

“His face ceased instantly to be a face”: Gothicism in Stephen Crane

Agnieszka Soltysik Monnet, University of Lausanne

Stephen Crane is regarded as among America's most important Naturalists, especially for his first novel *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* (1893), which was set in the Bowery district of New York. The same attention to realistic detail, dialect, and environmental forces impacting individual lives that characterized *Maggie* is also present in *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895), his second and most famous work. Critics often supplement the term “naturalist” with another – “impressionist” – when discussing Crane's specific style, in an attempt to account for Crane's bold range of metaphors, his reliance on color to create mood and his tendency to evoke emotion when describing settings. It would be more accurate to say, however, that Crane's work is indebted to the gothic, a fact that has been overlooked due to a tendency to see realism and the gothic as polar opposites on a stylistic spectrum. This essay examines Crane's use of gothic imagery and rhetoric in a range of texts from *Maggie* to later stories, poems and newspaper articles. Of these, *The Red Badge of Courage* is Crane's single most densely gothic text, though *The Monster* also explicitly borrows its title and key trope from the gothic tradition. Although Crane was influenced by Ambrose Bierce's gothicism, the uses to which he put this mode were significantly different and uniquely his own. I will show that the single most important image in Crane's gothic repertoire is the face that has lost its human appearance and has become uncanny -- through strong emotion, mutilation or death. Crane's fiction returns time and again to two main themes, death and a condition I will call for now the estranged self; both are figured by this trope in his work. Both of these themes are also strongly linked to violence and warfare,

themes which inspired Crane's most effective gothic writing, though ultimately the reigning pro-war ideology of his generation pulled his later war fiction away from the gothic.

That Crane read and admired Ambrose Bierce's Civil War fiction, published in 1892, *Tales of Soldiers and Civilians*, is a matter of historical record. "Nothing better exists," Crane told a friend, speaking about Bierce's "Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" (cited in Berryman 168). Bierce's influence on Crane – with his gothic tales as much as his war writing – is particularly visible in *Red Badge of Courage*, where we can recognize the world that Bierce created in "Chickamauga" in the gory details used to describe injuries, the intense play of ironies, the forest that shifts from being a sunny and innocent field of play one minute to a hellish shadow world of devils and beasts the next. It bears saying nevertheless that Bierce and Crane use gothic elements in quite different ways. We could call this a question of degree but it is also a matter of purpose. Bierce wrote a number of stories that were clearly gothic or supernatural or "fantastic" (as the title of the collection identified them), whereas Crane always uses the gothic on a purely linguistic or rhetorical level. The gothic is a metaphorical toolbox for him, whereas with Bierce we can speak of a level of engagement that approaches what critics used to call genre. I would use this term with great care since literary theory has convincingly questioned the validity of the notion of genre, moving since several decades to a more pragmatic, performative and qualified understanding of form. In light of this scholarship it makes more sense to think of the Gothic as a mode that combines readily with other modes and forms. Thus, Crane's novel is first and foremost a war novel, a realist narrative of an infantryman's first experiences with combat, a genre that would become very common in the twentieth century, but it draws heavily on the gothic for its imagery, atmosphere, and figurative language at certain moments. Bierce also

combines the gothic with other forms, the Western tall tale, the sketch, the fable, the incident of war, etc., but Bierce will sometimes allow the gothic to dominate the story – going as far as using supernatural occurrences – whereas Crane never does.

The most important difference between the two writers' use of gothic elements in relation to war is that for Bierce it is a means for describing psychological damage whereas for Crane it is mainly a language for representing fear and violence. The gothic allows Bierce to show something that was only beginning to be understood at the time, namely, that war can destroy people psychically as well as physically (Monnet 177). Thus Bierce's war stories are full of characters with varying degrees of madness, and the gothic tropes of haunting, the undead, and the uncanny are used to illustrate this insanity. This translates into a strong antiwar current in Bierce's work. What is strikingly missing from Crane's war fiction and nonfiction prose is an acknowledgement of the possibility of mental injury or trauma. The question that interests Crane far more is how men act in the extreme circumstances of war, what is revealed to them of their characters, and how they are changed by the experience. This change, however, is never represented as damage or diminution, but, in keeping with the jingoistic attitudes of his generation, always as a change for the better (if they survive, of course, or don't suffer debilitating physical injuries). In Crane's work, boys become men in the crucible of war. Thus, Crane rarely uses the trope of haunting, which is Bierce's favorite trope for traumatic memory, as it would become more widely known in the twentieth century.

Instead, what Crane generally uses gothic rhetoric for is to describe the transformed and estranged state of men in danger, in combat, or in the grips of strong emotion (fear, rage, drunkenness, etc.). Crane is generally fascinated by the situations in which men become something other than themselves, or in which they are subject to forces – internal and/or external – that are beyond mere volition or personality. One of

these conditions that Crane returns to repeatedly in his work is alcoholic intoxication. This is a theme that will feature centrally in his best-known short stories, such as “The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky” and “The Blue Hotel.” It is fully present already in his first novel, *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*, in the character of Maggie’s mother, who is arguably the most villainous character in the book. Her role in Maggie’s downfall is presented as a consequence of her unnatural lack of motherly feeling and femininity, since she is represented as very large and very aggressive, but the most terrifying aspect of her character is the fact that she drinks. In his descriptions of the mother, Crane uses a colorful and gothic-tinged language that renders her fully monstrous. One of the first of these passages describes her luridly: “The rough yellow of her face and neck flared suddenly crimson. She began to howl” (13). She also “screams” and “roars” and “howls” in this altercation with her husband, terms that evoke animalistic violence and serve to compare her to a beast. The incident ends with the mother casting her terrifying attention on her son: “Her glittering eyes fastened on her child with sudden hatred. The fervent red of her face turned almost purple. The little boy ran to the halls, shrieking like a monk in an earthquake” (15). The reference to the “monk” explicitly evokes the British Gothic tradition but the many references to color – crimson, red, purple – to represent violent emotion and violence itself are uniquely Crane’s.

If the mother is the most explicitly gothic character in the novel because of her drinking, there is one other scene in which a full-fledged gothic vocabulary is used, and this is the fight between Maggie’s brother and the man who has “ruined” her. It is the only scene of its kind in the book and it clearly anticipates the way that Crane will use the gothic in *Red Badge of Courage* and later stories. As in the descriptions of the mother, a lexicon of animals is used to describe the rising tension: “he snarled like a wild animal” (47), “the glare of a panther came into Jimmie’s eyes” (47), “they bristled like three

roosters,” and “the bravery of bulldogs sat upon the faces of the men” (48). When the fight actually begins, a darker and more explicitly gothic vocabulary emerges: “The faces of the men, at first flushed to flame-colored anger, now began to fade to the pallor of warriors in the blood and heat of a battle. Their lips curled back and stretched tightly over the teeth in ghoul-like grins. Through their white, gripped teeth struggled hoarse whisperings of oaths” (48). We see again the typically Cranean attention to color, first “flame-colored,” then a ghastly pallor. The faces of the men serve as synecdoches for their emotions, but the masklike grin that settles on their features is once more something specific to Crane. It is a symptom of his attempt to render the strangeness and impersonality of violence. The men are no longer themselves, they are grim figures in an event that wholly transcends their personal individuality. They are no longer even in control of their actions and words. The oaths are given agency as they struggle through the men’s gripped teeth. It is not the men who swear, but the oaths that speak through the men. The description of the fight continues in this highly impersonal and dissociated mode: “their blood-colored fists whirled,” “blows left crimson blotches upon the pale skin.” The sounds they make are not human sounds: “Pete at intervals gave vent to low, labored hisses, that sounded like a desire to kill” while “Jimmie’s ally gibbered at times like a wounded maniac” (48). In Crane’s fiction, violence transforms men into beasts, but there is also an element of religious ecstasy or frenzy in the passage when one man is described fighting with “the face of a sacrificial priest.” One can note again the focus on the face, and the utterly transformed character of the men in the midst of their battle. This scene anticipates in every respect the way that Crane will describe combat in his next novel.

As I have mentioned, *The Red Badge of Courage* is the most full realized gothic text that Crane wrote, largely because it is the only text wholly devoted to the literary

rendering of the subjective experience of fear and violence. This is the topic for which Crane would use the gothic most often and most fully. The novel has not been read as gothic in the twentieth century, however. Its reception has focused almost entirely on its ironic treatment of the male rite of passage theme, with a critical debate raging for decades about whether the young protagonist Henry Fleming should be read as a hero or as vainglorious coward. I will return to this question in a moment, when I discuss the short story titled "The Veteran" that Crane published a year later, which shows the same protagonist as an old man reflecting back on his Civil War experiences. For now, I would like to discuss the three main ways that Crane uses the gothic in the novel. These three ways can be described as atmosphere, battle, and injury and death. By atmosphere, I refer to the way that Crane uses gothic imagery to create a certain ambiance as well as to describe the setting. This imagery begins in the very first paragraph, where Crane describes the military camp on the bank of a stream whose "sorrowful blackness" was countered only by the "red eye-like gleam of hostile camp fires" in the distant hills (3). This image, giving the enemy army a kind of monstrous form and face, will continue throughout the book, with descriptions of the armies as "huge crawling reptiles" or "monsters wending with many feet" or even "rows of dragons" (15). The dragon image will be repeated in the book but another image for the armies, and for the war more generally, emerges at times, anticipating the literature of World War I, and this is the image of the death machine. As Henry watches from a distance at one point, "the battle was like the grinding of an immense and terrible machine to him" (50). What it produces, in a grim travesty of industrial production, is "corpses." The conceit is reinforced in another line shortly after when the protagonist surveys how "the torn bodies expressed the awful machinery in which the men had been entangled" (51). This is one of the most terrible images of the book and one of the most resistant to military

jingoism. It is often cited by critics who argue that the novel is a fierce and ironic criticism of war.

The other main pattern of gothic imagery in the book, to represent injury and death, also seems to fall into this antiwar tendency. These passages are relentlessly demystifying and absolutely uncanny. One, for example, is clearly inspired by Bierce: the man who has been shot through the cheeks. In "Chickamauga" there is a man with a "face that lacked a lower jaw—from the upper teeth to the throat was a great red gap fringed with hanging shreds of flesh and splinters of bone" (51). Crane is clearly thinking of this image when he writes: "Its supports being injured, his jaw hung afar down, disclosing in the wide cavern of his mouth a pulsing mass of blood and teeth" (125-6). We can note how extremely dehumanizing this injury is, especially since it concerns a face which is distorted into an inhuman "cavern" where the mouth should be.

No topic inspired Crane to passages of gothic figuration of greater intensity or power than those concerning death. The narrator describes being a soldier as "touching the great death" and it is clear that death is something of a mystery both to the protagonist and to Crane, something both terrible and uncanny in its power to render humans into inanimate objects. Although the first corpse Fleming encounters is more piteous than anything else, exposed in death, and avoided by all the soldiers who nevertheless "try to read in dead eyes the answer to the Question" (24). The second corpse reveals something far more terrible to Fleming. It is seated against a tree in a grotesque mimicry of human posture, but the face has nothing human in it. The eyes "had changed to the dull hue to be seen on the side of a dead fish" (47). The mouth once more is the worst feature, open and now an "appalling yellow," with an ant "trundling some sort of bundle" across the upper lip. In fact, "little ants" are running all over the "gray skin of the face." The corpse is twice called a "thing" and yet it and Henry

“exchanged a long look” (48). Its eyes are “liquid looking” but turn Henry to “stone” even as he shrieks and flees. Looking back at it once more, he sees the ants “swarming greedily upon the gray face and venturing horribly near to the eyes.” The framework here is fundamentally that of the uncanny, the confusion of the animate and inanimate, human and insect, living and dead, but the passage also invokes the abject, of which the corpse is the most basic instance.<sup>1</sup> The corpse in this passage is waste, subject to the decomposing activities of ants, and yet his imagination gives it life and agency, as Henry listens to hear if “some strange voice would come from the dead throat” (48).

The third main pattern of gothicism in *The Red Badge of Courage* is the one already discussed with regard to *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*, namely, violence as bestiality. This is the most consistent and recurring conceit in Crane’s work, though sometimes it is embellished, as in *Maggie*, with references to religious frenzy or berserker-type madness. War itself is often figured in both animalistic and religious terms, as a “red animal—war, the blood swollen god,” a phrase that is used at least twice in the book (25, 69). More specifically, the moments of combat are described as transforming Henry with a “red rage” into a “driven beast” (35). His teeth are set in a “curlike snarl” and he cries out “savagely” (94). He is like a “mad horse” and his friend springs at the enemy banner like a “panther” (129, 130). The other soldiers also seem to the youth like “animals, tossed for a death struggle into a dark pit” (95). The lexicon of animality is reinforced with a vocabulary of religious ecstasy: “he had been a barbarian, a beast...he had fought like a pagan who defends his religion” (97). The soldiers are in a “state of frenzy,” gripped by “wild battle madness.” The rhetoric also dips into the macabre and satanic at times: the youth feels surrounded by “swirling battle phantoms” (127), his fellow soldiers are “jabbering the while...with their swaying bodies, black faces, and glowing eyes, like strange and ugly fiends jigging heavily in the smoke” (124).

Combat is thus consistently figured as a state of temporary insanity, in which men revert to more primitive instincts, of animals or of pagans. They are not themselves, and yet they discover through this experience their deepest selves. There is no room for choice and will power; they act as madmen, irrational and unselfconscious, but they thereby take an accurate measure of their true natures. In the case of the protagonist, he discovers himself a coward on the first day of battle but a hero, a “war devil,” on the next. The fact that Crane makes him both has confused critics for over a hundred years, and the reception of the book is defined by the debate over whether Henry is a hero or a craven fool.<sup>2</sup>

This debate is fueled by Henry’s own uncertainty over the answer to this question in the last chapter. This is the only moment in the novel, and in Crane’s work as whole, where the trope of memory as a haunting is invoked. When the battles are over, Henry looks over the events of the last couple days and tries to “comprehend himself” (133). He is initially pleased with the public praise he has received, but then he remembers his shameful deeds: running away from battle, and abandoning a dying man in a field. These memories are figured in terms of being haunted, by “the ghost of his flight,” and “the somber phantom of his desertion in the fields,” and by a “specter of reproach” (134). His conscience itself seems to be figured as a “specter in his path,” to take the phrase Edgar Allan Poe uses in “William Wilson” (the Gothic tale that most perfectly expresses the conceit of conscience as an exteriorized phantom). The final ambiguity in the novel comes from the fact that he is able to chase these phantoms away in the last page and discover in himself “a store of assurance” and a “quiet manhood” (135). Some critics have read this ironically, as a continuation of Henry’s various self-deceptions in the novel, but the narrator fails to make the irony explicit. Instead, he allows Henry to finish

the narrative feeling like a man as a “ray of sun came through the hosts of leaden rain clouds” (136).

It has proved impossible to mount a definitive reading one way or the other through internal evidence, but a short story published by Crane a year later that revisits the character of Henry Fielding can help shed light on this puzzle. In “The Veteran,” the final story in a collection of eight short stories called *The Little Regiment* (1896), Henry Fielding is an old man telling eager listeners, including his young grandson, about the fact that he ran from his first battle. The men laugh and admire his courage to admit this potentially shameful fact, but Henry himself has clearly come to terms with it and explains his subsequent actions as a question of having gotten “used to” combat (83). Apparently he acquitted himself bravely after this first flight, and achieved the level of an “orderly sergeant.” Crane does not let Henry merely speak of his overcoming of his initial cowardice; the whole point of the story is in fact to prove that Henry is not only a coward, but has become a heroically brave man thanks to his combat experience. The second half of the story begins with the discovery of a fire on Henry’s property. A curious thing happens to Henry’s face at the news. It ceases “instantly to be a face” and turns into a “mask, a grey thing, with horror written around the mouth and eyes” (84). It is a very striking image – unmistakably gothic – and could be read either as a reaction of fear or as a steeling himself to courage, because Henry immediately runs to the burning barn and leads out the horses at great risk to himself. Anticipating the later story, “The Monster,” where a black man saves a boy from a fire but loses his face when chemicals fall on him and burn it away, Henry emerges from the fire with no whiskers and very little hair. After he saves the cows, he is reminded by the “Swede” who accidently started the fire (anticipating another famous story with a drunken Swede—“The Blue Hotel”) that some colts are still in the barn. Attempting to save them is a suicidal act, but Henry

cries “poor little things” and rushes into the burning barn, which collapses upon him. In this way, the story settles in no uncertain terms the question of Henry’s courage. He may have been cowardly and foolish in his first battle, but the novel and the story both work to demonstrate that he has learned to do his duty, and even far beyond. The ending of “The Veteran” gives his death a decidedly melodramatic flourish, with its description of “the old man’s mighty spirit, released from its body” (86) and floating up into the universe. It is clearly a redemptive ending and is meant to help readers understand Crane’s intentions in the novel. Criticized for writing a novel about a cowardly soldier, Crane uses “The Veteran” to show that Henry’s story is not of cowardice but of learning to overcome a natural fear and become a better man.

Thus, “The Veteran” suggests that combat, far from being psychologically injurious, helps build character and turn vain, selfish boys into good men. In this respect, Crane is entirely a product of his generation, which was defined not only by jingoism and a hawk-like eagerness for imperial expansion but a conviction that war offers men an excellent opportunity to build character. Arguments in favor of the Spanish-American war tended to rely on this belief, and no one was more vocal about the benefits of a little combat on the American male than Theodore Roosevelt (Hoganson 68-87). Debates about the war found Civil War generation men far more cautious about the prospect of war than their sons, who had never lived through war. Although some readers have mistakenly taken *The Red Badge of Courage* as an ironic and critical account of war by a Civil War veteran, in my view it should be read as an argument for the benefits of war as a rite of passage by a young man of Spanish-American War generation. In fact, reading Crane’s dispatches from the wars he covered as a reporter, in Greece, and then Cuba, one is struck by how little gothic imagery there is in them. Instead, Crane focuses on ironic incidents of war, chance accidents, occasional moments of bravery or cowardice, and

other interesting but never horrific details. While covering the war in Cuba Crane uses the word “gallant” freely, especially in describing the Rough Riders, and falls completely in line with Roosevelt’s own enthusiastic account of the battle of San Juan Hill. In fact, when describing the “thrill of patriotic insanity” that “coursed through us” when he heard “By God, there go our boys up the hill!” he uses the first person plural to emphasize that *he was there* (“No. 39” 158).

After *The Red Badge of Courage*, Crane published two collections of Civil War stories, *The Little Regiment and Other Episodes from the American Civil War* (1896), which contained “The Veteran,” and *Wounds in the Rain: War Stories* (1900). The earlier collection still bears traces of Bierce’s influence and contains various moments where gothic language is used, but far less so than *The Red Badge of Courage*. There are no ghastly corpses or bloody battle scenes. Instead, the gothic is used mainly to represent mood and atmosphere and the subjective experience of fear. The most interesting story in this regard is “Three Miraculous Soldiers,” about a Southern girl hiding three rebels in her barn while Union soldiers occupy her property. Like the heroines of Walpole’s and Radcliffe’s novels, the protagonist is a plucky and intrepid young woman. Crane uses gothic imagery in this story mainly in one moment, when she creeps down to the barn to help them and is gripped by fear and wonder at the fact that they seem to have disappeared. Because her “dominating emotion was fright” (37), the scene is painted in terms of “shadowy figures,” “monstrous wavering shadows,” “ghoulish whiteness” and “terror after terror” (38). Nevertheless, the Gothic has shrunk in scope from the novel to serving in a far more limited way in the short story collection. It almost never appears at all in the later short story collection, *Wounds in the Rain*. In fact, the only place that the Gothic re-emerges in Crane’s later work in a significant way at all is in a poem, “Do not weep, maiden, for war is kind,” in the volume of poetry, *War is Kind*, published in 1900.

It is the only poem dealing with war in the entire collection, but it is strikingly dark for a man whose last contracted assignment was a series of celebratory articles about famous battles (*Great Battles of the World*). In “Do not weep, maiden, for war is kind,” the recurring image is “a field where a thousand corpses lie” and the ironic refrain “war is kind” (45). It is clearly an antiwar poem, focusing on the people who mourn the fallen rather than on heroism and combat itself, addressing the “maiden” who loses her lover, the “babe” who loses its father, and the “mother” who loses her son. The image of the “battle-god” which we saw in the novel returns, but is not swollen with blood this time, though his “kingdom” is a “field where a thousand corpses lie.” In other words, the Gothicism is present but muted. The fact that Crane chose a poem to express a criticism of the slaughter produced by war is interesting in light of the way that poetry would become the literary form most devoted to antiwar sentiment in the twentieth century, especially in the wake of World War I.

I want to end with a look at “The Monster” (1899), which is after all the text by Crane with the most explicit allusion to the Gothic with its title. “The Monster” is also an interesting companion piece to *The Red Badge of Courage* (and especially “The Veteran”) insofar as it returns to the theme of an unheroic man doing heroic deeds. Like Henry Fleming, Henry Johnson is a vain and somewhat foolish young man, very concerned with impressing his employer’s young son and the girls in the neighborhood. He also finds himself performing a deed of utmost heroism with no hesitation, acting on pure instinct to plunge into a burning house in order to rescue the child that has been his friend. If the basic situation resembles Henry Fleming’s, certain key circumstances and the results are dramatically different. First of all, Henry Johnson is black, and so Crane indulges in the casual racism of the late nineteenth century in rendering his pride in his appearance comically ironic. For the white nineteenth century American, nothing

was quite so ridiculous as a black dandy. Secondly, instead of changing for the better by his brush with danger, like Henry Fleming, Henry Johnson has the misfortune of being hideously disfigured and going mad. To be precise, he emerges from the fire with no face and no coherent self. The story is not concerned with his abjection, however, but with the stubborn loyalty of the man whose son he saved, Dr. Prescott, who defies his friends and neighbors by insisting on taking care of a man who is now an insane and terrifying outcast. One of the ironies of the story is the theme of how heroism and monstrosity, seemingly opposed, are strangely linked: Henry becomes a hero and a monster at once, as does Dr. Prescott, more gradually. If his gratitude to Henry is heroic, his association with the lunatic makes him a pariah in his community and a source of terror as well. "If you're sick and nervous, Doctor Prescott would scare the life out of you, wouldn't he?" one townswoman says to another (52). Thus, the gothic language in the story is mainly used for the effect that Henry's face (or rather, lack of) has on people: fear. Like Frankenstein's monster, Henry makes people flee in terror when he appears. Their descriptions of what they saw after the fact are framed in an explicitly gothic rhetoric: "a thing, a dreadful thing" (46) and "a monster" (47).

One plausible way of reading the story has been as a commentary on human prejudice and mob violence. In this light, the monster is not Henry Johnson but the community which insists on seeing him in this light and treating both him and increasingly his protector accordingly. Yet the story seems to present a dilemma for the reader in terms of how to read Dr. Prescott's insistence on saving and keeping the terrifying and now lunatic Johnson under his roof. Readers have wondered if Crane does not wish Prescott to be understood as going too far. The dilemma the story presents is an ethical double-bind that situates the story at the heart of the Gothic tradition. Like Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Melville's *Pierre* or James' *Turn of the Screw*, "The Monster" uses

a gothic framework in order to probe the mysterious event-horizon of conventional ethics, the zone where our moral compass fails and our judgment doubles back on itself. Often, in such texts, two radically incommensurable moral paradigms or world-views encounter each other and create dramatic situations that both demand and defy the reader to position him or herself with regards to the story. The combined force of the imperative and impossibility to do so is often the source of the most compelling and unforgettable gothic narratives, such as this one.

By way of conclusion, I would like to return to the issue of faces and the uncanny effect of disfigurement so powerfully staged in "The Monster." As mentioned earlier, this is arguably the single most important rhetorical and thematic feature that consistently runs through Crane's fiction, and is often the locus of gothic effects. What seems to have fascinated Crane about the human face as a trope most of all is how it permitted him to represent divided or failed identity. In other words, Crane returns again and again to the moments and situations in which subjects are not themselves. To take a very simple example, one of Crane's most famous stories – "The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky" – is about drunkenness, and the way that people became altered – both themselves and yet not themselves – by strong drink. When Scratchy Wilson is sober he is "the nicest fellow in town" who "wouldn't hurt a fly," but when he drinks he terrorizes the town with his gun and stalks the sheriff (116). Combat is another situation in which people act in ways that they do not fully control with their conscious mind, as we have seen in *The Red Badge of Courage*, which is why it was considered such an incomparable test of character in the 1890s (and continues to be a mythic site of masculine identity formation). We could say that danger more generally causes people to act involuntarily. One story, "The Sergeant Private's Madhouse" (1899) is about a soldier so frightened that he goes temporarily mad and sings, luckily spooking the enemy into retreating. As

in *Red Badge* and *Maggie*, violence and combat both induce emotional states in Crane's world in which men seem to transcend themselves and become other, both more primitive or more exalted.

That such transformations are uncanny is obvious, and no alternation is more uncanny than that effected by death itself. In all of these cases, Crane's writing focuses on the face as the site where this strangeness is most visible and most terrifying. No story illustrates this better than the late tale, "The Upturned Face" (1900). Set during the Spanish-American war, the story is about the terrifying uncanniness of the human face in death. Two young soldiers tasked with burying a body are violently intimidated by the corpse's "chalk-blue" face and "gleaming eyes" that "stared at the sky" (297). Scarcely able to touch the body to search it for personal effects, they are most particularly upset by the prospect of dumping dirt on its face. Recalling the horror that Henry Fleming feels when he finds a dead body with ants on its face, crawling on its mouth and approaching the eyes, the story has no particular plot except the fact of the dread felt by the soldiers as they confront the upturned face of the corpse. This is among the most succinctly gothic of Crane's tales: death is its theme, and the uncanny is the framework through which the potent affect generated by the presence of death is mediated. The face which is no longer a face is Crane's favorite trope to approach the strangeness that death introduces into life. Just as the German *Unheimlich* is able to signify both the familiar (*Heimlich*) and its opposite, so the dead face is able to signify both the human subject and its inanimate opposite, i.e. dead matter. The story ends with the dreadful sound that the dirt makes as it falls on the body, "plop," a sound that underscores the fact that the body has now become indistinguishable from the substance in which it lies.

With the trope of the disfigured face, Crane finds a way to figure a theme that was emerging in the late nineteenth century and which would be a core feature of twentieth

century intellectual life, namely, the self-estranged self. Without recourse to psychoanalytic tropes of repression or sexual neurosis, Crane finds a powerful image for the dissolution of the coherent and self-identical subject that was emerging in the latter decades of the nineteenth century. If I have conflated the uncanniness of the divided self (alienated by madness, emotion or intoxication) with the uncanniness of the corpse, that is because Crane was equally fascinated by both and used the same trope to figure them. Whether dead, drunk or deranged, the face was Crane's favorite and most gothic synecdoche for the strangeness of the human psyche in a secular and scientific age.

In conclusion, Crane's place in the Naturalist movement must be supplemented by an acknowledgement of the crucial role played by gothic rhetoric in his work, especially around the theme of the modern subject in the grip of forces – both inner and outer – beyond his control. The Gothic offers Crane a toolbox for writing about the ways in which violence and warfare estrange men from themselves and irrevocably alter them, either in death or in the ecstasy of combat. Far from being opposed to Realism or Naturalism, the Gothic is an integral part of the Naturalist aesthetic and a crucial means of figuring the forces that overwhelm and annihilate the modern subject.

---

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Although the standard critical reference for the uncanny is Sigmund Freud's essay about the effect produced by a confusion of the familiar and unfamiliar, there is another kind of uncanny that Freud mentions only briefly in his discussion of Ernst Jentsch's work, and which is more relevant for Stephen Crane's work, and that is the uncanny produced by a confusion about the animate or inanimate nature of a given figure or object (The Uncanny 135-6). For the abject, the best discussion remains Julia Kristeva's *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982).

<sup>2</sup> According to Michael Schaefer, John J. McDermott is representative of critics who argue that Crane meant readers to see Henry as a hero, while Weihong Julia Zhu argues that Henry's courage is "absurd" ("The Absurdity" 2). Schaefer's article "'Heroes Had no Shame in their Lives': Manhood, Heroics, and Compassion in *The Red Badge of Courage* and 'A Mystery of Heroism.'" Offers a concise summary of this debate.

---

## Works Cited

- Berryman, John. *Stephen Crane*. New York: Octagon Books, 1980. Print.
- Bierce, Ambrose. *The Collected Works of Ambrose Bierce*. New York: Gordian Press, 1966. Vol. I-XII. Print.
- Crane, Stephen. "Maggie." *The Works of Stephen Crane* Vol. I: *Bowery Tales*. Ed. Fredson Bowers. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1969: 7-78. Print.
- . *The Red Badge of Courage. The Works of Stephen Crane* Vol. II: Ed. Fredson Bowers. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1975. Print.
- . "The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky." *The Works of Stephen Crane* Vol. V: *Tales of Adventure*. Ed. Fredson Bowers. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1970. 109-120. Print.
- . "The Veteran." *The Works of Stephen Crane* Vol. VI: *Tales of War*. Ed. Fredson Bowers. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1970. 82-88. Print.
- . "Three Miraculous Soldiers." *The Works of Stephen Crane* Vol. VI: *Tales of War*. Ed. Fredson Bowers. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1970. 22-47. Print.
- . "The Upturned Face." *The Works of Stephen Crane* Vol. VI: *Tales of War*. Ed. Fredson Bowers. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1970. Print.
- . "The Monster." *The Works of Stephen Crane* Vol. VII: *Tales of Whilomville*. Ed. Fredson Bowers. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1969: 7-66. Print.
- . "No. 39, Cuba." *The Works of Stephen Crane* Vol. IX: *Reports of War*. Ed. Fredson Bowers. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1971. Print.

- 
- . "Do not weep, maiden, for war is kind." *The Works of Stephen Crane* Vol. X: *Poems and Last Remains*. Ed. Fredson Bowers. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1975. Print.
- Freud, Sigmund. *The Uncanny*. Trans. David McClintock. London: Penguin Books, 2003. Print
- Hoganson, Kristin L. *Fighting for American Manhood: How Gender Politics Provoked the Spanish-American and Philippine-American Wars*. New Haven and London : Yale UP, 1998. Print.
- Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Columbia UP, 1982. Print.
- McDermott, John J. "Symbolism and Psychological Realism in *Red Badge of Courage*." *Nineteenth Century Fiction* 23 (1968): 324-31. Print.
- Schaefer, Michael. "'Heroes Had no Shame in their Lives': Manhood, Heroics, and Compassion in *The Red Badge of Courage* and 'A Mystery of Heroism.'" *War, Literature and the Arts* 18 (2006): 104-18. Print.
- Soltysik Monnet, "Transnational War Gothic from the Civil War to World War I." *Transnational Gothic: Literary and Social Exchanges in the Long Nineteenth Century*. Eds. Bridget Marshall & Monika Elbert. Ashgate, 2013. 173-188. Print.
- Wood, Adam H. "'Crimson Blotches on the Pages of the Past': Histories of Violence in Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage*." *War, Literature and the Arts* 21: 38-57. Print.
- Yost, David. "Skins Before Reputations: Subversions of Masculinity in Ambrose Bierce and Stephen Crane." *War, Literature and the Arts* 19: 247-260. Print.
- Zhu, Weihong Julia. "The Absurdity of Henry's Courage." *Stephen Crane Studies* 10.2 (2001): 2-11. Print.