

Stephen Crane's Refrain

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Poetry's liberation from the shackles of meter is one of the most important non-events in late nineteenth-century literary history. It's *important* because it is to this day so commonly invoked, not only to legitimate a particular way of reading poems, as if they were what Theodor Adorno calls "depositions of impulses," but also to celebrate the human subject's liberation from inauthenticity and expressive constipation.¹ It's a *non-event* because the long and complex history of versification in English poetry is poorly suited to teleological narratives of liberation, despite a lot of early twentieth-century fanfare about breaking "new wood" and "insurgent naked throb[bings] of the instant moment."² Yet the perpetuation of such liberation narratives is powerfully motivated, and deeply inscribed in our scholarship, our course syllabi, and our anthologies and editions. In the history of poetry in English, Walt Whitman is the foremost symbol of metrical iconoclasm, not least because he is also such a powerful symbol of personal idiosyncrasy asserting itself against many deeply entrenched social and sexual norms. The fictive isomorphism of poetry and person, with which Whitman so dearly loved to play, and play off of and against, very understandably tends to get naturalized as the meaning of his achievement: free verse means a free subject.

This is a harder equation to derive from the spare, irhythmic verses of Stephen Crane, alongside which Whitman's seem reassuringly measured, lushly and extravagantly familiar. Turning from Whitman's poetry to Crane's one may feel like

a figure in one of Crane's poems, searching for erotic opportunities in "the ashes of other men's love."³ Crane doesn't deny the personal; he combusts it, like a fossil fuel, and lets the residue trail behind on the page, where it congeals into toxic, post-human landscapes:

Behold, from the land of the farther suns
I returned.
And I was in a reptile-swarmling place,
Peopled, otherwise, with grimaces,
Shrouded above in black impenetrableness.
I shrank, loathing,
Sick with it.
And I said to him,
"What is this?"
He made answer slowly,
"Spirit, this is a world;
This was your home."

(P, 17)

Like a David Maisel photograph of sewage flows or wasted mines, this untitled poem from *The Black Riders and Other Lines* (1895) conjures a world both industrial and primordial, a world that is uninhabitable, yet for which there is no alternative. And like a Maisel photograph, Crane's poem exploits form as an index of human artistry in relation to a scene of degradation that makes scant place for the human ("This was your home"). Crane's specifically poetic achievement, however, has less to do with aestheticizing visual blight than with figuring the effort to speak from beyond certain conventional limits of the self, the better to articulate the defamiliarized, depersonalized contexts of its communications.

This essay calls to account the sentiment of liberated and liberating free-verse artistry through a reading of Crane's poetry that combines formal analysis (a counting, or measurement) and ethical reckoning (a characterization of the lyric subject). More simply put, it is an effort to interpret, in the work of a very untraditional poet, his use of a very traditional poetic device—the refrain—to measure or mark out a timely sense of a

depersonalized aesthetics. Timely, that is, not in terms of present critical anxieties about the aesthetic, but rather in terms of a late-nineteenth-century preoccupation, in literature, science, philosophy, and beyond, with the phenomenon of repetition, which is, of course, the precondition for any type of measurement and for any concept of the personal.

As Andrew Ford observes, the word *measure* has never shed its etymological origins in the Greek word *metron*—an evaluative term, Ford reminds us, with moral force.⁴ We still say a response is “measured” when it strikes us as proportionate and duly limited. When considering measurement in connection with literature, it’s natural to think of poetry, which actively displays, through versification, its competence to measure. Poetry, like Crane’s, that departs from conventional versification potentially calls prior evaluations into question, possibly defaces contemporary lineaments of what is called beautiful with disproportionate or excessive markings.

The response to such departures is often disapproving, and we in turn may find ourselves eager to vilify such disapproval as reactionism. A case in point is William Dean Howells’s response to the third untitled poem in Crane’s *Black Riders*, which he quotes in its entirety, after sharing his own engaged but ultimately disapproving perspective:

I cannot see how the thought in the following
lines, which seems to me fresh, and fine and
true, would have been any less so if it had been
cast in the mould which need not have been
broken to secure them the stamp of novelty:

In the desert
I saw a creature, naked, bestial,
Who, squatting upon the ground,
Held his heart in his hands,
And ate of it.
I said, “Is it good, friend?”
“It is bitter—bitter,” he answered;
“But I like it
Because it is bitter,
And because it is my heart.”

Howells does not say what he takes to be the particular “mould which need not have been broken” in these lines, unless it is the general mould of verses he is prepared to call, as he puts it, “duly rhymed and measured.”⁵ Instead of vilifying Howells, however, one can simply underscore his own evident sense that something goes unrecognized and unarticulated in his disapproval of Crane’s prosodic unruliness, his “free verse,” as it would come to be called.

Insofar as anyone still remembers the 1890s as a time of important critical statements on prosodic innovation, it’s usually in connection with Stéphane Mallarmé’s 1897 essay “Crisis of Verse,” in which he announces that, with the advent of *vers libre*, the ear has finally been set free from normative versification and “the rigid and childish mechanism of its meter.” While acknowledging that “the recollection of strict verses”—in particular, for French poetry, the alexandrine—will continue to haunt prosodic innovators, he nevertheless crows that an unprecedented heterodoxy has taken hold of versification. “For the first time in the literary history of any people,” he writes, “anyone with his individual game and ear can compose an instrument, as soon as he breathes, touches, or taps scientifically.”⁶

Mallarmé’s emphasis on “anyone” seems to suggest that the “crisis of verse,” in one of its dimensions at least, is a crisis of democratization. Poetry, it would appear, is for Mallarmé “no longer a specialized activity,” as Leo Bersani puts it, suggesting that what Mallarmé refers to as “the ‘science’ of poetry is equivalent to a kind of self-possession through self-attunement”—a humanistic “science” grounded in the individuated authority of personal feeling.⁷ But Mallarmé’s essay also reveals itself, in the speculative mobility that Bersani identifies as its hallmark, to be the champion of something like a universalist program for linguistic depersonalization. It goes so far as to anticipate—even to dramatize—“the disappearance of the poet speaking,” thereby problematizing a common understanding of the poet’s encounter with language “as if,” to quote Paul de Man, “it were the expression of a subjective intent with which he could grow familiar . . . a tool that could be made to fit his needs.”⁸

De Man is worth briefly citing in this context, and by way of

returning to Crane's own problematics, because his interpretation of Mallarméan poetics as an ironization of liberal aesthetics helps clarify the terms of a fin-de-siècle "crisis of verse" that pertains to poetry in English as well as in French—to Crane as well as his Symbolist contemporaries. One problem, though, with de Man's account is that it is too dismissive of the fact that prosodic experimentation is an index of historical forces to be reckoned with in any account of literary history and the shifting bases of aesthetic judgment. It's true of course that the rhetoric of emergency informing Mallarmé's announcements of unprecedented tamperings with the rules of verse is deeply ironic. But de Man misleads us when he alleges that this irony, while appreciated in Mallarmé's Paris, would have "baffled his foreign audience."⁹ Not at all. The history of metrical variation in English prosody, however it differed from the French, was not so ancient and so eclectic that the contemporary situation of experimental versification was without serious controversy. In English, the term "free verse" often was, and continued for some time to be, a derogatory term. More importantly, it came to be (and remains) a way of naming certain historical, motivated shifts in the degree and manner of intensity focused on norms of versification.

The question then is: What is the relation between the degree and manner of this intensity in Crane's time and the more or less simultaneous cultural elaboration, corroborated here by the better-known example of Mallarmé, of a counter-liberal, post-Kantian aesthetics in which the integrity and dignity of persons is no longer presumed to be the most important measure of artistic value and expressive decorum? Returning to the autocardiophagic creature of Crane's poem "In the desert"—the poem that Howells accused of breaking the mould that need not have been broken—what, if anything, does that poem's form have to do with its figure of depersonalization? The poem is both a literalization and an undoing of the idiomatic phrase "to eat one's heart out." Against a voided background—"the desert"—the creature appears as if out of the blankness of his own annihilation. He has literally become detached from his center, his "heart," and is now perhaps seeking to reintegrate the lost or abandoned self by eating his heart, so to speak, back

in. His presentness to the speaker (who sees and hails him) and the phenomenology of taste (he eats his heart and likes it) signify the restoration of the creature's subjectivity. Indeed it may be the speaker's presentness to the creature that is the first sign of this restoration.

Could it also be the last? As the creature eats his heart, re-incorporating it in a way that makes personal involvement with others (subjectivity) once again possible, he also destroys the organ, consuming rather than restoring it. The heart makes its appearance on the stage of reintegration only to reveal subjectivity and the suffering that is its index ("I like it / Because it is bitter") to be what Emerson calls "scene-painting and counterfeit."¹⁰ The speaker, and the reader as his representative at the scene of reading, is perhaps being shown nothing more than an illusory glimpse of the interstices of non-consciousness. The poem, that is, may count most as the description of an interlude in the speaker/reader's own depersonalization, a mere phantasmic break in the nothingness that precedes and follows it. "Eat your heart out" may be the poem's curse upon the reader, the curse of the illusion—the mirage—of individual consciousness.

This reading of the poem's contents makes it rather easy to view its irregular form as another projection of the illusion of individual consciousness. "Free verse" is the term for a complex history of experimental versification that, at least since the eighteenth century, has been notoriously difficult to disengage from liberal-progressive accounts of expressivity. In these accounts, being free from the constraints of traditional forms means being personally free to give more intelligible shape to one's own distinctive voice. From time to time, some canny poet or reader cries out "Hoax!"¹¹ But anti-humanistic readings of metrical and typographical irregularity are rare, and even those recent and contemporary prosodists at the furthest remove from patterns of sentimental expressivism often find it difficult to avoid the self-regard of avant-gardism. How remarkable then to recognize in the irregular form of Crane's "In the desert" what may already be—in what was one of the first volumes of free verse ever published in the U.S.¹²—a kind of immanent critique of free verse as a manifestation of identity and personal freedom.

To pursue the possibility of this critique with Crane is to be driven back again and again on the problematics of repetition. Indeed, it is repetition, the fundamental precondition for all prosody, that links the fin-de-siècle's intensified focus on norms of versification to contemporaneous moves toward a non-objectivist depersonalized aesthetics. In the 1880s and 1890s, repetition was at the conceptual heart of existential (Nietzsche) and psychoanalytic (Freud), as well as aesthetic, reorientations of thinking about (and beyond) the human subject. During those same decades, more often associated with literary exhaustion than consequential experimentation, we actually find quite an impressive roster of poets in the U.S., England, France, and elsewhere who, along with Mallarmé and Crane, were doing their best not to flinch from the intuition that any simple equation between free verse and personal freedom was chimerical, and that the anxious defense against, or promotion of, the analogy between aesthetic forms and social forms was symptomatic (one might call it a repetition compulsion) of spiritual, epistemological, and ontological anxieties far less well articulated.¹³

Like many of Crane's poems, "In the desert" contains several words and phrases that recur at least once. In his short, metrically irregular poems, the force of such repetitions is especially strong, though the qualities of that force vary with the specific rhetorical figure constituted by the repetition. "In the desert," with only fifty words unevenly divided into ten lines, exhibits multiple figures, including three I'd like to call by name. These are: *ploce* (the repetition of a word after a significant interval—in this case, the two instances of the word "heart"), *epizeuxis* (the repetition of a word two or more times in immediate succession—in this case, the pair "bitter—bitter"), and *anaphora* (the repetition of a word at or near the beginning of successive clauses or sentences—in this case, the trio "I saw" / "I said" / "I like"). I'd maintain that the differentiation of these figures, despite the creeping desuetude of the classical terminology, is helpful inasmuch as it underscores their diversity of effect (a diversity that is often densely concentrated in the device of the refrain, to which I'll come shortly). In the *ploce* "heart" / "heart," for example, we hear the quoted voice of the

creature echoing the principal speaker of the poem, forcing the question of their identity and relation as subjects. Whatever distinct range of symbolic values the heart may have for either subject, they share the same word for it. They conspire, as it were, to stabilize the signifier of those many values, even as the creature's echoing of the principal speaker may augment the reader's sense of its depersonalization, its creaturely subordination.

The epizeuxis "bitter—bitter" is the poem's most dramatic figure of repetition, the creature's vehemence nicely sounded in those explosive trochees. At the same time, epizeuxis signals a kind of snag or catch in the flow of meaning, a cognitive stutter, a sensation of being stuck in place. The sensation, depending on how the words are voiced, might be perceived here as either deliberative or defensive. Is the creature testing the word, trying it out twice to make sure he has the right one? Does he repeat himself in fear of being misunderstood or disbelieved? Perhaps he is savoring not only the bitterness of his heart but also the word "bitter" itself, as a sign of the pleasure of *articulate* abjection. In his abjection, he has not only been seen by another but is also himself able to correct the other's perception: no, not good, but bitter.

The anaphora "I saw" / "I said" / "I like" helps complicate the scene of recognition and individuation by conflating the subjects of enunciation—the principal speaker ("I saw," "I said") and the creature ("I like")—while also sustaining the contrast between the principal speaker's affective neutrality and the creature's intensity. It's tempting to treat this poem as an exceedingly compact and austere counterpart to Robert Browning's and W. H. Auden's lyrical readings—in "Caliban upon Setebos; or, Natural Theology in the Island" (1864) and *The Sea and the Mirror* (1944), respectively—of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, and especially of the creaturely Caliban, whom Browning describes as "a bitter heart that bides its time and bites."¹⁴ For all three poets the creaturely Caliban, or the Caliban-like creature, has a powerfully overdetermined relation to contexts of creation and becoming.

Noting the derivation of *creature* "from the future-active

participle of the Latin verb *creare* (to create)," Julia Lupton observes that

creature indicates a made or fashioned thing but with the sense of continued or potential process, action, or emergence built into the future thrust of its active verbal form. . . . The *creatura* is a thing always in the process of undergoing creation; the creature is actively passive or, better, *passionate*, perpetually becoming created, subject to transformation at the behest of the arbitrary commands of an Other.

But this Other, too, Lupton argues, following Walter Benjamin, is also *creature*, "is finally both sovereign and subject, mind and matter, tyrant and martyr, but he suffers the two modalities in a wildly disjunct form that refuses to resolve into a reciprocal or homogeneous economy."¹⁵ The creature stands for the destabilization immanent to identity and for an expressivity that is neither personal nor universal, but always intersubjective. The creature is there to remind us that we are incapable of the authentic production of the same, of re-production, or simple repetition, but that we are nonetheless constantly falling back on what seem to be the best rhetorical resources—the figures of repetition—enabled by our fictive lives of stable individuation.

In this light, it seems almost inevitable that Edgar Allan Poe would have chosen the refrain as the device on which to base the structure of his most famous poem of creaturely subjection, "The Raven" (1845). And, being Poe, he resolved also to improve upon this ancient and venerable device, to lift it out of what he refers to in "The Philosophy of Composition" (1846) as its "primitive condition." "As commonly used," Poe writes,

the *refrain* . . . depends for its impression upon the force of monotone—both in sound and thought. The pleasure is deduced solely from the sense of identity—of repetition. I resolved

to diversify, and so vastly heighten, the effect, by adhering, in general, to the monotone of sound, while I continually varied that of thought: that is to say, I determined to produce continuously novel effects, by the variation of the *application* of the *refrain*—the *refrain* itself remaining, for the most part, unvaried.¹⁶

Poe's aim is to *heap* the refrain (another word for "refrain" is, after all, "burden") with significance and to insist on instructing the reader (by way of varied "applications") in gradations of that significance through the generation of suspense. As John Hollander puts it, "the ultimate story of modern poetic refrain is 'What is it to mean *this* time around?'"¹⁷

In other words, every refrain is a little bit refractory. Like other figures of repetition, refrains may substantially allegorize the play of resistance and expectancy in relation to uncertain or unwelcome futures.¹⁸ This helps account for some of the strongly reactionary rhetoric leveled at the opening poem of Crane's 1899 volume, *War Is Kind*:

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.

(P, 45)

Some contemporary critics, including Willa Cather, hated the idea that Crane's poem might be about imminence rather than retrospection—about the self-perpetuating militarism of modern life, perhaps, or even about what William James referred to as the coming "war against war."¹⁹ Here is part of Cather's remonstrance: "Either Mr. Crane is insulting the public or insulting himself, or he has developed a case of atavism and is chattering the primeval nonsense of the apes. His *Black Riders*, uneven as it was, was a casket of polished masterpieces when compared with *War Is Kind*. And it is not kind at all, Mr. Crane, when it provokes such verses as these—it is all that Sherman said it was."²⁰ One has a sense of irony not simply lost, but anxiously defended against—a sense confirmed by another contemporary reviewer, Rupert Hughes: "It is Mr. Crane's purpose to tell us that war is not kind in a thirty-line Walt Whitman lyric, so why mislead us? To be ironical is all right, but why drive the iron in so far? We all know that war was brutal, that it killed lovers, husbands and sons, but we never thought of telling the sweethearts, wives and mothers that war, therefore, was kind."²¹

To some extent, such reactions against Crane's poem reflect a progressivist spirit of the age, represented importantly not only by William James but also by Jane Addams, who wrote at length in unremitting expectation of humankind's finally "displacing the juvenile propensities to warfare" with the perpetual peace of "cosmopolitan affection."²² But Crane drove readers to extremes with what they found to be the unbearableness of his irony, encapsulated, of course, in this poem's refrain, "War is kind." The refrain or repetend, "War is kind," appearing at the end of the first, third, and fifth stanzas, and also at the end

of the initial lines of the first and third stanzas, has a coercive force—not only as part of the refrain against mourning, but also as an obscene Orwellian slogan tending to overwrite and override, as Cather suggests, General Sherman’s legendary dictum, “war is hell.” Repetition solicits remembrance. But more than this, repetition is a figure of truth; it seeks to weary the clamor for persuasion with the self-evidence of iteration. And it may do still more. It may compromise the forces of intellectual and passionate resistance by provoking defensiveness and by frustrating hopes for transformative engagement. Under such stress, reading ceases to be experienced as a collaborative field of invention and improvisation, and repetition becomes the rhetorical figure of despair. This is what makes the irony of “War is kind” unbearable to Cather and to many other readers.

This unbearableness has a context and a history. The exquisite sense of dramatic irony in Cather’s own fiction, for example, had already found its unsettling counterpart in the work of other nineteenth-century ironists, such as Heinrich Heine, with whom Crane shared a profound disillusionment with religion, a sense of immutable suffering absolutely unredeemed by religious significance, and a tendency to proclaim disillusionment in particularly unsympathetic forms of irony. A dramatic instance of this is the following poem from *War Is Kind*:

A little ink more or less!
 It surely can’t matter?
 Even the sky and the opulent sea,
 The plains and the hills, aloof,
 Hear the uproar of all these books.
 But it is only a little ink more or less.

What?
 You define me God with these trinkets?
 Can my misery meal on an ordered walking
 Of surpliced numbskulls?
 And a fanfare of lights?
 Or even upon the measured pulpiting

Of the familiar false and true?
 Is this God?
 Where, then, is hell?
 Show me some bastard mushroom
 Sprung from a pollution of blood.
 It is better.

Where is God?

(P, 47)

The reiterated insult of “a little ink more or less” conspires with ambiguous deixis (“these books,” “these trinkets”) to produce an effect of self-mockery, repelling sympathy, that is inseparable from the poem’s bitter rejection of religious texts. That is, the poem itself and the book of verse in which it appears are, like the scripture and dogma on which human misery is invited by the church to meal, “only a little ink more or less.” One might be disposed to hear a defiant allusion to the poem’s own non-metrical verses in the contemptuous phrases “ordered walking” and “measured pulpiting.” It’s as if the very rhythms of orthodoxy offend the poet, and his response includes an offense against the regimented patterning of such rhythms. In their vehement reactions, in turn, against Crane’s formal offenses, his early critics may have been unconsciously acknowledging the difficulty of responding directly to the substance of what sometimes amounted to Crane’s nihilistic irony.

But measure and order, as we’ve seen, aren’t simply anathema in Crane’s poetics. In fact he had recourse to them in his greatest poem of cosmic despair, devastating beyond irony, not yet published at the time of his death:

A man adrift on a slim spar
 A horizon smaller than the rim of a bottle
 Tented waves rearing lashy dark points
 The near whine of froth in circles.
 God is cold.

The incessant raise and swing of the sea
 And growl after growl of crest

The sinkings, green, seething, endless
The upheaval half-completed.

God is cold.

The seas are in the hollow of The Hand;
Oceans may be turned to a spray
Raining down through the stars
Because of a gesture of pity toward a babe.
Oceans may become grey ashes,
Die with a long moan and a roar
Amid the tumult of the fishes
And the cries of the ships,
Because The Hand beckons the mice.

A horizon smaller than a doomed assassin's cap,
Inky, surging tumults
A reeling, drunken sky and no sky
A pale hand sliding from a polished spar.

God is cold.

The puff of a coat imprisoning air.
A face kissing the water-death
A weary slow sway of a lost hand
And the sea, the moving sea, the sea.

God is cold.

(*P*, 83)

The parallelism of clauses, the symmetry of the four shorter strophes around the central longer strophe, and above all the unvarying refrain serve to hem in the ocean's vastness without in any way diminishing its lethality. Just as the horizon's diminutive rim ("smaller than the rim of a bottle"; "smaller than a doomed assassin's cap") holds in place the sea's seethings and the "lashy dark points" of its waves, so does the diminutive refrain reduce speculation and hope (represented chiefly by the long central strophe, distended by irony and engrossed with conditionals) to the miniscule sentiment of God's deadly indifference: "God is cold."

Like his contemporary Nietzsche (they both died in the summer of 1900, though Crane was little more than half Nietzsche's age), Crane felt acutely the persistent entropic chill of a world from which God was withdrawn. He was far less sanguine than Nietzsche, though, about the potential for reinvesting that once God-afflicted world with thoroughly re-valued values. In Nietzsche, the sea is one of the scenes of that reinvestment: "at long last," he writes in a famous passage from *The Gay Science*, "our ships may venture out again, venture out to face any danger; all the daring of the lover of knowledge is permitted again; the sea, *our* sea, lies open again."²³ But Crane's sea voyagers—the four men adrift in the short story "The Open Boat," the wrecked sailor in the poem "To the maiden," and the "man adrift on a slim spar"—founder amid waves that are, as Crane puts it, like

dead grey walls
 Superlative in vacancy
 Upon which nevertheless at fateful time,
 Was written
 The grim hatred of nature.

(P, 47)

As in many other motifs of writing in Crane's work, the uncertain legibility here of the wave-walls (they are "Superlative in vacancy" yet bear the trace of their inscription) also suggests the revelation of historicity ("at fateful time, / Was written").²⁴ The phrase "at fateful time" (in these lines from "To the maiden," as well as in the poem "God fashioned the ship of the world carefully" [P, 5], where the phrase also occurs) means chiefly: at a consequential, decisive moment. It is fate understood ironically as chance, the fortuitousness upon which history pivots, and which is anthropomorphized by Crane's wrecked sailor as "The grim hatred of nature."

The wrecked sailor could easily be taken as one of Crane's recurring figures for the heroically isolated individual, for the imperiled subject that may yet prevail—figures that would include the narrator of his short story "The Open Boat." Daniel Hoffman, in what remains after half a century one of

very few readings of the poem "A man adrift," argues for the close relation of the story and the poem as similar narratives of a prevailing subject, a survivor-interpreter. In the poem, Hoffman discovers two clearly differentiated points of view, corresponding to two clearly differentiated subjects: that of the drowning man and that of "another who survives." The refrain, he argues, is "the despairing lament of the dying man betrayed by his God"—until, that is, the final strophe, where it becomes "a judgment made by another who survives to interpret his death to the living."²⁵ This maneuver grants the reader what may be a more readily satisfying sense of thorough individuation than the text itself supports or than the "fateful time" of its inscription—a time characterized by the emergent historicity of the subject and thus the beginnings of its philosophical deconstruction—is able to bestow upon it.

Indeed, there is no good reason to insist on investing the refrain with the sentiment of personal voice. There never has been. Traditionally, the refrain is precisely the device that interrupts monophonic lyric discourse, either with choral polyphony or with phatic, often subverbal, reassurance. And no matter how modern and untraditional the poem, a refrain always asserts the disruptive power of the conventional—the power, that is, to disrupt the fiction of the unique voice. In "A man adrift," the refrain "God is cold" doesn't so much consolidate or interpret as interfere with the coalescence of meaning. The poem's grammar suggests as much. None of the four shorter strophes has a nonparticipial verb. They are impressionistic accumulations of detail that suggest a scene just coming into view—a scene repeatedly disrupted and displaced by the simplest of declarative sentences: "God is cold." The scene could be characterized as a scene of pity—thus, "God will not be importuned." Or it could be characterized as a scene of anger—thus, "God will not be denounced." Or we could find pity and anger united in the indecorum of resentment, suggested perhaps by the engrossed and ironic central strophe. Yet this is the only strophe that does *not* evoke the repressive force of the refrain.

It is, however, the only strophe to detour us away from the immediate scene of drowning and thus from its possibly too

gratifying aesthetic transvaluation in the surrounding shorter strophes, where a lulling pace is ensured by the absence of enjambment; where frequent sibilance gently—and, of course, ironically—figures the delicacy of fluidic movements; where the impersonal (“A man”; “A pale hand”; “a coat”; “a lost hand”) helps ennoble through universalization the pathos of individual helplessness; where death’s violence is rendered mild and sensuous (“weary slow sway”), even sensual (“kissing the water-death”). Indeed, these may be among the loveliest verses ever written about drowning, verses in the company not only of near-contemporaries Whitman (on the death of the gigantic swimmer in “The Sleepers”) and Melville (on the death of Billy Budd in “Billy in the Darbies”) but also of Shakespeare (on the death of Ophelia in *Hamlet*). What need do such verses have of a refrain, unless it be to check, curb, or reprove that sentiment of beauty? Perhaps the spectatorial relation to suffering is opened to critique in this way: we are at risk for dehumanization in our own sublime detachment from or disinterest in the suffering of the drowning man. Or it may be that the drowning man’s own objectification—his own dehumanization—is the extreme toward which the refrain curbs us from tending. Or perhaps it is the uneasy pleasure of reflexiveness as experienced by the poet—or the poet-identified reader—in images that evoke the activity of writing: the sea referred to as “Inky” and the pun on “hand.” The antepenultimate line—“A weary slow sway of a lost hand”—is hard not to hear as an allusion to the hand that writes, and to handwriting that trails away inconclusively, as inconclusively, as unemphatically, as the poem itself would trail off, exquisitely, without the strong punctuating refrain.

Such speculation on the problematics of enjoyment is not without its own fin-de-siècle history. Later nineteenth-century elaborations of the socialist critique of the relation between aesthetics and capitalism, for example, percolated through the ersatz-socialist world of New York’s Art Students’ League, in which Crane found his first artistic home and allies and developed his own style of social realism. And around the same time, in its more genteel Boston precincts, the *Atlantic Monthly* (which reviewed but never published Crane’s work) complained that “aesthetics is still the vaguest and most fantastic branch of

psychology.”²⁶ That was overstating the case, of course. But it makes a good deal of practical and also political sense if, for “most fantastic,” we hear “riskiest,” and if, for “psychology,” we hear “the psychology of freedom.” “A man adrift” is a poem about the problematics of enjoyment in that it poses the most basic of existential questions (“Am I alone?”) through a figure of extreme attenuation of selfhood: not just the figure of a dying man, but the figure of a subject in the process of relinquishing, or forfeiting, or being confronted with the sheer illusoriness of its differentiation as a subject. That such a process might be experienced as something other than traumatic is a possibility afforded by the terrible beauty of the poem’s four short strophes, even as that possibility seems repeatedly to be threatened with repressive closure by the refrain. At the end of the final strophe, the path of what one might characterize as the refrain’s strong verticality—its movement from top to bottom of the page, like a heavy thing crashing through the floors of a building—is elegantly crossed by the sibilant, horizontal ploc of the penultimate line: “The sea, the moving sea, the sea.” That, within earshot of this juxtaposition, the conventional refrain might sound more like a paroxysm of the anti-aesthetic than a reassuringly conventional poetic device is no mean index of the place Crane’s poetry ventures to occupy in the history of poetic decorum.

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NOTES

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1. Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1997), 244.
2. See Ezra Pound, “A Pact,” *Poetry* 2 (1913): 1; and D. H. Lawrence, “Poetry of the Present” (1918), in *The Complete Poems of D. H. Lawrence*,

- ed. Vivian de Sola Pinto and Warren Roberts (London: Heinemann, 1964), 185.
3. Stephen Crane, *Poems and Literary Remains*, vol. 10 of *The Works of Stephen Crane*, ed. Fredson Bowers (Charlottesville: Univ. Press of Virginia, 1975), 62; hereafter cited parenthetically as *P*.
 4. Andrew Ford, *The Origins of Criticism: Literary Culture and Poetic Theory in Classical Greece* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2002), 18–19.
 5. William Dean Howells, "Life and Letters," *Harper's Weekly*, 25 January 1896, 79.
 6. Stéphane Mallarmé, "Crisis of Verse," in *Divagations*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 2007), 203, 204–5.
 7. Leo Bersani, *The Death of Stéphane Mallarmé* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1982), 37.
 8. Mallarmé, "Crisis of Verse," 208; Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*, rev. ed. (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1983), 69–70.
 9. De Man, *Blindness and Insight*, 5. One notes a further irony here in de Man's echoing of Max Nordau's *Entartung* (1892): "The whole dispute concerning prosody and the rules of rhyme is, so to speak, an inter-Gallic concern, and is of no consequence to the literature of the world. We have long had everything which the French poets are only now seeking to obtain by barricades and street massacres" (from a reprinted 1895 translation, *Degeneration* [New York: Howard Fertig, 1968], 138).
 10. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Experience," in *Essays and Lectures*, ed. Joel Porte (New York: Library of America, 1983), 472.
 11. See, for example, de Man's reading of Mallarmé's 1897 poem "A Throw of the Dice," in *Blindness and Insight*, 74.
 12. Of course, a great deal of nonmetrical poetry, or free verse, had been published in the U.S. by the time of Crane's 1895 collection *The Black Riders and Other Lines*. But, unlike earlier volumes of poetry—Emerson's 1846 *Poems*, for example—that mix metrical and nonmetrical verses, *The Black Riders* contains only nonmetrical verses.
 13. This group of poets included Jules Laforgue, Gustave Kahn, W. E. Henley, John Davidson, Ernest Fenollosa, and W. E. B. Du Bois.
 14. Robert Browning, "Caliban upon Setebos; or, Natural Theology in the Island," in *Robert Browning: The Poems*, ed. John Pettigrew (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1981), 1:809.
 15. Julia Reinhard Lupton, "Creature Caliban," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 51 (2000): 1, 6. See also Eric L. Santner, *On Creaturely Life: Rilke, Benjamin,*

- Sebald (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2006).
16. Edgar Allan Poe, "The Philosophy of Composition," in *Essays and Reviews*, ed. G. R. Thompson (New York: Library of America, 1984), 17.
 17. John Hollander, "Breaking into Song: Some Notes on Refrain," in *Lyric Poetry: Beyond New Criticism*, ed. Chaviva Hošek and Patricia Parker (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1985), 75.
 18. Such a stance toward the future might be said to have amounted almost to a generalized cultural condition in the American 1890s, as a consequence of such epochal factors as economic depression and widespread unemployment, the mythologizing of the disappearance of the "frontier," the ascendance of the corporate "person" and the failure of antitrust law, the misery of swelling immigrant populations and other urban poor, legislated racism and the terror of lynching, and ambivalence about aggressive imperial expansion. Crane wrote about and reported on many of these phenomena extensively in his fiction and journalism.
 19. William James, "The Moral Equivalent of War" (1910), in *Writings: 1902–1910*, ed. Bruce Kuklick (New York: Library of America, 1987), 1281.
 20. Willa Cather, review of *War Is Kind*, by Stephen Crane, *Pittsburgh Leader*, 3 June 1899, 6; repr. in *The World and the Parish: Willa Cather's Articles and Reviews, 1893–1902*, ed. William M. Curtin (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1970), 2:700–702.
 21. Rupert Hughes, "Mr. Crane's Crazyquilting," *Criterion* (1899), repr. in Stanley Wertheim and Paul Sorrentino, *The Crane Log: A Documentary Life of Stephen Crane, 1871–1900* (New York: G. K. Hall, 1994), 385.
 22. Jane Addams, *Newer Ideals of Peace* (New York: Macmillan, 1907), 10–11.
 23. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* (1887), trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1974), 280; italics original.
 24. For an extensive analysis of motifs of writing in Crane's prose, see Michael Fried, *Realism, Writing, Disfiguration: On Thomas Eakins and Stephen Crane* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1987).
 25. Daniel Hoffman, *The Poetry of Stephen Crane* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1957), 97. See also John Blair, "The Posture of a Bohemian in the Poetry of Stephen Crane," *American Literature* 61 (1989): 215–29. Blair disputes Hoffman's assertion that the poem expresses Crane's own thorough rejection of God by arguing even more strenuously for the coherence and consistency of the projected persona of the drowning

man throughout the poem: "By giving the reader the perceptions of the sailor as he drowns through the sailor's own point of view, Crane puts the reader into the immediacy of the man's physical plight; in the same movement, he gives immediate access to the bitter searching for fault on the man's part. We are privy to the drowning man's denunciation of his God because it is part of his immediate experience as he drowns; yet it is not Crane's experience. . . . [T]here is no hate, no denial in the poem, only an understanding of the emotions, the angst and the denial, of a man isolated in a hopeless situation" (227).

26. "The Philosophy of Enjoyment of Art," *Atlantic Monthly*, June 1896, 844.