FICTION AND POLITICS: THE PROGRESSIVE IMPULSE IN STEPHEN CRANE'S *MAGGIE, A GIRL OF THE STREETS*

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'There's room at the top, they are telling you still,
but first you must learn how to smile as you kill."

John Lennon, "Working Class Hero"

STEPHEN CRANE IS one of the most celebrated writers of American fiction. His reputation stems from his pioneering of the naturalist style whereby real life is reconstructed in fictional contexts. This style combined with Crane's pervading social consciousness led to his first novelette, *Maggie, A Girl of the Streets* (1893). *Maggie* is an exposé of the harmful consequences of Social Darwinism upon the lives of the working class in a New York City tenement. It is driven by a progressive impulse that anticipates the growth of Progressive politics during the early twentieth century. It is a formidable exemplar of the use of fictional resources to advocate social justice. This brief essay elucidates the socio-political import of the naturalist style in fiction by analyzing a few key passages from Crane's book.

During the last quarter of the nineteenth century, "Social Darwinism," a social theory derived from ideas propounded by Herbert Spencer and William Graham Sumner (and founded also on a specious understanding of Charles Darwin's accounts of biological evolution), exerted a powerful influence on American attitudes towards the socio-political structure of industrial capitalism. Social Darwinism recognized four main principles: (1) that society, in addition to whatever else might be said of it, is chiefly an arena of economic competition; (2) that the terms of struggle are determined by the conditions of the marketplace; (3) that success is rewarded by

survival, and when spectacular, by wealth; and (4) that the process of competition invigorates society by perpetuating the strong and eliminating the weak.[1]

One consequence of Social Darwinism was an unfortunate bifurcation of social consciousness. On the one hand, it justified acquisitiveness and what Thorstein Veblen would come to call "conspicuous consumption."[2] On the other hand, it allowed for the all-too-often brutal exploitation of working class labor. Moreover, it cultivated in the working class themselves the same acquisitive and consumptive motives underlying the conditions of their oppression. This tendency prolonged any consequential social reform until well into the twentieth century.

Against this tendency arose dissident voices. The most prominent were the Populists who tried to subvert Social Darwinism with their rejection of capitalist incantations to competition, the individual and economic progress. Such capitalist virtues propped up the notion that the inadequacy of the individual rather than the inequity of society was the root cause of socio-economic marginalization. The Populists, among others, inverted this notion in order to demonstrate that socio-economic conditions were the consequence of inequitable socio-economic structures.

Populism, as a political movement, concentrated mainly on rural economic issues and, as a result, failed to attract a great deal of support among urbanites. Nonetheless, it did serve as a wellspring of ideas for a growing congeries of urban reformers, including Stephen Crane.

Crane melded his concern for the neglected masses with his talent as a journalist to produce the evidence upon which *Maggie, A Girl of the Streets* is based. In this regard, Russell Nye observed that "Crane talked sympathetically and interestedly to New York street-walkers, wandered through the Bowery, slept in flophouses, talked with drifters, pried stories out of breadlines and loiterers, and kept himself out of money by responding too readily to a hard luck story."[3] Consequently, Crane gained an acute perception of the lifestyles of New York City's lower class. This, in turn, allowed him to write vividly his story about the sad life of an impoverished tenement girl whose efforts to escape the tenement resulted only in a spiral of increasing despair.

The naturalist style is well suited to Crane's argument in *Maggie*. His candid depiction of material conditions and social relationships in the tenement district in which the protagonist Maggie resided vivifies the contradictions between the lived experience and social valuations of its inhabitants.

Uniquely, Maggie's aspirations included escape from the tenement

and cultural refinement. With her boyfriend Pete, the bartender in whom Maggie saw her ideal of success and most likely path of escape, she attended melodramas at which "[s]he rejoiced at the way in which the poor and virtuous eventually overcame the wealthy and wicked . . . [and] wondered if the culture and refinement she had seen imitated . . . by the heroine on the stage could be acquired by a girl who lived in a tenement house and worked in a shirt factory."[4] These melodramas created in Maggie an intense hatred of everything having to do with tenement life from her material impoverishment to her spiritual deprivation.

Conversely, in other characters we find demonstrated a greater resignation to social conditions. Unlike Maggie, none expresses an urge to escape the tenement. Rather, they think only of surviving or, perhaps succeeding, within it. Maggie's father and mother found their consolations in alcoholism. Her brother Jimmie, like Pete, aspired to become important among his fellow tenement dwellers. He fulfilled his aspiration in becoming a truck driver for a brewery. The fates of these characters are negotiated within the perimeters set by unchallanged social forces beyond their control. Their attitudes mimic the elite ideologies in a way that suggests children who play at being grown-ups without having the slightest notions of what adulthood means beneath its appearances.

The difference between Maggie's attitude and the others can be illustrated by looking at her approach to life in contrast with the approach of her brother Jimmie. Jimmie's paradigm for survival was emotional and physical toughness. He came to regard the "gentlemen" he encountered on the streets as dandies whose fine clothes and manners were evidence of their inferiority to him. Meanwhile, Maggie "began to note with more interest the well-dressed women she met on the avenues. She envied elegance and soft palms. She craved these adornments of person which she saw every day on the street, conceiving them to be allies of vast importance to women[.]"[5]

Unfortunately for Maggie, her dreams of grandeur—untempered by a critical awareness of society—led her to seek situations in which her natural diffidence was exploited. For example, her association with Pete led to a string of emotional rejections beginning with Pete himself and ending with her own mother. Some indeterminate evil, probably prostitution, overcame Maggie following Pete's jilting of her. Her despondency following these emotional calamities led her to commit suicide. Even then, her death occassioned mourning only for her fall; not for the end of her life.

Crane's ironic portrayal of Maggie's fall has allegorical significance to two important propositions about working class deprivation and

Social Darwinism. First, the individual through her or his own efforts cannot work out of oppressive conditions. This requires collective effort. Second, working-class acquiescence to the tenets of Social Darwinism impedes the development of class consciousness thereby paralyzing reform from below. As Maggie's case teaches, the working class, by following Social Darwinism, pit themselves one against another in competing for pre-determined shares of power, status, and wealth. They accept uncritically the size of the shares that have been allotted them by the capitalist class. For the working class, the Sumnerian ideal of an upward spiral of progress is supplanted by a vicious cycle of decay and death.

Perhaps Crane understood the complicity of nineteenth century romantic forms in obscuring the contradiction between capitalist ideology and class structures. By resisting this "happy ending" mode of fiction-writing, he helped inaugurate a realist form with the capacity to shock the status quo from its Victorian complacency into an era of social reform. Of course, this is not to suggest that the potential to overcome centuries-old oppressions inheres in any one work of the naturalist style. However, to the extent that this style flourishes in fictional genres and is accompanied by a will for social change, a perpetual corpus of such works can contribute to social restructuration. In a small way, Stephen Crane shows the way.

NOTES

1 John Kenneth Galbraith, *The Affluent Society* (New York: Mentor, 1958), p. 53.

2 Thorstein B. Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York: The Modern Library, 1934), pp. 68-101.

3 Russell Nye, "Stephen Crane as Social Critic," *Modern Quarterly,* 11 (1940), p. 49.

4 Stephen Crane, *Maggie, A Girl of the Streets,* in *Three Great Novels by Stephen Crane* (Greenwich, Connecticut: Fawcett, 1970), p. 62.

5 Crane, pp. 58-59.