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American Literary History, Volume 16, Number 4, Winter 2004, pp.
596-618 (Article)

Published by Oxford University Press



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Class Mimicry in Stephen Crane's City

Andrew Lawson

William Dean Howells's novel *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (1890) presents a haunting sense of New York as a divided city. The novel's protagonist, Basil March, an aesthetically minded journalist, delights in the Bowery's "gay ugliness," its "shapeless, graceless, reckless picturesqueness" (183). March relishes every "interesting shape of shabby adversity" he encounters, from the "bare, cue-filleted skulls" of "Russians, Poles, Czechs, Chinese," to "[t]he colossal effigies of the fat women and the tuft-headed Circassian girls of cheap museums" (183). In the Bowery's "frantic panorama" March perceives "the fierce struggle for survival," a struggle waged against "deformity," "mutilation," "destruction," and "decay" (184). He watches as a "Christian mother" is wheeled down Mott Street in a cart by two policemen, followed by a crowd of "swarming and shrieking children" (186). A later walk down Madison Avenue on a Sunday afternoon presents March with a radically different spectacle, one of "fashion," "richness," and "indigeneity" (301). "Their silk hats shone," he observes of the promenaders, "and their boots; their frocks had the right distension behind, and their bonnets perfect poise and distinction" (302). But March decides he prefers Mott Street. In a characteristically glib effort to convert socioeconomic facts into aesthetic qualities, he tells his wife, "I understand now why the poor people don't come up here and live in this clean, handsome, respectable quarter of the town; they would be bored to death" (302).

Howells's narrative works to reiterate what had already become, by the late nineteenth century, a well-established topography of New York as a city polarized between the "opulent rich" and the "degraded poor," its citizens occupying self-contained, noncommunicating worlds (Blumin 18). Stephen Crane's *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* (1893) initially adopts this point of view. Crane's characters inhabit the brutal, lower-class realm of the Bowery tenement, recently opened up to a middle-class readership by Jacob Riis's *How the Other Half Lives* (1890): a world of "dark stairways" and "tattered gamins," of "howls and curses, groans and shrieks" (Crane, *Maggie* 7, 3, 11).

Maggie Johnson's brother, Jimmie, maintains "a belligerent attitude toward all well-dressed men," particularly "obvious Christians and ciphers with the chrysanthemums of aristocracy in their button-holes" (14). This sharp demarcation between social worlds begins to break down, however, with the arrival of Maggie's bartender suitor, Pete. With his "checked legs," "oiled bang," "blue double-breasted coat," and "patent-leather shoes" (which resemble "murder-fitted weapons"), Pete seems to be the lineal descendent of the Bowery b'hoys as working-class dandy, bringing uptown sophistication and self-esteem into the Johnson household (17). On a subsequent visit, Pete appears with "fascinating innovations in his apparel" (20), leading Maggie to suppose that his wardrobe is "prodigiously extensive" (21). She worries that Pete's "aristocratic person" might "soil" (19), given the "disorder and dirt" of her home (18).¹

The Bowery of the 1890s provided plentiful resources for Pete's cross-class dressing. According to *Shepp's New York City Illustrated* (1894), the "better class" of the Bowery's secondhand stores sold the "cast-off and often only slightly-worn garments" of "young men . . . of aristocratic families, addicted to many changes of raiment" (3). This meant that "Patsy McClosky, the Bowery 'tough,'" could arrive "resplendent, at the Bartenders' Ball, in the identical clothes which Mr. Livingston Schuyler Van Der Knickerbocker wore on Fifth [A]venue a month before" (3). The sentimental distinction between the Bowery and Madison Avenue that Howells's *March* wishes to hold onto appears to have been eroded. In *Maggie*, Pete displays what anthropologist Michael Taussig calls the "mimetic faculty," the urge not just to "copy" and "imitate," but to "yield into and become [the] Other" (xiii). For Taussig, as for Pete, the "wonder of mimesis" appears to lie in the copy "drawing on the character and power of the original" (xiii). The Bowery bartender can "break boundaries" by exercising his mimetic faculty, "slipping into Otherness, trying it on for size" (33). Pete practices the kind of "mimetic excess" made possible by modernity, with its proliferation of images and goods; his "miming body" exhibits "an ineffable plasticity in the face of the world's forms and forms of life" (34).

The anthropologist's hymn to mimesis captures something of the emancipatory potential there is to be grasped in the culture of consumption. But for Thorstein Veblen, writing in *Popular Science Monthly* in 1894, there is less to celebrate. For Veblen, "the maxim that no outer garment may be worn more than once" expresses the principle of novelty regulating fashion, a principle that leads, "[i]n the most advanced communities of our time," to the "constant supersession of one wasteful garment or trinket by a new one" ("Economic Theory" 72). Dress, Veblen argues, is a primary index of "pecuniary strength," displaying "the visible ability to spend, to consume

unproductively" (68). Both Mr. Livingston Schuyler and Pete practice what Veblen calls "conspicuously unproductive consumption" (68). Both leisure-class gentleman and working-class dandy are driven by emulation, which Veblen later defines as the "striving to be, and more immediately to be thought to be, better than one's neighbor" ("Socialism" 392). The practice of emulation evolves from the desire to imitate another person with the aim of equaling or excelling him or her. Emulation is imitation with a competitive edge, a paradoxical engagement with another identity in the pursuit of difference, or what Veblen calls "invidious distinction" ("Economic Theory" 26). The prevalence of economic emulation indicates how far the "leisure class scheme of life" (83) has come to set "the norm of reputability" for the modern, urban community: the assertion of individual prowess and self-esteem through conspicuous consumption, the cultivation of a sensuous, aesthetic approach to the business of living (84). Modern capitalism, Veblen argues, has ameliorated basic wants, freeing expenditure for wasteful purposes. The bloated plutocrats parading their wealth at Newport are parodied by the mesmerized consumers browsing the aisles at Wanamaker's department store, lured by cheaper prices for ready-made goods. Pete the Bowery bartender becomes susceptible to "the charm that invests the patent-leather shoe, the stainless linen, the lustrous cylindrical hat" ("Economic Theory" 170–71).

Veblen observes that modern urban society increases both the "freedom of movement of the individual" ("Socialism" 395) and the "number of persons before whose eyes each one carries on his life" (396). At the same time, there are decreasing chances for the awarding of esteem "on any other basis than that of immediate appearances" (396). The status of persons—hard-won, ephemeral, fleeting—calls out for material embodiment in the world of "color, light and spectacle emanating from goods" (Bronner, "Reading" 51). As March remarks to his wife of the Madison Avenue promenade, this is "a culture that furnishes showily, that decorates, and that tells" (Howells, *Hazard* 301). Under these conditions, the "struggle for existence" has been transformed into a "struggle to keep up appearances"—the struggle to match or excel the telling manifestations of status by adjacent social groups (Veblen, "Socialism" 399). Status emulation is based on class mimicry, a form of mimetic excess attuned to both the aesthetic and the precise indices of social worth in a rigorously stratified society.

Mrs. Helen Campbell observes the pervasiveness of class mimicry in *Darkness and Daylight, or Lights and Shadows of New York Life* (1891), one of the urban reform texts that provide a context for *Maggie*. Campbell points out that the shopgirl knows "what constitutes the life of the rich" better than "the rich ever know of the

life of the poor" (257). "From her post behind the counter [she] examines every detail of costume, every air and grace of the women she so often despises, even when longing most to be one of them. She imitates where she can, and her cheap shoe has its French heel, her neck its tin dog-collar. Gilt rings, bracelets and bangles, frizzes, bangs and cheap trimmings of every order, swallow up her earnings" (257). Crane makes a similar observation. In order to impress Pete, Maggie spends a portion of her week's pay from the collar and cuff factory in which she works "in the purchase of flowered cretonne for a lambrequin," hanging the finished article "with infinite care" on the "slightly-careening mantel, over the stove, in the kitchen" (20). The lonely lambrequin (according to the *OED*, "a short curtain or piece of drapery . . . suspended for ornament from a mantel-shelf") makes the tenement kitchen a debased parody of the cluttered Victorian parlor, with its plush fabrics, upholstered furniture, and copious bric-a-brac. By the reproduction of such decorative effects, Maggie hopes to lend a "standardized air of propriety" to her surroundings, in comical contrast to Pete's aristocratic flamboyance (Halttunen, "Parlor to Living Room" 161).²

Maggie's mimetic work is identifiable as an example of what Marx terms "commodity fetishism," the process by which the "definite social relation between men themselves" assumes "for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things" (165). Harder to grasp, but just as poignant, is the illusion Maggie labors to achieve of sensuous participation in the life world of the class whose consumption habits she mimics, even as she expends her own labor on the commodity in order to fashion it into the desired object. Maggie's consumption practice, misdirected and skew-whiff as it is, connotes labor rather than status, leisure, and ease. Here, emulation involves not merely the commodification of class, the packaging of a social relation for ready consumption: it loops back into the repressed world of production, the very coercive social relations class mimicry purports to escape.³

In this article I consider a series of cultural practices based on class mimicry that flourish in late-nineteenth-century New York: vaudeville, organized charity, and prostitution. These practices, along with fashion, are represented in *Maggie* as the hallmarks of an urban society that is imitative, emulative, and competitive, a society governed by "laws of conspicuous and performed identity" (Fisher 165). But they are also practices pressed into the service of class formation, that paradoxical process which constitutes individuals by equipping them with the signs and tokens of a social group. Together, these practices function in a highly ambiguous manner to both make and unmake the self, weaving and unraveling the fabric of identity as they perform their cultural work.

1. A Very Elegant and Graceful Bartender

The relay between leisure and labor that closes the circuit of consumption and production in Maggie's act of class mimicry is repeated in the case of Pete. Pete's borrowed "aristocratic" identity appears to lend him mimetic substance through a self-constituting act achieved entirely within the realm of consumption. Pete's subsequent actions, however, reveal not traditionalist working-class bravado but a crippling lower-middle-class anxiety that stems from his position as a new kind of white-collar worker. Pete represents a marginal class poised between rowdiness and respectability, on the verge of its transformation by an "enforced gentility" (Kasson 251). This class location can be identified via Pete's consumption practices, practices that Crane's narrative traces back to his character's productive activity.

Pete takes Maggie first to a variety show at a Bowery beer garden, which features "[a]n orchestra of yellow silk women and bald-headed men" (21) playing "a popular waltz," with waiters "vending fancy cakes" in the costumes of "French chefs" (22). A girl wearing "a pink dress with short skirts" performs a dance which reveals her "pink stockings" and is cheered and leered at by "tipsy men" (23); a ventriloquist makes "two fantastic dolls" sing "mournful ditties and say funny things about geography and Ireland" (23); two girls billed as sisters sing a hymn and perform a dance never seen "under church auspices" (24); and a woman "of debatable age" sings "a negro melody" and performs "an imitation of a plantation darkey," finishing with "some verses which describ[e] a vision of Britain being annihilated by America, and Ireland bursting her bonds" (24). The variety show offers a peculiar mix of high and low culture. Working-class traditionalism—blackface minstrelsy, burlesque dance acts, and appeals to ethnicity—is combined with lower-middle-class aspiration—waltzes, fancy cakes, and the dancers' finale, which features "some of those grotesque attitudes which were at the time popular among the dancers in the theatres up-town, giving to the Bowery public the phantasies of the aristocratic theatre-going public, at reduced rates" (23). Crane's depiction of the Bowery beer hall raises the question of who, exactly, Bowery culture belongs to. Is this a genuine popular art, produced by the "turbulent and ungovernable" people, or a mass culture manufactured in their image (Hall 228)?

The answer is that the very notions of culture and belonging are being made problematic in the early 1890s by the repackaging of Bowery raciness as vaudeville, a new form of entertainment that both blurs and reinforces class boundaries. Variety shows were associated with "dissolute men and lewd women, liquor, boxing matches, and prostitution" and had replaced theater as the major form of

entertainment in New York City by the end of the Civil War (Barth 201). But by the early 1890s, the variety show was “inch[ing] towards respectability”—the show described by Crane at what is probably the Atlantic Gardens is relatively innocuous (Barth 201). In the vaudeville shows pioneered at Union Square by Tony Pastor, Bowery raciness was commodified with the aim of satisfying the contradictory desires of an increasingly female, middle-class audience seeking “both the prim and the prurient” (Snyder 33). Pastor “barred liquor, banned prostitutes, and sheared the entertainment itself of excessive vulgarity” (Burrows and Wallace 1145). But he also promised respectable patrons a more relaxed form of entertainment: “Your Broadway belles” and “Fifth Avenue swells” might be “afraid to go in for a little fun for [fear of] disarranging their toilets [sic],” but in the Bowery, “people enjoy themselves just when they feel like it. They don’t care a curse for what others may say, for that’s the custom” (qtd. in Snyder 19).

The audience for vaudeville was made up of what Mark Hodin identifies as “low-income clerical workers, status-anxious laborers, and Americanized immigrants,” members of a diffuse but fast-growing lower middle class (199). The fact that vaudeville was patronized by a “respectable” clientele offered the promise to these “status-anxious variety fans” of a theatrical experience “unmarked by working-class life” (196). Vaudeville involves a process of class mimicry, in which the lower middle class purchase an aura of respectability, while the “respectable” middle-class spectator obtains a “therapeutic revitalization” (203). Both parties in this transaction “believe it their right and privilege to acquire something not really theirs,” released into a new, consumerist mentality which is “unattached and acquisitive” (198).

Vaudeville also appealed to “urban audiences oriented to precision and concerned about performance” (Barth 201). In the adroit banter of straight man and comedian, or the apparent effortless of a gymnastic display, these audiences received lessons in how to match dynamism, nerves, and excitement with coolness, discipline, and poise, lessons in how to become what Hutchins Hapgood described as “finished, resourceful, technically expert men and women” (qtd. in Barth 208). Vaudeville dramatizes the anxiety of status that attends the performing self, making visible the existence of what Bruce A. McConachie calls the “class margin” (177). This class margin regulates the performances of social actors like Pete.

For Robert Park, inaugurating the Chicago School of urban studies, the specialization and differentiation of roles in the modern city provide an opportunity for the “fascinating but dangerous experiment” of “living at the same time in several different contiguous, but otherwise widely separated, worlds” (126). In a classically voluntarist manner, Park sees the “fortuitous and casual” (125) relationships

of the modern city as effecting the “mobilization” of the individual: in the segmented social worlds of the city, every individual can, in principle, find the “moral climate” capable of stimulating his or her “peculiar nature” and bringing it to “full and free expression” (126). But Crane casts a rather more baleful and disenchanting eye on human behavior in the urban environment. The art of life, for Pete, is reduced to “skating on thin surfaces” (Park 126), and it involves danger as well as fascination, dispersing his identity among contradictory and discontinuous roles. The structural limits regulating class identity as individual performance are revealed in Crane’s representation of Pete’s place of work.⁴ Pete works in a space consecrated to appearance, a “glass-fronted” saloon. “Papered in olive and bronze tints of imitation leather,” with a bar of “counterfeit massiveness” (33), the saloon parodies the middle-class parlor in its dedication to what Miles Orvell identifies as “abundance,” “artifice,” and “replication” (49).⁵ Here Pete is no longer the nonchalant dandy, but the conscientious attendant of other people’s pleasures. He stands behind the bar, “immaculate in white jacket and apron” rather than a double-breasted coat, his hair “plastered over his brow with infinite correctness” rather than hanging rakishly in an oiled bang (49). The owner of the saloon, we learn, “insist[s] upon respectability of an advanced type” (49). What was flamboyant and self-assertive in Pete’s mimetic excess has become craven and conformist. The process of class mimicry given institutional form by vaudeville flatters the vanity of the middle-class patron temporarily released from the strictures of respectability by the Bowery custom of not caring for what others may say. But there is no quid pro quo for the marginally respectable bartender Pete, whose white-collar, service-sector job depends precisely on what people say about him.

At the crisis point of the narrative, Maggie is banished by her mother, who assumes Pete has already ruined her daughter’s innocence, making its actual loss inevitable. Pete becomes embarrassed by Maggie after his friend Nell, a “woman of brilliance and audacity,” describes her as a “‘little pale thing with no spirit’” (49). But it is not because of her lack of personality or self-esteem that Pete rejects Maggie.⁶ When he sees Maggie approach, Pete gives a sudden “start” and turns her away from his bar, fearing for the “previously-mentioned eminent respectability of the place” (50). Pete’s mimicry of the codes of respectability is oddly compulsive, his body animated by a set of values as powerful as those of the Bowery boy. “Respectability” is repeated a further four times, the sequence culminating in the “convulsive movement” of the clergyman approached by Maggie, who saves his respectability by “a vigorous side-step” (51). The discourse of respectability operates through what Pierre Bourdieu terms a “bodily hexis,” a set of habits or dispositions in which

“one’s whole socially informed relation to the world” is expressed (*Language* 86). As we see in the reciprocal reactions of clergyman and bartender, the petit bourgeois hexis involves a caricature of bourgeois dispositions, with their “physical postures of tension and exertion [...] haughtiness and disdain” (86). Pete stiffens as he blends into his productive role. He is the petit bourgeois “man of appearances” who, because of his “ambiguous position in the social structure,” is “haunted by the look of others and endlessly occupied with being seen in a good light” (Bourdieu, *Distinction* 253).

What is remarkable about *Maggie* is that respectability is shown to have infiltrated the darkest recesses of the slum. In the early chapters of the novel, Maggie’s mother, Mrs. Johnson, lives a barely sentient, animal-like existence in keeping with Howells’s depiction of the Bowery as a kind of human zoo. Her face “inflamed and swollen from drinking” (12), her body “prostrate, heaving” (13) on the floor, she stirs only to blaspheme and give her daughter “a bad name” (21). But when Pete arrives, offering to take Maggie for “a hell of a time,” she becomes suddenly concerned for the family’s honor and condemns Maggie as ““a disgrace teh yer people”” (30). Later, raising a “dramatic finger” (48), she publicly rejects her daughter before the tenement’s regular crowd of “interested spectators” (30). Catching the mood of melodrama, Jimmie refuses his sister’s plea for help: “Radiant virtue sat upon his brow and his repelling hands expressed horror of contamination” (48). These contradictions form a widely noted aspect of Crane’s irony and are typically ascribed to a form of false consciousness.⁷ But the answer to the question of why Bowery tenement dwellers in *Maggie* insist on switching roles so drastically can be found in another practice of class mimicry that brings classes into a nonreciprocal relation of cultural exchange.

2. The Charitable Visitor

By the 1880s, the middle classes of New York City had withdrawn to the suburbs, to what Theodore Dreiser called “little islands of propriety” from which social polarization and its attendant evils appeared all the more threatening and problematic (qtd. in Boyer 128). A new Protestant evangelizing effort, based on the familiar practices of tract, revival, and mission, had failed to make any real impression on the largely Catholic and Jewish immigrant populations of the city. Anxious middle-class reformers therefore developed a more comprehensive and coordinated strategy of moral control, through the charity organization movement.⁸ The key assumption of organized charity was that poverty had its basis in moral deficiency. For the movement’s founder, S. Humphreys Gurteen, this moral deficiency

was exacerbated by social polarization. Under the new spatial order of the city, Gurteen claimed, “the classes which wealth and poverty make ha[d] drifted apart,” and the poor now lacked contact with the “civilizing and healing influence” of the respectable classes (qtd. in Boyer 149). Organized charity sought to restore the healing influence of the middle class by promoting “the personal intercourse of the wealthier citizens with the poor at their homes,” bringing “the extremes of society” together “in a spirit of honest friendship” (Gurteen 113). The “friendly visitor” would investigate each individual case, distinguishing between the “worthy” and the “unworthy,” and insuring that financial relief was blended with “a judicious mix of moral exhortation” (Lubove 3).

The fundamental belief of organized charity was thus in the power of the moral exemplar to regenerate character. In this project of moral suasion, the friendly visitor had to make an impression by, in effect, performing middle-class identity. Letters, handbooks, and articles in the movement’s journals provided a fund of advice on the requisite techniques for cultivating what Francis A. Smith termed the “thrift, self-dependence, industry, virtue, [and] health . . . of our poor friends” (qtd. in Boyer 151–52). At the same time, Gurteen counseled the charitable visitor to “[a]void anything like dictation in any suggestions, however valuable” (224). Overt pedagogy, a too zealous supervision, would smack of artifice, breaking the illusion of friendly reciprocity and opening up the very chasm of social distance the visitor sought to overcome. Through the practice of friendly visiting, the urban middle class theatricalized their identity, making class mimicry the foundation of their reforming strategy. By the time Crane visited the slums, the Associated Charities of Boston, in its Thirteenth Annual Report (1892), had noticed that this aspect of cultural performance was actually working against them, that the “acquiescence” of the poor in middle-class standards might be “feigned” (qtd. in Lubove 17). Later, Jane Addams observed how “to the visitor” the poor “gravely laud temperance and cleanliness and thrift and religious observance” (27–28), a “deception” Addams attributes variously to conscious strategy, bewilderment, and “an innocent desire to please” (28).

By the early 1890s, then, the Bowery has become a thoroughly theatricalized space in which the boundaries between life and art have been breached and confused in the effort to train character. A range of techniques of class mimicry is available to help “radiant virtue” sit on Jimmie’s brow when rejecting Maggie; a whole repertoire of words and gestures, habits and dispositions guides the “repelling hands” which express his “horror of contamination” (48). The paradoxical effect of these disciplinary practices is that character itself becomes artificial, hollowed out: the production of affective depths

becomes a matter of technique; warmth and spontaneity are reduced to effects. When Mrs. Johnson learns of Maggie's death, she is instantly attended by "a woman in a black gown," whose "vocabulary" is "derived from mission churches" (57). The chorus of gathered neighbors begins "to groan in different keys," the scene lit by "[t]he inevitable sunlight . . . streaming in at the windows" (57). When Maggie's mother declares, "'I'll fergive her! I'll fergive her!'" (58), we have no way of knowing whether this is a cry of genuine emotion or a scripted performance for the benefit of "interested spectators" (30).

This displacement of sentiment by technique was of concern to Addams, who contrasts the "cold and calculating action" (22) of the charitable visitor with the "emotional kindness" of "primitive and genuine . . . neighborly relations" (19). Addams argues that the "daintily clad" visitor, "a young college woman, well-bred and open-minded," has become aware of the falseness of her position (16). Her washerwoman "hostess," after all, "represents social value and industrial use, as over against her own parasitic cleanliness and a social standing attained only through status" (16). For Addams, the close personal contact of respectable visitor and washerwoman reveals, on closer inspection, "an absolute clashing of two ethical standards," disclosing a moral and cultural relativism rather than the desired hegemony of middle-class values (19). The reiteration of middle-class power through performance reveals that power's essential instability, rather than its monolithic continuity. Addams goes further, asserting that "[i]t is quite obvious that the ethics of none of us are clearly defined" (14). What gives Crane's writing its "modern" aspect is that the author reproduces this clashing of ethical standards in the very textures of his prose.

Amy Kaplan writes of how class conflict in the 1890s produced "fragmented and competing social realities" (9). But, Kaplan argues, "class difference struck [American] realists less as a problem of social justice than as a problem of representation" (11). Writers like Howells, Edith Wharton, and Dreiser were less concerned with showing how the other half lived than with exploring the problem of "an interdependent society composed of competing and seemingly mutually exclusive realities" (11). Realist writers attempted to "mediate and negotiate" between these incommensurate realities by constructing narratives that defined a "common ground" (12). Howells seeks this common ground in a vision of "community based on work and character," Wharton in the "exchange of intimacy," and Dreiser in "anonymous consumers and spectators with shared desires" (12). Crane's modernity, it seems to me, lies in his refusal to establish any kind of common ground and in his determination to forge a style that highlights and exacerbates the incommensurability of urban realities.

Crane mixes and juxtaposes discursive formations and systematically plays on the incongruities and abrupt shifts of perspective this technique produces. It is with Pete, the elegant bartender, that this stylistic effect most strongly registers:

There was valor and contempt for circumstances in the glance of his eye. He waved his hands like a man of the world, who dismisses religion and philosophy, *and says "Fudge."* (17; emphasis added)

When he said, "*Ah, what deh hell,*" his voice was burdened with disdain for the inevitable and contempt for anything that fate might compel him to endure. (19; emphasis added)

She thought that if the grim angel of death should clutch his heart, *Pete would shrug his shoulders and say, "Oh, ev'ryt'ing goes."* (20; emphasis added)

Crane's sentences pay studious attention to the way the language of the parlor gives way to the language of the street, marking the shifts of register by which "valor," "fate," and "grim angel of death" are succeeded by "fudge," "what deh hell," and "ev'ryt'ing goes." A certain Victorian rectitude is met head-on by the colloquial verve of the Bowery, the stylistic mark of Pete's indeterminate, lower-middle-class position in social space, poised precariously as he is between respectability and rowdiness.

In the heteroglossia of the Bowery, where the "beau ideal of a man" (19) shrugs his shoulders and says "fudge," where Negro melodies merge with hymns and Irish nationalist songs, there is no coherent framework, no transparent window through which to view the world, only a montage of languages. Crane's text shares this lack of structural coherence, which paradoxically becomes a structuring principle, with the impossibly fragmented urban space that produces it. Thomas Bender comments that the "culture of metropolitan life is largely the product of its spatial elaboration—the proximity and necessary contact of various competing narrative trajectories and hierarchies of representation" (qtd. in Banta 42). Crane produces what might be called discursive space, spatializing competing discourses that derive, however ambiguously, from class locations.

3. A Girl of the Crimson Legions

Maggie's immersion in the phantasmagoric world of the commodity leads her into the process of commodifying herself. Imitation of middle-class domestic styles, the fashioning of lambrequins,

takes Maggie from standardized propriety to a self-destructive immersion in the delusory world of appearance. In the Bowery beer garden, she wonders at the “splendour” of the dancer’s costume and loses herself in “calculations of the cost of the silks and laces” (23). At the melodrama, again with Pete, she wonders if the “culture and refinement” she has seen “imitated” on the stage “could be acquired by a girl who lived in a tenement house and worked in a shirt factory” (28). As Maggie regards the “grizzled women” with whom she sews, women who appear to her as “mere mechanical contrivances,” she begins to see the “bloom on her cheeks” as “valuable” (25). By the novel’s conclusion, she has become “[a] girl of the painted cohorts of the city,” a street girl or prostitute (52).

“In the form taken by prostitution in the big cities,” Walter Benjamin argues, “the woman appears not only as a commodity but, in a precise sense, as mass-produced article” (346). The new scale and visibility of prostitution in the modern city confirm “the dominion of the commodity fetish” under advanced capitalism, and this is the secret of its appeal (345). The prostitute inspires the ardor of the bourgeois man not because he is sexually repressed, but because she reflects the social form of his existence back to him: the prostitute is the commodity form made flesh. Late-nineteenth-century writers in the popular genre of urban sensationalism registered this troubling affinity between the human and the artifactual. For Charles Loring Brace, in *The Dangerous Classes of New York* (1872), it is commodification that constitutes the horror of prostitution. The prostitute “soon learns to offer for sale that which is in its nature beyond all price, and to feign the most sacred affections, and barter with the most delicate instincts. She no longer merely follows blindly and excessively an instinct; she perverts a passion and sells herself” (116).⁹

The prostitute also partakes in a narrative trajectory that figures a special kind of social mobility: an ascent and a descent, a movement up and down the social scale. In *Lights and Shadows of New York Life* (1868), James D. McCabe observes that “[n]ew faces are constantly appearing on Broadway to take the place of those who have gone down to the depths” (590). For McCabe, the narrative of social mobility is highly compressed: the prostitute enjoys “[o]ne year of luxury and pleasure” as the inmate of a “first-class” brothel, “and then the woman begins her downward course” (582). Matthew Hale Smith, in *Sunshine and Shadow in New York* (1869), fills out the class dimensions of the narrative. “Girls new to the business” are “flush in health, well-dressed, and attractive.” They “visit theatres, ride in cars, hang around hotel doors.” This class “throng the watering-places” of the rich, the saloons of Broadway and the pleasure boats of the North River (429). But “[f]rom this grade the class

descends to mere ragged, bloated drunken dregs," a lower class who "offend all decency as they ply their trade" (430). McCabe and Smith represent the narrative of descent according to the conventions of melodrama: the prostitute's life story is shaped by the simple polarities of good and evil, sunshine and shadow. Although it follows the narrative of descent in typically compressed form, Crane's text discloses a more complexly stratified world, a "multilayered sexual geography" of New York City which is also a geography of class locations (Gilfoyle 223). As Junius Henri Browne observes in *The Great Metropolis* (1869), "prostitution like everything else, has its degrees, its upper, and lower, and middle class, with miscellaneous varieties" (438).

Chapter 17 of *Maggie* opens in an uptown entertainment district where "[t]wo or three theatres" are emptying a crowd "upon the storm-swept pavements" (51). Cabs clatter to and fro, electric lights shed "a blurred radiance," and there is "[a]n atmosphere of pleasure and prosperity" (51). This is most likely Union Square, which by the 1890s had become an upscale amusement area that included Wallack's Theater and Steinway Hall and was bordered on the west by Fifth Avenue, New York's most fashionable thoroughfare (Gilfoyle 210). The area followed the same pattern of development as the notorious Tenderloin district: mid-century mansions were gradually invaded after the Civil War by hotels, restaurants, and theaters; the upper class moved uptown, and, in search of high rental income, landlords converted brownstones into "expensive, neatly kept brothels" (Gilfoyle 211). From "early afternoon to early morning," according to one resident, the streets were "patrolled by hundreds of women" (qtd. in Gilfoyle 211). These were what Browne describes as the "highest grade" of prostitutes, "women who are young and desirable," and "live in the best houses," often as the mistresses of "sporting" men from the upper class; according to the *doxa* Browne reports, they are "able to palm themselves off upon the uninitiated as fine ladies and fascinating vestals" (438).

This is precisely what Maggie, who has now become "[a] girl of the painted cohorts of the city," attempts to do (52). Maggie has already, inadvertently, discovered how to walk in such a way as to be identified as a prostitute: wandering "aimlessly for several blocks" (50) after being rejected by Pete, she discovers that men look at her "with calculating eyes" (51). To become a prostitute, it is only necessary to look like one, to mimic a well-established gestural repertoire. Now, dressed in a "handsome cloak" and with "well-shod feet," Maggie throws "changing glances" and "smiling invitations" to men of "rural or untaught pattern" and seems to be "sedately unconscious of the men with a metropolitan seal upon their faces" (52). She has fully embraced the "artifactual and the representational,"

the twin aesthetic principles governing the culture of consumption (Seltzer 122). In the process she makes herself into a type, a member of the painted cohort. Maggie has apparently found a niche in the market catering to the uninitiated, to farmers rather than sporting men. But niche marketing has its perils, as we quickly discover.

Maggie crosses “glittering avenues” and hurries past saloons and concert halls playing “swift, machine-like music” (52). She is most likely walking down the Bowery toward the Lower East Side, away from the upper-class zone of prostitution. But the first man she comes across has precisely the metropolitan seal Maggie wants to avoid: “He had on an evening dress, a moustache, a chrysanthemum, and a look of ennui, all of which he kept carefully under his eye. Seeing the girl walk on as if such a young man as he was not in existence, he looked back transfixed with interest. He stared glassily for a moment, but gave a slight convulsive start when he discerned that she was neither new, Parisian, nor theatrical. He wheeled about hastily and turned his stare into the air, like a sailor with a search-light” (52).

Benjamin points out that commodity production under the conditions of advanced capitalism has a dialectical character, in that the “novelty of products” becomes central as a “stimulus to demand” (331). At the same time, frenetic innovation only serves to disclose the essential sameness of the commodity form: “the ‘new’ . . . must be wrested heroically from what is always again the same” (337). The prostitute, too, must innovate. He or she must produce “market-oriented originality” (333). The bargain is a paradoxical one: the product must be sufficiently in advance of popular taste to attract customers, but not so original as to be unintelligible. To create is always to speculate, to gamble.

Maggie walks on, “out of the realm of restaurants and saloons,” passing more “glittering avenues” and going into “darker blocks” away from the crowds (52). She has reached the western boundary of another zone of prostitution, the bohemian quarter around Bleecker Street and Washington Square, an area which occupied a “middle ground” between the “expensive type” offered around Union Square and the cheaper goods offered downtown (Gilfoyle 389 n. 28). Again, Maggie is out of luck. She glances “keenly” at a “young man in light overcoat and derby hat,” who rebukes her, with a “mocking smile,” for sizing him up as a farmer (52). Although this man is apparently able to read the signs of prostitution, the next, “[a] laboring man” with bundles under his arms, is seemingly oblivious to them: to Maggie’s “remarks” he replies, “‘It’s a fine evenin’, ain’t it?’” (52). Another boy tells her, “‘Not this eve—some other eve!’” A “drunken man” shouts “‘I ain’ ga no money, dammit’” and walks away, cursing his luck (53). Maggie has come across a lower-middle-class/working-class

clientele who are either too choosy, too ignorant, or simply too poor. She has descended to the "second class" of women, whose life is "more fluctuating than their luckier sisters" (Browne 438). "Their position shifts like sand," Browne warns, "and the shadow of sudden death is always above their head" (439).

Maggie goes on "into gloomy districts near the river," where "tall black factories" alternate with the "broad beams of light" cast by saloons: the area below Canal Street (53). Mrs. Helen Campbell begins her investigations of the lower class here and is struck by the district's juxtaposition of industrial plant and "dens given over to all abomination"—"stale-beer dives," rat pits, cockpits, and bucket shops (51). Women "hideously painted and bedizened" are here, women of "the lowest and most degraded type" (Campbell 428), or, as Browne has it, "wretched females" who "live on mere animal excitements and liquid fire" (439). Crane marks the declension less melodramatically: instead of player pianos, there is only the vigorous "scrap[e]" of a violin and "the patter of feet on boards"; instead of well-dressed men, Maggie is met by "a man with blotched features" and, "further on the darkness," by "a ragged being with shifting, blood-shot eyes and grimy hands" (53).

As she goes into the "blackness of the final block," Maggie is looked at by real estate (53). Having made her body into property subject to contractual exchange, she is observed and devoured by the larger property of the Lower East Side: the shutters of the "tall buildings" are closed "like grim lips," and these structures seem to have "eyes that loo[k] at her, beyond her, at other things" (53). Maggie's economic being has been determined by real estate, by the relations among property owners who harvest rents from mansions and bordellos without discriminating between them; she has navigated an urban geography of decreasing taxable values, to end in a space of industrial production and debased consumption.¹⁰ To make this journey is also to travel backwards in evolutionary time, to a meeting with a man in "torn and greasy garments," a lumpen proletarian who is also a lower form of life, his body shaking "like that of a dead jelly fish" (53).

Maggie has been compelled into emulation and conducted not upwards but downwards through social strata organized and sustained by class mimicry, her society's regulative principle. Conspicuous consumption promises release from necessity but works only to bind its practitioners more closely to the economic determinants of their being. Maggie is finally unable to escape the zone of production: the blare of pleasure in which she supposed Pete to live cannot sustain life any better than the mere mechanical grinding out of the sweatshop. The river her body will momentarily disappear into is lit by the "yellow glare" of a "hidden factory," its waters "lapping oilyly" (53).

4. Why the Young Clerk Swore

Cultural criticism has focused on the 1890s as the historical moment when a moral conception of a stable *character* gives way to a new, more flexible notion of *personality*, now conceived, in Jean-Christophe Agnew's summary, "as a protean effect: a display in which the personal properties of the self mingled with the stage properties of its immediate surroundings" (142).¹¹ Modern personality posits a self whose substance consists of its performances, a self making itself up as it goes along. Such a self fits smoothly into the fully blown culture of consumption which emerges in the 1890s, along with mass-produced goods, magazine advertisements, and the installment plan. The culture of consumption produces the troubling sense that identity is founded on "fabrication and calculation," rather than affective depths (Knoper 75). But perhaps the fit between modern self and consumer culture is rather too smooth in these accounts.

One critic who thinks so is Mark Seltzer, whose *Bodies and Machines* makes a sustained argument against reading persons as "indexes of the social" and so reproducing what he calls "the realist tautology," the "circular relation between interior states and material conditions" (128). For Seltzer, nineteenth-century realist texts function as technologies that coordinate or "manage" a "double discourse" in which persons are represented as both "natural" and "artificial," as bodies and machines, or, in the terms alluded to above, as self-possessed characters and socially constructed personalities (95). For Seltzer, there is no way out of this conundrum: to valorize either individual agency or social structure is to grasp only one half of a dialectical relationship. Two episodes from *Maggie* illustrate what is at stake; both center on the role of imitation.

At the Bowery beer hall, Maggie wonders whether the ventriloquist's dolls really talk, only to be assured by Pete that "'it's some damn fake'" (23). At the theater, Maggie ponders whether she can acquire the "culture and refinement" she has seen "imitated" on the stage (28). According to Seltzer, Maggie "gains an interiority or becomes a person" by "internalizing a desire to imitate" (93). She cultivates an interiority which is only made possible through a self-objectifying process in which she is both warmly human and doll-like, both self-possessed and socially disciplined. At this point, Seltzer refers directly to class division: the melodrama Maggie watches posits both an unbridgeable gulf between upper and lower classes, as well as "a desire to transcend this difference"; Maggie's route to transcendence is the imitation of "middle class values" (94). Class features implicitly in Seltzer's later arguments that "the achievement of personation through practices of consumption" is based on "a privilege of relative disembodiment or relative weightlessness," the ability

grasped at by Maggie to detach herself from her immediate material conditions and enter the realm of the artifactual and the representational (124). But by the time Seltzer comes to his final arguments about the culture of consumption, class has dropped out of the picture. Indeed, consumption itself appears to offer not just an instance of the “realist tautology” but a solution to it. The “rhythm of suspending and recovering animation and agency” witnessed in Maggie’s theatrical experiences becomes a “reanimating ritual of consumption,” which we are to read as “the reaffirmation of agency itself” (143). Consumption is now conceived of as a punctual event in the life of an individual, abstracted and isolated from economic structures and the interrelationships between social groups.

This is why I have preferred to use the term *class mimicry*, rather than *imitation*, to describe the social process which informs consumption in Crane’s text. And it is why I have tried to insist that class mimicry draws individuals into nonreciprocal relations of exchange which are determined by position, status, and class membership.¹² For *Maggie* has something to say about the cultural shift from character to personality, from authenticity to artifice. A performing self, self-consciously adopting roles to match particular settings, does not extinguish the notions of autonomy and agency if the quick-change artist knows what he or she is about: some principle of an originating and responsible actor is retained. But a self driven by automatic reflexes, by a compulsive habit of mimicry, is a different proposition. This is the modern consumerist self depicted in Crane’s narrative.

Maggie tells a story about the perils of mimetic excess and about the ambiguity of mimesis. Although initially creative, mimetic excess saps vital energy, draining the organism of life. After a brief flash of store-bought distinction, Pete lapses into the rigidly conformist employee stationed at his post; Maggie’s lambrequin and cloak kick-start a compressed narrative of degradation. Both characters resemble those “mimetic insects” described by Roger Caillois which, “falling victim to a strange contagion, give up trying to stand out” (Hollier 11) and become “a branch among branches, a leaf among leaves” (Caillois 12). The end of mimicry is “assimilation to the surroundings,” surroundings which become alien and annihilating (Caillois 27). Indeed, for the “dispossessed souls” of Crane’s narrative, urban space itself becomes “a devouring force” (30). While Maggie plummets downwards through the city’s zones of prostitution to be engulfed by terminal darkness, Pete mimes the stages of intoxication from “benevolence” to “tearful insistence” (54) to “deep anxiety,” before “lurch[ing] foward” and falling “groaning to the floor” (56). Pete enters into what Caillois terms “the psychology of psychasthenia” (28), into “cataleptic attitudes,” “immobility,” and “automatic swaying”

(31); he suffers “a drop in the level of psychic energy, a kind of subjective detumescence, a loss of ego substance, a depressive exhaustion” (Hollier 11).

This declension of the self—which is less the result of thermodynamic principle than of compelling social structure—is registered in Crane’s story “Why Did the Young Clerk Swear?” The story appeared in the humorous New York magazine *Truth* in March 1893, after Crane answered an ad in the *Herald*, the paper that had just fired him as a correspondent, and took a job as a clerk in “a gentleman’s furnishing shop on Bleeker Street” (Stallman 79). The story concerns a “lonely clerk with a blond mustache and a red necktie” (33) who languishes in a “little gents’ furnishing store,” covertly reading “a French novel” in a kind of mimicked bohemianism (34). In his furtive perusal of this story of inadvertently revealed ankles, “warm blush[es],” and “wet eyes” (36), the clerk is interrupted by a succession of customers from different classes, including “an elderly gentleman with a dripping umbrella” (35), “a shopping woman with six bundles” (37), and a brash working-class “youth with a tilted cigar,” a ghostly reappearance of Pete (38). The clerk attempts to preserve the autonomy of his aesthetic experience, to hold at bay a real world of social actors each performing their scripted roles. When the fictive heroine flees from the lover’s embrace, the clerk hurls the novel from him with “a wild scream of disappointment” and cries “[d]amn” (38).

The clerk occupies what Taussig calls the “silly if not desperate place between the real and the really made up” (xvii). Modern urban people live in this conflicted space, consuming representations and constructing themselves. We are all addicted to vicarious participation in the sensuous existence of imaginary people, constantly trying identities on for size. Although we try to believe in a stable identity and so “act as accomplices of the real,” we know “in our heart of hearts that the way we picture and talk is bound to a dense set of representational gimmicks” which “have but an arbitrary reference to the slippery referent easing its way out of graspable sight” (xvii). We should therefore yield to the slipperiness of mimesis and affirm with Taussig that “there is no such thing as identity in any grand sense—just chimeras of possible longings lounging,” like Crane’s clerk, “in the interstices of quaint necessities” (253). Mimetic excess can provide the form of “immersion in the concrete” necessary to “break definitively from the fetishes and myths” of late capitalism, from the dreamworld of the commodity and its illusory freedoms (254).

But in the texts examined here, the depression, the exhaustion, the disappointed scream speak of a residual self unsatisfied with its fictions, with its conspicuously performed identity, precisely because these things are fabricated within the unequal relations of a class

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society. Maggie, Pete, and the young clerk perform to a script they have not written, in the shadow of the sweatshop and the sales counter. It is class that enters ineluctably into mimicry in the modern metropolis: there is no imitation without emulation, without the pursuit of an invidious distinction. To acknowledge that “heart cannot meet heart” in an urban “world of strangers” (Halttunen, *Confidence Men* 188), and so to place one’s faith in conspicuous consumption and “skillful social performance,” is to practice a class privilege (189). If the middle classes have become, in Bourdieu’s words, “committed to the symbolic,” acquiring a “permanent disposition towards the bluff or usurpation of social identity,” then that bluff is considerably riskier, and fraught with more severe consequences, for people like Maggie and Pete (*Distinction* 253). Crane’s novel shows that there is nothing quaint about necessity. Mimetic excess functions as the tribute exacted by pecuniary strength on pecuniary weakness: a story to break a mother’s heart.

Notes

1. On the late Bowery boy style and its commercialization, see Sante 122–40 and Harlow 425–26.
2. In Howells’s *Rise of Silas Lapham*, a description of the parlor of the Laphams’ Boston house in unfashionable Nankeen Square functions as an index of parvenu status-striving: “[T]he chandelier was of massive imitation bronze; the mirror over the mantel rested on a fringed mantel-cover of green reps and heavy curtains of that stuff hung from gilt lambrequin frames at the window” (215). On parlor parodies in late-nineteenth-century fiction, see Ohmann 142–49 and Orvell 40–72. By the 1890s, a reaction against plushness, eclecticism, and clutter had set in among the professional-managerial class, making parodic representations of the parlor function as what Ohmann calls “a measure of cultural distance” (144).
3. On the separation of production and consumption in the modern city, “as if the two acts belonged to different people,” see Trachtenberg 139. On this separation as a calculated strategy of advertisers, see Leach 146–50.
4. Halliburton argues that, because of his “social origins,” Crane views class through the “prism” of status and consumption and is ignorant of the “concrete productive activity” of his characters” (54). I think that this view can only be sustained if a narrow definition of “productive activity” is applied.
5. Orvell usefully describes the way in which “imitation materials” and “ersatz fabrications” come to constitute “the core of consumer society” and argues that “the imitation became the central category, not merely endured, but exulted in” (55).
6. Here I am arguing against Gandal, who interprets Maggie’s fall as the result of her failure to fully embrace the “Bowery spirit” (57), with a consequent loss of confidence rather than loss of morality (102).

7. See, e.g., Pizer, for whom Crane's "ironic method" (122) exposes how people in the Bowery follow beliefs "false to their experience" (123), as well as their "self-deceiving theatricality" (125). On the influence of melodrama on Crane's depiction of the Bowery, see Gullason.
8. On the organized charity movement, see Boyer 143–61; Lubove 1–21; and Ward 46–61.
9. For a discussion of how the prostitute in the Gilded Age was represented as "the quintessential commodity," a figure who "embodied the vast social and economic changes brought by the burgeoning of capitalism and city life," see Stanley 218–63, esp. 222.
10. For statistics on taxable values, see Gilfoyle 386 n. 11, 216. For a summary of how the "grid" system allowed urban space to be divided into "private packages for sale," see Trachtenberg 115–21, esp. 116. Trachtenberg describes how investment decisions result in the segregation of space by function, class, and income: "visible poverty set aside from visible affluence, with marked-off degrees between them: thus the city reflected and reinforced the hierarchies within the corporate structure itself" (118).
11. The *locus classicus* is Susman. Among works guided by Susman are Gandal, Halttunen ("Parlor to Living Room"), and Stearns.
12. For a rather different critique of Seltzer, see Horwitz, who argues that Crane's narrative allows his middle-class readers to take satisfaction from "the other half's degradation as imitations" (625).

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