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# Stephen Crane at Summer Resorts : Seeing Is Disbelieving

Shunji Kuga

## I

Stephen Crane (1891-1900) resided at Asbury Park, New Jersey during the summers of 1888 through 1892. He worked as a correspondent for his brother's news bureau and reported on life at the crowded summer resort. He sometimes visited the adjacent Avon-by-the-Sea and Coney Island, one of the most well-known seaside resorts in 19th century America. At the peak of the summer season, an estimated 15,000 people flocked to the Asbury Park area, ranging from wealthy businessmen and their families to Jersey farmers.<sup>(1)</sup> In short, mass tourism was thriving, and Crane emerges as a pioneer in the study of such booming tourism. Few scholars, however, have investigated Crane from this viewpoint.

Crane's articles center on the contrasting aspects of tourist resorts which simultaneously amuse and enlighten people. He vividly depicts a dance party at a hotel and the lingering excitement of the guests,<sup>(2)</sup> while he meticulously reports the lectures given by noted scholars and artists at the summer school held at Avon-by-the-Sea.<sup>(3)</sup> At one of the lectures, Crane met Hamlin Garland, and as is well known, their acquaintance had a great influence on Crane's literary career thereafter, thus demonstrating the truth of resorts as places of enlightenment. Pleasure and morality do not necessarily conflict with

each other. As Crane says in "Along the Shark River," some tourists "are inclined to mingle useful lessons in the arts and sciences with the pleasure and expense usually attendant upon seaside life." (p. 520) In reality, however, the happy marriage of culture and recreation is not much in evidence. In "Coney Island's Failing Days," for example, Crane emphasizes the melancholy that pervades a Sunday night train crowded with returning vacationers. They are returning from delightful Coney Island to New York City and by extension, to a monotonous, mundane life-style and to an "inevitable, overhanging, devastating Monday." (p. 327) A stranger, the narrator of the article, assumes that one of the vacationers "will be a truckman." (p.327) Such a working-class vacationer, who can only afford a day's excursion, is obsessed with the idea of pleasure as a duty and frantically seeks out pleasure at a resort. He tries to keep his exhausting city-life out of memory for a short while. Therefore, in Coney Island the "truckman" is "engulfed in whirligigs and beer and has forgotten that there are Mondays." (p. 327)

Of course, Crane ironically sees these hedonistic people who "know nothing with the scornful glance of knowledge," (p. 505) but he equally entangles in his ironies the losing battle of some prominent citizens of the summer resorts who force the vacationers to mend their ways. Asbury Park is under the influence of straightlaced Methodists, and in Avon-By-the-Sea, these citizens forbid the sales of novels.<sup>(4)</sup> James A. Bradley, the founder of Asbury Park resort is eager to sponsor "baby parades," and wishes his Asbury Park to be a model for healthy family resorts. However, Bradley, who "still owns the greater part of the city, is considerably troubled in mind" (p. 550) because despite his order, all shops are open on Sunday, needless to say, in accordance with the needs of customers. Bradley, the guardian of moral righteousness, tries to regulate the sales of spirits with little success. As

one might expect, not a few tourists, especially “summer girl and golden youth” (p. 517) ignore Bradley.

Crane’s short story “The Pace of Youth” dramatizes the conflict between the old and the young or between the ruling and the disobedient. Riding a merry-go-round could be described as a domesticated form of horseback riding in the wild. (“Within the merry-go-round there was a whirling circle of ornamental lions, giraffes, camels,...”<sup>(5)</sup>) Recreational facilities in resorts guarantee customers exciting and even thrilling experiences free from danger. Their safety is protected by the constant supervision of the resort employees. Ironically, Frank, who works as operator of a carousel at an amusement park in Asbury Park, and Lizzie, who sells tickets at the booth are under the similar (and probably more strict) supervision of Lizzie’s father Stimson, the owner of the amusement park. While serving up amusements to vacationers, Stimson keeps his daughter away from any secular pleasure. Lizzie and Frank are not tourists, but they become influenced by the romantic and easygoing atmosphere of the summer resort. Not the words -- they are strangely inarticulate --, but the playful milieu leads them to flee the carousel, whose unchanging cycles symbolize Stimson’s constant surveillance. The father’s failed attempt to run after them makes him recognize generational gap and transition.

The summer tourists’ defiance of Puritanical modesty and short-lived amnesia of restrained city life, however, bring about a paradoxical result ; vacationers often feel relaxed by doing the same thing as they would do in Manhattan. People are not ready to become absorbed in nature but they are content with merely “seeing the people.” (p. 516) They are even frustrated by the peacefulness of nature which one would think they would welcome. “Mr. Binks’ Day Off” is a

small masterpiece in its pointed representation of the psychology of these urban-oriented people. Mr. Binks, a clerk who lives in a little Harlem flat, decides to take a vacation because he feels that “the million leaves looked into his soul and said something sweet and pure in an unforgotten song.” (p. 305) Once he arrives at a tiny village in the country, however, his yearning for nature is countered by the feeling that “the tranquillity of the scene contains a meaning of peace and virtue that is incredibly monotonous to the warriors from the metropolis.” (p. 309)

In this story, Mr. and Mrs. Binks are gradually soothed by the calm of nature (“The Binks had been silent... purified, chastened ....” [p. 313]), but the reason for their ultimate satisfaction can be traced back to the place they choose to go: the thinly populated countryside of New Jersey. The region surrounded with the “song of trees” (p. 312) greatly differs from booming resorts. Furthermore, the nature of the commercial resorts is systematically developed by the tourist industry. In “Crowding into Asbury Park,” Crane informs the reader of the development of Asbury Park, which used to be “for the most part unpeopled.” (p. 640) “The Seaside Assembly’s Work at Avon” is a similar report about the necessity to rework the Shark River in order for yachts to anchor safely there. In “A Prosperous Year at Asbury Park,” the reader sees where “salt baths attract many people,... a swimming pool” is being built. (p. 532) “There are detailed maps of every portion of the Monmouth shore with the property lines correctly shown, and the name of the owner of each plot of ground and cottage.” (p. 532) Just as swimming in a pool takes the place of sea bathing, trying a swan boat “with propellers worked by the feet” (p. 532) substitutes for an adventurous sail in a wild sea. Moreover, as mentioned before, riding a carousel in “The Pace of Youth” is an

imaginary experience of riding a horse. In short, “the typical resort” is, as John Urry says in his detailed study of modern tourism *The Tourist Gaze*, an artificial “construction of nature.”<sup>(6)</sup> As Crane’s “Pike County Stories” show, the natural environment is still preserved only a few miles from New York. Yet unlike the Binks, city-dwellers often pursue a domesticated nature and accordingly reveal their attachment to city life more unconcealedly than the Binks.

## II

It would be rash to think that Crane always stands aloof from vulgar tourists, the tourist industry and the entertainments it offers. In “The Pace of Youth” Crane seems to support the younger generation inspired by the vacationers’ pleasure-seeking attitude. The short story is said to be a wish-fulfillment of Crane’s frustrated courtship of Lily Brundon Munroe.<sup>(7)</sup> The biographical facts inform the reader that Crane enjoyed himself with Lily at Asbury Park ; he “danced several times with Lily,” and “spent happy hours riding the merry-go-round.”<sup>(8)</sup> Certainly Crane was an occasional attendee. But he “was abjectly poor and undernourished,” and as a result “ate little and seemed to resent others eating heartily.”<sup>(9)</sup> And Crane “discouraged” Munroe’s singing, and “hated the gossiping porch-sitters at the hotels.”<sup>(10)</sup> One wonders whether Crane would not or could not become wholeheartedly hedonistic. “Holiday-making is a form of conspicuous consumption,”<sup>(11)</sup> and therefore in the typical resort money counts for much. As Crane testifies, Asbury Park entrepreneurs “regard” tourists “with a voracious air,... compelling a great expenditure.”(p. 326) And if the vacationers are found “scant and feeble,” they “must madden” (p. 326) those voracious local men. The drastic difference in treating tourists according to their vacation budget will make them money conscious

and even class-conscious. For those who cannot afford recreational activities, there may be no choice but to see the others enjoy them. "There are some people who stand apart and deride these machines." (p.324) But tourists do not always have to pay to enjoy amusements; as Crane chronicles, there are free "shows" such as "baby parades" or the procession of laborers in their uniforms.

Crane's most famous dispatch from resorts focuses on that procession and its spectators: "Parades and Entertainments." Writing this article caused Crane to stop assisting his brother with the Tribune. Crane did not describe the Junior Order of United American Mechanics, the paraders, with unequivocal favor so that the owner of the Tribune, the supporter of the Mechanics, might easily understand it. Nor did Crane take sides with the spectators of the march. He was neutral as he had mostly been, but in this article his neutrality has often left the reader perplexed, even from the first sentence: "The parade of the Junior Order of United American Mechanics here on Wednesday afternoon was a deeply impressive one to some persons." (p. 521) The reader may well regard "some persons" as the spectators of the march, the summer tourists. But Crane adds that "the spectacle of an Asbury Park crowd confronting such an aggregation was an interesting sight to a few people," (p. 521) which makes the reader realize that "some persons" and "a few people" are other bystanders watching both the vacationers and the paraders. These bystanders, whom one would reasonably think Crane joins, see the demonstration of the Mechanics as being "the most awkward, ungainly, uncut and uncarved procession." (p. 521) What makes it so "awkward," however, is that "they wound through the streets to the music of enough brass bands to make furious discords." (p. 521) They appear to be the puppets manipulated by the brass band, and therefore not surprisingly, "... they had no ideas of

marching. They merely plodded along, not seeming to quite understand,...a pace.” (p. 522) Crane’s attitude towards the paraders is sympathetic rather than sarcastic. The Mechanics are pathetic, being out of place in this Asbury Park resort which “creates nothing. It does not make ; it merely amuses. There is a factory where nightshirts are manufactured, but it is some miles from town. This is a resort of wealth and leisure, of women and considerable wine. The throng along the line of march was summer gowns, lace parasols,...” (p. 521-2)

Whereas seeing the Mechanics as helpless victims (“being uncouth and begrimed with dust [p. 522]) and hinting at their social inferiority, Crane nevertheless says that they are “dignified,” and moreover adds that they are “men of the middle class.” (p. 522) Crane hence challenges the reader’s preconception of a difference in social standing between paraders and spectators. Indeed, still keeping the typical blue collar image of “the tan-colored, sun beaten honesty in the faces” (p. 521), the Mechanics “smiled occasionally and from time to time greeted friends in the crowd on the sidewalk.” (p. 522) But again, Crane reverses his emphasis and brings the reader back to the problem of difference in position, this time difference between the tourists (the spectators) and the tradesmen. The voracious locals understandably have little interest in the parade ; “Asbury Parker is a man to whom a dollar, when held close to his eye, often shuts out any impression.” (p. 521) Crane concludes Asbury Parker “is apt to consider that men and women, especially city men and women, were created to be mulcted by him.” (p. 521)

### III

Crane’s alternate class-conscious and non-class conscious explanations of the scene of the parade seem contradictory, yet the

latter explanation opens up the possibility for the reader to interpret the story as an example of Cranean “accidental” shows; Crane suggests that the spectatorship occurs irrespective of the difference in social standing between the naive Mechanics and the “amused” (p. 522) pedestrians, simply because the Mechanics are “accidentally” on display while the others happen to be spectators. Accordingly, the vacationers can enjoy the march as it is, undisturbed by the social context, especially in this carefree resort life.

Crane’s typical story of such an “accidental” show is “When Man Falls, a Crowd Gathers.” As the title suggests, a man falls on a street in the East Side of New York, and a crowd gathers and “turn their gaze on the prone figure.” (p. 345) “Their eyes ... are held in a spell of fascination.” (p. 346) The created difference in position between them comes from sheer contingency, and their positions could be interchangeable. But so long as the man remains unconscious, the position of the crowd as bystanders is secure. As Mary Esteve remarks, “communication in this sketch is sabotaged.”<sup>(12)</sup> The lack of communication enables the spectators’ contemplation of “a death into which a human being has sunk,” and “the marvel of this mystery of life or death holds them chained.” (p. 346) Meditating on “life or death” by seeing the unconscious man may seem unwarranted freedom of the imagination. In the minds of the audience priority is not given to respecting human life. It takes some time for their “curiosity” to “pass away.” (p. 347) When an ambulance comes and takes the man away, some of the spectators’ “eyes express discontent at this curtain which has been hung down in the midst of drama.” (p. 349)

Joseph J. Kwiat regards the spectators’ unusual eagerness to witness the scene as “the morbid and stupid animal curiosity” and “a display of cosmic indifference to the private little tragedy.”<sup>(13)</sup>

Undeniably, however, Crane himself is attracted to such a spectatorship: staring at an object and deliberating on what it signifies or does not signify, without establishing a personal relation with it or thinking of the required action. Crane, in “The Broken-Down Van,” describes the similar uncommunicative eyes turned on the captain of a wrecked van in a busy street in Manhattan. Moreover in *The Red Badge of Courage*, the reader sees Henry’s absent-minded fixation on the counter-gaze or non-gaze of a corpse. (“He was being looked at by a dead man,... The eyes, staring at the youth,... [Henry] remained staring into the liquid-looking eyes. The dead man and the living man exchanged a long look.”<sup>(14)</sup> And Henry, neglecting his duties, often falls into a “trance of observation,” and turns a “spell bound gaze” on a battle scene.<sup>(15)</sup> His attitude does not seem to be the pose of a bystander being too far above the scene with ironic detachment. Nor does his position seem too close to it in rendering minute impressions. Henry is simply staring at the scene, without reference to a social, military or ethical context. Henry’s gaze echoes the eyes of “the Spanish crowd” who “swarm over the operating-table” on which a wounded soldier under anesthesia awaits surgical operation in “War Memories.”<sup>(16)</sup> In this long quasi-documentary story, these indifferent eyes are often shared by the author as well as Vernall, the narrator. Crane “rejects any totalizing interpretation of the war” and even suggests “the inadequacy of language to convey experience,”<sup>(17)</sup> but nevertheless he attempts to get himself close to the battlefield, filtering it solely through his perceptions.

The question to be settled is what is left in a purely visual perspective. Indeed, the Cranean act of disassociation from social agency seems to open up the chance not only for unusual eye-witness accuracy but also for seeing a thing *from within*. Yet by contrast, as

Giorgio Mariani points out, Crane's "spectacular mode" may end in a mere "sensational display."<sup>(18)</sup> The more crucial point is the possibility that exclusive commitment to visual images is flawed by its inability to check social biases and that those biases function as a ruling principle. A seemingly disinterested vision may ironically pave the way for prejudice. In *The Red Badge of Courage*, Henry's "primary emotions" seem to be controlled by the abstract idea of "the public eye."<sup>(19)</sup> Henry's (or Crane's) focus on spectacles of war, in its disengagement from normal human emotions, and in its mechanic listing of what he witnesses, reveals a striking similarity between men and machines. Henry, who acts or ceases to act in accordance with his immediate observations and turns his back on critical thinking, may behave as and adopt the ethics of an automaton. Terence Michael Mulcaire insists that Crane's vision "was to provide the basis for a healthy industrial society,"<sup>(20)</sup> as stated in Frederick Winslow Taylor's *The Principle of Scientific Management*. Henry's heroism is systematic and mechanic in his belief that "one needs only 'fit' as a little piece within a system...,"<sup>(21)</sup> and vice versa ; as Mariani remarks, "by submitting himself to army discipline," Henry indulges himself in his semi-autonomous vision and fulfills his heroism of "a free subject."<sup>(22)</sup>

#### IV

The present paper does not concern itself with whether Henry's camera eye, even if it plays down social or military conditions, is inescapably bound by them. As Peter Stallybrass and Allon White point out, watching a "spectacle" may cause conflicting reactions in the spectator: a sense of inferiority of "exclusion ('why can't that be me?')" and that of superiority which "defines" "difference ('You must not be that.')."<sup>(23)</sup> Certainly, the reader observes such mixture of envy

and distancing in Henry's eyes cast on the corpse. And from here may develop the sense of distinction in social standing. In any case, at least in summer resorts in which tourists are supposed to see "sights" of their own free will, Crane well knows that their seemingly neutral perspective is colored by the ideology of the "management" (an asset of Taylorian "healthy" industrialism)<sup>(24)</sup> of leisure and the spirit of exploitation. As has been seen, Crane takes it as natural that urban-oriented visitors should belie their will to become close to the earth and embrace urbanized "nature" under the management of the tourist industry. Moreover in "Parades and Entertainments," Crane illustrates how the vacationers' disinterested spectatorship is degraded by the local merchants who attempt to "mulct" them. The article does not argue about the official reason of the march. Whether it is carried out under the name of the edification of lounging tourists or is of a political cause, Crane regards it as trivial because he knows that hedonistic tourists are hardly "enlightened" by such a campaign. Crane finds the hidden purpose of the parade in that *by the merchants* "the Junior Order of United American Mechanics is expected to have a very staggering effect upon them [= the visitors]." (p. 522) In other words, the tradesmen hope that the amusing parade will make it easier for them to "mulct" the vacationers. Therefore for Crane, though the Mechanics are seemingly demonstrating voluntarily (they may believe so<sup>(25)</sup>) and appear to "happen to" amuse the pedestrians, they are virtually put on display by the entrepreneurs. And the scheme of the local merchants seems to be successful; the tourists "submit to the arrogant prices of some of the hotel proprietors with a calm indifference,..." (p. 517) The trick of the parade accounts for Crane's alternate class-conscious and non-class conscious description of the parade as mentioned before; the vacationers innocently see the parade and enjoy it as it is, which enables

Crane to dispense with references to the social context of the demonstration. But their “indifferent” (p. 522) eyes are practically manipulated by the greedy merchants. Hence it behooves Crane to explain the social strategy of tourism. For Crane, entertainment in resorts, ranging from merry-go-rounds to shows is both artificial and strategic; they are designed to please uninformed tourists and ultimately exploit them. Crane in the narrower spectrum of resorts proves how a naive viewpoint is manipulated by the outside world. Detaching himself from the ordinary vacationers by the biting irony that “the visitors were men who possessed principles,” (p. 522) yet not as an omniscient bystander but as one of knowledgeable “some persons” or “a few people” at a resort, Crane declares that at least he is not trapped in the system of modern tourism. Seeing the realities of tourism makes him disbelieve it. This sense of disbelief and repulsion will be added as one more reason for his conditional commitment to the entertainments at Asbury Park, other than his limited budget and his “troubled spirit” with “no concrete plans for the future”<sup>(26)</sup> with Lily Brunden Munroe.

Despite John Urry’s thickly detailed representation of the changes of tourism in the postmodern era,<sup>(27)</sup> most people, whether professional critics or ordinary readers, will simply agree that the exploitative tourist industry and vulgar tourists are a fact today. In short, one still sees in today’s tourism the identical trend with Crane’s records of the early stages of resorts and his examination of the psychology of vacationers.

The small oeuvre of Crane’s writings on resorts, besides pioneering analysis on modern tourism, occupies the unique position among his works in its overriding concern for the problematic relationship between man’s “neutral eyes” and an external idea

menacing this neutrality.

## NOTES

- (1) See James Colvert, *Stephen Crane* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1984), p. 24.
- (2) Stephen Crane, "The Seaside Hop Hotel," Vol. VIII of *The Works of Stephen Crane*, ed. Fredson Bowers (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1973), pp. 527-8. Further page references from this volume will appear parenthetically in the text.
- (3) See "Avon Seaside Assembly" and "Avon's School by the Sea," pp. 501-505.
- (4) See "Gay Bathing Suit and Novel Both Must Go," *Tribune*, Aug.5, 1888.
- (5) Vol. V of *The Works of Stephen Crane*, ed. Fredson Bowers (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1970), p. 3.
- (6) John Urry, *The Tourist Gaze: Leisure and Travel in Contemporary Societies* (London: Sage Publishers, 1990), p. 94.
- (7) See Michael W. Schaefer, *A Reader's Guide to the Short Stories of Stephen Crane* (London: G. K. Hall & Co., 1996), p.354.
- (8) Stanley Wertheim and Paul Sorrentino, *The Crane Log: A Life of Stephen Crane 1871-1900* (London: G. K. Hall & Co., 1993), p. 74.
- (9) Ibid.
- (10) Ibid.
- (11) Urry, p. 23.
- (12) Mary Esteve, "A 'Gorgeous Neutrality': Stephen Crane's Documentary Anaesthetics," *ELH*, vol.62 no.3, 676.
- (13) Joseph J. Kwiat, "The News Paper Experience: Crane, Norris, and Dreiser," *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 8 (1953), 107.
- (14) Vol. II of *The Works of Stephen Crane*, ed. Fredson Bowers (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1975), pp.47-48.
- (15) Ibid., p. 28.
- (16) Vol. VI of *The Works of Stephen Crane*, ed. Fredson Bowers (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1970), p. 255.
- (17) Michael Robertson, "Stephen Crane," *A Sourcebook of American Literary Journalism: Representative Writers in an Emerging Genre*, ed. Thomas B. Connery (New York: Greenwood, 1992), p. 77.

- (18) Giorgio Mariani, *Spectacular Narratives : Representation of Class and War in Stephen Crane and the American 1890s* (New York : Peter Lang, 1992), p. 82.
- (19) See John J. Conder, *Naturalism in American Fiction : The Classic Phase* (Lexington : University Press of Kentucky, 1984), p. 65.
- (20) Terence Michael Mulcaire, "Democratic Aesthetics in Nineteenth Century American Culture," Ph.D.thesis, University of California at Berkeley, 1991, 147.
- (21) Ibid., 167.
- (22) Mariani, p. 155.
- (23) Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics of Transgression* (Ithaca : Cornell University Press, 1986), p. 183.
- (24) See Hayward Janes Holbert, *A History of Professional Management in American Industry* (New York : Arno Press, 1976), pp. 41-70.
- (25) One of the paraders later insisted that "We are not a labor union... drilled to parade in public." "Selections from the Mail," *Tribune*, Aug. 24, 1892.
- (26) *The Crane Log*, p. 74.
- (27) He suggests that today tourists should have become more sophisticated and conscious of the artificiality of tourism. ("The post-tourist knows that they are a tourist and that tourism is a game....") Urry, p. 100.