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SOME PROBLEMS OF THE CRITICAL RECEPTION OF STEPHEN CRANE'S "MAGGIE, A GIRL OF THE STREETS"

Josef Grmela

There is hardly another famous American book of fiction from the turn of the century that has been and still is so controversial as Stephen Crane's *Maggie, A Girl of the Streets*. Its original 1893 version was turned down by publishers both "respectable" and "off-beat", and found little positive response (with the exception of W. D. Howells and Hamlin Garland) with either readers or critics after it had been published at the author's own expense. Its second, bowdlerized version, published three years later, at the height of Crane's *Red Badge of Courage* bestseller success, hardly met with any more appreciable interest. Since then *Maggie's* fate has become almost indistinguishable from that of most other literary "classics": it became a standard item in academic curricula and obligatory reading lists, and perhaps partly because of that, it has slowly but surely made its way at least among the affected students to the unenviable status of books which, to use the fitting words of Mark Twain, everybody wants to have read and nobody seems to read. Yet, at least beginning with the twenties, *Maggie* was and still is read by a considerable number of critics whose interpretations can be generally divided into two groups: the "pietistic" and the iconoclastic. (There seems to be no-one who interpreted *Maggie* just "moderately".)

Those who felt it a question of principle to treat the memory of the tragic pioneer of modern American literature with nothing but piety, invariably found *Maggie* a great work. This view has not lost its currency even today. According to the well-known Crane specialist R. V. Stallman, *Maggie* is nothing short of that supreme ideal of all American fiction writers and their critics, "the great American novel".¹ However problem-

¹ Quoted from Thomas A. Gullason, "The Prophetic City in Stephen Crane's 1893 *Maggie*", in: *Modern Fiction Studies: The Modern Novel and the City*, Spring 1978, vol. XXIV, No. 1, p. 129.

atic in its description of the genre, and clearly exaggerated in the book's evaluation, Stallman's view is still by no means isolated. The hopes of the "Maggie lobby" to rekindle the flagging interest of the public in the novella (though not necessarily in *The Red Badge of Courage* or in Crane's later short stories, which need no such rekindling) received new impetus in 1966 with the discovery of the original, unexpurgated version of the tale.²

Yet even that did not prevent the re-emergence in the late seventies, after more than a half-century of low profile, of the "anti-Maggie" school of thought. Perhaps the crassest expression of the latter's feelings, reflecting growing objections to Crane's first ambitious work of fiction, has been the view of the Crane (and basically pro-Crane, though not uncritical) scholar Thomas A. Gullason: "Maggie is nothing more today than an historical curiosity and an old-fashioned melodrama."³ Can it be that the new "anti-Maggie" views are at least partly a revival of the old conservative criticism of the novella as being too one-sidedly negative in its depiction of American life, and too cruelly naturalistic? This writer has found no proofs to that effect. In fact, the contention most likely to be raised against *Maggie* today, and understandably enough after all that has happened in this century, is that the book even in its unexpurgated form is not (and was not even at its time) realistically cruel enough. (This, admittedly, given the atmosphere in which the book was written, could hardly be helped.) Nevertheless, one of the old objections to the book still keeps suggesting itself as a possible explanation for the apparent lack of its appeal: "the author's cynicism and coldness, because, in telling the story, he left the reader to invest with sentiment the facts that he related barely . . ."⁴

Perhaps it is not uninteresting that this view, presented in an ironical tone by the "Maggie-all-the-way" critic Van Wyck Brooks (he was incidentally speaking of the bowdlerized version of *Maggie*, unaware yet of its somewhat less genteel predecessor) was very much the impression (in all earnestness) of the present writer when he first, in his tender youth, little suspecting his future career in American studies, subjected *Maggie* to his rather intuitive scrutiny. What I minded about the book then, and what I have minded about the book ever since then, was of course not so much the absence in it of any "positive thinking" or even "sound American values" to counterbalance the cold world of the slums, but rather the lack of human warmth towards the people of the slums on Crane's part. This somewhat uneasy impression has perhaps as much to do with my subjective feelings as with the objective fact that in most of the

² Cf. Joseph Katz, "The Maggie Nobody Knows", in: *Modern Fiction Studies*, Summer 1966, vol. XII, No. 2, pp. 200-12.

³ Thomas A. Gullason, op. cit., p. 129.

⁴ Van Wyck Brooks, "Introduction to Stephen Crane", *Maggie, a Girl of the Streets*, Fawcett Publications, New York 1963, p. 6.

social fiction which exists in the Slavic or Central European languages, warmth towards the suffering is certainly no unknown quality, even though the description of the world in this literature may be more naturalistically cruel than that to be found in *Maggie*. My misgivings were not appreciably tempered even by the affirmative tone of most of the forewords, afterwords or other popularizing works relating to Crane published in this or other ex-socialist countries.⁵ These interpretations, in many cases still the first and only attempts in the respective national literary criticisms at evaluating Crane, either conveniently ignored that strange distance which I seemed to sense between Crane and his slum characters, or, apparently convinced by the predominant American "*Maggie* lobby", even confidently stated that "Crane's sympathies were on the side of the disinherited and the oppressed. In the person of *Maggie* he poeticizes the common man".⁶

The results of my research into Crane's early writings seem to suggest a somewhat more balanced view of *Maggie* — not necessarily rejective, though certainly much more critical than the interpretations of the "pietists" regardless of their respective ideological stance. Indisputably, one possible new approach to Crane's *Maggie* — strangely enough as yet untried (at least to my knowledge) by any of the growing number of interpreters of the novella — is to look at it through the prism of his other New York City writings, i.e. not only *George's Mother*, but also Crane's New York City newspaper sketches. Although the latter have been easily accessible since 1966 in the collection of *The New York City Sketches of Stephen Crane and Related Pieces*, edited by R. W. Stallman and E. R. Hagemann,⁷ their literally eye-opening relationship to *Maggie* has so far been widely ignored, not least by the co-editor of the collection, R. W. Stallman. However, even *George's Mother*, the other of Crane's well-known New York City short fictions, seems to suggest a radically new interpretation for *Maggie*. According to one of the most convincing interpretations of *George's Mother* by Jean Cazemajou, this short story forming a free sequel to *Maggie* is not really a fiction about the problems of the slums, but rather "a distant echo of Crane's conflicts with his own mother".⁸ If *George's Mother*, for all its ostensible subject-

⁵ In spite of the unifying, more or less mandatory Marxist-Leninist methodology, there are of course a number of individual variations in the assessment of Crane's *Maggie* or other of his works. But on the whole what predominates overwhelmingly is a rather uncritical approach to Crane more or less explicitly aiming to link Crane with the "progressive tradition" in American literature. The one outstanding exception to this simplifying tendency is the view of the East German Americanist Karl-Heinz Schönfelder mentioned in note 23.

⁶ O. V. Vasilyevskaya, *Tvorchestvo Stivena Krejna*, Moscow 1967, p. 69.

⁷ R. W. Stallman, E. R. Hagemann, eds., *The New York City Sketches of Stephen Crane and Related Pieces*, New York 1966.

⁸ Jean Cazemajou, "Stephen Crane", in: *Seven American Literary Stylists from Poe to Mailer: An Introduction*, ed. by George T. Wright, Minneapolis 1973, p. 101.

-matter, is not so much about the city slums, but basically about "something else", to what degree is *Maggie* about the slums, and to what degree about other problems? Many of the New York City newspaper sketches of the early Crane, written at approximately the same time as *Maggie* and *George's Mother*, seem to support the belief that Crane's own life in the slums was not very much aimed at learning the ways of or improving the "environment" or the conditions reigning in the slums (in spite of his often quoted "naturalistic" intention to show how unfavourable conditions influence the lives of those who have to live under them⁹). After all Crane was never reputed as showing a belief in the potential realisability of social reform, nor did he ever fully believe that the "conditions" were a sole or prime cause of the material and spiritual poverty of the slum dwellers. Rather the contrary. The chief cause lay, in Crane's view, in the psychological sphere: "The root of Bowery life . . . is a sort of cowardice . . . a lack of ambition or to willingly be knocked flat and accept the licking".¹⁰

Some of Crane's New York City newspaper sketches show an even more "unnaturalistic" and certainly "non-social" attitude. (It is perhaps no accident that even *Maggie*, which compared with the sketches is certainly the least opinionated, has never been unequivocally labelled as "social fiction", though some of the interpretations, especially those published before 1989 in the former socialist countries, tend to create precisely that impression.) One of the best examples of this attitude can be found in the well-known sketch "The Men in the Storm". Its collective hero is a group of unemployed "types",¹¹ significantly "mostly American, German and Irish, many (of them) strong, healthy (and) clear-skinned fellows with that stamp of countenance which is not frequently seen upon seekers after charity".¹² These shelterless men, facing one of the worst New York City blizzards, provide Crane in their unswerving hardiness with the pretext for describing that kind of hero (i.e. a real, unambiguous hero), which he would no doubt like to see replace the "cowards of Bowery" referred to by him in other instances. As Crane has it, "one does not expect to find the quality of humor in a heap of old clothes under a snowdrift",¹³ and yet "the men huddled, and swore, not like dark assassins, but in a sort of an American fashion, grimly and desperately, it is true, but yet with a wondrous under-effect, indefinable and mystic, as if there was some kind of humor in this catastrophe".¹⁴ How little Crane

⁹ Cf. Edwin H. Cady, "Stephen Crane: *Maggie*, A Girl of the Streets", in: Hennig Cohen, ed., *Landmarks of American Writing*, Washington, D. C. 1970, p. 202.

¹⁰ Quoted in: James H. Pickering, *The City in American Literature*, New York 1977, p. 86.

¹¹ R. W. Stallman, E. R. Hagemann, op. cit., p. 93.

¹² Ibid., p. 93.

¹³ Ibid., p. 95.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 95.

really understood or identified himself with slum life (after all, he could at any time opt out of it) is evident from one of his frequent flights in the story from the social realm into that of "the aesthetic": "It was wonderful to see how the snow lay upon the heads and shoulders of these men, the flakes steadily adding drop and drop, precisely as they fall upon the unresisting grass of the fields."¹⁵

No-one can deny that Crane voluntarily subjected himself to many of the hardships of the poor among whom he lived, yet was that enough for Crane to "get under the skin" of his fellow-inhabitants of the slums? There is ample evidence that Crane always perceived himself as someone striving for the ideal of a "perfect Anglo-Saxon gentleman".¹⁶ And it is surely no wonder, given the general atmosphere of the day, that even Crane, to use the chauvinistic words of Henry James describing his own feelings, did not attempt to establish any "claim to brotherhood with aliens in the first grossness of their alienism".¹⁷ A glance through Crane's New York City sketches quickly confirms the impression raised already by "The Men in the Storm", namely that Crane's sympathies extended almost exclusively to (in that order) "Americans, Germans and Irish", little to anyone else. Even the last named Irish could hardly measure up to the first named "old stock" Americans. Is not this, rather than Crane's much discussed "naturalism", a key to understanding the strange distancing of the author from the Irish slum characters in *Maggie*?

Should there be any doubt left as to where Crane's ethnic sympathies and antipathies lay (and these were largely identical with his sympathies and antipathies towards the poor, the latter being after all chiefly the unadjusted aliens), it is enough to get acquainted with another of his sketches included in the Stallman-Hagemann collection, "*A Christmas Dinner Won in Battle*". Its story is bound to strike the present-day reader as almost incredible in its naiveté. A young, diligent owner of a small plumbing business, Tom (just Tom), a true-blooded American, falls in love with the daughter of old Colonel Fortman, at present a leading local industrialist. Young Tom's ruminations about how to gain the hand of his beloved in spite of the social difference between them are coincidentally driven to a solution by a catalysing event, a strike. A horde of strikers surrounds the house of Colonel Fortman, and threatens to set it on fire. It is mainly thanks to Tom's courage and ingenuity that the worst does not come to the worst, and that the police come in time to save the besieged businessman and his daughter. The grateful Fortman invites the slightly wounded Tom to a well-earned dinner, and lets him know that his objections against his daughter's marriage with the young hero no longer hold.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

¹⁶ Edwin H. Cady, *Stephen Crane*, New York 1962, pp. 75—6.

¹⁷ Quoted from Warner Berthoff, *The Ferment of Realism: American Literature 1884—1919*, New York 1965, pp. 13—4.

As if this wondrous story would not suffice, Crane does not hesitate to express his misgivings about the striking men and women in a most forceful way: "(The) concourse of Slavs (Slovaks?), Polacs (sic!), Italians and Hungarians . . . seemed as blood thirsty, pitiless, mad, as starved wolves".¹⁸ "They resembled a parade of Parisians at the time of the first revolution."¹⁹ "There were men with dark sinister faces whom Tom had never before seen. They had emerged from the earth, so to speak, to engage in this carousel of violence."²⁰ "A raving grey-haired woman, struggling in the mud, sang a song which consisted of one endless line: 'We'll burn th' foxes out, We'll burn th' foxes out, We'll burn th' foxes out'. As for the others, they babbled and screamed in a vast variety of foreign tongues."²¹

There is no doubt that unlike a fellow-member of the same generation, Jack London, Stephen Crane was incapable of uniting his pride in being an "Anglo-Saxon American" with many sympathies for others who were not, let alone with the cause of revolution. According to Crane, "the people of the slums of our own cities fill a man with awe. That vast army with its countless faces immovably cynical, that vast army that silently confronts eternal defeat, it makes one afraid. One listens for the first thunder of the rebellion, the moment when this silence shall be broken by a roar of war. Meanwhile one fears this class, their numbers, their wickedness, their might — even their laughter. There is a vast national respect for them. They have it in their power to become terrible. And their silence suggests everything".²² Indeed a far cry from someone politicizing the common man.

To set the record straight, it remains to be said in the end that it has by no means been my objective to question the position of Stephen Crane in the serious American literature of his time because of his xenophobic attitudes. After all these were shared to some degree by no small number of American authors born in the second half of the 19th century (cf. among others Henry James, T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound) the value of whose contribution to literature, as we know today, can hardly be established on the basis of their controversial opinions.²³ The chief motive

¹⁸ R. W. Stallman, E. R. Hagemann, op. cit., p. 122.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 122.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 122.

²¹ Ibid., p. 123.

²² James H. Pickering, op. cit., pp. 86—7.

²³ Having concluded that Crane's motive in writing *Maggie* had little to do with any unequivocal sympathy, but rather with (to put it in the unusually frank and fitting words of K.-H. Schönfelder — cf. K.-H. S., K.-H. Wirzberger, *Literatur der USA im Überblick*, Leipzig 1977, p. 261) a "mixture of compassion, hatred and contempt" for the slum-dwellers, one has to ask what — in spite of this very ambivalent approach — compelled Crane to live among, "research" into and write about the poorest inhabitants of American cities. It is perhaps arguable that apart from vaguely sharing the interest of his pious Methodist mother in helping

for my "revisionist" effort lies elsewhere: in the pressing need to substantially revise and re-write much of what in the past four decades turned out to be one of the predominant genres in the scholarly output of many Czech and Slovak Anglicists and Americanists, namely the ubiquitous foreword and/or afterword — that odd mixture of truths, half-truths (however well-meant) and tactical omissions aimed at blunting the inquisitorial zeal of the censor. Unfortunately, this particular genre still happens to be taken at face value by the great majority of our readers, who have no access to possible countervailing sources of facts and opinions.

the city poor, Crane's extraordinary interest in the "war-like" conditions of the city slums (the apt comparison is E. H. Cady's; cf. E. C. Cady, *Stephen Crane*, New York 1962, p. 90), as well as in real war conditions, was less elicited by the actual conditions of those who peopled these comparable scenes, than by his own search for extreme situations which were either to prove or deny his suspicion that unlike the well-ordered universe believed in by his parents, life was basically a chaotic, destructive, and in Crane's view therefore no doubt absurd proposition. (Cf. in this connection his famous poem "A Man Said to the Universe".) However, this existentialist aspect of Crane's oeuvre deserves separate scrutiny.

NĚKTERÉ PROBLÉMY KRITICKÉ RECEPCE NOVELY STEPHENA CRANEA „MAGGIE, DÍTĚ ULICE“

Diskutovaná novela je samotnou americkou kritikou tradičně považována za jedno z nejvýznamnějších děl americké literatury konce minulého století. Tento dlouho a téměř jednomyslně panující názor, jakož i „progresivně“ interpretovatelný námět *Maggie*, ovlivnily hodnocení této prózy i v ex-socialistických zemích — s jedinou výjimkou literárního historika bývalé NDR K.-H. Schönfeldera, který ke Craneovu „newyorskému“ období zaujímá diferencovanější a kritičtější stanovisko, i když ho blíže nerozebírá. Pokusy řady amerických literárních historiků v období po 2. světové válce revidovat některé překonané názory na americkou literaturu 19. století se však, zejména v poslední době, nevyhly ani Craneovi, zvláště jeho *Maggie*. Vedle přetrvávajících „pietních“ názorů na Cranea a jmenovitě *Maggie*, je tak možno se setkat i s názory, že *Maggie* je „staromódním melodramatem“ a dokonce „historickou kuriozitou“ (Thomas A. Gullason). Přestože se autor této studie zcela neztotožňuje s takto vyhrčeným kritickým stanoviskem, domnívá se, že je — zejména v našem kontextu — řada důvodů pro zaujetí přesnějšiho a tedy i kritičtějšího stanoviska vůči jmenované novele. V této souvislosti autor studie zkoumá vztah mezi *Maggie* a s ní časově i tematicky souvisejícími Craneovými novinovými črtami z prostředí newyorských slumů, které vrhají nové světlo na motivaci a záměry, jež vedly Cranea k napsání *Maggie*. Z črt je zřejmé, že takzvané naturalistické distancování se Cranea od jeho postav v *Maggie* není ani tak výsledkem jeho jednoznačného příklonu k doktríně naturalismu, jako spíše jeho sporných národnostních a sociálních názorů, jakož i skutečnosti, že Cranea mnohem výrazněji zajímaly obecné problémy existenciální nežli konkrétní problematika života velkoměstské chudiny. Interpretace „existencialistických“ prvků v *Maggie* ve srovnání s jinými Craneovými díly by si ovšem vyžadovala další samostatné zkoumání.

Paralelně s tímto svým obsahem je tento příspěvek i implicitní výzvou k podstatné revizi a „přeapsání“ oněch z různých vnějších důvodů zkreslených „dějin“ americké literatury, jak se s nimi donedávna setkávali i naši čtenáři ve většině předslův a doslův k překladům z této literatury.