

## NOTES

### *Brander Matthews' Re-visioning of Crane's Maggie*

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REVIEWING Stephen Crane's *Maggie*, Hamlin Garland praised the novella as the most truthful and unhackneyed tale of the slums he had ever read, but he qualified his praise of Crane's compelling study in naturalism by contending that it "is only a fragment. It is typical only of the worst elements of the alley. The author should delineate the families living on the next street, who live lives of heroic purity and hopeless hardship."<sup>1</sup> Garland's critique of *Maggie* will be familiar to most Crane scholars; less known, however, is the fact that two months before his review appeared, Garland, apparently intending to promote *Maggie*, had urged Crane to send a copy of the book to Brander Matthews. An influential literary critic and professor of drama at Columbia University, Matthews was an intimate friend of and was highly regarded by not only Garland but William Dean Howells and Mark Twain as well. During the "war" being waged in the United States at the time between the literary romanticists and realists, Matthews was a staunch ally of the latter; and he especially encouraged accurate fictional portraits of New York City life. Matthews himself published a number of what he termed "snapshot" sketches of New York in the early 1890s, reprinting twelve of them in a volume titled *Vignettes of Manhattan* in 1894. Thus Garland had good reason for suggesting that Crane send his novella to the professor.

Crane took Garland's advice. In a letter dated 21 March 1893,

<sup>1</sup> "An Ambitious French Novel and a Modest American Story," *Arena*, 8 (June 1893), xi-xii; rpt. in Stephen Crane, *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*, ed. Thomas A. Gullason (New York: Norton, 1979), pp. 144-45. All page references to *Maggie* refer to this edition (a reprint of the 1893 edition of the novella) and will appear in parentheses within the text.

he wrote to Matthews that he was, at Garland's suggestion, sending him a "very small book." Crane closed his brief note with a request: "If you write me what you think of [the book], you would confer a great favor."<sup>2</sup>

Whether Matthews conferred the favor and expressed his opinion of *Maggie* to Crane is not known; but there is no doubt that the tale of Rum Alley evoked a written response from the professor—not in expository but in fictional form. In his short story "Before the Break of Day," first published in the July 1894 issue of *Harper's Monthly* and reprinted in *Vignettes of Manhattan*, he re-visioned Crane's work, transforming it from a tale of tragic defeat into one of heroic triumph. In doing so, he produced, ironically, the very kind of romanticized fiction that Crane parodied in *Maggie*, and that Matthews himself repeatedly seemed to disparage in his polemical defenses of literary realism.<sup>3</sup>

"Before the Break of Day" opens with one Maggie O'Donnell asleep in her dingy, rat-infested apartment above a saloon she and her husband Terry own, Terry having left the tenement before dawn to lend a hand in preparations being made for the Fourth of July celebration to occur later that day. The date is significant, for this tale, in sharp contrast to Crane's novella, is an endorsement of the American Dream. Maggie's life, we learn from the omniscient narrator, has been hard. She spent her childhood in the squalor of Hell's Kitchen; like Crane's Mag Johnson, she was often beaten by her alcoholic stepmother (her natural mother died when Maggie was five years old) and her late father (who, inebriated, fell down the stairs to his death after missing a blow at his daughter). At age fourteen, she was forced to work in a sweat shop. But where Crane's Maggie found the factory a "dreary place of endless grinding" (p. 20), Matthews' heroine reflects that her first days of work were the happiest of her girlhood: "She remembered the joy which she felt at

<sup>2</sup> *Stephen Crane: Letters*, ed. R. W. Stallman and Lillian Gilkes (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1960), p. 15. Stallman and Gilkes identify the "very small book" as *Maggie*.

<sup>3</sup> For a sample of Matthews' arguments for a truthful realism and against an invidious romanticism in fiction, see his review of Howells' *Criticism and Fiction* in *Cosmopolitan*, 12 (Nov. 1891), 124–26; and the essays "Romance against Romanticism" and "The Study of Fiction" in his *The Historical Novel and Other Essays* (1901; rpt. Freeport, N.Y.: Books for Libraries Press, 1968).

her ability to earn money; it gave her a sense of being her own mistress, of being able to hold her own in the world.”<sup>4</sup>

Maggie’s happy world began to disintegrate, however, when she became infatuated with a Bowery tough named Jim McDermott, who is as insensitive and brutish as the Jimmie and Pete of Crane’s *Maggie*. Refusing to break off her relationship with him, she was, like her counterpart in Crane’s novella, locked out of her apartment by her stepmother. Under the pernicious influence of Jim, Maggie quit her factory job and began spending her evenings at a Bowery dance hall. When Jim was convicted of a crime and sentenced to jail, Matthews’ Maggie found herself as lonely and vulnerable as Crane’s after Pete jilted her: “the thing plainest before [Mag O’Donnel] was the Morgue; she was on the way there, and she was going fast, and she knew it” (p. 92).

But this forlorn Maggie did not continue her downward trajectory; her slide toward the abyss was halted by the arrival of Terry, a bartender who is the very “beau ideal of a man” (*Maggie*, p. 19) that Crane’s Maggie idealized Pete to be. Terry, the narrator informs us, took pity on Maggie and thrashed Jim when that villain emerged from prison and harassed her; falling in love with the poor girl, he took her to the Tombs and married her as soon as he was able. With a lot of hard work and a bit of luck (good luck, of course, is not to be found in Mag Johnson’s indifferent universe), Terry and Maggie were able to buy the saloon that employed Terry.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, like the protagonist of the romantic play that Crane’s Maggie attended with Pete, Maggie O’Donnel has marched from poverty to, if not wealth exactly, at least economic security: “Terry was doing well. . . . He was sure to make money; and perhaps in two or three years they might be able to pay off the

<sup>4</sup> “Before the Break of Day,” in Matthews, *Vignettes of Manhattan* (New York: Harper, 1894), p. 92. Subsequent page references to “Before the Break of Day” refer to this edition of *Vignettes* and will appear parenthetically in the text.

<sup>5</sup> Matthews’ description of the saloon’s bar reveals that he borrowed details as well as major plot and character elements from Crane’s work. Compare Matthews’ “The bar curved across the saloon, and behind it the sideboard with its bevelled-edge mirrors lined the two inner walls. The sideboard glittered with glasses built up in tiers, and a lemon lay yellow at the top of every pyramid” (p. 87), to Crane’s sketch of the bar in which Pete works: “Upon its shelves rested pyramids of shimmering glasses that were never disturbed. Mirrors set in the face of the sideboard multiplied them. Lemons, oranges and paper napkins . . . sat among the glasses” (p. 34).

mortgage on the fixtures. Then they would be rich" (p. 94). As she lies awake in bed in the narrative's present tense, Maggie does indeed have reason to celebrate the Fourth of July.

Melodramatic as is the narrator's account of Maggie's rise from the Hell's Kitchen gutter toward a modest version of the American Dream, this section of the tale is bland in comparison to what follows. When she hears a noise in the room below, Maggie suspects that someone is attempting to rob the saloon safe, which contains her and Terry's life savings; though alone and unarmed, "she was not in the least afraid" (p. 94). Her only course of action, she determines, is to proceed downstairs and call the police on the saloon telephone. When she reaches the phone, however, she finds herself staring into the shifty eyes of her nemesis, Jim: "You try to squeal and I'll shoot—see?" he warns. Undaunted, Maggie picks up the phone, tells the operator that Jim McDermott is in the act of burglarizing her saloon, then faces Jim and cries: "Now shoot, and be damned!" (pp. 96–97). He does, but misses; for some inexplicable reason, she laughs "tauntingly," and he fires again, wounding her in the arm. When the police arrive, she is bloodied and unconscious but not seriously injured, and Jim has fled, without the money he sought to steal. Maggie's American Dream remains intact.

"Plainer than ever before is the duty of the novelist now to set up no false ideals, to erect no impossible standards of strength or courage or virtue, to tell the truth about life as he sees it with his own eyes."<sup>6</sup> So wrote Matthews the literary critic in his essay "The Study of Fiction" (1898). Yet in "Before the Break of Day" he re-visioned one of American literature's most powerful examples of realistic fiction as a tale of romantic ideals and improbable if not impossible standards of courage; moreover, we find idealized characters and improbable incidents in many other of Matthews' vignettes of the metropolis. Why, one wonders, would Matthews the fiction writer so blatantly violate his own critical standards? The answer, I would suggest, is that Matthews perceived no discrepancy between his critical views and his fictional productions; put simply, he considered "Before the Break of Day" to be a more truthful vision of slum life than Crane had constructed in *Maggie*.

<sup>6</sup> "The Study of Fiction," p. 83.