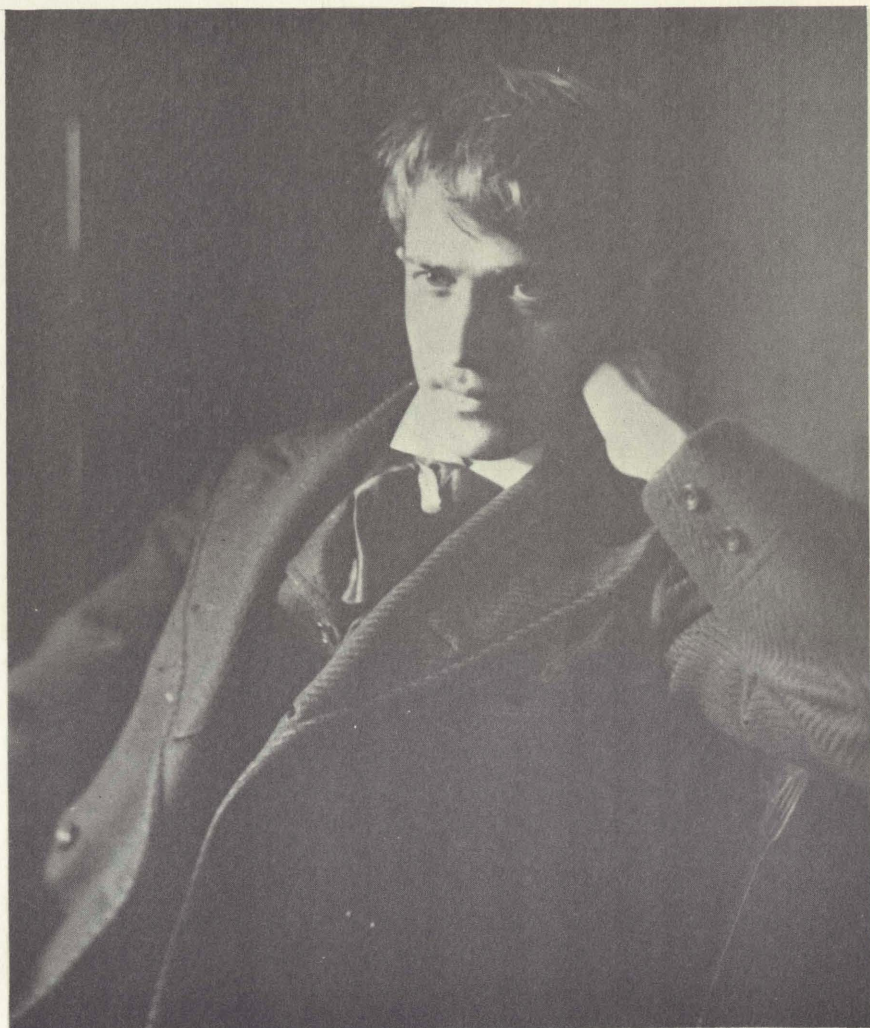


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Stephen Crane in 1893. Photograph by Corwin Knapp Linson, artist, friend of Crane, and author of *My Stephen Crane* (Syracuse University Press, 1958). From the Stephen Crane Papers, George Arents Research Library.

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Should the wide world roll away
Leaving black terror
Limitless night,
Now God, now man, nor place to stand
Would be to me essential
If thou and thy white arms were there
And the fall to doom a long way.

Manuscript of "Should the Wide World Roll Away," 1894.
From the Stephen Crane Papers, George Arents Research Library.

The Modernity of Stephen Crane's Poetry: A Centennial Tribute

by Walter Sutton

A hundred years have passed since the birth of Stephen Crane and eighty since his casual stay at Syracuse University, where he was better known as a baseball enthusiast than as a writer of high promise. Yet his writings in prose and poetry, beginning with *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* (1893) and *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895) and continuing through the brief career that ended with his tragic death in 1900, retain a distinctive contemporaneity, a vitality and freshness that have resisted the passage of years. This quality is more evident, perhaps, in his poetry, which until lately has been neglected by critics.

In the free verse poems that appeared during his lifetime in *Black Riders* (1895) and *War Is Kind* (1899), Crane looked forward to the theory and practice of Imagism, which, under the leadership of Ezra Pound and T. E. Hulme, emerged during the decade of the First World War as a movement that shaped the revolution in modern poetry. In their conciseness, intensity, imagistic power, and rhythmical freedom, Crane's poems of the nineties anticipated the specifications set forth in the famous "tenets" of Imagism published in Harriet Monroe's *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse* in March, 1913:

- I. Direct treatment of the "thing," whether subjective or objective.
- II. To use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation.
- III. As regarding rhythm: to compose in sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of the metronome.

As a nineteenth-century writer of free or experimental poetry, Crane was preceded only by Walt Whitman (1819-1892) and Emily Dickinson (1830-1886). But his poems are at once more radical in form and modern in outlook than those of either of these forerunners.

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In their brevity and metaphoric originality, many of Crane's poems are like those of Emily Dickinson, whose posthumously published work was brought to his attention by William Dean Howells. But Crane wrote in free rather than measured verse, and some of his poems, especially those employing syntactical parallelism as a formal device, are more reminiscent of Whitman's. An example for comparison and contrast is the title poem of *War Is Kind*, which celebrates ironically the relief from suffering provided by death. The theme recalls the passage in "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" in which Whitman looks back on the "debris of all the slain soldiers of the war" and sees that they, unlike the living, have been freed from suffering. Like Whitman, Crane employs parallel structure as a basic organizing device. His verse is typically more economical and compressed, however, as in his opening stanza (see reproduction):

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.¹

(PSC, p. 81)¹

Unlike Whitman, whose pantheistic faith provided an optimistic view of death, Crane treats the subject with a distinctively modern irony:

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

(PSC, p. 81)

For Crane, as for Whitman, death provides an escape from the tension of existence. But for Crane, the escape is not a return to the immortal sea of spirit, in the romantic sense, but a descent into the void precipitated by man's murderousness. Crane's irony drives home a sardonic moral condemnation of war lacking in Whitman, who, buoyed by his cosmic optimism, was capable of saying, "What blurt is this about virtue and about vice."

The sense of the void or the abyss that is a part of the modern writer's contemplation of a meaningless universe encourages irony, but it does not, in Crane's view, justify cynicism. There is rather, in his poetry as in his prose (*The Red Badge*, *The Open Boat*), a persistent reminder of man's moral responsibilities and an affirmation of the values of brotherhood and human love in an indifferent world. Perhaps the most concentrated expression of this

¹With one exception the text of the quotations provided here is that of *The Poems of Stephen Crane*, ed. Joseph Katz (New York, 1966). In the text of "Should the wide world roll away . . ." I have observed the punctuation of the manuscript in the Syracuse University Library rather than that of the printed version cited, which follows the text of the first edition of *The Black Riders* (1895).

WAR IS KIND

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 regi-
ment,
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.

view appears, without irony, in the brief love poem “Should the wide world roll away . . .” (see reproduction):

Should the wide world roll away
Leaving black terror
Limitless night,
Nor God, nor man, nor place to stand
Would be to me essential
If thou and thy white arms were there
And the fall to doom a long way. (PSC, p. 12)

The neglect or perversion of values provides the subject of a number of satiric poems which often reveal a flair for the kind of paradox favored by a later generation of writers. In one of these:

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. . . . (PSC, p. 93)

Even more remarkable for its indignant irony and novel imagery is the poem which begins:

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.

The synaesthetic effect of the imagery suits a society corrupted by materialism, in which the “outcry of old beauty” is “whored by pimping merchants.” The conclusion moves toward an unusual and peculiarly modern use of the image of “hats” to point up the precedence of superficialities over social ideals among a people enslaved by greed:

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 foot of a cryptic slave
Who speaks always of baubles,
Forgetting place, multitude, work and state,
Champing and mouthing of hats

Making ratful squeak of hats,
Hats.

(*PSC*, p. 101)

In the temper and technique of poems like these, Stephen Crane was in advance of his age. But the inventive genius that he displayed in the poetic Sahara of late-nineteenth-century America was not to find proper soil for growth and flowering until the beginnings of the modern revolution in the arts.

