



Stephen Crane

(1871-1900)

6 poems (1895-99)

1

God fashioned the ship of the world carefully.
With the infinite skill of an All-Master
Made He the hull and the sails,
Held He the rudder
Ready for adjustment.
Erect stood He, scanning His work proudly.
Then -- at fateful time -- a wrong called,
And God turned, heeding.
Lo, the ship, at this opportunity, slipped slyly,
Making cunning noiseless travel down the ways.
So that, for ever rudderless, it went upon the seas
Going ridiculous voyages,
Making quaint progress,
Turning as with serious purpose
Before stupid winds.
And there were many in the sky
Who laughed at this thing.

2

Should the wide world roll away,
Leaving black terror,
Limitless night,
Nor God, nor man, nor place to stand
Would be to me essential,

If thou and thy white arms were there,
And the fall to doom a long way.

3

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

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

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

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

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

4

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

5

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

The trees in the garden rained flowers.
 Children ran there joyously.
 They gathered the flowers
 Each to himself.
 Now there were some
 Who gathered great heaps --
 Having opportunity and skill - -
 Until, behold, only chance blossoms
 Remained for the feeble.
 Then a little spindling tutor
 Ran importantly to the father, crying:
 "Pray, come hither!
 See this unjust thing in your garden!"
 But when the father had surveyed,
 He admonished the tutor:
 "Not so, small sage!
 This thing is just.
 For, look you,
 Are not they who possess the flowers
 Stronger, bolder, shrewder
 Than they who have none?
 Why should the strong --
 Why should they not have the flowers?"
 Upon reflection, the tutor bowed to the ground,
 "My Lord," he said,
 "The stars are displaced
 By this towering wisdom."

COMMENTARY

"Poems numbered 1-2 appeared in *The Black Riders and Other Lines* in 1895; poems numbered 3-6 appeared in *War Is Kind and Other Lines* in 1899. Critics have often pointed out Crane's indebtedness to Emily Dickinson and his anticipation of the Imagist poets. Reacting against the popular tradition of Tennyson and Longfellow, Crane achieved something of the concentration, the Impressionistic pictorial effect, and the irony of modern American poetry."

James E. Miller, Jr.
The Literature of the United States 2, 3rd edition
 (Scott, Foresman 1953-66) 664

"The ferocity of the attacks on *The Black Riders* has been, if anything, understated, but from the beginning there were powers in opposition. The very influential Harry Thurston Peck, reviewing it in the *May Bookman*, declared roundly: 'Mr. Stephen Crane is the Aubrey Beardsley of poetry...a true poet whose verse, long after the eccentricity of its form has worked off, fascinates... If Whitman had been caught young and subjected to aesthetic influences, it is likely that he would have mellowed his barbaric yawp to some such note.' The little book was just 'the most notable contribution to literature to which the present year has given birth'.... High comparisons these, to Whitman and Beardsley, and there were judges who concurred.

But Crane's poetry is...written in a strange short-line free verse, so that everything depends upon phrasing; and Crane's ear, angular in prose, was more angular in verse.... God is the brutal villain of *The Black Riders*, and some pieces that set against this Old Testament swaggerer an interior pitying God (XXXIX, LI, LIII) went unnoticed. His mother's had been warring with his father's God in Crane's

thought. Neither won; both perhaps disappeared... But God was not the only villain. Crane's irony shot everywhere, and against the extreme self-possession of his manner, against his confident gleaming dissatisfaction with God, with sages, with churches, with 'virtuous' persons, must be set a restless, ironic view of man himself. Courage, Truth, Wisdom, Kindness, are the themes of this poetry; but 'coward' is nearly as common a word as 'brave,' and 'lie' and 'fool' are commoner than their opposites, and the work burns with cruelty, active or indifferent. It was not perceived in 1895 that the attitude of the poet is hopelessly moral.... As a rule, Tradition is a lie. What matters is to rebel and tell the Truth: to dare (XII) and not to pretend to see what others do (XLIX)."

John Berryman
Stephen Crane

(William Sloane 1950; World/Meridian 1963) 113-16

"Emily Dickinson as yet had no reputation and few readers and...Crane and Santayana did not yet count for much as poets--nor, I think, should they now. On the whole, these poets were *fin-de-siecle* Romantics... Their poems are, in the bad sense, exercises in rhetoric."

Roy Harvey Pearce
The Continuity of American Poetry
(Princeton 1961) 255-56

"Crane is the most interesting of the new poets of the later nineteenth century in America. If we must continue to think of him as 'minor,' it is more because he wrote so little, within so narrow a range of subject and sensibility, and so little of what he did write represents him at his best, than because his best cannot stand comparison with the work of greater poets. He published just two slender volumes of verse before he died in 1900 at the age of twenty-eight, but a dozen or so of his poems are not adequately praised by saying that they are the most memorable and distinctive poems written in America in the 1890's....

It still remains true that many of the finest artists and critics of the recent past have found Crane a 'good,' and often a brilliant, writer. A significant test of a writer's quality is the quality of the minds he attracts. Hemingway was thinking, almost certainly, of Crane's fiction, not of his verse... But judging from his own early work in verse, he might well have said the same thing of Crane the poet.... Here we see the same effort at compression, the same stripping away of all that might be thought of as traditionally 'poetic,' and the same rejection of ancestral pieties that we find in most of Crane's best-known poems....

There was a tradition *behind* Crane, as well as one stretching before him to the present. Daniel Hoffman in his very fine critical study of Crane's poetry tells us that the two important *direct* influences on Crane were Ambrose Bierce and Olive Schreiner, not, as so many critics have surmised, Whitman and Dickinson; but his kind of verse had been called for, and in some degree even foreshadowed in practice, in the tradition which Emerson had initiated long before. In 'The Poet,' which Crane very probably never read...Crane might have used to justify his own practice. The 'argument' should be primary, the 'finish of the verses' secondary, Emerson had said... Crane would make the idea that 'The nearer a writer gets to life the greater he becomes as an artist' the center of his artistic credo....

Poem LXVI of *Black Riders* shows Crane composing 'in the sequence of the musical phrase,' as Pound would later word the Imagist determination to avoid traditional syllabic-accentual prosody. And the sentences seem to grow, as Emerson had said poetic form should, from the thought... Here the cadences are strong enough to survive a prose printing, but the division into lines enhances their effect. By comparison, a typical late Whitman poem is much more regularly rhythmic (tending toward iambic measure, and with five stresses in each line) and considerably less pointed, less compressed, less witty as statement than Crane's... 'A man said to the universe' is a fair specimen of a considerable part of Crane's work, and its bare, spare, ascetic quality, the length to which it goes to avoid the appearance of being 'poetic,' seems to me to represent an impoverishment of poetry. The *thought* is the only thing that matters in Crane's poem. When Dickinson similarly relied on abstraction and personification in her more gnomic verses, she had the hymn meters at the back of her mind to play her words against.

But Crane's work is not always so thinly assertive. Anthologists have done him a great disservice by choosing to reprint chiefly his most strikingly 'original' poems—'original' in their contrast with the more

traditional poetry of the age... 'original' too in the extent of their repudiation of the resources of poetic language; 'original' finally in their unqualified expression of the new 'Naturalism.' But the poems that may be so described are not generally Crane's best, as Daniel Hoffman has so convincingly shown. If Crane's work does not exhibit a steady development, at least it is not so much all of a piece as those who know only a few of his poems have supposed.... He sometimes shapes his lines to regular stanzas, he sometimes uses refrains, he often employs Biblical parallelism in a somewhat Whitmanesque manner, and now and then he even makes sparing use of internal rhyme. His rhythms do not tend toward the kind of regularity that makes it profitable to count syllables, as Whitman's often tend to do in his later work, but in his finest poems the stresses do come regularly, as they do in speech uttered under the pressure of strong emotion....

With great emotional intensity and with a compression of meaning that is his hallmark, Crane explored a narrow range of feeling and themes. The old label 'Naturalist' of the literary historians is only partly applicable to the ideas and attitudes we find equally in his verse and his fiction.... Different poems are incompatible, thematically, with each other, but that only adds interest to the body of his work as a whole and as a kind of *distillation* of the thought of the 1890's.... There were only a few things Crane was sure of in all his work, and he expressed them over and over in both his weaker and his strongest poems. He was sure he could not accept the church, any church, or expect it to tell us anything *true* about God.... He was sure that the God who has not revealed himself in the message proclaimed by the churches is not revealed by Nature either. Nature seemed to him clearly indifferent to man's fate....

Toward the end of the decade he seems to have been moving away from his partial and spasmodic 'Naturalism' toward a position that might be called a kind of heroic humanism with theistic overtones but with no communication possible between God and man. Man must accept responsibility for his fate and find the courage within him to act in freedom and in readiness to sacrifice himself for others. Man is small, weak, almost helpless, almost overwhelmed; but if he dares to act as a man and not a thing, he can become human. (If this begins to sound as though I were describing not Crane but Camus or Sartre or Hemingway, the reader may take this as a clue to what it was in Crane that so strongly attracted Hemingway and so many others in the present century.)... His position...could be described in the famous epigram of the Existentialist philosopher Heidegger: 'I do not deny God's existence but I affirm his absence.'

Crane's emotional range and freedom are limited, and his themes equally so. Irony is his commonest tone, and fear and a sense of intense loneliness are the feelings that tend to remain with us from the poems after we have put them down... His technical virtuosity in his best poems exceeds in range and inventiveness the stock of emotions and ideas he had to work with--as perhaps one ought to expect to be the case with so young a writer, so gifted.... What results is a kind of compressed...recapitulation, in a style essentially American...of some of the major themes of American poetry and fiction up to 1900.... Yet he was the first to go so far toward making Emerson's criterion of 'veracity' his overriding concern, and the first after Whitman to achieve forms that might really be described as 'organic,' growing from within outward.

If this were not distinction enough, the critic who wished to argue that placing Crane among the 'lesser' poets, as I have done, is unfair to him, could point to the purity and intensity of his expression of a feeling that links his sensibility with ours, the feeling that the universe is experienced first and most immediately as hostile, threatening, a wild and lonely place in which the outcome of man's effort to preserve his identity is desperately uncertain."

Hyatt H. Waggoner
American Poets: From the Puritans to the Present
(Houghton 1968) 240-49

Michael Hollister (2015)