

**READING REALITY:  
THE TORTUOUS PATH TO PERCEPTION  
IN STEPHEN CRANE'S  
"THE OPEN BOAT" AND "THE BLUE HOTEL"**

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Stephen Crane's short stories transcend the mere depiction of the world as conceived by realism and naturalism. His narratives can be regarded as experiments in perception where the author explores the nature of reality as a human construct. Crane's main concern does not rest on moral assumptions, rather on the frustrating process that makes human beings generate meaning from an indifferent nature. This process is portrayed by exposing the characters to situations that push them to their limits - situations in which human ability to perceive is put to the test, only to be finally undermined.

"The Open Boat" and "The Blue Hotel" are exemplary in illustrating the multifarious and deceptive nature of reality. In the former, an ironic kind of self-awareness is achieved by the correspondent's acceptance of human limitations and the absurdity of his condition. In the latter, the use of the wrong code of behavior leads to an endless series of misunderstandings and to the subsequent murder of the Swede. Both stories share Crane's characteristic use of ambiguity that lets the reader have a say in the story.

It is the intention of this paper to examine the structure, characterization, and symbolism of these two works in order to exemplify Crane's concept of a multifaceted reality lacking in concrete referents, and its thematization within the text. After a brief survey of the previous studies on the topic, I shall discuss the organization of the two stories and the role of the main characters and central metaphors. The last section of my essay concerns the study of the epistemological consequences of Crane's view regarding the role of the reader in modern literature. Though this essay does not draw on a particular school of criticism, I will frequently use some concepts taken from psychoanalysis (Jacques Lacan's distinction between the "imaginary" and the "symbolic", and the unstable ["floating"] nature of the signifier)<sup>1</sup> as well as phenomenology (Wolfgang Iser's description of the reading process as entailing "ideation", and leading to a heightening of the reader's self-awareness.)<sup>2</sup>

Studies of Crane have usually focused on matters related to his subscription to particular literary movements, such as realism or naturalism;<sup>3</sup> however, in the last two decades new vantage points have developed. The interest in the analysis of Crane's particular use of ambiguity and his vision of human perception have drawn the reader's attention to the epistemological problem of man's ability to interpret the universe.<sup>4</sup> With regard to narrative techniques, scholarship has

stressed Crane's use of painting devices, particularly those of impressionism.<sup>5</sup> Finally, a few innovative essays explore indeterminacy as a potential stimulator of the reader's response, and the hidden metaphors of writing as representative of "Crane's formidable powers of defamiliarization."<sup>6</sup> In using some of these approaches, as well as the above-mentioned concepts by Lacan and Iser, I shall attempt to explain what I consider to be a paradox in Crane's fiction: the failure of the characters in interpreting reality (their misreadings of the world) enable the reader to comprehend the mischievous and symbolic nature of the universe.

## 1. THE PARADIGM OF WONDER: UNANSWERED QUESTIONS IN "THE OPEN BOAT"

From the introductory sentence of "The Open Boat" ("None of them knew the colour of the sky." [277]),<sup>7</sup> to the concluding one ("[...] and they felt that they could then be interpreters" [302]) an apparent transformation of the characters takes place. Both sentences frame the content of the story and seem to suggest a growth in self-awareness.

As a result of a shipwreck, four men float adrift in the middle of the sea. In the very beginning, these four characters (a captain, a cook, an oiler, and a correspondent) are absorbed in the contemplation of waves and the liquid horizon: "and all of them knew the colour of the sea" (277). Appearing in the same paragraph, this narratorial description shows a striking contrast with the above-mentioned introductory sentence. At any rate, both direct the reader's attention to the element that exclusively obsesses the characters: the sea. The image of the sea as representative of the "unconscious" is a commonplace in psychology and symbolism. But, the reflecting quality of the ocean waters brings to mind a new analogy at the center of Lacan's "theory of the subject": that of the mirror.

According to Lacan, human subjects enter a pre-existing system of signifiers that can function only within a given linguistic code. The entrance into that system and the previous stages are controlled by the unconscious. In this pre-linguistic state, which Lacan calls "Imaginary," the child is unable to establish a clear division between himself and the surrounding world, between subject and object. The awareness of his condition as "another" is described by Lacan through the narcissistic metaphor of the mirror. The subject's projection of unity into the fragmented surface of the mirror, leads to the creation of the "ego" as a part of an ordered system. That system (the "Symbolic Order" in Lacan's words), is organized in linguistic terms and has in the phallus its privileged signifier. Nevertheless, the id is still at work after the formation of the ego, and the world of the "imaginary" frequently intrudes into that of the "symbolic." The explanation for these intrusions rests on the subject's demand for the satisfaction of his repressed needs. But, as this demand can only be shaped by means of linguistic discourse, which belongs to the patriarchal and repressive dominion of the "symbolic", satisfaction is never accomplished and the subject is split.

What is important for our purpose is the implication of Lacan's postulates for the interpretation of literature and the arts. His theory of dreams is textual. Since the unconscious, in his view, is identified with an unstable signifier which "floats", reality can never be fully grasped. One signifier remits to another in an endless chain. The split in the subject's mind is, above all, a split from "the Real". In this context, modern literature resembles the works of the unconscious and thematizes this fracture. As Elizabeth Wright (1984: 113) points out: "For Lacan, narrative is the attempt to catch up retrospectively on this traumatic separation, to tell this happening again and again, to re-count it".

The situation of the four castaways in the middle of this mirror-like sea parallels that of the subject at the prelinguistic phase. They cannot verbalize even their condition. The correspondent wonders why he is there. The captain lies with "profound dejection and indifference" (277). The only dialogue which takes place in the first section concerns the search for a "life-saving station" and a "house of refuge", surrogates of their search for a linguistic code that could justify their existence in the world. The cook and the correspondent argue about the difference between these two images of a place of shelter. The quality of this short conversation, which reminds the reader of the theater of the absurd, is significantly described by the narrator as being organized "in disjointed sentences" (279). It is made of a series of suppositions, questions, and negations that neutralize each other. "We're not there yet" (279), is their recurrent conclusion. In fact, they still have a long way to go before being able to reach "the reality principle".

More evidence suggests that this passage presents a concentrated allegory of the process of ego-formation at the "mirror phase". The narrator's portrayal of the cook "invariably" gazing at "the broken sea" (277), evokes the fragmented self-image that is projected in the mirror at this stage. (The organization of the aforementioned dialogue reflects a similar idea at a diegetic level). This fragmentation keeps the characters from grasping the wholeness and, therefore, their relationship to it. The movement of the waves and the effect of a receding horizon can also be interpreted as metaphors of the "floating" quality of the signifier and the "displacement" undergone by dream images (the metonymic effect of language in which significance shifts from one image to a contiguous one):

A singular disadvantage of the sea lies in the fact that after successfully surmounting one wave you discover that there is another behind it just as important and just as nervously anxious to do something effective in the way of swamping boats. (...) There was a terrible grace in the move of the waves. (278).

The end of the paragraph summarizes the contradictory feeling of attraction and repulsion ("terrible grace") which characterizes the entrance in the world of the "symbolic". It also leads the reader to consider a new interpretation of the story in the light of Michael Fried's studies on the metaphors of writing. According to Fried (1987: 101), in Crane's stories "a thematics of writing is from the outset

given manifold expression and then at a critical juncture is personified as terminally dreadful in its effects". One of the most recurrent features of Crane's narrative is the use of symbols (corpses' upturned faces), rhetorical devices (alliterative representation of the author's initials: "S"/"C"), images of miniaturization, etc. as emblems of representation, metaphors that evoke what he calls, "the scene of writing", following Jacques Derrida. The thematization of the act of writing is accomplished via some of these images that provoke at once the appeal and the horror of the characters. The symbolism of color supports Fried's reading of Crane's narrative as allegories of writing. White pervades all the descriptions in this section. The tops of the waves (images of the signifier, as I suggested above) are "of foaming white" (277), and the same portrayal is again repeated several times:

The manner of her scramble over these walls of water is a mystic thing, and, moreover, at the top of them were ordinarily *these problems in white water*, the foam racing down from the summit of each wave requiring a new leap, a leap from the air. [my italics] (278)

Describing through this passage the menacing nature of the whiteness of the waves (which evoke the whiteness of a blank sheet of paper), Crane provides another token of what Fried describes as the author's "fear of writing" (1987: 118), mirroring at once the ambiguous and threatening ethos of the signifier in the "symbolic" world. A new stress on this very same topic is provided two paragraphs later in close connection with a remark about the characters' epistemological problem (their inability to interpret the universe): "(...) and the foam was like tumbling snow. The process of the breaking day was unknown to them. They were aware only of this effect upon the colour of the waves that rolled toward them. (279)

At a certain point of the opening section, the narrator seems to withdraw from the story and take the reader's position: "Viewed from a balcony, the whole thing would doubtless have been weirdly picturesque" (278). This often-quoted passage, that establishes a switch in perspective, not only confers detachment to the narrative voice but also can be interpreted as one of the first tokens of the allegorization of the act of reading within Crane's story. I will expand this idea in my analysis of other significant citings in "The Open Boat" and "The Blue Hotel". By now, it is my purpose to state the symbolic richness of these stories, in which the step-by-step process of growing self-awareness in the characters (described in terms similar to those of the rites of passage, or Lacan's metaphor of the mirror phase) is paralleled by the foregrounding of "the scene of writing"<sup>8</sup> and "the processing of the text"<sup>9</sup> in the reader's mind.

Section II of "The Open Boat" goes on portraying the character's uncertainty about their condition: "They were travelling, apparently, neither one way nor the other. They were, to all intents, stationary" (281). As explained above, their ignorance of the symbolic (linguistic) code makes it impossible for them to

communicate by words, that is why they also remain "silent", as the narrator obsessively repeats:

Whereupon the three were silent, save for a trifle of hemming and hawing. To express any particular optimism at this time they felt to be childish and stupid. (...) So they were silent. (280)

This prelinguistic phase in which the castaways still remain, leads them to interpret events in the terms of their unconscious. They regard the presence of black gulls as a bad omen. In the description of these birds, the narrator emphasizes the hypnotical quality of their glance. They stare at the men in the same way the four men stare at the horizon in search for their symbolic "house of refuge":

Often they came very close and stared at the uncanny and stared at the men with black bead-like eyes. At these times they were uncanny and sinister in their unblinking scrutiny, (...) His black eyes were wistfully fixed upon the captain's head. (...) the bird struck their minds at this time as being somehow gruesome and ominous. (281)

In chapter III, as the characters approach the land, the phallic symbols increase. The most obvious of this images is that of the lighthouse. If in the previous section it was described just as "the point of a pin", now we are told that "meanwhile the lighthouse had been growing slowly larger" (283). Simultaneously, the four castaways decry a line in the horizon that they interpret as the seashore, and thus, the privileged signifier of the symbolic world is associated with a geographical manifestation of its dominion: "Even as the lighthouse was an upright shadow on the sky, this land seemed but a long black shadow on the sea. It certainly was thinner than paper" (283). The parallelism between the process of ego-formation and the act of writing is further supported by Fried's interpretation of the land in this passage, as one of Crane's multiple versions of "the scene of writing" (1987: 143).

More phallic images are used to depict the foreshadowing of the characters' similar change in condition. At a certain point of this part the correspondent produces eight cigars from his pocket. Their description and number are enlightening: "Four of them were soaked with sea-water; four were perfectly scatheless" (284), as if this event smoothed the path for the forthcoming encounter with the up-to-now ignored world of the symbolic order. It is noteworthy that it is the correspondent, the man of letters and so the most receptive to the linguistic organization of that world, the one who produces these emblematic cigars, as if the fact of being in possession of the signifier would allow him to become the leader of the characters' entrance into the existing organization of thought.

As Thomas L. Kent (1985: 262) points out, the aforementioned encounter with the social order (portrayed in part IV), represents the center and the climax of the

story. The initial state of their approach is marked by the recurrent use of the expression “Funny they don’t see us”, (285-287) that evokes once more the nonexistence of a central self in the characters at this pre-symbolic phase of their development. The phrase “from it [the land] came no sigh”, points to the same direction and expands further their inability to interpret a linguistic code that they still have to learn. As a consequence, the castaways’ learning process is set in linguistic terms: “Four scowling men sat in the dinghy and surpassed records in the invention of epithets” (285), a process that is matched by the measured growth of the omnipresent lighthouse: “Southward, the slim lighthouse lifted its little grey length” (285).

In the narrator’s description of the land and in the characters’ perception of it, reality is invested with the most extreme subjectivity. Nothing is, everything “seems to be” or “appears to be”. Given this situation, the correspondent and his companions limit themselves “to see” without being able to decipher the information they perceive. Their uncertainty and inability to interpret reaches its height with the arrival of an omnibus and the waiving of a shirt by a man. The characters speculate without being able to come to any conclusion. They are faced with signifiers that are meaningless for them:

“What’s that idiot with the coat mean? What’s he signalling, any how?”  
 “It looks as if he were trying to tell us to go north. There must be a life-saving station up there”.  
 “No; he thinks we’re fishing. Just giving us a merry hand. See? Ah, there, Willie!”  
 “Well, I wish I could make something out of those signals. What do you suppose he means?”.  
 “He don’t mean anything; he’s just playing”. (289)

The organization of this central episode in the form of a long dialogue without authorial intrusion, makes the reader share the characters’ uncertainty. The narrator withdraws completely from the storytelling and the events and questions remain unexplained. The reader is consequently left with the same epistemological doubt as that of the castaways.

In part VII the physical encounter with the land is preceded by the view of a “tall white windmill” (297). This new phallic symbol plays the same pivotal role as the often-mentioned lighthouse. It evokes the image of the privileged signifier of the symbolic world of differences that helps all signifiers to achieve unity with their signifieds:

The correspondent wondered if none ever ascended the tall wind-tower, and if then they never looked seaward. This tower was a giant, standing with its back to the plight of the ants. It represented in a degree, to the correspondent, the serenity of nature amid the struggles of the individual. (297).

The correspondent, surrogate for the writer, learns through this symbol how to read reality, but this recently acquired awareness leads to what he calls a "new ignorance of the grave-edge" (297). For him, knowledge becomes the result of accepting the unstable nature of signifiers, of perceiving reality as simulacrum: "The shore was set before him like a bit of scenery on a stage, and he looked at it and understood with his eyes each detail of it" (300). The same concept is raised again several lines below: "he was impressed as one who, in a gallery, looks at a scene from Brittany or Algiers" (300). Both citations make the reader face the fictive nature of the symbolic code used to interpret "the Real", and, by extension, the artificial quality of "the Real" itself that becomes a mere human construct.

The emblematic sentence that concludes the story ("and they felt that they could then be interpreters" [302]) is an ironical allusion to the progression endured by the characters: from ignorance to the acceptance of human limitations to perceive.

## **2. IN SEARCH FOR A CODE: DELUSION AND MISINTERPRETATION IN "THE BLUE HOTEL"**

Though the setting is apparently different, those epistemological problems that absorbed the characters' attention in "The Open Boat" are also at the center of "The Blue Hotel". The dialectics between ignorance and knowledge is obsessively repeated, leading finally to an open ending in which the reader is faced with a series of unanswered questions. The ultimate conclusion may be fairly defined by just one word: wonder.

Other striking similarities between these two stories are: the thematization of the acts of writing and reading, by the foregrounding of both the scene of writing and the endless (and often frustrating) process of "consistency-building" in the personages' mind; the contraposition between the primitive world of the instincts and the raising of a new society organized according to moral and linguistic standards; and, intimately connected with the last point, the difficulty for human nature to adapt to an alien code of behavior.

Among the differences, Crane's use of a decaying West and its substitution by a repressive order of morals is used to illustrate the characters' inability to cope with a reality lacking of stable referents and signifiers. Nevertheless, these two settings are only "apparently" different, since they can also be read as allegoric of Lacan's theory of the ego-formation through the mirror metaphor. Moreover, the world of the hotel and that of the saloon (the two polar settings of the story) mirror the above-mentioned distinction between the imaginary world of the unconscious and the symbolic order.

According to the setting, "The Blue Hotel" is basically structured in two sections with a final chapter that may be considered like an epilogue or a postscript. The first section begins with the arrival of the three strangers (the Swede, the Easterner, and the cowboy) at a hotel near Fort Romper and concludes with the

Swede's flight from this place, which constitutes the bulk of the novel (parts I-VII). The second section (part VIII) describes the Swede's journey to Fort Romper in the middle of a snow storm, his experiences in a saloon, and his murder by a gambler. In the epilogue (part IX) two of the characters (the Easterner and the cowboy) reflect on the absurdity of the events some months after these took place.

From the outset the reader is introduced in the hotel's chimerical world of appearances. The narrative flux seems to mirror the workings of dream images in which "condensation" (several images combine) and "displacement" (significance shifts from one image to another) are the two regulatory impulses through which the unconscious hides meaning. In his textual theory of the subject, Lacan calls the first process "metaphor" and the second one "metonymy". I shall provide some examples of these.

The description of the hotel itself, the characterization of Scully, its proprietor, and the actions of all the personages show the attributes of a ritual. Determinism is an integral component of this ritual, and so, travellers alighted at the railway station are "obliged to pass the Palace Hotel" (325), and being overcome by its blueness, they become trapped in this hellish place. The narrator describes Scully as a "master of strategy", who practically makes the other characters "prisoners". The washing of the guests's hands and faces is portrayed like a "series of small ceremonies", (326) and the "enormous stove" in the center of the room is seen as "humming with godlike violence". (326)

The concept that better defines Crane's characterization of most personages in the story is ambiguity. According to the narrator's suggestions, Scully is both a devil and a priest, the Easterner, a passive witness and the moral consciousness of the story, the gambler, as will be seen in the analysis of the next section, is at once a wolf and a respectable citizen. But, among all the characters, it is the Swede who best exemplifies Crane's command on his aesthetics of ambiguity. His behavior is a mystery for the others and for the reader himself. Although he acts paranoid (showing his irrepressible fear of being killed in the hotel) as he conducts himself boastfully. The final paragraph of the first part establishes the inability of the Swede and the other characters to understand each other. After "making furtive estimates of each man" like a hounded beast, he roars with laughter. The remaining emotion is the same as in "The Open Boat", wonder:

Finally, with a laugh and a wink, he said that some of these Western communities were very dangerous; and after his statement he straightened his legs under the table, tilted his head, and laughed again, loudly. It was plain that the demonstration had no meaning to the others. They looked at him wondering and in silence. (327)

The signs of strange behavior on the part of the Swede multiply in the first section of the narrative. His nervousness and excitement is inexplicable for the others. Thus, when they all play a game of "High-Five", he addresses Johnny (Scully's son) and introduces the first premonition of his own murder: "I suppose



there have been a good many men killed in this room" (329). Johnny's answers to the Swede's suggestions of being menaced stress the ignorance of the former: "What the hell are you talking about?" "I don't know nothin' about you", "I don't know what you're driving at" (329). The same attitude is shared by the cowboy ("What's wrong with you, mister", (329) and the Easterner, whom the Swede addresses, looking for support:

"They say they don't know what I mean", he remarked mockingly to the Easterner.

The latter answered after prolonged and cautious reflection. "I don't understand you", he said impassively. (329)

As the correspondent in "The Open Boat", the Easterner is suggested to be another surrogate for both the writer and the reader. Compared to the other personages, he seems to be closer to an accurate perception of reality. His name, Mr. Blanc, associates him with the space of writing, as Fried implies (1987: 183). But, as the protagonist of "The Open Boat", the Easterner only approaches an explanation for the facts retrospectively in the very last chapter. As the events take place, his interpretation of the Swede's behavior, thought reasonable, does not ever prove to be right. His first argument about this matter is significantly a literary one: he sees in the Swede an up-to-date quixotic figure unable to distinguish between reality and fiction: "it seems to me this man has been reading dime novels, and he thinks he's right out in the middle of it —the sootin' and stabbin' and all" (335).

In part IV, a striking change can be appreciated in the Swede's personality. After having a symbolic drink (parody of Eucharist) with Scully, the former assumes the role and personality of the latter, mimicking the host's exaggerated solicitude and self-confidence. His re-entry into the room is described in these terms by the narrator: "It was the entry of two roisterers from a banquet hall" (336), and from now on all his movements and talk respond to this new acquired boastfulness: "He arose and stalked with the air of an owner off into the executive parts of the hotel" (336). It is now the Swede the one who reveals himself as the leader in the visionary dominion of the hotel. He occupies everyone else's attention and gives the supper described in the following part "the appearance of a cruel bacchanal" (337). The oblique use of religious imagery (in this case a blasphemous allusion to the Last Supper), opens the possibility of a new reading of the story. In fact, Crane's tormented character is often invested with the attributes of a sacrificial figure—at a certain point the narrator portrays his gestures as those "of a martyr" (330). His isolation and foreshadowing powers support the same idea.

After the supper, all the characters except Scully play a new game of High-Five. If in the previous game the cowboy was described as "a board-whacker" (328), Crane's paranoid martyr is now portrayed in the very same terms: "The Swede had adopted the fashion of board-whacking". All these attempt of self-assertion by mimicking the others suggest the Swede's struggle to go beyond "the prelinguistic mirror phase". As the correspondent in "The Open Boat", the Swede

is trapped in the world of “the imaginary”, represented by the hotel itself. He is unable to project unity into his fragmented self-image reflected in the metaphoric mirror of his milieu. The Swede’s mimetic tendencies are manifestations of his inability to identify with objects in the world as “others”. But, unlike the protagonist of “The Open Boat”, he is denied the possibility of an epiphany-like moment in which he could come to terms with the mischievous nature of reality. As a consequence, he remains as a split subject in the “imaginary” state of being.

The Swede’s search for selfhood is likewise a search for truth. This concern leads him to overreact when he discovers that Scully’s son, Johnnie, is cheating. The manifestation of his wrath increases the oppressiveness in the environment: “This little den was now hideous as a torture-chamber” (339). When in part VIII the Swede enters the saloon, he will choose the gambler, a professional cheater, as the target of his provocations.

The narratorial description of the subsequent fight between Johnnie and the Swede tends to emphasize the fictional and ambiguous nature of reality: “During this pause, the Easterner’s mind, like a film took lasting impressions of three men—the iron-nerve master of the ceremony; the Swede, pale, motionless, terrible; and Johnnie, serene yet ferocious, brutish yet heroic” (342-345). In this scene the Easterner becomes emblematic of the writer’s ideal of aesthetic detachment. He is just an impassive witness of the events. His rendering is as ambiguous as reality itself, and so he describes Johnnie in terms that seem to be blatantly contradictory (“serene yet ferocious, brutish yet heroic”). Furthermore, Crane’s cinematic prose is mirrored by the narrator’s filmic perception of the contenders.

The Easterner’s appreciation of the lonely figure of the Swede is also noteworthy. It is reminiscent of a recurrent myth in the American fiction, that of the outsider, the solipsistic hero in possession of undecipherable truths: “There was a splendour of isolation in his situation at this time which the Easterner felt once when, lifting his eyes from the man on the ground, he beheld that mysterious and lonely figure, waiting” (344). Such an enigmatic portrayal of the Swede produces a play of mirrors in which the author projects his “ego ideal” (an exemplary of detachment) into the Easterner (his most immediate surrogate), who, in his turn, does the same in relation to another character.

In the introductory paragraphs of part VIII the Swede is depicted passing into a snow storm, with which he is symbolically identified: “His face, fresh from the pounding of Johnnie’s fists, felt more pleasure than pain in the wind and the driving snow” (348). As the sea in “The Open Boat”, the reflecting quality of the snow evokes the implications of Lacan’s mirror metaphor. At this point, the narrator states the indifference of nature in a passage that parallels to perfection that of the concluding chapter of “The Open Boat”. However, in “The Blue Hotel” this epiphany is revealed to the reader but not to the Swede: “The conceit of man was explained by this storm to be the very engine of life. One was a coxcomb not to die in it. *However*, the Swede found a saloon” [italics mine] (348).

If the hotel represents the world of appearance, the pure possibility (“the imaginary”), the saloon is the world of fact (the society’s closed and repressive

“symbolic order”). Similarly, the Palace Hotel epitomized a world of legend, the wild West of stories. The saloon, however, is the actual world for the Swede, the new urban society of history. The characters and the events in this new setting match impressively those discussed in the previous one. But, their nature is radically different. Unlike the blueness of the hotel, a red light illuminates the saloon. Four men are sitting about a table drinking. The barman of the place, significantly called “its guardian” (a role that Scully plays at the onset), gives the Swede a whisky, though this time he has to pay the twenty cents of the purchase. The four people around the table play a card game. They are not transient men but two “prominent local business men”, “the district attorney”, and “a professional gambler”, who is “trusted and admired” by the community. Thus, they are representative of the economic and political power. The narrator uses a long paragraph in describing the gambler. He is “a man delicate in manner, when among people of fair class”, “judicious”, etc.

Definitely the Swede is not in the appropriate milieu. Immediately after the narrator points to the presence of a mirror in back of the bar, the character asks “the guardian” the question that unleashes the tragic events: “Have something?” The Swede forces the barman and the card-game players to drink with him. Nonetheless, communion is not possible between people holding different codes of behavior. The gambler’s answer confirms this fact: “My friend, I don’t know you” (352). In the dream-like environment of the hotel, the Swede is able to impose his own perception of reality. In the universe of actuality, however, his aggression is responded with the cold shot of a long blade. His death is rounded off with “a cry of supreme astonishment” (352). Wonder is the ultimate emotion that pervades Crane’s fiction. The last paragraph of this climatic episode extends wonder to the reader: “The corpse of the Swede, alone in the saloon, has its eyes fixed upon a dreadful legend that dwelt atop of the cash-machine: “This registers the amount of your purchase” (352).

The cash-register metaphor has been extensively discussed by critics. To a certain extent, it may be understood as emblematic of the Swede’s condemnation for his incapacity to understand and accept society’s repressive code. I interpret it as a symbol of the infinite number of possible readings of reality. The text limits itself of display a series of different, and sometime opposite, points of view. There are no privileged vantage points. It is the reader who has to assemble the different perspectives and give coherence according to his expectations for the future and his experience of the past.

Chapter IX, the postscript, dramatizes the reader response to the narrated events. Several months after the murder, the Easterner and the cowboy still try to find an answer for their behavior. “(...) a thousand things might have happened”, admits the former. To explain the characters’ shared guilt, he makes use of a linguistic metaphor: “We are all in it! This poor gambler isn’t even a noun. He is a kind of adverb. Every sin is the result of a collaboration” (354). But, the cowboy, of course, ignores the basics of grammar and does not understand the Easterner,

“The cowboy, injured and rebellious, cried out blindly into this fog of mysterious theory: ‘Well, I didn’t do anythin’, did I?’” (354).

At this point, the Swede reveals himself again as a redeemer figure. Though he was undoubtedly incapable of coming to terms with reality, his death allows the Easterner to undergo a transformation. As in the concluding passage of “The Open Boat”, self-awareness is reached by accepting the absurdity of human condition, and the impossibility of interpreting reality from a narrow or one-sided point of view.

Crane’s short stories exemplify human struggle for making sense from reality. They describe the step-by-step process of perception, in which characters are usually defeated by the deterministic forces of nature. In “The Open Boat” and “The Blue Hotel”, this process evokes likewise the tragedy of the split subject. The main characters are involved in an endless search for selfhood that moves them to go beyond the “imaginary” state of being in which there is no clear distinction between subject and object. The process of the characters’ ego-formation, in its turn, is paralleled by the act of writing and the act of reading. The former is revealed by the foregrounding of the writing materials and the author’s projection of his ideal ego in the aesthetic detachment represented by the correspondent and the Easterner. The latter is mirrored by the dispersion of the point of view that moves the reader to participate in the assembly of meaning.

The reader’s task may be as frustrating and painful as that of Crane’s personages; however, as Iser (1978) remarks, reading has a therapeutic consequence since it permits us to discover aspects of ourselves and of others we have hitherto ignored. Trapped in the hall of mirrors built up by Crane we can either get lost in its passages or find a way out of the labyrinth. But, there are as many passages as readings, and as many ways out as realities.

## Notes

1. All the Lacanian concepts discussed in this paper are taken from the English selected edition of his major works entitled *Ecrits: A Selection* (1977) and a volume based on a year’s seminar (*The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, 1978). For more comprehensive explanations of his theory see specific chapters of Jane Gallop’s

*Reading Lacan* (1985) and Ellie Ragland-Sullivan's *Jacques Lacan and The Philosophy of Psychoanalysis* (1986).

2. Though I do not discuss in depth the concepts of the German phenomenologist, I make use of his approach towards the conclusions. It is particularly interesting the way Crane's narrative dramatizes the epistemological uncertainty of the reader when facing modern narrative. Furthermore, the personages' ego-formation mirrors the process of "consistency building" in the reader's mind. Iser's "theory of aesthetic response" is systematized in his work *The Act of Reading* (1978).
3. The most interesting and recent study of Crane's subscription to naturalism is John J. Conder's *Naturalism in American Fiction: The Classic Phase* (1984); particularly suggestive is Conder's discussion of the moral vision in "The Open Boat". For an analysis of naturalistic symbolism in "The Blue Hotel", see also James Trammell's article (1957).
4. The epistemological emphasis in Crane's fiction has been analyzed by Donna Gerstenberger (1971-72), Frank Bergon (1975), James Colvert (1965), and Thomas L. Kent (1981).
5. In *Stephen Crane and Literary Impressionism*, James Nagel provides the most exhaustive account of Crane's impressionistic techniques.
6. Michael Fried (1987) has been the only one dealing with the "thematics of writing" in the works of the American writer. For his discussion of the topic in "The Open Boat" and "The Blue Hotel" see *Realism, Writing, Disfiguration* (1987: 143, 181, 183).
7. All Crane quotations are taken from *Great Short Works of Stephen Crane*. New York: Harper & Row, 1965.
8. The "scene of writing" is a concept that Fried borrows from Jacques Derrida's "Freud and the Scene of Writing (1978)". As Fried (1987: 185) points out, the thematization of writing and its implications for the reader have been also the focus of Jacques Lacan's "The agency of the letter in the unconscious since Freud" (1977) and Paul de Man's "De-Face-ment" (1984).
9. In Chapter III of Iser's *The Act of Reading* (1978), the German philosopher sees "the processing of the text" (the phenomenology of reading) as a "dialectic between illusion-making and illusion-breaking". The audience's expectations undergo a modification as the reading progresses. As the characters in Crane's fiction, the readers try to establish connection that lend coherence to their activity. This process, that Iser labels as "consistency-building", has an ultimate therapeutic effect in the reader's mind. "Reading becomes a medium through which consciousness comes to realize itself". (Holub, 1983: 92).

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