

The Mirrors of Naturalism: Stephen Crane's Pragmatic Determinism

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**Abstract**

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My dissertation contributes to current scholarship on nineteenth-century American naturalism by arguing that the emergent theories of determinism and pragmatism were antithetical to, and yet dependent upon, one another. On the one hand, Stephen Crane's fiction reveals determinism's heavy weight upon the naturalist genre (the sense that humans cannot affect their worlds), yet unlike Frank Norris or Jack London, for instance, Crane innovatively employs pragmatic elements that work against the very deterministic frameworks that structure his stories. By tracing the dialectic between these theories, I demonstrate how Crane's fiction not only reveals the destructive relationship between nature and humanity but also, in his pragmatic suspicion of static concepts, the failure of language to accurately interpret the world of the *fin de siècle*. My lens provides for more complex interpretations of Crane in addition to Theodore Dreiser in ways that highlight how the deterministic yet pluralistic character of naturalism serves as a bridge between the realist and modernist styles.

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## Introduction

### Literary Naturalism in the Context of Determinism and Pragmatism

Stephen Crane's death on June 5, 1900 concluded a decade-long career that had coincided with the brief rise and decline of naturalist fiction in all its complexity. This study places Crane's fiction within the intersecting world of 1890s thought, grappling on the largest scale with the crises of representation that all naturalist works were subsumed by in the wake of cultural revolutions in science, technology, and the making of history itself in the late nineteenth-century. More specifically, it narrows these responses into two categories, what I am calling the 'deterministic' and 'pragmatic' reactions. Both of these types of reactions, I will argue in this chapter, are representational choices, and both, as I will show in the following chapters, are dependent upon one another in Crane's fiction in a way that helps explain and complicate the naturalist genre.

Overall, I will be discussing how the emergent theories of determinism and pragmatism are antithetical to, and yet dependent upon, one another. On the one hand, Stephen Crane's fiction reveals determinism's heavy weight upon the naturalist genre (the sense that humans cannot affect their worlds), yet unlike Frank Norris or Jack London, for instance, Crane innovatively employs pragmatic elements that work against the very deterministic frameworks that structure his stories. By tracing the dialectic between these theories, I am able to read how Crane's fiction not only reveals the destructive relationship between nature and humanity but also, in his pragmatic suspicion of static concepts, the failure of language to accurately interpret the world of the *fin de siècle*. My lens provides for more complex interpretations of Crane in

addition to Theodore Dreiser that highlight how the deterministic yet pluralistic character of naturalism serves as a bridge between the realist and modernist genres.

This introductory chapter is bracketed into three sections which serve not only to specify naturalism as a genre, but to situate it within a larger literary arc between the American renaissance and modernism. Part I unpacks, from a historical and literary perspective, my definition of the ‘deterministic style,’ which comes to a head at the turn of the century. This section gives a brief tour of the cultural problems inherent in the late nineteenth-century which prompted a specific type of stylistic response (represented chiefly by Frank Norris, Henry Adams, and others). Part II tells a parallel, though strikingly different, story of how the ‘pragmatic style’ unfolded in American history and literature in the late nineteenth-century (using Emerson, the James Brothers, and Herman Melville as main examples). Both representational styles, as we will see, seem at first glance to be opposed to one another (in many ways they are opposites), but Part III explains how their interdependence provides a crucial understanding of the naturalist genre at the turn of the century and how my project intervenes with recent critical approaches to naturalism. Part III concludes by introducing the specific lens through which I analyze Crane – how the deterministic and pragmatic style are combined – and provides a chapter breakdown for the rest of the dissertation.

#### I: “To Find the Value of X”: The Evolution of the Thesis-Driven Deterministic Style

Frank Norris always had a plan. “I entered college,” he declared, “with the view of preparing myself for the profession of a writer of fiction” (qtd. in French 24). After all, as he later noted, one “who can address a hundred thousand people is, no matter what he may be, in an

important position” (“Conscience” 88). Education was paramount for Norris in achieving this goal, as he supposed it would be for others: he later argued that novelists “go fumbling and stumbling along in this undisciplined fashion, governed by no rule, observing no formula, setting themselves no equation to solve” (“Future” 11). Throughout most of his widely-read essays at the turn of the century, it seems Norris’s instinct is not to discuss “life” in its mobile complexity, but rather to pin it down with finalized concepts – to capture it, in a sense. In admitting that novelists needed an equation to solve, he set up equations for himself in *McTeague* and the *Trilogy of Wheat*, texts which ultimately became the greatest icons of the American naturalist movement. Norris, in fact, helped create the movement by damning the “Teacup Tragedies” of literary realism (domestic dramas he figured had little to do with real life) and attempting to push the regionalist movement aside.<sup>1</sup> This style, in his words, “notes only the surface of things”: it is “the drama of a broken teacup, the tragedy of a walk down the block, the excitement of an afternoon call . . . Realism bows upon the doormat and goes away and says to me, as we link arms on the sidewalk: ‘That is life.’ And I say it is not” (“Plea” 76).

Yet despite sharing an obsessive resolve with other late nineteenth-century writers to rid American literature of cliché (an admirable enough goal), Norris’s rhetoric also seems curiously simplistic. In labeling writing as a self-conscious project of construction with rigid aims to realistically depict the human condition against its natural backdrop, Norris declared what writing *should* do and *how* it could be achieved in strikingly binary terms. The novel, he asserts,

. . . must tell something, must narrate vigorous incidents and must show something, must penetrate deep into the motives and character of typemen, men who are composite pictures of a multitude of men . . . The social tendencies must be expressed by means of analysis of the characters of the men and women who compose that society, and the two

must be combined and manipulated to evolve the purpose – to find the value of  $x$ .  
 (“‘Purpose’” 91)

To ask a rather basic question: why is Frank Norris so serious? Why is he so utterly humorless and sincere about the purpose of fiction at the turn of the century? (And why does he bizarrely propose, as a solution, to represent “typemen?”) His vague yet pompous pronouncements are symptomatic, I would argue, of a sense of panic, of being part of a literary age which Jackson Lears has famously depicted as engrossed by a widescale crisis of representation, a time in which “reality itself began to seem problematic, something to be sought rather than merely lived” (“Salvation” 6). Fiction writers were reacting in new ways to a rapidly industrializing society, to the “reduction of the world to a disenchanting object to be manipulated by rational technique” (Lears *Grace* 4), or to what Alan Trachtenberg simply calls “the incorporation of America.”<sup>2</sup> The dramatic rise of wealth, growth of the city, extension of the frontier, immigration, education, revolutions in science (specifically the influence of Darwinism), and radical ‘improvements’ in technology had a sort of stunning effect on the American public – Lears describes “a spreading sense of moral impotence and spiritual sterility” as promoting the pervasive feeling that “life had become not only overcivilized but also curiously unreal” (*Grace* 4-5). Darwinism alone posed an obvious challenge to intellectuals in its foundational idea; in the words of George Cotkin, its acceptance “posited change, process, and struggle as essentials; it promised little succor to those thinkers who craved a solid, unshifting foundation for values and beliefs” (xii). From a literary, representational perspective, it was difficult to imagine readers relating with quotes like this one, drawn from Margaret Fuller’s 1843 *Summer on the Lakes*:

The rapids enchanted me far beyond what I expected; they are so swift that they cease to seem so ... After I found it permanent, I returned many times to watch the play of its

crest. In the middle waterfall beyond, nature seems, as she often does, to have made a study for some larger design. She delights in this, – a sketch within a sketch, a dream within a dream. (5)

Fuller's intent here is to make the mobile scene in front of her freeze, while linking it with religious qualities. The writer appears, in the cadence of her sentences, to have all the time in the world to capture this moment as (obviously) part of God's larger design. Not only does her eye naturally happen upon the centralized "middle" waterfall, but in verbalizing her gaze, she affirms that nature "often" does this (she does not seem interested in defining this moment as a 'moment'). Missing from this quote is any sense of religious doubt, banal realism, randomness, or even motion.

Decades later, George M. Beard's study of neurasthenia, *American Nervousness* (1884), helped make the disease a household name by depicting a specifically periodized form of panic. The study was, similar to Max Nordau's *Degeneration* (1895), wildly popular among the reading public. (Nordau's study adamantly cited the rise of egotism, hysteria, and fatigue amongst a plethora of other ills in modern society.) Both point to technological advances, especially the telegraph, railroad, and printing press, as culprits of society's general disorder. Yet in their breadth, these writers, like many contemporary academics, were finding ways to dumb down society's complex changes into simplistic systems of meaning. Herbert Spencer and Joseph Le Conte were most guilty of this in their repurposing of Darwin's theories to fit within clean models of religious satisfaction. The reception of Le Conte's public theology, specifically his *Evolution: Its Nature, Its Evidences, and Its Relation to Religious Thought* (1888), was "appealing," in Cotkin's words, "precisely because of its vagueness and sweet rationality" (23). Ronald Martin's explanation that "the strongest motive of American thought of the late

nineteenth century was to reconcile science and religion” (69) was testament to the fact that both writers and readers were thirsty for condensed explanations of worldviews, preferably those that connected dots between the largest dogmas.<sup>3</sup>

Significantly for our study, some historians (Trachtenberg and Cotkin) have found ways to link the panic of trying to keep pace with modernization with the suddenly popular phrase ‘determinism’ – as if the term helped people deal with rapid change. Beard’s text and others frequently document the inevitability of technological advancement in ways that seemed connected with nature (in either celebratory or fearful fashion). Progress in manufacturing, for instance, was celebrated by David Wells as being like a “mighty river” whose “movement is beyond control,” and hence the efforts to control it would, “like the construction of piers and the deposits of sunken wrecks, simply deflect the current or constitute temporary obstruction” (qtd. in Trachtenberg 56). Frederick Jackson Turner’s 1893 frontier thesis is another example of how an immensely popular document painted society’s ‘picture’ in large strokes, as the text rests upon the inevitability of American westward movement. And of course the most popular voice of the age, Theodore Roosevelt, consistently drew upon deterministic rhetoric before and after he was president. Describing the “mighty tide of immigration” as an inevitable force, for instance, he warned in *American Ideals* (1897) that if immigrants’ customs “remain alien elements, unassimilated, and with interests separate from ours, they are mere obstructions to the current of our national life, and, moreover, can get no good from it themselves” (1138). Trachtenberg documents, in a broad sense, how the rapidity of change was categorized in the designation of determinism: that term, he writes, “appeared not only in explicit theories and observations of the role of machinery in economic prognosis; it also appeared at a deeper level of thought, in less self-conscious processes of mind. Images of machinery filtered into the language, increasingly

providing convenient and telling metaphors for society and individuals” (44). The historian’s use of the term “convenient” to describe the machinery metaphor can also be applied to the determinism metaphor more broadly in the late nineteenth-century, since it implies only one (simplistic) way to represent life in its complexity.

To step back, from the context of this chapter, if we are to understand that late nineteenth-century American fiction constituted, in the words of Donald Pizer, “a critical response to the conditions of late-nineteenth-century American life” (“Problem” 15), then this chapter demarcates two critical responses (one determinist, one pragmatist) which this literature explored.<sup>4</sup> The first involved a sense that “experience” could not fully be grasped in its entirety, that characters were subsumed by their environments within a determinist vein. This is generally understood to be writing of a desperate, grasping nature, writing which admits the difficulty to constitute experience under the pressure of societal shifts and the evolution of the Darwinian idea, and hence portrays characters that attempt to ‘wrestle’ with life in a sense, to gain experience by trying to represent it but failing. These works of literature evoke the later, canonical laments of Henry Adams in 1907 who saw the previous century as having moved too quickly for human perception to grasp, and who complained that the contemporary method of representation – whether through art, religion, or the making of history itself – to be flawed. “Pessimism itself, black as it might be painted,” he wrote in the *Education*, “had been content to turn the universe of contradiction into the human thought as one Will, and treat it as representation” (432). Adams, like many of his contemporaries, did not trust that philosophers and artists could depict human experience accurately, because the act of representation was tainted by false lenses and desires for incorporation and unity.<sup>5</sup> Throughout the *Education*, Adams simultaneously evokes and critiques his generation’s failure to pin down society’s

changes, as his language resorts to binaries in the text's first half to define mid-nineteenth-century life, and struggles to articulate the colossal changes at the turn of the century. Those changes were so pervasive that Adams famously declared (albeit with a comedic touch) that "the American boy of 1854 stood nearer to the year 1 than to the year 1900" (53).

Overall, the overwhelming transitions of the Gilded Age presented fiction writers with an uncertainty of their purpose. It was one thing to simply reflect upon "the surface of things" (what Norris truly meant as an insult) and quite another to do something about them, to try your damndest to capture and capitalize upon what was happening: the writer had a job to do, according to Norris and Howells, and that included defining things as well as reflecting upon them. Amy Kaplan writes how the fiction style of these times "often assume[s] a world which lacks solidity, and the weightiness of descriptive detail . . . often appears in inverse proportion to a sense of insubstantiality, as though description could pin down the objects of an unfamiliar world to make it real" (9). While Kaplan's study focuses upon Howells, Wharton, and Dreiser, her central theme of writers participating in acts of social "construction" in the final two decades of the century corresponds with Norris's instinct for capturing the human condition in perfect unity.<sup>6</sup> Jennifer Fleissner's study on naturalism provides further contextual backing. In her chapter titled "The Compulsion to Describe" in *Women, Compulsion, Modernity: The Moment of American Naturalism* (2004), she pinpoints how obsessive tendencies within naturalist characters (what we'd call obsessive-compulsive order today) is symptomatic of the era's obsessive need to order and rationalize an abundance of confusing material. "The very assertion of control, of rational organization and separation," she argues, "thus becomes an indicator of the absence of control, of a blind emotional investment . . . akin to those displayed by the characters themselves" (42).<sup>7</sup> Norris's rhetoric, seen in this light, is certainly symptomatic of a troublesome

age for intellectuals, captured most obviously in Adams's words. Norris and Adams sought to define 'man' through language, but had trouble finding the right terms: while Adams continually sought new forms of education, Norris doubled down on his assertion that novelists could capture the human condition, since his age was, in his own words, "the day of the novel" ("Responsibilities" 95). Combing glibly through history in "The Responsibilities of the Novelist" (1902), Norris broadly discussed the achievements of architects, sculptors, and playwrights of previous eras before somehow maintaining that, at the turn of the century, "the novel is the great expression of modern life" (94).<sup>8</sup>

More importantly for our purposes is *how* Norris defined the great American novel, because it helps us understand the intended purpose of the 'deterministic style' in naturalist fiction. Norris wanted novels to be serious, for lack of a better word: novelists must have a sense of "sincerity," and to be sincere, he intoned, you must be "a good *man* as well as a good novelist" ("Reward" 86). The "best class" of novels, in his words, must "prove something" by revealing not simply "a study of men" but "of man" ("Purpose" 90).<sup>9</sup> Characters, in short, mean nothing if they are not representative of the human condition as a composite whole: indeed, Harold Kaplan defined this version of the naturalist style accurately when he said "the overall literary effect was to subordinate the action of individuals to social process and the character of individuals to the identity of groups" (4). In many ways, naturalism was defined as Zola and Norris first discussed it, coupled with how literary critics of the twentieth century linked it with other determinist principles (especially in how heredity and environment determined human behavior in ways unknown to the people themselves). This is precisely why Norris's *McTeague* (1899) is considered the quintessential naturalist novel. Kevin Starr writes,

The overt thesis of *McTeague*, the primacy of hereditary traits, is realized magnificently. Cultural and intellectual historians turn frequently to *McTeague* as a central statement of evolutionary awareness in late nineteenth-century America. Profoundly influenced as an undergraduate by Professor Joseph Le Conte of Berkeley, Norris internalized Le Conte's concern for the dialectical battle between ethical and evolutionary forces in human behavior (to include de-evolution back to animalism) as the central perspective of his own imaginative and psychological apprehension of human life and conduct. (xxxiv)

*McTeague* itself, Starr writes, asks basic questions popularized by Herbert Spencer as in "Just how free are we?" and "What possibilities of choice does our animal heritage leave us?" (xxxv). These were questions that many naturalist texts influenced by determinism asked. But in answering these questions with mostly pessimistic answers, this specific style of naturalism imported a deterministic worldview at the level of plot. Whereas characters in other genres show the ability to affect their worlds and influence their surroundings through fluid modes of agency (Huck and Jim on the riverboat, challenging social norms), determined characters typically find themselves influenced by their surrounding world to the point of lacking agency altogether (an unnamed protagonist dying in the wilderness). This also means the world of the fiction seems to have been determined in advance. Making a valid if simple comparison, Keith Newlin has likened this aspect of literary naturalism to melodrama at the turn of the twentieth century, as they both shared a sense of futility against an inevitably pessimistic backdrop. Newlin quotes the playwright Clayton Hamilton, who defined melodrama in 1911 as "a serious play in which the incidents determine and control the characters . . . A train of incidents is foreordained and the characters are subsequently woven into the tiny pattern of destiny that has been predetermined for them" (8). Many naturalists, too, were consistently compelled by this formula. Their

“achievement,” writes Mary E. Papke, in revealing such a magnetic downward trajectory, “is to imagine that world for us in so shocking a fashion that we are moved to respond in horror ‘Not that’” (xi).

But strangely, naturalism can also promote social reform. Charles C. Walcutt illustrates the naturalist project of connecting a “pessimistic determinism” with an “optimistic social purpose” in a way that will prove helpful to our study. The novelist, he writes, who is committed to both science and reform,

[h]as to establish the validity of two assumptions: that the state of man needs to be improved, and that human conditions are determined by the operation of material causes which can be traced, recorded, understood, and, finally, controlled. The . . . best possible way to illustrate and validate these two assumptions is to write a ‘naturalistic’ tragedy in which a human being is crushed and destroyed by the operation of forces which he has no power to resist or even understand. The more helpless the individual and the more clearly the links in an inexorable chain of causation are defined, the more effectively documented are the two assumptions which underlie the scientists’ program of reform, for the destruction of an individual demonstrates the power of heredity and environment over human destinies. And if the victim’s lot is sordid, the need for reform is “proved.” The more helpless the character, the stronger the proof of determinism; and once such a thesis is established the scientist hopes and believes that men will set about trying to control the forces which now control men. (24-25)

As perhaps the first work of American naturalism, Rebecca Harding Davis’s *Life in the Iron Mills* (1861) provides helpful (albeit stereotypical) examples of Walcutt’s definition of the naturalist genre influenced by determinist principles. Davis’s pawns of the repressive mills are

first depicted as emerging *out* of their environment, indeed introduced only after several paragraphs of oppressive descriptions of the cloudy, smoky setting (the sky and the factory are meant to be confused). The characters themselves are then introduced in lists, in brief snapshots without active verbs: “Masses of men, with dull, besotted faces bent to the ground, sharpened here and there by pain or cunning; skin and muscle and flesh begrimed with smoke and ashes . . . breathing from infancy to death an air saturated with fog and grease and soot” (12). Not only are characters deliberately undistinguished under this capitalist regime, but the regime itself is given such enormous, timeless weight that its nightmarish borders in this determined world cannot be deciphered:

Not many even of the inhabitants of a manufacturing town know the vast machinery of system by which the bodies of workmen are governed, that goes on unceasingly from year to year. The hands of each mill are divided into watches that relieve each other as regularly as the sentinels of an army. By night and day the work goes on, the unsleeping engines groan and shriek, the fiery pools of metal boil and surge. . . . as soon as the clock strikes midnight, the great furnaces break forth with renewed fury, the clamor begins with fresh, breathless vigor, the engines sob and shriek like “gods in pain.” (19)

As an instructional work of fiction, Davis’s novella describes “a” manufacturing town, emphasizing that one can simply describe the many (and the title itself, beginning with the word “Life” – not “a” life – asks the reader to assume these tragedies occur all over America). The narrator, too, famously breaks the fourth wall while saying, early in the novella, “I want you to hide your disgust, take no heed to your clean clothes, and come right down with me . . . I want you to hear this story” (13). Like later works of naturalism, this one’s initial setting and tone are a deliberate ‘lesson,’ in a sense.

Decades later, Norris borrowed this style and infused it with further clarity, using popular refashionings of Darwin and further reactions to the Gilded Age in his instructional works of fiction. By making his fiction's 'aboutness' so obvious, the prose has its own brand of sincerity. The first novel of his proposed epic, *The Trilogy of Wheat*, reveals how the large forces of capitalism (understood as deterministic) are so pervasive that the characters are unable to fully explain, or even articulate, the changes that are happening around them. While that confusion may lie, thematically, at the heart of most naturalist works, the style of Norris's *The Octopus* (1901) is, more so than Davis's, unique in its insistence upon clarity. One need only glance at the preface, principal of characters, and map before the book begins to glean the writer's insistence that the reader understand the terrain and purpose of his story (the preface provides succinct summaries of each novel in the then-uncompleted trilogy). The first sentence, too, creates a clear picture by implicitly suggesting the reader consult the map on the accompanying page: "Just after passing Caraher's saloon, on the County Road that ran south from Bonneville and that divided the Broderson ranch from that of Los Muertos, Presley was suddenly aware of the faint and prolonged blowing of a steam whistle that he knew must come from the railroad shops near the depot at Bonneville" (9). This passage links the steam whistle to an obvious symbol, the railroad corporation, just as the innocent ranchers can be symbolized by the sheep which will be run over by a train to conclude the chapter (this after Presley, the aspiring poet, views the county from its highest hill and experiences an epiphany because of what he explicitly *sees*). The entire novel, thus far, is about how characters successfully decode symbols. Readers, simultaneously, are easily able to identify what objects are supposed to represent, as each house, for instance, has one or two hints which suggest aspects of its inhabitants.

Norris's 'this means that' approach to fiction likely had something to do with the stress he put upon education (specifically, the craft of writing instruction) during the decade he was writing and publishing fiction. Pizer describes his beliefs in ways that should not surprise us, having read Norris's polemics on literature: he "believed that the translation of creative insight into a novel required a trained understanding of the tools and methods of fiction. . . . These techniques had to be learned, and explicit instruction might aid and shorten the process" (*Literary Criticism* 4). These interests can be reflected in his characters as well: Presley's ambition is to write 'the story of the West,' to compose "the great song that should embrace in itself a whole epoch, a complete era, the voice of an entire people" (13). Indeed, the character has "the forehead of the intellectual" and a temperament "of the poet," and other characters, like Annixter, are initially described in ways that highlight the theme of education (12-13, 24).

But, in a way that Norris himself wouldn't even appreciate, his narrator speaks too omnisciently, telling and not showing the reader certain aspects. In his essay, "The Novel with a 'Purpose'" (1902), Norris admits that the necessary moralizing on behalf of the serious writer should be "the result not of direct appeal by the writer, but [should be] made . . . to the reader by the very incidents of the story" (91). In his fiction, however, he is too transparent about how incidents reflect larger points. This might make sense, perhaps, if we consider his definition of naturalism as somewhere between his (outdated) versions of realism and romanticism. Pizer writes:

Norris placed realism, romanticism, and naturalism in a dialectic, in which realism and romanticism were opposing forces, and naturalism was transcending synthesis. Realism was the method of "accuracy," and was therefore limited to the surface commonplaces of

life. Romanticism, on the other hand, probed life for “truth,” and therefore dealt with the sensational, violent energies at the heart of life. (*Literary Criticism* 69)

While the terms realism and romanticism are not useful for our purposes, it is important to recognize that Norris was obsessed with these terminologies – that his logic of making fiction ‘work’ depended upon rigid concepts. His awkward desire to walk a tightrope between detailed composition – describing the world accurately as it appears – and defining the loftiness of whatever ‘truth’ is supposed to mean does help explain his occasionally dubious rhetoric (one scholar calls his ideas “generally embarrassing” (Ronald Martin 146). *The Octopus* is occasionally concrete and brutal in its realistic description of things – we don’t simply hear that sheep are run over by a train, but see that “backs were snapped against the fence posts; brains knocked out” (41) – and at other times, it drives home a lesson in paint-by-numbers fashion: the chapter concludes with Presley viewing the train “as the symbol of a vast power, huge, terrible, flinging the echo of its thunder over all the reaches of the valley” (42). Presley *realizing* what the symbol is at the same time the reader does is imperative to the novel’s deterministic purpose: to understand and to educate.

*McTeague*, too, is impelled by a desire to clarify symbols in overarching fashion. The opening few paragraphs paint a memorably specific image of McTeague’s office and view of the street, but we are told, repeatedly, that the protagonist occupies this exact space and time every Sunday according to his “custom” and “habit” (1-2).<sup>10</sup> The result is that the scene, despite its supposed realism, does not actually appear to be happening, since the reader first learns about things which are not occurring for the first time. In its most mobile and complex visual descriptions, the narrator is busy capturing representative objects to look at. For instance, the following view of a diverse and bustling street in San Francisco (from McTeague’s perspective)

might be visually appealing to some readers in its specificity, but its detail distracts us from its larger purpose to form a definitive, comprehensive scope. The scene, despite its movement, is oddly frozen:

The laborers went trudging past in a straggling file – plumbers’ apprentices, their pockets stuffed with sections of lead pipe, tweezers, and pliers; carpenters, carrying nothing but their little pasteboard lunch baskets painted to imitate leather; gangs of street workers, their overalls soiled with yellow clay; their picks and long-handled shovels over their shoulders; plasterers, spotted with lime from head to foot. This little army of workers, tramping steadily in one direction, met and mingled with other toilers of a different description . . . (6)

Here and elsewhere, the style celebrates the city while simplifying it: in its strokes to depict ‘types,’ for instance, there is no sense of a singular person. The above depiction also latches on to absolutes like “carrying nothing but,” “from head to foot,” and “steadily in one direction,” and the objects these men carry are never described as things they ‘sometimes’ or ‘might’ carry: the impulse, instead, is to pin down one-to-three representative objects per occupation. Of course, this is McTeague’s perspective, the same McTeague who is described as seeing “the same panorama unroll itself” day after day (9). But the narrative remains obsessed with base perspectives at other times. When McTeague realizes his friend, Marcus, loves the same woman as he does, the prose is deliberately slow and reaches for a lame metaphor: “Yet they were both in love, presumably, with the same girl, and now Marcus would try and force the secret out of him; would rush blindly at the rock upon which the two must split, stirred by the very best of motives, wishing only to be of service” (52).

The image of two grown men wrestling over a rock is precisely what this novel is about. Norris was interested in symbols that could represent the whole. The writer's obsession with characters who lack agency in a determined universe helped give rise to a holistic writing style with a lesson behind it. As we shall see, this marks the largest difference between Frank Norris and Stephen Crane: Crane avoids the obvious symbolism altogether. His ideas, never stated explicitly, are borrowed partially from the pragmatist movement highlighted below.

## II. "Truth *Happens* to an Idea": The Evolution of Literary Pragmatism

Perhaps it makes sense that pragmatism is difficult to define in a vacuum. At the same time, there are almost too many ways to *apply* the philosophy of pragmatism to other disciplines, which suggests that pragmatism is less an 'idea' and more of a 'method.' Pragmatism itself offers the intellectual an odd method of searching for truth because it does not, in fact, aim to find truth. If truths are found, they are important in the sense that further truths can also be found. Analyzing Henry Adams's failure to find answers through his systematic theories, John Patrick Diggins asks, hypothetically, if the philosophy called 'pragmatism' could have saved him:

Continually disappointed by the experience of trying to derive knowledge from experience, Adams liked to see himself suffering from what he called, somewhat playfully, the "anxiety of truth." Pragmatism promised to relieve such an anxiety by showing us not what to think but how to think and how to move confidently ahead

instead of dwelling behind in a metaphysical wondersickness. If Adams dove deep and found nothing, Dewey taught Americans how to swim on the surface and how to conceive nature for the purpose of using it. (21)

Indeed, William James and the pragmatists represented an opposing vision which implicitly challenged the determinist impulse to write in conclusive fashion, and which represented a chief difference between the two modes of thought. To determine anything, in James's pragmatism, would be a form of cheating or jumping steps: it would, quite simply, be a false enterprise because it would not rely upon the densely particular matters of the present upon which the future depends. Indeed, pragmatism is represented by its ability to use the continuously shifting present in order to construct new vantage points on an open-ended future. Of course, the appeal of pragmatism, its malleability, is also its weakness: it does not cohere to a ready-made definition. James's well-quoted line that "Truth *happens* to an idea" is a way of saying that definitions come later: we act, we think, we make decisions, and only later do we draw a circle around those decisions and designate labels (*Pragmatism* 574). The idea of determinism, on the other hand, is centered on linearity, which goes against the pragmatists' practice of remaining alert to transitions within present moments. In his excellent study on the history of "transition" as a metaphor, Jonathan Levin states that pragmatists reject "any kind of transcendental, transexperiential force that guides or grounds moral and intellectual processes from without" (14). Instead, James's consciousness originates from within: like a surfer, the knower rides a tide, but instead of the tide being mysteriously large and unseen (as the determinist would see it), the knower has the ability to co-create this tide by becoming aware of its every movement and using it, pragmatically, to her purposes.

As an additional contrast with determinism, pragmatism values an idea so long as it creates a 'function for action' in the particular present: in other words, a thought that does not fit into a local train of consequences is not worth categorizing, whereas a thought which is applied to consequences has a reason to be cherished, and hence labeled accordingly. The 'thought' itself is only valued for its relation to its knower: in James's words, "The knower is an actor, and co-efficient of the truth" ("Remarks" 357). Hence, determinism would hypothetically be viewed as a forced application of a thought or 'system' upon large masses of people who, collectively, have no relation to the original system. For instance, Herbert Spencer's theories are unsurprisingly lambasted by James since they are filled "with the same noonday glare" because of their lack of "mysteries and shadows" ("Spencer" 100).<sup>11</sup> What is critiqued from the pragmatist perspective, then, is not only a projection of a totally fabricated future, but also the application of a system completely severed from an originating human source. Determinism, from the pragmatist perspective, is a vague blanket theory which pretends to apply to real life, but ultimately, like any large theory, does not. Here it is worth mentioning Cornel West's suggestion that pragmatism's function in American history is not to find answers but rather to ask more questions: "[it] is less a philosophical tradition putting forward solutions to perennial problems in the Western philosophical conversation initiated by Plato and more a continuous cultural commentary or set of interpretations than attempt to explain America to itself at a particular historical moment" (5).

It makes sense, then, that James indebted himself to Emerson, who doubted institutionalized (as opposed to individualized) forms of salvation. Indeed, as the basis of its shape-shifting definition, pragmatism must deny any sort of everlasting creed or dogma, because these 'ism's' can be replicated in false fashion in different contexts.<sup>12</sup> Emerson's "Divinity

School Address” to Harvard, delivered on July 15, 1838, reflects a crucial un-hinging process that was distancing American writers and intellectuals from institutionalized religion: in complaining that “churches are not built on [Christ’s] principles, but on his tropes” (235), his invective centered not on Christ’s original teachings but on the false ways in which his words had been translated over the years. Certain “divine laws,” in his words, only “elude [and] evade our persevering thought, and yet we read them hourly in each other’s faces” (232). Dismantling religion was not Emerson’s objective but rather destroying its binding written qualities which somehow always place “man” at the center of its divine laws. Man, instead, *does not* and *should not attempt to* understand religion within its privileged sphere: that is partially what it means to (ironically) ‘understand’ God’s beauty. “There is no power of expansion in men,” he writes in “Experience” (240), invoking that humans’ attempts at communication and rationalization are flimsy at best. “What help from thought?” he asks. “Life is not dialectics. We, I think, in these times, have had lessons enough of the futility of criticism . . . Intellectual tasting of life will not supersede muscular activity. . . . Life is not intellectual or critical, but sturdy” (241).

James’s later interest in ‘sturdiness’ and ‘muscular activity’ is obviously indebted to Emerson, seeing as how the pragmatic idea necessitates valuing transition that cannot adequately be represented through intellectualizing. In another passage from “Experience,” Emerson critiques the rationalizing process of delineating ‘cause and effect’:

How easily, if fate would suffer it, we might keep forever these beautiful limits, and adjust ourselves, once for all, to the perfect calculation of the kingdom of known cause and effect. In the street and in the newspapers, life appears so plain a business, that manly solution and adherence to the multiplication-table through all weathers, will insure success. But ah! presently comes a day, or is it only a half-hour, with its angel-whispering

– which discomfits the conclusions of nations and of years! To-morrow again, everything looks real and angular, the habitual standards are reinstated, common sense is as rare as genius – is the basis of genius, and experience is hands and feet to every enterprise – and yet, he who should do his business on this understanding, would be quickly bankrupt.  
(245)

Decades later, James described a similar framework to introduce his “Pragmatism” lecture, proving that the philosophy is necessitated by man being an “absorber” (not a “lawgiver”) to nature:

For a hundred and fifty years past the progress of science has seemed to mean the enlargement of the material universe and the diminution of man’s importance. . . . Man is no lawgiver to nature, he is an absorber. She it is who stands firm; he it is who must accommodate himself. Let him record truth, inhuman though it be, and submit to it! The romantic spontaneity and courage are gone, the vision is materialistic and depressing. Ideals appear as inert by-products of physiology. (493)

If ideals, usually represented by language, are only “inert by-products of physiology,” how can we discuss pragmatism from a literary perspective? What, in short, *is* language when used pragmatically? In many ways, it is language that is anti-intellectual (certainly anti-educational) in the sense that it does not assume that its use achieves ends beyond the context in which it is being spoken; pragmatism’s ‘use,’ in other words, is not ‘use-ful,’ but rather, orientational. James himself said, “No particular results then, so far, but only an attitude of orientation, is what the pragmatic method means” (*Pragmatism* 510). Language’s use, in this sense, should not be concerned with translating ideas from one medium to another in replicable fashion, but rather in creating new ways of translating ideas each and every time one writes. If pragmatism as a

philosophy is a way of un-stiffening our ideas, in regards to literature it un-stiffens our assumptions about how literature is supposed to translate ideas by continually searching out new ways of delivering those ideas.

Nicholas Gaskill asks a similar question in his essay “What Difference Can Pragmatism Make for Literary Study?” (2012). After a sweeping review of the history of pragmatist literary criticism,<sup>13</sup> he admits that while the theory “provides [critics] with an occasion to combine historical, philosophical, and literary analysis in innovative and compelling ways,” it is doubtful whether it has an “exportable insight.” If it did, he supposes, it might have “to do with treating literature as a radical empirical inquiry into the interface between feeling and language,” but he leaves that only as a supposition (374-89). His earlier article, “Experience and Signs: Towards a Pragmatist Literary Criticism” (2008), provides more of an answer to his own question by explaining how *analyzing literature pragmatically* is a useful exercise because it combines the continually shifting present-tense of appreciating literature (one responds differently to a literary text each time one reads it) with the lasting power of representational categories (words have effects on the world). Gaskill’s analysis, which uses terms from Peirce and Dewey, defines literary language as uniquely occupying Peirce’s “Firstness” of having an unaware, unedited feeling bound up with experience-in-motion with the “Thirdness” of having the productive use of representational categories: reading literature, then, is a productive exercise for the critic since she can both have the ability to redirect and reshape social ends while “remain[ing] open to the nonphilosophical intuitions about the nature of experience made most manifest in our encounters with art” (178).<sup>14</sup>

Analyzing literature pragmatically, in other words, is productive insofar as the exercise alerts us to the ways that representational categories are not ‘determined,’ for lack of a better

word, but the question still remains (for us) whether literature can be considered ‘pragmatic’ or ‘non pragmatic.’ Can we ask, as critics, whether one text is more ‘pragmatic’ than another? I would argue that while there is nothing akin to, say, ‘a pragmatist sentence’ (while pragmatism is not simply ‘evident’ based upon single examples), one can certainly define a ‘pragmatic style’ if the style consistently enacts an alertness to the contingencies of language within the text itself. A brief tour of Melville’s mid-century fiction will model what I mean by a pragmatic style, and will help frame further discussion on late nineteenth-century pragmatist fiction embodied by Henry James and others.

### Two Ways of Seeing: Ishmael’s Pragmatic Vision

*Moby-Dick* (1851) offers a textual platform on which readers can observe two protagonists (Ishmael and Ahab) wrestling with the same knowledge (‘the whale’). Ishmael, in my mind, embraces a pragmatic way of defining concepts, whereas Ahab’s definition is bound up with his needing to capture one thing which simultaneously determines his worldview: in this sense, the latter is both completely determined and is a determining character. But the text itself is so mobile (in its setting and its narratorial style) that Ahab’s definitions are continuously changing. As Walcutt asserts, somewhat obviously, the novel’s “thesis cannot be simply, or even clearly stated. It has to be ‘rendered,’ to use Henry James’s famous word, and the rendering involves indirections and ambiguities that carry the reader more and more deeply into the maze of Truth” (“Introduction” x).

That maze, evident in every work of fiction, spurs, or even defines, the character of Ishmael. Emerson states in “Experience” that “All good conversation, manners, and action, come from a spontaneity which forgets usages, and makes the moment great. Nature hates calculators;

her methods are saltatory and impulsive” (245). Ishmael asks the reader to *call him* Ishmael instead of telling the reader that he is Ishmael (‘I am Ishmael’): from the opening sentence, the novel approaches language springily, non-definitively, open for reinterpretation. Indeed, Ishmael is Ahab’s opposite as a character attempting – whether consciously or unconsciously at first – to flee from rationalized forms of explanation and rules. Ahab is not Ahab without a compass and a map, whereas Ishmael’s early fascination with the mysterious Queequeg, for instance, says a lot about his later musings and his slippery, passive reluctance to let the sea inspire his un-forced reveries. He is set up, from the outset of the magnum opus, to represent a growing reluctance to accept vague and openly mutable forms of history and spirituality: as the narrative moves further along, he starts to say things as in “when a man’s religion becomes really frantic ... then I think it high time to take that individual aside and argue the point with him” (87). From a storytelling perspective, specifically, Ishmael is a narrator in awe of ambiguity and mobility of definition: his fascination with a painting he observes in the Sprouter-Inn is, first of all, a highly symbolic, self-conscious realization of himself telling the beginning of an epic story; this first image of the whale is not already there, waiting to be discovered, but rather comes into narrative existence only through Ishmael’s process of cognition. The start of chapter three focuses on this painting, which the reader is not meant to fully understand until the third paragraph (there are three paragraphs of description) whereupon we recognize that it is an “exasperated whale” that is pictured. (The previous suggestion to the reader is at the end of the second paragraph when Ishmael asks, “But stop; does it not bear a fair resemblance to a gigantic fish?”) The first paragraph in fact begins by describing a vague image of colors and blurs – “unaccountable masses of shades and shadows” – which only clarifies itself somewhat in the second paragraph, and then finally the image comes into being in the third only *after* Ishmael applies “a final theory

of [his] own” to the interpretation. The long description moves itself from an idea of “chaos bewitched” – not an object but a collection of thoughts placed together by Ishmael – to a more visual painting-over of the idea of the “something” (seeming to be painted over by Ishmael’s palette, an *application* to what the idea should represent), to, finally, a description of the whale and the boat, yet still hazy.

Significantly, and typical of later passages as well, Ishmael does not consider himself the ultimate eye and interpreter here; he bases his reading upon what he has learned previously, applying a pragmatic accumulation to what he has figured out, basing it upon the “aggregated opinions of many aged persons with whom I conversed upon the subject.” In this way Ishmael brings attention to not simply a mediated, but a multi-mediated perspective in which other vague writers are brought together, collectively, to understand the truthiness of this subject. Simultaneously, Melville draws out this scene in real time, as if Ishmael were in motion, bringing the reader into the conversation by addressing the “you” of the audience and saying “at last” and “But stop” to control the scene. This ‘scene-ing’ of what would typically exist as a paused reflective description apart from the action of the character somewhat mows over the belief of authoritative description to begin with as there is no cultural “authority” here. Instead, the reader’s and writer’s minds are being reinvented in motion, as in Emerson, drawing new circles of interpretation in time because there is no ultimate “truth” to rest upon. Ishmael understands his interpretative mode of cognition as directing the main thrust of his story, and his mind-in-motion is what excites his sense of adventure as a sailor proud to be doing something for the first time, taking to the open water because the open water is not something to be *conquered* but something to glide upon investigatively (20-21).

Similarly, several chapters later, Ishmael's interpretations of the 'whale' continue to come into being through an accumulation of rumors and myths which have been recycled, re-edited, and reinterpreted over time. In the chapel in New Bedford (he has still not embarked on the ocean), Ishmael notices another painting that symbolizes his soon-to-be-adventure:

Between the marble cenotaphs on either hand of the pulpit, the wall which formed its back was adorned with a large painting representing a gallant ship beating against a terrible storm off a lee coast of black rocks and snowy breakers. But high above the flying scud and dark-rolling clouds, there floated a little isle of sunlight, from which beamed forth an angel's face; and this bright face shed a distinct spot of radiance upon the ship's tossed deck, something like that silver plate now inserted into the Victory's plank where Nelson fell. (45-46)

Here Ishmael once again sets up an explicitly *symbolic* picture of the representation of his future journey, and, at the same time, this second vision of a ship in disarray has relevance to the first, as the Sprouter-Inn painting (a horrifying and chaotic image of a whale jumping over a ship) is contrasted with its opposite version here, a boat blessed by an angel. Hence, two conflicting moral visions are told by Ishmael, as the scenes described in both paintings are similar but are read through different aesthetic lenses – one is the artist's sublime portrait of chaos and confusion, part of what Robert Abrams would call the emergence of mid-nineteenth century ambiguous landscape that “cannot ultimately be seen, encountered, and inhabited in any stable and comprehensive way” (131),<sup>15</sup> whereas the other is a similar ship being guided from above, religiously and with a hint of direction behind it. Ishmael momentarily reads through this second painting with the acknowledgement that “the pulpit leads the world,” a statement which will, of course, morally contradict itself later in the novel as well (45-46).

To step back, several things are happening here. First, Melville is deliberately playing with repetition so that each repeated reference (to the ‘idea of a voyage’) is fused with a different context and experience. In his pragmatist study, Jonathan Levin describes Gertrude Stein’s famous repetitions as purposefully designed so that each repeated word in “Melanctha” (1909) – and there are many – is meant to be reinterpreted. Her words “continue to signify meanings, but their repetition suggests something more than just what the words mean: the temporal, rhythmic unfolding of conscious experience” (158). The repetition of terms “denaturalizes them,” writes Levin, “underscoring the way in which their meaning is a function of an abstract design” (159). From this perspective, Melville and Stein can also be seen as postmodernists in their deconstructive approach to language. Secondly, in a similar way to how the postmodernists set up contradictory moral visions as a critique of society’s collective visions which in effect organize power, Melville sets up his first visions and portraits of the whale – in this case, visions also of anarchy on the ocean that are meant to be symbolized by the whale – as being observed from different angles so that the reader then questions who authorizes these moral visions.<sup>16</sup> Melville sets up the focused object of obsession for Ahab (the whale) as something also in need of continual reinterpretation, not only physically but all the way down to its first definitions, which are integrated into the novel shortly after Ishmael’s observations of the paintings. Chapter 32, “Cetology,” focuses upon a term that originated in the early 1850s, and the details of that chapter touch upon, with subtlety and unsure deliberation on Ishmael’s part, how those who have “written of the whale” have built upon each other’s myths which have, ever so slowly, carved out an identity of its essence. Rather than explicitly landing upon an accurate definition of “cetology” (the study of whales, not even yet the study of *the White Whale*), Ishmael combs heavy-handedly through names of writers – listing 29 in one sentence – who helped “build” the

myth of the monstrosity over the centuries, and the culmination of the chapter is, of course, by page 139 of 521, still far from accurately revealing who or what Moby-Dick is. Ishmael describes himself as “the architect, not the builder” of this account of cetology’s history because if he were a “builder” in this chapter, he would be directing a vision outright and controlling the narrative in a single way, which is antithetical to the narrative of the novel as a whole; indeed, by playing the role of the “architect,” Ishmael allows a flow and range of interpretations to pull the novel’s focus in different directions simultaneously, similar to how the shortened chapters (135 of them in total, some of which exist in song) rapidly shift focus for the reader throughout.

The last chapter contrasts the flowing, ego-less voice of Ishmael with the pointed directness of Ahab who threatens to narrate the story himself, self-narrating his adventures while yelling directives to the other crew members (one full paragraph describes his exact, timed gaze upon the rest of the crew). The whale himself is now seen and felt through Ahab’s eyes, no longer a combination of mythologies but centralized in Ahab’s mission to conquer and control and dictate space, irritated with things he cannot see and literalize: “Would now the wind but had a body,” he exclaims, describing his impotence at not being able to see the wind, “but all the things that most exasperate and outrage mortal man, all these things are bodiless, but only bodiless as objects, not as agents.” At this point the whale’s body is finally threatening to emerge from the water, but for the most part he fails to be seen by the crew – “D’ye see him?” are Ahab’s first frantic words of the chapter – but is rather *felt* and *heard*, sensed by the crew through a rumbling sound and a “subterranean hum” beneath. When the whale finally surfaces, its image is, similar to the initial painting described by Ishmael, vague, clouded, and ultimately feared by its watchers because the animal is un-define-able to categorize visually: “a vast form

shot lengthwise, but obliquely from the sea,” and “[s]hrouded in a thin drooping veil of mist, it hovered for a moment in the rainbowed air; and then fell swamping back into the deep” (515).

Ahab’s frustration at not grasping the wind and the “whiteness of the whale” (its blankness, its openness for interpretation) is not unlike the reactions of the narrator of “Bartleby” (1853) when confronted with the blank slate of the title character. The narrator’s definition is wound up in his gridded, corporate profession of the mid-century American city, a representative figure of Max Weber’s famous pronouncement of modernity as the “disenchantment of the world.” The narrator’s descriptions of his copyists in the opening pages rely on mechanized, comforting if/then statements: “*If* now he lowered the table to his waistbands . . . *then* there was a sore aching in his back” (8, emphases mine). The narrator’s words to Bartleby are practically all directives and commands, symbolizing brief things to check-mark (they cannot possibly be reinterpreted in other ways). Bartleby’s famous response, revealed in the same tone in each particular instance, drives the narrator to states ranging from annoyance to utter breakdown because his initial directives, when not responded to in the way they are constructed to be responded to, evaporate into nothingness: the narrator’s sentences (questions posed as commands) might as well not exist when coupled with Bartleby, and hence Melville’s pragmatic purpose in this story is to reveal how pathetic humans can be when severed from their reliance on linguistic patterns. “Will you, or will you not, quit me?” the narrator asks towards the story’s conclusion. “I would prefer *not* to quit you,” Bartleby responds, once again obliterating the expectation of a comforting binary response (33).

Because Ishmael is not narrating this story, Melville’s tale does not have a pragmatic ‘style’ in the way *Moby-Dick* does, but in its humor, it exposes a worldview bereft of that improvisational aesthetic. Melville’s critique of the rationalized workplace would prefigure later

nineteenth-century fiction in its increased stripping down of the logic of the bureaucratic, Taylorist, “disenchanted” world. Ross Posnock writes, “Much of the ferment of experimental literary, artistic, and intellectual activity that occurred roughly from 1875 to 1925 erupted in protest against the bureaucratic dominance of abstraction, rational cognition, and instrumentality that had disambiguated modern life in obedience to the Enlightenment (or Baconian) imperative of efficiency” (*Curiosity* 56). This ambiguous ‘reaction’ would only increase as the century progressed.

Despite Melville’s mid-century pragmatic style (which can also be observed in the work of Poe), critics have typically ignored nineteenth-century literary pragmatism outside of the genre of “realism.” In a noteworthy (though problematic) quote spanning decades, Sami Ludwig maps out why realism should essentially be considered the classic pragmatist literature:

The moment of “realism” in American literature can be seen at a transitional point after the demise of the religious superstructure, and emerges out of what Paul Carter calls “the spiritual crisis of the Gilded Age.” . . . If we associate realism with such a transition, we can see it as a moment of freedom, as a theoretical turning point *between* dominant master narratives of identity. It stands between a transcendental superstructure that precedes it and similarly totalizing notions of subtextual determinism that follow it (as manifested later in naturalism and secularized subconscious subtexts of control). From the cognitive point of view, the realist transition from “soul” to “character” can thus be seen as a moment between the controlling realities of a romantic supertext and a modern subtext, as a liminal period in which determinist allegories are perceived as negotiable in human interaction and hence subject to human agency. (153)

The history of literary pragmatism is more complex than Ludwig makes it out to be when he prescribes it as the typically “realist” literature (drawing a circle, so to speak, around Howells, Twain, and Henry James). This is coupled with the fact that most pragmatist literary studies hop from the realists to the modernists, while ignoring both the naturalists in the middle and earlier American writers. Paul Grimstad’s *Experience and Experimental Writing: Literary Pragmatism from Emerson to the Jameses* (2011) takes a step in the right direction by including Poe and Melville alongside James, finding a common thread of these mid-century writers making their fiction *about* the experimental processes that helped bring them into being,<sup>17</sup> and my brief input on Melville in the previous section gives a sense of how critics could hypothetically discuss pragmatism in antebellum fiction. That being said, while Ludwig’s thesis fails to account for pragmatist elements in naturalism by, in a sense, gliding over naturalism’s definition (“secularized subconscious subtexts of control”), his study is noteworthy for our project in its depiction of *what makes literature pragmatic*. Throughout his book, Ludwig associates pragmatism with characters who exhibit free agency in response to their ever-changing contexts. His opening chapter, “Mark Twain: ‘Learning the River,’” models his approach through a reading of *Life on the Mississippi* (1883), which he calls a “parable about orienting oneself in reality” (18). In one dense sentence, using Twain’s metaphor of orientation as a lens, Ludwig explains the complex process of both experiencing reality while attempting to catalogue it: “the temporal progression that makes the stabilization of varying perceptions possible and provides cognitive knowledge out of the perceptual flow at the same time involves a destabilizing factor, because the outside reality itself keeps on changing as well” (16). Ludwig’s analysis in this chapter, stressing that “[e]ven the most elaborate organizational system depends on the reality it organizes” (19), even if that reality always changes, is relatable when viewed head-on with any

of William James's essays, where James consistently (yet always with a different rhetorical flavor) pulls the rug out from under grandiose statements: "It is obvious that for our rulers at Washington," he wrote on intervention abroad, "the Filipinos have not existed as psychological quantities at all . . . we have treated [them] as if they were a painted picture."<sup>18</sup>

Psychological quantities are, of course, what Henry James sought in his pragmatist fiction. Literary scholars have long been pointing out the fruitful affinity between the two, demonstrating, in the words of Richard Hocks, "that whereas William is the pragmatist, Henry is . . . the pragmatism; that is, he possesses the very mode of thinking that William characteristically expounds" (4).<sup>19</sup> Henry writes near the end of his final preface of how he became a pragmatist, in a sense:

"[T]he whole conduct of life consists of things done, which do other things in their turn, just so our behaviour and its fruits are essentially one and continuous . . . and so, among our innumerable acts, are no arbitrary, no senseless separations. . . . To 'put' things is very exactly and responsibly and interminably to do them. Our expression of them . . . belong[s] as nearly to our conduct and our life as every other feature of our freedom."  
(*Art* 347)

In resisting the impulse to designate arbitrary transitions within his life, Henry is able to revel in an awe-inspired state. Like William, Henry is cognizant that each and every moment of his life is saturated with a type of meaning that has effects upon all the others; no individual "act" is distinguished or concrete enough to *not* be bound up with the rest of his experience. This includes blurring the distinction between 1) prose and 2) ideas in and of themselves. The elder James's influences on Henry's thought – that to *think* is to do, that to *process* is to do – are an impetus behind much of Henry's still underappreciated writing about writing. Indeed, realizing

how pragmatism works makes Henry wary of defining things in absolute terms. In “The Art of Fiction” (1884), he celebrates boundless creativity as a process that shuns borders and categories: truly penetrating the psychological depth of an author or character means embracing the weirdness of a text as opposed to appreciating the perfection of its form. Stating that the only obligation a novel has is to be “interesting,” James argues that the fiction writer lives “upon exercise, and the very meaning of that exercise is freedom.” Novels, indeed, should capture “a direct impression of life” and should only be appreciated for their “form” after the process of composition: “The tracing of a line to be followed, of a tone to be taken, of a form to be filled out, is a limitation of that freedom and a suppression of the very thing that we are most curious about” (33). Grimstad, among others, has recently depicted “Literary Pragmatism” as being bound up with experimentation. A work’s “condition of expressiveness,” in Grimstad’s words, “is the specific experience searched out and made shareable through the amassed decisions of composition” (13).

The thesis-driven determinist novel would seem, then, to break those rules, as the purposeful evasions of static and omniscient points of view are strikingly contrary to Henry James’s style. Levin writes that James’s “characters and his narrative do not simply develop or evolve through the course of a novel; rather, the process of development utterly overtakes the narrating and the narrated selves” (118). Posnock elucidates Henry’s autobiographical prose in its relentless breaking down of binaries separating the subject and object, or writer and text, the idea being that “curiosity” and “experience” themselves (pragmatist buzz words) hover between the two:

In short, James rejects “depth models” or such binary modes of thinking as inside/outside, essence/appearance, or authenticity/inauthenticity. Replacing these

oppositions, and the metaphysics that anchor them, is James's commitment to practice, particularly the practices of curiosity and representation, each a "variable process" in a world where "relations stop nowhere." (48)

Committing himself to realist writing, then, also involved a pragmatist awareness of breaking barriers between subject and place. This is a pragmatist tendency because in its elemental critique of foundations, pragmatism dwells in the spaces between representations, finding its nesting spots in transitions or 'non-resting spots,' so to speak, in order to create new meaning. Other realists have been observed pragmatically, like Twain in Jason Gary Horn's unique *Mark Twain and William James: Crafting a New Self* (1996), and Howells in Emily Curtrer's article "A Pragmatic Way of Seeing: James, Howells, and the Politics of Vision" (1993). Curtrer, for instance, remarks upon how Howells and James share "a common concern with the relation between knowledge and representation," stemming from James's desire to "free the visual as much as possible from the coding function of perception" (260, 263). In addition, Henry James and other writers exhibiting pragmatist tendencies successfully find ways to depict change through the lens of a precise, individual-centered mode of representation constantly in flux, understanding that ideas about life must be experienced first-hand, or that, in the words of Louis Menand, "ideas do not develop according to some inner logic of their own, but are entirely dependent, like germs, on their human carriers and the environment" (xi).

In sum, literary pragmatism seems, at first glance, markedly different from works of literature that portray deterministic worlds. The following section, however, proposes ways to see the two modes of thought aligning and forming a common set of assumptions about literature (which, in the following chapters, we will use to read Crane).

### III. Naturalism

What we've observed so far are two styles of writing that seem, at first glance, to be opposed. The crystallization of these styles, in the fiction of Frank Norris on the one hand and Henry James on the other, appears to come to a head in the 1890s, but their odd fusion, best revealed through Stephen Crane's fiction, can help us understand the function of American literary naturalism as a genre. Crane's fiction forms a type of literature *about* the struggle between pragmatism and determinism, as characters in Crane's work are trapped but attempt to escape being determined by finding alternative modes of expression related to the pragmatist desire to free oneself from definitions. The styles of deterministic and pragmatic writing are bound up with each other as opposites: they represent two sides of the same coin.

To a certain extent, this extends current assumptions about the naturalist literary genre. As it is understood today, naturalism is not simply an explanation of how determinism 'works' (this is a popular misconception of the genre). If that were the case, the literature would not exhibit realistic or interesting characters – though certain naturalist works like *McTeague* are specifically critiqued on this score. Indeed, for our purposes, it is more helpful to recognize naturalism as a genre revealing the struggle between deterministic forces (whether represented by nature or by, say, the economics of capitalism) and the efforts of individual characters. In this sense I am agreeing with how Charles Walcutt and his followers have defined the genre in the twentieth century. Walcutt writes that naturalism does not simply “demonstrate” determinism but rather exhibits the tension between determinism and free will, in a sense dramatizing the opposition between these poles in melodramatic fashion. He writes, “The reader is aware of the opposition between what the artist says about man's fate and what his saying it affirms about

man's hope. Both of these polar terms are a part of the 'meaning' of a naturalistic novel" (29). Pizer, too, sees the genre's value in its suggestion of "a compensating humanistic value" which "affirms the significance of the individual" ("Late Nineteenth-Century" 569).

This "compensating humanistic value" can be seen, for instance, in Hugh Wolfe, one of the pawns of Davis's previously-discussed *Life in the Iron Mills*. Despite the narrator's instructive opening, she also makes it explicitly clear that in order to create change, one must focus on individual characters: "I can paint nothing of this," she says, "only give you the outside outlines of a night, a crisis in the life of one man" (23). In asking the audience to "hear this story," she means for them to "Stop a moment" in order to "see it clearly" (13-14). The audience notices that Hugh Wolfe is a mutterer and a stutterer early on (a naturalist trope in its own right<sup>20</sup>), but also appreciates Davis's later attempts to imbue Hugh with flexible forms of transcendence, transformative, collective thought processes which serve to break barriers, to express himself the way Thoreau and Whitman would: looking out the prison-bar window at the story's end, Hugh finally feels a sort of freedom in viewing various phenomena pass before his eyes, people walking in different directions and going about their separate paths: "he strained his eyes to catch a glimpse of each passer-by, wondering who they were, what kind of homes they were going to, if they had children" (58). This open meditation, which breaks past the hampered, repetitive thought process he employed earlier, is given its full weight and transcendence as he combs through his memories before dying.

Hugh's release from being 'placed' within the overwhelming mill backdrop (and what comes with it: expectancy of work) is depicted by his aimless wandering, a transgressive act in its own right: the last lines we hear about Wolfe before the newspapers capture his crime is, "He wandered again aimlessly down the street, idly wondering what had become of the cloud-sea of

crimson and scarlet” (49-50). Wolfe in effect transgresses the norms of his culture because he allows himself to feel instinctually without having a reason for it: he challenges the Western rationalist wheels-in-motion mindset (what we’re calling determinism) by taking leave of his work and walking. Davis’s novella, then, captures naturalism from both sides: the defeating backdrop which ultimately kills its characters, and the (failed) attempts of Pizer’s “compensating humanistic value.”

But we are concerned with the ‘moment’ of literary naturalism in the 1890s, so Davis’s novella does not take in certain themes that turn-of-the-century texts would: specifically, the basic problem of failing to represent things accurately (as Henry Adams reminds us). While naturalist criticism went through a New Historicist phase in the 1980s when a number of studies used the texts to, in a sense, explain the history,<sup>21</sup> these studies do not read the literature with as much complexity as later critics (e.g. Donna Campbell and Jennifer Fleissner) do. Moreover, the New Historicist studies are overly fixated on the determinist angle, and are more likely to ignore characters’ opposing reactions to their restricted movement. More recently, critics have focused on the more liberating aspects of naturalist characters, but when they analyze them, they tend to lump them into other genres, like naturalism’s ‘bigger and better brother,’ realism, or, simply, modernism.<sup>22</sup> My study is less interested in comparing the naturalists to these more studied literary modes that bookend naturalism’s decade-long proliferation that it is in understanding the naturalist genre as a specific literary form at the turn of the century.<sup>23</sup>

My approach centers on the failure to communicate effectively, but specifically through my lens of determinism and pragmatism. The chapters will mostly analyze the depiction of ‘character’ in naturalist fiction, seeing as how pragmatism is, in the words of Menand, “an account of the way people think – the way they come up with ideas, form beliefs, and reach

decisions” (351). We will focus on how characters are introduced, how they think, how they move, how they affect their surroundings, and how they change. In other words, because pragmatism as a philosophy concerns itself with how people are constructed and how they construct things – and not, for instance, with how mountains are affected by sunlight, how cities change over long periods of time, or how coincidences occur across separate times or places – our view of naturalist fiction will mostly dwell within the realm of character development, focusing on the intersection of interests between the mind and the world.

In this sense, determinism and pragmatism share a lack of concern with interiority. While naturalist characters are depicted as cogs in a system (their motives seemingly premeditated or constructed by outside forces), pragmatist characters are similarly meant to be observed from the outside, their actions having merit based upon their influence on the outer world. In short, neither determinist nor pragmatist characters are constructed from the premise that a character’s ‘subjectivity’ has inherent value – they are, as part of their definition, both part and parcel of their physical surroundings, therefore creating in their identities a shady border between their inner, core identity and the world that surrounds them.

Indeed, William James broadcasted the notion that ideas do not exist unless they are applied, and similarly, determinist fiction depicts a sense that thinking in its own right is often futile. Theodore Dreiser writes in *Sister Carrie* (1900), “How true it is that words are but the vague shadows of the volumes we mean” (6). While Dreiser’s narrative, like much of the work of Norris and Crane, depends upon viewing surfaces – very rarely do we even delve as deep as the previous quote in his text – many of pragmatism’s claims center on the Jamesian notion that what is believed does not matter unless what is believed is transformed into action. Like certain tropes of naturalism in which narrators dance around the meditating protagonist, painting the

entire scene with exquisite detail yet crucially ignoring the developing mind of the character, pragmatism also dismisses the ‘function of thinking’ as a concept that deserves its own portrait: while thinking *does* have value, it only has value if it is justified in ends. William James writes, “Beliefs, in short, are really rules for action; and the whole function of thinking is but one step in the production of habits of action. If there were any part of a thought that made no difference in the thought’s practical consequences, then that part would be no proper element of the thought’s significance” (“Philosophical Conceptions” 259). This crucial understanding of pragmatism shares with determinism an obsession with ‘consequences,’ a fascination with seeing how exactly a row of dominoes falls.

But most importantly, pragmatism, in its understanding that “truth *happens* to an idea,” pays homage to the notion that *instead of our values determining our actions, our actions determine our values*. It is for this reason that determinist literature centers on environmental influences upon characters: a character is not formed until he is shaped by his environment. Jack London describes his protagonist in “To Build a Fire” (1902) as being “quick and alert in the things of life, but only in the things, and not in the significances” (1048). Literary pragmatists, for better or for worse, dedicate their energies to the present moment before the seemingly destructive acts of analysis and systemization sink in. Both forms avoid delineating static interior depictions of characters not because they find it tedious or boring, but because they simply don’t believe that they provide an accurate portrait of people. Ludwig writes, “The point for [William James] is that reality hangs together in the world but not in its conceptual representations” (43). That is because reality, like language itself, is always changing. Joan Richardson’s *A Natural History of Pragmatism* (2007) provides a helpful link between Darwinism and pragmatism with the declaration that “The signal, if implicit, motive of Pragmatism is the realization of thinking

as a life form, subject to the same processes of growth and change as all other life forms” (1). Speaking specifically of Emerson, she writes, “[his] stylistic practice significantly incorporated the prime features of nature’s process as Darwin would describe: the profligacy of forms necessary to ensure the possibility of adaptation or fit to constantly changing conditions; and the physical responsiveness of an organism, in this case language, to its accidental environment” (8).<sup>24</sup> Her perspective fits both with determinism and pragmatism in its keeping the subject and object close. Deterministic writers often depict their characters *through* their surroundings – the places they encounter, the people they talk to, the objects they pick up. Indeed, this is a crucial connection to pragmatism, which breaks down subject-object dualism in order to understand how characters are framed through their surrounding spaces. In Levin’s words, “nothing has its identity in itself. Everything is instead what its dynamic web of relations constitutes it as” (121).

How, then, do naturalist characters execute agency? That depends on the writer. Whereas London’s characters may be sitting ducks in a snowstorm, or Norris’s protagonists pawns of a wide-scope capitalist maneuver, most actually attempt to fight the forces that befall them, and these forms of resistance frequently take a pragmatist form of adapting to new circumstances. The classically successful pragmatist character is someone like an adept athlete, a quarterback who constantly sees a new line of defense and hence continuously readjusts his game plan to predominate over those multifaceted challenges. Ludwig’s analysis of Twain’s riverboat captain, highlighted earlier in this chapter, reminds us that an effective pilot is one who speedily looks for holes in old patterns: “As soon as we think the representational ability perfected, our knowledge proves no longer useful, because reality itself has changed” (19). When they act heroically, naturalist characters, to keep in mind the view of naturalism as portrayed by Walcutt and Pizer (one which does not simply view the destruction of man due to forces, but rather enacts the back-

and-forth pull and tug between the two) are able to change themselves by changing their circumstances – they are able to, in effect, buy into William James’s notion that “The knower is an actor, and co-efficient of the truth” (“Remarks” 21).

This dissertation will view Stephen Crane’s fiction by beginning with the premise that pragmatism and determinism are conceptually tied to each other because they are, in a sense, at odds with each other. The level of struggle one way or the other hints at the turmoil between the two modes of thought, with the work of fiction representing the field of play. The following three chapters advance in chronological order as Crane’s writing adapts from more determinist to more pragmatist through the 1890’s. Chapter One stresses how Crane’s earliest journalism and first novel, *Maggie* (1893), mock the human ability to tell rational stories when consumed by nature’s unpredictable forces, a tension born out of the inability to use language effectively enough within the moving stream of experience. Relating words to concepts, William James writes, “The essence of life is its continuously changing character; but our concepts are all discontinuous and fixed . . . you can no more dip up the substance of reality with them than you can dip up water with a net, however finely meshed” (*Pluralistic* 243). Crane’s early texts point not so much to naturalism’s display of man’s inevitable downfall in a deterministic world, but rather to man’s specific shortcomings with regards to speech: this reveals the broad determinist perception that humans cannot control their world, especially through language, an assumption shared by the pragmatist view that life moves too quickly and overflowing to accurately be documented through words.

Chapter Two tackles the dissertation’s central tension through a single character, Henry Fleming, whose key problem in *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895) is linking the terms separating his mind and the world. The chapter is framed through four dialectics representative

of this binary, exploring how Henry attempts to find middle ground within these conceptual poles: his separation of the concepts in the novel's first half is indicative of tropes of literary determinism, whereas his attempts to bridge these concepts together is more aligned with literary pragmatism.

Chapter Three explores Crane's pragmatic implication that by grasping at one's surroundings through one's language – by creating content through dialogue – one can gain mastery over one's surroundings by being attentive to present circumstances. Characters discussed in the previous two chapters were not able to achieve this, but those from Crane's later stories, especially "The Monster" (1898) and "The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky" (1898), are able to do so, but at the expense of their morality: these stories are less about how people fail to communicate than about how their articulation creates barriers rather than communities. In so doing, these stories also deconstruct the narrative process, pointing to how, within these deliberately metafictional tales, pragmatism and postmodernism share a common language. Lastly, "The Open Boat" (1897) represents Crane's sense of how characters can successfully avoid the traps of being determined by remaining alert to processes of transition.

The Afterword places Crane alongside contemporaries Henry Adams, Henry James, Theodore Dreiser, Edith Wharton, and the modernists. In an extended look at *Sister Carrie* (1900) and a shorter take on *The House of Mirth* (1905), this chapter asks a few questions about the definition of the naturalist genre, implicitly questioning where Crane's fiction would have gone if he had not passed away in 1900. The constant sense of indeterminacy in these novels not only departs from the rigid naturalism of Frank Norris and Jack London, but, in subtle conversation with the James brothers, deliberately portrays a more selective, pluralistic, and occasionally ironic perspective on the purpose of narrative at the turn of the century. At the same

time, the Afterword explains why Crane is specifically not a modernist – why, in short, he is a representative figure of the 1890s.

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<sup>1</sup> Donna Campbell documents this thoroughly in *Resisting Regionalism: Gender and Naturalism in American Fiction, 1885-1915* (1997), arguing that “naturalism grew in part as a gender-based countertradition not only to realism but to female-dominated local color writing” (5). The depiction of naturalism as a goal-oriented and ‘forced’ genre helps explain the insecurity of many of its writers in a way that will prove useful to our study.

<sup>2</sup> Trachtenberg’s *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age* (1982) and Lears’s *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture 1880-1920* (1981) revolutionized historians’ understanding of late nineteenth-century American life in their interdisciplinary works. Both, following in the line of Robert Wiebe’s aptly titled *The Search for Order: 1877-1920* (1966), reveal a radically insecure national culture at the turn of the century. Trachtenberg’s use of “incorporation” means, in his words, “a more general process of change, the reorganization of perceptions as well as of enterprise and institutions” (3).

<sup>3</sup> Ronald Martin’s *American Literature and the Universe of Force* (1981) provides excellent context for American writers’ obsessions with “force” at the turn of the century. At one point, Martin brings Spencer, Le Conte, and others together to explain how “Evolutionary force-philosophy,” in his words, “filled a specific need in America” (60). Overall, Martin’s study provides a diagram of how science and philosophy of the late nineteenth-century created a unique platform for the American naturalists.

<sup>4</sup> George Cotkin takes a broader (though similar) approach to this period in his *Reluctant Modernism: American Thought and Culture, 1880-1900* (1992). Unlike Lears, who focuses on the nostalgic aspect of this era, and unlike others who prefer to define an advanced (or nascent) form of modernism at the turn of the century, Cotkin deliberately defines a transitional era

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grasping in both directions: his “reluctant modernists” were “attempting to synthesize the traditions and ideals of Victorianism with the challenges and possibilities of modernists streams of thought” (xi). Victorians, in his summation, “craved certitude, emphasized control, and proudly upheld a patriarchal view of the world,” whereas the modernist temper “was a feeling, verging on a certainty, that the world was an alien, confusing, and not altogether comfortable place to dwell” (xii).

<sup>5</sup> Harold Kaplan’s *Power and Order: Henry Adams and the Naturalist Tradition in American Fiction* (1981) makes a strong case for why Adams helps explain American literary naturalism. “Adams,” he writes, “expressed the naturalist imagination working at the margin of questioned values and struggling to create a mythology and ethos to guide human existence” (x).

<sup>6</sup> Jay Martin makes a broader version of this argument in *Harvests of Change: American Literature 1865-1914* (1967) as he includes more post-war American writers (Dickinson, James, and Twain) in their search for order. “So rapid and wholesale were [these cultural changes] that the mind found it difficult to accommodate them. . . . American writers, as men needing to deal with an ordered mind, were thus committed during this period to the absorption of the new conditions of culture into a systemized consciousness” (11-12). Martin’s study, though outdated, provides a useful comprehensive sweep of how writers deliberately sought out to achieve “The Great American Novel,” for instance.

<sup>7</sup> Fleissner’s argument extends Lee Clark Mitchell’s New Historicist argument in *Determined Fictions: American Literary Naturalism* (1989). Mitchell’s study, which does not focus on female characters to the extent that Fleissner’s does, does an admirable job of close-reading how naturalist characters’ lack of agency is revealed through their actions, but Fleissner’s text provides a much stronger interdisciplinary backing in her defining of the term “compulsion.”

<sup>8</sup> Norris was, of course, greatly influenced by Howells’s role as a literary commentator, including the latter’s column for *Harper’s Monthly*, the “Editor’s Study” (1886-92). In *The Social Construction of American Realism* (1988), Amy Kaplan writes, “The 1880s and 1890s saw an

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unprecedented boom in the output of novels, leading Howells to claim that they ‘really form the whole intellectual life of such immense numbers of people, without question of their influence, good or bad.’ By force of numbers and accessibility alone, popular fiction could construct a shared world for masses of readers” (17).

<sup>9</sup> Émile Zola’s influence on Norris is obvious here. Zola, who helped define naturalism in Europe, wrote about literature as having a specific moral function in a much more surprising way than Norris: “We are, in a word, experimental moralists, showing by experiment in what way a passion acts in a certain social condition. The day in which we gain control of the mechanism of this passion we can treat and reduce it. . . . [our purpose is] [t]o be the master of good and evil, to regulate life, to regulate society, to solve in time all the problems of socialism, above all, to give justice a solid foundation” (25-26).

<sup>10</sup> While much has been written about McTeague’s repetitive actions, Jennifer Fleissner’s use of the word “compulsion” works better for our purposes, as she defines compulsion as a direct symptom of being determined: “Determinism, after all, can still allow for the sense of a beleaguered soul struggling against external forces, whether social or natural; compulsion would indicate more of a participation, even an investment, in one’s own reduction from agent to automaton” (39).

<sup>11</sup> William James adds the following on Spencer as a way to introduce his theory: “His dry schoolmaster temperament, the hurdy-gurdy monotony of him, his preference for cheap makeshifts in argument, his lack of education even in mechanical principles, and in general the vagueness of all his fundamental ideas, his whole system wooden, as if knocked together out of cracked hemlock boards – and yet the half of England wants to bury him in Westminster Abbey” (*Pragmatism* 503).

<sup>12</sup> Emerson is, almost without exception, considered the first American thinker associated with the development of the pragmatic idea. This line of influence (running from Emerson to William James) is given its fullest and most convincing account in Richard Poirier’s *The Renewal of*

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*Literature: Emersonian Reflections* (1987). See also: Levin, *The Poetics of Transition* (1999), and Richardson, *A Natural History of Pragmatism* (2007).

<sup>13</sup> Gaskill points to Richard Rorty's *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979) as one of the groundbreaking works of neopragmatism due to its antifoundational stance, and also credits those following in the line of Richard Poirier's more strictly literary work on pragmatism like Ross Posnock and Jonathan Levin. Cornel West and Giles Gunn are credited with helping widen the historical field of pragmatism in the 1990s, whereas Louis Menand's *The Metaphysical Club* (2002) impressively places the pragmatists within the exact intellectual milieu of the late nineteenth-century. Gaskill finds twenty-first century studies on literary pragmatism continually refreshing due to their breadth of historical periods and the refreshing new ways in which pragmatism is linked with interdisciplinary studies (most impressively in Joan Richardson's *A Natural History of Pragmatism* (2007)).

<sup>14</sup> Gaskill's essay is only one example of how literary critics have used pragmatism productively in conversation with the business of 'being a critic.' Cornel West, for instance, bluntly admits that Dewey was the last American pragmatist because "[a]fter him, to be a pragmatist is to be a social critic, literary critic, or a poet – in short, a participant in cultural criticism and cultural creation" (71).

<sup>15</sup> Robert Abrams's *Landscape and Ideology in American Renaissance Literature: Topographies of Skepticism* (2003) analyzes how antebellum writers deconstructed stable ways of knowing by deliberately complicating culturally-constructed senses of place. The study would hypothetically provide a solid context for understanding how literary pragmatism can be gleaned in fiction before Henry James.

<sup>16</sup> In *Thomas Pynchon's Narratives: Subjectivity and Problems of Knowing* (2000), for instance, Alan W. Brownlie argues that Pynchon's first three novels deliberately assault the reader with myriad ways of knowing things as a way for the reader to question (morally, politically) where knowledge bases come from.

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<sup>17</sup> For instance, Poe's thoughts on reasoning changed while discovering the creative steps inherent in random experimentation in a way that affected his composition. Grimstad writes: "As the basis for pragmatism . . . such logic stressed the role of experiment in reasoning itself" (47). Grimstad articulates his thesis in this chapter as such: "I have tried to make explicit how experience itself has shifted from eye-witness observation to a search for a kind of writing that, while being an particular example, at the same time invents the general category of which it is an instance" (64).

<sup>18</sup> Letter to *Boston Evening Transcript*, March 4, 1899 (qtd. in Mills, ed., 266).

<sup>19</sup> While useful, Richard Hocks's *Henry James and Pragmatist Thought: A Study in the Relationship of the Philosophy of William James and the Literary Art of Henry James* (1974) pales in comparison to Ross Posnock's *The Trial of Curiosity: Henry James, William James, and the Challenge of Modernity* (1991). Posnock's tome not only delves into the intricate relationship between the brothers but places them within the intellectual milieu of turn-of-the-century social and cultural theory on both sides of the Atlantic.

<sup>20</sup> Lee Clark Mitchell's previously-mentioned *Determined Fictions: American Literary Naturalism* (1987) is an excellent case study of how and why naturalist characters speak repetitively and with such a limited vocabulary.

<sup>21</sup> These include June Howard's *Form and History in American Literary Naturalism* (1985), Walter Benn Michaels's *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism: American Literature at the Turn of the Century* (1987), and Mark Seltzer's *Bodies and Machines* (1992).

<sup>22</sup> Two examples are John Fagg's *On the Cusp: Stephen Crane, George Bellows, and Modernism* (2009) and Jill Kress's *The Figure of Consciousness: William James, Henry James and Edith Wharton* (2002). Both are excellent, original studies, but do not care to define Crane and Wharton as naturalists.

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<sup>23</sup> Fleissner's *Women, Compulsion, Modernity: The Moment of American Naturalism* (2004) is an example of a recent study that does this well. Her book "shows a naturalist heroine getting stuck along the way to completing her personal story, while also showing how this individual stuckness, linked in each case to a form of compulsion, is tied to a stuckness at the broader level of history as well" (31). Her thesis is tied to the repeated symbol of the "failed bildungsroman" as being symptomatic of naturalism.

<sup>24</sup> Richardson's text does not analyze fiction writers outside of Henry James, but provides one of the most useful interdisciplinary accounts of pragmatism with its references to evolutionary biology and neuroscience. Like most English scholars writing on pragmatism, she glides over the naturalists while favoring others. (Like Levin's *The Poetics of Transition*, she jumps from the Jameses to Gertrude Stein and Wallace Stevens.)

## Chapter 1:

### “The Little Man” Making Orations: Crane’s Faithless Vision (1890-1894)

“These men pose so hard that it would take a double-barreled shotgun to disclose their inward feelings and I despair of knowing them.” (218)

“Hartwood scenery is good when viewed swiftly.” (127)

-Letters from Stephen Crane to  
Ripley Hitchcock and Willis Brooks  
Hawkins, respectively<sup>1</sup>

In August 1891, a young reporter attended Hamlin Garland’s lecture series on American literary history and theory in Asbury Park, New Jersey. That reporter, 19-year-old Stephen Crane, who had been assigned to write on the lecture for the *New-York Tribune*, heard Garland speak about William Dean Howells, and then the two played catch outside the lecture hall as a means to spark conversation (Dooley 7). Baseball had, in fact, been Crane’s passion at Syracuse University, where, it seemed, young Stephen did not care to excel in his studies. “I did little work at school,” he confessed to a friend, “but confined my abilities, such as they were, to the diamond. Not that I disliked books, but the cut-and-dried curriculum of the college did not appeal to me” (99). Standing only five feet seven inches tall, the often sickly teenager was in fact a lively sportsman with impressive eye-hand coordination and was a natural fit as the team’s catcher and shortstop. Slow to appreciate viewpoints veiled in scholarship but quick to visualize unadorned beauty – which to him was evident chiefly in art and athletics – the young Crane,

seeming to foresee his early death, rapidly dove into experience and produced hundreds of newspaper sketches and stories in less than a decade. The fact that his fiction and nonfiction seemed to bleed into each other says less about his disinterest in the strictness of genre and more about his desire to catch the brief sparks of reality inherent in the human experience, regardless of their coherence within an overall whole. While Frank Norris was trying to simultaneously write and define the Great American Novel, his college dropout contemporary was defining it more indirectly by largely invalidating bedrocks of knowledge. Indeed, Crane's irony and inversion of norms and irony provided an expression of modern life which Norris failed to capture or even understand – in a sense, Crane's success slipped through Norris's fingers, because while the two tackled a similar problem (defining humanity's relationship to the environment), their stylistic approaches were different.

Crane's father was a Methodist minister and his mother was the daughter of one. In the words of Thomas Gullason, his father "warred against gambling, profanity, cigarette and opium smoking, alcohol, baseball, dancing, novels, and the theater," whereas his mother's Calvinist upbringing, "with its belief in natural depravity and in the hell-fire and day-of-doom philosophy, only instilled fear and horror in young Crane and then finally open rebellion" (25). Stephen, meanwhile, was the youngest son who would hear arguments between his older brothers and parents over the importance of religion. His parents were well-read and took education seriously, but Stephen attended school intermittently because of his delicate health. His father's death in 1880 (when Stephen was eight) further complicated matters as his mother moved the family several times between three locations: Port Jervis, NY, Roseville, NJ, and Asbury Park, NJ. As a teenager, he attended the Claverack College and Hudson River Institute, best known for its military training program. Though he would attend two more colleges, his experience at

Claverack was apparently the most idyllic for Crane, partially because he took military training seriously and was preparing himself for West Point. His brother, however, convinced him there would not be a war in his lifetime, so he should pursue something more practical: Stephen then transferred to Lafayette University to pursue mining-engineering.<sup>2</sup>

Years later, when asked by the publisher of *Union and Advertiser* for an autobiographical “blurb,” including his educational background, Crane submitted an eight-paragraph response beginning with the ungrammatical sentence, “Dear Mr. Hilliard: If you will pardon this kind of paper, I think I will be able to you more easily what you wish to know.” The letter neared its conclusion with the equally awkward line, “I am not so sure that the above is what you want but I am sure that it is the most complete I have ever written.” Enclosed squarely in the middle of the bio is this paragraph explaining his education:

As for myself, I went to Lafayette College but did not graduate. I found mining-engineering not at all to my taste. I preferred base-ball. Later I attended Syracuse University where I attempted to study literature but found base ball again much more to my taste. At Lafayette I joined the Delta Upsilon fraternity. (165-167)

Compared to the rest of the response, this portion is deliberately short (a previous paragraph, five times as long, recounted his family’s military background). Crane is also deliberately self-deprecatory, downplaying his belief in his education for comedic effects. Although some editors have called Crane the second-worst speller among distinguished American writers,<sup>3</sup> the reader wonders whether he voluntarily wrote ‘baseball’ in two different ways, judging by the measly 13 words written between them. His last sentence (‘oh right, a fraternity’) is a deflated tack-on which he forgot to mention earlier, and he does not mention that he was in the same fraternity at Syracuse. Dramatically opposed to, say, *The Education of Henry Adams*, this blurb seems as if

its goal is to destroy narrative coherence. His response is paradigmatic of much of his later communication with editors who asked him for autobiographical information: evasive, brief, self-deprecating, silly.

Mark Twain's oft-quoted line that he 'never let schooling interfere with his education' can be applied to Crane in two respects: Crane was, in fact, well-read as a youth, and he found most of college a distraction.<sup>4</sup> A real education, for Crane, was seeing things from different vantage points and being in the middle of the 'action,' so to speak. His general restlessness, whether to play baseball, to live amongst the poor in New York, or, in his future, to tour the American West and seek out combat in foreign wars,<sup>5</sup> can partially be attributed to culture. Bill Brown has documented the dramatic spike in sportsmanship in the American 1890s (specifically boxing and football) which, more broadly, suits Theodore Roosevelt's masculine cult of the "strenuous life."<sup>6</sup> Lears writes of the era, "As the rationalization of culture increasingly . . . reduced more and more existence to banal routine, life at war . . . sometimes seemed to promise authentic experiences no longer available in everyday life: the opportunity for moral and physical testing, the sheer excitement of life amid danger and death" (*Grace* 98). During the 1890s, while Crane was in his twenties, he was part of a generation of young Americans nostalgic about a Civil War they had never seen, involved in what Brown calls an "ideological matrix" where "the nonpurposive [was] repeatedly instrumentalized" (11). Sifting through his letters, one finds not only misspellings, as if he were constantly rushing off, but repeated references to the thrills of being in motion directly alongside his damnations of living an indoor lifestyle. Scenery, he tells his longtime friend (and fellow journalist) Willis Brooks Hawkins, is best seen from a swift horse: "You can push your lifeless old bicycles around the country but a slim-limbed thoroughbred's dauntless spirit is better . . . Let him fling himself to the other side of

the road because a sumach tassel waves” (127). In another letter to Hawkins, he seems to stop, mid-sentence, interrupting himself with “That’s enough about books,” and then abruptly returning to a previous topic of conversation (presumably where Hawkins was promoting America’s sudden bicycle fad):

On the bicycle question, I refuse to listen to you. In the old days at military school I once rode a wheel - a high one - about three miles high, I think. An unsmiling young cadet brought one into the armory one morning and as I was his senior officer I took it away from him. I mounted by means of a friend and rode around and around the armory. It was very simple.

When I wished to dismount however I found that I couldn’t. So I rode around and around the armory. Shafer, who was champion of Pennsylvania in those old high-wheel days, watched me and said I did some things on that wheel which were impossible to him. A group of cadets gathered in a corner and yelled whenever I passed them. I abjured them at intervals to let me off that wheel but they only hollered. At last, I ran into a bench and fell neatly on my head. It broke the machine, too, praise God. Some days later I whipped the boy who had loaned it to me. Not for that, mind you, but for something else. (131)

This seemingly pointless “sketch” actually reveals many aspects of our writer’s intent in storytelling. First, Crane is indirect in how he feels about things: while he tells his most trusted pen-pal of the era about this seemingly negative experience, the reader senses that it was one of the highlights of Crane’s life. On a thematic and stylistic level, the sketch illuminates his recurrent interests and stylistic modes: his distrust of new inventions (modes of transportation in New York, or Amusement Park rides on the Jersey shore); his underrated, Twain-like, blunt sense of humor; his delight in capturing absurd and awkward moments; his moment-to-moment

impressionism, including how things appear from different vantage points; and his repeated references to men who act like chickens with their heads cut off, especially while they are speaking or yelling in groups (the dialogue is distant, muted, chaotic, nonsensical).

We also cannot ignore the subject matter of a man-made object going nowhere. In the previous chapter we noted how Jennifer Fleissner depicts the naturalist “moment” as being stuck in a struggle for articulation or representation, a naturalist theme which we can certainly attribute to Crane. In *Hard Facts*, Philip Fisher describes the turn-of-the-century motifs of the “rocking chair” and “Ferris Wheel,” which display “none of the linear motion of progress and exploration but rather the fact of rising and falling” (155). The texture of *Sister Carrie* (1900), in his words, “is composed of images of motion of which the most profound are not the horizontal motions of train rides, carriage excursions, [etc], but instead the tragic and vertical motions of rising and falling: the motion of the rocking chair” (155). Crane’s unicycle adventure is recited in exciting fashion but also reveals a point about human invention and progress at the turn of the century. In his review of *Maggie* and *George’s Mother* in 1896, Frank Norris astutely notes what many critics would later echo: that the “picture” Crane makes is “not a single carefully composed painting, serious, finished, scrupulously studied, but rather scores and scores of tiny flashlight photographs, instantaneous, caught, as it were, on the run.” While he calls this style “catching,” he also finds it “handled in a manner almost too flippant for the seriousness of the subject” (“*Maggie*” 164-165). Norris’s observations are well-worded and typical of how critics, then and now, responded to Crane’s impressionistic style, especially in his earliest writings (Gullason calls Crane’s early language “playful, humorous, and satiric,” yet also “too stilted and bombastic” (40)). However, these comments ignore how Crane’s writings between 1890 and 1894 have an argument of their own, especially when read metaphorically as pointillistic

perspective. Using the directionless unicycle as an initial metaphor, this chapter analyzes Crane's writing before *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895) to highlight his deliberate mockery of human progress, invention, and articulation in the context of American naturalism. In Part I, "Crane's 'Little Man,'" I start my discussion with how, as a true "naturalist" interested in the confusing and mostly destructive relationship between nature and people (and indeed as the *first* American naturalist of the 1890s), Stephen Crane was specifically interested in language's failing role in the world. First, he assumed, like Emerson, that nature in itself is absolutely unknowable in its range and scope, and this causes a type of reverence from characters who act as (helpless) spectators. This can be viewed everywhere in his writing but I will focus on his representative New York sketches of 1894 to drive the point home – in part because they are, somewhat ironically, set in America's most bustling city, reflecting Crane's implication that determinism operates everywhere. Secondly, I will observe his Sullivan County sketches and quasi-fictional story, "The King's Favor," to show how people in Crane's world cannot function in nature to begin with, typically because they can barely communicate effectively (these texts reveal, quite simply, the difficulty in forming words). In addition to framing Crane's characters in a specific fashion, Part I also serves as a general introduction to the writer's impressionistic prose style.

In Part II of this chapter, "...Making Orations," I move beyond Crane's already-proven perspective that humans are impotent in the realm of nature's forces (a trope of literary determinism) in order to analyze his display of them as naturally arrogant creatures who put on false airs. We start by noting his irony in the Atlantic Sketches, his distaste for showy new inventions, and his more obvious disdain for all forms of clothing worn by the upper class. (Based on his letters to Hawkins alone, there is nothing Crane despises more than clothes.) At their worst, Crane's characters over-rely upon destructive codes like religion and gender

stereotypes drawn from pulp fiction in order to put on airs which cause “rank” among people. This point is driven home through an analysis of his first novel, *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* (1893).

Overall, this chapter reveals everything about why Crane preferred riding horses to unicycles, or why he felt boxed-in by societal pressures and sought out newer forms of boundary-breaking expression in his later works. “My idea of happiness,” Crane wrote in his blurb to *Union and Advertiser*, “is the saddle of a good-riding horse” (167). His faithless view of humanity, somewhat deterministic, could only be ameliorated by interactions with nature that offered him different points of view, preferably at high speeds. In first laying this groundwork of Crane’s vision, or lack thereof, we are able to grasp a naturalist seer who was ready to tackle larger questions about the borders between characters’ psyches and their environments in his later work.

Part I: Crane’s “Little Man”: New York Sketches, Sullivan County Sketches, “The King’s Favor”

New York Sketches

During and after college, Stephen Crane pursued journalism in New York City, where he produced some of his best and most representative work. While some critics have framed his sketches as “warm-ups for novels,” others have critiqued the simplicity of this view, pointing out the overlap between Crane’s novels and sketches.<sup>7</sup> Both genres, in my opinion, express Crane’s vision anyway (and, indeed, his “nonfiction sketches” are at least partially fictionalized).

“The Broken-Down Van,” published in the Sunday *New York-Tribune* in July 1892, paints a scene spanning a few minutes during which a horse-drawn furniture van (presumably representing wealth and privilege) loses a wheel in a poor neighborhood. The sketch does not give us access into the minds of characters involved in these moments, but simply presents the carriage-riders and the neighborhood reacting to this accident. The sketch is notable, in Michael Robertson’s words, for the “rigorous moral neutrality” owed to its equal attention to all social classes (85). I will return toward the end of this chapter to why Crane’s “moral neutrality” is significant in the context of my project, but I lead with this simple incident of the wrecked van to stress one of Crane’s main goals as a writer: to put the spotlight on the absurdity of technological devices, especially those involving transportation. Crane does not take interest in what a horse-drawn furniture van (with too many words) can *do*, but is instead fascinated, and likely amused, by watching it lose a wheel.

Indeed, as the first American naturalist, Crane’s true interest is in watching how people react to bad things, whether these are devices gone haywire or, as is more typical for the genre, to nature’s wild, unpredictable forces. Time and again, Crane comes back to this basic, elemental theme of man vs. the elements, which has led some critics to call him a writer in the epic tradition.<sup>8</sup> We cannot even begin to discuss Crane without stating the obvious: his signal works of literature, especially *The Red Badge* and “The Open Boat,” are about survival in the most abstract form – so much so that his stories decontextualize themselves from specific places and times. Consider a few sentences from his Nebraska journalism in February 1895, which could just as well be about the Middle Ages. At one point, he leads an article with the most stereotypical naturalist sentence ever written – “The vast prairies in this section of Nebraska contain a people who are engaged in a bitter and deadly fight for existence” (“Nebraska’s” 409)

– and in another passage, he defines the “farmer” romantically, simplistically, and seemingly with a sense of admiration:

The final quality of these farmers who have remained in this portion of the State is their faith in the ultimate victory of the land and their industry. They have a determination to wait until nature, with her mystic processes, restores to them the prosperity and bounty of former years. . . . In the meantime, they depend upon their endurance, their capacity to help each other, and their steadfast and unyielding courage. (“Nebraska’s” 419-420)

Of course, we must take Crane’s audience into account here, and the sense that he is participating in the turn-of-the-century tradition of mythologizing the West.<sup>9</sup> That being said, it is interesting to note how Crane’s farmers are “determined” and “dependent,” not simply upon “the land” but upon each other in the aggregate. As we’ll notice in his sketches, human beings are not individuated from each other because Crane is interested in people *as a category*. Bill Brown sees Crane’s urban sketches as precursors to “The Open Boat” in terms of how the later story seems to “transcend the limits of naturalism and realism and to emerge as an autonomous (protomodernist) work of art” (50). In describing “The Open Boat” as an “atopia” in terms of how it dislocates experience and history from its human actors – as a narrative existing “within a discursive production of nonsocial space” (50) – Brown allows us to see, too, how Crane frames his early sketches abstractly in order to investigate the boundary between humanity and nature. While this theme is unsurprising in American West journalism, where farmers in the nineteenth century *were* dependent upon the weather, it is more noteworthy when Crane imports this theme to the city.

Partially for that reason, Crane’s vision in his New York sketches seems to avoid other topics like class differences. This was shocking at the time because of the popularity of Jacob

Riis's *How the Other Half Lives* (1890), which sparked journalists' sentimental crusade to help the poor. If Crane's later Nebraska articles could be classified as typical mythologies of the West, there was nothing ordinary about his vision in the New York sketches. Robertson notes how Crane's subject matter in "The Broken-Down Van" ("the physical details of poverty, vice, and exploitation") was quite common in 1890s newspapers, but what is "[n]ot so common is the complete absence in the sketch of any moralistic commentary" (85). Crane's other urban sketches are similar. "The Men in the Storm," for instance, does not exactly have a plot, but simply reveals the brutality of a setting and a people. The opening two sentences are strikingly well-written in both their specificity (you believe Crane was standing on a specific New York cross-street, in a blizzard, in October 1894), and, oddly, in their abstract timelessness (this could be Russia in 1642):

The blizzard began to swirl great clouds of snow along the streets, sweeping it down from the roofs, and up from the pavements, until the faces of pedestrians tingled and burned as from a thousand needle-prickings. Those on the walks huddled their necks closely in the collars of their coats, and went along stooping like a race of aged people. (176)

These people, Crane goes on to describe, stumble by buildings that throw "great beams of orange and yellow upon the pavement." But then Crane switches the perspective from what the reader *sees* to the actual *seer* himself/herself. Trying to make sense of watching this scene, he gives us the third paragraph, which broadens our sense of what the sketch is about:

There was an absolute expression of hot dinners in the pace of the people. If one dared to speculate upon the destination of those who came trooping, he lost himself in a maze of social calculation; he might fling a handful of sand and attempt to follow the flight of each particular grain. But as to the suggestion of hot dinners, he was in firm lines of

thought, for it was upon every hurrying face. It is a matter of tradition; it is from the tales of childhood. It comes forth with every storm. (176)

The passage is notable in its deliberate desire to form a comprehensive view of humanity (and, moreover, the sense that the writer has a *choice* to observe individual lives, but chooses not to). Crane basically tells us how disinterested he is in following individuals' lives: in this sense, he is a deterministic writer at his most pessimistic, because granting even one glimpse at one grain of sand would humanize the depiction of the men in the storm. (For instance, in the previous chapter, I mentioned how Rebecca Harding Davis's concern with "Hugh" at least humanizes *The Life in the Iron Mills*.) Instead, men are "men" in the plural, and being lumped together means they are not directing their actions: agency is completely absent. In other passages, he compares the movement of people to movements of nature (the entire sketch, it becomes clear, presents people the way it presents wind, water, and snow): "When the door below was opened, a thick stream of men forced a way down the stairs"; "The crowd was like a turbulent water forcing itself through one tiny outlet"; "The tossing crowd on the sidewalk grew smaller and smaller" (180-181). Like ants, they inevitably flow in a certain direction – they are "determined" partially because their movement is predictable.

The same crowds emerge in "When Every One is Panic Stricken" and "When A Man Falls A Crowd Gathers," sketches published in the *New York Press* on November 25 and December 2, 1894, respectively. These texts go beyond simply revealing how crowds move in reaction to nature's forces (as in how water fills space); they portray how people are riveted by natural disaster. An urban fire and a man's seizure cause crowds to flow in from all directions, and the gawking spectators do nothing to assist the problems at hand. The initial setting of "Panic" sets the tone for the cityscape as extension of nature's brutal forces, describing a

dwelling “which the churning process of the city had changed into a hive of little industries” (197). Later, while watching the fire burn down a building, the “eyes of the crowd” were “upturned to it in an ecstasy of awe, fear and, too, half-barbaric admiration” (198). Crane even goes so far as to call this power of nature “their master after all” (199). The people “felt the human helplessness that comes when nature breaks forth in passion, overturning the obstacles, emerging at a leap from the position of a slave to that of a master, a giant” (198). “When A Man Falls,” too, paints the spectators as though their lives were leading up to viewing this singular event (in this case, to a man lying on the brink of death at their feet). In this case, Crane actually distinguishes one part of the crowd from another, but only as a way, it turns out, to break them into smaller crowds (in other words, they are still not individualized):

As for the men near, they hung back, appearing as if they expected [the body] might spring erect and grab them. Their eyes, however, were held in a spell of fascination. They scarce seemed to breathe. They were contemplating a depth into which a human being had sunk, and the marvel of this mystery of life or death held them chained. Occasionally from the rear a man came thrusting his way impetuously, satisfied that there was a horror to be seen, and apparently insane to get a view of it. More self-contained men swore at these persons when they tread upon their toes. (202-203)

Crane’s “self-contained” men are not so because they choose to look away or assist the man, but because they merely “swear” when their view is blocked. Crane’s rare attempt to show what people are thinking is purely driven by what the people are first seeing: the entire paragraph from which this quote is drawn is directed by the word “eyes.”

Both sketches conclude in the same way: with other men saving the day with strange airs of indifference. In “Panic,” that group is the firemen, which Crane first paints as a single blocked

force (“a tornado, a storm of horses, machinery, men” (199)) and in “When A Man Falls,” it is the hospital workers depicted by their horse-driven black wagon. Upon both of their arrivals, the crowds go wild, but in their moments of heroicism, the heroes are seemingly bored: an ambulance worker appears “as imperturbable almost as if he were at a picnic” and the firemen “seemed to look at fires with the calm, unexcited vision of veterans” (204, 201). “When A Man Falls” ends in purposeful denouement after the ambulance disappears and the crowd feels as if “they had been cheated” (204), whereas “Panic” ends with what seems to be Stephen Crane’s personal disappointment once he sees the “calm, unexcited vision” of the firemen who walk “tranquilly” and exude a “blasé air”: “It was only the populace with their *new nerves*, it seemed, who could feel the thrill and dash of these attacks, these furious charges made in the dead of night, at high noon, at any time, upon the common enemy, the loosened flame” (201, emphases mine).

These final lines tell us why Stephen Crane is considered the first literary impressionist. At the very least, they help explain his oft-quoted line (first documented in a letter to John Northern Hilliard) that “a man is born into the world with his own pair of eyes and he is not at all responsible for his quality of personal honesty” (195). “Panic” is neither about a fire nor about how people see a fire, but rather about how *new eyes* (those of Crane and most of the crowd) see a fire compared to *old eyes* (those of the firemen). A more traditional sketch would have ended earlier, but in stepping back and deliberately detaching itself from the childish ecstasy of the bulk of it, the text reinforces Crane’s impressionistic credo, proving that no two eyes see the same things alike. The sketch ends with the deflating acceptance that the way the writer saw the magnificent scene unfold (colors, gongs, bells, shouts, a loud shriek that “made the spectators

bend their bodies, twisting as if they were receiving sword thrusts” (198)) simply was not how everybody else saw it.

It can be argued that Crane’s religious antagonism, coupled with his well-read but transitory boyhood, help explain his literary impressionist style (a biographical topic that is impossible to pin down and, of course, easy to generalize); more important for the frame of my study is how Crane’s impressionism, which has been thoroughly discussed for over a hundred years, helps provide the literary scholar with a foundation for understanding Crane’s doubt of meta-narratives (which, in turn, explains his proto-postmodernism).<sup>10</sup> We will analyze Crane’s more wholesale destruction of narrative form in Chapter Three, but for now, it will be helpful to observe his Sullivan County sketches in his more basic parodic phase, as they broaden Crane’s naturalist argument about what people can (and cannot) do.

### Sullivan County Sketches

During his college years, Crane spent the summers in Sullivan Country, New York, where his older brother William owned a large tract of land. He wrote a series of sketches – some nonfiction, some tales based on truth – which were published in the New York *Tribune* in 1892. The young Crane was amused by the oral traditions of Sullivan Country, noting that “insignificant facts, told from mouth to mouth down the years, have been known to become of positively appalling importance by the time that they have passed from behind the last corn-cob in the last chimney corner.”<sup>11</sup> Crane ended up re-writing ‘tall tales’ of the rural environs in many of his sketches. John Fagg frames his sketches as interrogations of narrative form: in one poignant close-reading, he uncovers how in his sketches centered on Indian-killer Tom Quick,

Crane “removes the surface details that differentiate the various incidents in Quick’s career to emphasize their fictional, generic nature,” and further, by “drawing attention to their syntactic structures, he uncovers and critiques the repetitive, generic status of the stories he retells” (25-26).<sup>12</sup> Here I will delve deeper by highlighting spaces in which Crane questions the narrative process in his “little man” sketches, which are based less obviously upon subverting tall-tale myths and are more centrally focused upon humanity’s basic relation to nature in a deterministic environment. As mentioned, in the city sketches, people were portrayed as specks of sand: the reader never saw what individual people *decided to do* but rather how they moved blindly in packs like running water or, simply, goggled at things. (Even the heroes of the stories, the firemen and ambulance men, are captured en masse in a way which suggests their work is inevitably connected to “force”; the characters are not agents but agents of a cause, like army men.) The characters in the following sections are more distinguished by their actions, albeit stupid actions: at the very least, the plot-progression of these stories is governed by the characters’ decision-making, as opposed to being framed in a completely boxed-in, deterministic style (e.g. a sketch where whether the number of characters in a “crowd” is a dozen or eight-dozen makes no difference to what actually happens in the story).

The first of these sketches published, “Four Men in a Cave,” immediately questions its title, as the subtitle reads one (or two) optional ones: “Likewise Four Queens, and a Sullivan County Hermit.” This is typical for Crane – a variety of titles lest we, the readers, desire to think it is about one thing. The cave itself is described in four different ways within the opening ten lines – “this thing,” “a cave,” “its black mouth,” and “a little tilted hole” – which is also typical of Crane, who searingly searches for multiple ways to describe the same object (66). Always concerned with physical space and distance in relation to an object, Crane will continuously

search for new ways to see an object since that particular vantage point *is* the reason for why it's being described. This is easily understood in "Killing His Bear," a sketch in which a bear, seen from the perspective of a hunter, changes its form based upon the viewer's positioning, not unlike Ishmael's visions of the whale in *Moby-Dick*: the animal is first "indistinct and vague in the shadows," then "a frightened kitten," then a "shadowy mass" (85). The hunter never sees the bear as a holistic category – it is always a shimmering blur of movement – until it is finally dead, and the reader senses a newly-described animal depicted with a highly-attuned visual sense: "Some hundreds of yards forward he came to a dead bear with his nose in the snow" (86).

By employing the use of "a" over "the" dead bear, Crane implies an impressionistic and pragmatic perceptive difference between what *was* and what *is now*, throwing into doubt the notion of a continuous ontological being. William James explains how, with our selective attention and limits of representational categories, humans learn to adapt to circumstances based upon patterns instead of relying immediately upon static categories:

A baby's rattle drops out of his hand, but the baby looks not for it. It has 'gone out' for him, as a candle-flame goes out; and it comes back, when you replace it in his hand, as the flame comes back when relit. The idea of its being a 'thing,' whose permanent existence by itself he might interpolate between its successive apparitions has evidently not occurred to him. (*Pragmatism* 562)

Like the hunter himself, the bear is never related to what it previously was in the story: it is instead always a newly-described thing. Jonathan Levin writes on Henry James's pragmatism within his fiction, "any thing is indistinguishable from our sense (or our various senses) of that thing" (122). This trope of Crane's, too, might explain why so many critics find that "he cannot create characters" or that he "keeps them typical or anonymous" – Crane needs a certain amount

of anonymity in order to give such a varied view of them from multiple perspectives (Gullason 37). Norris famously wrote how Crane's characters "are types, not characters," because "his scenes and incidents are not particularized": with him, he wrote, "it is the broader, vaguer, *human* interest that is the main thing, not the smaller details of a particular phase of life" ("*Maggie*" 166). Norris is astute in a way that pinpoints his fellow naturalist's "naturalism" in ways we have already discussed, but it can also be argued that, in a highly impressionistic style, and not unlike characters depicted within high postmodernism, these characters must inevitably lose a portion of their psychological depth for an ability to morph and change at high speeds. (Similar critiques have been made, say, against Thomas Pynchon).

If Crane uses '*a*' as opposed to '*the*' to introduce already-known subjects at certain times, he does the reverse at the beginnings of stories. Here is how "Four Men in a Cave" begins:

The moon rested for a moment on the top of a tall pine on a hill.

The little man was standing in front of the campfire making orations to his companions.

(66)

Despite being told in the past tense, Crane simply assumes you are staring at a painting he has laid in front of you: there is only one moon, one tall pine, one little man, and one campfire in your frame of vision. It does not matter that other tall pines may 'exist,' only that you pay attention to this one. In fact, despite his tendency to switch perspectives rapidly, each individual description (usually segregated by single sentences, as in the above example) is essentially a snap-shot in the ways Norris previously discussed. This ironically has the same effect that switching '*the*' for '*a*' has in the previous example: the images are seen more clearly, in this case because there is no narrative relation between the first and second sentence yet – the eye, for now, is allowed to wander without inferring any narrative connection.

Indeed, by starting both sentences with “The,” the main subjects of each sentence are not influencing each other but are rather different angles to see the scene, like separate shots during a film shoot. The first is a peaceful meditation upon a quiet moon which is resting behind a romantic backdrop, and even though it rests “for a moment,” it feels longer; the second sentence displays a presumably self-conscious little man “making orations,” an interesting choice of words which feels deliberately awkward and forced. Instead of choosing to describe the man as delivering a speech or, simply, talking, he is “making orations,” a bald statement which cuts out a middle verb akin to speaking: the man is not eloquently considering his words as they pour from his mouth – he is far, then, from ‘writing’ – but is rather “making” something, whether it be a stew, a fire, or indeed a speech, and the contrast of this physical verb with the anti-physical “orations” deliberately falls on tin ears and emphasizing the awkwardness of speech itself. Moreover, the use of orations in the plural suggests a pointlessness to the whole affair, as if there were a limited amount of orations available or as if what he is saying has been said before. Either way, the reader sees the little man from afar, perhaps from the moon’s perspective: he is diminutive and muted despite his gesticulations. On the one hand, this explains Crane’s basic impressionism, in the sense that he focuses upon the moments between human perception and human narrative (“making orations” being the indicative example of this). On the other, it purposefully demeans man’s place in the world by making this protagonist seem as “little” as possible.

Crane develops a similar notion of man’s impotence (coupled, interestingly, with loudness) within nature’s realm elsewhere in the Sullivan County sketches. “The Octopush,” for instance, follows a group of fisherman embarking upon newly-seen territory, and the setting is introduced in the third paragraph as four sentences begin by leaving the human subjects and

observing four subjects of nature (“The sun,” “Troops of blue and silver darning needles,” “Bees,” and “Butterflies”) while the verbs attributed to them simply describe how they appeared, not forms of blunt action, but instead how they “gleamed,” “danced,” “bustled,” and “flickered.” The next sentence has a similar effect: “Down in the water, millions of fern branches quavered and hid mysteries” (75). Hence, a large paragraph whose purpose will later be to meld humans with a new environment begins with five sentences attributing verbs to five natural subjects, unrelated to one another except for the fact that they encompass the same natural ‘scene.’ Only after this staccato introduction of natural things that gleam, dance, bustle, flicker, and quaver (distracting the reader pleasantly by pinballing his attention to varying natural objects) are we introduced to another natural thing, man, who is similarly depicted in a state of nonaction: “The four men sat still and skiddered. The individual puffed tremendously” (75). By delegating the four men in a boat to the middle of the paragraph, subsumed underneath beautiful depictions of nature, Crane seems to be viewing them both *as* nature, and as the most helpless elements of nature in the scene. Indeed, until the sixth sentence, the ranking of the five natural subjects roughly follow their order of appearance, their size, and their height with regards to the ground (or in this case, the water): the sun, the needles that dance over the surface but which are described with the aggressive plural “Troops,” the bees “in the shallow places,” the butterflies, and the ferns which are only partially seen underwater. Only after that do we view man, somewhat in a middle location of all these, and defined not by his looks (as all the other subjects are described) but by his annoying sounds: “Ever and anon, one of the four would cry ecstatically, or swear madly” (75).

Man is depicted, then, as loud, awkward, and invasive, ill-fitting with his clumsy use of words. The next line further emphasizes how strange he appears in context in a sentence which

deliberately twists and turns in comic fashion: “His fellows, upon standing to gaze at him, would either find him holding a stout fish, or nervously struggling with a hook and line entangled in the hordes of vindictive weeds and sticks on the bottom” (75). Most of the verbs which are attributed to the characters in these sentences – “skidder,” “puff,” “cry,” “swear,” and “struggle” – are reflective of being imbalanced and annoyed, and none describe anything giving them power or control (these men *do* catch fish, but Crane refuses to highlight the act of fishing, only the after-effect of seeing a man hold a fish, and not within a specific scene but as a muted, somewhat boring example). The key to Crane’s depiction of man in nature is *context*: as a writer with both determinist and pragmatist qualities, his “man” is not seen in the abstract, but as wrestling with his surrounding environment, and that surrounding environment highlights an awkwardness of man’s self-conscious gesticulations within nature’s privileged, quiet sphere. In his Sullivan County sketches, Crane’s little men attempt to meld with their environment, but they do not, largely because they speak and are aware of how they speak.

Looking further, Crane’s “Four Men in a Cave” dwells more explicitly with the human voice in conjunction with a mysterious natural environment. As the four men descend into the cave, they are the literal embodiment of a “moving box,” his famous later catchphrase from *The Red Badge of Courage*: “The swirling mass went some twenty feet and lit upon a level, dry place in a strong, yellow light of candles. It dissolved and became eyes” (67). Crane’s fascination with the difficulty of perception is continuously made evident in this story as there are multiple references to what can and cannot be perceived at each individual moment. Patrick Dooley writes, “Almost any page of Crane, selected at random, notes observers who experience odd sounds or unusual shapes and colors because they are too far away or too close to the action. Crane insists that readers appreciate that sound and color depend upon distance and light” (40).

The men's perceptions change most dramatically when they find a hermit who prompts the little man to play poker with him. The hermit speaks – “It's your ante,” he says – but, if we extend Dooley's analysis to sound, Crane is more interested in *how* people speak in particular moments as opposed to what they literally say. In this instance, we are given multiple references to the sound of his voice, as if made physical with penetratingly exact metaphors: “It was a true voice from a cave, cold, solemn and damp”; his laugh “was either the chatter of a banshee in a storm or the rattle of pebbles in a tin box”; his voice “grew so mightily that it could not fit his throat” (68-69). While each quote describes sound, they veer away from an interest in rhetoric and point inevitably back to Crane's visual sense, in which the aural nature of speech is crucial to understanding the entire canvas of the scene as it unfolds. (This also explains his tendency, made most obviously in *Maggie*, of spelling out rough dialects, misspellings, and mispronunciations amongst characters.)

More noticeable within these passages are the metaphors that are deliberately *not* similes: the hermit's laugh does not sound like something but is either “the chatter of a banshee in a storm” or “the rattle of pebbles in a tin box.” By cutting out the rendering explanation of how things tend to appear or sound, Crane re-enforces that his fiction is *about* perception and impression (and specifically *not analysis* of those perceptions and impressions). By *not* acknowledging what something may look or sound like, Crane simply takes out the narrative element in description: rarely will he say ‘he was reminded of the story when . . .’ as opposed to ‘he [saw something]’ which the reader may implicitly recognize as happening previously. As befitting the determinist and pragmatist ideas, Crane's disinterest in psychology in his early writing relates to how he chooses to display action out in the world: instead of the reader being lead to follow a rhetorically intelligent thought process within a character's head, she must

decipher how the characters' actions play out in experience and what that might say about them. Though not as self-aware as Henry James in this respect, Crane's early depiction of action being played out in experience can be somewhat related to Levin's pragmatic explanation of James's fiction: "Interesting people, in James's world, are never simply open to inspection. We see them, and often they seem themselves, as mediated by the surface of their lives" (121). Levin continues to explain that for the pragmatists nothing has a sole "identity" in itself but everything "is instead what its dynamic web of relations constitutes it as." Beneath these surface illusions, then, "there is no singular truth about the self," only "a far-reaching and temporally unfolding web of relations" (122). While Levin's reflection upon surfaces can help us understand how to read James (and Dreiser, in this study's Afterword) pragmatically, Crane's novelty is that while his depictions are overtly visual, they are never meant to explain reality (or nature) holistically; his style, again, is concerned with visual perception, not visual reality.<sup>13</sup>

More important for our immediate purposes, it is worth noting times in Crane's sketches when the physical and rhetorical converge, especially in the scenes in which the fiction depends upon someone attempting to speak rationally (the entire theme of "The King's Favor," to be discussed next). Nearing the conclusion of "Four Men in a Cave," the hermit translates his physical contortions – described in so much aural detail earlier in the story – into a command: "His voice grew so mighty that it could not fit his throat. He choked, wrestling with his lungs for a moment. Then the power of his body was concentrated in a word: 'Go!'" (68-69). In this instance, the "power of [the] body" is what drives the speech to come forth, not vice-versa, and yet the men only flee after the following sentence in which the hermit points a "quivering, yellow finger" at their exit (69). Many of Crane's sketches are a certain play upon this theme – an impotent voice struggling with the body producing it, or, more broadly, a narrative-creating

creature (a human being enveloped in a storytelling culture) struggling with a capricious natural environment.

### “The King’s Favor”

“The King’s Favor,” published in Syracuse’s undergraduate paper on May 11, 1891, captures many elements of Crane’s later texts, especially regarding an interest in surface sensations and the elementary connection between human beings and nature regardless of language (elements related to both determinism and pragmatism). Crane’s work of fiction (loosely based on truth) is interested in how characters begin to operate before they speak: as in William James’s pragmatism, it focuses on the cusp of utterance and does not suppose that one’s dialogue is indicative of one’s character, especially when a scene is changing so quickly. Furthermore, the story is specifically interested *in that* difference between speech and non-speech, finding its significance (and humor) in a barbarism of non-speech, of what happens when two languages cannot communicate with each other.

First of all, it is worth panning out to show how recurrent the tensions of articulation were in Crane’s entire life and work. One of his last pieces of fiction, “Making an Orator” (1899), is explicitly about a schoolboy with a stuttering problem who is forced to make a presentation and fails: though the story feels comedic, it ends with the somber line that the boy “did not know that on this day there had been laid for him the foundation of a finished incapacity for public speaking which would be his until he died” (629). Crane’s personal letters are littered with concerns over what he’ll say at formal gatherings, even though nobody recalls him being a poor speaker. His responses to Elbert Hubbard, who asked Crane to speak at the Committee for

the Philistine Society Banquet in Buffalo, were timid and almost deliberately written in a lumbering, slow style: “I would be very bad at a regular speech but I will do my best in some way” (150). Just before the banquet, he wrote his friend, Hawkins, that “this flummy-doodle business” he was about to embark in would reveal “what a ridiculous hole I’m in” (155). After the banquet, he recounted his experience to Nellie Crouse, comparing it to how he felt about social gatherings in the larger sense (the sentences feel cyclical, stuttering, and aimless):

I am often marvelously a blockhead and incomparably an idiot. I reach depths of stupidity of which most people cannot dream. This is usually in the case of a social crisis. A social crisis simply leaves me witless and gibbering. A social crisis to me is despair. . . . At Buffalo . . . where everyone was strange, I was as cold as iced cucumbers when I arose and I said what I had to say very deliberately. The social crisis catches me sometimes and sometimes it doesn’t. At Buffalo however I didn’t talk as well as I could talk and to a woman I never talk as well as I can talk. Now that is exactly what I mean. (185-186)

Of course, the reader must be aware of Crane’s deliberate sense of modesty, humor, and the basic sense that letters (as opposed to revised work) will always sound a bit loose. Still, his letters typically dance around their true subject and have difficulty crystallizing what they actually mean to say; either that, or they deliberately revel in searching for a subject, like the comic dance in the unicycle recollection. The above quote repeats the same ‘idea’ in the first two sentences and another ‘idea’ in the next three sentences – there is a slow repetition of reformulating ways to say the same things. Either way, the reader is left with the sense of the writer chasing himself around in circles. In a surprising revelation, one of Crane’s friends remarked how “when he was not working, he would sit writing his name – Stephen Crane –

Stephen Crane – Stephen Crane – on the books, magazines, and loose sheets of paper about the studio” (qtd. in Berryman 73). This can be associated with Fleissner’s study on how the naturalists’ “compulsion to describe,” in her words, is reflective of (and helps reinforce) the era’s sense of being “stuck” in representing things – how, to take one line from her work, “the naturalist’s tendency to ‘describe’ is literalized in the sense of one who ‘describes’ a circle – tracing its basic contours over and over, remaining within a set of borders that this very practice works repeatedly to secure” (44).<sup>14</sup>

Crane’s writing, from the very beginning, emblemized this struggle of articulation, whether he mined it for comic or dramatic effects. “The King’s Favor,” based upon a tale he overheard, observes a respected American tenor sharing his songs with a Zulu chief in South Africa. He begins by busting a stereotype of musicians, a common way in which he begins many of his newspaper sketches regarding the aristocratic, and is also careful to spell out the tenor’s full name in a formal tone – “Mr. Albert G. Thies, a prominent New York tenor” (52) – in order to accentuate his later troubles with a different kind of authority, King Cetewayo, a prisoner of the British and former war leader who occupies a large farmhouse with his wives. During his performances for the chief, an interpreter oddly translates the dialogue for the host, yet after he performs an inspiring war song, there is “no need for an interpreter” because “the king recognized at once the sounds of battle, the clatter and din of war, and the cries of victory” (54). A long paragraph then describes what the king sees flashing before his eyes: a flurry of warriors moving “snake-like through the rustling grass” as they approach the “stolid, calm Britons” (54). Immediately assuming, then, an obvious connection between the singer and himself due to the song’s tone, the king refers to Mr. Thies as a warrior and asks if he would lead the Americans to war against the British, which Mr. Thies declines, thus prompting the king to give him “the

highest honor known to his race”: his wife, Mursala, a six foot two inch woman described earlier as being “very muscular” (54-55). Here the narrative pauses in anticipation as Crane makes evident the ultimate purpose and interest of his story, to dwell in the awkward space between communication and non-communication:

When the interpreter put the king’s kindness and condescension into English, a solemn hush fell upon the two white men. The king and his four wives gazed expectantly.

The silence was horrible. Mr. Thies moved his feet restlessly and felt very uncomfortable. (54-55)

By pausing before he attempts a response, Crane focuses upon how we attempt to wrestle with meaning when exact words are not there to be used, and, regardless of that, how the exact wording of the interpreter’s rendering is less crucial than the cultural mores which have been historically rooted to both the king’s favor and the hypothetical rejection of the offering from the Zulu and American perspectives, respectively. In that silence lies all the communication the story needs: the expectant gazing versus the shuffling feet. Furthermore, there are simply no words, in either language, to reject the offer without offending the king. Crane displays a fascinating interplay in which the two parties cannot communicate except through silence and music: the words themselves do not make up believable narratives to the other parties (‘the respect given by offering one’s wife’ or ‘the disrespect taken by accepting another’s wife’) because the format of that speech is less important than the symbolism tied to that through cultural tradition.

In this way, Crane’s story is both a work of determinism and pragmatism. It is deterministic in certain stereotypical naturalistic ways because of its emphasis on brute force, fear, rank between men, and its lack of attention to how characters change. The characters are dictated by their environment and will not be unglued from their previous perspectives (nobody

will change in this story). It is also a tale about “man” confronting “nature,” as the king’s culture is clearly depicted as animalistic, and its values, from the physical descriptions of its powerful members to the king’s dreams of war, are clearly brutalistic. As the two come to an agreement on a middle ground – the Americans giving the king gifts in fear of offending him – the long paragraph is muted in speech, as the Americans are only guessing at what the king thinks: “The two friends *felt* that it was an evil hour for them”; “They commenced to *feel* safe”; “The king *seemed* very sorry to have Mr. Thies leave” (55, emphases mine). As the friends leave, the story ends on a comic aside which is reflective of Crane’s later sketches, but the lingering tension of the previous scene stays with the protagonist. That tension is born out of the inability to use language effectively enough within the moving stream of experience, a chief interest of all of Crane’s later fiction in which words are simply not catching up to nature’s teeming and overflowing torrent. Relating words to concepts, William James writes,

The essence of life is its continuously changing character; but our concepts are all discontinuous and fixed ... [T]hese concepts are not parts of reality, nor real positions taken by it, but *suppositions* rather, notes taken by ourselves, and you can no more dip up the substance of reality with them than you can dip up water with a net, however finely meshed. (*Pluralistic* 243)

While Crane’s later fiction delves more accurately into modes of perception, “The King’s Favor” introduces us (through the subject of the interpreter) to a specific type of lens with which to view his later work: an obsession with verbal misunderstanding, especially in *Maggie*. The interpreter’s words are never relayed through the narrator, and a certain reader would observe the comically reductive way in which he speaks to the king about music, which, with its overflowing

relations to nature, cannot be reduced to language: “[he] explained the words of each number after it was rendered” (53).

Before turning to his Atlantic sketches and *Maggie*, let us recap how our author has depicted character from a strictly content-based – as opposed to stylistic – perspective. In the city, his people are clumped together like ants or do nothing but act as spectators – in this sense, they are not individuated because they are framed as lacking agency altogether. In nature, they are limited vocally, yet they yell incoherently while falling into water, or, simply, get lost, proving that their incapacity to survive in the wilderness is on par with their incapacity for surviving in the city. Thirdly, while human beings do attempt to speak, their speech is just that, an “attempt,” and little more (at best, there is more attention paid to the struggle to speak than to the speech itself). The following section observes what happens when Crane’s characters actually *do* speak and start to affect their environment.

## Part II: “... Making Orations”: Atlantic Sketches, *Maggie*

### Atlantic Sketches

“Damn the east!” Crane wrote Hawkins in November 1895, before traveling to the American West. Though he had never been west of Pittsburgh, he delighted in western stereotypes based on the few westerners he’d met: “When they are born they take one big gulp of wind and then they live.” “We in the east,” he lamented on the other hand, “are overcome a good

deal by a detestable superficial culture which I think is the real barbarism” (136). From his earliest writing, Crane lambasted pomposity. In his 1890-1892 summer reportings from the New Jersey shore, he reveals how human beings (specifically upper-class human beings in resort towns) are both vain and clueless about their words and mannerisms. The first article that can reliably be identified as his, for instance, describes a summer gathering with the American Institute of Christian Philosophy:

The guests claim that they can tell the members of the institute from afar by a certain wise, grave and reverend air that hangs over them from the top of their glossy silk hats to their equally glossy boots. (“Avon’s”)<sup>15</sup>

What is noticeable is not simply the irreverent inversion of ways of seeing – how he turns these members, in Robertson’s words, “into superficial signifiers created by their clothes and behavior” (60) – but the speed at which he does so. In first reading “The guests claim,” the reader immediately distrusts what the guests are truly seeing as opposed to how they choose to lie about what they are seeing to others in order to feel appreciated. In other words, Crane’s satire is so effective because he is already providing an example of faulty vision in others as evidence of strong vision within himself (similar to Twain’s satire, Crane’s keen perception not only unmasks pretension but also ways in which people observe pretension).

Secondly, the excess of adjectives in describing the clergy is a comment upon the futility of a full physical description: the words “wise,” “grave,” and “reverend” do not serve to complement one another, nor do they necessarily distinguish themselves from each other, probably because they are all linked to the Victorian word “air,” the subject of the clause. While Crane might hypothetically be distrustful of the word “air” because of its un-physical nature, he is simultaneously fascinated by it because an “air” can be indicative of an individual’s perception

(it is not a “thing,” but how somebody sees a thing – in other words, an impression). In this case, however, Crane satirizes an “air” because it is depicted as a false, collective way of seeing – an individual does *not* piece together the clergy in this article, rather, the vision of the clergy is a forced construction between bored guests who, the reader senses, adopt a holistic way of seeing because they only look at signifiers, that is, their clothes. The conclusion of the sentence, “from the top of their glossy silk hats to their equally glossy boots,” emphasizes that their “air” is indeed simply a reflection of their attire, and “glossy,” repeated twice for comic excess, is an adjective deliberately used to describe surfaces.

The next sentence unsurprisingly switches the target of satire from the guests to the clergy themselves: “A member [of the clergy] gazes at the wild tossing of the waves with a calm air of understanding and philosophy that the poor youthful graduate from college, with only a silk sash and flannel suit to assert his knowledge with, can never hope to acquire.” Crane, who, in one critic’s words, “often looked like a hobo” and whose “general attire was slovenly” (Gullason 31), sets up a direct attack on the word “gazes” in this sentence, a verb which serves as the natural extension of “air.” To young Stephen Crane, the seer, the “wild tossing” of the waves might serve as inspiration for a painting in motion, bound by beautiful contradictions – one cannot know which way the waves will break – but for the sedate clergyman, the scene of nature is neutralized by his “understanding” and “philosophy,” another instance in which two words serve as one to emphasize the futility of either word. Crane seems to elevate nature’s contradictory elements over man’s reductive interpretation of nature, in this case its “wild” landscape. As an “irreverent son of a minister,” in the words of Robertson (59), Crane targeted the upper classes in his first pieces of journalism while ignoring his more passionate viewpoints. Instead, his early journalism keenly observes humanity’s construction of things, which seems

absurd through his crystalline lens, whether it be the pretensions of the clergy or the construction of some of America's first Amusement Parks:

Asbury Park is rapidly acquiring a collection of machines. Of course there is a toboggan slide. Now, in the process of construction, there is an arrangement called a "razzle dazzle." Just what this will be is impossible to tell. It is, of course, a moral machine. Down by the lake an immense upright wheel has been erected. This will revolve, carrying little cars, to be filled evidently with desperate persons, around and around, up and down. ("Crowding into Asbury Park")

Similar to his recounting of his unicycle ride, this passage shows Crane's tendency to look at new inventions from a queer, sideways perspective. (He would later write sketches titled "Coney Island's Failing Days," "The Broken-Down Van," "A Lovely Jag in a Crowded Car," and "A Freight Car Incident.") In the quote above, his interest is not in what these rides will do but, if anything, how they are being built by humans in real time. In capturing these moments of construction, he avoids a subject-object split between such familiar rides and the people who built it, and therefore assumes the detached narratorial perspective of an alien seeming to observe the human condition from afar. Instead of defining the Ferris Wheel for what it is, Crane breaks its visual depiction into two sentences, starting the last sentence of the above description with "This," emphasizing his awkward relation to the new thing: indeed, it is being defined before it can be captured by a concept in a way that William James would find pleasing. By defining these rides in such bare descriptors – "collection of machines," "an arrangement" – Crane even demythologizes an element of pure play. In another article covering a marching parade, Crane surmises that the march "was a deeply impressive one to some persons," and then pans out to say, "Asbury Park creates nothing. It does not make; it merely amuses" ("New-Jersey Coast").

Reflecting upon his further critique that the procession “had no ideas of marching,” Crane seems specifically interested in grace in movement while not related with machines. Here it would be interesting to note Robertson’s keen observation that we must “note the limits” of Crane’s irony: “In all Crane’s New Jersey coast reporting only two groups are invariably safe from his irony: artists – whether visual artists, musicians, or writers – and professional athletes” (60). If pressed to compare the two, both are identified and judged by how they visually display themselves (their grace is determined by their surfaces, not what their surfaces occlude).

In short, Crane’s Atlantic sketches hint at a writer alert to the pretensions of society and the things they create. If Henry James was interested in unpacking how the rich donned their clothes and mannerisms – and through that, exploring what that said about human expression – Crane satirized affluent members of American society in order to establish an obvious border between their self-conscious airs and his more elemental concerns, as evident through much of his later writing. Crane saved his greatest critiques of people’s words, actions, and belief-systems for his first novel, *Maggie*.

*Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* (1893)

Crane was well aware that his early sketches were often whimsical and pointless. In a letter to Lily Munroe, he referred to his Sullivan County tales as related to “the clever school in literature,” lamenting that “there must be something more in life than to sit and cudgel one’s brains for clever and witty expedients.” So, he explained, he developed “all alone a little creed of art which [he] thought was a good one” – and which, one sentence later, he’d admit was the same exact creed as Howells and Garland, one that gets “nearest to nature and truth” (63).<sup>16</sup> This

vagueness proves that Crane was one of the least articulate American writers when it came to defining his own style, but his attempt at least starts to define the naturalist movement: being “nearest to nature,” according to *Maggie* anyway, partially means not dwelling too obsessively on the meanings that arise from experience. In its base depiction of a young prostitute who dies in a mud pile while being influenced by ignorant and idiotic family members, *Maggie* is one of the most graceless books in American history. It is considered the first American naturalist novel for many reasons. First, it depicts humans in ways similar to what I have already described: as being pawns unaware of their drift (Crane realized this as he famously wrote to Garland that the text “tries to show that environment is a tremendous thing in the world and frequently shapes lives regardless” (53)). But more uniquely in the context of 1890s journalism, Crane reveals his subject matter with little apparent feeling. Even in the most innocuous domestic scenes, his unaffected eye reveals things baldly: during a family dinner, one son forced pieces of food “between his wounded lips,” while the other “gorged his small stomach” and the mother “swallowed potatoes” (9). John D. Barry, assistant editor of the *Forum*, wrote the young writer on why his press could not print his novel (Crane would later publish it himself):

Such a theme as yours, in my judgment, ought not to be treated so brutally – pardon the word – as you have treated it: you have painted too black a picture, with no light whatever to your shade. I know one might say that the truth was black and that you tried to describe it just as it was; but, one ought always to bear in mind that literature is an art, that effect, the effect upon the reader, must always be kept in view by the artist and as soon as that effect approaches the morbid, the unhealthful, the art becomes diseased. . . . I presume you want to make people think about the horrible things you describe. But of what avail is their thought unless it leads them to work?<sup>17</sup>

Stanley Wertheim and Paul Sorrentino say the letter is “among the earliest critical responses to *Maggie* and exemplifies the unpreparedness of the American literary establishment in the late nineteenth century to accept fictional presentations of the wretched living conditions of the urban poor unadulterated by sentimental pleas for reform” (51). The simplest argument as to why Crane does not moralize is, quite obviously, because impressionists do not moralize – impressionists document impressions and move on. But like many fiction writers in his wake (namely Hemingway, his biggest influence), Crane seems to have had an active, self-conscious repulsion from fiction “with a purpose” (as Norris would put it), writing at different points in his life that “Preaching is fatal to art in literature” (230), “Imagine me representing a ‘cause’” (143), and “I detest dogma” (202).<sup>18</sup> His version of naturalism, it seems, is deterministic in the obvious ways addressed above, but pragmatic in the lack of explicit categorization and explanation which follows description. If we keep in mind Stephen Crane’s motive as expressed in this chapter – the naturalist desire to document the impotence of the human condition – then what Crane is doing in *Maggie* is flatly seeing people without false lenses and reveling in the baldness of what is there. He also notably applies the same type of lens in his twin sketches “An Experiment in Misery” and “An Experiment in Luxury,” perhaps to make a point: regardless of class difference (the sketches view the poor and rich, respectively), he reveals the ways in which humans, as an aggregate whole, choose to display themselves. In that sense, he is truly a naturalist in his earliest writing.<sup>19</sup>

The first five paragraphs of *Maggie* document some previously mentioned tendencies: a strong physical setting, an overbearing sense of crowds, and an emphasis upon the difficult moment in which characters come to speak. Jimmie, the initial protagonist, throws stones at his enemies in a make-believe war where the mass of the scene is clearly governing the individual

decisions. As in “The King’s Favor,” Crane frequently describes *how* the boys evoke their words as opposed to documenting the words themselves. In the first five paragraphs, a slim eleven sentences, there are eight references to expressions of animosity, and only two of which have dialogue attached to them. Rarely is there an action or dialogue that is not linked with a physical expression of anguish which is neither purely physical nor audible. This signifies an impotence of pure expression in relation to the physical scene: in over-documenting moments in which his characters are coming to speech but not speaking, Crane emphasizes (once again) that speech is difficult, awkward, and futile – by hearing a lot of grunting war cries, nobody in fact hears anything. The scene is, despite its noise, dimly quiet. (1)

Furthermore, physical actions which might attribute agency to individual characters are either depicted in the mass (“they threw stones”) or immediately documented in the past tense. We do not see any singular actions in the present tense – say, a rock being thrown by a character – but we see the effects of the previous violence, oddly, while the violence is happening: “His coat *had* been torn to shreds”; “He *had* bruises on twenty parts of his body”; “A stone *had* smashed in Jimmie’s mouth” (1-2, italics mine). This simultaneous effect of a chaotic yet muted violence coupled with the precise, tangible after-effects of pain creates a moving literary portrayal of war, one made even more shocking with a paragraph describing the even larger canvas of the scene:

From a window of an apartment house that uprose from amid squat ignorant stables there leaned a curious woman. Some laborers, unloading a scow at a dock at the river, paused for a moment and regarded the fight. The engineer of a passive tugboat hung lazily over a railing and watched. Over on the island a worm of yellow convicts came from the shadow of a gray ominous building and crawled slowly along the river’s bank. (2)<sup>20</sup>

Taken in its entirety – Jimmie’s bodily pains, the wider scene of brawl en masse, the city during its routine – Crane’s approach signals a different type of social critique than what 1890s readers would have expected. Crane is not explicitly moralizing, but by showing what is happening from multiple scenes simultaneously, he is showing what is *not* happening in a single instant: nobody is paying attention. (He does this more boldly at the end of “An Experiment in Misery” when the disheveled protagonist sees that “a multitude of buildings” are “throwing no downward glances” at his condition [147].)<sup>21</sup> Crane’s passage in *Maggie* gives an overburdened attention to a single slice of time. The actions of the paragraph, whether attributed to humans or objects, are reluctantly passive, while the strongest verb describes an apartment which “uprose” from poorer buildings, pointing towards urban rank. Pizer credits Crane’s precision in this paragraph as canvassing “an entire social destiny” that is “compact in character,” noting that the convicts themselves are “the inevitable products, in time, of the animal conditions of the shore” (“Aesthetic of Length” 44). But the paragraph is most unique in context, when considering the paragraphs which sandwich it: indeed, the following sentence is “A stone had smashed in Jimmie’s mouth,” as we return to the scene of battle instantly. Despite the first ten paragraphs describing constant physical movements, it might as well be happening simultaneously.

Crane’s purpose in depicting this early chaos is to demonstrate, in the following scene, how reality is constructed after-the-fact in pragmatic fashion. Pete, the 16-year old bully who walks onto the scene, delivers a blow to a child and the rest of Devil’s Row scatters, leaving him with Jimmie and the Rum Alley victors. Immediately the younger children start bragging to the respected Pete in exaggerated terms and begin to deliver “distorted versions of the fight” (3). By stressing, somewhat repetitively afterwards, how their stories were also “enlarged” and “magnified,” Crane acknowledges that, despite the level of physical detail involved in this

naturalist tale, how the novel is also a meditation upon farce: the majority of characters will use the raw material of their lives to expand upon their deflated egos.

In a study comparing Crane's impressionism to the thought of William James, Allan Gardner Smith makes a basic point about James: "According to [him] the mind always offers a selective attention to the chaos surrounding it: the sense organs themselves are selective and eliminate many impressions, and the mind only fixes on what is of interest to it" (242). This selective attention, however, also highlights an element of pragmatism only if the impressions make a practical difference in the lives of the characters. Crane emphasizes immediately that valor "grew strong again" after the boys' exaggerated recounting of events, and takes that element of strength seriously (3). Smith would agree that this example demonstrates an "area of consonance between Crane's psychology and James's," that is, one in which thought and action are melded together: "We find James affirming, perhaps rather insistently, that all mental events result in action . . . or else they do not happen. So action becomes the expression, perhaps even the essence, of psychological fact" (243). The point here is that Crane, aside from simply demonstrating the human impulse for creating multiple narratives out of one, also stresses how this is a natural, perhaps even elemental, aspect of humanity: as in any stereotypical sports or war narrative (both of which Crane would become well-versed at), "valor" and "confidence" are essential motives for human action and agency. In this novel, Crane hints at some later avenues he would explore in *The Red Badge* and "The Open Boat" involving what people do (successfully) with narratives; as we shall see in *Maggie*, however, the purpose always remains pessimistic, as it is a typical deterministic fiction of decline.

Following their bragging, the children begin to part as Jimmie's father enters the scene. The reader is struck with a disturbingly specific reality as the man exhibits power through

silence: he demands their attention by simply regarding them “listlessly.” Although his verbal commands prompt Jimmie to move, it is the father’s physical aura which freezes the crowd. The first chapter ends in half-comical denouement as Jimmie, who first stood above the heap of gravel for the honor of Rum Alley, follows his father by a dozen feet, presumably with his head down and his vision skewed. Jimmie is self-conscious enough to realize how he is storied: though he wishes he were “some vague kind of soldier” at chapter’s end, he simultaneously feels the “degradation” of a boy being “taken home by a father.” By concluding the scene with the words “a father” (as opposed to “*his* father”), Crane emphasizes Jimmie’s awareness of his abstract situation: the protagonist of this short chapter, four pages in total, comes to complete awareness that he is like anybody, a naturalist cog in the system (4-5).

As a work of naturalism, the first chapter itself underscores three things: first, the bleak display of an animal sense of humanity going nowhere (a mass of brawling children depicted in a chaotic, incoherent sense of order with regards to physical scale and temporality); secondly, the instinctual need for those animals to re-tell and re-construct their past to gain a sense of composure and clarity within their lives; and thirdly, the futile sense that the re-telling will not save them from the ultimate reality involved with being children living in the New York Bowery at the turn of the century, the sense that they are “stuck.” The first and third are reflective of typical deterministic fiction whereas the second highlights a more pragmatic and postmodernist ideal displayed more prominently in Crane’s later fiction.

Noise But Not Music: Faulty Narrative Codes

If many readers and critics from the 1890s did not see Crane's novel as ironic (Norris among them), irony has been the predominant critical topic about the novel since then. Pizer, as usual, has written most clearly on the subject, arguing the text is "not so much about the slums as physical reality" as "about what people believe in the slums and how their beliefs are both false to their experience and yet function as operative forces in their lives" ("*Maggie* and American Naturalism" 4). Crane's irony, Pizer further asserts, is that purity or innocence "is destroyed not by concrete evils but by the very moral codes established to safeguard it" (7). In the following section I will extend this argument to encompass how exactly Crane dismantles man's attempts at vocal communication within a community by exposing, on the one hand, an ethos in which the male characters (Jimmie and Pete) over-rely on brute physical force and their vision – they are careless and brutish when they speak – whereas the female characters (Maggie, Mary, and some neighbors) over-rely on romantic and religious ideals disconnected from the reality of their situations – they attempt to speak eloquently, but their speech is lofty and does not correspond with the realities of their context. If in a work by Henry James dialogue *is* character, then in Crane, dialogue is character in a perverted sense: characters' speech is by definition not connected with their psychological states. This points not so much to naturalism's general pessimism ('no matter what happens, humans cannot comprehend and overcome nature's forces'), but more specifically, to man's failings with regards to language. The implication Crane is hinting at (and that he would display more explicitly in his later fiction) is that by grasping at one's surroundings through one's language, one can at least gain a hold on one's surroundings by remaining in the present. These are aspects noticeable in *The Red Badge* and "The Open Boat" which remain out-of-grasp for the protagonists of *Maggie*.

If *Maggie* began with Jimmie's lofty vision of the circular procession of boys attacking him (setting up a value system for how integral it is for Jimmie to see well), his vision only sharpens as he ages into adolescence, to the detriment of his other values (specifically his communication with his family). Chapter Four speeds forward in time to view Jimmie's lack of appreciation for church and anybody displaying affectation: he "despised obvious Christians and ciphers with the chrysanthemums of aristocracy in their buttonholes." Instead of dedicating his life to his thoughts, Jimmie is instead a flat, physically-defined rebel, the devil on Stephen Crane's shoulders. "On the corners," the novel explains, "he was in life and of life. The world was going on and he was there to perceive it" (15). For a moment one can sense a pragmatic element there, as Jimmie's definition is inseparable from its context – his vision is entirely "of" the present – but his rage is simultaneously selfish and brutish, causing a regrettable effect on the surrounding community. Jimmie, indeed, begins to think as a determinist, revealing the basest level of contemplation, and which merely showcases the evolutionary extension of his earlier childhood identity as soldier. As a truck driver, his chosen profession, he "became so sharp that he believed in nothing," which gave him a "private but distinct element of grandeur in its isolation" (16). Instead of his driving establishing a sense of appreciation for his physical context (working with others in some type of shared language of the road), driving itself becomes a metaphor for survival of the fittest, as he compares pedestrians to "pestering flies," respects and fears the enormous fire-engine with a "dog-like devotion," and defines himself, a rogue driver, as the "common prey" of police officers. Jimmie becomes so hypnotized by his charges from his "key-truck of chaos" that he feels he has "the inalienable right" to be in a certain place at a certain time. But while his vision is keen, his purpose is simply interior, to place himself at a

higher rank than other males in his community within a fabricated system, as if he were playing an imaginary sport:

He fell into the habit, when starting on a long journey, of fixing his eye on a high and distant object, commanding his horses to start and then going into a trance of oblivion. . . . When he paused to contemplate the attitude of the police toward himself and his fellows, he believed that they were the only men in the city who had no rights. (16-17)

Jimmie is not simply a selfish “animal” in a brutish world, but is also deluded of the reality of his circumstances. His habit of “fixing his eye” on a distant object can be explained as a suicidal submission to the world’s powers: instead of maneuvering its complexities, he either rams into it head-on (without vision, involving possible collision) or avoids it altogether (as in his fearful reactions to firetrucks). Indeed, his childhood dream of being “a vague kind of soldier” while being led home by his father after being wounded is comparable to his reckless driving as physical evidence for his frustrations of impotence. When we see him stumble drunkenly home in a later chapter, he is described in peripheral fashion, a cutout of a typical deterministic scene: “Jimmie came when he was obliged to by circumstances over which he had no control” (31).

Crane’s establishment of Jimmie and Pete as heroes of battle is meant to be overturned as we begin to view them as mocked figures who have little actual effect upon their surroundings. When Jimmie is finally challenged to communicate a thought he has, he begins an even worse downward trajectory. Feeling confused by Pete’s advances upon his sister Maggie, Jimmie “has an idea” that it is not “common courtesy” for one’s friend to intrude upon one’s sister, and his attempts at explaining this to his mother show the (comic) difficulty of delivering speech: “He was trying to formulate a theory that he had always unconsciously held, that all sisters excepting his own could, advisedly, be ruined” (38, 40). Unable to construct a theory – that is, an

application of language to generalize an understanding of the world – except through expressive grunts implying he will do violence, Jimmie’s gesticulations simply get his mother to blindly agree, yelling “May she be cursed forever!” (41). In a later scene, Jimmie is challenged with empathy but refuses to consider it: “he wondered vaguely if some of the women of his acquaintances had brothers. Nevertheless, his mind did not for an instant confuse himself with those brothers nor his sister with theirs” (52). Further, in an even more telling passage, he demonstrates more rigid adherence to a singular worldview:

Of course Jimmie publicly damned his sister that he might appear on a higher social plane. But, arguing with himself, stumbling about in ways that he knew not, he, once, almost came to a conclusion that his sister would have been more firmly good had she better known why. However, he felt that he could not hold such a view. He threw it hastily aside. (53)

Norris critiqued Crane for creating one-dimensional characters, saying that “his people are types, not characters” (“*Maggie*” 166). Of course he is right. But he does not account for Crane’s ironic purpose in creating these characters. Here, a brief but apt comparison can be made to Crane’s later story, “The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky” (1898), in which the drunk gunslinger Scratchy Wilson cannot possibly comprehend that the man he is supposed to fight, Jack Potter, is reluctant about a shootout due to his recent marriage engagement. (We will discuss this story in greater detail in Chapter Three.) Scratchy, a typical naturalist character, is shocked by genre change within this short, comical tale: his surprise at Potter’s marriage pronouncement as opposed to the expected gunfight represents his misunderstanding of what “scene” he is supposed to be in, and this recontextualization, an element in transition, freezes him cold: “it was merely that in the presence of this foreign condition he was a simple child of the earlier plains” (392). In opposition

to Scratchy is Potter, the other protagonist, whose initial train ride to begin the story, a beautifully accurate description of motion, is recalled to him before his final decision, before, in a sense, his bravest decision: “but yet somewhere at the back of his mind a vision of the Pullman floated” (391). Potter in a sense wins the battle over Wilson because he is able to hold opposing ideas together representing change: a change in location, a change in his profession, a change in his marital status, a change of genre. Potter is unaware of where his life is headed next, but, like a good pragmatist, he is contextualized in the present. Levin writes, “The pragmatist refuses to abstract the processes of knowing from the immediate and densely particular contexts of knowing” (4).

In *Maggie*, however, there is no opposing pole with which to view transition. Jimmie and Mary (Maggie’s mother) continuously use hyperbolic language borrowed from religious doctrine; indeed, his mother’s language, the novel tells us, “was derived from mission churches” (74). The repetitive uses of the words “sin” “badness” and “judge” when related to her daughter’s complex downfall, especially in the novel’s final scene, are mind-numbingly banal, and the surrounding crowds of the tenements, “an unceasing babble of tongues,” merely repeat and simplify the mother’s pronouncements throughout the course of the novel (62). Considering Crane’s family background, it is both prescient and amusing to consider that his most negatively-painted character in all his literature, Mary, is most memorably defined both as a brute (Jay Martin says she is “hardly more than an animal” [59]) and as somebody who can only explain herself through religious hyperbole.

We last see Maggie merging into the city in Chapter 17, an unnamed “girl of the painted cohorts of the city” who “went into the blackness of the final block,” emphasizing the significance of the anonymous “A” of the novel’s title: “*A Girl of the Streets.*” In this short

chapter, six of eight of its middle paragraphs begin with other subjects, males who either ignore or converse with her: “A tall young man,” “A stout gentleman,” etc. These men, each painted differently by Crane, accentuate the carelessness, once again, of a large city in which members walk by one another and do not speak the same language, especially when their genders differ (66-68). While Maggie herself is the central focus of the chapter, Crane deliberately melds her into the overburdened crowd underneath a male-dominated cityscape. Crane might be watching, but all his surrounding characters, like Jimmie the Truck Driver, have tunnel vision.<sup>22</sup> Meanwhile, the crowds which influence her mother do not help in repeating rumors on her downfall: “Women bent toward each other and whispered, nodding their heads with airs of profound philosophy” (61).

Like her brother, Maggie herself subscribes to a bloated value system which does not, in fact, correspond with her world. Her attraction to Pete begins in interesting fashion as her vision of her surroundings begins to change, similarly to how Potter, in “Yellow Sky,” sees the world around him in transition: with Pete in her presence, “[t]he broken furniture, grimy walls, and general disorder and dirt of her home of a sudden appeared before her and began to take on a potential aspect.” However, whereas Potter’s vision of the moving Pullman represents *actual* transition (he is able to conceptualize the present moment through appreciating the morphing change of the rapid vehicle yet remaining clearly within himself), Maggie sees the room falsely transform to something archetypal, and suddenly Pete is perceived as “the ideal man”: “Under the trees of her dream-gardens there had always walked a lover” (21-22). By switching so rapidly to a different tense in lionizing the ragged Pete, Crane dismantles humanity’s absurd reliance upon romantic metaphors to explain the world. Furthermore, despite the fact that Pete is exposed as a raw, violent, and relatively inarticulate young man in the opening chapters, Maggie instantly

starts seeing him in opposite terms, indeed as “elegant” and as someone who must have a “prodigious” wardrobe (23, 24). Leaning out the window to watch him walk away, a stereotype at its worst, Maggie transforms once again into a different plane to fictionalize his presence: “Here was a formidable man who disdained the strength of a world full of fists. Here was one who had contempt for brass-clothed power; one whose knuckles could ring defiantly against the granite of law. He was a knight” (23). In a passage which does not progress from one sentence to the next, Maggie’s hyperbole simply intensifies a singular emotion. Turning back to her family’s ragged apartment, she is overcome by the return to an actively-recognized temporality, as a clock is regarded as “an abomination” which “ticked raspily” (23). Unable to negotiate the transitions of the everyday with her imaginary senses of Pete, Maggie suffers between two realities for the remainder of the novel, often within a single sentence: “As thoughts of Pete came to Maggie’s mind, she began to have an intense dislike for all of her dresses” (30). Lost in the wonders of museums and plays on their dates – two spectacles which Pete does not care for – Maggie toggles between a “transcendental realism” of the on-stage dramas and Pete’s reactions to, say, a row of vases at a museum: ““What d’blazes use is dem?”” (32). By asking the use of these displaced objects, Pete’s values – physical and within real time, the thoughts of someone who grew up heaving stones and maneuvering the intricacies of the city – represents the opposing gulf to Maggie’s displaced idealism. Maggie here is not responsible for having “her own set of eyes,” as Crane described his own goals in writing. His critique of her is that by seeing through false lenses, she contributes to her own demise. (Whereas William James would say that her being in a state of “wondersickness” contributes to her inaction in the world.)

If Crane mocks narrative effects – specifically in Maggie’s turning Pete into a romantic subject – he also positions scenes in a way that emphasizes a lack of communication between

subjects. Indeed, Crane does not simply reveal a fallen world in brute determinist fashion; he mocks it through a rapid shifting of perspectives which reveal how this is not a simple cause-and-effect story but reliant upon present environments. Rarely does Crane explain the transition from one scene to the next; instead, he continues to introduce the same characters, occasionally with varying names, within new contexts, showing that he does not take sides with any pitiful character. Jimmie's fight with Pete happens quite suddenly as Jimmie sits in a saloon ordering a drink from Pete, referred to simply as "the bartender" (43). The fight describes them as various types of animals, and the room transforms in a way reminiscent of the opening scene of the novel (in which things fly, but we don't see the throwers). Crane underscores the lack of any meta-narrative as "some unknown prayers" went out, "perhaps for death." The brawl itself, involving other random persons, has deliberately been set up through previously fractured narratives so that the reader sees Jimmie, Pete, Maggie, and Mary as complicit within its ultimate downfall due to their failures of communication, while on the floor, mirrors "splintered into nothing," revealing a raw pointlessness to the entire affair (46). If, at the beginning of the scene, the saloon is described in elegant stillness – a large paragraph, describing the exact precision of the room, ends by stating how "the elementary senses of it all seemed to be opulence and geometrical accuracy" (42) – Crane deliberately wrecks that perfection which is symbolic of the human reliance upon clothes, religion, and affect by exposing a naturalist scene of physical disarray: in emphasizing how the mirrors splinter into nothing, he also reveals, bravely, that the vision of the room meant nothing to begin with and has no meaningful story to tell.

Interestingly, the following chapter begins, "In a hall of irregular shape sat Pete and Maggie drinking beer" (47). Typically, Crane does not explain how much time has passed or how the characters were influenced from the previously-narrated scene. The narration often

relies upon quick fragments, whereas the characters themselves – Maggie, Jimmie, and Mary – construct false ultimate narratives to try to explain their story more accurately: Maggie’s idealistic sense of Pete, Jimmie’s dedication to an “idea” that a man shouldn’t spoil one’s sister, and Mary’s obsession with “sin” drawn from sermons all ultimately explain why the characters defeat themselves. Failing to find the appropriate categories of language to communicate with one another, the characters are framed differently in a series of brief sketches in the present tense: beginning with Jimmie who stood for “the honor of Rum Alley,” we see these characters grow awkwardly into their present conditions by chasing false narratives.

Meanwhile, the settings around them are revealed baldly and do not evince a hidden symbolic meaning of their own (they are not reminiscent of a world infused with narrative). If Jimmie stands for honor, he is also a boy “with bruises on twenty parts of his body” and his features look like “those of a tiny insane demon” (1). Placing an unaffected eye upon the realities of the slums, Crane even depicts music in unflattering fashion, describing how “a versatile drummer pounded, whacked, clattered, and scratched on a dozen machines to make noise” (50). Focusing upon the desperate verbs attributed to the making of the music, as opposed to the effects of the music itself, Crane reveals a world in his early fiction in which humans indeed “make noise” but do not make music. That noise, as also revealed through his earlier sketches, have failed to link onto a pluralistic reality in ways described by William James and the pragmatists.

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<sup>1</sup> Here and elsewhere in this chapter (unless otherwise noted), Crane’s personal letters are selected from *The Correspondence of Stephen Crane: Volume I* (ed. Stanley Wertheim and Paul Sorrentino, New York: Columbia UP: 1988). The page numbers refer to this volume.

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<sup>2</sup> The biographical information in this paragraph is from Wertheim's and Sorrentino's collection in a section titled "School and College" (27-30).

<sup>3</sup> Wertheim and Sorrentino write that "Crane takes second place only to F. Scott Fitzgerald as the worst speller among prominent American writers" (332).

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Gullason notes that Crane, who was often accused of having a limited literary knowledge, was in fact "secretive about his reading habits." Though he feigned ignorance of many authors, his library included works by Kipling, Fielding, Frederic, James, and Scott, and he seems to have had a decent knowledge of Howells, Balzac, Dostoevsky, and others (21).

<sup>5</sup> In their brief time spent together in England, Joseph Conrad was surprised by Crane's willingness to join foreign wars. When news came that the USS *Maine* sank in Cuba in 1897, drawing the U.S. into a war with Spain, Conrad described the young writer as "white-faced" with excitement and needing to secure enough money to travel there, "lest peace should be declared and the opportunity of seeing a war be missed." Conrad added, "Nothing could have held him back . . . He was ready to swim the ocean." ("Introduction" 32-33)

<sup>6</sup> One of the many intriguing arguments that Brown makes about the final decade of the nineteenth century in *The Material Unconscious: American Amusement, Stephen Crane, & the Economies of Play* is that "[p]lay, not work, appeared to be the mode through which a culture expresse[d] itself" (9).

<sup>7</sup> Responding to Tom Wolfe's regrettably oft-quoted line that Crane's Bowery sketches were "warm-ups for novels" (45), Michael Robertson clarifies that "[b]oth biographical investigation and literary analysis complicate any attempt to construct a genealogy for *Maggie* that moves from observation to journalism to fiction" (77).

<sup>8</sup> See Chester L. Wolford, *The Anger of Stephen Crane: Fiction and the Epic Tradition* (1983).

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<sup>9</sup> Mary Lawlor writes an excellent study on the complex intersections of naturalism and western literature in *Recalling the Wild: Naturalism and the Closing of the American West* (2000). Though Crane ended up satirizing much of western myth in his later fiction, his view was simultaneously stereotypical. Lawlor writes, “His sense of the frontier tended to begin with rather schematic situations, and much of his writing on the West, journalistic as well as fictional, is organized by cartoonlike binary relations between wilderness and civilization, open and closed societies, and so on, however much the effect of his work was to complicate these very oppositions” (140).

<sup>10</sup> Donald Pizer remains the most comprehensive and lucid scholar on Crane: his collected essays on the author, which tackle many of the previously mentioned themes, are in *Writer in Motion* (2013). The fullest account of Crane’s impressionism is James Nagel’s *Stephen Crane and Literary Impressionism* (1983). Patrick Dooley, a philosopher by training, puts Crane at the nexus of turn-of-the-century pluralistic thought in his *The Pluralistic Philosophy of Stephen Crane* (1993).

<sup>11</sup> The quote is drawn from *The University of Virginia Edition of the Works of Stephen Crane*, ed. Fredson Bowers, Volume 8, page 199.

<sup>12</sup> Alongside Michael Robertson’s *Stephen Crane, Journalism, and the Making of Modern American Literature* (1997), John Fagg’s *On the Cusp: Stephen Crane, George Bellows, and Modernism* (2009) is one of the best studies on Crane’s less studied early journalism. Fagg’s chapter on Crane’s use of the “ellipses” charts why the “sketch” genre accommodated Crane’s overall style perfectly: “Making no pretense to supply a linear narrative or a complete history, Crane draws attention to the act of selection, or inclusion and exclusion, and so to his own position as author. Crane’s insistence on the brevity of the literary sketch in the face of a characteristically rambling discursive practice is itself a form of intrusion, a stamping of individual authority onto the traditions of the hunting yarn” (17).

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<sup>13</sup> Patrick Dooley notably connects Crane's basic worldview with the pragmatists: "Like the philosophers who were his contemporaries, William James and C.S. Peirce, Crane is not skeptical about humanity's ability to know the world. However, no single world exists. Accordingly, no single record of it can claim truth. On the contrary, because a multitude of worlds can be experienced, a plurality of true description is both a realistic goal and a reasonable expectation" (29-30).

<sup>14</sup> Fleissner quotes Theodore Dreiser in a fascinating line from his memoir *An Amateur Laborer* to make her point stick: the author describes walking around the city with the idea "that angles or lines of everything – houses, streets, wall pictures, newspaper columns and the like, were not straight and for the life of me I could not get them to look straight" (26). Fleissner's example typifies her depictions of writers who exacerbate their inaction by compulsively attempting to describe their surrounding experience. One also cannot ignore Michael Fried's odd thesis in *Realism, Writing, Disfiguration* (1987) that Crane's fiction is obsessed with moments of inscription.

<sup>15</sup> This article, "Avon's School by the Sea," and the subsequent two articles I quote in this section ("Crowding into Asbury Park" and "On the New-Jersey Coast"), are taken from the *New-York Tribune* (by way of Robertson's book). Because none of the articles are more than a page long, I reserve page numbers for the Works Cited.

<sup>16</sup> It is strange, and somewhat endearing, that Crane links himself to Howells and Garland here, despite clearly forging an original prose style of his own. This fits a trend in nearly all his letters (whether to publishers, friends, or women he was courting) of speaking disparagingly of the novelty of his writing. After the successful publication and reception of *The Red Badge*, for instance, Crane wrote to Daisy Hill, "I am clay – very common uninteresting clay" (209).

<sup>17</sup> Barry's letter, dated March 22, 1893, is selected from Wertheim and Sorrentino's *The Correspondence of Stephen Crane* (49-51).

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<sup>18</sup> The three quotes are taken from the Wertheim and Sorrentino collection in three separate letters. Thomas Beer also quotes him as saying, “I 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 quarreled with each other about what Socialism meant, I ran away” (205-206). Beer’s 1923 biography, it should be noted, has been accused of making false statements, but the above quote was too funny for me to ignore.

<sup>19</sup> In addition to class, Robertson reflects on Crane’s limited attention paid to race: “During a period when virtually all white Americans shared racist assumptions, and when many intellectuals and writers used racial and ethnic differences as a means of explaining economic and social inequality, Crane’s general indifference to race is remarkable” (109). This suggests an extension of the previously-made point: that Crane’s aim in fiction was to trace human interactions with the environment as opposed to depicting how society deals with itself in terms of, say, politics, economics, or social relations.

<sup>20</sup> Fagg’s chapter “Frame” (in *On the Cusp*) executes intriguing close-readings of passages like this one which radically pan “in” or “out” from specific scenes. Fagg distinguishes Crane from writers like Howells who had a clear moral purpose in writing fiction. Connecting the younger writer’s ambivalence about *why* he is seeing things in the exact way he is seeing them to George Cotkin’s history of uncertainty in *Reluctant Modernism* (referenced in my introductory chapter), Fagg assumes that Crane’s “attitude toward the question of framing expresses a cultural moment in which standard models of reason, causation, and coherence were thrown into doubt” (85).

<sup>21</sup> In his flat social canvassing of the city, Crane was likely a major influence in a long tradition of depictions of the carelessness of the American city. For instance, David Simon, who regularly said his landmark HBO series *The Wire* (2002-2008) was influenced by nineteenth-century novels, is famous for documenting Baltimore flatly but from multiple perspectives in order to make a point about the failure of institutions. In “shifting the perspective from the narrative of the single common man to that of disposable men,” according to C.W. Marshall and Tiffany

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Potter in a critical essay on the show, *The Wire*'s tragedy comes through partially due to its panned-out, emotionless point of view.

<sup>22</sup> Crane, for his part, never seemed to understand the city. His letters regularly complain about his obligations in New York (often connected with formal dinners or “tea”). Trying to get out of the Philistine Society dinner given in his honor, he wrote Hawkins, “I think if you will invent for me a very decent form of refusal, I will still be happy up here with my woods” (135). On a more serious note, in 1896, he was reporting on the Tenderloin District of New York, but was publically ostracized (in the newspapers) after defending a prostitute who was a friend of his in a false arrest. He rarely returned to New York after this controversy.

## Chapter 2

### Orientation on the Battlefield: Managing Perceptual Thresholds in *The Red Badge of Courage*

(1895)

“Modern politics,” wrote Henry Adams, “is, at bottom, a struggle not of men but of forces. The men become every year more and more creatures of force, massed about central power-houses. The conflict is no longer between the men, but between the motors that drive the men, and the men tend to succumb to their own motive forces” (*Education* 421-422). A full decade before Adams was analyzing how determinism operates on an institutional level, a focus of the emerging modernist novel, Stephen Crane was writing *The Red Badge of Courage*, one of the era’s most distinctive texts about the inability to distinguish people from one another in the modern industrial era.<sup>1</sup> The war machine portrayed in Crane’s slim novel has such power over men’s decision-making processes that the novel is less about war, per se, than about agency in an abstract sense. (Crane described himself, in various letters, as “weak mental machinery” and “clay – very common uninteresting clay.”<sup>2</sup>) If most contemporary reviewers recognized versions of this fact – that the novel was less a realistic depiction of the American Civil War in 1863 and more of an abstract psychological thriller of the modern mind – others were outraged and shocked at the novel’s positive reviews and its headings in many best-seller lists.<sup>3</sup> Army General A.C. McClurg’s reaction, printed in the April 1896 issue of *The Dial*, is unsurprising if we take into account the general’s combat experience and awareness that Stephen Crane had never been in battle: the book, he writes, is “a piece of intended realism based entirely on unreality.” He goes on to criticize the “mere riot of words” in the novel’s action, from the protagonist’s portrayal to the movement of the army as a whole:

[The protagonist's] poor weak intellect, if indeed he has any, seems to be at once and entirely overthrown by the din and movement of the field . . . No intelligent orders are given; no intelligent movements are made. There is no evidence of drill, none of discipline. There is a constant, senseless, and profane babbling going on, such as one could hear nowhere but in a madhouse. Nowhere are seen the quiet, manly, self-respecting, and patriotic men, influenced by the highest sense of duty, who in reality fought our battles.<sup>4</sup>

Donald Pease places McClurg's review in historical context, emphasizing that "in its very force his reaction represents the urgent need to recover that sense of a developing American character [which] Crane's account has taken leave of" (9). As already recounted in our introductory chapter, writers at the turn of the century were swimming in an ambiguity of purpose, direction, meaning, and even patriotism: as Larzer Ziff points out, writers born in pre-Civil War America "yearned to impose upon the whirl of late-nineteenth century America the dream of stasis, an ideal and all-covering beauty . . . Static idealization of the human condition seemed to be the answer to the impossibly unaesthetic whirl of social conditions" (22).<sup>5</sup> Pease's article, however, poignantly argues that *The Red Badge* "underwrites the absence of continuity in a war that never achieves the epic qualities either Henry or a nation of historians would impose on it" (9) – Crane, then, not only mocked the war narrative as a literary genre, but pulled the rug out from American notions of progress and exceptionalism.<sup>6</sup>

The intensity of McClurg's review also signals how unusual Crane's prose style appeared to many. McClurg noticed "the violent straining after effect in the mere unusual association of words, in the forced and distorted use of adjectives" (54). Positive reviews, of course, lauded Mr. Crane's style as being innovative and brilliant,<sup>7</sup> though still others found his overdescriptions in

certain passages odd. *The New York Daily Tribune*'s response mirrored many others in critiquing how "[t]he writer takes half an hour to describe what happened in half a minute." The *Scranton Tribune* agreed, writing that while "the dissection is minute and skillful," "we do not care for 233 pages full of mind-analysis when we are led to expect, from the prospectus, that we are to be treated, instead to a vivid, rousing story." Similarly, the *New York Mail and Express* admitted "a genius of a certain kind" in the novel, but one that "is not large enough, nor varied enough, to create such a story of our civil war as we hoped this might prove" (25, 24, 31).

Negative reviews, then, typically shared an expectation of a specific genre which the young writer was, in fact, flatly disinterested in. Crane, who hated long novels to begin with, clearly subtitled his novel "An *Episode* of the American Civil War," and he called his book "a mere episode in life, an amplification" (qtd. in Wertheim and Sorrentino 233).<sup>8</sup> More crucially for our purposes, the book reviews share an assumption that the novel's content or 'aboutness' can be discussed separately from its prose style, whereas the signal accomplishment of the novel, according to many critics, is that the awkward prose is embedded into the meaning of the novel itself: the novel, from this understanding, *enacts* a certain search for meaning.<sup>9</sup> In my mind, *The Red Badge* is a philosophical text in which the protagonist, Henry Fleming, attempts to distinguish the borders between his inner psyche and surrounding environments: in this sense, Henry attempts to think pragmatically by confirming a reciprocal relationship between one's thoughts and one's physical surroundings, but, ultimately, fails. Jonathan Levin writes, "The pragmatist refuses to abstract the processes of knowing from the immediate and densely particular contexts of knowing" (4), a quote which suggests that "knowing" lies somewhere between the process and the context of one's thought, hovering in a middle zone which may (or may not) shift. Significantly, the quote also reveals that the purpose of "knowing" for the

pragmatist might not be to know anything – at least not conclusively. The complexity of Crane’s fiction develops between *Maggie* and *The Red Badge of Courage* as the protagonist of the latter plays with this middle-zone self-consciously: he not only questions whether his subjective assessments of the world are accurate, but even wonders whether his assessments even matter in the wider context of being. In doing so, he explicitly questions the entire structure of knowing behind his rigorous tests of ‘manhood’ on the Civil War battlefield, demonstrating an interest not in manly stereotypes or American patriotism, but in the accuracy of anyone’s perceptions when overwhelmed by rapid-fire transitions between the privacy of one’s thoughts to the overwhelming immediacy of the social present (in this case represented by the battlefield with comrades). Those transitions between the private and public are simultaneously a disruption to the supposed separation between the “processes of knowing” (one’s private thoughts) and the “contexts of knowing” (being in the world), the fine line that William James was so intent on destroying throughout his writings. Like a work of philosophy, but one which does not rely upon handy answers and definitions, *The Red Badge* is that rare work of fiction which consistently questions the nature of perception, but reveals very few holistic answers. In this way, the novel is both comparable to Crane’s earlier works – by revealing things baldly and in odd juxtapositions, we see things in new lights, yet the result is not a clearer view of the world but rather a more complex one that cannot be pinned down with definitions – and an advancement upon them by giving his characters the liberty to play the roles of (faux) philosophers. In this second sense, Crane’s later work is less overtly deterministic, as his characters are, while still at the whim of the world, still attempting to push back by asking questions about the nature of existence.

Indeed, by opening up central questions about how we perceive or interpret the world, especially while we are young and malleable, in a work of fiction as opposed to an essay or work

of philosophy, Crane uses his genre to, once again, baldly reveal the nature of experience without relying upon the removed academic viewpoint veiled in concepts. As Patrick Dooley has noted, Crane seemed to have a philosophical worldview in line with the pragmatists,<sup>10</sup> but the fact that his vision is never explicitly spelled out is part of the purpose of his project: both pragmatism and the writing of fiction rest upon their inability to be solidified by conceptual explanation – in a certain way, pragmatism is a philosophy which *must* be artistically conveyed. Bruce Wilshire writes how, for William James, “there is a knowledge by acquaintance (and truth) which is presupposed by descriptive or theoretical knowledge,” and in this sense James tries to become “present as a person in his writing”: “[his] genius as a philosopher is his ability to mate reason with the pre-reflectively experienced world – an activity of mind usually consigned to the dramatist or artist” (xx, xvii, lxiv). In searching out new viewpoints, then, pragmatism is enacted in writing and meant more as a lens through which we contextualize the world without relying upon the burdensome weight of past concepts. Stephen Crane, I imagine, would hypothetically agree with James’s critique of, say, the philosophy professor:

The world of concrete personal experiences to which the street belongs is multitudinous beyond imagination, tangled, muddy, painful and perplexed. The world to which your philosophy-professor introduces you is simple, clean and noble. The contradictions of real life are absent from it. Its architecture is classic. Principles of reason trace its outlines, logical necessities cement its parts. Purity and dignity are what it most expresses. It is a kind of marble temple shining on a hill. In point of fact it is far less an account of this actual world than a clear addition built upon it, a classic sanctuary in which that rationalist fancy may take refuge from the intolerably confused and gothic

character which mere facts present. It is no *explanation* of our concrete universe, it is another thing altogether, a substitute for it, a remedy, a way of escape. (*Pragmatism* 495)

Understood from this general perspective, the irony of a philosophy that depends upon its slipperiness of definition would *not* be conceived as a flaw when its message is translated through the medium of fiction. In Crane's world, we see things the way, perhaps, we should be trained to see things, and are offered selective interpretations of how the world operates without strict dogmas mediating it.

To begin, let us lay out a few binaries that *The Red Badge* operates upon and which, in effect, organize this chapter. Let me say upfront that these are simplistically-worded binaries because they are meant to depict Henry's (not our) understanding of dualism (the point of this chapter, as we shall see, is that Henry separates these concepts to begin with).

Soldier-----Army  
Verbal-----Physical  
Life-----Death  
Agency-----Determinism

On the left side we have certain distinguishing characteristics of Henry from Henry's perspective, i.e. what makes "Henry know that he is Henry." He is, indeed, an individuated *soldier*; his *verbal* capacities distinguish him from others; he is *alive* and hence constantly changing his identity; and he has *agency*. The right alignment shows what lies outside of Henry's control: although he is a soldier, he is part of an *army*; he is also mere *physical* matter, undistinguished from other matter in nature; his proximity to *death* means his identity can be eternalized at any given moment; and he is *determined* by outside forces. All eight statements are, of course, correct in singular statements, but Henry's problem as the novel unfolds is that he

struggles to link the left and right terms together (or even find an ambiguous middle). He struggles to answer, for instance, the following questions: *As a soldier, how does he fit within an army? Do his words have effects on the world? What lies on the cusp between life and death? If he has agency, how is he determined, and vice versa?* While a pragmatist would consider both the mind and the world (represented loosely by our left and right poles) as central to the other's development (lying in middle zones between those poles), the protagonist of *The Red Badge* finds it nearly impossible to consider them simultaneously, especially within the novel's first half, so instead of finding some sort of reciprocal development in which one side helps explain the other, Henry ping-pongs between the left and right poles. (In this cycling, I come back to one of the main arguments of my dissertation: that Stephen Crane's fiction enacts a struggle of articulation which is representative of 1890s literature.) While Henry is thoroughly befuddled in the novel's first half, however, by the conclusion of the novel he is able to make some adjustments and operate on a more successfully pluralistic level – though not as well as some characters in Crane's later fiction (like those in "The Open Boat"). This process is achieved through the twin orientational experiences of socialization and fighting: by talking more and more, and fighting more and more, Henry becomes more acclimated to his fellow comrades (with whom he begins an antisocial and alienating co-existence) and more comfortable with the perplexing physical and mental nature of warfare within a difficult-to-map terrain. Overall, this chapter will consider how the defining single character of Crane's middle phase (Henry Fleming) is an advancement upon the complexity of those characters in *Maggie* and his earlier works by at least approaching the separation between the mind and the world, though ultimately falling short (as we shall see, while he achieves a successful social existence, he still cannot answer the question of whether his experiences are led by his agency or are determined from above). On a

wider scale, it can be understood that Henry's early separation of the above concepts in the novel's first half is a trope of literary determinism, whereas his attempts to bridge these concepts together is more aligned with literary pragmatism. This short novel, which wrestles with these two philosophies simultaneously, is perhaps the most centrally representative work of fiction in this dissertation – the novel's central problem, indeed, is revealed through a toggling between determinist and pragmatist worldviews.

The first section, "Soldier/Army," discusses how the early differences between Henry and his comrades become more closely aligned by novel's end. Like the other conceptual poles, this one can (occasionally) serve as a metaphor for the others: in showing how Henry and his comrades become more linked, for instance, we might simultaneously, in parallel fashion, be discussing similarities in other poles, and vice-versa. (In other words, while this chapter is organized in this specific fashion, overlaps will be suggested, either explicitly or implicitly, with the other poles.)

### Soldier/Army

Compared to *Maggie*, the most striking difference in *The Red Badge* is that the text introduces us to a character of similar intelligence to its author. At this point in the dissertation it should be assumed that by "intelligence" I do not mean knowing things, per se, but, in more typical allegiance to Crane and James, a dark amalgamation of 1) knowing the limits of what one knows, 2) knowing that what one knows will be subject to change as one discovers new things, and 3) that knowing what one knows might not matter anyway. Added together, intelligence might mean "sense of humor" in this regard. One of the more heavily quoted lines from the novel

is: “He had grown to regard himself merely as a part of a vast blue demonstration” (8). While this sentence can be read from a bleakly apathetic perspective – Henry, as a pawn in a nonsensical affair, realizes that the only thing holding the supposed “army” together is a lame, blinding allegiance to the color of their uniforms – it also suggests a healthy satirical attitude from Crane (and perhaps Henry himself), with the words “grown to” and “merely” implying that the protagonist is, at least, aware of *arriving* at this dumb apathy: by specifically *growing to* find himself in this stilted position, the quote implies a thudded advancement towards its opposite, mocking the bildungsroman in just a few words.

But comedy is not Henry’s strong suit, and if it was, he might dwell in the middle zone between “Soldier” and “Army” more easily – to unpack the quote further, he might find extra words between “He had grown to regard himself” and “merely as a part of a vast blue demonstration.” The paradox, of course, is that to *be* a soldier means to enact the mass movements of the army – one’s agency determines how one is determined, in a sense. In *Laughter*, Henri Bergson defines the comic character (somebody whom we find funny) as somebody who specifically does *not* grow or change at moments which typically define one’s character (like the classic dramatic character), but rather as one who exhibits base behaviors common to humans as ‘a general category’ at times when the reader expects unique development. At times, Henry fits this definition of a character when he makes sudden jumps from being an alienated, psychologically disturbed youth to an undifferentiated army man, just like everybody else. If not exactly “comic,” these jumps can be interpreted, more broadly, as a fatalistic problem concerning human freedom in the capitalist system. Thomas Pynchon’s novels, for instance, regularly frame characters in a binary system: they are either so alone in their processes of self-realization that they are unidentified, in an ivory tower and labeled “paranoid”

by the powers that be, or they are completely *of* ‘The System.’<sup>11</sup> In a brilliant analysis of *Gravity’s Rainbow* (1973), Edward Mendelson writes that the novel “perceives the contemporary era in terms of its first brief moments of origination and possibility, when the means of control, Pynchon suggests, were engaged and the political and technological character of our time determined once and for all” (47). But, he adds, one of the surprising problems that Pynchon paints is in how easily the agentless characters *choose* to be subsumed within deterministic structures:

[t]he book insists that we are not determined . . . unless, paradoxically, we choose to be . . . . The possibilities of freedom, the whole range of probabilities that lie between and outside the one and the zero, exist in the book but are always difficult to locate or achieve. Everyone in *Gravity’s Rainbow* who confronts the agonies of choice and decision tries to dream instead of a world in which all difficulties of choice are removed – in which the condition of the world has miraculously been altered for the better – in which an illusory and easy “freedom” from the problems of responsibility and the anxiety of human limitation somehow replaces the true and difficult freedom to act and choose. (47)

Like Pynchon, Crane reveals how difficult freedom is to achieve, yet alone to locate: Henry struggles with “the anxiety of human limitation” in trying to give himself agency, but in doing so, often resorts to boxing himself within a system in which he has no control. As we’ll see, this relates not only to how easily Henry becomes subsumed into the army’s movements, but also to his desires to meld into nature, or, quite simply, to die.

But to begin, we must show how alienated Henry is from the rest of his comrades early in the novel, if only to reveal, in the loneliness and weirdness of this state, his later desire to merge

into a system. Henry is first distinguished as somebody self-conscious (at least to a certain extent). Until he appears, the opening 13 paragraphs are not unlike the opening of *Maggie* in that Crane pays particular attention to how crowds of men argue from a muted distance, and how, due to their bickering, they simultaneously grow in confidence (they create their worlds and use words to distinguish themselves from one another) and are revealed to be absurd, directionless, and impotent in their verbiage. Indeed, from the opening paragraph, the men are distinguished by their “noise of rumors,” as the soldiers only begin stirring from their sleep by stories that were made up: one soldier was “swelled with a tale he had heard from a reliable friend, who had heard it from a truthful cavalryman, who had heard it from his trustworthy brother.” (In repeatedly emphasizing the reliability of each of these subjects with adjectives while extending the distance between each person, Crane’s humor operates with a precise terseness). In the first page alone (and in ways that should remind us of the previous chapter), the army can serve as a metaphor for the pointlessness of war to begin with, as the men are immediately made to appear defensive about self-created stories and arrogant about them by bloating them out of proportion in order to defend their own personal honor: the soldier who begins the first rumor “adopted” an “important air,” spoke “pompously,” and, most alarmingly, when challenged, “felt called upon to defend the truth of a rumor he himself had introduced.” The scene, like that of the gesticulating man to begin “Four Men in a Cave,” is seen from afar, muted, as the dialogue sounds clunky and each character melds into the next in their indistinct loudness (3-4).

Henry is introduced as a youthful private who “listened with eager ears to the words” of the rumor-telling soldier, immediately distinguished by the “numbers” of the crowd by the simple fact that he listens to the “words” and not the false bravado posing behind it. Henry does not see himself as ranked with these men at the outset; like most protagonists within the war

genre, he begins as an “other” amidst a cacophonous mass. Perhaps because he actually listens to the stupidity of the man’s words, Henry then immediately desires to be “alone with some new thoughts” and retires to consider the path that brought him here (4). In then opening up flashbacks to conversations with his mother and his initial decisions to go to war, Stephen Crane’s literary style hints at being less stereotypically naturalist than his previous work: the words of Henry’s past are what affect his future consequences (not necessarily anything happening to him in the physical world). The weight put on explanations between him and his mother displays an openness towards Henry’s interior world that will determine the future course of the novel – in dedicating five pages to his present stage in the war, the reader is made to understand that this is *Henry’s* narrative, not a flat portrait of soldiers during war-time (what the opening 13 paragraphs posed as). And yet, that will also pose as one of the central problems of the novel – Henry’s inability to wean himself from his thoughts at crucial times. We will also come to discover that the flat stupid men speaking in the opening paragraphs are exactly what Henry will turn into – what he must turn into – in order to be properly oriented on the battlefield.

As we catch up to the present, we learn that Henry’s voluntary enlistment was for heroic reasons that are rapidly not being fulfilled: the “Greeklike” and “Homeric” purposes for which he joined the army do not correspond with Henry’s boring life in camp (5-8). At times like these, the reader gets a foreshadowing of Henry’s desire to meld into a vague deterministic system (“Homeric” implies placing himself in an already-existing story in which he probably dies). Later he asks whether he would hypothetically run from battle and decides that “[p]reviously he had never felt obliged to wrestle too seriously with this question,” as if each run from battle were exactly the same (9). Despite Henry’s vagueness, however, Crane’s impressionism allows us to focus on Henry’s shifting thought process: in these flashbacks we are less interested in what

Henry does and more in how he changes his mind about war as a concept. Furthermore, he “contemplated the lurking menaces of the future, and failed in an effort to see himself standing stoutly in the midst of them” (10). In these instances Henry is alert to whether he is accessing the past, present, or future in his thoughts, and yet he simultaneously sees them as determined, as if there were a ready-made answer to what the future holds. But this panic about his future clears the field for Henry’s first real breakthrough that can be considered the first turning-point of the novel, the realization that his future (and, by proxy, his identity) is in fact undetermined as he decides to “go into the blaze” and test himself in real experience (13). Only then are we introduced to some sentences that meld the inner world of Henry with the outer world – sentences which describe both simultaneously, like how Henry hears his comrades – but we are still far from appreciating the interplay between the two. Throughout most of the first half, in fact, Henry is slow to process what people are saying, as in the following three examples:

His emotions made him feel strange in the presence of men who talked excitedly of a prospective battle as of a drama they were about to witness, with nothing but eagerness and curiosity apparent in their faces. (14)

At last he heard from along the road at the foot of the hill the clatter of a horse’s galloping hoofs. It must be the coming of orders. He bent forward, scarce breathing. The exciting clickety-click, as it grew louder and louder, seemed to be beating upon his soul. (15)

As the horseman wheeled his animal and galloped away he turned to shout over his shoulder, “Don’t forget that box of cigars!” The colonel mumbled in reply. The youth wondered what a box of cigars had to do with war. (15)

At times like these, the reader imagines Henry with a fish-bowl over his head – it makes some sense that readers like McClurg were baffled in trying to explain this character (McClurg resorted to “an idiot or a maniac” with “no trace of the reasoning being” [53]). Despite the fact that each quote melds the outer world of his comrades with Henry’s ears (and within very dense language) we don’t know how Henry feels, unless “seemed to be beating upon his soul” counts as a feeling. In the first quote, the word “strange” only serves to occlude any actualized feeling; the second quote employs a deadened sentence of awakening realization only *after* the horse has passed, implying a slow delay of processing a simple symbol; and the third simply implies Henry is out of the circle of humor within his army (the reader, too, never knows whether the cigar statement is made in jest, but the army frequently kids around with Henry never being “in” on any joke).

At this point in the novel, we are either meant to assume that our protagonist is a bit dim, or that Crane’s narrative is so focused upon individual perception that the paused interpretation of conceiving meaning-from-symbol is deliberately slowed because it is meant to be the central action of the novel. In an article on literary impressionism, Ian Watt explains how Joseph Conrad, who Crane influenced tremendously,<sup>12</sup> deliberately tried to “find ways of giving direct narrative expression to the way in which the consciousness elicits meaning from its perceptions”:

One of the devices that [Conrad] hit on was to present a sense impression and to withhold naming it or explaining its meaning until later; as readers we witness every step by which the gap between the individual perception and its cause is belatedly closed within the consciousness of the protagonist. . . . This narrative device may be termed delayed decoding, since it combines the forward temporal progression of the mind, as it receives

messages from the outside world, with the much slower reflexive process of making out their meaning. (356)

Watt's definition helps explain Henry's perceptions in other moments as well: in usual Crane lingo, we see characters *expressing* something without delving into the nature of that expression (in short, we see people place their imprint upon the world, but we do not reach inside them to view their thoughts): "A mounted officer *displayed* the furious anger"; "The battle reflection that *shone* for an instant in the faces on the mad current"; "There was an appalling *imprint* upon these faces" (31, emphases mine). In rapidly taking in the individual physical appearances of various officers (not to mention rapidly collapsing their stuttering dialogues together) Crane does not delineate between other men in the army. This is one of the many strange effects of Crane's impressionism, but worth noting: his impressionism inherently makes it difficult to distinguish between characters (seeing as how characters are typically distinguished by verbal cues too), so, in that sense, the delay in conceptual representations (a common trope of literary pragmatism) simultaneously creates the lumping together of characters (a common trope of literary determinism). Impressionism, in other words, helps define both of my 'styles' of the literary naturalist.

All of a sudden, in Chapter 5, Henry merges with his army. While in the midst of battle, he loses "concern for himself" and becomes "not a man but a member" as he is "welded into a common personality" (34). In a few paragraphs which sound like a sports advertisement, our protagonist is conscious of his surrounding men, feels a common goal and enemy, and becomes a "driven beast" (35): the reader neither senses Henry as a person nor the other men in this passage, only a vague symbolism (almost an idea) of a regiment.<sup>13</sup> Finally, as a later passage demonstrates, Henry only senses a prideful attachment to the army when he imagines himself

dying for it, showing that, like in the previously-discussed scene, he fails to appreciate how to live within the army without resorting to absolutes. These also help explain how the right poles are linked: death, the army, and Henry's physical surroundings are all "deterministic" in Henry's mind – his mind rests at peace when he imagines himself dying for the army amidst nature. Indeed, before he joined their flow, he depicted them majestically, swaying like grass and moving in a singular direction:

A moment later the regiment went swinging off into the darkness. It was now like one of those moving monsters wending with many feet. The air was heavy, and cold with dew. A mass of wet grass, marched upon, rustled like silk . . . Once a man fell down, and as he reached for his rifle a comrade, unseeing, trod upon his hand. He of the injured fingers swore bitterly and aloud. A low, tittering laugh went among his fellows. (15-16)

The men in this passage are indicative of the whole: it matters not how many people are marching, only that they move together. Chapter 11 similarly characterizes the army as a single awesome unit which Henry feels magnetically attracted to. In observing that the roadway has transformed into "a crying mass of wagons, teams, and men," he suddenly feels "comforted" by their sights and sounds which eradicate any individual exclamation: though people swear "many strange oaths," they are overall "indifferent to all howls" and are defined by the "pride of their onward movement" and their "importance" (64). Though he does not figure out what is "important" throughout the entirety of the novel, he feels envious in "regarding a procession of chosen beings" (65). Henry imagines he is a "blue" figure dying again with his army and finds peace in that thought. The passage is framed through longing and jealousy – the thoughts are clearly defined as "thoughts" and as dreams which are not a part of Henry at the moment.

But still, aside from the obvious deterministic thrust of the army – framed in such a way that Henry is perhaps projecting his ideas of determinism upon it – our protagonist is rarely seen in the same physical space as his comrades early in the novel. When we are given a visual portrait of men, Henry is usually watching with his typical queer sense of detachment. That changes in the novel’s second half once he opens himself up to communication. A comrade who has regularly been following him starts to become defined as a “friend” of Henry’s, and their dialogue reveals a different sense of time than earlier exchanges in the novel: we see pauses and breaks in the action, not the typical one-way exchange so symptomatic of the novel. Indeed, the aspects of the passage read like any work of realism:

But the other made a deprecating gesture. “Oh, yeh needn’t mind, Henry,” he said. “I believe I was a pretty big fool in those days.” He spoke as after a lapse of years.

There was a little pause.

“All th’ officers say we’ve got th’ rebs in a pretty tight box,” said the friend, clearing his throat in a commonplace way. “They all seem t’ think we’ve got ‘em jest where we want ‘em.” (83)

Stylistically, the passage is unremarkable for a work of fiction, but remarkable for *The Red Badge of Courage* – the “little pause” and clearing of the throat suggest that Henry and his friend are operating on the same temporal pace: we hear things the way they are revealed to them. At moments like these, Henry exists in a profitable middle zone of our conceptual poles: he is an individualized soldier, but in reaching out to another soldier, he is also framing himself as part of an army.

More confident with his social abilities than previously, and playing in the middle zone further, Henry then critiques the leadership of the army and, in doing so, ironically initiates

himself further. A major turning point occurs as he realizes that he can actually be *heard*: after exclaiming a line of dialogue, he hears himself as from afar, then realizes that he can in fact speak, using previous language from other comrades to help him join the pack of complaints:

“Well, don’t we fight like the devil? Don’t we do all that men can?” demanded the youth loudly.

He was secretly dumfounded at this sentiment when it came from his lips. For a moment his face lost its valor and he looked guiltily about him. But no one questioned his right to deal in such words, and presently he recovered his air of courage. He went on to repeat a statement he had heard going from group to group at the camp that morning. (90-91)

In noticing that Henry is listened-to, we also realize that in his later whiny, repetitive exclamations that he starts to sound like his comrades – Henry is rapidly *becoming* the men he ignored and disliked at the novel’s opening. But unlike in the novel’s first half, Henry does not vaguely associate the army with a general category (a monster, a machine, a loose collection of men). Instead, he is able to remain in a middle zone for the remainder of the novel, achieving a balance between a knowledge of himself and his surrounding unit. The reason this is most noticeable when critiquing his army is because critiquing one’s unit necessarily implies being inside and outside of that category. The critiques, too, typically come from long sentences with rhetorical effects because this threatens the army’s leadership: in an endless confusion about where they are going, the corporals and lieutenants are consistently cursing and changing their minds and cutting off their lower ranks from developing well thought-out rationalizations. Upon hearing Henry speak to his friend in a fairly long and somewhat eloquent statement about the faults of the army – Henry uses such metaphors like “chased around like rats” and feeling like “a

damn' kitten in a bag" – an angry lieutenant tells them to stop speaking "in long-winded arguments": "Less talkin' an' more fightin' is what's best for you boys" (92-93).

In later passages, as the novel concludes, Henry is seen and heard even more. Despite remaining overwhelmingly confused about the direction of the war, like everybody else, he finds that he is respected within their weird social order. In occasionally yelling back to soldiers (disagreeing with them), he proves that he is not blindly obeying orders towards chaotic scenes of action but sometimes half-directing the orders himself. Henry's growing obsession with holding his regiment's flag – he and his friend hold it together, and start severely panicking when it becomes lost – is symptomatic of his need to remain aligned with his team: holding the flag itself is as clear a symbol as possible of defining the border between an individual and his army.

Henry is rewarded, in a sense, by later acknowledging the limited perceptions of other men near the end of Chapter 21. After several scenes in which he and his friend fight alongside the army, and the narrative describes subjects which could be identified as either Henry or anybody else in the regiment (a deliberate confusion), our protagonist comes to an understanding that his lieutenant, though flawed in his damning assessment of a previous situation because of his limited view of the battle, can be excused in such a difficult-to-gauge atmosphere: "'Oh well,' he rejoined, 'he probably didn't see nothing of it at all and got mad as blazes, and concluded we were a lot of sheep . . . It's just our awful luck, that's what'" (119). In realizing that the lieutenant is neither right nor wrong but simply "didn't see nothing of it," thereby relating bad luck to the overall situation, Henry is more aware of contextualization than previously – instead of making grandiose declarations of right and wrong within his own head, he contextualizes his present moment to his friend in a mature way. The following scene sees Henry being affirmed by higher ranks, as the chapter ends with a long series of compliments heard from another person

having overheard the lieutenant. In listening to his accomplishments, Henry, his friend Wilson, and the others “made an excited circle” (120).

Before the final successful battle in which Henry and Wilson grasp the flag together in the long grass congratulating each other, we see an action scene which reveals the cumulative effect of individual and team supporting one another in a unified movement:

[Henry] could feel the onward swing of the regiment about him and he conceived of a thunderous, crushing blow that would prostrate the resistance and spread consternation and amazement for miles. The flying regiment was going to have a catapultian effect. This dream made him run faster among his comrades, who were giving vent to hoarse and frantic cheers. (127)

As an obvious adolescent, Henry’s socialization is tied up within him being an audience for others – here, and many times elsewhere, he gains confidence because he thinks people are impressed by him: he runs faster because of the “amazement for miles” which he might cause. In the final chapter, as he marches away, he reflects upon his past accomplishments and misdeeds, recalling “with a thrill of joy the respectful comments of his fellows upon his conduct” (132), but also worrying about a soldier he deserted in the field earlier. However, his past heroic deeds ring truer for him – though he briefly doubts his honor silently, the fact that he is marching alongside fellow soldiers in real time brightens his spirits, as he does not dwell in private angst for too long, adopting a strangely vague and uplifting rhetoric: “He found that he could look back upon the brass and bombast of his earlier gospels and see them truly” (134).

The novel ends on a controversially odd note of elation, partially due to Henry’s social acceptance. We come to realize that Henry’s moods – which rarely vary between ecstatic and depressed – are no longer influenced by his self-created narratives of woe or heroism while

talking to himself (as was the case early in the novel, chiefly the very beginning), but are rather governed by real experience as defined by social interaction. Henry is able, within this binary, to achieve balance, although he notably struggled with it at first. If he were to remain either clueless of his social surroundings (lost in wondersickness), or, on the other hand, an uncritical cog of the army's forces, he would have represented a more deterministic character.

### Verbal/Physical

Like characters in "The King's Favor" (discussed in the previous chapter), those in *The Red Badge* hover when expected to speak. There is a noticeable leap of faith in the transition from turning one's thoughts into one's actions. As a result of this tension, words themselves (when uttered) seem awkwardly futile, and actions themselves (when enacted) are awkwardly performed without the assistance of words. Characters fail to fit and match their words with their physical actions: at the very least, it is a struggle when achieved. Rarely is there an actual back-and-forth dialogue more than two times that is not interrupted: a typical "conversation" in *The Red Badge* is a sergeant shouting to a dozen men from an enraged horse, a half-response by one man, then an explosion which kills half of them and prompts Henry to cocoon into his own thoughts. Although Henry improves in this category through the novel, he still oscillates between verbal and physical perceptions of his reality by the conclusion in a way that suggests an on-going tension. The reason this is a "problem," I am arguing, is because Henry designs that border to begin with: he is less likely to consider the borders between his interior and exterior worlds, even though the text often suggests awkward interplays between the two.

If there is an initial standoff between Henry and his army, there is a similarly resistant connection between the verbal and physical at the outset of this novel. In earlier scenes mentioned, Henry dwells in flashbacks, mostly those governed by words (either told by his mother or himself), and when returning to a physical reality – the Civil War in the present – there is typically a slow, dreamy, awkward transition. The novel, of course, is largely about Henry figuring out *how* to capture the experiences happening in front of him, so while there are other mechanisms at work (he’s also trying to survive in the wilderness, to negotiate his vision), it can be argued that his main goal is to understand the war the way an artist would: with the perfect words.<sup>14</sup> Partially for this reason, and partially because Crane is an impressionist, Henry is noticeably slow in translating the experiences happening under his nose. If it was noticeable in the beginning that he reveled in being a storyteller – as we are reminded of the “Homeric” reasons for his enlisting (5) – we are convinced of it by the end, as Henry’s fascination with having an audience while speaking sparks his confidence in war. The final scene quite obviously draws a line in the sand as Henry separates his earlier physical experiences (complex, meandering) with the stories and interpretations he will later make of them:

Later he began to study his deeds, his failures, and his achievements. Thus, fresh from scenes where many of his usual machines of reflection had been idle, from where he had proceeded sheep-like, he struggled to marshal all his acts.

At last they marched before him clearly. From this present view point he was enabled to look upon them in spectator fashion and to criticize them with some correctness, for his new condition had already defeated certain sympathies. (132)

In the first paragraph, Henry *struggles* to articulate things. In the second, he suddenly transforms his past experiences into narratives (likely displacing or diluting what actually happened).

Similarly, in the previous section, his first observation that his army was a “blue demonstration” is an (easy) way of ignoring the true intricate nature of his regiment, that they quarrel and bicker and that members vary from each other (Henry only integrates with them once critiquing them to their faces in real-time). Henry starts articulating words more accurately, however, when he starts to fight for the first time – his hold on handy definitions becomes looser. Significantly, just before the first true action of the novel, he “returned” to his theory of a blue demonstration, implying within context that the youth cannot simultaneously access the world and dwell within a “theory” – they are mutually exclusive (22). The very following sentence, however, is severely abrupt and its stumbling syntax does not hint at when it will end:

One gray dawn, however, he was kicked in the leg by the tall soldier, and then, before he was entirely awake, he found himself running down a wood road in the midst of men who were panting from the first effects of speed. (22)

The space just before this one (just after the “blue demonstration”) essentially represents the transition the entire novel is most interested in exploring: that between his mind and the world. A few paragraphs later, Henry starts to realize what is happening as his legs churn him forward, and attempts to match his previous thoughts about the war with his current experience:

The sun spread disclosing rays, and, one by one, regiments burst into view like armed men just born of the earth. The youth perceived that the time had come. He was about to be measured. For a moment he felt in the face of his great trial like a babe, and the flesh over his heart seemed very thin. He seized time to look about him calculatingly. (22)

Henry’s attempt to see “calculatingly” in the last sentence implies a simplifying and categorizing impulse. Like the short sentence before the action begins – “The youth returned to his theory of a blue demonstration” – there are no commas breaking this sentence apart: it is clear and calm,

seemingly unified. However, the line opening this paragraph is chopped into commas and combines several subjects together: the “sun,” “rays,” “regiments,” and “the earth” all compete for attention as the reader is slowly revealed a panorama of new vantage points representing the difficulty of perceiving nature unveiled. Neither of the four subjects make sense without understanding the unfolding aspect of the previous one: the earth is what the regiments come out of; the regiments are revealed by the rays; and the rays are the arms of the sun – each is a deliberate transition into the next, and should not be considered in isolation. In designing the sentence like this, Crane melds nature and the human just as Henry is unsure whether he is thinking or seeing: the sentence introduces the Confederacy for the first time as men “just born of the earth” (by including “just,” we imagine them emerging from the earth at that moment, somewhere in a dreaded in-between), not to mention that the regiments are not given agency but are simply revealed cinematically because of the sun’s rays (they “burst” into view, not doing anything but simply appearing in Henry’s vision). The following two sentences, short and comma-less, match the last sentence in simplicity, and the second-to-last sentence describes him like an animal aware of a thinner-than-expected border between his heart and the outside world.

Yet despite Henry’s attempts to see, his vision is never really able to match his own descriptive accounts of what happens, or vice-versa. This is, once again, an element of Crane’s delayed decoding. The second and third sentences in the above paragraph are separated in a way that makes the thought-process itself seem as if it were a useless stumbling block: if he perceives that the “time had come,” the following delay – “He was about to be measured” – feels forced and anticlimactic, not to mention un-visual. And indeed, once he does see a larger panorama of his first battlefield several paragraphs later, drawn in actual painterly detail by the exacting eye of Crane, he is not able to process this vision into a clarifying thought of his own: indeed, after

having seen the true fighting from afar, the narrative oddly explains that Henry “tried to observe everything” and concludes, “[i]t looked to be a wrong place for a battle field.” The reason why Henry is not able to actualize the battlefield is because of his expectations of narrative, reminding us of the reviewers who hated his book: indeed, the scene begins with a single-sentence five-word paragraph: “He expected a battle scene.” Everything he sees in the following two paragraphs, then, is framed through disappointment:

There were some little fields girted and squeezed by a forest. Spread over the grass and in among the tree trunks, he could see knots and waving lines of skirmishers who were running hither and thither and firing at the landscape. A dark battle line lay upon a sunstruck clearing that gleamed orange color. A flag fluttered.

Other regiments floundered up the bank. The brigade was formed in line of battle, and after a pause started slowly through the woods in the rear of the receding skirmishers, who were continually melting into the scene to appear again farther on. They were always busy as bees, deeply absorbed in their little combats. (23)

Because of his impressionism, Crane shows us exactly how Henry views this deathly scene: as a toy battlefield, with people clumped together in the present tense, “always busy as bees” (once again, this reinforces the odd way in which impressionism can make texts seem deterministic). Several other things are happening in this instant. First, Henry Fleming shows that he is not yet initiated in the war, because his initiation will be proven not once he employs an act of bravery, but once he understands that what he sees in nature is how he would describe it in words. The act of seeing properly, Crane is implying, partially means being able to keep pace with what is happening around you in real-time while keeping hold of your inner thought-processes as they re-map themselves. In *Pragmatist Realism*, Sami Ludwig explains how, for Mark Twain in *Life*

*on the Mississippi*, the metaphor of piloting effectively is useful for keeping pace with one's perception in relation to a changing landscape: "the temporal progression that makes the stabilization of varying perceptions possible and provides cognitive knowledge out of the perceptual flow at the same time involves a destabilizing factor, because the outside reality itself keeps on changing as well" (16). Representational abilities, Ludwig is saying, must keep aligned with the world's changing territory: "As soon as we think the representational ability perfected, our knowledge proves no longer useful, because reality itself has changed" (17). In this instance, because of his childhood expectations of war through narrative, Henry views the armies as detached from himself, despite the fact that he is in uniform and a stone's throw from being in physical combat himself. The novel, as a whole, is fascinated in the border between what Henry realizes and whether or not that applies to the world, an interplay that will change in later scenes. (At this point, he is more like characters from *Maggie* than those from "The Open Boat.")

If there *were* a way for Henry to muddle the line between his inner thoughts and the physical world (or, to include the previous theme, between himself and his army), it would conceivably be through dialogue, a symbolic interchange of agreed-upon words that, being out in the open, would exist as neither hiding within oneself nor floating aimlessly in nature. Ludwig describes "pragmatist reality," when it works, as "a product of social construction that is based on verifiability; it is a complex common-sense net of thirdness that needs to be experientially grounded at its edge" (50).<sup>15</sup> To clarify, Ludwig quotes James's own definitions of verifiability in *Pragmatism*:

Our thoughts and beliefs "pass," so long as nothing challenges them, just as bank-notes pass so long as nobody refuses them. But this all points to direct face-to-face verifications somewhere, without which the fabric of truth collapses like a financial system with no

cash-basis whatever. You accept my verification of one thing, I yours of another. We trade on each other's truth. But beliefs verified concretely by *somebody* are the posts of the whole superstructure. (576-577)

James is saying that action moves forward – that our “whole superstructure” moves forward – through face-to-face verifications “somewhere,” regardless of whether they are ‘true,’ seeing as how pragmatism is less concerned with defining truth and more interested in *how* these interactions (or “trades”) construct our evolving perceptions of the world (in other words, what matters is the *fabric* of truth, not necessarily the truth itself).<sup>16</sup> Applied to fiction, there are times when characters say things which do not advance the plot progression – seemingly 80 percent of early Crane – whereas dialogue that is “experientially grounded,” to use Ludwig’s words, has “cash-value,” to use James’s term. Early in *The Red Badge*, while there are occasional visual exchanges with his comrades – two characters looking at each other – Henry’s closest stares are with dead men (and, as we will see, these further prompt him to revel in his own thoughts). Furthermore, we have already seen how Henry’s visual attunement, though sharply delineated at times, either slows or rapidly increases his sense of what is happening in-the-world (when observing somebody, the novel’s pace obviously changes). Dialogue would feasibly place two characters within the same sense of pace: in some ways, interestingly, it represents the opposing field to impressionism, which centers on the delayed decoding of *one* character.

But the novel’s first half frames dialogue as opposed to nature’s forces (there is little interplay between the two). Indeed, one of the novel’s underlying arguments is that war destroys words: when dialogue is expressed during a battle scene, the words operate as a floodgate to control an oncoming wave of experience, a desperate way to understand the situation. For instance: “A sentence with variations went up and down the line. ‘Well, we’ve helt ‘em back.

We've held 'em back; derned if we haven't.' The men said it blissfully, leering at each other with dirty smiles" (37). As a typical example, dialogue here is repetitive because it does not do its job the first time around – the number of repetitive urgings and sputterings are countless in this novel. The sentence after the dialogue above seems queer and detached, as if it doesn't correlate with the words being said: why "dirty" smiles?

Henry's own thoughts, too, are interrupted, if not by the obvious loudness of war than by nature itself, which also operates on a different time scale. The following conclusion of Chapter 9, broken into short paragraphs revealing the stilted nature of individual experience, reveals how Henry's "philippic" is interrupted by a natural scene already displayed before him – his futile sense of a monologue cannot overshadow the already-existent sun which feels previously "placed" upon the scene:

As the flap of the blue jacket fell away from the body, he could see that the side looked as if it had been chewed by wolves.

The youth turned, with sudden, livid rage, toward the battlefield. He shook his fist. He seemed about to deliver a philippic.

"Hell –"

The red sun was pasted in the sky like a wafer. (59)

Nearing the halfway point of the novel, Henry's "sudden" impulse here is not realized through his words, because nature has beaten him towards proper expression: if he cannot express his angst, it might be because, as this scene suggests, the physical world has already expressed it for him. In seeing the red sun, Henry's emotive burst is explained for him. Redness suggests blood, but a red sun specifically represents a setting sun, concluding the day, the chapter, and the dying man's life next to him: it inevitably feels melancholic and conclusive in a way that Henry's

words couldn't. Secondly, the sentence makes nature feel careless and apathetic: nature has already pasted the sun there, in the past tense, and conceivably that "wafer" of an image would be there regardless of whether the man died or not. And yet the line also feels determined, in the ways that nature always feels determined in this novel: Crane deliberately uses a verb ("pasted") to describe a past *action* of the most natural object, let alone a brittle object (emphasizing easily moveable), so that Henry's vision is such that he is subtly aware that God has designed this pitiful scene before him.<sup>17</sup>

In that sense, physical aspects of nature are often contrasted with words in this novel by Henry himself. If words attempt to control time as it unfolds – characters defining exact ways in which dialogue should be spoken, heard, and responded to – then physical nature is astoundingly consistent in its ignorance of pacing: in its always being there, Henry bloats its significance constantly as being "there" and always-there. That lack of boundary allows him to devise explicit religious symbolism around it or to, more modestly, revel in the fact that it can exist simultaneously with the world of men and war. The conclusion of Chapter 5 observes Henry left speechless by nature once again: "As he gazed around him the youth felt a flash of astonishment at the blue, pure sky and the sun gleamings on the trees and fields. It was surprising that Nature had gone tranquilly on with her golden process in the midst of so much devilment" (38). In calling Nature a "golden process," Henry fights back, in a sense, by trying to define nature in his own narrative fashion, placing religious connotations within a noun defining constant movement, oddly melding a timeless (heavenly) description with a term in motion. The importance of this scene, though, is that Henry still cannot understand how nature and action can coexist together, how the world can be defined through randomness while underneath the umbrella of Nature ("devilment" in this sense represents war, but also the more banal fact that shit happens). The

point is that Henry chooses to emphasize the *differences* between nature and war as opposed to their similarities: he does not integrate them into his singular vision of the world.

Similarly, throughout the novel's first half, Henry continues to choose to segregate his thoughts from the world. Before he meets his friend Wilson (as described in the previous section), he has a clear chance to speak to another individual, to place his words on display, at the conclusion of Chapter 10. Yet despite our protagonist's obsession to figure himself out, he does not communicate his inner dialogue to the world – to test it in experience. A tattered man questions him, and Henry considers his proddings as “knife thrusts to him”: “They asserted a society that probes pitilessly at secrets until all is apparent.” Interestingly, Henry in this scene prizes “those things which are willed to be forever hidden” (63). And yet after he opens himself up to his friend – and subsequently to his comrades, as we saw in the previous section – things start to change: he begins to integrate nature more within a realistic vocabulary. Whereas most of the novel sees him deciphering nature as a mysterious picture-book – he interprets a bough as a chapel signifying great meaning, and says floaty things as in “[t]his part of the world led a strange, battleful existence” (89) – the last few scenes observe a Henry who allows his interpretations to fit and match with the fluid physical world surrounding him (arguably the quality most valued in a soldier or athlete). If there is confusion in the topography of the landscape (as there always seems to be), Henry responds quickly and without panic, as in the following brief scene: “They made a hurried search for the supposed stream, but did not find it. ‘No water here,’ said the youth. They turned without delay and began to retrace their steps” (99).

Words are also not wasted in these scenes – as any successful coach knows, the right amount of verbiage must be used to direct action successfully. (As we have noticed throughout the novel, breakdowns on the battlefield are often paralleled with breakdowns in language, as

generals are frequently identified by their incomplete roars of cursing.) More importantly, nature is briefly comprehended for Henry toward the end of the novel, as are the sounds of war circling around him that previously caused confusion. In his charge in Chapter 19, nature is first melded with the opponent as a way to suggest that to conquer the enemy, Henry must conquer his own understanding of the physical world of nature (both, as the passage reveals, are framed as confusing and difficult to decipher): "...the woods and thickets before it awakened. Yellow flames leaped toward it from many directions. The forest made a tremendous objection." But then Henry starts to understand the routinized process of war as he keeps staring at the clump of trees and the "song of the bullets was in the air and shells snarled among the treetops" (104): his surroundings here are dangerous but understood. The repeated statements of comprehension in the following paragraph suggests how dramatically Henry was misinterpreting the landscape and opponent in previous scenes:

It seemed to the youth that he saw everything. Each blade of the green grass was bold and clear. He thought that he was aware of every change in the thin, transparent vapor that floated idly in sheets. The brown or gray trunks of the trees showed each roughness of their surfaces. And the men of the regiment, with their starting eyes and sweating faces, running madly, or falling, as if thrown headlong, to queer, heaped-up corpses – all were comprehended. His mind took a mechanical but firm impression, so that afterward everything was pictured and explained to him, save why he himself was there. (105)

There is still a questionable sense of relation between Henry's verbal articulations and what he physically sees as it only "seemed" to him that he saw everything and he "thought that he was aware" of changes in the atmosphere, but the quote is the closest this novel gets to muddling the line between the two. Also, Henry's obsession to re-explain to himself what happened later still

suggests an awkward tension between being in-the-now and recalling his experiences in the future. But in general, he is able to verbally explain his physical situation in this scene. (The last few words on “why he himself was there” will be the focus of our last section on “Agency/Determinism.”) In coming to understand where exactly he is, he is also able to comprehend the enemy more clearly – instead of referring to them as dragons or melding them into nature, he finally comes to see them as reflective of himself: “There was a recognition as he looked at the types of faces” (113). While the war itself is constantly horrific – bodies are always falling around him, sounds are too loud, the scenery changes too quickly – Henry adapts to the circumstances.

And yet despite his improved vision, the final scene of the novel returns Henry to one pole – the pole of storytelling – as he reimagines his past acts in vague heroic terms: “He came from hot plowshares to prospects of clover tranquility, and it was as if hot plowshares were not” (134). The metaphors within this famously odd ending clearly devalue the realism of the previous scenes. By reverting to loftiness in the novel’s final page, Henry seems to rapidly be forgetting his acts of war. Of course, in this sense, the interplay between words and nature – or between the verbal and physical – is never fully grasped, as Henry’s mode of cognition as framed through narrative maintains a tenuous hold on the physical nature surrounding him, though it does slightly improve as the war continues. By novel’s end, Henry basically understands how he operates in the present better by distancing himself from thoughts about what war *should* be, but he continues to flatter himself by returning to modes of mollifying narrative structures while he is not fighting (as proven by the ending and other scenes in which he is at rest).<sup>18</sup> Unlike the previous section in which the poles between soldier and army come

neatly together, there is still something left to be desired between Henry's verbal understanding of his own physical experiences.

## Life/Death

Early in the novel, a central question starts to emerge as to the true differences between a living person and a dead person, a set of poles which can vaguely be paralleled with the differences between a soldier and the army, verbalization and physicality, and agency and determinism. Indeed, Henry's appreciation of the world gets closer and cloudier once he sees his first dead body in the following scene. In two instances, the words "as if" are in play, *as if* to suggest Henry's desire to meld the actuality of the dead man with his own interpretation of what happened, attempting to close the border between himself and the dead man:

And it was as if fate had betrayed the soldier. In death it exposed to his enemies that poverty which in life he had perhaps concealed from his friends.

The ranks opened covertly to avoid the corpse. The invulnerable dead man forced a way for himself. The youth looked keenly at the ashen face. The wind raised the tawny beard. It moved as if a hand were stroking it. He vaguely desired to walk around and around the body and stare; the impulse of the living to try to read in dead eyes the answer to the Question. (24)

This sudden first presence of death forces Henry to play in a middle zone, to attempt to see better, to try to reach an answer toward "the Question" of life's transition into death. But like in "When a Man Falls a Crowd Gathers," Crane never reveals answers, only disappointment. In this case, the disappointment is not an ambulance flying away, but rather Henry having a panic-attack

in which he imagines the physical world intruding on him. His earlier observations of nature (passive and distant) are now penetrating his private reveries: instead of seeing the distant hills and armies as toys, he sees everything too closely, too threatening and invasive, too overburdened by perception:

This advance upon Nature was too calm. He had opportunity to reflect. He had time in which to wonder about himself and to attempt to probe his sensations. . . . Absurd ideas took hold upon him. He thought that he did not relish the landscape. It threatened him. . . . A house standing placidly in distant fields had to him an ominous look. The shadows of the woods were formidable. . . . The swift thought came to him that the generals did not know what they were about. It was all a trap. (24)

The short sentences emphasize a whirlwind of varying viewpoints moving too rapidly for the mind to accurately take in: Henry is baffled and therefore makes things up (indeed, soon he “glared about him, expecting to see the stealthy approach of his death” [24]). Despite supposedly melding his mind with the world, prompted by the sight of a life-like corpse bordering the two, his mind now is doing too much work, creating a spillover effect in which innocent objects within his perception – a house – are given overwhelming agency to provoke him. In other words, Henry is not fitting and matching properly: he is having a panic attack in which his surroundings do not match what they actually are.

However, Henry overcomes this rattling confusion (imagine, in our poles, a Mexican jumping bean) by shifting directly to the right – by seeing himself as part of his army and by keeping absolutely quiet. Henry’s panic, it should be noted, also included being in the middle-zones of those poles, as he doubts his generals’ ability to lead and decides to “step forth and make a speech” about the leadership (25). And yet, just as “[s]hrill and passionate words came to

his lips,” he stops. Henry does not speak or critique his army. He realizes, silently, that others are also in their worlds, “quiet and absorbed,” and that “even if the men were tottering with fear they would laugh at his warning” (25). In keeping quiet, Henry maintains the determined (yet mollifying) sense that individual motivation, if not coming from above, is about as effective as rustling a blade of grass. He sees himself marching, once again, as part of the “They”: “And they were deeply engrossed in this march” (25).

Henry’s panic about the border between life and death clearly comes from its ambiguous nature. However, once he imagines being dead, he “conceived it to be nothing but rest” (27). Nearing the end of Chapter 3, Henry finds solace in the simplicity of death because it gives him “comprehension” as something “neat” in a way that his place in the regiment does not: “He would die; he would go to some place where he would be understood” (27-28). The link between determinism and death is made more explicit as the narrative moves on. In a highly representative scene, immediately after admitting that he, Henry, is “the work of a master’s legs,” he retreats into nature and suddenly projects a sense of determined peace with made-up rules. Similar to how he was first confronted with an impossibility – that his place in the battle was pointless – thereby forcing a long defense of how the determined world works, Henry here is at first confronted by the confusions of nature: attacked by creepers, he “could not conciliate the forest.” And yet suddenly, after being annoyed by his physical surroundings, he hears insects “making rhythmical noises” and “grinding their teeth in unison.” This inspires him to chase nature’s path further, admitting that the landscape was “the religion of peace.” Seeing signs from a squirrel that there are laws which accord with his mind, he approaches “a place where the high, arching boughs made a chapel” (47-48).

Crane deliberately overdoes this scene for a reason. Henry's reveries of being in a frozen, eternal place is shattered as he pushes some "green doors" aside:

He was being looked at by a dead man who was seated with his back against a columnlike tree. The corpse was dressed in a uniform that once had been blue, but was now faded to a melancholy shade of green. The eyes, staring at the youth, had changed to the dull hue to be seen on the side of a dead fish. The mouth was open. Its red had changed to an appalling yellow. Over the gray skin of the face ran little ants. One was trundling some sort of a bundle along the upper lip. (48)

The fact that the corpse is changing colors while staring at Henry is crucial to Crane's understanding of Henry's perceptions within the novel. Henry is never challenged more than at this moment, as he must negotiate visual changes while battling away everlasting truths. The moment is horrifying in its ambiguity – the man is, to put it crudely, just not *dead enough*, and all the while, ants are running up and down the corpse, emphasizing more horrid motion and the sense that the man is not unlike a log or any object of nature: is the corpse, like Henry, mere matter? Unable to comprehend this scene, Henry shrieks and flees. The novel continues in oscillating fashion.

#### Agency/Determinism

The opening of *The Red Badge* famously observes Henry combing through war narratives and imagining what real war will be like – famous because Crane had never been to war and received most of his impressions of the Civil War through gazing at *Century Magazine's* pictures.<sup>19</sup> Henry's conversations with his mother suggest the protagonist believes in a vague sort of religious teleology as well. However, at one point, he makes a break with his previous ways of

thinking and decides that his actions will determine his character, in a sense. This crucial realization essentially kick-starts the novel and opens up the “agency” aspect of the dialectic:

For days he had made ceaseless calculations, but they were all wondrously unsatisfactory. He found that he could establish nothing. He finally concluded that the only way to prove himself was to go into the blaze, and then figuratively to watch his legs to discover their merits and faults. He reluctantly admitted that he could not sit still and with a mental slate and pencil derive an answer. (13)

It would be difficult to find a quote more aligned with William James. In searching for active experience that creates meaning as it discovers itself – only to actively change its meaning further – Henry has a pragmatist awakening connected with his identity: he is not, alarmingly, determined. It may be assumed that Henry’s previous religious leanings, whatever they may be, are simultaneously shattered at this point as well. Upon telling his mother he enlisted for the war earlier, she immediately replied, ““The Lord’s will be done, Henry,”” showing, at the very least, that Henry has departed from his mother’s sense of religious determinism (6). Henry at this point realizes he is an “unknown quantity” who “must accumulate information of himself,” and that his previous “laws of life” were “useless” (10). In realizing that he must watch his own legs to discover who he is, Henry sets up the unique challenge inherent in living and perceiving simultaneously.

Typically, seeing well means Henry is given agency, whereas seeing poorly causes panic, confusion, and the sense that he is being determined. Henry admits that in battle he’d rather be shot head-on, “between the eyes,” than while running away because “it is better to view the appalling than to be merely within hearing” (42). In running from the enemy with other comrades in one scene, Henry, described as a “blind man,” starts suddenly turning his situation

into a determined game with rules, thereby resorting to a false sense of laws attached to his regiment: assuming that everybody else is running because he is too, he “felt vaguely that death must make a first choice of the men” and that, quite simply, “[t]here was a race.” Running past one soldier, Henry “knew that he looked upon a man who would presently be dead” (42-43). It is crucial to note that while essentially blind, Henry makes things up, defining a larger system that he is a part of in order to maintain a sense of comfort. The strangest example of this is directly after the retreat in which he realizes that, despite running away, the regiment actually won the battle. Confused, then, about his purpose, his army’s purpose, his place within the army, and ultimately the differences between agency and determinism, Henry settles on the following fascinating conclusion:

He had fled, he told himself, because annihilation approached. He had done a good part in saving himself, who was a little piece of the army. He had considered the time, he said, to be one in which it was the duty of every little piece to rescue itself if possible. Later the officers could fit the little pieces together again, and make a battle front. If none of the little pieces were wise enough to save themselves from the flurry of death at such a time, why, then, where would be the army? It was all plain that he had proceeded according to very correct and commendable rules. His actions had been sagacious things.

They had been full of strategy. They were the work of a master’s legs. (46)

Henry finds peace within a system in which his motives, one way or the other, describe the motives of his unit: in framing it this way, his choices (like those of Pynchon’s characters) are not representative of his actual freedom. In the most cyclical passage of the novel, it is as if Henry were repeating to himself *I have agency because I am determined because I have agency...* The other key here is that Henry “told himself” these things in the first sentence: the

narrative he constructs is not assumed as reserved and obvious, but is actively conceived by him at this specific moment for a specific reason. He also commends himself for being “wise” and for having made an individual decision based around a specific “time.” In merging aspects of individual decision-making with the army’s overall motives, Henry attempts to link the binaries between himself and his army, and yet in attempting this, he only sees himself further as part of a determined structure, as something which has to happen beyond his will and his awareness: his relief is similar to the comfort he gains while imagining himself dead, part of nature, or merged within the “blue demonstration” of his army.

The novel continues to toggle between poles and deal in extremes. It is impossible for Henry to understand how his actions affect the whole, partially because the whole is so obviously undistinguished. We don’t know what American state they fight in or what year the battle takes place.<sup>20</sup> In its extreme focus, we lose the larger landscape, and the physical geography is framed from the opening paragraph as being a challenge to both decipher and negotiate. Agency is typically linked with Henry being close to a situation, close enough to verbalize his actions as an individual who is conscious that he is alive. But these scenes are only understandable as flashes and fragments which withhold crucial facts like the army’s purpose. “His mind took a mechanical but firm impression, so that afterward everything was pictured and explained to him, save why he himself was there” (105). Henry never knows why he is “there” in *The Red Badge of Courage*, which partially explain his quasi-religious desires to merge into nature and death.

As a result, Henry will occasionally rail against soldiers who consider “luck” as part of their war experience, and then suddenly change his mind again. In a strange passage in which he calls himself “a man of experience,” he simultaneously “declared to himself that it was only the doomed and the damned who roared with sincerity at circumstance.” A man “with a full

stomach,” on the other hand, “had no business to scold about anything that he might think to be wrong in the ways of the universe.” Henry declares that he will “not give a great deal of thought to these battles that lay directly before him” because he could “leave much to chance,” and yet also says, “how could they kill him who was the chosen of gods and doomed to greatness?” (87). These series of contradicting passages show his indecision – and lack of awareness of his indecision – in whether fate or circumstance governs his universe. Evoking more fictional rhetoric, he describes others as “weak mortals,” whereas he himself “fled with discretion and with dignity” (87). Like his consistent desire to be dead amidst his comrades in the fields – melded with his army and with nature – Henry once again constructs, in times of panic or desperation (usually while he is fleeing and not visualizing things) an overly grandiose and vague description of himself linked with determinism.

The same can be said of his comrades. Concluding Chapter 20, Henry’s regiment is confused about the tides which turn their battles: after configuring whether things are turning for the better or worse – following a scene of extreme fear and desperation – a vague rhetoric is expelled to prove that, to deal with the mis-directions of circumstance, “they were men”:

It had begun to seem to them that events were trying to prove that they were impotent. These little battles had evidently endeavored to demonstrate that the men could not fight well. When on the verge of submission to these opinions, the small duel had showed them that the proportions were not impossible, and by it they had revenged themselves upon their misgivings and upon the foe.

The impetus of enthusiasm was theirs again. They gazed about them with looks of uplifted pride, feeling new trust in the grim, always confident weapons in their hands. And they were men. (114-115)

The first paragraph is notable for its confused negotiation between agency and determinism: there is a clear effort to define the middle-zone between individual fighting and war's conclusiveness (what determines what), and the paragraph's confusion lies in the soldiers' inability to ultimately know the difference (the first sentence especially has uncertain and wordy syntax – it doesn't come to its point fast enough because it is working itself out). Whether events “prove” or “demonstrate” anything is a central question of the novel that Henry continually tries to answer, and which help define the narrative's overall focus upon the relationship between subject and object. After coming to a turning-point in their perception of the battle halfway through the paragraph, the second paragraph immediately resorts to absolutes which simplify their situation, but which also demonstrate a necessary injection of confidence which will likely, in turn, make them fight better (as we've seen in other parts of the novel). The narrative regularly bounces between these extremes of wordy senseless sentences of misdirection – defined by moment-to-moment agency gone awry – to vague deterministic conclusiveness, crystallized by the use of “always confident” weapons above (in resting in a safe present tense which swallows the significance of the past and future – thereby rejecting the claim that chance and luck determine the passage of time – a certain confidence is gained by Henry and his comrades).

The novel ends in similar fashion as Henry constructs a nearly fictionalized past tense of his battle experience: walking through capricious weather as he relays previous events, he says surprisingly reductive things as in how “the existence of shot and counter-shot was in the past” and how he “had been where there was red of blood and black of passion, and he was escaped” (132). If the entire novel has been about the complex negotiations between the protagonist and his world within a crystallized present tense, why does Crane decide to end his narrative with such flat, flowery binaries? The answer is because Henry is still in continuous negotiation with

himself, and his vague declarations are a symptom of what has always been going on throughout the book – yes, his vision has improved and he is more in-tune with his comrades (in short, he is better at war), but he still has no idea if what he is doing affects the war overall or if an overall plan is set in place from above. In a final scene framing Henry walking toward sunshine but still presumably toward battle – it is never explained – the book does not actually seem to end, as many previous chapters ended in false conclusive gestures simply to change rapid direction in the following chapter, usually by whizzing bullets interrupting Henry’s reveries. In fact, apart from a few faint developments reflective of a bildungsroman (Henry making a friend, for instance, and thereby gaining social confidence), the novel is curiously not determined by cause-and-effect, and the chapter divisions are the least interesting part of how the narrative is constructed: in brief, the novel is not defined by its length. Short or long, the length of the book would not matter, as the back-and-forth vibration between Henry’s uncertainty and false confidences would continue to be in motion regardless of how the novel developed. If he died in the next scene, it wouldn’t be surprising, and it also wouldn’t change the overall effect of the novel – *The Red Badge of Courage* would have a similar literary effect regardless of how it concluded.

Yet ending on Henry’s death would prove something against Stephen Crane’s literary project. It would end in conclusiveness, and highlight a symbolic meaning for why we read this book to a certain point: the novel would hypothetically end because the protagonist was, after negotiating between life and death, finally dead. Crane, though, does not write to reveal meanings. It would, in a sense, cheapen the fact that things are still undetermined, and would give Henry what he wants in ultimate conclusiveness. If his protagonist is constantly wrestling with what it means to be alive by finding respites in his desires to be dead (which is the truly

interesting part about this novel), Crane deliberately leaves things undetermined so that the reader can continue to ask these questions herself: like the final scene of Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* in which Oedipa Maas awaits the results of the auction determining her fate, *The Red Badge of Courage* ends on undetermined questions because the book initially asked difficult questions that must always be in transition. The novel is largely about transition anyway because it proves that transition is nearly impossible to define except through depicting how confusing verbalizing transition actually is.

Most importantly, if Henry were to die in the last scene, Crane would be writing a typical naturalist novel of decline (like *Maggie* or *McTeague*) as opposed to a more complex impressionistic naturalist novel – the book would be concerned with wholes and not fragments. (If we added another set of poles, “fragments” on the left and “wholes” on the right, those would also suffice for this chapter.) Crane's prose style, in this sense, is reflective of his philosophical questions, as he veers away from holistic points – who won the war – and remains close to the action in order to delve into actual experience (agency in a changing physical environment). If his protagonist searches for absolutes in metaphors related to death, the physical world, his army, and, linking them all, a deterministic universe in which agency has little weight, then Crane's project is to both reveal those natural human curiosities *as curiosities*, but ultimately to unlearn them too, and hence dwell in the fascinating interplay between those concepts and those of limited, individualized perception, as that is where consciousness lies in transition.

In August 1896, Theodore Roosevelt wrote Stephen Crane a letter, thanking him for an autographed copy of *George's Mother* and asking him for a favor. Because of his love of *The Red Badge of Courage*, Roosevelt asked him to write a story “of the frontiersman and the

Mexican Greaser in which the frontiersman shall come out on top; it is more normal that way!”<sup>21</sup>  
Crane never wrote the story.

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<sup>1</sup> Calling *The Red Badge* an early modernist novel is in no way original – in its willful ignorance of meta-narratives and its constant questioning of personal agency, the book is obviously modernist in many respects. Scholars have also frequently discussed the book in tandem with industrial capitalism: for instance, Daniel Shanahan’s “The Army Motif in *The Red Badge of Courage* as a Response to Industrial Capitalism” sees Henry’s initiation into the army as signaling his becoming “a man of his time”: “Crane uses the army and the war to portray the mass mentality which had begun to replace individualism at this time, to evoke the spirit of predatory competition which has begun to dominate the American landscape” (202).

<sup>2</sup> The first quote is in response to John Northern Hilliard of the *New York Times* in early 1896 when Crane was asked, presumably, about his literary career. Earlier in the letter, Crane explains his oft-quoted line about how a “man is born into the world with his own pair of eyes and he is not at all responsible for his quality of personal honesty,” after which he writes that despite trying to be honest, he is neither an honest nor unique person. The second quote is drawn from a letter to Daisy Hill in 1896 in which Crane seems taken aback by Hill’s candor towards him (the entire letter is explaining how average he is). From *The Correspondence of Stephen Crane*, edited by Stanley Wertheim and Paul Sorrentino, pages 196 and 209, respectively.

<sup>3</sup> *The Red Badge* was published by Appleton in October 1895 and immediately received enthusiastic reviews (more so by British presses than American, though both were laudatory). Wertheim and Sorrentino note that “[b]y March and April [1896] *The Red Badge* headed many best-seller lists, and there were fourteen printings in 1896” (183). Negative responses as in General McClurg’s (below) took aim at the laudatory reviews themselves in addition to Crane’s novel.

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<sup>4</sup> Selected from *Stephen Crane: The Contemporary Reviews*, edited by George Monteiro, pages 52-55. (Later reviews are also taken from this edition). Though McClurg misses the point, his accusation of Crane's 'unrealistic' depiction of soldiers was likely correct as Crane would later discover himself in his actual experiences with war. Radically unlike the manic scenes he portrayed in *The Red Badge*, what he observed in the Greco-Turkish war in 1898 revealed to him indifferent-looking men who "fought with the steadiness of salaried book-keepers" ("Crane at Velestino" 20). Michael Robertson's chapter "After *The Red Badge*: War Journalism" provides excellent detail on Crane's later war reporting abroad.

<sup>5</sup> The most notable sources previously discussed were Robert Wiebe's *The Search for Order*, Alan Trachtenberg's *The Incorporation of America*, Jackson Lears's *No Place of Grace*, Jay Martin's *Harvests of Change*, and Amy Kaplan's *The Social Construction of American Realism*. Larzer Ziff's quote is drawn from his *The American 1890s*.

<sup>6</sup> As Robertson notes in his "After *The Red Badge*" chapter, busting heroic American stereotypes was typical for Stephen Crane. Years later, he would deliberately write about Theodore Roosevelt's "Rough Riders" in the Spanish-American War of 1898 from an inverted, mocking point of view.

<sup>7</sup> The most laudatory review came from George Wyndham in *New Review* (January 1896). Wyndham credited the young writer with breaking out of convention, saying that "Mr. Crane, as an artist, achieves by his singleness of purpose a truer and completer picture of war than either [Tolstoy], bent also upon proving the insignificance of heroes, or Zola, bent also upon prophesying the regeneration of France." Crane's vision, in his words, "chimes with the universal experience of mankind" (39-46).

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Gullason recounts that Crane "had a perpetual warfare with the novel form": "He was critical of the long novels of Mark Twain; he thought Thomas Hardy overtreated his materials,

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and that Henry James was too ‘diffuse.’ Even his own *Red Badge Crane* considered too long” (20).

<sup>9</sup> In addition to Donald Pizer, Lee Clark Mitchell and Jennifer Fleissner make the most convincing arguments on these grounds in *Determined Fictions* and *Women, Compulsion, Modernity*, respectively. Mitchell’s study on the naturalists’ distortions of grammar is particularly relevant to *The Red Badge*.

<sup>10</sup> From Dooley’s Preface: “The same matrix that nourished the era’s intellectuals, artists, scientists, jurists, clergy, and philosophers also influenced Crane. In his works there is an acute and penetrating statement of the contextual epistemology and pluralistic metaphysics developed by his contemporary, the philosopher William James. Crane, along with the classical American pragmatists, holds that reality’s rich and teeming resources are so complex and overflowing – and humanity’s awareness of and access to the world so limited and partial – that no more than a highly selective interpretation is possible” (xxi).

<sup>11</sup> Versions of this argument have been made by Tony Tanner, Brian McHale, Harold Bloom, Alan Brownlie, and others.

<sup>12</sup> Conrad, one of the earliest to call Crane an impressionist, was enamored of his younger friend’s talent. For instance, after having read “The Open Boat,” he blabbered the following to him in a letter: “Confound you – you fill the blamed landscape – you – by all the devils – fill the sea-scape. . . . You are an everlasting surprise to me. You shock – and the next moment you give the perfect artistic satisfaction. Your method is fascinating. You are a complete impressionist. The illusions of life come out of your hand without a flaw. It is not life – which nobody wants – it is art – art for which everyone – the abject and the great hanker – mostly without knowing it” (qtd. in Wertheim and Sorrentino, 315).

<sup>13</sup> It is difficult to tell how ironic this passage is meant to be. On the one hand, the sentence “*the* effects of *the* war atmosphere” (35, emphases mine) imply a mocking of the genre, but on the

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other, Crane was avidly engaged in the brotherhood of war. His time at Claverack military academy and, in later years, with soldiers in Greece and Cuba were reportedly idyllic for him. Judging from his letters alone, it's doubtful that he spent so much time 'in brotherhood' simply to mock the impulse.

<sup>14</sup> Lee Clark Mitchell's chapter on *The Red Badge* analyzes Henry's linguistic processes, down to the grammar itself, as further proof of him being determined. Stephen Crane, he writes, "quietly withheld from his novel those structures – grammatical, scenic, and narrative – that enable readers to project certain comforting assumptions about agency onto fictional characters" (116). My argument is not as pessimistic as Mitchell's, as I frame Crane's characters in his middle phase as having more agency than those in his earlier texts.

<sup>15</sup> By "thirdness," Ludwig is referring to C.S. Peirce's conceptualization of firstness, secondness, and thirdness. Roughly speaking, firstness is the indistinct quality of feeling, secondness is the reaction, and thirdness is the distinct form of representation or mediation that the reaction takes. Peirce's pragmatism is notable for distinguishing secondness from thirdness, assuming that thirdness is nearly impossible to share with others. In Ludwig's account, a "net of thirdness" would entail a socially-constructed sharing of representational categories.

<sup>16</sup> James goes on to define pragmatism's conception of truth as "like a snowball's growth": "these beliefs make us act, and as fast as they do so, they bring into sight or into existence new facts which re-determine the beliefs accordingly" (*Pragmatism* 584-585).

<sup>17</sup> Donald B. Gibson published a fascinating article on nature in *The Red Badge*, arguing in part that Crane "was the first American writer to write from the perspective that the human mind, consciousness, distances humans from nature" (97). In contrast with earlier writers and his contemporaries, Gibson writes, "Crane did not entertain the notion that any kind of sympathetic bond exists between humankind and nature" (97). He analyzes *Maggie* and *The Red Badge* as texts which enact themes like the 'survival of the fittest.'

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<sup>18</sup> Fleissner writes how critics either view this ending as “Henry heroically achieving a classic wartime manhood” or Crane “empty[ing] out this very ideal as a farce” (64). But she believes, as I do, that they are part of the same oscillating process: Henry finds cohesion only to lose it later in cyclical fashion.

<sup>19</sup> When asked how he depicted war so accurately, Crane responded in a variety of ways, including “I have never been in a battle, of course, and I believe that I got my sense of the rage of conflict on the football field” (qtd. in Wertheim and Sorrentino 228).

<sup>20</sup> Many agree the novel is based on the Battle of Chancellorsville (VA), from April 30 to May 6, 1863.

<sup>21</sup> Roosevelt had read an unpublished manuscript of Crane’s “A Man and Some Others,” in which an American sheepherder is killed by Mexicans (qtd. in Wertheim and Sorrentino 249).

### Chapter 3

#### “Everybody Says What?”: Crane’s Irony & Metafiction (1897-98)

The success of *The Red Badge of Courage* made Crane depressed. The novel, in his mind, was too long, and he feared the acclaim would make him lazy. “I am, mostly, afraid,” he wrote William Dean Howells. “Afraid that some small degree of talk will turn me ever so slightly from what I believe to be the pursuit of truth” (qtd. in Wertheim 192). As for his finances, Crane said, “I don’t care a snap for money until I put my hand in my pocket and find none there” (ibid. 217). In general, it is remarkable how attuned to the present moment Stephen Crane was. His favorite story of Ambrose Bierce’s was “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge” (1890) to which Crane said: “Nothing better exists. That story contains everything.” (The story takes place within a few seconds).<sup>1</sup> Judging from all his writing, his impressionism seemed less of a stylistic choice and more of an ingrained mode of operation – he almost certainly had attention-deficit disorder – which is why writers like Joseph Conrad said “he is *the only* impressionist and *only* an impressionist.”<sup>2</sup> This makes further sense if we recall his pride for his own poetry. Crane preferred his collection “The Black Riders” to *The Red Badge*, saying the poetry collection is “the more ambitious effort” whereas the latter “is a mere episode” or “an amplification” (qtd. in Wertheim 231). The writer, in Thomas Gullason’s words, had a “perpetual warfare with the novel form” (20). Frank Norris, on the other end of the spectrum, was “so conscious of the role of planned effect,” in Pizer’s recounting, that, for instance,

he criticized Doubleday and McClure for printing a chapter of *A Man’s Woman* with its close at the bottom of the right-hand page. “If the reader thinks there is more of the chapter to follow,” he wrote his English publisher, “it spoils the climactic effect and by

the time he has turned the page and found out his mistake the right psychological moment is gone.”<sup>3</sup>

Although Norris’s concern is admirable (and relatable) to most writers, his assumption is that everybody reads at a similar pace: Norris *as a writer* is also concerned with the reader *as a reader*. His project, to take this simple critique as an example, is to govern the writing *and* reading process: if his fiction succeeds, it succeeds in the way that he means it to succeed. In many ways, Norris hoped to achieve planned effects and responses from his readers, whereas Crane, as an impressionist and an ironist, offered his readers selections of events so that readers could interpret them in various ways – in this way, as I will discuss, he writes in a literary pragmatist tradition. Take, for instance, the following lines of dialogue from Crane’s novella “The Monster” (1898), when crowds pressure a certain character, Martha, to accept a specific fear which is governing the town:

The allied forces broke out in chorus: “But, Martha, everybody says so. Everybody says so.”

“Everybody says what?” (504)

In her blunt response, Martha represents the only agent who questions a town’s swirling rumor that Henry Johnson is the epitome of a gruesome, evil force. The novella, up to this point, is fueled by accumulating rumors defining this evil, but here, Crane repeats “everybody says so” so that the words have little effect on the reader: Martha, a stand-in for Crane, is bored by repetition, just as she is bored by crowds ranting and yelling and clucking about. Near the end of the novella, a second character starts a conversation by saying “I suppose we might as well admit at once that we’ve come to interfere in something which is none of our business” (505), a point which might as well preface every line of dialogue in the novella. If “The Monster” is, in its

aboutness, a sophisticated observation of a complex visual reality (a man who, because of an accident, no longer has a face), it is also stylistically revealing in the way it unfolds two simultaneous narratives: first, the rumors of dialogue which eventually build throughout the second half of the novel, attempting to define the scenes in overly conclusive gestures; and second, the larger canvas of Crane's multiple perspectives, highlighting a different character's point of view in nearly every chapter. If Martha's aloofness to ignorance and ignorance of what "everybody says" is a significant scene, it is because she chooses *not* to listen to the surrounding social world which, with every whispered rumor and representative leap of faith, distances itself from the truth. From a Jamesian perspective, the novella is Crane's critique of bigness, on the destructiveness of social narratives when they germinate from one person to the many, and is also emblematic of Crane's implicit thesis that adopting multiple lenses on single scenes is essential to maintaining a moral universe.<sup>4</sup> In a certain sense, Frank Norris is determining his narratives (whether he means to or not), whereas Crane, as both an impressionist and ironist, is doing the reverse.

One difference between "impressionism" and "irony" is that irony is more deliberate in how it affects the reader. If Crane's earlier writing evoked a murky but unmistakably faithless vision revealed through impressionistic prose (seen more easily from a pointillist perspective than from any singular reading of a singular text), then his later fiction revealed the same vision but more concretely through a deliberate metafictional form that stripped the fictional short story of its familiar groundings. This chapter, then, focuses more on irony than impressionism because irony is more of a deliberate tool that deconstructs the narrative process: I will argue that Crane's four masterpieces of 1897-1898 – "The Blue Hotel," "The Monster," "The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky," and "The Open Boat" – are the most canonical of his short fiction because of their

deconstructive status, because of their purpose in challenging common ways to read narrative at the turn of the century. In *Beyond Solidarity: Pragmatism and Difference in a Globalized World*, Giles Gunn relates the pragmatist project to what many theorists have said about “the aesthetic”:

Aesthetic texts . . . are less interested in confirming or interpreting the known than in extending the realm of the knowable. But the realm of the knowable they potentially extend is not one whose contents can be defined apart from the figures of its expression, and the figures of its expression allow for – and indeed invite – speculation as to their meaning precisely because of their critical relation to their own medium. (152-153)

I quote Gunn’s recounting of the aesthetic partially because his text is about pragmatism: the chapter from which it is taken, “The Pragmatics of the Aesthetic,” finds many correlations between pragmatism and the aesthetic thanks to his astute readings of Hannah Arendt, Martha Nussbaum, Richard Poirier, among others.<sup>5</sup> But definitions of the aesthetic are also helpful in tandem with Richard Rorty’s understanding of the role of philosophy and (as we’ll see) Patricia Waugh’s defense of the role of metafiction. Rorty, the first philosopher to be termed a “neopragmatist,” writes about the discipline of philosophy as part of his larger critique of language as a detached medium in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*: “Interesting philosophy is rarely an examination of the pros and cons of a thesis. Usually it is, implicitly or explicitly, a contest between an entrenched vocabulary which has become a nuisance and a half-formed new vocabulary which vaguely promises new things” (9). Rorty’s borrowed theories of language, what he calls his “Wittgensteinian attitude” derived from other thinkers, claims that “only sentences can be true, and that human beings make truths by making languages in which to phrase sentences” (15, 9). This “nonteleological view of intellectual history,” in Rorty’s words, is explained compellingly by Donald Davidson:

Davidson lets us think of the history of language, and thus of culture, as Darwin taught us to think of the history of a coral reef. Old metaphors are constantly dying off into literalness, and then serving as a platform and foil for new metaphors. This analogy lets us think of “our language” – that is, of the science and culture of twentieth-century Europe – as something that took shape as a result of a great number of sheer contingencies. Our language and our culture are as much a contingency, as much a result of thousands of small mutations finding niches (and millions of others finding no niches), as are the orchids and the anthropoids. (16)<sup>6</sup>

Rorty’s reading of Davidson’s view of language, of “new forms of life constantly killing off old forms – not to accomplish a higher purpose, but blindly” (19), is believable only if we consider language as not revealing eternal truths – in other words, if we consider language pragmatically rather than eternally. In a later chapter, Rorty contrasts the metaphysician with the ironist, asserting that while the metaphysician is concerned with finding how “the right description can make us free,” the ironist “has to say that our chances of freedom depend on historical contingencies which are only occasionally influenced by our self-redescriptions” (90). In this sense, language *as language* can be analyzed as emerging from historical moments for very particular reasons,<sup>7</sup> interesting if we take into account Patricia Waugh’s defense of metafiction as a style which peaks and ebbs at particular times for particular reasons. While Waugh states that metafiction is “a tendency or function inherent in *all* novels” – every work of fiction has a certain response, however antagonistic, towards its own form – she also enforces that its “fundamental and sustained opposition” to “the construction of a fictional illusion” is more likely to emerge during what she calls “‘crisis’ periods” in the history of the genre (42-44).

What, then, counts as a “crisis period”? Writing in 1984, she assumes that her historical era “has been singularly uncertain, insecure, self-questioning and culturally pluralistic” (44) – fairly vague terms, to be sure, but nevertheless helpful for thinking about how to contextualize various narrative forms. And although the smaller scope of her article does not include the sheer range of historical reasons for literary changes between 1880 and 1920 (which are briefly sketched in my introductory chapter), her most pertinent literary example is indeed the transition between the nineteenth-century and modernist “novel” at the turn of the twentieth century:

In eighteenth-and nineteenth-century fiction, the individual is always finally integrated into the social structure (usually through family relationships, marriage, birth or the ultimate dissolution of death). In modernist fiction the struggle for personal autonomy can be continued only through *opposition* to existing social institutions and conventions. This struggle necessarily involves individual alienation and often ends with mental dissolution. (47)

In this sense, Henry Fleming of *The Red Badge* (1895) is clearly a marginal figure in American literary history – he is both initiated, however awkwardly, into the army’s industrialized, forward movement, and at the same time, baffled by his purpose. The tension, as the previous chapter demonstrated, is never ultimately resolved, which indicates its fit within the naturalist genre. *The Red Badge* is also, aptly, only partially an ironic text – it is metafictional, but only to a certain extent (e.g. what do we make of the ending?). As Waugh states, metafictional writers at their best constantly turn inward to examine the relationship between fictional form and reality: their purpose is not to disregard reality but rather to *disregard the ways contemporary society is writing about reality*. The war they fight, then, is against “the language of the realistic novel which has sustained and endorsed such a view of reality” (47). Waugh further notes that they

“have come to focus on the notion that ‘everyday’ language endorses and sustains such power structures through a continuous process of naturalization whereby forms of oppression are constructed in apparently ‘innocent’ representations” (47).

Taken to that extent, what is Crane actually rebelling against at the turn of the century? There are no simple answers, but the fact that his devout parents used a metanarrative to explain and determine his lifestyle gives us something of a hint. Crane’s earliest texts, let us be reminded, are satires on all forms of pretension, and his earliest depictions of people were those in large, undistinguished groups, pointlessly wandering in circles. In relation to their speech, characters were either selfish and dumb as in *Maggie*, or rarely spoke meaningfully to one another as in *The Red Badge of Courage*. Crane’s third phase, however, is less focused on how individuals like Henry Fleming develop their thoughts in relation to the world than on what literally happens when dialogue is batted around to construct a social reality.<sup>8</sup> By drawing extremely fine lines between the construction of social narratives happening within the novel as opposed to the physical layouts and unfolding actions from multiple perspectives of individual scenes, Crane is essentially questioning narratives in a metafictional fashion.<sup>9</sup> As we’ll see in this chapter, Crane saves his biggest satires for literature itself.

Indeed, up to this point we’ve been considering Stephen Crane as a writer who reveals the limits of language within deterministic plotlines: we see, as the plots unfold, characters wrestling with being determined. In other words, though I am constantly contrasting Crane with Norris, we cannot ignore that Crane’s earlier texts are, like Norris’s, London’s, and Dreiser’s, relentlessly linear and rarely stray from a central group of characters – *The Red Badge*, for instance, never leaves the mind of Henry. (Because of Crane’s impressionism, if things are happening simultaneously within these works of fiction – say, different characters gossiping at

the same time – we are usually privy to one of those perspectives at a time.) Barbara Hochman reminds us that naturalism as a genre emphasizes “the conflict between the relentless movement of time and the characters’ impotent resistance to that movement”; because of this, the naturalist text “generally presents its sequence of events in straightforward chronological order, with little of that flare for subverting the surface coherence of plot that we associate with the fiction of modernism and postmodernism” (224). Crane’s later fiction, however, departs from this trend and plays with simultaneous narratives to further critique the way we tell stories. In this sense I am positioning him as a literary pragmatist questioning the purpose of language in ways similar to how certain literary critics, from Poirier to Levin to Grimstad, have done.<sup>10</sup> This inevitably requires us, too, to recognize literary pragmatism as sharing traits not only with metafiction but with the broader and more troublesome term “postmodernism” – more helpful if we forego, as some scholars have, pinning that label to the 1960s and considering it more loosely as a set of literary techniques used at different times throughout history.<sup>11</sup> Posnock helpfully writes that “postmodernism and pragmatism both renounce the pursuit of epistemological grounds and instead seek only to offer new forms of intellectual life, more varied and revisable cultural artifacts” (72). More specifically than Posnock and Grimstad, who, within their quotes, simply call for experimentation and a rejection of modeling based on past behavior, Ihab Hassan’s definition of postmodernism helps our cause when brought into understanding with literary pragmatism’s indeterminacy: calling postmodernism “a vast will to unmaking” into “indeterminacies,” he defines the postmodern project as filled with the following concepts: “ambiguity, discontinuity, heterodoxy, pluralism, randomness, revolt, perversion, [and] deformation” (586-593). Adding to that, Rorty describes the “generic trait” of the postmodern intellectual as an emphasis on “redescriptions” – his main agent of redescription is a historicist,

anti-essentialist, and ironist. Lastly, as Morris Dickstein notes, pragmatism appeals to “postmodernists seeking native roots for their critique of absolutes and universals” (1); both critique the certainty of foundational principles, which can be gleaned through certain literary techniques like irony, ambiguity, and pluralism, among others.

These traits are vague when clumped together – *relativism!* – but are significant in reference to the 1890s for two reasons. First, thanks to Stephen Crane, they had a fairly sudden spike in intensity: while irony was always prevalent in Mark Twain, Crane employed a version of Twain’s irony with his new impressionistic style, coupled with his equally shocking lack of faith in any metanarrative. (Many readers, as the previous two chapters reminded us, either had no idea what to make of Crane, or instantly delighted in his novelty of expression.<sup>12</sup>) Secondly, these traits can be contrasted in some ways from the later modernist movement. The modernists, as I will reiterate in the following chapter, see the relativistic nature of society as the *starting point* for their experiments with art, whereas Crane is a *revealer* of the relativistic nature of society – he smashes the glass, so to speak. In other words, modernists do not need “native roots” for their “critique of absolutes and universals” because they have already assumed the lack of absolutes and universals. In a somewhat connected fashion, one of modernism’s identifying moods is its nostalgia for earlier bedrocks of knowledge, something which Crane and the pragmatists did not share (if Crane ever sounds nostalgic, it is meant ironically). Dickstein writes that while pragmatism and modernism share many assumptions at the turn of the century – “the break-up of cultural and religious authority, the turn away from any simple or stable definition of truth, the shift from totalizing systems and unified narratives to a more fragmented plurality of perspectives” – their attitudes also differ in the following crucial respect:

But where many modernists, especially after World War I – the *Waste Land* generation – would portray the fragmentation of the modern world with an acrid nostalgia for earlier hierarchies, the pragmatists tend to be exuberant and constructive rather than pessimistic. The dark and apocalyptic strain of modernism held little appeal for them; the rupture with past certainties opened up new horizons. They saw “the quest for certainty” as the futile and misguided remnant of an outworn metaphysics, and they take the new, contingent, human-centered world as source of opportunity and possibility. (5)<sup>13</sup>

Like Dickstein and Diggins, I see the pragmatists as distinct, in many respects, from the modernists. My interest is in how Stephen Crane, who neither scholar writes about, fits in. I situate Crane’s fiction, with its metafictional critique of foundational certainties, on the cusp of the modernist movement, but not squarely a part of it due to its concentration on tearing down the scaffolding as opposed to constructing something unified in its aftermath (in this sense, Crane’s impressionism once again comes into play: he is not as willing to deploy categories to define what he is doing, but rather, offers myriad perspectives as guidance). In *The Renewal of Literature: Emersonian Reflections*, Poirier writes, “Literature generates its substance, its excitements, its rhetoric, and its plots often with the implicit intention, paradoxically, to get free of them and to restore itself to some preferred state of naturalness, authenticity, and simplicity” (11). Poirier’s original thesis, stemming from what he describes as an Emersonian tradition that gathers steam from William James and runs through William Carlos Williams, Alan Ginsberg, and Jack Kerouac, is in a sense ‘anti-academic’ about literature, or at least the way literature is commonly framed within late twentieth-century criticism: if Poirier values literature that makes arguments “against treating literature as a source of adaptable knowledge” (7), then his literary line of influence, indebted heavily to American pragmatism, ought to include Stephen Crane.

This chapter depicts “The Monster” and “The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky” as metafictional narratives which critique, in multiple ways, the act of storytelling. The final section, on “The Open Boat,” reveals how characters can – and should – use dialogue to their advantage within a determinist text. These three stories also represent platforms for Crane to tackle the determinism and pragmatism question addressed in previous parts of this study: does the world unfold according to pre-determined laws, or do characters have real agency? In the last pages of “The Blue Hotel” (1898), the fourth of Crane’s supposed late masterpieces (which I do not analyze in detail), the previous events in the story are questioned by one of the protagonists, the cerebral “Easterner,” who comes to the seemingly radical conclusion that “Every sin is the result of collaboration” and that “the apex of human movement” is responsible for unfortunate events (448). Crane’s obsession with games throughout so many of his writings – whether they be forms of gambling or recreational sports – are simultaneously a fixation upon chance-in-real-time: how final results are influenced by collective physical actions by various individuals. He is, at heart, fascinated in the differences between a) the unfolding of events, and b) the ways in which we represent them in their conclusions (in paying more attention to the former, he is taking a pragmatist stance). In “The Blue Hotel,” the “gambler” who is rightly tagged in the murder of the Swede to conclude the story is not, in the Easterner’s words, “a noun” but instead “a kind of adverb.” He concludes the text by saying, “Every sin is the result of a collaboration. We, five of us, have collaborated in the murder of this Swede” (448). “The Monster,” too, tells the detailed events that help explain the final conclusion, the fact that Henry Johnson has no face, just as “Yellow Sky” tells the complex unfoldings of a final simplistic conclusion, the lack of a shootout: all three stories, in a sense, tell two narratives, one that is falsely observed from the surface of people’s dialogue in soundbites – a Swede killed by a gambler; a faceless man

wrecking havoc; the lack of a shootout – and a more detailed recalling of events that complicate, and indeed critique, what people in the stories are saying. The famous last words of “The Open Boat,” “and they felt that they could then be interpreters,” signifies Crane’s achievement in displaying events-in-action which are not interpreted, until, presumably, after the story is over: unlike in “The Blue Hotel,” “The Monster,” and “Yellow Sky,” the four shipwrecked characters are at the cusp of utterance throughout the entirety of the narrative – the story’s motion is driven by action-and-dialogue working together so that false narratives (rumors by others) are not distracting the forward movement of the story. Crane’s implicit understanding of James’s pragmatism is clear in the sense that he admits that the men *will* become interpreters after the events mentioned: telling stories is valued, in a sense, and is naturally a part of how humans interact, but Crane’s thorough suggestion of the destructiveness of simplistic narratives told by many of his protagonists also signal a nineteenth century writer in postmodern clothing.

“The Monster” starts with the Roman numeral “I,” and then the sentence, “Little Jim was, for the time, engine Number 36, and he was making the run between Syracuse and Rochester” (449). Already the narrative begins in transition. The “I” also signals that Jim is only part and parcel of the narrative, as chapter “II” introduces Henry Johnson, and future chapters introduce more characters until we find that Jim and Henry start to become decentralized – crowds start to take over the story.

Meanwhile, characters themselves, in typical Crane fashion, live in their own worlds. While the son and his father, Dr. Trescott, occupy the same space in the first paragraph, they occupy different temporal zones as the man paces “slowly to and fro” with his lawn mower and the boy imagines himself as a train moving at an exacting pace: “He was fourteen minutes

behind time” (449). Henry Johnson, the family’s African-American coachman, is characterized as someone with “an eye for the demonstration,” as someone who says one thing but thinks another (456). While Jimmie and Henry seem to have an amicable relationship, they undoubtedly process the world around them differently. Until the eighth chapter, the novella feels oddly uncertain of its focus or simply unaware of its plot: the settings are established with a basic sense of clarity, characters are distinguished from weird perspectives, but nothing actually *happens* that constitutes needing to turn the page (and, as in previous works of Crane, dialogue seems to float behind action – people yell and repeat things to half-listeners). Not until the Trescotts’ house catches fire do all the members of the community circle the home and start collectively narrating what is happening. “Suddenly all roads led to Dr. Trescott’s,” the chapter begins. “The whole town flowed towards one point” (466). Indeed, we do not know the ‘aboutness’ of the novella until everybody starts talking about the same thing – the reader senses relief upon realizing what everybody has in common. And yet, the previous chapter had described Henry’s exact experience within the burning house attempting to save Jimmie. Unlike many action scenes in *The Red Badge*, this one is told with a clear sense of progression, likely because nobody else is yelling at this character: the colorful images and vivid imagery of Henry’s near-death is told in minute detail before he passes out.<sup>14</sup> Despite the surrealness of the scene, it is told in the most accurate prose of the novella, because Henry’s experience is private: the rest of the town is not privy to it.

The crowds around the fire, however, create the turning point of the novella: from here on out, two stories are narrated simultaneously, one of ‘rumors’ and one of ‘reality.’ The ninth chapter describes the chief of the fire department like a detached intellectual, “moving leisurely around the burning structure and surveying it, puffing meanwhile at a cigar,” and there is also

“considerable discussion” from children about which fire company got there first. At this stage, the scene is un-clarified, as each character deals with his or her impressions. But finally, a “great rumor” develops “among the crowds” concerning what happened: they decide that Henry accidentally knocked over a lamp and nearly killed Dr. Trescott and Jimmie. During these discussions, “Only the more courageous viewed closely the three figures veiled in yellow blankets” (470) – as if Crane were saying, ‘if only people actually saw what was in front of them.’ Crane deliberately places a physical reality juxtaposed next to a created rumor.

As the story continues, visual cues decrease as verbal ones increase. Previously, Henry was depicted as someone whose outward manner could reveal something different from his interior: he was a good actor, in a sense, who could convince people of things based on his visual cues, by the stories he could tell with his face. After the fire, that face “had simply been burned away” (471). The effect of this on the narrative is enormous: since his face represents a blank – and since a ‘blank face’ is something nearly impossible to comprehend, almost an oxymoron – others in “The Monster” try to write his narrative for him, to fill in the gaps which horrify them, to try to explain his future. He is seen as being “both leonine and impracticable,” and the result of him being impracticable convinces the local newspaper to announce his death (471). A judge later tells Trescott, ““No one wants to advance such ideas, but somehow I think that that poor fellow ought to die”” (473). Many pages go by from other characters’ perspectives of Henry while Henry is not actually seen, and the further we are from him, the more he is referred to as a “devil”: the narrator goes so far as to mention literature, describing how one person “gave a number of details, rendering his lie more splendid by a repetition of certain forms which he recalled from romances” (489).

Chapter 17 starts off painting a pretty picture of the Farragut family “spending their evening as usual on the little rickety porch.” Here is the second paragraph:

There appeared suddenly before the Farraguts a monster making a low and sweeping bow. There was an instant's pause, and then occurred something that resembled the effect of an upheaval of the earth's surface. The old woman hurled herself backward with a dreadful cry. Young Sim had been perched gracefully on a railing. At sight of the monster he simply fell over it to the ground. He made no sound, his eyes stuck out, his nerveless hands tried to grapple the rail to prevent a tumble, and then he vanished. Bella, blubbering, and with her hair suddenly and mysteriously disheveled, was crawling on her hands and knees fearsomely up the steps. (489)

This spectacularly-written passage is remarkable in its deterioration of description. There is simply a lack of knowledge of how to depict the scene. Blank words like “pause,” “no sound,” “nerveless,” and “vanished” dominate the passage, as does the wordy and vacant attempt at a description: “occurred something that resembled the effect of...” Most noticeably, there is no reliable chronology of events, as four characters occupy the same space but three seemingly die in place and in comically different ways. There is no reason why Sim's description takes three sentences whereas the old woman and Bella are described in one sentence each. The passage is deliberately awkward because a blank face implies the greatest sort of fear for these characters: a misunderstanding of how to process, let alone describe, what is in front of them. No language is possible in this paragraph because the family members cannot, even while conscious, agree upon a way to describe what they saw. A few scenes later, we hear from one character, ““They put Henry in jail because they didn't know what else to do with him, I guess”” (494). The novella ends with Henry being taken in by the Trescotts and cared for, at the expense of their high

standing in the town – the doctor’s reputation plummets and his wife stops receiving visitors. The final scene depicts the husband and wife mechanically counting cups on their table for visitors who are not, in fact, coming: they seem like naturalist character tropes, lifeless, stumbling, and repetitive in their ghostly dialogue with one another.

What’s unsaid in this novel is said by others, falsely, destructively, and ultimately. The town’s gossip has ruined the Trescott’s social standing because they cannot explain the scenario themselves. Because Henry’s non-face is hard to describe, others have described it for them by avoiding ambiguity and jumping to conclusions. Crane’s critique of these characters is clear, partially through his humor. In the Farragut scene described above, the chapter ends with the seemingly pointless sentence: “At the back of the house, Mrs. Farragut, who was of enormous weight, and who for eight years had done little more than sit in an arm-chair and describe her various ailments, had with speed and agility scaled a high board fence” (490). Coupled with the full scene on the porch, one can sense a laughing Crane: if this novella is partially told from an omniscient perspective like a typical naturalist novel, it occasionally seems to be mocking the townspeople, with the exceptions of Henry (whose perspective is given serious weight in the earlier chapters), and with Martha, who the narration describes as having a “great mind” (492).

Indeed, Martha is immediately depicted as being “single,” meaning she is not co-opted by outside influences and narratives. She doubts others as she “overrode all opponents with a sniff” and is considered “the most savage critic in town” (492-494). Notably, her lack of self-consciousness about her high standing prevents her from simply saying things to say things: “She was an engine, and the fact that she did not know that she was an engine contributed largely to the effect” (494). She becomes the only townspeople to shut down blind assumptions about Henry:

“Why, Martha,” said Carrie, in a reasoning tone, “you talk as if you wouldn’t be scared of him!”

“No more would I,” retorted Martha.

“O-oh, Martha, how you talk!” said Kate. “Why, the ideal Everybody’s afraid of him.”

Carrie was grinning. “You’ve never seen him, have you?” she asked, seductively.

“No,” admitted Martha.

“Well, then, how do you know that you wouldn’t be scared?”

Martha confronted her. “Have you ever seen him? No? Well, then, how do you know you *would* be scared?”

The allied forces broke out in chorus: “But, Martha, everybody says so. Everybody says so.”

“Everybody says what?” (504)

In simply admitting the uncertainty of a future scenario, Martha is considered a radical. Her surprising refusal to ‘assume’ something is testament to how powerful the collective rumors are that drive the story’s plot: she is the lone wolf who doubts the “allied forces” and therefore is representative of Crane’s doubtful perspective on story-telling cluttered with dialogue. Martha, in a sense, kills the story’s excitement in her failure to get excited about something: her answers are either rhetorical questions or dead-ends like “Nor would I.” She represents a black hole that does not progress the narrative’s linear plot, *per se*, but instead digs into individual moments with greater depth: instead of considering how events follow events in determined fashion, Crane’s representative character dwells upon what *actually* would happen in individual moments when not taken to their assumed extremes. James writes in *Pragmatism*, “But if you follow the pragmatic method, you cannot look on any such word as closing your quest. You must bring out

of each word its practical cash-value, set it at work within the stream of your experience. It appears less as a solution, then, than as a program for more work, and more particularly as an indication of the ways in which existing realities may be *changed*' (509). Ultimately what Martha is doing is not simply 'doubting' but doubting in order to change a static situation: she is the pragmatist character which *Maggie* could have used.

Indeed, Martha and the multiple perspectives around the simplified rumors offer the reader the chance to view the story as metafiction – as a critique of a fictionalized process happening within the story. Waugh reminds us that metafiction is “a tendency *within* the novel,” one “which operates through exaggeration of the tensions and oppositions inherent in all novels: of frame and frame-break, of technique and counter-technique, of construction and deconstruction of illusion” (50). Very few American stories do a greater job of exaggerating and mocking the story form as Crane’s “The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky.” As an opposite character type to Martha, Scratchy Wilson cannot possibly envision that he is *not* living in a story driven by assumed genre constraints. Scratchy is a drunk village idiot who walks around a stereotypical Western town looking for a gunfight: when he hears the old sheriff is in town, he assumes a ‘showdown.’ Crane, cognizant of Western pulp fiction, sets them across from each other, and then the sheriff, Jack Potter, announces he will not fight because he is getting married.<sup>15</sup> Scratchy’s response, besides a few bewildered repetitions of the word “married,” is to hang his head low: “He was like a creature allowed a glimpse of another world . . . it was merely that in the presence of this foreign condition he was a simple child of the earlier plains.” This ending, like many conclusions of Crane’s stories, ends with a thudded, awkward, deflated silence. Because Scratchy cannot hold two opposing ideas in his head – that his nemesis is no longer a nemesis because he is grown up – he becomes frozen, and the story simply stops (402). Crane’s

point here, then, is to reveal a potentially exciting story that we, as narrative creatures, are used to, and then collapsing it because it is not realistic enough. If “The Monster” and *Maggie* critique the telling of stories to begin with, “Yellow Sky” reveals that a literary genre is outworn.

The story, though, is not a simple satire, as its realism is depicted through its protagonist, Jack Potter, who is able to hold opposing ideas in his head as he is in the middle of a radical transition of his own. From the opening train ride, he seems comfortable (or at least aware of) his place in transition: the window reveals such “dignity of motion” in its view of a landscape “sweeping into the east, sweeping over the horizon” (391), and he explains to his wife, with excitement, that the train stops only four times across the state of Texas and that the “dazzling” parts of the coach include “sea-green figured velvet” and wood that “gleamed as darkly brilliant as the surface of a pool of oil” (392). Reflecting the title, “The Bride *Comes* to Yellow Sky,” the story’s opening scene lies on the cusp of transition: they are neither here nor there, but in seeing the landscape sweep past them – specifically in viewing how “the plains of Texas were pouring eastward” (391) – they are comfortable in this state of motion (title emphasis mine). These observations are repeated at the story’s conclusion when Potter in a sense wins the battle over Scratchy: before he convinces him to drop the gun, Potter’s “theories are unstiffened” (to borrow a line from William James): “[Potter] was stiffening and steadying, but yet somewhere at the back of his mind a vision of the Pullman floated: the sea-green figured velvet, the shining brass, silver, and glass, the wood that gleamed as darkly brilliant as the surface of a pool of oil – all the glory of the marriage, the environment of the new estate” (401). Liquid metaphors abound as Potter transforms from stiff to reveling in the ‘new.’ Scratchy, meanwhile, is flabbergasted by this “enforced reasoning” (402) because he has been painted as a character who does not grow, mature, and adapt. His dialogue resembles childish monologues, as he walks in circles, yells at

the sky and empty houses, and waits for a familiar drama to unfold. In his repetitive dialogue, Scratchy is not ‘of’ experience, nor is he socialized – in searching for “his ancient antagonist” while “chanting Apache scalp-music,” he is behaving as if within a dream: “The man was playing with this town; it was a toy for him” (400). Scratchy represents the ‘bad naturalist novel’ in his brute simplicity and focus upon ‘force’ and ‘power’ (he basically *is* Norris’s protagonist McTeague), whereas Potter indicates a retirement from this hard-worn genre and an acceptance of complexity. What happens when these two viewpoints come together in the end is evidence that complexity ‘wins out,’ in a sense.

However, the most innovative aspect of “Yellow Sky” is a third perspective – neither from Potter’s nor Scratchy’s visions, but rather, from the watchful eyes of an audience embedded within the narrative: the townspeople in a saloon. First, it is crucial to note that the 12-page story is split into four fairly equal sections:

I: POV from Potter and his wife entering Yellow Sky from the moving train;

II: POV from six men and a dog in the Weary Gentleman Saloon;

III: POV from the circling Scratchy Wilson outside the saloon;

IV: POV from all of the above outside the saloon, expecting a ‘shootout.’

A more typical story would have solely used parts I, III, and IV. So why does Crane include part II, especially when the six men and dog do not participate in the action? (In fact, we never see them, only sense them, in the final scene.) One vague answer would point to Crane’s consistent democratic impulse to give his narratives a full panoramic effect. The first section, for instance, while nominally focused upon Potter and his wife, also delved into the minds of porters and waiters watching them, and the third section oddly cared to explain that Scratchy’s shirt was “made principally by some Jewish women on the East Side of New York” and that the tops of his

boots were “of the kind beloved in winter by little sledding boys on the hillsides of New England” (398-399). This, however, is just Crane being Crane: with some exceptions in *The Red Badge*, it is rare to see him dwell upon one character’s psyche in meditative detail before jumping out to make tangential comparisons. The impulse to leap out of the geographical bounds of Texas in explaining Scratchy’s clothing is weird but typical of his desire to over-explain what something looks like in the present (a vertical description) at the expense of how the plot moves forward horizontally – not unlike Martha’s purpose in “The Monster.” In stretching the first sentence about Scratchy – the local Texan drunk who can only be understood by the stereotypes of the place he resides in – to where his clothes *originated*, not to mention within a clause in the middle of a sentence, Crane expands the democratic reach of his story so that the reader does not remain stiffly bound to the gravity of the local lore. Taken in its entirety, the sentence is remarkably original and odd: “A man in a maroon-colored flannel shirt, which had been purchased for purposes of decoration, and made principally by some Jewish women on the East Side of New York, rounded a corner and walked into the middle of the main street of Yellow Sky” (398-399). It is significant, too, that Crane ends this passage with him stepping upon the *middle* of the main street, because the juxtaposition of his moment ‘in the sun’ with the earlier input that his clothes were made by “some” people at some place or another reveals a comic sense of deflation: nobody, in fact, *should* be the center of any story, because we all are influenced by one another. (However, while Scratchy is ignorant of the origin of his clothes, Potter is continually described as being socially aware: in his mind he has committed an “extraordinary crime” by marrying before getting his friends’ approval: he has a “duty to his friends, or of their idea of his duty, or of an unspoken form which does not control men in these matters” [393]. Potter’s commitment to social awareness is ultimately what defines the

difference between him and Scratchy, since Potter's announcement that he will not fight is because of his commitment to his marriage.)

However, the question still remains: if wide panoramic perspectives representative of democratic variety are injected into sections I and III (with Potter being aware of them while Scratchy ignores them), what is the added purpose of Part II in the saloon? As the scene seems fairly staged – one could imagine its limited geography and counting of the players as appearing in a staged performance, especially after “[t]he two Mexicans at once set down their glasses and faded out of the rear entrance of the saloon” (396) – it seems that Crane is mocking audience expectations. The way action unfolds feels scripted: “The drummer’s tale was interrupted by a young man who suddenly appeared in the open door. He cried: ‘Scratchy Wilson’s drunk, and has turned loose with both hands’ . . . Immediately a solemn, chapel-like gloom was upon the place” (396). The drummer has a clear role to play as the receptor of knowledge from the others, who tell him the ‘exposition’ of the drama, answering his questions with lines like, “‘He goes out and fights Scratchy when he gets on one of these tears’” (397). Interestingly, Crane sets up two levels of audiences in this scene, and if we, the readers, are a third level, we can envision readers reading about a character (the drummer) asking questions to others (the three “Texans”), who, as further readers of what is happening outside, choose to board up the saloon in fear of the real ‘scene’ out there. The situation is set for violence outside – “‘He’s dead sure to shoot at [the door], and a bullet may come through’” (397) – but this is only really based upon dialogue we hear recited in unison by the Texans through several layers: indeed, they speak twice “in chorus” and the three are not individualized from one another. Like in “The Monster,” a second meta-narrative develops which tells us how people within the story *desire* to see the story unfold (and meanwhile, Crane is writing the ‘larger’ narrative which takes in more perspectives).

The drummer, in this scene, is confused as he is “swayed between the interest of a foreigner and a perception of personal danger” (397): he is unsure whether to ‘access the scene’ or to be an audience member. Finally he starts to communicate better with the Texans by reducing his assault of questions and starting to communicate via silence, which seems apt considering Crane is critiquing false narratives in this section: “The drummer wished to ask further questions, which were born of an increasing anxiety and bewilderment; but when he attempted them, the men merely looked at him in irritation and motioned him to remain silent” (397). This quote, and the following sentences in which the men communicate in quiet yet effective gestures with one another, reveal that the drummer’s thoughts and concerns do not apply to the situation (because they are interior and not visual), and that the sole way to connect is via gestures, which are, after all, ‘out’ in experience. Like in so much of Crane, sound seems to segregate the characters: the section concludes with them hearing Scratchy outside, which “instantly removed a bond from the men” (398).

So, before the expected ‘shootout’ in part IV, Crane tells the stories of three surrounding scenes happening more or less simultaneously (from the approaching train, the saloon, and the outdoors). If the middle of these previous scenes were omitted (the saloon), the final scene would simply display two characters walking into each other’s lives with no backdrop to glue their history together. In this sense Crane creates the tension of his narrative by using other characters on the sideline, but the obviousness (or, as Waugh would put it, “exaggeration”) of their ‘telling’ the situation suggests a mockery of them: of course, their build-up is essentially false blabber and, like in “The Monster,” created only because those doing the talking do not have a visual tablet to observe: the saloon is boarded up, and Henry’s face is a blank, so everybody makes everything up.

The crucial point here is that the rumors are created before the events are taking place: if, according to James, truth *happens* to an idea, then the reverse is happening here. Many of Crane's narratives are plays upon this theme: they critique how narratives themselves can swallow up the ultimate meaning of the event. Even *The Red Badge* is ostensibly about a character struggling with how to document the reality of his life in stories. Within the realm of metafiction, Crane's sense of irony, more than anything, distinguishes him from other naturalists. Brian Nicol, who defines the postmodern attitude as ironic, says that irony is a "non-literal usage of language, where what is said is contradicted by what is meant . . . or what is said is subverted by the particular context in which it is said." It "works," in his words, because

we are unconsciously aware that in language meanings are not fixed but contain other possible meanings. All words bear traces of previous and other potential uses, and their meaning changes depending on the tone of utterance or the particular context in which they are uttered. Irony is therefore not just cynical, not just a way of making fun of the world. It demonstrates a knowingness about how reality is ideologically constructed. (13)

As an impressionist, Crane creates literature which is necessarily ironic. If meanings are not "fixed" in language, then impressionism moves steadily along in a way that takes in both determinism (forward movement and dead characters) and pragmatism (the withholding of meaning). Time and again, then, Crane makes it clear that his characters have trouble communicating via language because words contain other possible meanings and are overly dependent upon their contexts. Like both the pragmatists and postmodernists, he sees words as containers with a limit to their use. However, "The Monster" and "Yellow Sky" play up this theme by addressing it not simply through dumb characters but at the level of narrative structure:

the four numbered sections of “Yellow Sky,” for instance, deliberately challenge the reader to question and interpret the events that are happening.

At the same time, the four numbered sections imply a familiarity with narrative form that must exist in order to mock the form. Waugh makes the crucial point that metafiction, as opposed to what she calls “aleatory writing,” must begin from “an extremely familiar base” so that they can “be comprehended through the old structures”: redundancy of style is needed to provide a sticking power which the fiction can then subvert.<sup>16</sup> “The Open Boat” is different from “Yellow Sky” in this respect, because whereas “Yellow Sky” begins with the assumption of a Western, “The Open Boat” begins with the shocking sentence “None of them knew the of the sky” (360). Indeed, if “The Monster” and “The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky” simply expose bad narratives, “The Open Boat” teases out the difference between the signifier and the signified. In this sense Crane’s metafictional stance can be attributed to the desire to break down Cartesian dualism, following less in the lines of systematic philosophers who try to detach reality from experience, and more in line with Rorty’s list of favorite thinkers who have attempted to break that dualism (and whom he links with pragmatism): Nietzsche, Heidegger, Derrida, James, Dewey, Goodman, Sellars, Putnam, and Davidson (10). One might also add Wittgenstein, who describes ‘doing philosophy,’ and, in a sense, prescribing ideologies through writing, as putting a “false interpretation” on human expression and “draw[ing] the queerest conclusions from [them].”<sup>17</sup> Indeed, in agreement with William James, who trusts (in Gunn’s words) “in the number and variety of [a text’s] arguments rather than in the decisiveness of any one of them” (86), this position inevitably becomes more democratic, open to different voices, reveling in chaos and playing amongst its varieties, in addition to remaining alert to moments which are suspended between the signifier and the signified.

The characters in “The Open Boat,” meanwhile, seem to take Crane’s ultimate premise that stories are distracting into such serious concern that their lives depend on it. The text is a thorough investigation of people trying to remain in the present by not letting their thoughts and words float away from their contextual surroundings. The key difference, compared with earlier works of Crane, is that these men must also depend *upon one another* to survive – to help each other see and speak and understand things in real time. Dewey writes, “the social participation affected by communication, through language and other tools, is the naturalistic link which does away with the often alleged necessity of dividing the objects of experience into two worlds, one physical and one ideal” (*Experience* xiii). The following passage is indicative of the story’s action when things go well for the protagonists:

“See it?” said the captain.

“No,” said the correspondent, slowly; “I didn’t see anything.”

“Look again,” said the captain. He pointed. “It’s exactly in that direction.”

At the top of another wave the correspondent did as he was bid, and this time his eyes chanced on a small, still thing on the edge of the swaying horizon. It was precisely like the point of a pin. It took an anxious eye to find a lighthouse so tiny. (365)

In such a tumultuously shifting landscape with north, south, east and west all muddled depending upon the millisecond in which the boat (the size of a bathtub) is swirled about, these characters must help each other see as their orientation is rapidly changing. The correspondent does not respond “I don’t see anything” but rather “I *didn’t* see anything,” meaning he is self-aware enough to realize his vision is already changing. Unlike in previous Crane texts, dialogue *does* drive action in this story, sometimes taking the place of action itself as we see what the characters see through their ongoing dialogue which does not waste words. From the very first

exchange, we get the sense these characters are speaking for survival as they obey each other's commands to steer in the proper direction. The captain's voice is "of a quality beyond oration" and their voices tend to merge so that we don't know who is speaking at certain points (361). The boat itself operates as a unifier, as in a passage when the correspondent speaks to the boat: "He mentioned to the boat in general how the amusement of rowing struck him, and the weary-faced oiler smiled in full sympathy" (367). At another point the narrator actually says, "The oiler or the correspondent took the oars again" (366). There is humor on the boat as well, but the humor is always shared between the members.

If these four men are bound to the boat and must operate as a single unit to survive, what happens when one of them acts selfishly? The narrative makes it pretty plain that speaking aloud about one's ills would be pointless. Crane does draw out a long paragraph saying what these men *could* hypothetically be thinking about in a quasi-religious tone (including a question of why "in the name of the seven mad gods who rule the sea" they could die so close to shore), but before this passage is revealed, the narrator says, "As for the reflections of the men, there was a great deal of rage in them. Perchance they might be formulated thus . . ." (369-70). In this specific case, Crane signals through "perchance" and "might" that he is not interested in dwelling in their thoughts because their thoughts are not driving the action of the story in pragmatic fashion. When, a few pages later, one of the characters – we don't know who – actually uses some of the exact panicked words of the previously described passage within a quoted paragraph ending in a question mark, the story's next few sentences look, curiously, like this:

The patient captain, drooped over the water-jar, was sometimes obliged to speak to the oarsman.

"Keep her head up! Keep her head up!"

“Keep her head up, sir.” The voices were heavy and low.

This was surely a quiet evening. (374)

The reader, then, is unsure if the previous panicked babbling, despite being in quotation marks, is in a singular character’s head, in all their heads, or is actually verbalized aloud to the others who are ignoring it. The point is, in a story with a heavy naturalist premise, the sense of retrospective questioning is almost overbearingly ignored by other characters: perhaps, the story is suggesting, determinism and pragmatism share a common language of ignoring hypothetical introspection in favor of action which moves characters’ lives forward. One of James’s oft-quoted lines from *The Principles of Psychology* drives this point home:

Every time a resolve or a fine glow of feeling evaporates without bearing practical fruit is worse than a chance lost; it works so as positively to hinder future resolutions and emotions from taking the normal path of discharge. There is no more contemptible type of human character than that of the nerveless sentimentalist and dreamer, who spends his life in a weltering sea of sensibility and emotion, but who never does a manly concrete deed. . . . The habit of excessive novel-reading and theatre-going will produce true monsters in this line. (125-126)

James not only reinforces the lack of action that may happen in these moments, but, more crucially, highlights the *habits* which form to block future resolutions and emotions from “taking the normal path of discharge.” The correspondent later finds himself near death, as we are given the following sentences: “He thought: ‘I am going to drown? Can it be possible? Can it be possible? Can it be possible?’ . . . But later a wave perhaps whirled him out of this small deadly current” (384). The text, in this instance, shows the exacerbating effects of words constructing words, constructing words, constructing words . . . all of a sudden, the character is stuck in a

metaphorical whirlpool, or Jennifer Fleissner's "moment of American naturalism" characterized by "arrested moment" (31): the correspondent is momentarily – in the broader context of my study – riding on Crane's unicycle, Fisher's ferris wheel, or Sister Carrie's rocking-chair. He is caught in a deadly cycle of repetition because he cannot find another vantage point to describe his situation.

However, the destructive habits which start to form are angrily broken up by other characters on the boat – their anger, it seems, is helpful. The following two paragraphs appear like this, and I am including the transition from chapter IV to V in the quote:

The cook's head was on a thwart, and he looked without interest at the water under his nose. He was deep in other scenes. Finally he spoke. "Billie," he murmured dreamfully, "what kind of pie do you like best?"

## V

"Pie!" said the oiler and the correspondent, agitatedly. "Don't talk about those things, blast you!" (374)

Why does Crane place a chapter break in the middle of a dialogue? One explanation could be that, like in the previously-quoted passage, the break indicates that others do not listen to – or deliberately ignore – the person speaking about something trivial to the survival of the boat: the end of the chapter signals that the cook said something boring and unessential to be 'affirmed' by the others (and the story frequently has tiny affirmations – synonyms of 'roger' – within dialogue). Indeed, the cook being in "other scenes" is so offensive/boring/impractical to the others (and, presumably, to the reader) that a chapter break seems warranted in order to reflect the mood on the boat. The action, instead, must move forward. James reminds us that beliefs, if they *are* beliefs, "make us act":

. . . and as fast as they do so, they bring into sight or into existence new facts which re-determine the beliefs accordingly. So the whole coil and ball of truth, as it rolls up, is the product of a double influence. Truths emerge from facts; but they dip forward into facts again and add to them; which facts again create or reveal new truth (the word is indifferent) and so on indefinitely. The ‘facts’ themselves meanwhile are not *true*. They simply *are*. Truth is the function of the beliefs that start and terminate among them. (*Pragmatism* 584-585).

James once again explains Crane’s concern with his characters – that their dialogue produces action in-turn (in this case, through productive dialogue). But Crane also continues to critique stereotypical storytelling in “The Open Boat” by choosing to designate chapter numbers which appear jilted and ready to crash. Like the buildup-and-deflation of “Yellow Sky,” “The Open Boat” mocks the story form by simply running one chapter’s ending fluidly into the opening of the next, thereby making the reader assume the story’s form is about as flimsy as the boat the protagonists are depending upon. The characters themselves, who keep the plot moving by yelling directions at one another, are dependent upon how well they speak to one another in a common language, and when they do not, their survival – and the story’s form – starts to crumble.

To keep from collapsing, dialogue must be connected to the movements of the body. After all, this is a naturalist story, where we are given the occasional omniscient rhetoric like, “When it occurs to a man that nature does not regard him as important . . . he at first wishes to throw bricks at the temple, and he hates deeply the fact that there are no bricks and no temples” (377). Nature is depicted as “indifferent, flatly indifferent” (381). And so characters themselves are defined by their physical limits – if there is a ‘plan’ at stake, for instance, the plan is based on

what the body can and cannot do: in this case, “[t]he plan of the oiler and the correspondent was for one to row until he lost the ability, and then arouse the other” (375). The correspondent at a certain point tries to summon a thought, but the weight of his physical limits are what govern his mental state: “He tried to coerce his mind into thinking of it, but the mind was dominated at this time by the muscles, and the muscles said they did not care” (382). Near the end, the same character jumps into the sea and, upon hitting cold water, wrestles with whether it is permissible to *think* about the temperature or not – the passage suggests there has been a delayed decoding between the immediacy and distance of his thoughts in previous parts of the story, and that they are attempting to re-correspond here:

The January water was icy, and he reflected immediately that it was colder than he had expected to find it off the coast of Florida. This appeared to his dazed mind as a fact important enough to be noted at the time. The coldness of the water was sad; it was tragic. This fact was somehow mixed and confused with his opinion of his own situation so that it seemed almost a proper reason for tears. The water was cold. (383)

Earlier in the story, the narrator told us that “[v]iewed from a balcony, the whole thing would, doubtless, have been weirdly picturesque” but that “the men in the boat had no time to see it” (362). Early on, then, Crane suggests a metaphor in the making – an odd juxtaposition that could reveal a fascinating new vantage point for the characters. However, the story itself is mostly concerned with lines that seem to mock the later Hemingway – “The water was cold.” – because to think that way is to survive. The characters, in short, have no time for metaphor; they do not even know, as the opening line reminds us, the color of the sky. The correspondent is nearly brought to tears because he has forgotten what “cold” is, similar to how he will forget what dry land is at the end. The second-to-last sentence describes a mysterious “shape” which can only be

interpreted as the ‘story’ of what had just transpired dragging itself behind the characters, before they finally became “interpreters”: “The welcome of the land to the men from the sea was warm and generous; but a still and dripping shape was carried slowly up the beach, and the land’s welcome for it could only be the different and sinister hospitality of the grave” (385-86). The men of the boat lost a member, the able oiler, and the aboutness of their journey is just catching up to them now. Most of them survived, indeed, because they remained in the present, but this “shape” of the shady border between life and death – the aboutness of their story itself – will hover within them.

The concluding sentence, in its vague reference to waves, reveals a timelessness that suggests that this story (more than Crane’s others) is meant to be analyzed abstractly: “When it came night, the white waves paced to and fro in the moonlight, and the wind brought the sound of the great sea’s voice to the men on shore, and they felt that they could then be interpreters” (386). If the characters of *Maggie* interpret too much and the protagonist from *The Red Badge* toggles between interpreting and acting, then the heroes of “The Open Boat” are actors first and foremost – their interpreting will begin once the last sentence is over.

Stephen Crane died of tuberculosis on June 5, 1900. The last few years of his life were spent traveling and documenting wars – he was on battlefields in Cuba and Greece, and lived in England and Germany. He did everything, it seemed, except interpret too much. The claustrophobia of his post-*Red Badge* success – knowing that his friends, for instance, were “prepared” to find him “grown vain” – was his greatest horror. “Do you know,” he wrote Nellie Crouse in 1896, “I have succeeded in making a new kind of an idiot of myself. They had a winter party at Hartwood and after I had sat before twelve fire-places and drank 842 cups of tea, I said: ‘I shall escape.’”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Qtd. in Gullason 21.

<sup>2</sup> Qtd. in Stallman and Gilkes 155. Conrad's letter to Edward Garnett is dated December 5, 1897. He also observes that Crane was "strangely hopeless about himself" and that his thought is "concise, connected, never very deep – yet often startling."

<sup>3</sup> Norris's quote is from a letter to Grant Richards on May 25, 1900, drawn from Franklin D. Walker's collection *The Letters of Frank Norris* (56). Pizer's commentary is from his edited collection, *The Literary Criticism of Frank Norris* (46).

<sup>4</sup> As previously alluded to, Crane never had an ironclad moral sense, but his writing – both in his fiction and his letters – consistently warns that writing can be destructive to other people. One of his best lines, for instance, is in his unpublished article, "The Mexican Lower Classes": "The most worthless literature of the world," he writes, "has been that which has been written by the men of one nation concerning the men of another." He goes on to establish what he feels travel writing should (and should not) do: "It seems that a man must not devote himself for a time to attempts at psychological perception. He can be sure of two things, form and color. Let him see all he can but let him not sit in literary judgment on this or that manner of the people." The quotes both reinforce Crane's inherent impressionism and his awareness of the dangers of making general assumptions through categories in a way William James would find pleasing. *Tales, Sketches, and Reports*. From *The Works of Stephen Crane*, ed. Fredson Bowers, Volume 8, page 436.

<sup>5</sup> Gunn quotes Nussbaum's framing of the pleasure of reading as radically indeterminate, which she argues is the source of its value: "Interpreting a tragedy is a messier, less determinate, more mysterious matter than assessing a philosophical example; and even when the work has once been interpreted, it remains unexhausted, subject to reassessment, in a way that the [philosophical] example does not" (14). Gunn uses Nussbaum and others as a way to explain

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pragmatism's ethical function: he takes "such cultural work to be important not alone because it reveals, as was once assumed, an essential unity of being underlying all its expressions but also because it suggests – or can suggest – something of the greater diversity of life forms that can now be comprehended and accepted as at once recognizably human and also ethically significant" (149).

<sup>6</sup> Donald Davidson's theories of language (collected in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*) are a boon for thinkers following in the line of Wittgenstein, but, like many philosophers in that tradition, he avoids aligning himself with any particular camp. Joan Richardson's *A Natural History of Pragmatism*, as mentioned in my introductory chapter, makes more explicit connections between Darwinism and pragmatism.

<sup>7</sup> Walter Benn Michaels made this fairly obvious claim about the American naturalists in loud fashion in the 1980s, which led to his *The Gold Standard and the Logic of American Naturalism*, Lee Clark Mitchell's *Determined Fictions*, Amy Kaplan's *The Social Construction of American Realism*, and several other New Historicist studies discussed in my project.

<sup>8</sup> When I say "Crane's third phrase," I am borrowing Donald Pizer's helpful bracketing of Crane's career into three distinct phases (emblemized by *Maggie*, *The Red Badge*, and "The Open Boat," respectively). These phases progress from showing self-deluded characters to those who gain better self-awareness. Pizer writes, "'The Open Boat' thus suggests that Crane has come some distance from *Maggie*. We are still battered by life . . . But we can now understand this condition and, to some extent, through our understanding, lessen its effect on us, both physically and emotionally. We need not all be victimized by the human capacity for self-delusion; some of us have the capacity to mature, under pressure, to understanding" ("*The Red Badge of Courage*: 'Text, Theme, and Form'" 122).

<sup>9</sup> By "social narratives," I mean stories that groups of people pass on (typically, rumors). Crane despised crowds, a pattern noticeable in his earliest and latest writing alike. The publication of *The Red Badge* didn't help matters: as he once complained, "that disgraceful Red Badge is doing

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so very well that my importance has widened and everybody sits down and calmly waits to see me be a chump” (qtd. in Wertheim 207). Following the positive reception of the novel, he wrote the following life goal to Nellie Crouse: “So you think I am successful? Well I don’t know. Most people consider me successful. . . . But upon my soul I have lost all appetite for victory, as victory is defined by the mob. I will be glad if I can feel on my death-bed that my life has been just and kind according to my ability and that every particle of my little ridiculous stock of eloquence and wisdom has been applied for the benefit of my kind. . . . at any rate it means a life of labor and sorrow. . . . I do not even expect to do good. But I expect to make a sincere, desperate, lonely battle to remain true to my conception of my life and the way it should be lived” (qtd. in Wertheim 186-187).

<sup>10</sup> Grimstad, for instance, defines this style in both fiction and nonfiction as deliberately curious and experimental, offering “an account of the relation of literature to pragmatism as a function of the relation of experience to experiment,” or to “make concrete the transition from thinking of experience as the squaring of inner and outer matters to thinking as a process continued in composition” (2). The best definition of this style, however, remains in Richard Poirier’s *The Renewal of Literature: Emersonian Reflections*, which I will reference later in the text.

<sup>11</sup> See, as one of several examples, *Victorian Afterlife: Postmodern Culture Rewrites the Nineteenth Century* (Kucich, John, and Dianne F. Sadoff, ed.: Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).

<sup>12</sup> To add yet another example, Crane’s style was so obviously original that writers acknowledged how easy he was to parody – and meant this as a compliment. In 1898, a reviewer for *The Criterion* wrote the following: “The fact that Mr. Stephen Crane is one of the most easily derided and parodied of our contemporary writers is almost a proof that he is a genius of the first order. He has been convicted of grammatical errors that compelled one to doubt the existence of a proof-reader in the manufacture of his books. He has been found guilty of waving a scarlet paint bucket around his head, and painting literature vermillion. . . . but who have we whose writers are so full of blood and bones?” (qtd. in Monteiro 163).

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<sup>13</sup> Dickstein is partially referencing John Patrick Diggins's *The Promise of Pragmatism: Modernism and the Crisis of Knowledge and Authority*.

<sup>14</sup> For instance: "Johnson halted for a moment on the threshold. . . . Then he rushed across the room. An orange-colored flame leaped like a panther at the lavender trousers. This animal bit deeply into Johnson. There was an explosion at one side, and suddenly before him there reared a delicate, trembling sapphire shape like a fairy lady" (465). I've offered only a sampling of this scene for the sake of brevity.

<sup>15</sup> Robertson clarifies that Crane's western short stories were not based on his actual experiences in the West (like his journalism was), but rather with the genre of the western. His stories were set within "a space defined not by geography or history but by the literary formulas of the dime novel and commercial popular culture," and rely on "formulaic literary depictions of situations that by 1895 were not to be found by a touring journalist" (121).

<sup>16</sup> Waugh goes on to say that experimental fiction "of the aleatory variety eschews such redundancy by simply ignoring the conventions of literary tradition. Such texts set out to resist the normal processes of reading, memory and understanding, but without redundancy, texts are read and forgotten." The "problem" she notices with aleatory writers – or writers who "attempt authentically to represent conditions of rapid social change" – is that they often produce works of art "which are ephemeral and even trivial" (48).

<sup>17</sup> See Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* (1976), 79.

<sup>18</sup> Qtd. in Wertheim 207.

Afterword:

Crane at the *Fin de Siècle*

Stephen Crane's brief writing career reflected many of the tensions inherent in the similarly brief genre of naturalism. (Jennifer Fleissner's study is subtitled "The Moment of American Naturalism" for a reason.) The aim of this Afterword is to clarify Crane's relationship to and distinction from other naturalists as well as the modernists. While I have already explored how Crane's writing embodies a deterministic yet pragmatic style that reveals the limits of human understanding at the turn of the century, this chapter considers his style alongside, first, Henry James and Henry Adams; second, Theodore Dreiser; and third, the modernists. To keep the purview of this entire study limited to Crane, I'd like to note that while the sections are useful to the extent that they identify glimpses and echoes of Crane in other writers, they admittedly function as sites of suggestiveness as opposed to exhaustive and finalized analyses.

The first section, "Three Henrys," places Crane's protagonist Fleming in relation to James and Adams, as all three grapple with crises of representation at the turn of the century. I argue that Henry James's acceptance of "curiosity" in his memoirs contrasts with Henry Adams's general discomfort with it in *The Education*, though Adams did occasionally intimate the value of curiosity in ways he was perhaps unaware of, a point which I will return to shortly. Crane's Fleming of *The Red Badge* is closer in alignment to Adams, underscoring the crucial relationship between Adams's doubts and the genre of naturalism. This section concludes with an analytic summary of Crane's writing that crystallizes how his pessimistic attitude differed from James's.

I lead with a comparison of the “three Henrys” because the subsequent sections begin to expand beyond Crane. Theodore Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie* (1900) employs a style reflective of Crane’s determinism, pragmatism, and impressionism, and while it obviously differs in many other respects (e.g. the writing is not metafictional), Dreiser’s naturalist novel offers an enlightening echo of Crane’s literary emphasis on surfaces over meanings. Moreover, unlike the works in Crane’s corpus, Dreiser’s book is more pragmatic in the way it unfolds transitional processes – Crane’s metafiction, which often made a mockery of cause-and-effect, differs from Dreiser’s attention to the value of seeing transition unfold in action. This section, titled “Simply on the Surface,” is given more space than the first because it helps us understand what literary naturalism is capable of through its prose style, thanks to Crane’s impressionistic influence. Lastly, the section “No Downward Glances” navigates the parameters of the naturalist genre in order to ascertain its overall intent from my point of view. Though admittedly, modernism lies beyond my area of expertise, I suggest ways we might distinguish between modernism and naturalism in order to clarify the goals of the naturalists. Drawing from many scholars, including the neopragmatist Rorty, I come to the conclusion that Crane’s role in the 1890s was, in many respects, more postmodernist than modernist in attitude – in whatever degree those terms can be defined.

Finally, I hope my Afterword clarifies the murkiness of my dissertation’s title, *The Mirrors of Naturalism*. If literature as a medium were symbolized by a single pane of glass, Crane did not see that pane as offering either transparency or a reflection. To be transparent would mean the pane would simply reveal, exactly, what is on the other side of the glass (an exacting method of realism); to be reflective would mean the pane would reproduce Stephen Crane himself (centralizing his psychology and his vision). Both offer categorical viewpoints:

one, to “reality” on the other side, untarnished by the writer’s vision; the other, to the writer’s purposive intent, the singular, unified artistry of Stephen Crane himself. But Crane, the modest impressionist, preferred to break the glass altogether, creating myriad viewpoints littered on the ground. Then he walked away. His prose thoroughly switches perspectives so that the reader glimpses just that – a series of glimpses and sparks, varying ways of interpreting the world through irony and impressionism. If earlier writing of the nineteenth century deliberately sought to construct wholes out of fragments, and if much of the writing of the twentieth century – including most works of modernism – sought to *do* something about those fragments, then Stephen Crane’s role, as glass-smasher, was properly situated in between both of those modes.

### Three Henrys

Henry James was not happy when Stephen Crane died. “What a brutal needless extinction,” he lamented, “what an unmitigated unredeemed catastrophe! I think of him with such a sense of possibilities & powers.”<sup>1</sup> Let it be noted that James clarified that he *thinks* of him in those terms instead of saying, outright, that Crane *had* those qualities. The distinction places a crucial emphasis on his pragmatism – James was, after all, just logging his thoughts at the present moment.

At the turn of the century, of course, nobody enacted the subtleties of the emerging field of psychology more presciently than William James’s younger brother, especially because of the writer’s ability to be, in Ross Posnock’s words, “rooted in this moment of transition, which is to say that the experience of being rooted is precisely what his daily life calls into question” (167). In all his memoirs, James wrote as if his environment were constantly changing his perceptions;

his sense of himself was not *non-existent* but rather always in a process of becoming, and hence impossible to categorize, paraphrase, or conceptualize in any way besides how it was processed at the moment. The effects of this point of view are, then, virtually endless. “The great thing,” he wrote to his brother William, “is to be *saturated* with something,” and in 1904, in Posnock’s words, “saturation takes the form of nonidentity, of refusing to stay within genteel boundaries or to resolve the tension of subject and object, stranger and native, detachment and entanglement” (76).<sup>2</sup> Crucially, saturation does not mean dwelling within one’s private psyche, but rather engaging with one’s surrounding environment: Posnock writes that the tenuous play, enacted best by James, is given its greatest critical explanation by Adorno’s immanent critique – as opposed to Marxist and deconstructive strategies, which in his opinion use “the insights of contemporary theory against James” [76].<sup>3</sup> When specifically discussing James’s prose in his memoirs, he conveys a few effects of that style:

By making his point of view that of a marginal, mimetic self, James practices a strategy of defamiliarization that deliberately estranges his audience’s expectations and orthodoxies. James celebrates vagueness, envy, belatedness, and imitation, qualities conventionally believed to be destructive of the self’s integrity. But it is precisely the assumption that the self possesses integrity – a closed, unified stability – that is called into question. The countermodel he offers – a curious, “gaping” self perpetually in “crisis,” vibrating to external stimuli – recalls Whitman, but without the poet’s immunity from embarrassment. Rather, James seems to cherish embarrassment as a dissonance constitutive of his fallibilistic selfhood. (177)

Posnock contrasts James with Whitman, assuming the latter would be embarrassed at this condition of nonidentity, but a similar contrast can be made between him and Henry Fleming,

because the latter, as a fictional character, oscillates between ways of knowing how to know oneself. As we saw in Chapter Two, Fleming ping-pongs from drawing a concrete line around his identity to assuming that he is a drop in the army's bucket. Fleming *is* embarrassed by his condition, which is why he does not grow to maturity – he is not able to employ defamiliarization and merge into his army without returning afterward to the opposing pole. So is Henry Adams, for the most part, whose *Education* (1907) is in many ways about that very struggle to begin with. In *The Promise of Pragmatism*, John Patrick Diggins specifically defines Adams as suffering from “metaphysical wondersickness,” whereas John Dewey (Diggins’s exemplar of the pragmatist movement) “taught Americans how to swim on the surface and how to conceive nature for the purpose of using it.” Adams, writes Diggins, assumed in his early years that “mind was a truth-knowing faculty, and he ended up drowning in his own doubts” (21).

However, in *The Education*, Henry Adams also reveals moments where he values James’s celebration of a non-definitive state of mind – a mind which T.S. Eliot described in his obituary for Henry James as “so fine that no idea could violate it.”<sup>4</sup> If much of Adams’s canonical text is about finding the appropriate forms of knowledge that adequately apply to the befuddling modern world, there are other more subtle moments – some of the best in the book – in which he fancies the uncategorizable. Harvard provided a good education, in his words, because despite it teaching very little, “and that little ill,” it still “left the mind open, free from bias, ignorant of facts, but docile. The graduate had few strong prejudices. He knew little, but his mind remained supple, ready to receive knowledge” (55). Adams is not writing sarcastically; like a good pragmatist, he truly values the education which is complete when, ironically, the mind becomes *ready* to receive knowledge. In a similar way, he values his father’s political

temperament, not because Charles Francis Adams (the son of John Quincy Adams and grandson of John Adams) had qualities of boldness or imagination like other members of his family, but rather because his mind “worked with singular perfection, admirable self-restraint, and instinctive mastery of form.” Self-restraint is the quality that Henry Adams seems most to fancy:

Charles Francis Adams was singular for mental poise – absence of self-assertion or self-consciousness – the faculty of standing apart without seeming aware that he was alone – a balance of mind and temper that neither challenged nor avoided notice, nor admitted question of superiority or inferiority, of jealousy, of personal motives, from any source, even under great pressure. (27)

As for his own writing, Henry Adams disparaged his college efforts as “thin, commonplace, feeble,” but in a way that reflects the qualities he previously admired in his father: indeed, in lines that sound like *Bartleby*, he “found that he could not be this – or that – or the other; always precisely the things he wanted to be . . . when he had nothing to say, he could not say it, and he found that he had very little to say at best” (66). Adams, quibbling over how to describe a subject searching for form, essentially enacts James’s curiosity, though unconsciously and without joy. Yet the fact that Adams “felt no doubt that [his writing] was in reality just what he thought of it” means that his writing, like his father’s “poise,” *lacks* a certain something that is, like his appreciation for Harvard, “supple” and “ready to receive knowledge.” Sami Ludwig writes, “though [William James] clearly values concepts as the necessary vehicles of thought and representation in general, he insists that they do not signify anything in themselves when treated beyond their cognitive referentiality” (47). Adams, in spots, attempted to treat concepts beyond their cognitive referentiality, but he is less consistent in his appreciation of his own style than Henry James was (and than Henry Fleming ever could be).

Adams might have agreed more with H.G. Dwight and a host of other critics on the confounding nature of Henry James's prose style at the turn of the century. Dwight wrote in 1907 that there is "an unmannerly levity about [him], as of him who should go into great company whistling, with his hands in his pockets. We relish the grand air better, and a proper sense of one's responsibilities" (qtd. in Gard 444).<sup>5</sup> Likewise, a reviewer of *The Golden Bowl* said James gives the reader an "endless chain of suggested improprieties . . . a tissue of hideous, nameless complications" (435). W.C. Brownell describes James's work as "an unfolding, a laying bare, but not a putting together. The imagination to which it is due is too tintured with curiosity to be truly constructive. . . . His curiosity is not merely impartial, but excessive" (411, 418).<sup>6</sup> None of these responses are surprising after reading a sample page of *The American Scene* (1907); of larger importance is how these critics appear desperate to find a cultural authority from a stable and distinct point of view at the *fin de siècle*. Adams could not find it, unless his frantic search, like Fleming's, was the stable point of view of the era. Henry James, the master, embodied the search in his acceptance of curiosity, something which the other Henrys were still in the process of discovering.

This Afterword, then, starts with the assumption that the writer of Henry Fleming – our very own Stephen Crane – was closer in attitude to Henry Adams than Henry James. Crane was a pessimist through-and-through. He revealed all the angles he possibly could from what he considered to be his limited perspective. In so doing, he did not assume that society would fix itself. One wonders whether, fourteen years after his death, he would have been shocked at the outbreak of The Great War. Instead, his life cut short in 1900, Crane's contributions to literature left readers with an unmasking of the traditional role of literature to reveal meanings. He did this by mocking narrative form and through defining himself (indirectly of course) as an ironist. As

the first American naturalist who was, by definition, interested in the confusing and – mostly destructive – relationship between nature and people, Crane was specifically interested in language's role in the world. First, he assumed that people cannot function in nature to begin with (as evidenced, early on, by his Sullivan County sketches), partially because they can barely communicate effectively (“The King’s Favor”), so they appear as naturally arrogant creatures who put on false airs (Atlantic sketches). When especially weak, they over-rely upon destructive codes like religion and gender stereotypes (*Maggie*), and even at their strongest and most self-assured, they have difficulty negotiating between their language and their physical actions (*The Red Badge*). In the rare times communication does work amongst individuals, it is harmful to unidentifiable ‘others’ in society (“The Monster”), typically because language only works collectively in ways people have previously been trained to understand, chiefly through narrative traditions which are difficult to break out of (“Yellow Sky”). Only when taking the limits of language seriously (“The Open Boat”) or in finding ways to act and improvise through language experimentally (as evidenced by his metafiction) can we function properly, which means, like Henry James, being alert to the contingencies of language.

Crane broke the glass, leaving mirroring shards at his feet, but he had few answers. However, his impressionistic style, both deterministic and pragmatic, offered vantage points from which to view humanity's failure to recognize itself at the turn of the century. I turn to Dreiser's prose, also deterministic and pragmatic, to help solidify our understanding of literary naturalism before we finally consider the differences between naturalism and modernism.

Simply on the Surface: Dreiser's Impressionism in *Sister Carrie*

In many ways, Theodore Dreiser provides an interesting comparison with Crane. Unlike the intellectuals Norris and James, Crane and Dreiser were journalists first, and as journalists were interested in the “facts” of life before the ideas.<sup>7</sup> While *Sister Carrie* (1900) does not reduce the narrative method to metafiction in ways that Crane’s latest work did, the book shares many similarities to Crane’s texts in its dismantling of truths and its valuing of impressionist expressions. Crane’s impressionism, which both documents deterministic pressure and pragmatic resistance, is shared by Dreiser, but also, like Henry James’s autobiographical prose, Dreiser’s style was so subsumed with its surroundings that his presence, as author, is difficult for critics to grasp. In this respect I agree with Richard Poirier when he defends the particular invisibility of Dreiser’s prose: “Like other admirers of Dreiser, I am compelled by the very fluctuations and unsteadiness of his voice, revealing as it does the extraordinary degree to which he can be intimidated by the Things he describes” (*World* 250). Poirier’s reflection makes particular sense if we simply observe the novel’s first sentence:

When Caroline Meeber boarded the afternoon train for Chicago, her total outfit consisted of a small trunk, a cheap imitation alligator-skin satchel, a small lunch in a paper box, and a yellow leather snap purse, containing her ticket, a scrap of paper with her sister’s address in Van Buren Street, and four dollars in money. (1)

Generally, first sentences suggest ways to read their novels. This one offers the close-reader several rough suggestions: first, that the author perhaps did not know where his novel was going, as the novel’s action stalls almost immediately by distracting itself with a weighty, seemingly irrelevant list of objects which meander in various directions; secondly, that the author purposefully wants us to read these objects as ‘clues’ for how to read *Carrie*, suggesting that her ‘things’ tell us more about her than her physicality or her thoughts; and thirdly, that neither

Carrie nor her things are worth interpreting yet because the novel has, simply, just begun. All three interpretations would be roughly correct and indicative of *Sister Carrie* as a whole: this is a novel that Dreiser began writing without a plan,<sup>8</sup> which places an incredible amount of importance upon things, and which refuses to be close-read at the sentence level because the novel is concerned not with its individual pieces but with its unfolding processes. As William James said, “All real units of experience *overlap*.”<sup>9</sup> These observations, in addition the novel’s constant preoccupation with transition, explain its pragmatic techniques which work against typical reductive readings of Dreiser.<sup>10</sup> *Sister Carrie* is not, as so many critics have said, a flawed masterpiece due to its limited consciousness on behalf of its characters; it is also an impressionist and pragmatic text which initially imbues its characters with flat portraits in order to see them accumulate knowledge through their surroundings and gain texture by novel’s end. Crucially, as we will see, Carrie’s ascension to stardom is not an accident of ‘luck’ in a determinist world, as a surface reading would suggest, but is due to her adaptive qualities stemming from her role as an actor, as she consistently morphs her outer appearance to fit the mold of the present. In this sense, Dreiser enacts the unfolding process of narrative more clearly than Crane, who, as the previous chapter made clear, was more disinterested in sustaining attention in the fictional form (who instead turned to metafiction). In this sense, Dreiser’s text is more ‘pragmatic’ than Crane’s in its attention paid to unfolding transitions.<sup>11</sup>

*Sister Carrie*’s first sentence rightly appears as though it came from a writer who admitted to the unplanned composition of his novel. Describing his initial venture, Dreiser has famously written, “I took a piece of yellow paper and to please [a friend] wrote down a title at random – *Sister Carrie* – and began” (qtd. in Riggio xi). But it also explains Dreiser’s interest in transformation, as this is not a book that tries to remain consistent in its values. Weighing against

the critical establishment, his remark in his oft-quoted piece “True Art Speaks Plainly” (1903) defends *Sister Carrie* against those desiring a more consistently moral novel: “It matters not how the tongues of the critics may wag . . . the business of the author, as well as of other workers upon this earth, is to say what he knows to be true, and, having said as much, to abide the result with patience” (473). Crane, writing the editor of *Demorest’s Family Magazine* in 1896, wrote something similar, though slightly less vague: “I have tried to observe closely, and to set down what I have seen in the simplest and most concise way. I have been very careful not to let any theories or pet ideas of my own be seen in my writing” (qtd. in Wertheim 230). While Dreiser’s statement might simply imply – more so than Crane’s – a defense of sloppy writing emphasizing an inductive approach to the craft, it aligns with Henry James’s defense of good fiction as feeling random, unedited, and unencumbered by form or theme. In “The Art of Fiction,” James writes,

Catching the very note and trick, the strange irregular rhythm of life, that is the attempt whose strenuous force keeps Fiction upon her feet. In proportion as in what she offers us we see life *without* rearrangement do we feel that we are touching the truth; in proportion as we see it *with* rearrangement do we feel that we are being put off with a substitute, a compromise and convention. (39)

“Rearrangement” is precisely what Dreiser was trying to avoid in depicting Carrie’s journeying through the text. Consistently, the novel does not try to portray Carrie herself, nor objects essential to her for the remainder of the novel, but rather objects she will have *lost* or *used* by the next day: food, money, luggage, and a slip of paper with an address. In a prescient analysis, Stanley Corkin writes, “[*Sister Carrie*] requires that the reader associate these objects, in all their resonance, with the book’s human characters. If the reader fails to perform these operations, the book deteriorates into a morass of description” (90).<sup>12</sup> Let the reader, too, be reminded from my

introductory chapter that the deterministic and pragmatic styles agree that subjects are determined, to a large extent, by their environment. The narrator consistently describes Carrie in ways which only skim the surface of her interiority: indeed, she possesses a mind “rudimentary in its power of observation and analysis” (2). Carrie is instead ‘termed’ by others. Her first interactions with her first lover, Drouet, show her being acted upon:

“That,” said a voice in her ear, “is one of the prettiest little resorts in Wisconsin.”

“Is it?” she answered nervously.

The train was just pulling out of Waukesha. For some time she had been conscious of a man behind. She felt him observing her mass of hair. He had been fidgeting, and with natural intuition she felt a certain interest growing in that quarter. (2)

At this early stage, Carrie reacts before she judges: her dialogue is not pre-considered but rather impulsive, reflective of her intuition. Interestingly, Dreiser delays the exposition of her consciousness of Drouet until *after* their dialogue, a flourish which is both rare in a novel that is so chronologically linear and notable for further highlighting a lack of interest in Carrie’s consciousness – by, in a sense, skimming over it in favor of the more physical developments which drive the story’s action. Blanche Gelfant writes, “As a naturalistic novel, *Sister Carrie* dramatized biological determinism through a plot that made every action consequential” (179). Dreiser’s impressionism, then, seems to enact both pragmatism and determinism, in ways similar to Crane. Indeed, *Sister Carrie* employs a relentlessly determinist plotline in which actions determine character traits, and not vice-versa. The protagonist’s reactions to being watched describe no overt feelings as she simply “felt him observing her mass of hair,” and when she is given to an emotional reaction, it is depicted as foreign, as from the outside: “she felt a certain interest growing in that quarter.” Never in this scene is Carrie said to “be” anything through a

direct adjective: she is not nervous, or elated, or ambiguous – rather, we flatly observe how her “felt” feeling starts to piece things together.

In the next sentence, she considers whether to follow her “maidenly reserve, and a certain sense of what was conventional under the circumstances” and ignore Drouet (thereby drawing from the past in order to make a present decision), but instead falls prey to “the daring and magnetism” of his aura (2). They begin having a conversation, in which Carrie tries to balance her “instincts of self-protection and coquetry” – notable because of how Dreiser labels these two rich and potentially varied terms as blunt “instincts.” But Carrie, despite being led by forces hypothetically outside her control, is not weak in this way – she is better off, as the novel shows us, by succumbing to present instincts than to remaining inert or following convention.<sup>13</sup> If being “conventional” means following past patterns which are tried and true, indeed of basing your lifestyle upon your current lifestyle, Carrie’s ascendancy in the novel is a testament to breaking that rule: she immediately moves out of her sister’s apartment, tries various jobs, gets involved with three men, all of whom offer her a new perspective on life she hadn’t previously considered, and finally succeeds on stage (in a different city) without any of those men by her side. Carrie’s mobility points to her practice in the world. Philip Fisher locates Carrie’s strength in her acting: acting, in his words, “involves primarily in Dreiser not deception but practice, not insincerity but installment payments on the worlds of possibility” (*Sister Carrie* 269). David T. Humphries, too, emphasizes that Carrie’s uniqueness comes from her ability to identify “the role that each person plays” and then considering “how to respond by adjusting her own role” (43). The quote reveals what many of Stephen Crane’s (and many naturalist writers’) characters fail to do.

This process of observation, identification, then adjustment relates with how two critics, Emily Curtrer and Sami Ludwig, together observe Howells’s realism through what they’re

calling a pragmatist lens. In *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, the literary editor Basil March, as someone who first relies upon “stock conceptions” of his observations to guide his views, forces himself to change his views in “a gradual process built of a number of incidents that undermine his habitual perceptions” (Curtrier 268). Significantly, Ludwig first points to a second character in the novel, the newspaper artist Angus Beaton, as stuck in certain “shortcomings of visual coding,” as a character who is stuck in internal reveries, and therefore has “ideas which have no practical consequences”:

Beaton is a drifter in a sea of his own sense impressions, which he never transcends, and his peculiar character is constructed from certain premises that are fundamentally perceptualist. For Howells, the interior symptom for such a mode of understanding is *reverie*, a projective absentmindedness that is stuck in images, usually structured around oneself in self-aggrandizing ways. (96)

The character in “reverie,” of course, is something William James would scoff at. Basil March, meanwhile, seeks to push past these stock conceptions, admitting to himself, “I want to philosophize the material, and I’m too new to it all yet. I don’t want to do merely superficial sketches” (156). Seeking “knowledge” rather than Beaton’s limiting “spectatorship,” which relies upon “aestheticizing, framing or naturalizing experience,” according to Curtrier, March is able to differentiate between the two modes of seeing (274). Ludwig adds that March’s “cognitive understanding involves a temporal dimension, a point that is emphasized by the fact that March’s research is never finished” (110-111).

Like March, Carrie reinvents her processes of perception throughout the course of the novel, in opposition to other characters. Drouet is first described as a Norris-esque “type” who is based upon certain unalterable characteristics: “His method was always simple. Its principal

element was daring, backed, of course, by an intense desire and admiration for the sex” (3). As someone more alert to her surroundings, Carrie, less dependent upon what is previously “conventional,” is deliberately framed as a youthful blank slate to begin the novel because she must gain experience by novel’s end. Walking the streets of Chicago looking for a job, we see her observe a “great six-story structure” (13), as Dreiser illuminates the building the way a child would see it, quickly, strangely, in almost pre-verbal fashion, like in much of Crane. Growing in curiosity throughout the novel, she sheds her previous ways by delving deeper into her consciousness. Driving through an upscale district with an acquaintance, Mrs. Hale, Carrie “did not grow in knowledge so much as she awakened in the matter of desire” (86). Following this inspirational drive – it’s worth noting that, like Jack Potter in “The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky,” rapid transportation often sparks Carrie’s desires – she sits alone, noticing the “comparative insignificance” of the apartment she shares with Drouet, and considers her life more carefully. “What, after all, was Drouet?” she asks. “What was she?” (87). Coming to no answers in this scene, she is interrupted by Drouet’s manager, Hurstwood, while Drouet himself is out of town, and therein we are introduced to the middle phase of Carrie’s development. As he makes himself comfortable with her, Carrie finds herself attracted to Hurstwood’s demeanor.

He seemed to radiate an atmosphere which suffused her being. He was never dull for a minute, and seemed to make her clever. At least, she brightened under his influence until all her best side was exhibited. She felt that she was more clever with him than with others. At least, he seemed to find so much in her to applaud. There was not the slightest touch of patronage. Drouet was full of it. (88)

Although Hurstwood is given all the attention here, at least Carrie is conscious of her observations, differentiating Hurstwood’s behavior from Drouet’s. While this passage begins its

focus on Hurstwood, it ends on Carrie, as we realize these lines are not only reflective of the scene but of how Carrie *conceives* of the scene. Of course, Carrie still only thinks of herself as an object of affection – as somebody to “applaud,” foreshadowing her acting career – and not as somebody who has the power to change a scene through her words, but she is self-aware enough to not be caught off-guard by the forces of attraction around her. In this sense she is becoming less determined and more self-aware of the stories which shape her (a microcosm of Crane’s main characters discussed in this study – from the clueless characters of *Maggie* to Henry Fleming struggling with self-awareness in *The Red Badge* to Martha in “The Monster”). In Carrie’s first encounter with Drouet, the narrator broadcasts, as if from above, “How true it is that words are but the vague shadows of the volumes we mean” (6). In contrast, in her first flirtation with Hurstwood, the narrator announces the same idea at first – “People in general attach too much importance to words” – but then zooms in to ground-level to consider the particularities of their evolving friendship: “In this conversation she heard, instead of his words, the voices of the things which he represented. How suave was the counsel of his appearance!” (88). The flirtation with Drouet is observed in a generalizing fashion, as if the two were cartoon cutouts, whereas the encounters with Hurstwood are given more specific weight, and mostly from Carrie’s point of view.

Continuing in his theory against words, the narrator says that “[t]hey but dimly represent the great surging feelings and desires which lie behind” (88). If we note how this is Dreiser’s second time explicitly making this point, we can sense a novelist who, like William James and Stephen Crane, does not see much transcendence in words: we use them, he seems to suggest, because they are the best we’ve got. According to elder James, words are clunky and representative of systemization, a crude form of signification which can not define the running

flow of consciousness: “our words,” he writes, “come together leaning on each other laterally for support.”<sup>14</sup> He declares in *A Pluralistic Universe* that “to make [the reader] return to life, I must set an example for your imitation, I must deafen you to talk, or to the importance of talk, by showing you, as Bergson does, that the concepts we talk with are made for purposes of *practice* and not for purposes of insight” (365).<sup>15</sup>

Donald Davidson’s philosophy of language, too, emphasizes the importance of words as tools, but not as meaning anything transcendent besides what they reveal on the surface. (Davidson, as mentioned in the previous chapter, lies along Rorty’s line of influence stemming from Wittgenstein.) His “What Metaphors Mean” (1978) states that “we must give up the idea that a metaphor carries a message, that it has a content or meaning (except, of course, its literal meaning)” (261). Davidson’s problems are not with the *use* of metaphors, per se, but with how theorists think they, as critics, can ‘solve’ a metaphor’s “encoded content” (261). Since metaphors run “on the same familiar linguistic tracks that the plainest sentences do,” Davidson finds that they, like all sentences, have use, but do not represent anything besides what they are offering to present (259). Like Crane’s prose, Theodore Dreiser’s raw style consistently tries to capture experiences while being aware of prose’s limitations: stating that people are “under the illusion that talking [a]ffects great results” and that words “but dimly represent the great surging feelings and desires which lie behind” (88), he is in fact defending his novel in spite of its cumbersome prose style, devaluing its dialogue sections, while at the same time suggesting how words can be misleading. According to him and the pragmatists, words are not representative of conclusive gestures. In the words of Jonathan Levin, the pragmatists’ concern “is less with the accuracy of the content of a perception or intellectual formula – with how exactly or how

adequately it corresponds to a reality – than with how it provisionally orients someone toward his or her world” (3-4).

Perhaps for this reason, Dreiser is partial to using adverbs after pieces of dialogue, to highlight the surrounding physical scene around the dialogue bubbles. The following exchange occurs within the same scene, and is typical of Dreiser’s dialogue-exchanges:

“I can’t promise,” she said, doubtfully.

“You must be more generous than that,” he said, in such a simple way that she was touched.

“Let’s not talk about it anymore,” she returned.

“All right,” he said, brightening. (90)

Dreiser’s overt adverbs and stage-directions – reminiscent of Crane’s language, especially in “The Open Boat” – are a way to contextualize the scene in a present moment, though they could also be critiqued as unnecessary. Adverbs are typically used if the dialogue does not speak strongly enough for itself,<sup>16</sup> which is precisely Dreiser’s point: his additions do just as much work as the banal dialogue, and their motive is to force interaction between the characters, not to dwell, metaphysically, within the words literally spoken. Those words, let us remember, mean nothing in their own right; their *use* is what is important. Davidson explains his thought further: “A metaphor does its work through other intermediaries – to suppose it can be effective only by conveying a coded message is like thinking a joke or a dream makes some statement which a clever interpreter can restate in plain prose” (262). Dreiser’s goal in *Sister Carrie* is to remain alert to present conditions by observing consequential actions: what is important is *how* what is said affects what is processed and said the next time around, reminding us how, like in all of Crane, representation is contextual.

Two days after his first dialogue with Carrie, Hurstwood pauses to consider his dilemma as a married man. Caught in a restrictive mindset because of his feelings for Carrie, he feels weighted in her direction, indicative of naturalism's gravitational pulls towards desire. We are given a sentence that is typical of Dreiser's 'bad writing,' replete with too many short inconsequential words, ugly alliterations, and a wonky prose style:

He had had no love affair since that which culminated in his marriage, and since then time and the world had taught him how raw and erroneous was his original judgment. Whenever he thought of it, he told himself that, if he had it to do over again, he would never marry such a woman. (90)

Lee Clark Mitchell makes an assertion that naturalism's "bad writing" is indicative of naturalism's closed-mindedness, which is why the texts should be close-read with a formalist approach.<sup>17</sup> Pizer agrees that the "crude and formless" prose of Dreiser and Norris can be taken as an "apt expression" of the times ("Introduction" 10). This scene is also telling in how Hurstwood, a stereotypical naturalist male, attempts to wrestle through his fraught condition – by drawing clear lines in the sand, like Crane's characters in *Maggie*. Ending this muddled section with the more forced and assured "he would never marry such a woman," he goes on to draw rationalist assumptions and devise a clear-cut plan of action which involves sexist generalizations, as his "experience with women in general" which were "well grounded on numerous experiences" has lessened his "respect" for the sex. Seeing the city woman as using "the art of the courtesan" and "the calculation of the mistress" to gain ends, Hurstwood simultaneously frames himself in scripted, binary terms, seeing himself as a "spider" whose decisions are based in either/or terms. Disparaging previous women he has known for their cold selfishness, he comes to see Carrie as attractive because of her innocence, specifically because of

what she does *not* represent. Sadly though, Hurstwood's cravings do not attempt to co-exist with Carrie's more pragmatic aesthetic (there is no sense of him trying to share something with her); rather, like all the men and women he has been speaking of, he sees her as a prized symbol, as someone who is representative of a condition: "He wanted to win Carrie because he thought her fate mingled with his was better than if it were united with Drouet's" (91). He is framed in a similar fashion to Norris's McTeague, a naturalist 'brute' defined by greed and clarified goals.

Carrie, meanwhile, is also fraught with ambiguity in this sticky situation, but instead of deliberately trying to change that condition, directing it toward specified goals, she is comfortable in stopping her thought-process when a decision is not fully formed. She "had at first wandered from one strange mental conclusion to another, until at last, tired out, she gave it up" (91). In this sense, Dreiser gives Carrie more of an internal world than Crane does with most of his characters outside of Henry Fleming. Carrie gives it up, in this scene, because, bridging connections, she thinks of Drouet in addition to Hurstwood, letting her surrounding experience override her (unformed) personal prejudice, something which Fleming would have struggled to do with ease. Later, she "could not have told herself at this moment whether she was glad or sorry" when Hurstwood returns (92). Her mindset is framed to consider multiple options and she does not choose one over the other for the sake of defensiveness; she is, instead, alert to remain on thresholds of transition. Like Henry James, Carrie specifically *sees* transition, and like Potter's revelations in Crane's "The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky," she is fueled by sensing that physical transition: her fleetingness, indeed, becomes her definitive quality. Instead of pinning down what she is seeing in representative concepts, thereby halting and destroying her perceptions as they unfold, she revels in the flow.

In his pragmatist reading of Howells, Ludwig writes how Basil and Isabel March (in the story “Their Wedding Journey”) are symptomatic of how a “Women’s Logic” centered upon “cooperation” comes into contrast with a male logic determined by foundational principles. Seeing the couple’s misunderstandings as deriving from the fact that the two “do not see reality in exactly the same way,” Ludwig depicts their failed communications as the fault of Basil’s pre-conceived methods which fail to ring true when placed next to Isabel’s more fluid mode of existence: “Thus in order to have successful relationships, rigid adherence to moral principles in which a logical model of consistency dominates behavior much be sacrificed.” Ludwig credits Howells for adhering to pragmatist insights, specifically that “discourse, as a cognitive product, is always grounded in the contiguous lives of the discourse producers” (127-133). Seeing as how Hurstwood’s fate goes steadily downhill in the novel’s second half, we can assume that his goal-oriented rationalism is partially attributed to these failings. There are hints of this failure to adapt in the following scene, as he aims to make a final impression upon Carrie by showcasing his love. Acting at first “a little strained in the nerves by the thorough consciousness of his mission,” he cannot readjust his perceptions to fit the scene at the moment of transition towards meeting Carrie in the flesh. Instead of considering how to acclimate and modify to future circumstances in case she reacts differently from how he scripted it, he is bound by the frozen promise he made to himself (not unlike the fates of those from *Maggie*). After sitting down with her, he remains nervous, only listening to her in the hope that “in silence her thoughts would take the colour of his own,” until he is able to control “the situation” by extolling his romantic feelings (94).

Carrie, on the other hand, is notably in-tune with Hurstwood’s mood: she is “very much aware that a climax was pending,” and finds herself acting for one of the first times in the novel by questioning him “with assumed airiness, but still excited by the conviction which the tone of

his voice carried” (95). In this instance Carrie finds herself more alert to her own consciousness than previously with Drouet, and is comfortable to remain presently-situated: she could “formulate no thought which would be just and right” to describe her situation, but “troubled herself no more upon the matter” as she “basked in the warmth of his feelings” (96). Hurstwood, meanwhile, is eager to jump toward conclusions, implying that if she would love him now then time would not be such a burden for him. “Time hangs heavily on my hands,” he admits (96). Nearing the end of this scene, we are given a glimpse of Carrie’s different sense of time, one which does not represent a burden of blankness that must be pounced upon and activated, but is rather dictated by the moving horse-drawn carriage and the melding of two seasons together in one: “With his free hand he seized upon her fingers. A breath of soft spring wind went bounding over the road, rolling some brown twigs of the previous autumn before it. The horse paced leisurely on, unguided” (97). Carrie’s moment of transcendence here, first prompted by the physical touch of Hurstwood, is depicted by unusually admirable uses of alliteration by Dreiser – “soft spring,” “wind went,” “over the road, rolling” – which help collapse spring and autumn into one penetrating moment, rare in naturalism. Meanwhile, there is no description of who is directing the leisurely horse: at this special moment for Carrie, nobody is in control, and dialogue, as is typical in important Dreiser scenes, does not predominate the scene.

Hurstwood, however, remains bound to the facts surrounding him in devastatingly banal naturalist fashion. Unable to fully comprehend his deterioration throughout the long novel, he is depicted as a typical naturalist character, affected by forces but without self-awareness: “Not trained to reason or introspect himself, he could not analyze the change that was taking place in his mind, and hence his body, but he felt the depression of it” (240). In his crime that sets the second half of the novel in motion, Hurstwood steals money from his office’s safe, then flees the

city with Carrie, relocating to New York.<sup>18</sup> Hurstwood then gradually declines, as Carrie comes to a new understanding of her social awareness through her entrance into the acting world. Finding that her “frown” onstage prompts laughter, she ends up riding the wave to fame through a gesture she cannot see herself and which does not, in fact, make her more attractive: her ability to listen to the director’s prompting to frown makes her a star. As an actor, Carrie’s ego becomes malleable. Humphries writes, “her unique ability that in observing the appearance of others she takes account of their possibilities and relates these possibilities to her own process of becoming. For Carrie, emulation is a process of transformation” (43).

In adapting to New York, Hurstwood’s role begins to diminish slowly, and the communication with Carrie does too. Carrying himself with “the same self-important air” as previously, he lies about his transformation, while Carrie remains in her “passive and receptive” state, paving the way to her meeting with Ames, her last love interest in the novel (221). Ames is introduced just before two transformative passages in which Carrie experiences the spectacular Broadway and the New York theater for the first time, occasions which prompt her to see herself more clearly, only after noticing how people see her. Noticing first how she is “stared at and ogled” on Broadway en route to the theater, the play then suggests a stronger life for her:

Some scenes made her long to be a part of them – to give expression to the feelings which she, in the place of the character represented, would feel. Almost invariably she would carry the vivid imaginations away with her and brood over them the next day alone. She lived as much in these things as in the realities which made up her daily life. (227-228)

Stephen Crane used metafiction to uncover certain truths about reality, similar to how Carrie becomes more curious of narrative devices as *Sister Carrie* moves along. Of note here is Carrie’s

developing inner consciousness, which thrives in an “alone” state, and how crucially that differs from her first depictions in the novel. Whereas Carrie was always a receptive character, she is now impressionable to artistic moods rather than to surface impressions. The play creates a reverie for her in which time merges: like the previously-discussed passage when she and Hurstwood shared a carriage, we are given a future vantage point quite abruptly – “she would carry the vivid imaginations...” – mixed with the past in the ambiguous “in the realities which made up her daily life.” There is also an intriguingly unclear direction of influence between Carrie and the production: she desires to “be a part” of the play because the play can give expression *to her*, rather than strictly vice versa. Choosing to live with the play, then, she enters a phase of her life where she both starts to recognize her contributions to the world – her potential as an actress, coming after recognizing her attractiveness on Broadway – by interiorizing the fact that she is being watched. (In this sense, she departs in sophistication from Crane’s characters, a point I’ll return to at the end of this chapter.)<sup>19</sup>

Ames further develops her self-awareness by challenging her artistic values. As they sit in an ornate restaurant, where wealth is evident in every utensil, Ames unveils the superficiality of this fascination, and her value system in the novel thus far, when he states, “they pay so much more than these things are worth. They put on so much show.” The conversation then turns to books, and when Ames says of a popular author that he “doesn’t amount to much,” Carrie turns toward him “as to an oracle.” Describing him as having “a clear, natural look,” as being a “clear-eyed, fine-headed youth,” and as seeming “innocent and clean” within the span of a few paragraphs – not to mention having “nothing sarcastic or supercilious” in the way he speaks – Carrie finally starts to judge his character in ways that strangely resemble herself early in the novel, showing Dreiser’s appreciation and admiration for the fresh state (236-237). Significantly,

whereas Carrie valued Drouet and Hurstwood for their knowledge of how to use the world around them to their advantage – how to impress, flirt, make money, and win friends in the city – her respect for Ames is of the opposite sort: that of intellectualizing the city so that its surfaces appear superfluous. Despite his brief appearances, then, his influence is immense for Carrie and the novel as a whole, as his societal lens helps wreck everything Carrie previously cherished, keeping in line with Carrie’s ever-evolving nature in the novel.

Ames largely disappears until the ending, except for a few flashbacks in which he is described as an ever-present representation of an idea for Carrie, something not subject to change. Carrie later reacts thrillingly to Ames’s monologue about her “natural” abilities, reflecting her disinterest in her own agency or will, but when he suggests for her to “change,” she remains dreaming of a better state: “It was a long way to this better thing – or seemed so – and comfort was about her; hence the inactivity and longing” (357). “Longing,” of course, is very distinguished from “doing” in this novel, especially in its second half, and it can be argued that Dreiser’s deterministic interest in *Sister Carrie* is how people change over time when they do not direct the changes themselves. (We occasionally catches glimpses of how people “feel” when they change, but rarely see those feelings generating future changes.) The human race, from Dreiser’s strange panned-out view, is not yet guided by reason or free-will, as he makes explicitly clear at the beginning of the eighth chapter: man’s current “middle stage,” which is guided neither by instinct nor reason, is hovering in between:

In this intermediate stage he waves – neither drawn in harmony with nature by his instincts nor yet wisely putting himself into harmony by his own free-will. He is even as a wisp in the wind, moved by every breath of passion, acting now by his will and now by

his instincts, erring with one, only to retrieve by the other, falling by one, only to rise by the other – a creature of incalculable variability. (56-57)<sup>20</sup>

Lacking free-will, Dreiser's characters slowly come into awareness of their circumstances in ways that bypass his need to "define" their changes. Documenting Hurstwood's decline, for instance, the narrative finds fascination in his slow self-appreciation of new circumstances: "He was beginning to find, in his wretched clothing and meager state of body, that people took him for a chronic type of bum and beggar" (360). It is this obsessively detailed aspect of the novel – its minute concentration upon how things change by describing them outright, creating a large canvas and spanning scope of time – that is one of the novel's most distinguishing features, and which coincides with Dreiser's disinterest in "words": we cannot point to one scene that "symbolizes" Carrie's rise to fame or Hurstwood's fall to suicide, because it has been happening in an accumulative fashion. It is for this reason, too, that the novel is somewhat resistant to close-reading: individual sentences are not 'representative' of the book's overall themes, because the book is itself always in transition. Just as the opening sentence flippantly documents Carrie's possessions which she will later lose, the only consistency in her journey is her shedding of layers: her parents, her sister (whose apartment is the reason for her leaving her parents), Drouet (who gets her out of her sister's apartment), Hurstwood (who erases Drouet on all levels), and finally Ames, whose anti-riches philosophy erases the glamour of Drouet, Hurstwood, and everything she has been working towards altogether. Each new relationship makes the previous one not worth remembering, and Carrie spends curiously little time in feeling nostalgic. The three major locations in the novel – rural Wisconsin, Chicago, and New York – are representative of Carrie's three developmental stages: childhood, adolescence (in which she grasps the world, weighing its options by testing relationships), and a solo adulthood when she is

most comfortable within her own mind, as Ames's monologues to her represent not a "relationship" per se (they never communicate effectively, or touch each other physically) but rather a vague ideal whose greatest effect is seen while Carrie is alone. Indeed, as the wispy Ames returns to and from Indianapolis, the novel itself ends with Carrie alone in her rocking-chair, not speaking with people per se, but considering *how* to think about and remember her past experiences. The reader observes, as he does while reading much of Crane, a character struggling to document her life, struggling in knowing how to use words.

"No Downward Glances": What is Literary Naturalism?

Although Crane is occasionally referred to as a modernist writer, my study rests on the assumption that he, like Dreiser, is well-placed within the naturalist moment – and, furthermore, that he is most interesting to us *as* a naturalist, so long as we see him wrestling with both deterministic and pragmatist strains (strains which, as I hope my study has shown, help define the naturalist genre).<sup>21</sup> Crane's version of naturalism is revealed through his impressionism, which remarkably documents the flattening forward-movement of determinism while simultaneously, in its shifting perspectives, emblemizing pragmatism as well. Impressionism, as a fictional style, avoids the barrier between psychologizing character and painting a landscape: it attempts to merge character and environment, and yet does so so rapidly that it evades interpretation. Dreiser, in many ways, employs a similar aesthetic.

Crane's and Dreiser's obsession with the environment is so central to their work that their characters cannot, almost by definition, be too sophisticated. If they were, the environment would no longer play a convincing-enough role in the text, which would furthermore serve no role for the deterministic and pragmatic 'styles.' Characters who are able to seriously weigh

options (considering some, discarding others) and who, through their sheer intelligence or will, are able to create worlds of their own, are not naturalist characters, in my mind. A modernist text can, for instance, delve so far into a character's stream-of-consciousness that the reader loses a sense of the "pressure" of the environment. The naturalist character, more bluntly, is *defined* by their push-and-pull with that environment; their purpose, fictionally, is dealing with that pressure.

In this respect, Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* (1905) provides a helpful contrast with Crane and *Sister Carrie*. While Dreiser's and Crane's styles are noticeable partially for what they lack – interiority, meaningful dialogue, conclusive gestures, texture and emotion within certain scenes but not within others – Wharton's adds a more sophisticated element which combines deterministic and pragmatist elements into an acceptable form of naturalism for our study, yet nearly breaks out of my naturalist designation due to the characters' increased self-consciousness and intelligence. Wharton represents, in my mind, the end of naturalism, and the end of this study.

Indeed, *The House of Mirth* is certainly scattered with deterministic and pragmatist moments. In its opening pages we read that Lily Bart "was so evidently the victim of the civilization which had produced her" (7). While this is a deterministic statement from the narrator, we also sense it from Lily herself when she asks, at various moments, if she controls her life: "but then she had never been able to understand the laws of a universe which was so ready to leave her out of its calculations" (29). Like Norris's narrator in *The Octopus* or Dreiser's narrator at times in *Sister Carrie*, this one latches on to sweeping, definitive statements early on, especially when describing the complications of one's history. "In this desultory yet agitated fashion," the narrator announces early, "life went on through Lily's teens: a zig-zag broken

course down which the family craft glided on a rapid current of amusement, tugged at by the underflow of a perpetual need – the need of more money” (31). Wharton gives us a clear ‘shape’ to envision her protagonist’s complex aging, grasping at physical metaphors and defined by a singular, stereotypically naturalist goal of “money.” The novel is admittedly naturalist because of its content – the slow documenting of Lily’s decline, thanks to pressures from the outside – and, in many ways, because of its style.

But the novel also suggests ways in which Lily resists being heavily determined, largely due to her awareness of how her mind works. Whereas Henry Fleming in *The Red Badge* struggled to establish a coherent communication with himself, and Carrie survived by, in a sense, not thinking, Lily Bart uses her self-consciousness wisely, or in ways more reminiscent of characters from Henry James’s (non-naturalist) novels. Early on, Lily recognizes that her aunt’s lifelessness is a detriment to her own, and so the reader recognizes that she is defined, partially, by her energy and adaptiveness: “Lily had abundant energy of her own, but it was restricted by the necessity of adapting herself to her aunt’s habits . . . . To attempt to bring her into active relation with life was like tugging at a piece of furniture” (39). Like Carrie, Lily is impulsive, and yet she recognizes how rare and, in a sense, dangerous that can be from the larger, deterministic perspective: “Why must a girl pay so dearly for her least escape from routine?” (16). In simply the opening pages, we see a character overcoming Henry Fleming’s problems of negotiating inner and outer selves:

Miss Bart was discerning enough to know that the inner vanity is generally in proportion to the outer self-depreciation. With a more confident person she would not have dared to dwell so long on one topic, or to show such exaggerated interest in it; but she had rightly guessed that Mr. Gryce’s egoism was a thirsty soil, requiring constant nurture from

without. Miss Bart had the gift of following an undercurrent of thought while she had appeared to be sailing on the surface of conversation; and in this case her mental excursion took the form of a rapid survey of Mr. Percy Gryce's future as combined with her own. (22)

This passage suggests that Lily is 'complete' in a sense that Henry and Carrie are not: she understands how people operate by distinguishing between what they are and what they reveal, and is able to speed through a "mental excursion" of somebody's supposed future, mixed with her own, all the while appearing to sail on a supposed "surface." In this sense *The House of Mirth* is less of a naturalist novel than *The Red Badge* or *Sister Carrie*, because those texts are more interested, subject-wise, in the developing, almost childish mind. Lily, however, is too smart for the naturalist novel. Naturalism seems to necessitate less intelligent characters because their stories document the struggle not between people but between person and world: the naturalist character is searching for articulation to help bridge that gap. Determinism, the sense that action is dictated from the outside, includes an assault on verbal capabilities – which we've seen in every Crane text – but Lily is less 'trapped' in this sense. Jill Kress frames Wharton's novels as wrestling with a different, more sophisticated question than Crane ever did: for instance, how writers can specifically define consciousness when words are untrustworthy. Her study couples Wharton with the Jameses in their "repeated attempt to understand questions about the mind through figurative representation, as well as a deep ambivalence regarding the multiplying tendency of words" (xi). I am suggesting, however, that Crane and Dreiser did not arrive at these conclusions yet: their concern was more with *revealing* the limits of language.

Despite that, many naturalist scholars consider the genre as delivering a hopeful message. Mark Papke admits that the naturalist text calls into question “the humanist values upon which community is based,” but at the same time,

. . . [f]or all its seeming pessimism, passivity, and self-destructiveness in the face of cultural crisis, naturalism depends upon the romantic hope that we will not simply settle for the spectacles of suffering or supreme indifference it presents with such visceral intensity. Naturalism thus asks us to refuse the hand dealt to us by our histories – if not to call for a new deck, since there isn’t any other, then to reimagine the rules of the game and the order of play. (xi).

In certain ways, then, my study assumes that Crane and Dreiser reimaged “rules of the game” in their flirting with pragmatism, impressionism, and the literary genre of metafiction, whereas Norris and London were more bluntly focused on the effects of the “bad deck.” But Papke’s distinction in *not calling for a new deck* is crucial to note, since it helps us define the parameters – or, indeed, limits – of the naturalist genre. Calling for a new deck would mean changing the genre of naturalism into something else entirely, whereas the naturalist text is *about* the inescapability of being dealt that hand. While not discussed in this study, the famous room of Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper” (1892) is the stereotypical ‘locale’ of the naturalist novel, at least in my mind.

The centrality of the metaphor of the boxed-in room explains my distinction of naturalism from realism and modernism. Mark Twain’s innovative turn of the century fiction shares certain similarities with Crane’s, but can hardly be emblematic of naturalism: as Jason Gary Horn points out in his comparative study of Twain and William James, Twain’s late fiction has a pluralistic aesthetic distrustful of categorization (in similar ways to how we’ve discussed

Crane), but at the same time, his texts usually resist the concept of blunt determinism.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, as Susan Gillman points out in a provocative essay, some of Twain's novels are specifically *about* reimagining history: she writes, "Twain's [fictional] histories refuse either the apocalyptic or the messianic, the possibilities and threats envisioned by so many others, in favor of redeeming the past in relation to the present – and leaving provisional the outcome of history itself" (12). While Crane's metafictional element is kept within the bounds of boxed-in deterministic settings (especially in "The Monster" and "The Open Boat"), Twain's provisional historical novels of the same era, like *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889), *Personal Recollections of Joan of Arc* (1896), and *The Mysterious Stranger* (composed between 1897 and 1908), are so experimental that they can hardly qualify as being works of naturalism. As works of historiographic metafiction, they certainly tell us something interesting about contemporary society by reimagining history, but in their playful flights from contemporary society, they lack the urgency that the typical naturalist text has.

Nothing in the unique genre of naturalism, however, is provisional: the characters are not placed in alternative spaces, but must succumb to the brutal necessities of the time and place given to them. Crane's "The Men in the Storm" begins, "The blizzard began to swirl great clouds of snow along the streets, sweeping it down from the roofs, and up from the pavements, until the faces of pedestrians tingled and burned as from a thousand needle-prickings" (176). Naturalist fiction is about overcoming odds, and the methods of composition centered on their frustrated characters – Henry Fleming being the greatest example – are the place to analyze them. Naturalism is a punching within a box: it reveals the limits of agency, true, yet its pessimism has a moral purpose since its eyes are relentlessly focused on the present and the real. Modernism, on the other hand, already assumes a fallen world, and because of that, its characters can execute the

‘inward turn’ so symptomatic of the genre. Though oversimplified, Astradur Eysteinnsson offers us a layout of how modernist literature deals with this “crisis of the subject” (he draws, in *The Concept of Modernism*, from Lukacs, Aurbach, Trilling, and others):

The signs of this crisis are generally felt to reside in a modernist preoccupation with human consciousness (as opposed to a mimetic concern with the human environment and social conditions), and they are perhaps most pronounced in the use of the ‘stream of consciousness’ technique in modernist fiction. Thus, in view of previous literary history, modernism is felt to signal a radical ‘inward turn’ in literature, and often a more thorough exploration of the human psyche than is deemed to have been probable or even possible in pre-Freudian times. But this inward turn is also widely held to have ruptured the conventional ties between the individual and society. (26)

Seen from this framework, literature no longer seems naturalist once it stops caring for social conditions or when the ties between “the individual and society” are ignored. Lionel Trilling’s modernist subject, unlike the earlier naturalist character who is still trying to articulate this problem, is one whose strategy is to escape the environment altogether (the decision is already made). The strategy from the writer’s perspective, in Trilling’s words from *Beyond Culture*, is of “detaching the reader from the habits of thought and feeling that the larger culture imposes, of giving him a ground and vantage point from which to judge and condemn.” This emblemizes the writer’s larger belief that “a primary function of art and thought is to liberate the individual from the tyranny of his culture in the environmental sense and to permit him to stand beyond it in an autonomy of perception and judgment” (xiii). But *The Red Badge*, for instance, is relentlessly a part of the “tyranny of [the individual’s] culture in the environmental sense”: Henry’s problem,

like his author's problem, is that he cannot disengage from the stuckness of his environment without feeling awkward about it.

What, then, *is* the naturalist character doing? He is still hanging on to the notion that there is a relationship between the human and the environment – he is doubtful, certainly, but is not yet giving up hope in seeing *within* the environment (like *Carrie*) a source of assistance and knowledge. At the very least, there is an observing of the fact that a relationship exists. Naturalist scholar Eric Carl Link provides a helpful contrast with realism:

The realists asked – directly or indirectly, as the individual case may be – what can we know about nature and human nature by studying, directly and with careful regard for honest, non-embellished documentation, human behavior, culture, and psychology themselves? The romantics and the literary naturalists asked a slightly different question – what can we know about nature and human nature by studying *the relationship* between facets of human behavior and human psychology and the environment of forces influencing these facets of behavior and affecting our interpretation of them? (166, emphases mine)

Link's definition helps us note that even if naturalist texts are about impersonal forces destroying human ambition, they are still optimistic enough in their attempts to see the outside world's traditional relationship with the individual. In this sense, we can understand naturalism as hanging onto this notion of a "relationship" in the moment before this hypothetical rope is severed. *Maggie* is about defeat, but it thoroughly connects its characters' failures to the failures of society-at-large: the text, in other words, at least chooses to look at the bigger picture. (Its subtitle is "A Girl of the Streets," not "Girl of the Streets.") The conclusion to Crane's "An Experiment in Misery" (1894) comes to mind as well. The "young man," after having slept

overnight in a boarding house and found that he and his friend have become ‘men of the streets,’ so to speak, sits on a bench and looks at people walking hither and thither. The final three paragraphs are worth quoting in full:

[The people] walked in their good clothes as upon important missions, giving no gaze to the two wanderers seated upon the benches. They expressed to the young man his infinite distance from all that he valued. Social position, comfort, the pleasures of living were unconquerable kingdoms. He felt a sudden awe.

And in the background a multitude of buildings, of pitiless hues and sternly high, were to him emblematic of a nation forcing its regal head into the clouds, throwing no downward glances; in the sublimity of its aspirations ignoring the wretches who may flounder at its feet. The roar of the city in his ear was to him the confusion of strange tongues, babbling heedlessly; it was the clink of coin, the voice of the city’s hopes, which were to him no hopes.

He confessed himself an outcast, and his eyes from under the lowered rim of his hat began to glance guiltily, wearing the criminal expression that comes with certain convictions. (147)

The penultimate paragraph of “Misery,” then, represents the brutal fact that modernists had already digested and hence were no longer interested in exploring – that the relationship between society and the individual was either dead, too confusing to register, or not worth registering holistically. In caring to register the lack of “downward glances,” the text’s naturalism is in full effect since it signals an *investment* in the concept of “downward glances” to begin with, or the link between the individual and society. (The words “no hopes” also evoke a faint possibility that hope might exist.) Papke reminds us that despite its pessimism, naturalism “depends upon the

romantic hope that we will not simply settle for the spectacles of suffering or supreme indifference it presents” (xi). Pizer, too, assumes that the genre “reflects an affirmative ethical conception of life, for it asserts the value of all life by endowing the lowest character with emotion and defeat and with moral ambiguity” (“Late Nineteenth-Century” 569). Pizer’s reflection particularly makes sense for Crane, who chooses to look at beggars sleeping in a boarding house in the utmost detail. Earlier in “Misery,” as the morning’s rays enter through the boarding house roof, the young man looks around, seeing how the sunshine

touched with radiant color the form of a small fat man who snored in stuttering fashion. His round and shiny bald head glowed suddenly with the valor of a decoration. He sat up, blinked at the sun, swore fretfully, and pulled his blanket over the ornamental splendors of his head. (144)

This passage is not meant to be funny. It observes how “the golden rays of the morning” which “came in bravely and strong” (from the previous sentence) become an aggressive affront to a penniless individual struggling, hour by hour, for his survival. Crane’s impressionism makes this happen because he does not get caught up in what “the golden rays of the morning” serve as a metaphor for – they simply look, to *his* eyes, at *that* moment, “golden,” and they also fall, realistically, onto this man’s bald head. Crane looks at this person: he is not afraid to register his resulting fury. But he does not empathize or make a moral judgment – in Pizer’s words, Crane is employing “moral ambiguity.” In simply looking, he reveals what the rest of society ignores – including, as Michael Robertson reminds us from Chapter One, what Jacob Riis and many journalists failed to see. “The sentimental crusade genre,” writes Robertson, “could improve material conditions, but it did nothing to lessen the cognitive distance between classes. The genre depicted the poor as victims in need of middle-class philanthropy” (86). In *Contingency, Irony,*

*Solidarity*, Richard Rorty contrasts his definitions of the “liberal metaphysician” from the “liberal ironist” in a somewhat connected way: “For the liberal ironist, skill at imaginative identification does the work which the liberal metaphysician would like to have done by a specifically moral motivation – rationality, or the love of God, or the love of truth” (93). But the metaphysician, in his searching for ‘new descriptions’ of things to make a difference, fails to speak for everyone, whereas the ironist “thinks that what unites her with the rest of the species is not a common language but *just* susceptibility to pain” (92).

Post-Crane, most modernists moved onto a wholesale “revolt,” in Eysteinnsson’s words, “against the traditional relation of the subject to the outside world” – they used their confidence of that “dead” relationship to express a full range of sensibilities from impersonality to extreme subjectivity (28). Daniel Fuchs, for instance, defines the general characteristics of modernism as being “alienation, fragmentation, break with tradition, isolation and magnification of subjectivity, threat of the void, weight of vast numbers and monolithic impersonal institutions, [and] hatred of civilization itself.”<sup>23</sup> While Crane’s texts helped bring many of these characteristics to the forefront of American literature, the suddenness of their emergence in the 1890s also represented an awkward transition into a modern era not quite ready to accept them. Crane’s characters do not have an armchair “hatred of civilization itself,” but rather an awkward, youthful, and uncertain hesitation on whether they are “of” society or not. They are Jimmie of “Making an Orator” (1899), a boy who must please his school’s institutional need to deliver a speech. They are Maggie’s mother, who uses outdated religious hyperbole to understand her situation, and Scratchy Wilson, who uses outdated fictional hyperbole to understand his. When they do achieve some sort of transcendence, they are violently pulled back into society’s restrictions, like the young man of “An Experiment in Misery” or Henry from *The Red Badge*.

The texts, in this sense, have both deterministic and pragmatist strains. Literary pragmatism has little value within texts that are not deterministic, since pragmatism needs to operate within a text whose problem is the negotiation between environment and individuality. Pragmatism helps make that negotiation happen.

Why, then, is Stephen Crane useful? Because he offers us pieces and fragments. And because he does not moralize. Frank Norris wrote in “The Novel with a ‘Purpose’” (1902) that moralizing on behalf of the serious writer should be “the result not of direct appeal by the writer, but [should be] made . . . to the reader by the very incidents of the story” (91). Norris had the right idea, but he and Dreiser had a more difficult time than Crane in not moralizing – their lofty narrators could take over in a fashion that, over time, looked embarrassing. To return to Rorty’s attempt at defining “solidarity” through irony and contingency, he emphasizes how the ironist, as opposed to the metaphysician, makes a political difference by illuminating, in fragments, how pain operates for people who cannot speak the words of pain. Solidarity, in his words, “has to be constructed out of little pieces, rather than found already waiting, in the form of an ur-language which all of us recognize when we hear it” (94). Rorty speaks for Crane as an ironist when he writes,

On [the ironist’s] conception, human solidarity is not a matter of sharing a common truth or a common goal but of sharing a common selfish hope, the hope that one’s world – the little things around which one has woven into one’s final vocabulary – will not be destroyed. For public purposes, it does not matter if everybody’s final vocabulary is different, as long as there is enough overlap so that everybody has some words with which to express the desirability of entering into other people’s fantasies as well as into one’s own. (92-93)

In “An Experiment in Misery,” Crane observes the lower classes and also hints at an indifferent cityscape. That, however, is all he does. Rorty’s “overlap” is *not* an assumption that things will change for the better. He goes on to admit as much:

. . . such reflection will not produce anything except a heightened awareness of the possibility of suffering. It will not produce a *reason to care* about suffering. What matters for the liberal ironist is not finding such a reason but making sure that she *notices* suffering when it occurs. (93)

Rorty makes a crucial point on a role of art. But he has also (understandably) been critiqued on this score. Surely recognition is important, but is “noticing” all that can be done? Giles Gunn tries to proffer further answers in his *Beyond Solidarity: Pragmatism and Difference in a Globalized World* (2001), calling Rorty’s notion of solidarity “limited” based partially on its “nativist and exceptionalist” take on pragmatism.<sup>24</sup> “Even if anything can be made to look good or bad by being redescribed,” Gunn states in response to Rorty’s valuation of redescription and irony, “some redescriptions are more accurate and helpful than others” (xvii-xviii). Gunn’s study, included with an impressive list of others he recounts, emphasizes pragmatism’s ability to speak for the “other.”<sup>25</sup> His version of pragmatism is connected with its engagement with the aesthetic, “not so much as a category *within* reflection but as a categorical model *of* reflection” (xix).

This differs somewhat from the way I am framing the modernist temper, which John Patrick Diggins specifically contrasts with the pragmatist *and* postmodern attitude in *The Promise of Pragmatism*. “Modernism,” in his words, “can neither believe nor rest content in disbelief” (8). Diggins’s modernist, then, is like Rorty’s metaphysician, or like Henry Adams – someone who needs the right words, who assumes that “the right redescription can make us free”

(Rorty 90). Diggins goes on to say that in contrast to the modernist, who embodies “the consciousness of what once was presumed to be present and is now seen as missing,” the postmodernist takes

a more relaxed look at things, either by comprehending how knowledge, power, and society function, by viewing history without purpose and meaning as simply the longing of human desire for its completion, or by giving up trying to explain the nature of things and being content with studying how beliefs come to be justified. To Dewey, who in some ways anticipated postmodernism . . . all such absences and their desire for fulfillment could be traced to the dualism of nature and spirit, a false outlook that fails to recognize that mind evolved from matter and thus can neither be separated from it nor reduced to it. (8)

And so it all comes back to evolution – just not Spencer’s version of it. “The signal, if implicit, motive of pragmatism,” writes Joan Richardson, “is the realization of thinking as a life form, subject to the same processes of growth and change as all other life forms” (1). The high modernists were horrified by a fractured society, which is why Eliot and Pound were considered conservative thinkers. Stephen Crane had no illusions that he did not live in a fractured world. In fact, his understanding of the world makes no sense without fracture. The success of *The Red Badge* was excruciating to him because success, in his words, “is defined by the mob.” His goal, instead, was to sound like stereotypes of the later Hemingway, to “make a sincere, desperate, lonely battle to remain true to my conception of my life and the way it should be lived.”<sup>26</sup> Crane’s characters – always adolescent in temperament – were awkward and unsure, as might befit a writer who died at 28. But his characters struck a chord with readers at the *fin de siècle*, as they also represented how people could not necessarily get a grip on how to describe their own

lives. One thing Crane knew for certain was that language, in short, could and *should* be experimental in nature: it should evoke curiosity, not represent platitudes or reinforce eternal truths. Crane, at least, left us with that legacy. As Conrad put it, he was “*the only* impressionist and *only* an impressionist.”<sup>27</sup> What did that mean? Plenty of writers would pick up the pieces in his wake.

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<sup>1</sup> The letter, dated June 7, 1900, was sent to Cora Crane as a condolence. Qtd. in Stallman and Gilkes, 288.

<sup>2</sup> James’s quote is drawn from Edel, 244.

<sup>3</sup> Though he goes into far more detail, Posnock reveals the following about immanent critique in relation to pragmatism: “Adorno’s point is to discourage idealism’s fetishizing of the mind as sovereignly self-sufficient by confronting it with its own impotence before the intractability of social contradictions. . . . With mind and epistemology dethroned and the potential to alter existence found to be a collective social project, immanent critique, like Deweyan pragmatism . . . focuses its energy on the insoluble task of cultural inquiry. Thus immersion and embodiment rather than self-reflection are its exemplary values, its form of social hope” (75-76).

<sup>4</sup> Eliot, T.S., “In Memory of Henry James.” *Egoist* (January, 1918)

<sup>5</sup> Though Dwight misses the point, he at least partially blames the “strangeness” of James’s style on “eyes accustomed to the telegraphic brevity of the newspaper” (444).

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<sup>6</sup> Dwight, Brownell, and the nameless reviewer of *The Golden Bowl* are authors of reviews drawn from Gard, Roger, ed., *Henry James: The Critical Heritage*. Posnock quotes from all three in *The Trial of Curiosity* (143).

<sup>7</sup> In *A World Elsewhere*, Richard Poirier remarks that “writing for [Dreiser] obviously did not involve the ‘building’ of a world so much as reporting on one already existent.” He contrasts Dreiser’s fiction with James’s and Wharton’s in saying that “so far as character and environment are concerned Dreiser had no intention of creating anything like a Jamesian ‘house of fiction’” (238).

<sup>8</sup> *Poirier* notes that “Dreiser merely sat down and put the words of his title at the top of a page without any idea how he was to fill it or succeeding ones” (*World* 238).

<sup>9</sup> Qtd. in “From *A Pluralistic Experience*” (Wilshire 364).

<sup>10</sup> Julian Markels offers an amusing and well-written summary: “By now the cataloguing of Dreiser’s limitations has settled into a rather dry routine: his turgid and graceless style, which led F.R. Leavis to observe that Dreiser writes as if he hasn’t a native language; his limited insight into the psychology of his characters; his wearisome attention to detail; and his editorial pretentiousness and inconsistency, in which he often seems bent on making metaphysical mountains out of mechanistic molehills” (527).

<sup>11</sup> But of course, in terms of style, Dreiser shares with Crane an appreciation for impressionist descriptions. While literary impressionism has constantly been linked to Crane, that connection has rarely been extended to Dreiser, as I think it should. “To the susceptible mind of the impressionist,” writes Orm Overland, “the surrounding world viewed at large is not simple and well ordered, but an indistinct and obscure picture made up of an irresistible flood of confused and ever changing sense impressions” (241). If that “flood” would seem “irresistible” to the visions of Crane and Dreiser, so would the style. Rodney O. Rogers writes that the relation between impressionistic painting and fiction is in the art’s general point of view: “Impressionism

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is a realistic style of description precisely because reality is ephemeral, evanescent, constantly shifting its meaning and hence continually defying precise definition” (276). Rogers’s quote aligns well with pragmatism.

<sup>12</sup> Corkin’s argument about Dreiser in *Realism and the Birth of the Modern United States: Cinema, Literature, and Culture* (1996) rests on the assumption that *Sister Carrie* is about the rise of consumer culture. He adds that the novel’s strength “relies on the reader’s comprehension of the world of commodities, as it assumes not only that the objects of the world are meaningful, but also that the specific importance of these things is fairly obvious” (89-90).

<sup>13</sup> A host of critics agree on this score, seeing Carrie not as an empty vessel who glides through the city’s forces, but as a person driven by hope and desire. In an article specifically focusing upon Carrie’s “desire,” Gelfant points to the protagonist’s consumption of goods as providing evidence of her evolving nature: “When Hurstwood comes to the end of his desire, when he does not want anything more, he dies . . . Wanting more, Carrie goes on living, dreaming of a happiness that, fortunately perhaps, she will never know” (191).

<sup>14</sup> Qtd. in R.B. Perry, *The Thought and Character of William James, op. cit.*, II, 328-329.

<sup>15</sup> Admittedly, a larger study would employ Henri Bergson’s concept of duration to help explain Dreiser’s running prose style. Bergson, like James, saw all the problems with intellectualizing time. “How much more instructive,” he writes in *The Creative Mind*, “would be a truly intuitive metaphysics, which would follow the undulations of the real! True, it would not embrace in a single sweep the totality of things; but for each thing it would give an explanation which would fit it exactly, and it alone. . . . Experience alone can say, and unity, if it exists, will appear at the end of the search as a result” (31). For the sake of brevity and clarity, however, I am keeping the purview of this study to pragmatism as a representative mode of thought and attitude emerging before the turn of the century.

<sup>16</sup> Stephen King’s *On Writing* (2000) is one amongst a score of instructional guides which warn against the adverb with regard to dialogue attribution. King writes, “When debating whether or

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not to make some pernicious dandelion of an adverb part of your dialogue attribution, I suggest you ask yourself if you really want to write the sort of prose that might wind up in a party-game” (120).

<sup>17</sup> Mitchell states, “Instead of liabilities, these elements actively generate the narrative power of naturalism, which unsettles our most cherished conceptions of agency precisely through distortions of usage” (xvii).

<sup>18</sup> Interestingly, Hurstwood’s decision to steal the money is not described – instead, we jump from a deliberating paragraph in which he cannot make up his mind to the following paragraph, starting with, “After he had all the money in the hand bag...” (193). Mitchell’s study notably characterizes one of the chief differences between realism and naturalism as occurring during “scenes of deliberation,” where realist characters are “defined through an elaborate process of responsible choice” whereas naturalist pawns do not possess “moral selves that are greater than the sum of forces that go into making them” (xii).

<sup>19</sup> In an essay titled “An Emersonian Perspective on Dreiser’s Characterization of Carrie,” Paul Orlov points out that Carrie’s occasional moments of intense interiority come during artistic performances, including when she is acting: “During her performance in *Under the Gaslight*, Carrie’s power of emotional projection into her role remains unaffected, it is worth noting, by the mediocrity of the other actors” (30).

<sup>20</sup> This quote is a good indication of why Stephen Crane was a better writer than Dreiser. Despite the ways I am discussing Dreiser’s prose in this chapter, his writing also infamously moralizes by using simplistic, binary applications of ideas. The above quote continues by applying Darwin’s theories in a reductive fashion: “We have the consolation of knowing that evolution is ever in action, that the ideal is a light that cannot fail. He will not forever balance thus between good and evil. When this jangle of free-will and instinct shall have been adjusted, when perfect understanding has given the former the power to replace the latter entirely, man will no longer vary. The needle of understanding will yet point steadfast and unwavering to the distant pole of truth” (56-57). In *Mechanism and Mysticism: The Influence of Science on the Thought and Work*

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of *Theodore Dreiser* (1993), Louis J. Zanine notes that while Dreiser read Darwin and others, he found in Spencer's simplistic writing "an interpretation of the universe that seemed to combine all branches of knowledge, including much of the content of his recent scientific reading, into one brilliant, all-encompassing philosophy" (7).

<sup>21</sup> Crane is occasionally considered a modernist writer (most recently and intriguingly by John Fagg in *On the Cusp*). Dreiser, however, isn't. Poirier writes that Dreiser is rarely considered modernist due to the novelist's lack of interest in "individual consciousness, in personal complexity, in those traditional and communal feelings which, according to the pseudo-medical testimony of certain people, run in their blood streams" ("Panoramic" 582).

<sup>22</sup> This is partially because Horn's study describes Twain's thought as searching for an "inward divinity" and sifting through multiple selves. The textual center of *The Mysterious Stranger*, for instance, is, in Horn's words, "yet another description of religious experience, one predicating the self as other and the other self as divine" (25). The comparison with James is often fascinating, but focuses more on the *Varieties of Religious Experience* than on his pragmatism.

<sup>23</sup> These are Eysteinnsson's words (75).

<sup>24</sup> Gunn reminds the reader that William James wrote an essay titled "A Certain Blindness in Human Beings." He goes on to say the following in his Introduction: "In actuality, pragmatism's concern with the dialectics of identity and otherness has recurrently appeared in, for example, W.E.B. Du Bois's lifelong study of 'the strange experience' of 'being a problem,' Jane Addams's efforts to socialize democracy at Hull-House, Gertrude Stein's experiments with William James's psychology in imagining her way into minds so different from her own in early works like 'Melanctha' and 'The Gentle Lena,' and John McDermott's explorations of the significance of pragmatist thought for global culture" (xv). This is not a final list but represents a few of Gunn's examples.

<sup>25</sup> See Cornel West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism* (1989); Ann Douglas, *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s* (1995); Charlene Haddock

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Seigfried, *Pragmatism and Feminism: Reweaving the Social Fabric* (1996); Ross Posnock, *Color and Culture: Black Writers and the Making of the Modern Intellectual* (1998); and Nancy Fraser, “Another Pragmatism: Alain Locke, Critical ‘Race’ Theory, and the Politics of Culture” (1998).

<sup>26</sup> Qtd. in Wertheim, 186-187.

<sup>27</sup> Qtd. in Stallman and Gilkes, 155.

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