

## PATRICK K. DOOLEY

### "A WOUND GIVES STRANGE DIGNITY TO HIM WHO BEARS IT"<sup>1</sup>

STEPHEN CRANE'S METAPHYSICS OF EXPERIENCE



Artistically, Stephen Crane's quest was capturing experience—**A**mostly human experience and experiencers, but his genius also disclosed the lived worlds of animals. "Experience" customarily refers to the obvious and ordinary stuff of consciousness, but as we shall see Crane's notion of experience was more complex and sophisticated. Philosophically, the upshot of his work amounts to an epistemological and metaphysical shake-down. Although common sense has us believe that we have a reliable grasp of what is out there (in reality) and what is inside (within consciousness), Crane was more attentive and sensitive and, thereby, more suspicious. He noticed that the contents and status of the inner and outer worlds are problematic and that the borderline between them is permeable. And so as Crane's artistic sensitivity uncovered the mystery of experience, his philosophical legacy earned him a place in a distinguished company of thinkers, beginning with Plato, who believed that wonder is the beginning of wisdom.

Actually, "wonder" is too weak a word for Crane's artistic and philosophical accomplishment; "surprise" comes closer. His objective was not to create doubt, neither the comprehensive and corrosive upheaval wrought by Descartes methodic doubt, nor the beneficial, though unsettling, irritation of doubt,<sup>2</sup> which is central to the thought of Crane's American contemporary, the scientist and philosopher, C.S. Peirce. Nor was Crane's goal the epistemological panic which plagues postmodern and deconstructionist critics. Instead his goals were positive: to foster awareness and to cultivate openness to experience.

Scott Slovic recommends the works of Annie Dillard as an anecdote to “the anesthesia of routineness.”<sup>3</sup> But whereas Dillard’s artful and leisurely paced essays gently wake us, Crane’s potent prose and poetry startles us with shocks of recognition. How powerful, how unpredictable, how disorientating it is to let Crane control one’s stream of thought! His work is so highly charged, the ozone smell of a cracking thunderstorm still lingers. A surge protector, or at least a transformer, is needed to buffer the excessive voltage of Crane’s writing. Forewarned and even shielded, readers of Crane continue to discover that neither the external nor the internal worlds are as they seem. In a word, for him, experience is an epiphany to be explored. With Crane as tour guide and commentator, richness, complexity, wonderful surprises and unsettling questions supplant the obvious and everyday world we ordinary mortals are used to.

A brief explanation of the term “experience” is in order. Crane’s contemporaries, American Pragmatists, C.S. Peirce, William James, and, later, John Dewey sought to overcome the subject/object duality and the common sense, spectator view of knowledge. William James, in his *Essays in Radical Empiricism* argued that a neutral stuff, pure experience, is epistemological and metaphysically basic. James proposed that a bit of pure experience could be both public (out there) and private (within consciousness). Such bits of experience exist in separate, but compatible histories—an experiencer’s mental biography and an experienced fact in the world.<sup>4</sup> James insisted that we couldn’t and do not deal with the world as detached observers. Instead we interact with and interfere with an environment. John Dewey suggested that the term’s sensation, perception, apprehension and knowledge be replaced with more with active and interactive notions. He insisted that cognition is not an affair of getting an accurate account of what is external to a disembodied knower, rather knowledge is a process. Actually knowledge is a transaction or a negotiation which remakes the neutral stuff which is prior to both the known and the knower.<sup>5</sup> In a pragmatic renovation of our notion of truth veracious ideas are not static, accurate copies but are fruitful (or faulty) behavioral incursions. “The truth of an idea,” writes James,

is not a stagnant property inherent in it. Truth *happens* to an idea. It *becomes* true, is *made* true by events. Its verity *is* in fact an event, a process: the process namely of its verifying itself, its *verif-ication*. Its validity is the process of its *valid-ation*.<sup>6</sup>

This concept of experience (as well as similar concepts of truth and reality) functions vividly in Crane's accounts of the experience of wounds in three short stories, "An Episode of War," "The Price of the Harness" and "A Mystery of Heroism: A Detail of an American Battle."

As it turns out, a wide range of conventional expectations about pain and being wounded are overturned in these accounts. However, not only his readers but also Crane's own fictional characters themselves discover that very little of what they expect to happen, ever happens. Further through a subtle enfolding, the reader becomes both spectator and participant. So, too, Crane's fictional characters both observe and constitute the experiences that occur. As a result, neither the spectator's nor participant's vantage point is epistemologically privileged.<sup>7</sup> Accordingly, at both extremes of that continuum, being the viewer or being the sufferer involves serious liabilities as well as significant advantages; moreover, as noted above, the "real" event which occurs is a *tertium quid* that is both public and private, at once, shareable and idiosyncratic.

Perhaps, for Crane, the most surprising misinformation regarding wounds has to do with pain. Pain is not always agonizing. It can be an intriguing, revelatory experience. I am reminded of my own experience of twice being in shock. Both times everyone who watched grimaced or averted their glances, but I did not—I was not in pain. Pain can also be pleasurable. Consider this passage from Edward Abbey's journal, *Confessions of a Barbarian*:

My lips are stiff and chapped, with a small crack in my upper lip, a reliable source of a kind of interesting tiny, dry pain which I take continual delight in experiencing.<sup>8</sup>

And I recalled a provocative article in *Sports Illustrated* on athletes and pain that I read nearly twenty years ago. In "The Face of Pain," Mark Kram related how Los Angeles Rams star (now sportscaster and actor) Merlin Olsen, thought of pain as an opportunity for mental gymnastics:

Pain is an interesting thing. . . . Man is an adaptable creature, . . . and one finds out what you can or cannot do. It's like walking into a barnyard. The first thing you smell is manure. Stand there for about five minutes and you don't smell it anymore. The same thing is true of a knee. You hurt that knee. You're conscious of it. But then you start to play at a different level.<sup>9</sup>

Kram comments that Olsen "looks upon pain as an interesting companion, as something which arouses his contempt and inexhaustible taste for pragmatism."<sup>10</sup> For Crane, too, pain often brings illumination and insight instead of suffering.

The wounding of the lieutenant in "An Episode of War" is first described as an irritating, random occurrence that disturbed a mundane routine. "The others cried out when they saw blood upon the lieutenant's sleeve" (671). They cannot see the wound, only the blood though the lieutenant "wincing like a man stung" (671). But Crane does not focus upon the pain—actually very little is made of the wound sufferer's suffering. Instead he stresses the ways in which the gunshot debilitates the officer. He can no longer sheath his sword; he can not use his right arm but must carry it. Part of his body becomes an alien thing, "he held his right wrist tenderly in his left hand, as if the wounded arm was made of very brittle glass" (672).

The irony, of course, is while pain can enfeeble, it can, more importantly, capacitate. The remainder of the story dramatizes how, "as the wounded officer passed from the line of battle, he was enabled to see many things which as a participant in the fight were unknown to him" (672). The image Crane uses to capture the strangely ambiguous power of pain to innervate and to empower, is one of his favorites: a curtain.<sup>11</sup>

A wound gives strange dignity to him who bears it. Well men shy from this new and terrible majesty. It is as if the wounded man's hand is upon the curtain which hangs before the revelations of all existence. . . . The power of it sheds radiance upon a bloody form and makes the other men understand sometimes that they are little. (672)

Among the several things that being wounded makes possible is the realization that as participant in battle the lieutenant did not understand it. Indeed, the farther he removes himself from participating and the more distant and spectator-like he becomes, the more accurate are his (and others) observations:

He came upon some stragglers and they told him how to find the field hospital. They described its exact location. In fact these men, no longer having part in the battle, knew more of it than others. They told the performance of every corps, every division, the opinion of every general. The lieutenant, carrying his wounded arm rearward, looked upon them with wonder. (673)

More participant/spectator reorientations are in store. Even the sufferer of an injury does not automatically grasp its seriousness or significance. As already noted, under the influence of shock, the patient does not feel the real damage of an injury. Further in the lieutenant's case a rearward officer corrects the lieutenant's appreciation of his own injury.

"Why man, that's no way to do it. You want to fix that thing." He appropriated the lieutenant and the lieutenant's wound. . . . His tone allowed one to think that he was in the habit of being wounded every day. The lieutenant hung his head, feeling, in this presence, that he did not know how to be correctly wounded. (673-74)

Interestingly, Crane's term "appropriate" is apt when describing our dealings with things (instead of persons). As earlier noted,

the arm had become an alien object to the lieutenant; in fact, both the soldier and his arm have been reified.

Having learned how to be “correctly wounded” the lieutenant sees a man who is dying but who apparently does not realize it. He wonders if he should alert the dying man about his condition?

Sitting with his back against a tree a man with a face as grey as a new army blanket was serenely smoking a corn-cob pipe. The lieutenant wished to rush forward and inform him that he was dying. (674)

Two additional perspectives on wounds remain in “An Episode of War.” The surgeon who tends to him treats him with “great contempt” (674) because the doctor views the wound as having “placed [him] . . . on a very low social plane” (674)—unlike the “strange dignity” with which his wound was invested by those formerly under his command. Finally, Crane’s radical questioning of the privileged or compromised positions of participants and spectators in understanding pain, the significance of an injury, and the lasting impact of a wound brings the story to its pungent conclusion.

And this is the story of how the lieutenant lost his arm. When he reached home his sisters, his mother, his wife sobbed for a long time at the sight of the flat sleeve. “Oh, well,” he said, standing shamefaced amid these tears, “I don’t suppose it matters so much as all that.” (675)

Really? In a household, when its head loses an arm, who are the observers and who are the participants? Crane’s ending is as problematic as it is poignant.

In “The Price of the Harness,” Crane again uses a curtain image, “the steep mountain range on the right turned blue and as without detail as a curtain” (1016) as he probes the complex and confusing experience of battle. This story, one of Crane’s longer short stories, examines all sort of misapprehensions and mistakes by both participants and observers. In Crane’s American Civil War stories, distance from the battle was the coefficient of clarity;

in his Spanish-American War stories, detachment and spectator-neutrality often have the opposite effect. The drawback that comes from being too remote is symbolized by a military reconnaissance balloon, which does not provide reliable intelligence, but only gives away the troops' position, drawing both friendly and hostile fire. In "The Price of the Harness" the balloon is shot down, and all witness its demise, "the balloon was dying, dying a gigantic and public death before the eyes of two armies"<sup>12</sup> (1022). Apparently those on the ground, involved in the battle are, sometimes, but not always, closer to the truth. In exploring the perspective of the infantry, Crane uses a technique later exploited by Alfred Hitchcock and more recently by Steven Spielberg in *Jaws*; first, false suspense is created: when the men sense danger, they are safe; and, then, false security: when the men feel safe, they are really in mortal danger. And so, Crane explains, after a long, tense wait when the troops are finally allowed to return gunfire, "a new sense of safety was rightfully upon them" (1029). Of course, then, the real carnage began.

"The Price of the Harness" tallies up the costs of war: death, destruction, wounds and pain. Crane depicts a variety of wounded men. Some are in shock, walking rearward, looking back from whence they had fought, "the wounded soldiers paused to look impassively upon this struggle. They were always like men who could not be aroused by anything further" (1028).

Others suffer terribly on the field and in the hospital. In particular, Martin, whom Crane follows for the first half of the story, is badly wounded. As in "An Episode in War," Martin shuns the surgeons' comfort and care, choosing instead to rest against a tree:

Martin saw a busy person with a book and a pencil, but he did not approach him to become officially a member of the hospital. All he desired was rest and immunity from nagging. He took seat painfully under a bush and leaned his back upon the trunk. There he remained thinking, his face wooden. (1028)

The climax of "Price of the Harness," perhaps more emotionally wrenching than the close of "An Episode of War,"

concerns a soldier who is wounded and dying but he does not realize it. Again the epistemological advantages and handicaps, which one assumes accrue to participants and observers, are undercut in Crane's account of experience. James Nolan has suffered a fatal stomach wound; he, however, believes his wound is minor. His only complaints are that he is cold and that the ground he is lying on is wet. The ground is not damp, his comrades explain. Nolan persists:

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

Grierson seemed to be afraid of Nolan's agitation, and so he slipped a hand under the prostate man, and presently withdrew it covered with blood. "Yes," he said, hiding his hand carefully from Nolan's eyes, "you were right, Jimmie."

"Of course I was," said Nolan, contentedly closing his eyes. "This hillside holds water like a swamp." After a moment he said: "Guess I ought to know. I'm flat here on it, and you fellers are standing up." (1031)

Crane has several soldiers well positioned to give an accurate report upon the factual matters under dispute. Above all the rest, Nolan has direct access to the situation. However, "he did not know he was dying. He thought he was holding an argument on the condition of the turf" (1031).

A brief look at the third story "A Mystery of Heroism" reveals familiar Cranean themes dealing battlefield trauma. The curtain image is repeated, "from beyond a curtain of green woods there came the sound of some stupendous scuffle as if two animals of the size of islands were fighting" (623-24). Again, a wounded right arm becomes an artificial appendage: "a lieutenant of the battery rode down and passed them, holding his right arm carefully in his left hand. And it was as if this arm was not a part of him, but belonged to another man" (624). Beyond these standard themes, Crane pays attention to some overlooked victims of war: plants, "for the little meadow which intervened was now suffering a terrible onslaught of shells. . . . And there was a massacre of the young blades of grass" (624) and animals,

especially horses, which suffer terribly in war. Indeed, Crane sometimes seems more attentive to the pain of the brute-soldiers than to that of their masters:

in this rank of brute-soldiers there had been relentless and hideous carnage. From the ruck of bleeding and prostate horses, the men of the infantry could see one animal raising its stricken body with its fore-legs and turning its nose with mystic and profound eloquence toward the sky. (625)

“A Mystery of Heroism” describes thirsty Fred Collins’ reckless dash across a no-man’s land to reach a well where he could fill canteens. At best, this foolish act is merely pseudo-heroic; even Collins realizes this. At worst, the risk he is taking is immoral for so great is the disparity between the serious cost and the trivial reward— nothing of moral significance could be gained by his bravado. As he approached the well safely, Collins felt like a fraud. “He was not a hero” (628); “he was an intruder in the land of fine deeds” (629).

It took too long to fill the canteens, so he filled a bucket instead. “In running with a filled bucket, a man can adopt but one kind of gait. So through this terrible field, over which screamed practical angels of death, Collins ran in the manner of a farmer chased out of a dairy by a bull” (630). That is, in running with the filled bucket, Collins has now incurred added risks, thereby further reducing the odds of any outcome which might justify or even mollify the risks he has taken. Halfway across the meadow, Collins passed a wounded artillery officer pinned under his fallen horse—the pain and suffering of both were already noted above. The stricken superior,

had been making groans in the teeth of the tempest of sound. These futile cries, wrenched from him by his agony, were heard only by shells, bullets. When wild-eyed Collins came running, this officer raised himself. His face contorted and blanched from pain, he was about to utter some great beseeching cry. But suddenly his face straightened and he

called: "Say, young man, give me a drink of water, will you?" (630)

"I can't," he screamed. . . . He ran on. (631).

But, then, Collins turned back. Reaching the wounded officer, Collins tried to give him a drink, "but his shaking hands caused the water to splash all over the face of the dying man" (631). Thereby, pain and suffering correctly appreciated by both the patient and the onlooker—and correctly responded to—transformed a foolish caper into a genuinely, moral act of heroism. Collins' compassion for the fallen officer was an act of supererogation: an action not required, but a good act nonetheless, one above and beyond the call of duty. Accordingly, in "A Mystery of Heroism" Crane showed how battlefield pain and suffering could convert an amoral, even immoral action into a moral deed. Perhaps a compassionate response to battlefield trauma might transform other foolhardy actions into exemplary acts beyond the pale of ethics! Or as Crane himself put it in "An Episode of War," "a wound gives strange dignity" both "to him who bears it" (672) and moral standing to those who respond to pain and suffering.

I conclude by recalling my opening comments about the high voltage of Crane's writing. Philosophically speaking, Crane has used the considerable candlepower of his prose to illuminate several hidden, unnoticed and surprising contours of the experience of battle wounds and suffering. "Experience," I hope I have shown, is the proper term for the subject matter of Crane's explorations. He has clearly gone beyond the traditional dualisms of subject/object and reality/appearance. I am not surprised at Crane's epistemological and metaphysical sophistication—especially his grasp of the ambiguous status and the dubious merits of spectator/participant perspectives. After all, Crane was genius living at the turn of the century when the pragmatic temper dominated the culture of America. A culture that John McDermott has aptly described by the title of his fine book, *The Culture of Experience: Philosophical Essays in the American Grain*.<sup>13</sup> ☞

## NOTES

1. Stephen Crane, "An Episode of War," *Stephen Crane: Prose and Poetry*, J.C. Levenson, ed. (New York: Library of America, 1984), 672. Subsequent references to this text are parenthetical.
2. See Peirce's seminal (often reprinted and easily accessible) essays "The Fixation of Belief" for his account of belief, doubt, and inquiry and "How to Make Our Ideas Clear" for his foundational statements of the pragmatic theories of meaning and truth.
3. Scott Slovic, "Sudden Feelings: Annie Dillard's Psychology," *Seeking Awareness in American Nature Writing* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1992), 65.
4. See my *Pragmatism as Humanism: The Philosophy of William James* (Chicago: Nelson Hall, 1978) for more on James' notion of pure experience.
5. For an excellent survey of Dewey's thought, see James Campbell's *Understanding John Dewey: Nature and Cooperative Intelligence* (Chicago: Open Court, 1995).
6. William James, "Pragmatism's Conception of Truth," *Pragmatism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978), 97.
7. For more on Crane's examination of actor/spectator perspectives see the second chapter of my *The Pluralistic Philosophy of Stephen Crane* (Bloomington: University of Illinois Press, 1993).
8. Edward Abbey, *Confessions of a Barbarian*, David Peterson, ed. (Boston: Little, Brown and Co, 1994), 32.
9. Mark Kram, "The Face of Pain," *Sports Illustrated* 44.10 (8 March 1976): 62.
10. Kram, 62. Along these lines, recent interest in environmental ethics has lead several theorists to revisit Darwin, especially his concepts of pain as unwelcome information (and pleasure as reward). J. Baird Callicott's "Animal Liberation: A Triangular Affair," *Environmental Ethics* 2 (1980): 311-338 was influential in a philosophical analysis of Darwin's biological notions of pain and suffering.
11. Surely Crane's most powerful curtain image occurs in "An Eloquence of Grief" in which he describes the scream of a young woman after she was pronounced guilty as "so graphic of grief, that it slit with a dagger's sweep the curtain of common-place" (863).
12. See "Stephen Crane's Vivid Story of the Battle of San Juan" for the same sort of trouble caused by another reconnaissance balloon.
13. John McDermott, *The Culture of Experience: Philosophical Essays in the American Grain* (New York: New York University Press, 1976). Equally helpful is McDermott's more recent volume, *The Streams of Experience:*

*Reflections on the History and Philosophy of American Culture* (Amherst:  
University of Massachusetts Press, 1986).