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## "I looked here; I looked there; Nowhere could I see my love." The Problem of "Presence" in The Black Riders and Other Lines

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“I looked here; I looked there; Nowhere could I see my love.” The Problem of “Presence”  
in *The Black Riders and other lines*

By

Nathaniel M. Gustafson-Sundell, MLIS

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

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In

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This thesis has been examined and approved by the following members of the student’s  
committee.

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Anne O’Meara, Chair

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John Banschbach

## **Acknowledgements**

To my mom, who taught me to listen for double-meanings.

### **Note on the Text**

I refer to the poems of *The Black Riders and other lines* by an abbreviated title and number. Thus, poem I of *The Black Riders* is identified as *BR* 1 in this essay. For pagination, I refer to a facsimile version of the first edition of the text. While I have converted the text to poetic sentence case (in which the first letter of each line is capitalized), I have kept the original punctuation.

The two authoritative versions of this text, edited by Joseph Katz and Fredson Bowers respectively, each make changes to the punctuation of the poems from the original publication. These revisions can change the interpretation of the poems. There may have been good reasons for at least some of these changes. For example, Bowers *BR* 8 follows an extant manuscript version. However, I distrust the warrant for preferring an unpublished version or a later published version to the first published version, unless there was an explicit correction. After all, Stephen Crane himself probably only “corrected proof for the first impression of the first edition” (Katz lxiii).

## Abstract

“I looked here; I looked there; Nowhere could I see my love.” The Problem of “Presence” in *The Black Riders and other lines*. Nathaniel M. Gustafson-Sundell. M.A. English Studies. Minnesota State University, Mankato. 2015.

Although the poems of *The Black Riders and other lines*, by Stephen Crane, have often been treated as if they are simple – easy to interpret and easy to categorize – these poems actually support a multiplicity of interpretations. The multiplicity of interpretations available in the poems informs the possibility of tracing a variety of interrelationships through the poetry. While a few previous scholars have treated the poems as if they are interrelated, the interrelationship of the poetry has not been explicitly and substantially addressed as a feature of the poetry. The poems, in fact, support a combinatorial complexity only previously hinted at in the scholarship on this poetry. In this essay, the problem of “presence” is identified and investigated as an important theme of *The Black Riders*, by examining individual poems and by tracing that theme through a single, exemplary interrelationship of the poetry. This “problem of ‘presence’” is rooted in language, as elucidated by Ferdinand de Saussure and Jacques Derrida. Because of the problem of “presence,” no “truth” can be known as truth – and, in fact, no thing can be known as a thing, in its “thingliness,” as if a thing can be known as it “exists” prior to language, as if it is fully “present.” The problem of “presence” can be found on the surface of several poems, for example, when characters in the poems fail to attain places or things, but this problem also underlies what appears on the surface of several poems.

The analysis of the problem of “presence” in the poems, as that problem is revealed through the interrelationship of the poetry – and as that analysis draws attention to the interrelationship of the poetry as such – undermines the assumption that the poetry is simple.

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## Introduction

In *The Black Riders and other lines*, by Stephen Crane, many of the poems share a similar problem, which we can call a problem of “presence,” as such, even if the manifestations of the problem appear on the surface to differ. In some cases, Crane writes about failed attempts to attain places or things which can also stand as metaphors for “truth,” such as the horizon or a “ball of gold in the sky” (Crane 36). In other cases, he does not as obviously depict the failed attainment of something, but he presents situations in which the narrator of, or a character in, a poem is separated from something or someone, such as a beloved. This problem of separation from someone, or the related problem of the failed attempt to attain something, can be expressed more plainly as the failure to achieve the presence of something, such as the presence of the horizon or the presence of a beloved. In other words, and more simply yet, we can see that these poems often feature the problem of “presence” itself.

In his early work, including *Of Grammatology (OG)* and *Speech and Phenomena (SP)*, Jacques Derrida introduced the practice of “deconstruction” (or “de-construction,” depending on the text and translation), a process through which he showed how certain key texts in the Western intellectual tradition rely on the “metaphysics of presence” (a phrase found several times in *OG*, for example, p. 49). By showing how these texts rely on the “metaphysics of presence,” he reveals how, in fact, all of (at least) Western thinking is pervaded by this metaphysics. While I will not be deconstructing *The Black Riders*, Derrida’s special appropriation of the word “presence,” which I will highlight here by demarcating it with quotation marks, is useful for the purpose of understanding

what is happening in several of the poems from *The Black Riders*. Thus, I will consider how the poems are often deeply concerned with the problem of “presence” itself, as this notion was elucidated by Derrida.

Simply to pluck a “notion” from Derrida’s thought is, however, frankly a fool’s errand. Not only does Derrida quite deliberately revise or otherwise undermine his own usage of words and concepts, some of which might be of his own coinage, within any given text, so that he can be difficult to quote or paraphrase accurately, but his argumentation tends to be convoluted, in which the many wrinkles of his argument seem inseparable from his overall argument. Any discussion of Derrida’s argument without attention to those many wrinkles can lead to a misrepresentation of his argument.<sup>1</sup>

Clearly, there is some risk here that I might misrepresent Derrida’s thought, especially as I plan only to sketch a very quick picture of his usage of “presence” in the first section of *OG*, which is primarily a deconstruction of the *Course in General Linguistics*, by Ferdinand de Saussure, and I am deliberately avoiding some aspects of his argument, although I will draw from other early texts occasionally for clarification.<sup>2</sup>

My goal is not really to depict Derrida’s thought fully; my goal is to describe just one thread of Derrida’s thought as it applies to my interpretation of *The Black Riders*.

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<sup>1</sup> Actually, simply to characterize Derrida’s style is problematic. In order to describe Derrida’s style, I really should explain why the style is difficult, but that explanation would entail explaining why Derrida is so careful with his words, why he coins terms and revises his usage, and so on, which would involve a much more detailed, and lengthier, explanation than this project requires. See Derrida on “Derrida”: “To be entangled in hundreds of pages of a writing simultaneously insistent and elliptical, imprinting ... even its erasures, carrying off each concept into an interminable chain of differences, surrounding or confusing itself with so many precautions, references, notes, citations, collages, supplements – this ‘meaning-to-say-nothing’ is not, you will agree, the most assured of exercises.” (*Positions* 14).

<sup>2</sup> My entire approach to Derrida’s thought might be considered to be antithetical to Derrida’s thought insofar as I treat him as offering “concepts” which can be plucked from his work, because he deliberately undermined these notions as concepts. Frankly, I’m not too concerned about this aspect of my misrepresentation. Just as he needed to use these notions (actually, pretty much as concepts) to get where he got, so to speak, I think I can use these notions productively.

Derrida says of his analysis of the *Course* that he treats “the Saussurian text . . . only as a telling example within a given situation,” because “this and some other indices . . . already give us the assured means of broaching the de-construction of *the greatest totality* – the concept of the *epistémè* and logocentric metaphysics” (*OG* 46). If I can convey here a good enough sense of what Derrida means by “logocentric metaphysics,” which is nothing other than the “metaphysics of presence” (both phrases recur through Derrida’s writing, so no specific citation is provided), then I think I will have conveyed enough information to describe how “presence” is a problem common to many of Crane’s poems. I do think that a lengthier reading of Derrida could yield richer results than I attempt to achieve here, but I simply had to be practical about the scope of this project. That said, I can’t simply launch into a discussion of Derrida’s notion of the “metaphysics of presence” without first expanding the scope of this Introduction a little, by establishing some key concepts from the *Course in General Linguistics*. These concepts are commonly taught in undergraduate literary theory courses, so I am not breaking any new ground, but I want to define my usage of these concepts – so that we are at least standing on the same ground, so to speak.<sup>3</sup>

Saussure describes how a “sign” consists of a “signifier” and a “signified” (Saussure 65-7). The signifier<sup>4</sup> is the “sensory” aspect of the sign, which Saussure identifies primarily as a “sound-image” (Saussure 66), instead of, say, a graphic mark.

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<sup>3</sup> One must resist the urge to act as if one is being clever when discussing Derrida’s ideas. He problematizes words in such a way that one feels awkward using those problematized words, such as “ground,” “central,” “essential,” “experience,” and many others, even “speak” – and because of this awkwardness, one feels the urge to overcompensate by winking elaborately when using these words, as if one is in control of the situation.

<sup>4</sup> I will not enclose the terms signifier and signified in quotation marks further, because these terms are now common terms and regularly used without special demarcation.

Saussure's identification of the signifier with the "sound-image" will be especially important to Derrida, given the spirit in which the "sound-image" is insisted upon by Saussure, as noted by the editors of the *Course in General Linguistics*, who comment "The sound-image is par excellence the natural representation of the word" (Saussure 66). The signified is the "concept" aspect of the sign (Saussure 66). Saussure points out that the word does not refer to a thing in the world, but a concept in a language: "...it is clear that only the associations sanctioned by that language appear to us to conform to reality, and we disregard whatever others might be imagined." (Saussure 66-7). Saussure insists that the signifier and the signified form a whole, the sign, so there are no "free-floating" or otherwise prior or "pre-existing" signifiers or signifieds (Saussure 113, 116).

Saussure describes the "bond" between the signifier and the signified as "arbitrary" (Saussure 67). That is, there is nothing about the "sound-image" that is dictated by the "concept," or vice versa. As Saussure clarifies, the bond is "unmotivated," insofar as there is "no natural connection" between the signifier and the signified (Saussure 69).<sup>5</sup> For example, English speakers might think of "a hard substance that comes from the ground" ("stone.") upon hearing the "sound-image" \ 'stōn\. Upon hearing the "sound-image" \py-'ā-drə\, however, no such connection is made. The "sound-image" \ 'stōn\ does not derive from the "hard substance" itself any more than \py-'ā-drə\ derives

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<sup>5</sup> Saussure does mention the possibility that some signifiers can be motivated to some extent, such as onomatopoeia, but he notes that these exceptions are limited and do not disprove his argument (Saussure 68-9). In fact, onomatopoeia words are not as representational of "real" sound (the "thingliness" of sound) as we might think. One might merely see how different are onomatopoeia words between languages, which begs the question taken up by Derrida of the "being-heard" of the sound (*OG* 63) – I'll contribute here with an empiricism Derrida would not have indulged – does the crow really caw, or only when "being-heard" in English?

from that substance. The two “sound-images” are not intrinsically stony (or hard, or ground-ish, for that matter).

Saussure explains that language is not “a simple naming-process” (Saussure 114). One cannot “start from the terms and construct the system by adding them together” (Saussure 113). Instead, one must understand language as a “system” to see that “the value of each term results solely from the simultaneous presence of the others” (Saussure 114). He notes how “the concept seems to be the counterpart of the sound-image,” within the sign (so to speak), as if the signifier is simply the name for a “thing” (really a concept, because we don’t know things, only concepts), but “the sign itself is in turn the counterpart of the other signs of language” (Saussure 114). That is, the sign is actually defined by its relationship to other signs. He provides an example by comparing “Modern French *mouton*” to the “English *sheep*” (Saussure 115). Both words signify sheep, but the two terms do not have the same “value,” because English speakers distinguish between “mutton” as “meat ready to be served on the table” and “sheep” on the cloven hoof, while French speakers do not (Saussure 115-6). If the English word “mutton” were taken away, then the “value” of the English word “sheep” might change to be more equivalent to the French word “mouton,” but, as it is, the words are not equivalent. Similarly, the “value” of the word “stone” is shaped by the words near to it, such as “boulder” and “pebble,” “rock” and “gravel.”

Saussure makes very clear that there are no “pre-existing concepts” (Saussure 116) or “ideas” (Saussure 117) prior to language. He points out that “if words stood for pre-existing concepts, they would all have exact equivalents in meaning from one language to the next; but this is not true” (Saussure 116). And further, he notes that

“concepts are purely differential and defined not by their positive content but negatively by their relations with the other terms of the system” (Saussure 117). Not only are concepts (that is, signifieds) “differential,” but signifiers are also “differential”: “The important thing in the word is not the sound alone but the phonic differences that make it possible to distinguish this word from all others” (Saussure 118). What appears to be “positive content” in either the signified or the signifier is actually determined “negatively,” insofar as the “content” is carried by the differences between signifiers and signifiers, or signifieds and signifieds. Saussure reiterates: “Whether we take the signified or the signifier, language has neither ideas nor sounds that existed before the linguistic system, but only conceptual and phonic differences that have issued from the system.” (120). Derrida pays particular attention to this fundamental “conceptual and phonic” division assumed by Saussure and, in so doing, casts doubt on Saussure’s entire endeavor, although Derrida relies on Saussure’s key insight that language is “differential” in order to make his case.

Derrida finds that Saussure’s prioritization of speech as the “linguistic object” (*OG* 31) and his consequent characterization of writing as a “representation” of speech (*OG* 30), are not aberrations, but recur throughout the “Western tradition” (this is a characteristic Derridean phrase, found, for example, in *OG* 35, so I will retain the quotation marks). Derrida cites Aristotle as an example, who wrote: “‘spoken words (ta en tē phonē) are the symbols of mental experience (pathēmata tes psychēs) and written words are the symbols of spoken words’” (qtd. in Derrida, *OG* 11). Derrida notes that Saussure “takes up the traditional definition of writing which, already in Plato and Aristotle, was restricted to the model of phonetic script” (*OG* 30). For Derrida, this focus

on phonetic writing is anything but accidental – or, as he puts it, the phonetic writing “model” is “necessarily but provisionally imposed” (*OG* 43).

The phonetic model is “necessary” because Saussure, like Plato and Aristotle, lives within an “epistémè” which phonetic writing “inaugurates” (*OG* 33). That is, Saussure models his linguistics within a “system of understanding” (“episteme.”) shaped by phonetic writing, so that the basic concepts of linguistics, not to mention the endeavor itself, are dictated by this “system of understanding” (see *OG* 43). Derrida considers the phonetic model to be “provisional” to the extent that the model is not, in actuality, universal. In the first place, phonetic writing is not the only model of writing, given the counter-examples of ideographic and mathematical writing (etc., see *OG* 32), and in the second place, phonetic writing is not ever purely phonetic. Derrida draws attention, in particular, to “spacing” in phonetic writing, which is not phonetic (*OG* 39). Derrida will later conceptualize “spacing” in a broader sense, which I will note as appropriate, because it just may be that we can see a startlingly clear example of this Derridean “spacing” in Crane’s poetry.

Derrida highlights especially how Saussure characterizes phonetic writing in opposition to speech. He cites Saussure: “Writing, though unrelated to its inner system, is used continually to represent language. We cannot simply disregard it. We must be acquainted with its usefulness, shortcomings, and dangers.” (qtd. in Derrida, *OG* 34). In the first sentence of this citation, “language” is described as an “inner system,” and Saussure equates language with speech throughout much of the *Course*,<sup>6</sup> while writing is, in any case, exterior. Derrida finds this characterization of speech and writing again to be

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<sup>6</sup> ...except where that equation would discomfit his argument, as Derrida points out. Derrida draws attention to several of Saussure’s self-contradictions.

recurrent throughout the “Western tradition,” which we saw in the example from Aristotle. In Derrida’s view, the opposition of speech to writing is the model for analogous, “derivative” oppositions. Thus, for example, he comments:

... writing, the letter, the sensible inscription, has always been considered by Western tradition as the body and matter external to the spirit, to breath, to speech, and to the logos. And the problem of soul and body is no doubt derived from the problem of writing from which it seems – conversely – to borrow its metaphors. (*OG* 35).

Derrida frequently lists such “derivative” oppositions (such as *OG* 8, 33, 63, etc.), including, for example, “the outside and the inside” (*OG* 8).<sup>7</sup>

Derrida finds that writing and speech also provide the model for signifier and signified (which is one sense in which linguistics is modelled within the “epistémè” which phonetic writing “inaugurates,” as claimed in *OG* 33). On the one hand, Derrida notes that “The written signifier is always technical and representative. It has no constitutive meaning. This derivation is the very origin of the notion of the ‘signifier.’” (*OG* 11). On the other hand, “the voice is closest to the signified, whether it is determined strictly as sense (thought or lived). Or more loosely as thing.” (*OG* 11). This “closeness” of speech to the signified, which can be mistaken for a “thing” (instead of a concept)

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<sup>7</sup> In actuality, as we discover further along, toward the end of chapter 2 in *OG*, Derrida’s view is more subtle, but I will not go into the details of his argument in this Introduction. Briefly, I might say that “differance” “produces” these oppositions (*Positions* 9), so it might be more accurate to say that phonetic writing is attributed as the “first metaphor” (*OG* 15) with certain qualities, such as exteriority –these oppositions don’t really derive from phonetic writing, but from “arche-writing” (*OG* 56). I will discuss “differance” again in this Introduction. This is one of those cases where, I think, Derrida develops one understanding only to subvert that understanding later, although the first understanding informs the later, more accurate, understanding.

because of that perceived closeness, informs Derrida's notion of the "metaphysics of presence."<sup>8</sup> He refers to the Greek word "*Phonē*," which can be translated as "sound," "voice," or "speech," to characterize the closeness of speech to the signified:

*Phonē*, in effect, is the signifying substance *given to consciousness* as that which is most intimately tied to the thought of the signified concept. From this point of view, the voice is consciousness itself. ... the signifier seems to erase itself or to become transparent, in order to allow the concept to present itself as what it is, referring to nothing other than its presence. (Derrida, *Positions* 22)

Derrida refers to the bias that speech is, or primarily informs, the "inner system" of language, so that speech is (at least) implicitly held to be closer to meaning than writing, as "phonocentrism."

Derrida further describes "phonocentrism" as the basis of "logocentrism" (both terms recur throughout Derrida's texts, but see, for example, *OG* 11-2). "Logocentrism" is the idea that signs "are preceded by a truth, or a meaning already constituted by and within the element of the logos" (Derrida, *OG* 14). Hence, in another passage, in which he describes the experience of speaking (and the voice of consciousness), he comments:

It is the unique experience of the signified producing itself spontaneously, from within the self ... The unworldly character of this substance of expression is constitutive of this ideality. This experience of the effacement of the signifier in the voice is not

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<sup>8</sup> Derrida points out how the signified always implicitly precedes the signifier, as if there can be a signified without a signifier, which Saussure denies. Derrida "exposes" several of Saussure's self-contradictions, of which this is only one, entangled among others. My purpose here is not to re-construct Derrida's deconstruction of the *Course*, but simply to describe his ideas pertinent to his usage of "presence."

merely one illusion among many – since it is the condition of the very idea of truth ... (Derrida, *OG* 20)

In other words, and to be perfectly blunt, Derrida locates “the very idea of truth” in the experience of speaking, which is also the experience of “presence” (... of the “presence” of the signified) insofar as “the signifier seems to erase itself” (*Positions* 22).<sup>9</sup> Hence, “logocentrism” belongs to, and relies on, the “metaphysics of presence.” And, again to be blunt, let me note that I don’t think we need to assume much formality in the notion of “metaphysics” here;<sup>10</sup> the important issue seems to be that there are systems of thought that rely on “presence,” which is a “metaphysics of presence” perhaps insofar as “presence” provides a foundation of what is (in those systems), or as a means of discerning what is (by those systems).

Derrida highlights the unity of “phonocentrism” and “logocentrism” several times, especially in the first chapter of *OG*. Thus, he refers to “that logocentrism which is also a phonocentrism: absolute proximity of voice and being, of voice and the meaning of being, of voice and the ideality of meaning” (Derrida, *OG* 11-2). Recalling again Derrida’s quotation of Aristotle, in which writing merely represents speech which represents “mental experience” (qtd. in *OG* 11), we can see that writing is considered to

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<sup>9</sup> My presentation of Derrida’s argument here ignores most of his own use of evidence and other elaborations, which rely on his readings of Hegel, Nietzsche, Husserl (at length in *SP*), and Heidegger, among others, which I am not attempting to encompass. Again, my purpose is not to prove Derrida’s points, but to describe his usage of “presence.” As an aside, note how “Cogito, ergo sum” is transformed into an ironic tautology given Derrida’s reading.

<sup>10</sup> Apparently, “metaphysics” can be read in many ways, beginning as bibliographic metadata: “When Andronicus of Rhodes ... edited Aristotle’s works, the fourteen books dealing with ‘The First Philosophy’ were placed *after* the books on *physics* (*meta ta physika*) and were accordingly called metaphysics.” These “fourteen books” also happen to “deal with the most fundamental concepts: reality, existence, substance, causality, etc.” “Metaphysics” has also signified “the traditional attempt to establish knowledge about a realm lying beyond our natural world” (“metaphysics.”), which would lead to certain connotations. If “presence” isn’t ever really present here below (see below), but can only be encompassed in theology, then I think this last sense also matters to Derrida’s usage.

be the outside of an inside where meaning is presumed to “be.” Even without reading more of Derrida’s examples from the “Western Tradition,” we might infer that the implications for the characterization of writing are not good, given the presumed separation of writing from meaning. We might even appreciate Derrida’s claim that “The epoch of the logos ... debases writing considered as mediation of mediation and as a fall into the exteriority of meaning” (OG 12-3). In this context, it is worthwhile to recall Derrida’s quotation of Saussure, excerpted above, but worth repeating: “Writing, though unrelated to its inner system, is used continually to represent language. We cannot simply disregard it. We must be acquainted with its usefulness, shortcomings, and dangers.” (OG 34). Derrida draws particular attention to Saussure’s characterization of writing in the last sentence.

Derrida discusses at length how the “dangers” of writing are emphasized by Saussure, in the quotation above, and elsewhere, as if writing can (and does) “usurp” the role of speech (qtd. in OG 36), and as if writing can cause the “corruption” of language (OG 41). He notes that Saussure’s wary characterization of writing is again typical of the “Western tradition.” He discusses how, for example, “Already in the *Phaedrus*, Plato says that the evil of writing comes from without” (OG 34). He elaborates:

... the *Phaedrus* denounced writing as the intrusion of an artful technique, a forced entry of a totally original sort, an archetypal violence: eruption of the *outside* within the *inside*, breaching into the interiority of the soul, the living self-presence of the soul within the true logos... (OG 34)

In this tradition, Derrida emphasizes how Saussure insists on “the natural bond,” that is, “the only true bond, the bond of sound,” between “the signified” and “the phonic signifier” (qtd. in Derrida, *OG* 35),<sup>11</sup> so that writing, in opposition, is unnatural, “...the dissimulation of the natural, primary, and immediate presence of sense to the soul within the logos” (*OG* 37). However, Derrida is quick to point out, “... the violence of writing does not *befall* an innocent language” (*OG* 37). This is a key turning point, at least for my discussion here, because Derrida will go on to show that “presence” was only ever an illusion. The qualities attributed to writing, such as exteriority, are already “in” speech, or really, language itself, which is an issue Derrida primarily explores by recalling Saussure’s insight that language is “differential.”<sup>12</sup>

Derrida employs several coined terms in the course of exploring the implications of Saussure’s insight that language is “differential,” only a couple of which I will mention here, and only insofar as these terms are necessary for the purpose of analyzing Crane’s poetry. In order to approach these terms, we might recall Saussure’s insight that there are no ideas prior to language and that the units of language (so to speak), the signifiers and signifieds, are determined “negatively,” to see that what we know is not, in actuality, present, but defined by other terms that are not present. That is, the very reality (and “truth”) we ascribe to any given “thing” – which is not a “thing” in any case, but a concept – is in some sense happening elsewhere, where the “thing” isn’t, because the

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<sup>11</sup> I don’t know if the exact phrase “the natural bond” is in Derrida’s copy of Saussure’s text (on p. 25) or in his reading of the text. In fact, my text does not include this phrase, but only “the only true bond” – although Saussure does write, a few sentences after this latter phrase, that speech precedes writing in the “natural sequence” of language learning, so he does certainly invoke nature to distinguish speech from writing (Saussure 25).

<sup>12</sup> Thus, we might see, Saussure’s characterization of writing, and the characterization of writing in the “Western tradition” more broadly, serves as a kind of wish-fulfilling self-deception, precisely so that “presence” can be preserved as a viable notion (...and thus to preserve the foundations of many cherished concepts, not to mention sciences, like linguistics).

“thing” depends for its conceptuality (for what it “is” really) on its differences from other “things.” Derrida coined the terms with which I am concerned here, “differance” (or “différance,” depending on the text and translation) and “spacing,” to better comprehend that “differentiality” underlying things as we know them. These terms will prove especially valuable in Chapter 3 of this paper.

The notion of “differance,” which I deliberately call here a “notion” because Derrida has stated that the word “is neither a *word* nor a *concept*” (*SP* 130), might best be approached with an example, although I’ll admit the example is merely a stepping stone. Or, in fact, the example is a stone. As noted above, the “sound-image” \‘stōn\ signifies a concept related to other “nearby” concepts, including “boulder” and “rock,” such that the “value” of “stone” depends on those related concepts. “Boulders” help define what we know as “stone” (what “stone” can be), just as “stone” helps define “boulders.” The concept is not only related to, and defined by, such nearby concepts, but the concept is also related to all other concepts. If a stone is thought as “a hard substance that comes from the ground” (“stone.”), then “ground,” “hard,” and “substance” would seem to precede the stone, although we could imagine a different order of development.<sup>13</sup> These terms help to define “stone,” but, in turn, these terms are defined by other terms. “Ground” differs from “sky” seemingly essentially. “Water” can be a kind of “ground,” but it also falls from the “sky.” And “water” helps define “stone,” clearly, insofar as “stone” is “hard” and “water” isn’t (so “water” helps define “hard” too), and “stones” sink in “water,” so really, “water” can’t be a kind of “ground.” We could go on and on, in

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<sup>13</sup>We could impose a certainly fictional origin story on language, where, say, the need to name a tool leads to a whole series of other language needs: these are the things I made the tool from – I call them stones – and this is where I was sitting when I made the tool – I call it ground... The actual origin story is not important to my example.

every case finding that the “value” of a signified depends on the “values” of other signifieds, and the quotation marks would surely proliferate eventually to enclose (in order to signify the qualification of the “presence” of, and actual difference of) every word used. That is, there would be no one signified to start them all, to found them all – no one signified singularly “present,” without difference. Derrida calls this not-word which is not present, “differance.”<sup>14</sup>

Derrida has described “differance” in several texts, often provisionally and subject to revision later in the same texts. He has made the point that he utilizes this notion in different ways depending on his needs, although he would write this sentence differently – instead to draw attention to how his varying uses of this notion have been “imposed” upon him (*SP* 131). In order to clarify the notion of “differance” a little more thoroughly, I’m going to indulge myself to several quotations, beginning with Derrida’s typical description of “differance” as a “play of differences,” which might also be taken to explain my “stone” example above:

... the signified concept is never present in itself, in an adequate presence that would refer only to itself. Every concept is necessarily and essentially inscribed in a chain or a system, within which it refers to another and to other concepts, by the systematic play of differences. Such a play, then – differance – is no longer simply a concept, but the possibility of conceptuality, of the conceptual system and process in general. (*SP* 140)

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<sup>14</sup> “Since language ... has not fallen from the sky, it is clear that the differences have been produced; they are the effects produced, but effects that do not have as their cause a subject of substance, a thing in general, or a being that is somewhere present and itself escapes the play of difference.” (*SP* 141)

Derrida is absolutely clear, if I haven't been already, or Saussure wasn't, that a signified can never be fully "present" (not to mention a "thing" itself):

This concept can be called *gram* or *différance*. The play of differences supposes, in effect, syntheses and referrals which forbid at any moment, or in any sense, that a simple element be *present* in and of itself, referring only to itself. (*Positions* 26)

Derrida draws attention to how "différance" actually underlies the perception of "presence," although this "presence" is illusory:<sup>15</sup>

Différance is what makes the movement of signification possible only if each element that is said to be 'present,' appearing on the stage of presence, is related to something other than itself but retains the mark of a past element and already lets itself be hollowed out by the mark of its relation to a future element. (*SP* 141)

That is, he pursues Saussure's recognition that language is "differential" to its logical conclusion: "Presence is a determination and effect within a system which is no longer that of presence but that of différence..." (*SP* 147). Of course, one might attempt to regain the assurance of "presence" by presuming some kind of original "presence" to found the "system," but Derrida would cry foul, insofar as "différance" is "originary" of knowing (Derrida uses the word "originary" fairly often, beginning, in *OG*, on p. 19), and

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<sup>15</sup> In Derrida's view, this "presence" then gets attributed to speech, while the "hollowness" is displaced to writing, so that the illusion of "presence" can be preserved as if it is real.

thus also prior to pointing and grunting purposively (and “*differentially*”) in the “first” attempt to communicate, if such a story is imagined as “originary” of language.<sup>16</sup>

Derrida describes “differance” as “originary” on several occasions, although he is careful to problematize the notion of “origin” itself.<sup>17</sup> Thus, he comments: (1) “Differance is ... the formation of form” (*OG* 63); (2) “... Differance ... refers to what in classical language would be called the origin or production of differences and the differences between differences, the *play* of differences.” (*SP* 130); (3) “... the movement of *différance*, as that which produces different things, that which differentiates, is the common root of all the oppositional concepts that mark our language” (*Positions* 9); and, most simply, (4) “Differance defers-differs” (*OG* 66). “Differance,” however, cannot be considered an origin in any customary sense, because “differance” never was. That is, as Derrida puts it, “differance” might be “‘originary,’ but one would no longer be able to call it ‘origin’ or ‘ground’” (*OG* 23). In fact, in one of Crane’s poems, we’ll encounter a literally groundless scene which has evoked several and varying interpretations. In my view, this poem evokes the groundlessness of “differance” – the fact that “differance” as ground never is, so “presence,” the phantom offspring of “differance,” so to speak, can only be “held” in the context of such groundlessness – but a glance at the poem itself will have to wait until Chapter 3. In fact, we almost have enough information to move on to

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<sup>16</sup> “But can we not conceive of a presence and self-presence of the subject before speech or its sign, a subject’s self-presence in a silent and intuitive consciousness? Such a question ... supposes that prior to signs and outside them, and excluding every trace and differance, something such as consciousness is possible.” (*SP* 146-7). We’ll circle back to this issue in the course of reading Crane’s poems.

<sup>17</sup> What Derrida says of the “trace” (a term which I will not delve into here), we can say equally of “differance,” because “The (pure) trace is differance”: “The trace is not only the disappearance of origin ... the origin did not even disappear,” because “it was never constituted except reciprocally by a nonorigin, the trace [differance], which thus becomes the origin of the origin” (*OG* 61).

the main body of this paper, although first it will be helpful to clarify Derrida's usage of at least one more term, "spacing," as a function of "differance."

Derrida is clear that "differance" is "originary," not merely of a language which might otherwise be thought to originate as a naming of things, as if things differed as they are signified prior to language, but "differance" is also "originary" of, or perhaps simultaneous with, "temporization" (or "temporalization") and "spacing" as well. Derrida thus describes "differance" not only as a "play of differences," a phrase which should seem familiar by now, but additionally, he notes how "differance" "is ... spacing":

Différance is the systematic play of differences, of the traces of differences, of the spacing by means of which elements are related to each other. This spacing is the simultaneously active and passive ... production of the intervals without which the 'full' terms would not signify, would not function. (*Positions* 29)

That is, in order to differ, and thus to mean (and "be," which is to seem "full," as in fully "present," another notion which should seem familiar by now), those "terms" must also be separated in space and time. "Spacing" here is not "merely" a word descriptive of language, of the "pause, blank, punctuation, interval in general, etc." of either speech or writing (*OG* 68) – "spacing" is also cosmic:<sup>18</sup> "Origin of the experience of space and time, this writing of difference ... permits the difference between space and time to be articulated, to appear as such ..." (*OG* 65-6). This cosmic aspect is inseparable from the

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<sup>18</sup> The choice of this word is my own. I think the choice would probably be offensive to Derrida (or maybe not, insofar as "cosmic" implies cosmogony) but I like the conjoining of the cosmological with the implications or connotations of "outer space" and "mind-blowingness."

“mere” language aspect of “spacing” because, as we’ve seen, we can’t know a signified prior to language (which is “differential”).

The precise relationship of the “blank” in writing, and “punctuation,” to space and time in the cosmic sense, which is important to Derrida’s notion of “spacing,” as well as pertinent to my analysis of Crane’s poems, can seem obscure. After all, how do we get from commas, colons, and gaps in the text to “The outside, ‘spatial’ and ‘objective’ exteriority which we believe we know as the most familiar thing in the world” (*OG* 70-1)? In a pedestrian sense, we might point to the obvious analogy: just as these words I’m writing are differentiated by gaps (“spacing”) and can only be read linearly, in time, or spoken sequentially, “things” can only be known as differentiated by space and time. In Derrida’s view, I think, this analogy is not merely a happy accident, but “fundamental” to “things” insofar as they are language. In both cases, the terms cannot “signify” or “function” without separation (“spacing”), which is why Derrida might say: “*spacing* ... constitutes the origin of signification” (*OG* 68).

Derrida draws out a further implication of “spacing as writing” for the “subject” of writing. He writes that “Spacing as writing is the becoming-absent and the becoming-unconscious of the subject.” (*OG* 69). I think there might be several approaches to this sentence, although I’ll pursue only one approach here. First, I should note that the “subject” referred to here is not the grammar subject (“Spacing as writing”), but the writing subject – in this example, Derrida himself. Derrida writes elsewhere that “the subject ... is inscribed in language,” as “a ‘function’ of the language” (*SP* 145), which itself is not a very startling insight, insofar as we’ve already seen that knowing is in language, and knowing implies “I am” (thus the tautology: “*Cogito, ergo sum*”). Hence,

to understand why Derrida claims that “writing is the becoming-absent ... of the subject,” we might merely observe how Derrida himself disappears between his words, becoming absent, as white-space.<sup>19</sup> The separation of term from term separates the “subject” from himself. He, too, is on the “stage of presence ... hollowed out” by past and future “elements” – or terms, or words (*SP* 141). In fact, Derrida draws attention, I think especially, to the temporal aspect of “spacing” as it pertains to the “subject”:

...an interval ... must ... divide the present in itself, thus dividing, along with the present, everything that can be conceived on its basis, that is, every being – in particular, for our metaphysical language, the substance or subject. Constituting itself, dynamically dividing itself, this interval is what could be called *spacing*; time’s becoming-spatial or space’s becoming-temporal (*temporalizing*).”  
(*SP* 143)

Of course, the present must be divided “in itself,” because otherwise the present would be undifferentiated, as an eternal present amenable to theology perhaps, but alien to human knowing – and thus alien to human being, which as it turns out, isn’t as much as it is (“Cogito ergo non sum.”). As we’ll see, this notion of the separation of the subject from herself – or himself, especially, in the egocentric, androcentric poetry of Stephen Crane – will become pertinent as I explore the implications of Derrida’s thought, such as I have described it here, for the interpretation of Crane’s poetry.

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<sup>19</sup> Writing is also “becoming-absent” in another literal sense, if we imagine the text as a letter written by our correspondent, Derrida (that is, because his writing exists in his absence), but this discussion would lead me into other texts by Derrida, such as *Limited Inc*, which is not really necessary to my analysis of Crane’s poetry here.

The poems of the *The Black Riders and other lines* have not previously been analyzed in terms of “presence,” or the related notions of “differance” or “spacing.” Several scholars have previously described how *The Black Riders*, or Crane’s poems more broadly, are concerned with the search for “truth,” and a sub-set of these scholars have analyzed this search in some detail, to deliver a judgment on the attainability of this “truth” – whether and why, or under what conditions, this “truth” can be attained, as if it is a thing, in Crane’s poetry. Obviously, these discussions of the attainability of “truth” in Crane’s poetry are pertinent to my analysis, because the attainment of “truth” is so clearly problematized by Derrida’s notion of “presence,” so I will explore these previous approaches in some detail in my first chapter.

Most typically, the poems are divided into thematic or topical categories for the purpose of analysis, as a consequence of which, different problems (and resolutions, or really, results) are identified for each category. Thus, the “God” poems are considered separately from the “love” poems, leading scholars to miss features common to the poems across these categories. In my view, many of Crane’s poems in *The Black Riders* feature the common problem of “presence,” so that the “love” poems and the “God” poems, or other “kinds” of poems, can be thought of as different ways of approaching, or manifesting the “presence” problem. In contrast to most previous scholars, I will not set these different manifestations of the “presence” problem apart thematically, as if Crane merely writes poems primarily about God, on the one hand, or love, on the other. Instead, I will argue that, in many of Crane’s poems, “presence” itself is the underlying issue. That is, if no “presence” can be achieved, which we might understand with the help of Derrida, then we can see why no “truth” can be finally ascertained, no “ball of gold”

gained, no lover fully joined, and so on. “Truth” might indeed exist, as well as perfect love, or an absolute God, as matters of theology, but the impossibility of “presence” prevents any final statement by the human being. In fact, the impossibility of “presence” invites a variety of re-statements, which we see in *The Black Riders*, so that the ideal (of achieving the presence of something) might occasionally be contemplated in the poems, but only in the context of other poems which again and again return to the impossibility of achieving that ideal.

The identification and exploration of the “presence” problem in *The Black Riders* can begin with poems in which the problem is readily apparent (or mostly so), in the second chapter. Upon learning to recognize the “presence” problem, however, it will become possible to analyze poems which might not seem, on the surface, to be related. That is, in the third chapter, we can explore why some of the poems present imagery or actions which rely on an underlying opposition between inside and outside, such as, for example, *BR 3*, in which a “creature” holds its heart in its hands. Or we can consider why the world is groundless in *BR 10*. Or we can attempt to read the gaps in *BR 40* and *44*. Or we might even wonder how the idea of “sin” is functioning in the poems, although that word has always been read, in the scholarship on Crane’s poetry, merely as an artifact of Crane’s biographical upbringing.

Indeed, although the poems have typically been treated as if they are simple – easy to “get,” and therefore also easy to categorize – I will several times draw attention to the multiplicity of interpretation available in the poems as I pursue the theme of “presence” through the poems. This multiplicity informs the possibility of tracing a variety of “interrelationships” through the poetry. An “interrelationship” of the poetry is a

connection among the poems within which the poems can be read, and re-read, as those poems pertain to each other. That is, an “interrelationship” is a set of poems, including the connections between those poems, within which the reading of one poem modifies the reading of another poem. In my view, there are an unknown number of interrelationships in *The Black Riders* overall. These interrelationships themselves are not easy to delimit. One might fairly easily perceive an interrelationship, but not where it ends.

The notion of the interrelationship of the poetry is useful for the purpose of tracing the theme of “presence” through the poetry, but the interrelationship of the poetry does not depend on the theme of “presence.” There might be interrelationships running through the poetry on other themes or topics. The notion of the interrelationship of the poetry is important, I think, in and of itself. Some scholars have previously treated the poems as if they are interrelated, as I will describe in the first chapter, but only one previous scholar, William Knowlton Spofford, has explicitly acknowledged that “the poems lend themselves to multiple interpretations and interrelationships” (Spofford 17), although, unfortunately, he didn’t pursue this insight any further.<sup>20</sup> In the course of tracing the theme of “presence” through the poetry, I will occasionally mention that other interrelationships might be available, or I will point to the possibility of alternative interrelationships even in my own reading of the poetry. Hopefully, this notion of the interrelationship of the poetry will become more obvious in the first chapter, where I

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<sup>20</sup> In addition, David Halliburton, in his chapter on Crane’s poetry from *The Color of the Sky: A Study of Stephen Crane*, mentions how the poems “act and react on one another” (270). In fact, he pursues several “mini-interrelationships” of the poetry. We might say that he explicitly acknowledges the interrelationship of the poetry, but his analyses are also briefly categorical, so it is hard to say whether he does really acknowledge the interrelationship of the poetry as such, or if he is just mentioning certain qualities underlying that interrelationship without fully recognizing what he is seeing. In any case, he doesn’t pursue the interrelationship of the poetry even to the extent pursued by the scholars reviewed in the first chapter.

describe how previous scholars have relied on the interrelationship of the poetry. In the third chapter, I will pursue an example interrelationship of the poetry. In the Conclusion, of course, I will assess (briefly) what is new about my analysis, including my exposure of the interrelationship of the poetry, as well as my elucidation of the problem of “presence” in the poetry.

## I

The scholarship devoted to Crane's poetry is not very sizeable. While the publication of *The Black Riders* made a splash in 1895 and 1896, the poetry, along with Crane's writing generally, was largely forgotten soon after his death in 1900. Although some individuals associated with Imagism, including Robert Frost, Harriet Monroe, and Amy Lowell, acknowledged Crane's poetry to varying degrees in the teens and twenties of the twentieth century, and a multi-volume set of his work was published in the twenties with some fanfare, the study of his poetry was not durably revived until the forties, as evidenced by a handful of dissertations. This graduate student interest was followed by the publication of *Stephen Crane* in 1950, a critical biography by John Berryman, and *Stephen Crane: An Omnibus* in 1952, an anthology edited and introduced by Robert Wooster Stallman.

There are two major studies focused on Crane's poetry specifically. *The Poetry of Stephen Crane*, by Daniel Hoffman, was published in 1957, based on his dissertation completed at Columbia University in 1956. "Method and Meaning in the Poetry of Stephen Crane," a dissertation by Richard E. Peck, was completed at the University of Wisconsin in 1965, but not published. These two major studies differ considerably in approach. Hoffman's analysis of the poetry depends primarily on his interpretation of Crane's biography and psychology, whereas Peck rejects Hoffman's approach in no uncertain terms, instead proposing an approach he considers to be New Critical. Hoffman's monograph has long held a prominent place in the scholarship on Crane's poetry, although he has been cited as a foil probably as often as he has been cited as an

influence by later scholars. Peck's dissertation has not been influential. However, Peck does recognize that the poems can be read as if they interrelate. While it was not unprecedented at the time of his writing to treat the poems as if they interrelate, the approach had not been explicitly acknowledged as such. Peck himself does not explicitly or comprehensively pursue this approach, but he does see the possibility, even going so far as to suggest that the poems might be read together as a narrative. This suggestion prefigures the approaches taken by two scholars especially pertinent to this review, although it seems that Peck did not directly inspire those approaches, given that he is not acknowledged by either.

Because I am primarily concerned here to understand how the poems feature the problem of "presence," this review will focus on how previous scholars have treated the poems as if they interrelate. It is helpful to consider how the poems might interrelate in order to recognize a problem, or a theme, or a topic, common to many of them, such as the "presence" problem. I will also consider how "truth" has been previously identified and analyzed as a central concern of the poems. In my view, the pursuit of "truth" in the poems leads directly to the "presence" problem, although alternative explanations and perceptions of this pursuit deserve comparison. As it happens, the scholars who have treated the poems as if they interrelate have also, by and large, devoted considerable attention to the pursuit of "truth" in the poetry. However, the converse proposition is not similarly true. Several scholars have identified "truth" as a central concern of the poetry, but not all of these scholars have investigated this concern at length, so have not considered how this concern works across the poetry, which perhaps would lead naturally to the perception that the poems are interrelated.

The concept of the “interrelationship” of the poetry is not simple. As we will see, the assumed or proposed properties of the interrelationship of the poetry vary according to the reading of the scholar.<sup>21</sup> Thus, for example, if a scholar treats the poems as if they contribute to a narrative, the scholar will assume that there is a sequence to the poems, or propose a sequence, in order to describe the plot and the developing theme of the narrative. Reading the poems out of the proposed sequence would confuse the interpretation, but reading the poems in the right sequence enriches the interpretation of the poems. Instead of reading the poems as if they “stand alone” – that is, as if they make meaning alone – the poems are treated as if they are connected to other poems meaningfully, so that the reading of one poem influences the reading of other poems. The meanings available from the poems are thus modified by the perception of the interrelationship of the poems.

In actuality, the perception of an interrelationship of the poetry usually works both to enrich and to constrain the interpretation of individual poems, insofar as the reading of a poem must conform to some “whole” comprising the perceived interrelationship of the poems. Some proposed or assumed “wholes,” however, might not be so fixed in shape or require so much direction as a story, such as the interrelationship I pursue in the third chapter.

The concept of the interrelationship of the poetry must be distinguished from mere categorization. The poems have often been categorized, usually by theme, but also

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<sup>21</sup> In the scholarship, insofar as the poems have been treated as if they interrelate, only one interrelationship has been pursued by each scholar. Similarly, I describe only one interrelationship in detail, in the third chapter; however, I differ from previous scholars to the extent I point to the availability of other interrelationships. That is, I treat the interrelationship of the poetry as inherently plural, even as I use the same word to describe the singular interrelationships pursued by previous scholars.

on the basis of other schemes. Thus, for example, Hoffman divides the poetry into “love” poems and “God” poems. Such categorization treats the poems as if they are “related,” in the sense that the poems are grouped according to some perceived family resemblance, but not as if they are interrelated, in the sense that the reading of one poem can change the reading of another. Of course, these two approaches cannot be totally distinguished. The perception of relationship might, and usually does, involve the perception of a weak form of interrelationship – thus, a poem might be read alongside another, for illumination, within a category, perhaps also to characterize the category as a whole.<sup>22</sup>

Categorization of the poems can work against reading the poems as if they are interrelated. After all, categorization divides the poems, whereas interrelationship links the poems. As I noted in my Introduction, I consider the problem of “presence” to be shared by many of the poems, across a variety of “manifestations,” but other scholars might categorize the poems on the basis of those manifestations, which would naturally work against the possibility of seeing how those different poems share a common problem. However, we’ll see that several scholars both categorize the poems and read the poems as if they are interrelated, in which event the categorization constrains the interrelationship. For example, William Knowlton Spofford, in “The Unity of the Poetry and Prose of Stephen Crane: A Study of Motif, Structure, and Ethic,” treats the poems of *The Black Riders* as if they contribute to a narrative, but, in order to construct this narrative, he divides the poems “into four basic groups that suggest phases in an individual’s development” (Spofford 17), as we’ll see later. His interpretation of

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<sup>22</sup> ... leading to summary statements about those categories. A typical summary statement might read: “Human love was one of the poet’s supports...” (Kindilien 159).

individual poems is thus fitted to these categories, as well as to the coherence he analyzes across all the poems (...the story he reads).

The order of this secondary research review requires some explanation. I will begin by quickly discussing the two major studies of Crane's poetry, by Hoffman and Peck, as they provide a background to my investigation. Because Peck suggests that the poems can be read as a narrative, I will then move on to the two scholars who treat *The Black Riders* as a narrative: Yoshie Itabashi and Spofford. I will also review how each of these scholars depict the pursuit of "truth" in Crane's poetry. In order to better understand the underpinnings of Spofford's analysis, and to consider other major, sustained approaches to both the interrelationship of the poetry and to the pursuit of "truth" in the poetry, I will glance back from Spofford's secondary research review to the analyses of Max Westbrook and Marston LaFrance, both of whom propose non-narrative reasons to consider the poetry to be coherent (and interrelated). I will then complete my review of Spofford's analysis, considered in the light of his reliance on Westbrook and LaFrance. I will culminate my discussion of how the poems have been treated as if they interrelate by reviewing Susan Daughtry Barnett's thesis, "The Poetic Process in Stephen Crane's Poetry," which follows the preceding analyses in chronological order. Finally, I will conclude my discussion of how "truth" has been identified as a central concern of the poetry. To set the stage for this conclusion, I will pay particular attention to the analysis of Ruth Miller, although she herself does not consider the substance of Crane's poetry (as she sees it) to be the interesting aspect of his poetry. While the recipe of her argument differs profoundly from my own, I find that the ingredients of her argument complement my own dish quite nicely.

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Because Hoffman's book is the only published monograph on Crane's poetry, his analysis has inevitably drawn a great deal of attention in the secondary research – perhaps an undue share of attention – given that there is only one other book-length study of the poetry, and that unpublished. As I mentioned above, Hoffman interprets the poems from *The Black Riders* primarily biographically and psychologically. In his third chapter, "War in Heaven," he portrays Crane's family and religious background in order to explain the poetry. In his fourth chapter, "Love on Earth," his reading largely depends on Berryman, who considered Stephen Crane's psychology to exemplify a "Special Type" of psychological outlook identified by Sigmund Freud, "under the sway of the Oedipus Complex" (qtd. in Berryman 302), although Hoffman himself cautions against relying "exclusively" on Berryman's "psychological approach" (108). Instead, Hoffman again looks to Crane's religious background in order to claim that, in Crane's poems, "love is to be damned" (126).

Hoffman's approach is thematic, as the titles of his chapters indicate. Although he looks to Crane's biographical background for sources and explanations of all the poems, he categorizes the poems about "God" or "gods" separately from the poems about love. In the third chapter, for example, he discusses how the "God" poems reflect presumed differences between Crane's parents' notions of God. In both chapters, he considers Crane to have inherited uncritically and without irony an ancestral conception of "sin." In other words, Hoffman considers Crane's religious background to inform the poetry in a straightforward manner which he can easily backtrack to Crane's parents and more distant ancestors. Although he regards Crane's religious background as a common source

for both categories of poems, he does not interpret the poems together, so he does not investigate how the poems might share concerns, insights, or meanings, except those that derive from Crane's background. In Hoffman's view, the poems are concerned with distinct themes, plain and simple.

In general, Crane's poetry has suffered from an unfortunate tendency to attract biographical readings, perhaps because of the influences of Berryman and Hoffman, or else simply because Crane led an interesting life, so it is tempting to speculate about connections between his life and his writing. In one form of this approach, a biography of Crane is constructed in order to explain the poetry, which we see in Hoffman or in "The Posture of a Bohemian in the Poetry of Stephen Crane," by John Blair, among others. In another form, the poems are interpreted as a means to construct a biography (which then might be used, circularly, to interpret other poems), an approach we can see in "The Art of Stephen Crane," a dissertation which preceded either Berryman's or Hoffman's work, by Jean Whitehead, or in "A Spiritual Autopsy of Stephen Crane," by Keith Gandall. In either case, the poems are not explored on their own terms primarily, but only as they relate to the biographies offered by these scholars. That is, the interpretation of the poetry is subordinated to the scholar's reading (and writing) of Crane's biography.

While biographical interpretation in a literary critical context has been questioned from first principles in "The Intentional Fallacy," by W. K. Wimsatt, Jr. and M. C. Beardsley, the biographical approach to Crane's poems is particularly fraught with risk precisely because of his biography. Stephen Crane was a complex character, who, as an author, employed ambiguity, irony, and shifting perspectives to complicate all of his mature writings, perhaps beginning with *Maggie*. Thomas Kent, in his essay,

“Epistemological Uncertainty in *The Red Badge of Courage*,” has gone so far as to claim that certain passages of *The Red Badge of Courage* cannot finally be interpreted “on the extratextual level” (“Epistemological Uncertainty” 622). He argues that *The Red Badge of Courage* is fundamentally a “polysemous text,” “...because more than one interpretation is possible, actually because more than one interpretation is encouraged...” (Kent, “Epistemological Uncertainty” 628). This fundamental “epistemological uncertainty” (Kent, “Epistemological Uncertainty” 622) might be similarly true of *The Black Riders*.

Kent’s argument would be unavailable from the perspective of most biographical critics because, to the biographical critics, at least as they have tended to work so far, the interpretation of Crane’s poetry is within easy reach of what the critic “knows” about Crane the man and his background. While the critic might be able to see uncertainty as a feature of the text, the critic would not be able to accept that uncertainty as fundamental to the interpretation of the text – the biographical critic would instead step in to provide the missing certainty, by finding some explanation from Crane’s life, ancestry, or “intention.” In the biographical interpretations of Crane’s works published so far, Crane himself does not generally get credited with any of the trickiness or complexity his texts display; that is, he is treated as the open book his books are not.

The biographical approach to Crane has been rejected by several scholars, including Marston LaFrance, who pointed out, in *A Reading of Stephen Crane*, that “...if one approaches the poems without a commitment to any of [Hoffman’s] critical assumptions one’s reading will not agree with Hoffman’s” (130). Similarly, Peck, in his dissertation, dismisses the biographical approach broadly, for example, by noting that

Crane's biography is "germane only tangentially, if at all, to our understanding of Crane's poetry" (8), and also specifically, for example, when he criticizes one scholar, Maxwell Geismar, for continuing "the sort of fictionalising that Berryman began." (47).

Peck considers his own approach to be New Critical. He declares that his "essential concern" is with "the individual poem, considered in the context of the entire body of poetry" (9), an approach which he aligns with "'New' criticism" (10). In practice, however, Peck does not interpret the poems according to his own declaration. Instead, his tendency is to interpret individual poems within the context of the structure of his own dissertation. His two chapters which focus on analyses of the poems are entitled "Technique and Method" and "Poetry of Statement" respectively. Peck divides these chapters into sections, so his analyses of the poems serve as illustrations of the topics of the sections. The former chapter is divided into sections focused mostly on formal issues, including "style," "structure," "imagery," and "tone." The latter chapter investigates various aspects of Crane's subject matter, including his "iconoclasm," "romantic elements," "social criticism," and "ethical concerns." While one can see that Peck derived these topics from his reading of "the entire body of poetry" (9), his interpretations of the individual poems do not depend on that "entire body" (9), but on the topics themselves, and from his reading of the published and unpublished criticism which preceded him. That is, his interpretations of the individual poems are shaped to support his discussion of the topic at hand in any given section. His interpretations are interesting, just as Hoffman's interpretations are interesting, but his "critical assumptions" (LaFrance 130) circumscribe his interpretations as much as LaFrance implies of Hoffman.

Peck very thoroughly collects and discusses nearly all of the previous scholarship pertinent to his approach. Because his approach is topical, his research ranges across a wide variety of previous scholarship, including the initial reception, studies of Crane's influences and sources, as well as most of the criticism concerned with the form, style, or craft (or "art") of the poetry. Aside from his rejection of biographical approaches to literary criticism, Peck's dissertation is notable for the inclusivity of his approach, as if he is tying up several threads of previous scholarship. In fact, in his own analysis, he leans frequently on other views, although his synthesis is his own. Peck's synthesis can be considered especially helpful to the extent he salvages useful criticism from the work of scholars who otherwise tend to dismiss Crane's poetry as poetry, or to use the poetry only insofar as it helps elucidate the fiction. Thus, he notes Stallman's attention to "contrast" as he makes his own case for how "contrast" functions "as a vital structuring device in Crane's poetry" (Peck 141-5), although Stallman's useful insights about the poetry tend to get lost in his own writing because of his evaluative and ultimately dismissive discussion of the poetry.<sup>23</sup>

Peck does not explicitly attempt to treat *The Black Riders* as a text which coheres in itself, although he does recognize that *The Black Riders* might be read as a whole. Because Peck divides the poems among his sections, and because he jumps around in his reading of all of Crane's poetry together, including *The Black Riders*, *War is Kind*, and Crane's unpublished poetry, in order to illustrate his topics, he does not explicitly pose or develop an argument about how the poems interrelate. He does occasionally compare poems, such as when he compares deluded men in poems 59 and 36 of *The Black Riders*

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<sup>23</sup> "As unified wholes his poems are negligible ... They are certainly not notable for innovations of poetic technique and form. In technique they are bad models ... in texture they are flat ..." (Stallman 1966, 575)

(Peck 86), or when he compares the perspectives outside and inside of a church in poems 32 and 63 (Peck 179), so he does assume that the poems illuminate one another. In addition, he notes that Max Westbrook previously described how the poems demonstrate “a coherent, and positive, view of reality” (Peck 53). He also quotes Maxwell Geismar’s contention that the poems of *The Black Riders* are “actually episodes in free verse” (qtd. in Peck 93), so he is clearly aware that other critics had previously raised the issue of how the poems might interrelate. In fact, Peck himself comments off-handedly, without follow-up, that “One could almost picture the separate poems as incidents upon the Crane persona’s climb up his metaphorical mountain. The body of the poetry, when viewed this way, can be considered a unified statement like that in Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress*.” (165). Peck is probably directly inspired here by James M. Cox, who writes, in “*The Pilgrim’s Progress* as Source for Stephen Crane’s *The Black Riders*,” that “the ‘I’ who so frequently appears in the poems ... is indeed a new pilgrim ... in agonizing search for truth and mercy and love” (485). However, Cox identifies this “I” with Crane himself and does not otherwise argue in his article that the poems cohere.

Peck does not follow up on his own notion that *The Black Riders* might tell a story about the progress of a “Crane persona” (165), but this idea was explored soon after Peck’s writing, separately, by two scholars, Yoshie Itabashi and William Knowlton Spofford, although curiously, neither acknowledges the suggestion.<sup>24</sup> Considering possible precedents for her approach, Itabashi does note, in “The Modern Pilgrimage of *The Black Riders: An Interpretation*,” that Hoffman previously wrote about “a progress’

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<sup>24</sup> Itabashi can perhaps be presumed to have had limited access to some U.S.-based resources, such as this dissertation, but Spofford, writing within a decade of Peck at the same university on the same subject could be expected to have read Peck. On the other hand, Peck’s comment really is off-hand and tangential to the entire thrust of his dissertation.

and ‘stages’” as expressed by Crane’s poems, but she considers Hoffman to have missed his own insight, because of how “he took all the poems to pieces and categorised them according to several ideas” (Itabashi 3), a criticism which we have seen applies to Peck as well. Of course, Hoffman was describing the “progress” and “stages” of a biographical Crane (Itabashi 3), not a “Crane persona” within the poems (Peck 165), so the interrelatedness of the poems in his interpretation ultimately lies outside the poetry.

As it turns out, however, Itabashi also reads biographically, or apparently so – she seems sometimes to distinguish between “the poet,” as the protagonist of her analysis, and Crane, and sometimes not. Her “venture is to plunge into the poet’s spiritual struggle as manifested in his creation ... as he went searching for truth in life” (Itabashi 3). She reads the poems as they are numbered, in sequence, as “the whole experience of the spirit in search of truth” (Itabashi 4). In effect, she constructs a story from the poems about the real Stephen Crane, or possibly his avatar, whom she reveals to be a protagonist struggling in a conflict between his inherited religious beliefs and his modern “doubt” (38-9). In her interpretation, Crane does achieve a revelation of sorts, in which “love” is “the supreme virtue of man, although love is still too distant, though aspired toward, and too ephemeral, or dream-like, to be the real part of the poet’s soul and body” (Itabashi 40). Because the plot of her story is governed by the sequence of Crane’s poems, however, she considers Crane’s story to end badly for Crane, along with a spirit in the last poem of *The Black Riders*, smited for denying God.

Spofford’s approach is similar to Itabashi’s, insofar as he reads *The Black Riders* as a story, but he rejects the numbered sequence of the poems as the order of the story, instead proposing to re-order the poems into “four basic groups that suggest phases in an

individual's development" (17), which I will discuss later. In his secondary research review, he dismisses Itabashi's work because she follows the numbered sequence of the poems, considering her interpretation to be "a little flimsy when we consider how often he [sic] has to strain to explain why two poems with very different subjects, tones, and images appear next to each other in the volume" (Spofford 16). Despite Spofford's rejection of Itabashi's reading, he does not insist that his approach is the only approach to *The Black Riders*. In fact, in the course of discussing his proposal that there might be another sequence to the poems, in which he notes that the poems don't necessarily follow "a set scheme because such a framework would limit their rich interaction," he more profoundly observes that "the poems lend themselves to multiple interpretations and interrelationships" (Spofford 17), although he does not pursue this insight.

In general, because Spofford is focused narrowly on defining the uniqueness of his own approach in his secondary research review, he often seems dismissive of previous attempts to describe the interrelationship of Crane's poetry, and yet his review is useful as a catalog of those attempts up to the time of his writing. He mentions Hoffman only to reject the possibility that Hoffman provides any precedent, commenting that Hoffman reads "all of the poetry together" and (as Itabashi notes) that he "divides all of the poetry according to recurrent themes" (Spofford 12). As we have seen, these observations apply as well to Peck, although in his case, the division occurs along the lines of his topics. Spofford comments, further, that several critics, including "Katz, Fryckstedt, Berryman," and "LaFrance," have not "followed their own clues and investigated the possible unity of the first volume of verse by itself" (15). He dismisses the work of Max Westbrook, because Westbrook analyzes "all the poetry in one lump"

(Spofford 13), like Hoffman and Peck, and because that analysis only encompasses a portion of the “lump” (Spofford 13), which is to say that Westbrook does not treat *The Black Riders* either alone or in full, as Spofford proposes to do.

If we glance back from Spofford to Westbrook, however, we can see that Spofford’s approach in fact follows from, or is made possible by, Westbrook’s interpretation. Westbrook offers an early and highly convincing argument that “Crane’s poetry does cohere,” rejecting earlier accusations that Crane’s “world view is arbitrary, unrealized” (“Stephen Crane’s Poetry” 25). In Westbrook’s analysis, “Stephen Crane’s Poetry: Perspective and Arrogance,” there are two “voices” in Crane’s poetry, “the *iron* ... as the unassuming voice of the man of perspective, and the *alazon*” as “the loud voice of the man of arrogance” (“Stephen Crane’s Poetry” 32). Westbrook is not perfectly clear whether these voices are spoken by different personae in the poetry or if they are spoken by one persona, although he does note (with Spofford’s later approval) that “To mature ... is to change from *alazon* to *iron*” (“Stephen Crane’s Poetry” 32). Either way, Westbrook refers the coherence he uncovers in his analysis of the poems to Crane himself, as the source of “a reasonably consistent standard of values that shapes the essential unity of” the “poetry” (“Stephen Crane’s Poetry” 34). That is, he takes a step outside of the poetry to speculate about the biographical Crane, even though his analysis is founded in the interrelatedness he finds in the poetry and does not require that extra step to validate his analysis.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> He first assumes that the poems encompassed by his argument are interrelated, so that the repeated appearances of the “voices” he identifies in fact reinforce the meaningfulness of those “voices” (and the pertinence of his interpretation), but instead of identifying this interrelatedness explicitly, as the foundation of the coherence he finds, he looks elsewhere, away from his own analysis, to the person of Crane as the foundation for that coherence.

Westbrook is primarily concerned to show how recognizing the two “voices” changes the interpretation of Crane’s poetry, but he also characterizes his understanding of “truth” in the poetry, because he uses *BR* 28, which narrates two travelers’ descriptions of truth, as the keystone of his argument that the two voices are consistent throughout the poetry. That is, his interpretation of “truth” throughout the poetry depends on his interpretation of “truth” in this poem, because he characterizes the “voices” on the basis of what they say in the poem:

“Truth,” said a traveller,  
 “Is a rock, a mighty fortress;  
 “Often have I been to it,  
 “Even to its highest tower,  
 “From whence the world looks black.”

“Truth,” said a traveller,  
 “Is a breath, a wind,  
 “A shadow, a phantom;  
 “Long have I pursued it,  
 “But never have I touched  
 “The hem of its garment.”

And I believed the second traveller;  
 For truth was to me  
 A breath, a wind,

A shadow, a phantom,  
 And never had I touched  
 The hem of its garment.  
 (Crane 29)

In Westbrook's view, the "first traveller ... is wrong," whereas "the second traveller ... has gained perspective through his awareness of the nature of reality" ("Stephen Crane's Poetry" 27). Westbrook considers this poem to show that "truth exists ... but it exists as an elusive 'shadow,' not as a fixed 'rock' or institutionalized 'fortress.'" ("Stephen Crane's Poetry" 27). Westbrook further describes this "real" "truth" as "symbolic" ("Stephen Crane's Poetry" 29). He seems to consider this "truth" to be unattainable, insofar as "man cannot get his hands on a truth which is symbolic" (Westbrook, "Stephen Crane's Poetry" 29). However, he does also suggest that this "truth" can be "approached," but only "through the oblique language of symbolic experience" (Westbrook, "Stephen Crane's Poetry" 33). Spofford, as we will see, does not entirely share with Westbrook this understanding of "truth" in Crane's poetry, although he does seem to have been influenced by Westbrook, at least through Westbrook's apparent influence on Marston LaFrance's reading.<sup>26</sup>

Spofford, in his secondary research review, also superficially dismisses the approach of Marston LaFrance, because LaFrance, in his reading of Westbrook, sets Westbrook's notion of the two voices "in opposition" (Spofford 13). In Spofford's view,

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<sup>26</sup> Westbrook mentions that "not one Crane hero is judged by external values, by practical success or failure" (31). He also observes that "the real cannot be institutionalized" in Crane's poetry (Westbrook 26). LaFrance echoes both statements. However, Westbrook did not develop a foundational opposition as LaFrance does. LaFrance seems to have fed Westbrook's insights into a structure which is not only explicit, but which also "governs" the interpretation of the poems (so that Westbrook's insights can emerge as a product of LaFrance's structure).

LaFrance fails to see “the possibility that the two voices are intended to be from the same persona at different stages of development” (13). In fact, however, LaFrance seems to depend on that opposition, perhaps as a “critical assumption” of his own (130), insofar as he founds his argument on the oppositions he sees in Crane’s poetry. He asserts a “triumvirate” of crucial oppositions, between “two ... concepts of ‘God’” (an opposition which perhaps originates with Hoffman, but is traditional at this point in Crane scholarship), between “two ... voices” (from Westbrook), and between “two ... concepts of truth” (144-5). Underlying his discussion of these oppositions, and although it is organized largely thematically, he relies on a more fundamental opposition, between inside and outside (or inner and outer, internal and external). LaFrance treats this binary much as I propose to treat the “presence” problem, as an issue underlying poems usually interpreted separately (that is, categorically).

In LaFrance’s reading of Crane’s poems, there is an essential opposition between “externality” as “the universe and all its furniture” (132) and the inner, “private reality” (152) of the individual. External reality is “morally empty,” so any attempt to attain a moral ideal in the external world is bound to failure (LaFrance 134). LaFrance’s reading of *BR* 21, in which a narrator describes a trek across “burning sand” toward “a place of infinite beauty” (Crane 22), applies to his reading of all of the poetry (and to Crane’s fiction, as well as his letters to Nellie Crouse): “let an honest man have no illusions that the ideal can ever be attained in this desert world of externality beyond the individual’s control” (137). Thus, he proceeds to show that external pursuits of truth or love cannot be “ideally realized,” although they “must be pursued in practical action” (LaFrance 162), which is not paradoxical in his reading because the “concept of the conscience makes life

in” a “morally empty” universe “both bearable and meaningful” (134 and 151). That is, he considers Crane to privilege “the self” as “a private reality, apart from whatever external forces are aligned against it” (LaFrance 152). He considers ideals to be unattainable in the “external” world, because the world is “amoral” (LaFrance 132), but, on the other hand, those same ideals would seem to be attainable in one’s “private reality” (LaFrance 152).<sup>27</sup> In my own view, LaFrance’s reading is highly convincing and, eventually, I will draw attention to how my own reading cooperates with his. However, I’ll also try to show how the “presence” problem might underlie his foundational external/ internal binary, which will lead me to question to what extent ideals are attainable even “internally” in Crane’s poetry.

Returning to Spofford, we can see just how much he seems to follow LaFrance, especially to the extent he relies on a foundational opposition between inside and outside. Unlike LaFrance, though, Spofford considers this opposition to be resolved in the story he constructs from the poems, at least for the “central figure” in the story (19).<sup>28</sup> In this story, an individual matures through several stages, one of which involves the “pursuit of something external” (Spofford 35), but the individual must progress through this stage, eventually to learn to trust the “interior voice” (Spofford 56). The “central figure” (Spofford 19) then proceeds through further stages, to learn self-acceptance, finally to recognize that others also have an “interior voice” (Spofford 56), which may differ from

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<sup>27</sup> LaFrance implies that the inner reality is essentially moral – morally constituted perhaps – if we make his binary fully explicit and symmetrical, which he doesn’t quite.

<sup>28</sup> Really, Spofford treats the story as an allegory featuring an everyman, insofar as he considers the story to be universal, implicating any one. Spofford does not explicitly declare this aspect of his argument, but one can see it, for example, in his use of the word “one”: “as long as one’s eye is fastened on externals, one will not be able to concentrate on the voice within” (Spofford 58).

the individual's own, while the individual will also have gained compassion and respect for those differences.

Spofford's reading seems to be strongly influenced by LaFrance's reading, although there are some notable differences. In Spofford's reading, "truth" is shown to be attainable by listening to the "interior voice" (56). Similarly, in LaFrance's reading, moral ideals seem to be attainable, but only internally, in one's "private reality" (152). In Spofford's usage, "truth" is a subsuming term. Thus, for example, he can discuss what happens after the "seeker realizes what the full truth is" (Spofford 43), which is to say that he considers the poems to assume a "full truth" that can, in fact, be realized (even in the external world). In contrast, LaFrance refers to the search for truth as one theme among three, including the searches for God and for love.<sup>29</sup> In his usage, these three pursuits are subsumed in his discussion of the pursuit of moral ideals, so "ideal" is for him the subsuming term. In Spofford's view, the "truth" discovered by the "central figure" (19) cannot be "articulated," but it can be "communicated" through behavior (18 and 42). LaFrance, as we've seen, considers "practical action" (162) to be necessary, but he repeatedly makes clear that such action is bound to failure in Crane's poetry (and fiction); the ideal simply cannot be realized in the external world.

Indeed, Spofford conveys the sense that the individual's capacity to attain "truth" is also a capacity to change the world. He echoes LaFrance's observation that the "universe and all its furniture" is "amoral" (132) when he notes that "Any justice in society must spring from within each of us" (Spofford 55). In that same breath, however, he seems also to declare the possibility that such an external construction (of "justice")

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<sup>29</sup> In fact, Spofford barely touches the love poetry and when he does, he sublimates the love poetry as truth poetry.

could succeed, insofar as he describes justice as springing (one presumes out) “from within each of us.” In LaFrance’s reading of Crane’s poetry, in which the opposition of external to internal strictly constrains what is possible in the poems, justice could never be realized externally. Despite Spofford’s seeming suggestion that justice might “spring” forth, he does not explicitly declare whether he thinks “justice” (55) could be “ideally realized” (LaFrance 162) in “society” (55). He does, however, sound a Transcendentalist note as he reaches the conclusion of his reading of *The Black Riders* (that is, the first chapter of his dissertation), when he declares that “justice in the cosmos must also spring from the interior God, for He is the standard against which all things must be weighed” (55).<sup>30</sup> Spofford does not elaborate on this statement, but he would seem to have found a moral absolute in the “universe” of Crane’s poetry, pervading the “furniture” (LaFrance 132), although perhaps attainable only by the interior-searching of the people reclining thereon, which would seem to place him at odds with LaFrance ultimately, despite how closely he follows LaFrance to reach that conclusion.

After Spofford, one further scholar deserves close attention for how she describes the interrelationship of Crane’s poems. In “The Poetic Process in Stephen Crane’s Poetry,” Susan Daughtry Barnett assumes that Crane’s poems center on a single persona, like Itabashi and Spofford, but she does not read a single story or depend on a preferred sequence of the poems. In Barnett’s reading, the persona, or “protagonist,” as she prefers to call him, “is Crane himself” (6), so her reading is biographical. Like Westbrook, however, the biographical aspect of her argument is not actually necessary to her

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<sup>30</sup> Compare, for example: “But if, instead of identifying ourselves with the work, we feel that the soul of the Workman streams through us, we shall find the peace of the morning dwelling first in our hearts, and the fathomless powers of gravity and chemistry, and, over, them, of life, preexisting within us in their highest form” (Emerson 194).

argument. She refers to Crane's letters often to characterize Crane's attitudes as an aid when interpreting the poems, or when making general points about various categories among the poems, but those same interpretations and points could be made as validly within the poetry as without, and maybe the extra effort would lead to further insight. Like other biographical critics, she has a tendency to reach for interpretations indexed in her book of his life, which leads her to read quickly. For example, she claims that the "individual poems ... are not hard to interpret" (Barnett 2), but her interpretations of the individual poems sometimes differ significantly from the interpretations of previous critics. She doesn't seem to be aware of the multiplicity (and possibly the uncertainty) available in at least some of the poems, or perhaps to be aware of the range of previous readings of those poems.

Nevertheless, Barnett's approach is notable as a culmination of sorts. She does not seem to have read either Itabashi or Spofford, but her approach bears a resemblance to their approaches, insofar as she treats the poems as if they interrelate and she considers the poems to be centered on a protagonist searching for "truth." Unlike them, however, she does not read *The Black Riders* alone (as a unit), and, much more important, her reading is more flexible, because she does not depend on a plot to make her argument, so the poems can be read in nearly any order, although she does depend on thematic categories to organize the poems.

Barnett considers the poems to be the result of Crane's own search for "truth" in a variety of contexts, so she organizes her analysis using those contexts as categories. She claims that "The aim of the poet is at once to seek the truth and to speak it" on a variety of "subjects," including "the human condition ... the natural world ... and concepts of

deity” (Barnett 7). A consequence of her division of the poems among these various “subjects” (Barnett 7) is that her discussion occurs within those divisions, rather than across them, despite her overall concern for how the poems together describe Crane’s search for “truth.” Thus, in her second chapter, she reads “The poems about love” separately from “the poems about the natural world” (Barnett 29), before moving onto “the poems about god” (Barnett 33). In each de facto section, her interpretations refer primarily to the divisions themselves, which is reminiscent of Hoffman and Peck. In the “love poem” section, for example, her tendency is to paraphrase the love poems quickly, each in turn, to consider how each poem expresses something or other about love only. At the end of the section, though, she relates these categorical interpretations to her broader argument about “truth.” She comments that “none” of the love poems “describes love fully” (Barnett 33), and this description of how the love poems fail to encompass love in one breath (so to speak) will later contribute to her description of how all the poems depict “the nature of truth” (Barnett 51).

Barnett concludes that Crane’s poems, when read together, reveal a truth about “truth,” insofar as they “can lead ... to an understanding of the nature of truth” (51). She contends that Crane “examines nature, love, and god in a variety of different lights because the whole truth about nature, love, and god is made up of all the different ways of interpreting them.” (Barnett 51). Concomitant with this notion that the “whole truth” (Barnett 51) is a composite of perspectives is her insight that “no one person sees more than his limited perspective allows” (Barnett 43). In other words, she seems to assume, like Spofford, that there is “truth,” and, somewhat like Spofford, that this “truth” depends on the individual (as a source of perspectives, at least), but unlike Spofford, she does not

think that any individual can attain the “full truth” (Spofford 43). In her reading of the poems, the “truth” will always be greater than any one perspective precisely because “truth” comprises the combination of all possible perspectives.<sup>31</sup>

Barnett’s attention to the centrality of “truth” in Crane’s poetry is not unique. As we’ve seen, Itabashi, LaFrance, and Spofford each consider the search for “truth” (or the “ideal”) to be the central concern of Crane’s poetry. Other scholars have similarly observed that the search for “truth” is central to the poetry, at more or less length, although they have not similarly focused centrally on that search in their analyses. Notably, Carlin T. Kindilien, in his chapter on “The Poet Critics of Society and Religion” from his literary historical survey *American Poetry in the Eighteen Nineties*, considers “truth” to be a central concern of the poetry, if not the only concern, and he also seems to have seen that the love and “truth” poetry might share underpinnings. Thus, he turns from a brief discussion of the love poetry to note how “... the pursuit motif was developed beyond purely romantic motivation. It was a search for the ‘mystic shadow’ of Truth, for the unattainable ideal ...” (Kindilien 159). However, Kindilien does not pursue this insight any further – his concern is primarily to fit Crane into the proper niche of his study (“The *Black Riders* is the best place to study the element of revolt in the poetry of the Nineties.” 159), before he moves on to find the proper place for Ambrose Bierce.

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<sup>31</sup> Barnett’s approach is followed by Patrick K. Dooley, in *The Pluralistic Philosophy of Stephen Crane*, I think, insofar as he finds that “Crane is not skeptical about humanity’s ability to know the world” (29), but “reality is the totality of conflicting, ongoing, interpenetrating experiences” (46). That is, he finds that “truth” exists in Crane’s work (insofar as a “plurality” of truths exist), but “no single record of” the world “can claim truth” (Dooley 30). His book addresses Crane’s work broadly, although he has a chapter devoted to the poetry, in which he might be said to pursue a couple of weak interrelationships through the poetry based on theme; he skims very quickly through a couple of “kinds” of poems, including “God” and “war” poems. His philosophical contextualization of Crane’s work is very interesting, but tangential to my analysis.

Ruth Miller, in “Regions of Snow: The Poetic Style of Stephen Crane,” also observes, but does not pursue the search for “truth.” She summarizes:

Of the sixty-eight poems in *The Black Riders* fourteen ponder the nature of truth. The next largest number, thirteen inquire into the nature of God. . . . his quest for truth and his search for the meaning of God are so interrelated we may look upon all twenty-seven poems as having a similar concern. The remaining forty-one poems, indeed all the rest of the poems in the canon, have for their subject matter various applications of this pervasive search for truth . . . (Miller 334)

Miller does not explicitly set out either to prove or to explore this claim; instead, she addresses herself to questions of Crane’s style. In her conclusion, she comments how “There are, surely, philosophical, social, and religious meanings in the poetry of Stephen Crane but his poems attract more by their leaping disjunctive motions than by their import or relevance” (Miller 349). That is, Miller is more interested in how Crane’s poetry works than in what it might say.

Nevertheless, Miller can’t entirely exclude the “import” of the poems from her analysis. When she does acknowledge meaning, her reading is strikingly pessimistic. Her summary of the “love” poems is that “There is no love left in the world; love has passed beyond the world leaving it bereft” (Miller 336). As we’ve seen, this reading runs directly counter to Itabashi, who considers Crane to have, at least, glimpsed “truth” in his understanding of love, insofar as “love is a saving, compensatory force for the poet” (14). Further, in Miller’s reading of *BR* 28, a poem which compares two versions of “truth”

and is, as we have seen, central to Westbrook's recognition of the two voices in Crane's poetry, she claims "Crane associates himself with the second" version and that "he implies ... that he believes truth is not attainable, perhaps even non-existent" (Miller 338). On the one hand, Westbrook would disagree with the notion that this poem claims "truth" is "non-existent" (Miller 338). After all, he states quite certainly that he thinks this poem shows that "truth exists" (Westbrook, "Stephen Crane's Poetry" 27). On the other hand, Westbrook does seem to agree with Miller's contention that this truth is "not attainable" (338), insofar as "man cannot get his hands on" this "truth" (Westbrook, "Stephen Crane's Poetry" 29), although Westbrook is perhaps a little bit obscure on this point. Westbrook's understanding might actually be closer to LaFrance or Spofford than Miller, to the extent he implies this "truth" is attainable internally, through "symbolic experience" ("Stephen Crane's Poetry" 33), because the "eiron" can learn to "revere the individual conscience" and to "share the standard of values represented by the God who 'whispers in the heart'" ("Stephen Crane's Poetry" 30). That is, Westbrook might not consider the "truth" to be unattainable in Crane's poetry except by "hands" ("Stephen Crane's Poetry" 29), as both a synecdoche and metaphor for the external pursuit of "truth."

In Miller's description of the style of Crane's poetry, she mentions many sources of uncertainty, but, because she is not concerned to analyze "the pervasive search for truth" (334) in the poetry, or the "import" (349) more broadly, she doesn't explore the possibility that the style of the poetry is also expressive of the meaning of the poetry. She describes the poet as wearing a "stylized mask" so that "the precise nature of" his "thoughts eludes us" (Miller 329). In her view, he "disturbs our sense of logic with

illogic” (Miller 348). She comments on his “ambiguity of meaning” (Miller 331), even his “deliberate ambiguity” (Miller 333). She finds, pointing to one of the poems as an example, that “There are no pointers to the external frame of reference” (Miller 332). She observes how his use of “Repetition ... trips us up and puzzles us and pushes us to grab for the shift of meaning” (Miller 344). She describes the “vague” settings, “minimal” vocabulary” and “stripped ... detail” of the poems (Miller 338). She notes “encounters” which are “indecisive” (Miller 334) and “unresolved dramatic conflict” (Miller 349). And yet, probably because she considers Crane’s “wisdom” to be “adolescent,” she does not connect these stylistic features to the “import” of the poems (Miller 349).

Given that Miller considers the poetry to be centrally concerned with the pursuit of “truth” – a “truth” which she characterizes as “not attainable” (338) – and given that she identifies many stylistic features of the poetry which lead to uncertainty, although she herself doesn’t dwell on the function(s) of that uncertainty, what might have happened if she had not dismissed the “import” of the poems (349)? It seems possible that one could use much of her stylistic evidence to support an argument that the poems lead to “epistemological uncertainty” (Kent, “Epistemological Uncertainty” 622),<sup>32</sup> which wouldn’t be the same as claiming that the poems are meaningless. Instead, one might recognize that the poems support multiple interpretations and a variety of interrelationships, so that a single, “right” interpretation is “not attainable” (Miller 338), just like “truth” within the poems. By paying more attention to what seems to be occurring across the poems (which, in Miller, is the “pervasive search for truth” 334), it seems likely, or at least possible, that one might also begin to consider how extensively

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<sup>32</sup> ... in which event, the poems may be “deliberately” uncertain, but I can’t ask Crane and I wouldn’t trust his answer anyway, so I’m leaving him out of it.

the poems can be treated as if they interrelate. That is, one might begin to wonder how the “truth” of one poem informs the “truth” found in other poems, or how that “truth” informs the interpretation of metaphors, such as the “ball of gold in the sky” (Crane 36), and so on, perhaps eventually to see interrelationships crisscrossing the body of poetry, or some significant portion of that body.

Committed to both approaches, one might even entertain the possibility that the meanings available from the poems vary with the sequence in which the poems are read. And further, one might see that the sequence itself is uncertain – if we accept that the reading of the poems should inform the reading of the interrelationship(s) of the poems. But, of course, Miller makes no such claims. She published her article in 1968, in the same year Itabashi first explored *The Black Riders* as a narrative, so the possibility of treating the poems explicitly as if they interrelate in this way might not have been available to her (might not have been “prepared” historically), even if her “critical assumptions” (LaFrance 130) had allowed her to see these possibilities, which, of course, they wouldn’t have.

In my own view, it does make sense to treat the poems as if they interrelate, of course. It is not necessary to treat the poems as if they interrelate to see the “presence” problem, though, because this problem can be found in individual poems, read separately, as if they do not together cohere. However, I think a recognition of the “presence” problem in even a few poems should lead naturally to a slower, more careful reading of other poems for (perhaps less obvious) manifestations of the same problem – and so to a recognition that the poetry interrelates. That is, I think the recognition of the “presence” problem can lead to the recognition of the interrelationship of the poetry, and vice versa. I

think the recognition of “truth” as the (or a) central concern of the poetry should also lead to a similarly more careful reading, but we’ve seen this hasn’t always been the case. I think the explanation for this discrepancy has to do with the “critical assumptions” (LaFrance 130) of the scholars involved; if the “truth” of Crane’s poetry wasn’t pursued in a particular study, it was because other quarry was at hand.<sup>33</sup>

Further, I don’t think that there is a preferred sequence to the poems, despite the fact that they are numbered, which might seem indicative of the author’s “intention.” Indeed, the presentation format might primarily reflect the tastes of Crane’s publisher,<sup>34</sup> in which case, the numbers could be taken to reflect either the publisher’s or the editor’s sense of the order of Crane’s poems, or not. Personally, I think the Roman numerals heading each poem serve primarily as non-semantic separators, meaningful insofar as they declare breaks between the poems, not sequence. In this scenario, the numerals serve primarily an aesthetic function, to the extent as they have been preferred to asterisks or curlicues (or whatever), although they do perhaps also evoke a classical ambience (as tone) – reminiscent of columns outside a temple possibly – recalling the Pythia as much as the Stoa. But, after all, I needn’t be facetious (even if my guess is as likely as any, and

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<sup>33</sup> It seems to be traditional for scholars concerned with the coherence of Crane’s poetry, or *The Black Riders* specifically, to quote Crane himself on how his editor’s suggestion to cut certain poems from the collection would “cut all the ethical sense out of the book” (Crane, *Letters*, 40). I don’t think this quotation offers much evidence of Crane’s “intention.” In other words, I think the quotation is weak as external warrant for any given reading, so I rely entirely on what I find in the poems. Or, to be more succinct: I rely on internal warrant. You can see, though, that I just couldn’t help myself from mentioning this external warrant.

<sup>34</sup> The capitalization of the lettering of the poems was the idea of Fred Holland Day (the publisher). Apparently, Crane did not want the poems to have titles, but I have seen no evidence that Crane chose Roman numerals. He certainly does not seem to have numbered the poems in any version of his manuscript, including his final submitted manuscript, because Day refers to the poems by first line in correspondence preceding the publication of the poems. The Roman numerals could also reflect the taste of Crane’s editor, Louise Imogen Guiney, who offered the title “‘Sagittulae,’ (little sharp arrows)” for the book, which might be indicative that she was interested in Classical references (Colvert, “Fred Holland Day” 18-23).

fitting to the poetry, in my opinion). The fact is that we don't know much of anything either about the "intended" sequence of the poems or the "meaning" of the numbering. Spofford, in order to back his proposed sequence of the poems, notes that the "final arrangement" of the poems "does not necessarily reflect Crane's intention" (17). He mentions that "Extant evidence proves only that Crane himself was responsible for placing" the first poem (Spofford 17).

Nevertheless, we could pursue the problem of the sequence of the poems further by inquiring into the conditions of their composition. We know that Crane told Hamlin Garland that the poems simply came to him (as described by Garland): "'I have four or five up here,' he replied, pointing toward his temple, 'all in a little row,' he quaintly added. 'That's the way they come – in little rows, all ready to be put down on paper. I wrote nine yesterday'" (Gullason 100). Crane then proceeded to "compose" *BR* 6 in front of Garland, "God fashioned the ship of the world carefully..." We might take this brief anecdote as proof that Crane couldn't possibly have composed the poems in the sequence published (6-9=?), but, then, Garland is known to have been inexact in his recollections and Crane himself could very well have been performing a play for Garland's amazement (perhaps having already, actually, "composed" this poem among the earlier "nine"). Some of his biographers wouldn't put such a show past Crane. By thus inquiring into the composition of the poetry, we might find some slight proof that the poems were composed in a sequence other than they were published.<sup>35</sup> Such an alternative order could

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<sup>35</sup> We might, additionally make some hay of C.K. Linson's account, who possibly saw some of the earliest poems (maybe earlier than Garland, because Linson was a more intimate friend) including *BR* 62, 38 and 14 (Linson 49-50). But again, Linson's recollections are known to be problematic. Fredson Bowers claims that Linson saw the poems as much as a month before Garland (190). Bowers does expend some energy trying to reconstruct the order of composition based on Linson's account (192).

then be treated as if it undercuts any argument about the intentionality (and thus the presumed meaning) of the sequence as published, but really, what would this exercise actually accomplish?

In actuality, the issue of the sequence and numbering of the poems in *The Black Riders and other lines* is a red herring. Crane's "intention" doesn't much matter to how the poems are read, for all of the usual reasons "intention" has been considered an inherently problematic concept, but perhaps especially because I don't think an artist could ever fully (or "truthfully") paraphrase her or his own "intention" as it is manifested in a text.<sup>36</sup> If we, as the readers, can see an interrelationship among the poems, regardless of what the numbering might have meant to whichever person was responsible for the numbering, and if we can make a good enough case that what we are seeing is "real," then the interrelationship is there. In my own analysis to follow, I will not dwell at great length on the availability of alternative interpretations to individual poems, or on the availability of other paths through the poems, because I will be primarily concerned to trace just one interrelationship through the poetry – the interrelationship provided (or presumed, or uncovered) by my investigation of the shared problem of "presence." However, I do suspect that there might be many more such paths through this text.

In looking out for the "presence" problem, I will probably cross paths with previous scholars not so much in my approach to the interrelationship of the poetry,

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Bowers also considers the possibility that the poems were submitted in some order. He considers the initial 12 poems to have been grouped "in the original arrangement" (197), although he thinks the sequence of this group changed at publication. His evidence for the initial group of 12 is thin (based on speculation and word counts), but not impossible. The main point, in my view, is that there are numerous possible orderings even among these first 12 (197-8).

<sup>36</sup> Crane's texts perhaps provide the best argument why we shouldn't try to quote or paraphrase Crane's "intentions" – imagine quoting Henry Fleming on his own "intentions" at any given point in the course of *The Red Badge of Courage*.

because my explicit exposure of that interrelationship is mostly new to the scholarship on this poetry.<sup>37</sup> Instead, I will cross paths with previous scholars as I pursue what I consider to be a central concern of Crane's poetry, "presence." As we have seen, several scholars have focused on the pursuit of "truth" as a central concern of Crane's poetry and all of these scholars have commented on the attainability of that "truth." Westbrook, LaFrance, and Spofford each consider "truth" to be externally unattainable in Crane's poetry. However, each offers the possibility that "truth" might be somehow attainable internally, for example, by listening to the "interior voice" (Spofford 56), or through "symbolic experience" (Westbrook, "Stephen Crane's Poetry" 33). Itabashi does not consider Crane as the protagonist of his own poems to have attained "truth," but she does regard him as having glimpsed it. Barnett and Miller consider "truth" to be unattainable in the poetry. Barnett shows that the unattainability of "truth" in Crane's poetry results from the essential partiality involved in perspective.<sup>38</sup> Miller's identification of the centrality of the problem of "truth" in the poetry is not supported in her analysis of Crane's style, although her exploration of Crane's style could be heavily cited for the purpose of an analysis of "truth" in his poetry. Such an analysis might show that the unattainability of "truth" in the

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<sup>37</sup> Spofford explicitly acknowledges the "multiple interpretations and interrelationships" available in the poetry (Spofford 17), but his tightly focused analysis of only one possible interrelationship obscures this point. David Halliburton, in his chapter on Crane's poetry from *The Color of the Sky: A Study of Stephen Crane*, mentions that the poems "act and react on one another like moments of a musing conversation" (270), but he does not pursue this insight, in and of itself. He does note, upon reading *BR* 68, that "The poem does not stand alone ... but relates to other works from which a variety of impressions arises" (298), which is getting very close to the sense of "interrelationship" I pursue here. However, he does not pursue this thought substantially. Although I offer an analysis on the basis of only one theme, I am at pains throughout this essay to note that other possibilities are available, thus to invite attention to the interrelationship of the poetry as such.

<sup>38</sup> "The failure to grasp and articulate the truth is built into the poet's concept of the nature of truth. If every view of god, of love, and of nature is both right and wrong, if every view is a part of the whole reality and none is a whole reality itself, then no one individual can ever know truth entirely." (Barnett 42)

poetry is related to the essential uncertainty, or the “epistemological uncertainty” (Kent, “Epistemological Uncertainty” 622), underlying the interpretation of this poetry.

As I noted in the Introduction, I will investigate the unattainability of “truth” in Crane’s poetry, along with separations from a beloved, and so on. I will not separate the poems categorically, but I will also not subsume one kind of poem to another, which is to say I will not treat “love” poems as if they are “really” about the pursuit of “truth.” Instead, I will consider how both of these kinds of poems, and other kinds of poems, share a common problem which determines (or helps to determine) the action or scene (or consequences of either) described by the poems. That is, I will interpret the poems in a way they have not been interpreted before, in terms of an issue underlying what happens in the poems, at a “deeper” level than they have been previously interpreted, so to speak.<sup>39</sup> Nevertheless, my starting point is similar to several of the scholars I have reviewed here. Like them, I am also very aware of the pursuit of “truth” in Crane’s poetry, and I am also setting out to understand and explain how that pursuit plays out.

To be perfectly clear, I don’t think my analysis of the poetry is the only valid analysis. Just like Spofford, I think “the poems lend themselves to multiple interpretations and interrelationships” (Spofford 17), and these are my major, guiding “critical assumptions” (LaFrance 130). I do go a bit further than Spofford, eventually, to suggest that these “multiple interpretations and interrelationships” can lead the critic to

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<sup>39</sup> Westbrook and LaFrance similarly proposed underlying explanations to guide the interpretation of the poetry (by reading in terms of the two “voices,” or in terms of an underlying binary of inside/ outside). The narrative interpretations proposed by Itabashi and Spofford also underlie, and determine, their readings. The notion of “presence” would underlie all of these – in fact, the reading for “presence” would undercut and invalidate these interpretations to some extent, which I will consider briefly in the Conclusion.

see that this text is something unlike other texts (of the time) – even as I focus on reading just one possible interrelationship for just one major theme.

As to method, I will attempt to analyze only the text itself, and the experience of reading the text, but not the life or times of the writer. I hope I have made my reasons for this decision clear enough. Of course, the analysis I pursue here, although I consider it to be just one analysis available among others, is specific; that is, I consider the poems (if not all the poems) to feature the problem of “presence” in some way or other, and I rely on some of Jacques Derrida’s ideas to explain how this problem is functioning in the poems. Even though Crane’s writing precedes Derrida’s by about seventy years, Derrida’s notion of “presence” is useful here for the purpose of identifying and understanding what is happening in these poems, I think, because the poems investigate, in their own manner, a problem that was later to pre-occupy Derrida. One curiosity here is that Derrida is helpful to the extent his discussion is relatively more straightforward than Crane’s poems, although Derrida’s writing has often been characterized as complex, while these poems have so often been treated as if they are simple.

## II

Several poems in *The Black Riders and other lines* either discuss “truth” explicitly or present allegories (or metaphors) which seem, perhaps obviously, to stand for “truth.” I’m not sure I can re-construct Ruth Miller’s count of the poems, in which “fourteen ponder the nature of truth” and so many others “have for their subject matter various applications of” the “pervasive search for truth” (Miller 334), but I certainly agree with her that “truth” is a central concern of the poems. For my purposes here, however, the category of “truth” poems is not important in itself.

I have previously noted how the division of the poems into categories might work against the recognition of a problem underlying a set of poems broader than any given category, because the poems will tend to be considered – thought about – separately, leading to separate insights into each category of poems. In addition, the reliance on categories might tend to preordain how individual poems are interpreted – in effect, to pigeonhole the interpretations, so that they conform to the categories. For example, if a poem is categorized primarily (or only) as a “God” poem, then it will probably (inevitably) be interpreted as expressing an anti-dogmatic, or perhaps an anti-authoritarian, attitude. In such a reading, one might think that the poem merely expresses the up-ending of an order. In the example, dogmatism is up-ended by anti-dogmatism, or authority by a rebellion against it. Such a reading would likely be perfectly valid. The poems of *The Black Riders* tend often to challenge the “wisdom of the age” (Crane 12), and they are expressed so simply that one might think all of the meaning of the poems can be found on the “surface” of the poems, so to speak.

Indeed, at least a few of the poems might seem almost painfully obvious, which could lead some readers to think, like Barnett, that the poems “are not hard to interpret” (2), and to act accordingly. Certain poems, however, can be (perhaps surprisingly) problematic to interpret, whether or not that problematicity has been acknowledged by Crane scholars past. A handful of the poems have attracted widely varying interpretations. Unfortunately, a side-by-side comparison of these interpretations is not within the scope of this paper, although I think such a project would be interesting and especially relevant to the study of Crane’s poetry, given the commonplace (and too easily granted) assumption that the poetry is “simple.” Of course, we’ve seen how whole categories of poems have attracted contradictory conclusions, so that, for example, we’ve observed Hoffman claiming that “love is to be damned” in the poetry (126), while I’ve at least footnoted Kindilien’s notion that “Human love was one of the poet’s supports...” (159). Similarly, we’ve seen how several scholars have differed on the nature of “truth” in the poetry, so some have found “truth” to be attainable, although perhaps only under certain conditions (“internally” or “symbolically”), while Barnett has made an excellent case that “truth” is unattainable in the poems.

In view of these seemingly basic contradictions in the reading of the poetry broadly, as well as the variety of interpretations inspired by some of the individual poems, I have found it worthwhile to keep in mind what I take to be the “import” of *BR* 58:

The sage lectured brilliantly.

Before him, two images:

“Now this one is a devil,

“And this one is me.”

He turned away.

Then a cunning pupil

Changed the positions.

Turned the sage again:

“Now this one is a devil,

“And this one is me.”

The pupils sat, all grinning,

And rejoiced in the game.

But the sage was a sage.

(Crane 64)

As it happens, this poem has been interpreted in at least two different, opposing ways. On the one hand, the poem has been interpreted to reveal that the sage is actually a fool (as suggested, for example, by Hoffman 82-3). The poem itself perhaps supports such a conclusion because, after all, the narrator does not explicitly claim otherwise, even as the “pupils” sit “grinning.” The best support for such a conclusion, however, is probably provided by some other poems of *The Black Riders*, because the “sage” appears elsewhere in the text playing the fool, apparently mistaking a newspaper for wisdom (*BR* 11), or (possibly), as a “learned man,” leading the narrator on a path and losing his way (*BR* 20). In this view, the irony is that the sage is called a sage. On the other hand, the poem has been interpreted to reveal that the sage really is a sage, because the poem turns on that “But.” In this view, the irony is that the pupils, and perhaps some readers, don’t see the turn (an interpretation along the lines of Peck 201-2).

Now, personally, I believe the second interpretation – and, in my view, the poems, like this poem, are not merely concerned to up-end this or that order, as the “cunning student” does (or as any wisdom-cracking adolescent might, if we recall Miller’s judgment). The poems also up-end the very possibility of reading simply for an up-ended order. After all, what does it mean if the sage is really a sage? The “import” of *BR 58*, to me, is to learn to be very wary of my first reading, and also my second – and I carry this sense over to all of the other poems in the text, even as the other poems might be playing their own tricks, perhaps unexpectedly (or some might think impossibly), by setting up certain approaches (...if we can accept that the “sage” can be a set-up) to be up-ended. Put more positively, I take this poem also to justify a certain degree of optimism, even trust, on my part, to consider the possibility that any given poem might really be doing what I think it might be doing, even as I read a poem against its “surface” in some cases.

I began this chapter by observing that several poems in *The Black Riders and other lines* either discuss “truth” explicitly or present allegories (or metaphors) which seem, perhaps obviously, to stand for “truth.” In this chapter, I draw attention to these poems in particular because they illustrate the basic problem of “presence” in *The Black Riders*. To be clear, I am not so much concerned (here) with these poems as “truth” poems per se, although of course it is relevant that these are “truth” poems, not least because a “logocentric metaphysics” (that is, a “truth”-founded metaphysics) is a “metaphysics of presence” (Derrida’s phrases touched upon in the Introduction). Instead, I focus on these poems because they indisputably show characters or the narrator failing to attain something, even right there on the “surface.” This failure to attain something is a failure to achieve the presence of something. In other words, these examples can be taken

to “prove” that many of the poems really are pre-occupied with the problem of achieving the presence of something.

By examining how these examples consistently and coherently depict the failure of a persona to achieve the presence of something, I will also explore how the problem of presence really is a problem of “presence.” Thus, the failure to achieve the presence of something, consistently, might indicate the ideality of the problem (of achieving the presence of something), insofar as the problem seems necessary and systematic, “a determination and effect within a system which is no longer that of presence but that of differance” (*SP* 147).

I will also wonder whether these examples are additionally concerned with the “thingliness” of things – which is an unfortunate term, I know, but suitable and efficient for the purpose of evoking (repeatedly) the common-sense, but wrong, notion that a thing really is a thing, and not, in the first place, a concept expressed in a language.<sup>40</sup> Given how coherently the thingliness of things is doubted in the poems, we might recall Saussure’s repeated caution that we don’t know things, only concepts, and his insistence that there are no “pre-existing concepts” (Saussure 116). We have seen how Saussure’s idea that “concepts are purely differential and defined not by their positive content but negatively by their relations with the other terms of the system” (Saussure 117) crucially informs Derrida’s notion of the “play of differences” underlying “presence.” If we find that thingliness is doubtful in the poems – that is, if things are doubtful as things in the poems – and this doubtfulness of things co-occurs consistently with the problem of

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<sup>40</sup> While I imagined that I had coined this term, others have previously used this term to similar effect – and I am in good company, because Jonathan Lethem has used this term (“thingliness.”). For the purpose of this paper, however, we’ll continue with my definition.

attaining the presence of things, then, I think, the poems will beg the notion of “presence,” as that term is used by Derrida.

In the previous chapter, I dwelt at some length on the possibility of reading the poems of *The Black Riders* as if they are interrelated. The interrelationship of the poems is particularly interesting when the reading of one poem, or several, can be shown to modify the reading of other poems, bringing to light implications or possibilities that might not have been so easy to see on the “surface” of the poem. In the first set of poems I include in this chapter, where the failure to attain something is mostly obvious, on the “surface,” there is little need to resort to the possible interrelationships of the poetry in order to see how the problem of “presence” might be present. Frankly, my objective in reading this first set is blunt – merely to establish the existence of a problem I claim is there. There might be more going on beneath the “surface” of these poems than I describe, or there could be if someone were to read these same poems given some other concern, perhaps enabled by the discovery of an interrelationship among these poems which I haven’t noticed personally.

I don’t pretend that I can read these poems exhaustively or that I see some “unity” here that might prevail over all others, although I realize some might object that I am finding examples here “that seem to confirm the sense” I want “to find in them” (Colvert, “Stephen Crane” 12), as James Colvert once accused of a scholar whose work he found objectionable, in his essay, “Stephen Crane and Postmodern Theory.”<sup>41</sup> To that objection, honestly, I don’t think there’s a rebuttal, because the accusation itself doesn’t seem to have any specific application – which is to say, the accusation might be thrown at any

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<sup>41</sup> Colvert’s accusation mattered because Colvert was once considered to be one of *the* prominent Crane scholars.

work of criticism at all (to the extent the criticism finds a “pattern,” a “unity,” a “theme,” a recurring issue, or whatever, in some text). If I’ve learned anything from reading Crane’s fiction and poetry, it’s that folks tend to see what they want to see, or what they can see, and the critics of Crane have tended to confirm this, insofar as their criticisms have followed from their approaches – that is, their “critical assumptions” (LaFrance 130).<sup>42</sup> Thus, my goal here is to point at what I’m seeing, which absolutely does follow from how I’m approaching the text. The rest is up to you.

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Beginning with *BR 20*, there are several poems clustered closely together in the numbered sequence of *The Black Riders* in which the narrator of a poem or a character in a poem fails to attain something, or is travelling toward something, not yet having attained it, including *BR 20*, 21, 24, and 26. *BR 20* itself, although “first” in the order of this sequence, presents a variation on these poems, if we imagine that the subsequent poems in this “cluster” are more alike by excluding *BR 20*, because in this poem, the narrator travels with a friend, and we don’t know what he and his friend hope to attain (although, of course, we could presume it is “truth”):

A learned man came to me once.  
 He said, "I know the way, — come."  
 And I was overjoyed at this.  
 Together we hastened.  
 Soon, too soon, were we  
 Where my eyes were useless,

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<sup>42</sup> Or we might scrutinize their “Interpretive Communities,” as in Fish 171; my view is certainly not original.

And I knew not the ways of my feet

I clung to the hand of my friend;

But at last he cried, "I am lost."

(Crane 21)

In this poem, we might observe that somebody (seemingly an “alazon,” if we recall Westbrook) claims to “know the way,” or we might focus on how the narrator puts his trust in the “learned man” (as the voice of the external, if we recall LaFrance and Spofford), or we might even consider how this “learned man” confirms our sense of what Crane, the person, must think of sages (if we recall Hoffman), but I do not plan to dwell on any of these interpretations. My point in mentioning these interpretations now, only to drop them, is to reinforce my point that these poems support a multiplicity of interpretations. In addition, I want to point out that the seeming relevance of some aspects of the poetry will depend on the given interrelationship pursued in the poetry. I might skip some aspects of these poems as I proceed, but that is because I am hoping to draw attention to other aspects of the poems, not previously attended in the scholarship.

In this poem, for example, it is probably sufficient to note that the narrator and his friend do not attain (the presence of) their goal. They do not make it to the end of “the way” – and, clearly, the narrator and his friend do presume there is an end (or telos) of the “way,” which they do not achieve. This end is not only not attained, but it is also not present in the poem – we do not know what it is they hope to attain. In addition, though, one might argue that there is specific relevance to the details of the poem, because the narrator’s eyes become “useless” and he knows “not the ways” of his “feet.” These details perhaps draw attention to “thingliness” at the base of his confusion. He is not

merely lost; he also cannot make sense of things. Of course, the language here echoes passages in the *Old* and *New Testaments*, and that echoing might call to mind, for some readers, a specific object not attained by the narrator (such as “peace”).<sup>43</sup> However, this possible referentiality of the language is only tangential to the more basic, textual observations.<sup>44</sup> These observations should call to mind both Saussure and Derrida, insofar as we’ve heard from them that we don’t know things, only concepts, in systems founded on “differentiality” or “differance.” Hence, we might infer that the failure to attain the presence of the object in this poem is itself pre-figured in the failure of the thingliness of knowing and doing (by eyes and feet).

In *BR 21*, in contrast to *BR 20*, thingliness seems interposed between the narrator and his object:

There was, before me,  
 Mile upon mile  
 Of snow, ice, burning sand.  
 And yet I could look beyond all this,

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<sup>43</sup> It seems to me that the use of synecdoche here (of eyes and feet) recalls several passages of certain translations of the Bible, especially insofar as it is important for eyes and feet to know or find a way. I think there are comparable passages in the *Old Testament*, in *Proverbs*, *Isaiah*, and *Jeremiah*, for example, and in the *New Testament*, in *Luke* and *Mark*, for example. Thus, from the *King James Bible*: “The way of peace they know not...” (“Isa. 59:8”) and “...guide our feet into the way of peace” (“Luke 1:79”). Or how about *Mark*? “Having eyes, see ye not? and having ears, hear ye not? and do ye not remember?” (“Mark 8:18”).

<sup>44</sup> Much has been written about Stephen Crane’s background and education. Suffice it to say that the *Bible* served him as a major source of imagery, figures of speech, vocabulary, and so on. He grew up in a family of preachers and religious writers, and was infused with the language, so to speak. There are some excellent articles on Crane’s literary influences, some of which are mentioned in the Works Consulted at the end of this paper, but Hoffman and Peck each do a great job of discussing Crane’s influences.

In this paper, I do not make much meaning of Crane’s references as references, as I might the references of T.S. Eliot, for example. I realize that I am making some judgments about what is meaningful in these poems “off-stage.” Some of these judgments might, in fact, involve or imply speculations about Crane’s “intention” – so that, for example, I could admit that I don’t think Crane is a referential writer, or not much. Personally, I think Crane employs the language available to him to achieve ends beyond merely reacting to his past. In this poem, in any case, I don’t think the reference, even if it were an “intentional” reference, adds anything to my analysis.

To a place of infinite beauty;  
 And I could see the loveliness of her  
 Who walked in the shade of the trees.  
 When I gazed,  
 All was lost  
 But this place of beauty and her.  
 When I gazed,  
 And in my gazing, desired,  
 Then came again  
 Mile upon mile,  
 Of snow, ice, burning sand.

(Crane 22)

This poem additionally differs from *BR* 20 by showing the narrator's seeming attainment, or at least the illusion of his attainment, of his object, as he looks "beyond all this" to his object, which (or who), (again unlike the previous poem) is actually present in the poem ("this place of beauty and her"), at least illusorily. However, the narrator's attainment of his object is lost, or it turns out it never was. Of course, it matters that desire leads to the narrator's suffering, as a matter of wisdom (again tangentially referential, this time to the Buddhist Four Noble Truths, whether or not such reference is "intentional"), but for my purposes, the main issue is again the failure of attainment itself.

Given the apparent interposition of thingliness between the narrator and his object in this poem, it might seem that this poem reinforces the thingliness of things, unlike *BR* 20. In reply, one might observe how the thingliness of things seems focused in the two

uses of “this,” as if the word “this” points immediately (without mediation) to thingliness, but these two uses of “this” contradict and undermine each other. There is a place “beyond all this” (the “snow, ice, burning sand” interposed between the narrator and his beloved) and that place seems both immediate and substantial, not a “that place” at all, but a “this place of beauty and her.” It seems as if “this place” “in the shade of the trees” is more real than “all this” “snow, ice, burning sand.” But, after all, “this place of beauty and her” disappears at the end, and “all this” (“snow, ice, burning sand”) returns, so “this place” becomes a “that place” again. Each “this” excludes the “full” reality (the “presence”) of the other “this.” Thus, the doubtfulness of things in *BR 21* again coincides with the main fact that the narrator has not, and perhaps cannot, attain his object.

In *BR 24*, a single persona again fails to attain an object, but this poem offers another variation on that basic problem, because in this poem, there are two competing perspectives of that object, although only one of those perspectives will seem “right” to the reader:<sup>45</sup>

I saw a man pursuing the horizon;

Round and round they sped.

I was disturbed at this;

I accosted the man.

"It is futile," I said,

"You can never" —

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<sup>45</sup> Some scholars have focused on the otherness of the character in this poem, as an “alazon” (Westbrook) or as an example of a person seeking an external truth (Spofford), against whom the narrator is defined. These views are valid within the arguments of these scholars. Here, however, I treat this poem a little bit differently.

"You lie," he cried,

And ran on.

(Crane 25)

Interestingly, if we treat *BR 24* as if it interrelates with the preceding (and subsequent) poems (considered here), the situation in this poem would seem to offer the narrator the possibility of an insight into his own condition, because the narrator can tell that the character will never attain his object.<sup>46</sup> Given the narrator's opportunity for insight, we might also discern some dark chuckling in the background here (or, at least, some sage-like irony); the narrator might think that the character cannot attain his object only because the character's specific object, the horizon, is unattainable. That is, the narrator might not think the character's plight pertains to his own plight at all. Put another way, he also might not see how the thingliness of the horizon specifically, which is a thing not really there, pertains to thingliness more generally, as we are getting to know that thingliness through these poems. The reader of the poem, however, can see that the horizon is a metaphor – for what, it really doesn't matter (for my purposes) – but the properties of the horizon as metaphor certainly matter. Thus, the failure of the character to attain his object is again preordained by doubtful thingliness (... the doubtfulness of the "thing" as a thing that is the object of this poem).

In *BR 26*, the narrator again fails to attain his object, and again, we might discern a problem of thingliness:

There was set before me a mighty hill,

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<sup>46</sup> Also, the narrator can tell the character that he will never attain his object. The third person (the character) makes the first kind of telling possible (seeing and recognizing), as well as the second kind of telling, in quotation marks.

And long days I climbed  
 Through regions of snow.  
 When I had before me the summit-view,  
 It seemed that my labor  
 Had been to see gardens  
 Lying at impossible distances.  
 (Crane 27)

The poem is reminiscent of *BR 21*, although the thingliness of the “hill” and “snow” is not similarly contradicted by the thingliness of the distant “gardens.” The two places do not work against each other in this poem, unlike *BR 21*, in which the two instances of “this” contradicted each other. Instead, the two places seem to co-exist, to confirm one another, so that the reality of one is continuous with the reality of the other. The two places confirm one another insofar as a journey apparently connects them. But then, of course, the journey connecting the two places is “impossible,” which is to say that both places, here and there, are rendered “impossible” by the “distance” connecting them. Thus, we might wonder if the failure of the narrator to attain his object is again pre-figured (or preordained) by the doubtfulness of things (as place) in this poem. That is, the doubtfulness of things again coincides with the failure (in fact, the impossibility) of the narrator’s attempt to achieve the presence of his object.

Skipping ahead a little bit,<sup>47</sup> and ignoring, for a moment, some intervening poems which are also relevant in this chapter, to *BR 49*, we again encounter a persona failing to

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<sup>47</sup> I have been following the sequence of the poems simply as a matter of convenience, because it is unnecessary so far, for the most part, to read for the interrelationship of the poetry. Of course, I could have

attain an object, but this poem also repeats the variation first observed in *BR 24*, insofar as the poem similarly describes two competing perspectives of that object. In this poem, which is unusually long among the poems of *The Black Riders* (so I will not reproduce it in full here), a narrator is at first unable to see and then unable to attain a thing, a “radiance / Ineffable, divine” or “A vision painted upon a pall,” that a “thousand” others can see. Although the narrator has “leaped, unhesitant, / And struggled and fumed / With outspread clutching fingers” (Crane 52-3) to attain the “vision,” he fails. What the others have seen, and what he has glimpsed “in the far sky” is gone when he looks again. In its essentials, the poem is highly reminiscent of *BR 24*, in which the “man pursuing the horizon,” like the crowd in this poem, sees something the narrator doesn’t, but in *BR 49*, the narrator is not critical of what the others see; instead, he considers his failure as his alone and he seems to accept the reprobation of the crowd, “Fool! Fool! Fool!” (Crane 54).

The language of this poem is especially redolent of biblical language<sup>48</sup> – so much so, that we could take the poem simply to describe, metaphorically, the narrator’s failure of Faith, but for a problem – the “vision” itself. After all, a “pall” is “a cloth spread over a coffin,” or a “pall” might be “a dark cloud” (“pall.”). Although the narrator bewails the “blindness of” his “spirit,” the reader might see the narrator’s situation very differently. The reader might understand that a “vision painted upon a pall” is probably an illusion, an artifice veiling the sheer fact of death, perhaps. Or the “vision” itself might be a

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taken these poems in any order, although there is some additional explanatory convenience by grouping the poems as I have.

<sup>48</sup> See, for example: “...the people living in darkness have seen a great light” (“Matt. 4:16”) and “The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; a light has dawned on those living in the land of darkness.” (“Isa. 9:2”), from the *Holmen Christian Standard Bible*.

deception, observed at first as a “radiance,” it is like a will-o-the-wisp, leading the narrator into a dark cloud. That is, his pursuit of the light seen by others perhaps leads him astray from his own path, into the dark. The narrator’s confusion in the poem, as he cries in “despair / ‘I see nothing! Oh, where do I go?’” (Crane 53) might thus honestly describe the “pall” as cloud – the fact of the “pall,” as it were. Hence, the reader might see some irony in the narrator’s situation, insofar as the narrator has observed the “vision” as a “pall,” but he has not recognized the “vision” as a “pall.” He describes himself as blind, but in actuality, he sees – and he is the only one *in* the poem who sees, given his opposition to the crowd.

The narrator of *BR 49* is, in fact, even more like the “man pursuing the horizon” than the crowd, because the narrator fails to recognize that his object is simply unattainable. But if the narrator of *BR 49* is like the “man pursuing the horizon,” then we must recognize that the reader of *BR 49* is analogous to the narrator of *BR 24*, insofar as the reader can recognize what the persona has failed to recognize. In other words, the reader of *BR 49* is implicated in the reading of *BR 49*, as the reader is “positioned,” much like a character in the poem, by the poem and the interrelationship of this poem with *BR 24*.

Does the reader think the poem is only about the narrator’s failure to attain his object, specifically as a “vision” or painted “pall?” Does the reader think that the poem turns on the resolution of the “pall” as metaphor – on figuring out what the metaphor stands for? Regardless of what the metaphor stands for, the properties of the metaphor pertain to the result in the poem (as a thing that isn’t there), which is again the narrator’s failure to attain his object. Thus, the reader should not mistake the narrator’s failure to

attain his object merely as a question of religiosity or Faith (or whatever else one might think of the metaphor) – the reader must see that the object in question, as a “thing,” has implications for her own reading of thingliness. Or, put another way, and to recall my discussion of *BR 24*, the situation in this poem would seem to offer the reader the possibility of an insight into her own condition (as a presumed thing among things) – or, if such an insight is not palatable, at least into a condition which consistently and coherently underlies several of the poems.

There are more poems in *The Black Riders* in which a character or the narrator fails to obtain an object, but the focus of these poems might be elsewhere, or it might be split, on some other aspect of the situation. I skipped ahead to *BR 49* because that poem’s attention to the competing perspectives of the narrator and the crowd is at least as compelling as its focus on the narrator’s failure to achieve his object. In this chapter, I have been trying to draw attention to a basic problem in these poems, at least to prove that these poems are concerned with the failure of a persona to achieve the presence of something. I have also tried to show that this first problem co-occurs with a second problem, which I have called a problem of thingliness. In the handful of poems to follow, I want to draw attention to how these basic problems continue to be explored, although this second set of poems might look, in some ways, different from the initial cluster of *BR 20, 21, 24, and 26*. *BR 49* provides a transition to these poems (*BR 28, 36, 35, and 68*), because these poems also offer competing perspectives on some basic “thing” at the heart of each poem.

In *BR 28*, two “travellers” (sic) offer competing descriptions of “Truth.” In this poem, which I have previously reproduced in full, there is no failed attempt to attain the

presence of an object per se, although perhaps it is implied, insofar as the travellers could be pilgrims, concerned as they are with “Truth,” and the “second traveller” has never “touched / The hem of its garment” (Crane 29). Regardless of whether the travellers are pilgrims, the second traveller’s “Truth” seems impossible to attain, at least as a “thing,” although maybe it can be approached.<sup>49</sup>

The narrator declares that he believes the second traveller’s description of the “Truth” as “A breath, a wind, / A shadow, a phantom” (Crane 29). The reader might thus presume that the second traveller’s perspective is the “right” perspective – and, in fact, I’ve quoted Westbrook to that effect, so he serves as an example of such a reader. The narrator’s support for the second traveller’s view, and the repetition of the terms of that view, certainly lend authority to the second traveller’s view. The second view is also consistent with the other poems I have discussed so far in this chapter, exactly to the extent the object, “Truth,” seems unattainable as a “thing,” and to the extent that thing’s thingliness is cast into doubt (as “a breath, a wind,” etc.).

However, and despite my own (obvious) agreement with Westbrook’s general view, I want to draw attention to the first traveller’s certainty as such. His certainty that the “Truth” really is a “thing” that can be attained – such as “a rock” or “a mighty fortress” – is not unique among these poems. In *BR* 49, for example, the crowd was certain of the “vision.” In several of the poems which offer competing perspectives of an object, it might be (relatively) obvious which perspective is the “right” perspective, regardless of the certainty of the personae, but in some of these poems, the “rightness” of a perspective might not be so obvious.

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<sup>49</sup> We have seen different perspectives on the attainability of “Truth” in this poem, from both Westbrook and Miller.

In fact, some of these poems might seem blatantly to contradict other poems, because the “rightness” of one perspective within a particular poem might differ from what appears to be the “right view” of other poems. Such contradictions might be thought to demolish any notion that the poems offer either a consistent perspective on the attainability of the presence of something, or a coherent condition co-occurring with that failure of attainment. While one might simply think, as Amy Lowell did, that Crane’s poetry is frankly inconsistent (Lowell xxi-ii), my own view is that the poems are somewhat more subtle than Lowell’s reading.<sup>50</sup> That is, the poems are not at all inconsistent. Instead, they are coherent, but multiply so, so that the multiple interpretations available for each poem support multiple interrelationships running through the text, each of which might be found to be coherent. Thus, within any given poem, a statement of certainty, whether or not it is doubted or lent authority by the narrator, must be read in the context of *The Black Riders* overall, as that context is developed over the course of reading the poems. In *BR* 36, 35, and 68, as we read for competing perspectives, we must also look out for how the seeming “rightness” of a perspective might be modified by another poem. Of course, such a modification would depend on one’s discernment of an interrelationship between poems, or between a poem and an understanding of the *The Black Riders* overall.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Westbrook was probably the first to address Lowell’s criticism, and he did so convincingly, by showing how the poems “cohere” by speaking in two “voices” (24-5), as previously described.

<sup>51</sup> I suppose I should stress that this overall sense of *The Black Riders* should be provisional, but I think I have adequately expressed my view that at least many of the poems support multiple interpretations and that the interrelationship of the poetry can multiply those multiple interpretations. In using the word “overall,” I am thinking of a particular and provisional sense of how the poems work together (which would depend on how the poems have been read). In this essay, I have deliberately focused on one kind of interrelationship, but this reading results from an earlier, more open and exploratory reading, in which I discerned several possible approaches, before deciding to narrow on one of those approaches for the purpose of this writing. Again, if I haven’t made the point often enough or explicitly enough, I don’t think I

In *BR* 36, for example, the interpretation of the poem, or even one's sense of what in the poem deserves most attention, will depend on one's sense of *The Black Riders* overall and how one has read certain other poems:

I met a seer.

He held in his hands

The book of wisdom.

"Sir," I addressed him,

"Let me read."

"Child —" he began.

"Sir," I said,

"Think not that I am a child,

"For already I know much

"Of that which you hold.

"Aye, much."

He smiled.

Then he opened the book

And held it before me. —

Strange that I should have grown so suddenly blind.

(Crane 37)

Simply skimming through this poem, we can see how well Westbrook's notion of the "alazon" might apply to the narrator, or even to the sage, depending on one's view of the

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can insist on my reading; I have already noted how Thomas Kent has argued for the fundamental uncertainty of *The Red Badge of Courage* – I think that uncertainty similarly applies to *The Black Riders*.

sage. On the one hand, the sage could be a fool, because the narrator can see nothing in the book – the sage’s book is like the “vision” of the crowd in *BR* 49, leading similarly to “blindness,” which is the essential fact of the poem. On the other hand, the sage really could be a sage, as I asserted of the sage in *BR* 58, because the narrator can see nothing in the book – the sage’s book might point up the folly of the narrator’s boast, perhaps of his notion of “truth” altogether. These two or three quick interpretations depend to some extent on how the reader has read *BR* 28 (Westbrook’s central evidence for the “two voices”), 49, and 58, or the interpretation of this poem might in turn modify how one understands those poems, or other poems.

For my own earlier purposes, I could have pointed out simply that the narrator fails to attain the object he expects to attain. He looks in the book, seeking “wisdom” as “truth,” perhaps, but he finds nothing. And, of course, it is relevant that he finds himself blind, because again, a problem of thingliness co-occurs with the problem of attaining the presence of something. For my purpose now, however, it is especially relevant that there are two perspectives of the book, or there might be, depending on how one reads this poem in the first place (or in the second place, if the first reading is modified by a perceived interrelationship). The narrator calls the book a “book of wisdom,” but the “rightness” of this perspective is not obvious. The sage doesn’t exactly offer a competing perspective – his smile is the smile of a sphinx (...or a fool, depending on one’s reading) – but he might be thought to have a different perspective depending on how this poem is read (and read to interrelate with other poems). For example, if we agree with my last interpretation of the sage above, we might imagine what he thinks of the book. To the sage (as sage), the book might be a “book of folly,” for the reflection of fools (as

blindness), or it might be something else entirely, or not a thing, but the appearance of a thing – a “book of wisdom” not really there. The presence (or appearance) of the book might depend, in some way, on its distance from the narrator, leading up to the moment when the sage holds it open for the narrator to read. But I won’t insist on this last possibility – I merely offer the possibility because I have already peeked ahead to how I will be reading *BR* 35.<sup>52</sup>

*BR* 35 differs, or appears to differ, from the previous examples in at least two regards:

A man saw a ball of gold in the sky;  
 He climbed for it,  
 And eventually he achieved it —  
 It was clay.

Now this is the strange part:  
 When the man went to the earth  
 And looked again,  
 Lo, there was the ball of gold.  
 Now this is the strange part:  
 It was a ball of gold.  
 Aye, by the Heavens, it was a ball of gold.

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<sup>52</sup> I think, properly to read the interrelationship of poetry in *The Black Riders*, I should be shuttling back and forth between interpretations and re-interpretations of individual poems, but that endeavor is beyond the scope of this project. I will offer a simple version of such an approach in the next chapter, but I wanted to acknowledge that such an approach should be operative here, as well, if the circumstances of this writing weren’t so constrained.

(Crane 36)

This poem differs from the previous examples, in the first place, because the man achieves the “ball.” He doesn’t get lost on the way or find himself surprisingly far off from his object, he actually achieves it. But then, what he achieves is not what he set out to achieve. He doesn’t really attain the presence of his object at all – what he achieves is something unlike the thing he set out to achieve. In fact, as it turns out, this poem doesn’t actually differ from the previous examples, at least in this regard, because this poem again describes a problem of “presence” co-occurring with a problem of thingliness.

This poem differs from the previous examples, in the second place, because there are two perspectives of the object, and the seemingly “right view” conflicts with the “right view” we might expect after reading the previous examples. Or maybe not. Whether this poem actually differs from the previous examples in this second regard depends on the reader’s interpretation. Clearly, there are two competing perspectives within the poem. In the first perspective, which is presumably the man’s perspective in the presence of his object, the “ball” is made of clay. In the second perspective, which could be the man’s perspective from a distance, the narrator seems to confirm that the “ball” really is a “ball of gold” (“Aye, by the heavens”). That is, the narrator seems to lend authority to the perspective that the “ball of gold” is real, but the reader might instead expect the “ball” “truly” to be “clay,” because the “horizon” really didn’t seem attainable in *BR* 24, the “truth” was seemingly refuted as “a rock” in *BR* 28, and the “vision” turned out to be a “pall” in *BR* 49.

Of course, the poem isn’t unambiguous. The narrator might not actually confirm the reality of the “ball.” The narrator might not speak in this poem at all; instead, the

language of the poem might echo the man's own enthusiasm, as he decides again that the "ball" must be real (perhaps preparatory to setting off again, as a fool). In this sense, the man might actually be similar to the narrator of *BR 49*; he simply doesn't recognize what he has seen. Thus, the poem's possible interrelationship with *BR 49* could help resolve the ambiguity of the narration.

If the reader feels "certain" that the narrator does actually confirm the reality of the "ball of gold," however, then there are other consequences. One might throw up one's hands and agree with Lowell – the poems simply can't be read together, as if they are coherent. Or one might decide that *BR 35* is key poem, like *BR 28* in Westbrook's usage – so maybe *BR 49* should be re-read in the light of *BR 35*, not vice versa, and so on to further re-readings (and a somewhat different paper than the one I am writing, but not entirely different, because the reading would still be founded on the interrelationship of multiplicitous poetry). Or one might instead wonder if *BR 35* is somehow otherwise consistent with the previous examples.<sup>53</sup>

In my view, for example, it seems possible that the appearance of the "ball" matters, as a thing at a distance. The "ball" is a "ball of gold" when seen from far away, but not when approached. When the "ball of gold" is approached, it can't be attained. I'm reminded of Derrida's notion of "presence" again, insofar as the "ball" appears "on the stage of presence" (*SP 141*) – as a "thing" that "is" – but, after all, it can't be approached because the "presence" of the object "is a determination and effect within a system which is no longer that of presence but that of differance" (*SP 147*). Thus, the confirmation of the "ball" as a "ball of gold" by the narrator confirms my own sense that these poems are

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<sup>53</sup> I haven't exhausted the options. I merely wanted to suggest a range of possibilities.

repeatedly querying a particular problem and the aggregated responses (like a composite picture) describe a problem that looks more and more like a problem of “presence,” very much as Derrida used that term. However, I needn’t depend on this one reading of the “ball of gold” only. As we’ve seen, *BR 35* largely conforms to the pattern previously identified in this chapter, in which a problem of presence co-occurs with a problem of thingliness.

*BR 68*, like *BR 35*, also does not seem to conform to the pattern identified in this chapter upon an initial glance. In fact, this poem, which is the final poem in the book,<sup>54</sup> can be read as if it up-ends the expectations established in the previous poems, quite precisely, insofar as the persona’s object is achieved, that object is “thingly,” and the “right view” in the poem seems wrong to the reader:

A spirit sped  
 Through spaces of night;  
 And as he sped, he called,  
 “God! God!”  
 He went through valleys  
 Of black death-slime,  
 Ever calling,  
 “God! God!”  
 Their echoes  
 From crevice and cavern

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<sup>54</sup> The “finality” of this poem doesn’t, however, depend on its placement in the published sequence. For my purposes, the finality of the poem depends on its interrelationship with the other poems I have discussed them.

Mocked him:  
 “God! God! God!”  
 Fleetly into the plain of space  
 He went, ever calling,  
 “God! God!”  
 Eventually, then, he screamed,  
 Mad in denial,  
 “Ah, there is no God!”  
 A swift hand,  
 A sword from the sky,  
 Smote him,  
 And he was dead.  
 (Crane 75)

The spirit does attain its object, as it finally encounters “God,” and that “God” is “thingly” – not at all doubtful as a thing – as evidenced by the sword (and the smiting). There are also competing perspectives, at least implied, I think, because the “God” clearly responds to the spirit’s assertion that “...there is no God!” But the God’s perspective, as the “right view” in the poem, might seem all wrong to the reader. If this poem followed along the lines of *BR 24*, we would instead expect a narrator to observe the spirit’s cries, perhaps to comment in some way on the impossibility of an answer, or the futility of the search, and the spirit, flying on, would cry, “You lie!” If *BR 24* were more like this poem, we might expect the “man pursuing the horizon” to run right off the edge of it – or actually, to run right into a wall (of smiting).

Given that I have tried to show just how consistently the previous examples depict the problem of attaining the presence of something and how coherently the doubtfulness of things is expressed in these same poems, I wonder if this poem possibly undoes all of my work in this chapter? Of course, as we should expect by now, having previously acknowledged some of the multiplicity (or multiple duplicity) available in these poems, the answer to my question isn't either simple or certain. There is an alternative reading of this poem near at hand.

After all, one might argue against the reading above to claim the opposite – the spirit doesn't actually attain its object – the “God” it encounters is almost certainly different from the God it was seeking. And the thingliness of the “God” is a problem, again to the extent the “God” is not the “God” expected either by the spirit or the reader. In addition, the spirit's death might imply for some readers another world beyond the “this world” of the poem, thus raising the question of the world's thingliness, as well as again raising the question of the “God's” “Godliness,” insofar as there might be a “truer” “God” of the spirit's after-life,<sup>55</sup> although this is a tangent I won't pursue in detail.<sup>56</sup>

I'm not sure if one of these readings can be preferred to another. These readings, although they apparently conflict, could also be thought to be meaningful (additionally) insofar as they are, in a sense, simultaneous. If the first reading is thought to be “right,”

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<sup>55</sup> I will merely assert here that deities and after-lives often appear together in mythologies, from across the world, so the spirit's death perhaps implies an impending encounter with a deity more “real” than the “God” responsible for scheduling the encounter. Isn't it interesting that such an impending encounter must be uncertain (...will the spirit finally achieve its object)?

<sup>56</sup> There is another, much richer, specifically Derridean reading available here, insofar as a “God” can serve as a “transcendental signified” (*OG* 18), but the “God” of this poem is (ironically only) thingly – and this “God” appears merely to cause death. But this tangent would involve a lengthy explanation of how Derrida discusses “presence” in terms of “God” (“Only infinite being can reduce the difference in presence.” *OG* 71), as well as death (“...life without difference: another name for death...” *OG* 71), thus another foray into the complexities of *OG*, which would be well beyond the scope of this project.

then this poem merely up-ends the pattern identified in the previous examples, in which case this poem functions as the “cunning pupil” does in *BR* 58, as he up-ends the order of “sage” and “devil.” But if we pay any attention at all to the sophomoric humor of this poem as such, and as compared to the preceding poems, then we must question whether the poem does, in fact, merely jest. If the second reading is thought to be “right,” in addition to the first reading, as if they can both be “right” simultaneously, without the nullification of either reading, then it just may be that we can discern a “sage” lurking somewhere here.

In the first place, the poem does seem, at a glance, very much like the jest of a “cunning pupil.” There is seemingly just one laugh here, and that laugh requires neither discernment nor subtlety to “get.” The humor is utterly, and very unusually, unambiguous. Considering this lack of ambiguity, we might recall how Ruth Miller itemized the many forms of “deliberate ambiguity” in *The Black Riders* (Miller 333), and her attention to how the poems lead to “indecisive” encounters (334) or “unresolved dramatic conflict” (349). In other words, the humor of this poem, like the plot resolution, is simply unlike the preceding poems. In some of the poems here, it isn’t possible to ascertain where exactly the irony might end or to resolve the ambiguities satisfactorily. Indeed, the unsubtle humor of this poem seems as unlikely as the punchline – in which a “God” is asserted whose “Truth” could not possibly be “a breath” or “a wind” (Crane 36).

Regardless of how unlikely the humor of *BR* 68 seems, however, the fact is that the joke “happens.” That is, there is no denying that there is a joke, and it is remarkably

like another old sophomore standard.<sup>57</sup> So the poem does really invite a showy guffaw, or, at least, a “grinning” and “rejoicing,” of adolescent knowingness (Crane 36). At the same time, though, that very humor seems undercut, (1) by the unlikeliness of the humor itself as a “last laugh” in this book of ambiguities, and (2) by the availability of the second reading, in which the “God,” even by its very action (of smiting), casts doubt on its own finality – although that second reading depends upon the simultaneity, or even the priority, of the first reading. In *BR* 58, too, the sage’s (possible, but uncertain) sageliness similarly depends on the simultaneity, or even the priority, of the “cunning pupil.”

Finally, although I won’t insist on this possibility, the simultaneity of the two readings also recalls Derrida’s notion of “presence,” insofar as any attempt to “deconstruct” the “metaphysics of presence” of any work cannot escape, or write from outside, the “epistémè” “inaugurated” by the “metaphysics of presence” (*OG* 33) – which is to say that the “epistémè” will always “smite” us in the end.<sup>58</sup> But, of course, one can attempt to draw attention to the problematics of “presence,” if only very warily (... ambiguously, ironically, sometimes self-contradictorily), with repeated circlings and re-statements, just as these poems do, and Derrida does: “We thus interrogate the limit that has always constrained us, that always constrains us – we who inhabit a language and a system of thought...” (*SP* 139).

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Of course, there are other poems in *The Black Riders* which might be investigated in the terms of this chapter, but I don’t want to belabor my examples. To summarize briefly, I have read nine poems (of the sixty-eight overall in *The Black Riders*) in which a

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<sup>57</sup> “Nietzsche is dead. Signed – God”

<sup>58</sup> “Transgression implies that the limit is always at work.” (*Positions* 12)

persona either does not achieve the presence of an object or that achievement can be doubted. In these same nine poems, the “thingliness” of things, as world or as object, seems doubtful in some manner crucial to the resolution (or, the irresolution) of the poem. That is, the doubtfulness of things as things in these poems seems to prefigure the impossibility of attaining those things, as if the things are, doubly and indubitably, not there, not “present,” somehow “essentially.” Given Derrida’s exploration of Saussure’s insight that we don’t know things, only concepts, in systems founded on “differentiality,” these poems seem, almost presciently, to anticipate Derrida’s notion of “presence,” as “a determination and effect within a system which is no longer that of presence but that of difference” (*SP* 147). I don’t seek to explain that prescience here, because I don’t think there’s any great mystery.<sup>59</sup> In the chapter to follow, I will not seek to “prove” that there is a problem of “presence” in these poems any further. Instead, I will explore how an awareness of the “presence” problem leads to other interesting insights into the poems, even in some poems where the “presence” problem might not be quite so obvious.

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<sup>59</sup> These insights are available to any (Western) language user (or “epistémè” “inhabitant”). Such insights are perhaps especially available to certain categories of language users. One such category might include highly metaphorical or allegorical poets concerned with concepts such as “truth,” “love,” and “god.” We might look at the historical appearances of these concepts in poetry (and elsewhere) to find many examples of such “anticipations” (...grail). I could wander off into either history or biographical details here, to include speculations about Crane’s cultural exposure or proclamations about the Nietzschean zeitgeist, in order to explain why Crane the person might have been especially suited to write about this problem, but I don’t think such wandering would prove anything. Suffice it to say, as I already have, that the poems are concerned with a problem that looks awfully like a problem later described, or popularized, by Derrida especially.

The bottom-line is that these poems don’t “anticipate” a problem so much as they investigate a problem also investigated by others. The difference, of course, is in the method and incisiveness of the investigation.

### III

In the second chapter, the problem of “presence” in *The Black Riders and other lines* was investigated without much reliance on Derrida’s terminology specifically. For the most part, I was content merely to show how consistently and coherently things aren’t really “there” in the poems, thus to evoke the insights of both Saussure and Derrida, as if the problem of “presence” in these poems, as it is expressed in these poems, points (almost illustratively) to the fact that “Nothing – no present and in-*different* being ... precedes *différance* and spacing.” (*Positions* 28). There is no knowable “foundation under the play and the coming into being of signs” (*OG* 48), no thing that can be or be known outside of, beyond, underlying, or preceding the medium that provides being and knowing. Or again, “there is no presence before the semiological difference or outside it” (*SP* 141). To the extent the poems are metaphorical and about “fundamental concepts” (“metaphysics.”), such as “truth” or “God,” these poems both investigate and describe the impossibility of attaining (knowledge of) these concepts as things (... as we might “know” things).<sup>60</sup> To the extent the poems are metaphorical and about things at all, these poems describe the impossibility of knowing things as things.<sup>61</sup>

In this chapter, I will refer to Derrida’s notions of “*différance* and spacing” specifically, to help explain the action and resolution (or irresolution) of a set of poems, including *BR* 3, 7, 8, 10, 40, 44, 55, and 66. I could expand this set very easily to include

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<sup>60</sup> That is, the “presence” of these concepts can’t be attained, as certain knowledge, although, of course, the poems might yet suggest that one can have Faith, or a moral response, to the conditions described in the poems. But then, there have been several essays about the ethos of the poetry, again displaying quite stark contradictions in the interpretation of the poetry.

<sup>61</sup> Because, after all, “... the plenitude that is called sensible, would not appear as such without the difference ... which gives them *form*.” (*OG* 62).

more poems, but I must set limits to the scope of this paper. I will additionally touch upon the title poem (*BR 1*) at the conclusion of this chapter, to suggest, at least, how the “presence” problem might inform or lead to further analysis – which is to say that I won’t exhaust my reading. There are other likely paths through this book, even on the problem of “presence.” There are certainly other paths through this book altogether, given attention to other underlying problems or issues, informing other interrelationships.

Although I won’t exactly shuttle back and forth between poems in this chapter, to register how my reading of any given poem might lead me to re-read other poems, I have arranged my analysis as an example, actually a fairly simple example, of how such a reading for interrelationship can work in practice. Thus, I will only pay attention to those aspects of the poems relevant to the particular interrelationship of the poems pursued here – which means that, again, I might ignore some aspects of these poems. And because I will revisit a couple of the poems, to consider how those poems might be re-read within the interrelationship of the poems here, I won’t provide a map of this chapter in this introduction. That is, I won’t describe in advance exactly where I’m going in this chapter or what to look out for – because that would spoil the fun.

However, my method in this chapter requires some explanation, insofar as I will try to show how an interrelationship among the poems might come to be recognized in the first place. That is, I will start from something like “scratch,” as if I’m approaching the poems, at least the earliest poems of the set, without having figured out yet how to read the interrelationship of the poems. As I proceed, I will narrow in on an analysis of this interrelationship. I’m certainly not pretending to be a reader without my own “critical assumptions” (LaFrance 130) – in fact, I am re-enacting one of my own readings of this

book, in which I already suspected that the poems might interrelate (in many different ways) and I was already aware that there was a problem of presence in the poems, if not a problem of “presence,” to the extent I had previously observed how so many of the personae of the poems were failing to achieve what they were striving to achieve.<sup>62</sup> Of course, I can’t actually enact that earlier reading, not least because this reading will begin on page 88 of a thesis that follows from that earlier reading, so occasionally I might sound entirely too much like I know where I’m going, or where I’ve come from.<sup>63</sup>

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*BR 3* has previously attracted numerous, often contradictory interpretations. This poem seems obviously allegorical, as if it illustrates a lesson, which is perhaps why the poem has attracted so many interpretations. At first glance, however, the poem might seem oblique:

In the desert  
 I saw a creature, naked, bestial,  
 Who, squatting upon the ground,  
 Held his heart in his hands,  
 And ate of it,  
 I said, “Is it good, friend?”  
 “It is bitter — bitter,” he answered;

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<sup>62</sup> As it happens, although again it is not necessary to my reading, I follow the sequence of the poems in the book (like a reader somewhat familiar with the poems, flipping forward through the book) – although I do eventually circle back.

<sup>63</sup> Please bear with my apparent flippancy in drawing attention to my own thesis in this way. Actually, I think it is important that these poems several times draw attention to themselves not merely as poems, but also as print on a page, as noted by Jerome McGann (*Black Riders* 93-4). If I draw attention to my writing of this thesis, it is because I hope to prepare that later analysis.

“But I like it  
 “Because it is bitter,  
 “And because it is my heart.”  
 (Crane 3)

Upon reading the poem, one might at first think it has something to do with the cliché, “to eat one’s heart out,” which is “to worry excessively or to pine for something” (Kirkpatrick 50). Apparently, a similar phrase, to similar effect, was used as early as *The Odyssey* (Ammer 126). But what would it matter if the creature eats his heart out? In pursuing this thought, one might consider that the creature is beneath the narrator, insofar as the creature squats, so the scene might imply a judgement. In this view, the narrator is looking down on someone who is holding onto something, drawing “bitter” sustenance from that thing, perhaps exactly like a person pining over something. The creature wallows (...in self-pity or suffering more generally) as the narrator looks on, like a display in an allegorical zoo. Perhaps the narrator serves as our docent. Certainly, there are other poems in *The Black Riders* that seem similarly to offer displays which would make sense in an allegorical zoo, such as the “man pursuing the horizon” (BR 24). Or these displays might seem to punctuate an allegorical progress – we’ve seen that several scholars have suspected, and at least two have explored, some such underlying narrative.

For my part, I am not satisfied by the interpretation above. There are certain details of the poem – salient features – which are not addressed by the interpretation, however “neat” that interpretation might seem. I offered this interpretation simply to point out, as I did toward the beginning of the second chapter, that there are readings of these poems available which I do not pursue here, and these readings might lead to

wholly other chains of interrelationships reinforcing the initial readings that set off those chains. These other interpretations and interrelationships would probably be perfectly valid, insofar as they could be supported with textual evidence.<sup>64</sup>

Actually, however, I am not going to attempt to interpret this poem at this time, so much as I am going to gather information from this poem. I will note especially that the creature holds “his heart in his hands” and eats “of it.” The inside of the creature is outside, and seems symbolic, while the outside of the creature, the setting, seems also to be symbolic, even pathetically fallacious, as if the outside expresses something about the inside – either the narrator’s or the creature’s feelings. It probably also matters that the creature is not wholly unsympathetic, or not unambiguously unsympathetic. After all, the narrator addresses the creature as “friend” and there is something about the creature, perhaps its self-sufficiency, which is almost appealing. The heart is “bitter,” but the creature likes it – he seems to make a virtue of liking it.

The vocabulary of *BR 7* might offer a clue to the interpretation of *BR 3*:

Mystic Shadow, bending near me,

Who art thou?

Whence come ye?

And — tell me — is it fair

Or is the truth bitter as eaten fire?

Tell me!

Fear not that I should quaver,

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<sup>64</sup> And while I comment that the reading above is not satisfactory to me, I do think it is convincing (enough). I should point out, for the avoidance of doubt, that I don’t exclude the possibility that other interpretations (interpretations other than my own), not pursued here, might be both convincing and satisfying.

For I dare — I dare.

Then, tell me!

(Crane 8)

The description of the “truth” seems especially relevant. The “truth” might be either “fair” or “bitter” – or not merely “bitter,” but “bitter as eaten fire.” Of course, the “heart” of *BR 3* was “bitter” (and eaten) – so could the heart of *BR 3* have stood for the “truth,” or a “truth?” The echoed language certainly seems to connect these two poems. Reading forward, it will be worthwhile to listen for other echoes, possibly to find further connections.<sup>65</sup>

*BR 7* also evokes the discussion in the second chapter. Doesn’t the narrator sound in some ways like the narrator of *BR 36* – who was so confident in his readiness to view the “book of wisdom?” The narrator of this poem doesn’t know who the Shadow is or where it comes from, but he assumes the Shadow must somehow carry “truth,” as a thing which he, the narrator, has not yet attained. The thingliness of the Shadow is especially curious, insofar as the Shadow exists only in the eyes and address of the narrator. The Shadow hasn’t independently confirmed its existence to the reader, so to speak. And will the Shadow speak to offer the truth required by the narrator? Speaking the “truth,” the Shadow would perfectly confirm not merely its own presence, but “presence” itself, as

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<sup>65</sup> The vocabulary of *The Black Riders* is very limited, so we can expect words to be repeated. One might consider these echoes to be an accident of the small vocabulary, perhaps to point to Crane’s education as the “cause” of the small vocabulary, thus to debunk the “intentionality” of the vocabulary (. . . and thus the meaningfulness of these echoes). I think that argument is sheer fantasy, argued on altogether the wrong grounds. Crane was a prose stylist and highly innovative in his use of vocabulary, as his contemporary reviewers and later scholarly critics have noted, so one could certainly argue about the reach of Crane’s “intention,” but an argument on those grounds would grow increasingly speculative. The fact is that there is a text and a feature of the text is its small vocabulary. That small vocabulary leads to certain effects, such as echoes, which can also be read to reinforce the interrelationship of the poetry.

the “essence” or the heart of both “phonocentrism” (speaking...) and “logocentrism” (...the “truth”) – but, of course, the Shadow’s response hangs in the air.

I paused to note how *BR 7* evokes the terms of the second chapter, despite my own best intentions to move on to the business of this chapter, because the terms of the second chapter are also relevant within this chapter, and especially pertinent to some of the poems considered in this chapter. As it happens, *BR 8* is particularly problematic in the terms of the second chapter – insofar as, again, a narrator seems to attain the “presence” of his object. *BR 8* also continues the interrelationship of poems started with *BR 3* and *BR 7*, proceeding forward, which we can “hear” immediately, as *BR 8* echoes both poems:

I looked here;  
 I looked there;  
 Nowhere could I see my love.  
 And — this time —  
 She was in my heart.  
 Truly, then, I have no complaint,  
 For though she be fair and fairer,  
 She is none so fair as she  
 In my heart.  
 (Crane 9)

In this poem, quite remarkably, the narrator attains his “love.” He finds her, “this time,” not in the world, but in his heart, not outside himself, but inside himself. This poem would thus seem to describe an unusually straightforward resolution of the problem so

often expressed in *The Black Riders*, as exemplified by the poems discussed in the second chapter. Whether the poem is read “literally,” as a love poem, perhaps concerning fidelity, or metaphorically, as a “truth” or a “God” poem, perhaps concerning Reason or Faith, the poem would seem to emphasize the importance of looking within oneself, or of holding onto what one has learned, having looked within. In this sense, the poem certainly supports the analyses of both LaFrance and Spofford. But, if this is the case, the problem of “presence” would seem to be only an external problem, a problem of being in the world (as place), not a problem of being itself (as is).

If this poem does suggest that the problem of achieving the presence of something is merely an external problem, then this poem undercuts the case that the poetry, more broadly, is concerned with the problem of “presence,” as a term requiring special demarcation.<sup>66</sup> In fact, if this poem shows that the presence of something can be achieved “within,” then this poem actually subscribes explicitly to the “metaphysics of presence.” After all, the “metaphysics of presence” privileges interiority, as speech has been privileged to writing in the “Western Tradition,” as described in the Introduction, because speech has been understood as nearness to “truth:”

*Phonē*, in effect is the signifying substance *given to consciousness* as that which is most intimately tied to the thought of the signified concept. From this point of view, the voice is consciousness itself.

When I speak, not only am I conscious of being present for what I think, but I am conscious also of keeping as close as possible to my

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<sup>66</sup> I have repeated this definition several times, but I want to be perfectly clear, because this is a key point. The quotation marks around the word “presence” have pointed to Derrida’s usage of that term, as “a determination and effect within a system which is no longer that of presence but that of difference” (*SP* 147).

thought, or to the ‘concept,’ a signifier that does not fall into the world, a signifier that I hear as soon as I emit it ... the signifier seems to erase itself or to become transparent, in order to allow the concept to present itself as what it is, referring to nothing other than its presence. (*Positions* 22)

In other words, if *BR* 8 does indicate that the presence of something can be achieved, but only internally, then the problem of “presence,” as expressed by the poems, is ultimately phoney – not a problem of “presence” really, but a problem of presence.

Of course, I could argue that this poem might merely “try on” the viability of achieving the presence of something. In the Introduction, I noted that the “the ideal (of achieving the presence of something) might occasionally be contemplated in the poems, but only in the context of other poems which again and again return to the impossibility of achieving that ideal.” Certainly, I think this consideration is worthy. The poems clearly modify one another, as they also qualify one another, so if this one poem purely and simply contemplates the ideal of achieving the presence of something, then this poem might be the exception proving the rule of the other poems. Such an interpretation of this poem would, in my mind, highlight the “prettiness” of this poem specifically as a love poem – insofar as one might think it sweet that this poem tries on the attainability of “presence” as love, or through love. This prettiness might seem hopeful, or even gallant, to some readers – or drippingly sentimental to others.

Nevertheless, the prettiness of this poem could also be ironic, insofar as the poem might turn on an illusion. The constancy at the heart of the poem, as the fullness (or the

“plenitude”<sup>67</sup>) of “presence” achieved in the poem, might not be quite as certain as it seems. Although the narrator’s achievement of “presence” seems in some sense secure, even eternal (or everlasting), because he says he has “no complaint,” the “this time” of the poem demands attention. Not only does “this time” stand out as a peculiar conditional qualifying the “presence” achieved in the poem, but “this time” also stands out visually, highlighted by dashes, and temporally, as a pause in the motion of the poem, so that the poem seems to turn on, actually to depend upon, “this time.” However, I will not yet attempt to interpret the “this time” of this poem, not without first looking ahead at what might be happening in a handful of other poems interrelated with this poem.

*BR 10* presents a very different situation from *BR 8*, on the surface, although the tone of the poem might seem similar. In fact, *BR 10* comments directly on *BR 8*, as well as *BR 3*:

Should the wide world roll away,  
 Leaving black terror,  
 Limitless night,  
 Nor God, nor man, nor place to stand  
 Would be to me essential,  
 If thou and thy white arms were there,  
 And the fall to doom a long way.

(Crane 11)

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<sup>67</sup> This word is used characteristically by Derrida, throughout at least his early work, to describe “presence.” I mention it here because it perfectly suits the sense of presence under discussion, but only parenthetically, because I have not previously introduced the word.

The narrator's tone is gallant, either sentimental or grandly absurdist, depending on the reader. He seems to say that nothing matters to him except the "this time" of the poem, which he hopes may last. The condition may be bitter, but, in a sense, he "likes" it. We might notice how the "white arms" of the beloved, as a synecdoche for a previous era's stereotype of feminine beauty ("Mirror, mirror, on the wall..."), recall the beloved of *BR* 8, because there are none "so fair" as "she." Unlike *BR* 8, however, the beloved of *BR* 10 is outside the narrator, perhaps held in his arms, like the creature of *BR* 3 holds its heart in its hands. Or the beloved is holding him in her "white arms." In fact, the order of *BR* 8 is reversed in this poem exactly to the extent he holds onto a beloved, or is held, outside of himself, and perhaps also to the extent he and the beloved are "within" a fall to nothing, at the heart of an abyss. As the heart of the abyss, the meaning they make is their difference from the abyss.

In the Introduction, I mentioned that this poem seems to evoke the groundlessness of "differance," insofar as "differance" might be "'originary,' but one would no longer be able to call it 'origin' or 'ground'" (OG 23). "Presence," as an effect of "differance" (so to speak) can only be "held" in the context of this groundlessness. Of course, one might cherish this "presence" (as meaning), as the narrator cherishes his beloved – as if this "presence" is all there is (or, in fact, because this "presence" is all that "is") – but the "fall to doom" underlies that cherished "presence." Actually, the "fall to doom" can be read as a metaphor for the "endless difference" "originated" by "differance," underlying "presence," because any "thing" "that is said to be 'present' ... is related to something other than itself but retains the mark of a past element and already lets itself be hollowed out by the mark of its relation to a future element." (*SP*

141). The “fall to doom” implies the hollow at the “heart” of “presence” as an abyss underlying every “thing.” But then, of course, this abyss is what makes “presence” possible in the first place – so the “fall to doom” here, as “endless difference,” makes the lovers possible, as “presence.” Thus, the scene of *BR 10* seems like an uncanny illustration of “differance,” almost as if this poem allegorizes “differance,” although the inverse is true. The notion of “differance” is not illustrated by the poem; the notion of “differance” explains the poem. The next poems in the interrelationship pursued here, *BR 40* and *44*, are similar to *BR 10* insofar as they also seem to offer uncanny illustrations, even allegorizations, of other aspects of “differance.”<sup>68</sup>

*BR 40* takes place as a conversation between a narrator and his beloved, so this poem recalls both *BR 8* and *10*, read as a “love” poem. *BR 40* also echoes *BR 7*, which is a kind of vocabulary nexus connecting so many of these poems. Because this poem takes place entirely as a conversation, there are no quotation marks around the spoken parts of the personae – if these parts were quoted, the entire poem would be quoted. Instead, the spoken parts are separated by gaps in the text. In general, quotation marks are used often in *The Black Riders*. These quotation marks enclose certain sentences or phrases, as speech specifically, to identify the interaction between two personae (in poems that do not consist entirely of conversation), or as comments by a persona on the action of the poems. None of these uses of quotation marks are so very unusual, so these marks do not draw attention to themselves as they are used in each instance – that is, within each poem

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<sup>68</sup> Of course, as a not-word and not-concept, there is something fundamentally wrong about this notion that “differance” might be allegorically representable (...re-presentable). A similar problem must similarly constrain, or at least inform, the allegorization of negative theological concepts (“not this, not that”), but that would be a research project for another day.

– except perhaps in *BR* 44, which I will read next. However, these marks are notable as a salient feature of the poems overall, noticeable for their ubiquity in the text as a whole.

In *BR* 40, however, there are no quotation marks, although I must include these marks here for the purpose of conforming to the Modern Language Association (MLA) documentation style. A beloved begins the conversation, “And you love me”<sup>69</sup> to which the narrator responds, “I love you.” The beloved challenges the narrator to come to her, but the narrator does not: “Man’s opinions, a thousand thickets, / My interwoven existence, / My life, / Caught in the stubble of the world, / Like a tender veil, — / This stays me / ... I dare not.” The beloved insists that “If love loves, / there is no world / Nor word. / All is lost / Save thought of love / And place to dream.” The narrator responds again, “I love you” (*Crane* 42-3). And so the poem continues – as if it will circle around endlessly (in endless difference) – because, although the narrator says he loves the beloved, he cannot close the gap between himself and her. Of course, we might interpret this poem merely as social or behavioral commentary, about the impediments to “love” in the 1890s, or about Crane’s own romantic inhibitions, but there may be a little more going on.

As a conversation, the poem draws attention to itself as speech. Even without quotation marks, the alternation of viewpoints evokes a lover’s quarrel. The gaps in the text actually seem to highlight the separation between the narrator and the beloved – as if, in some sense, these gaps represent the gap that must be closed between the narrator and

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<sup>69</sup> One could tarry over this poem alone, although I realize I must be moving along. The punctuation of the opening sentence is wonderful in (at least) the first printing of the first edition of *The Black Riders* because there is none – the opening is neither statement nor question, or it may be both. In both the Katz and Bowers versions of this text, however, the first sentence is ended with a question mark, probably on the basis of a later printing or edition. Crane actually left the punctuation of the published poetry to his editor (McGann, Afterword 88) – so authorial intention is entirely beside the point.

his beloved. If this poem excerpts a lover's quarrel, then one might think this gap could be closed, if only the narrator would go to the beloved, or do what she asks. But maybe the gap can't be closed? The beloved beseeches the narrator to come to a place where there is "no world / Nor word" – where there is, in short, no differentiation. We might interpret that differentiation as social differentiation, of course, but we might also query the linguistic turn, as the beloved calls on the narrator to come to her where there is no "word."

This conversation, of course, takes place in words, as a poem, but it also draws attention to itself as words passed back and forth between two speakers. As a conversation – as speech – we might expect the poem, in some way, to evoke the "immediacy" of speech, as that "immediacy" is typically constructed "phonocentrically." In fact, I do think the speech aspect of this poem works, on the one hand, to "phonocentric" effect, insofar as this is a "love" poem and the speech of the lovers implies closeness to the feelings of the lovers. On the other hand, we must also recall, from the Introduction, that speech is not, in fact, privileged language. The "outside," as "endless difference," is already "inside" speech.<sup>70</sup> The "fall to doom" precedes (as if it is "originary" of) the sense of "presence." The narrator's incapacity to close the gap between himself and the beloved (actually, the gap itself) is a "function" of the language that makes them possible as lovers conversing, just as they are themselves "functions" of the language (*SP* 145):

...the subject, and first of all the conscious and speaking subject,  
depends upon the system of differences and the movement of

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<sup>70</sup> "The outside bears with the inside a relationship that is, as usual, anything but simple exteriority. The meaning of the outside was always present within the inside..." (*OG* 35)

*différance*, ... the subject is constituted only in *being* divided from itself, in becoming space, in temporizing, in deferral... (*Positions* 29)

In other words, the narrator's "interwoven existence" is indeed "Caught in the stubble of the world," as words. The narrator cannot accomplish the seeming resolution of *BR* 8 precisely because he and his beloved are "constituted" as beings, as they represent themselves in their speech. Thus, the language of *BR* 40, insofar as it is a focus of the poem, as speech, might be thought to stand for (as a metaphor stands for) language itself – which is to say that language stands for language in this poem.

*BR* 44, like *BR* 40, also draws attention to speech as language. In this poem, in a sense, we can see "differance" happen:<sup>71</sup>

I was in the darkness;  
 I could not see my words  
 Nor the wishes of my heart.  
 Then suddenly there was a great light —

"Let me into the darkness again."

(Crane 47)

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<sup>71</sup> Yes, of course, Derrida is rolling over in his grave, but hopefully, that's from laughing. Again, this poem seems to allegorize "differance" as if it were a concept, when, in actuality, the "concept" itself is simply very well-suited as an explanation for what is happening in the poem. The fault here is that I'm treating "differance" as a concept, but that can't be helped: "...differance remains a metaphysical name; and all the names that it receives from our language are still, so far as they are names, metaphysical." (*SP* 158). As a "metaphysical name," "differance" happens to be well-suited for allegorization, on the one hand, or treatment as a concept, on the other (...reification by any other name).

Of course, this poem recalls certain biblical passages (in fact, the same passages I footnoted upon reading *BR 49* in the second chapter), but this poem does not merely comment on those passages. Jerome McGann has drawn attention to the “typographical wit of this text,” specifically, “where the ‘great light’ comes as a small blank moment on the page” (McGann, *Black Riders* 94).<sup>72</sup> In my view, this “blank moment,” which is spacing, represents “spacing,” a gap as the production of a gap, in which “the subject is constituted only in being divided from itself, in becoming space” (*Positions* 29), as we saw above in *BR 40*. The narrator appears to himself, as it were, as he speaks. He becomes “present” as a “subject” in language, which the reader actually sees as speech, within quotation marks, but in so doing, he becomes aware that he is divided from himself, so he loses the actuality of his full presence in himself, which is unknowable (as “darkness”). He might “now” be able to see the “wishes of” his “heart,” but he is no longer “one” with his heart.<sup>73</sup> Thus, he wants to enter “into the darkness again.” But, of course, he can’t enter the “darkness,” because he cannot “be” in the “darkness.”

The “darkness” in this poem seems to be a place or a state prior to place or state, prior to differentiation itself, where there is “no world / Nor word” (Crane 42-3). Of course, the notion that there could be an “I” in this non-differentiated state, or “darkness”

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<sup>72</sup> In general, McGann draws attention to the “textual presence” of the poetry (Afterword 92), because one’s “attention” is drawn to “the poetry’s material features” (*Black Riders* 93). Thus, “The ‘I’” of the poems “walks in the white desert of the page, whose vacancy it populates by its walking, by the ‘lines’ of Crane’s title as they move out in a heroic but unfulfillable quest for completion.” (*Black Riders* 93). Unfortunately, he doesn’t have anything more to say on the “nature” of this unfulfilling, which I think is the problem of “presence” discussed here, either in his book on “The Visible Language of Modernism,” or in his Afterword to the facsimile of the first edition of *The Black Riders*, which he later published through Rice UP.

<sup>73</sup> We might circle back to *BR 21*, to note that the “desire” of that poem roughly parallels the “wishes of” the “heart” here. In desiring, the narrator of *BR 21* realizes a gap. I suspect that a quick tour of mythology might provide some comparable examples. The Gnostic Valentinian Sophia similarly “fell” into the world as a result of desire, at once causing the creation of the world and trapping herself in it, or a “lower” version of herself, broadly speaking (Jonas 174-205).

(which must be opposed to light), is problematic, but excusable as a projection onto the past – from a differentiated state (of being and knowing and wishing).<sup>74</sup> In fact, however, one poem in *The Black Riders*, at least, does seem to explore this “darkness” further, and thus to comment on the possibility that there could be an “I” (of sorts) prior to language, as “a self-presence of the subject before speech or its sign, a subject’s self-presence in a silent and intuitive consciousness” (*SP* 146).

*BR* 55 shows us what such “darkness” looks like, although, of course, we can only see from the outside:

A man toiled on a burning road,  
 Never resting.  
 Once he saw a fat, stupid ass  
 Grinning at him from a green place.  
 The man cried out in rage,  
 “Ah! Do not deride me, fool!  
 “I know you —  
 “All day stuffing your belly,  
 “Burying your heart  
 “In grass and tender sprouts:  
 “It will not suffice you.”

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<sup>74</sup> The very idea of place or state prior to place or state is a non-starter, of course; the best means to point to such an idea would probably borrow from negative theology (“not this, not that”) as Derrida so often does. Instead, such non-place/ non-state could be depicted allegorically, in positive terms – in which case, we would expect it to be depicted as darkness, or abyss, or maybe water, death, woman, etc. Thus, the “darkness” here seems quite appropriate – and, if there were time, we could construct an argument around these expectations, and where they come from, and how we might see them play out in the poems, which might lead to a proper “deconstruction” of these poems.

But the ass only grinned at him from the green place.

(Crane 61)

Several aspects of this poem deserve notice, for the purpose of this essay. In the first place, of course, is the ass. Despite the persona's claim that the "tender sprouts ... will not suffice," the ass "only" grins, as if, in fact, the "sprouts" in "the green place" do "suffice" – that is, as if the ass is satisfied and self-present "in a silent and intuitive consciousness" (*SP* 146). Really, however, any speculation about the knowing or being of the ass is projection, either the persona's ("Do not deride me, fool") or the reader's (if we imagine "the green place" does "suffice") – and the obviousness of the first projection calls attention to the second. In the second place, the narrator is not especially visible in this poem, as an "I" commenting on the action, as we have come to expect in the poems. The absence of the "I" might be pertinent insofar as there is no comment, no implied "right view" on whether the condition of the ass does "suffice," so that, ultimately, the sufficiency of the condition of the ass cannot be established.<sup>75,76</sup> Thus, the "darkness" here is finally impenetrable – there is no light to illuminate this darkness – and the shapes we perceive therein can only be the play of our own eyes (our own "I").

A third aspect of *BR* 55, the "heart" in the poem, is noteworthy insofar as it echoes *BR* 3 and 8, and recalls to mind how those poems initiated the particular

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<sup>75</sup> We might think that the lack of resolution in this poem hedges, so that a "silent and intuitive consciousness" might be held out as a possibility, however uncertain. Such hedging would be interesting to explore -- I think there is more of it in these poems, as might be expected if the poems are fundamentally uncertain. But this essay is concerned to prove that the problem of "presence" can be found in the poems and to explore the implications, not to explore the alternatives among a multiplicity of interpretations.

<sup>76</sup> The absence of the "I" might also be pertinent insofar as there is no inside perspective in this poem. This poem takes place entirely outside. In other words, the absent narrator, and the undifferentiated outside of the poem generally, might represent absent interiority, thus implying that there can be no "self-presence in a silent and intuitive consciousness" (*SP* 146). In other words, the ass has no inside. This reading of the poem works against the sense below, wherein the ass is interpreted as if it is already divided from itself (insofar as "the green place" signifies and the ass eats of its heart). So the poem is ambiguous.

interrelationship of poems pursued in this chapter. If we imagine that the condition of the ass does “suffice,” then we must consider how this poem perhaps comments on *BR 8* especially, and vice versa, because the narrator in that poem also seemed to attain a condition that did suffice. After all, in *BR 8*, we contemplated the possibility that the narrator had somehow resolved the problem so consistently encountered throughout these poems, because he attained his beloved by looking within. However, in reading that poem, it seemed that the “this time” of the poem was somehow peculiar – certainly noteworthy insofar as the entire poem turned on the visual and temporal break in the flow of the poem itself. In order to see how *BR 55* might relate to *BR 8*, then, it is also necessary to consider how the “this time” of *BR 8* functions.

Having read *BR 40* and *44*, in which “spacing” seemed, in a sense, to be allegorized, we might recall how “spacing” and “temporalization,” or “temporalizing,” go hand in hand (from the Introduction):

...an interval ... must ... divide the present in itself, thus dividing, along with the present, everything that can be conceived on its basis, that is, every being – in particular, for our metaphysical language, the substance or subject. Constituting itself, dynamically dividing itself, this interval is what could be called *spacing*; time’s becoming-spatial or space’s becoming-temporal (*temporalizing*).

(*SP* 143)

It is because of this “temporalizing” that each “element that is said to be ‘present,’ appearing on the stage of presence” is “hollowed out” by past and future elements (*SP* 141). In fact, we might say that *BR 8* actually “depicts” “differance as temporalization,”

as if we are seeing, as we imagined while reading *BR 44*, “differance” happen. In this poem, “the nonpresence of the other” (as the beloved) is “inscribed within the sense of the present” (*OG 71*), and thus the poem divides itself on “this time” – in which event, we might say that the visible gap of *BR 40* proceeds from *BR 8*.

Returning to *BR 55*, and recalling that “differance” is “the opening of the first exteriority” (*OG 70*), we might observe that the ass’s heart is actually exterior to the ass, so the ass cannot really be in a state of “self-presence.”<sup>77</sup> The seemingly sufficient interiority of *BR 8* thus opens out to the problem of “presence” as we encounter it consistently in the poems, over and over again. The interiority as “self-presence” of *BR 8* is belied by the fact that “the meaning of the outside was always present within the inside...” (*OG 35*), which we might observe insofar as the beloved (as other) is realized “this time.”<sup>78</sup>

The exteriority of the ass’s heart also helps explain *BR 3*, insofar as the ass buries its heart “In grass and tender sprouts,” which amounts to eating “of it” (*Crane 3*). In other words, we can recognize that the condition of the creature in *BR 3* parallels the condition of the ass, but the creature’s speech further implies a will. That is, the creature’s response to the narrator implies an endeavor, perhaps even a grandly “absurdist” endeavor – as if the creature is sustaining itself, or holding onto a condition that does suffice, in spite of the impossibility of “self-presence” – with all that implies in the “metaphysics of presence.” The emptiness of the outside in the poem, as desert, and the externality of the heart, each seem to allegorize a “presence” “hollowed out” by “endless difference,” but

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<sup>77</sup> As a tangent, we might speculate that language has very deep roots, insofar as “the green place” signifies to the ass, in which case, the ass is also already divided from itself. The ass’s world is differentiated, and so the ass seeks “presence” “In grass and tender sprouts” (*Crane 61*) – as an external “heart,” that is.

<sup>78</sup> And so it becomes was.

the creature likes it. In this sense, the creature is perhaps most like the narrator of *BR 10*, holding onto his sense of “presence” as meaning, even as that “presence” is “a determination and effect within a system which is no longer that of presence but that of differance...” (*SP 147*).

Of course, it isn't perfectly clear what the narrator thinks of the creature in *BR 3*. While, on the one hand, it may be implied that the narrator looks down on the creature, the narrator might also express simple respect (“friend”). The creature might even parallel the sage in these poems – living either as a fool or wisely, in the light of a “truth” that truth is unattainable, in the knowledge that things can't be known as things, because he has seen the problem of “presence,” and yet he holds on and he likes it. The appearance of the creature as either fool or sage would thus seem to depend on what one thinks of the creature's endeavor, and on what one imagines the alternatives might be. There might even be some cunning readers who think the creature's situation could be easily up-ended, because the “presence” problem is no problem at all (if Derrida is thought more devil than sage) – the creature need only put his heart back where it belongs and get on with life – maybe find a nice beloved to settle down inside himself.

On the other hand, the creature needn't necessarily represent the “last word” on “differance” in these poems. *BR 66* calls to mind Derrida's concluding paragraphs to his essay “Differance.” He asks: “How do we conceive of the outside of a text? How, for example, do we conceive of what stands opposed to the text of Western metaphysics?” (*SP 158*). In *BR 66*, I think, a very similar question is asked, especially to the extent an answer is implied that can't be spoken:

If I should cast off this tattered coat,

And go free into the mighty sky;

If I should find nothing there

But a vast blue,

Echoless, ignorant, —

What then?

(Crane 73)

In this poem, one might think the “tattered coat” is “the text,” as language (or as “Western metaphysics” in language). Thus, the narrator might “go free in to the mighty sky,” but it is “echoless,” which is perhaps obvious, and “ignorant,” insofar as it is unknowable, because language has been “cast off.” The “vast blue,” of course, paints the nothingness “there,” but this “nothing” must be expected, insofar as being, even the “presence” that results from “differance,” isn’t. Thus the question: “What then?”

Derrida, frankly, doesn’t answer the question – either his own, or this one. And of course, he can’t. But he has pointed to the possibility of the question. We can understand why the question might be posed, at least. And we can imagine that there might actually be an alternative to squatting in the desert, eating of one’s own heart – in an allegorical sense, that is.

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I have not exhausted the analysis of *The Black Riders* in terms of the problem of “presence.” In fact, I worry that I have scratched the surface only enough to mar it, but there is only so much one can do with so little time. I hope I have at least indicated that the problem of “presence” can be found in the poems, or some of them, and how the notion of “presence” might have some explanatory value when reading the poems.

Additional poems, not included here, could be analyzed either in terms of the second chapter or this chapter, or the problem of “presence” could be explored in other terms – either by pursuing another interrelationship through the poems or simply by questioning the individual poems more closely than they have typically been questioned.

For example, Jerome McGann has noted how the first poem of *The Black Riders* calls “attention to itself as a textual presence” (McGann, Afterword 92), a notion apparently inspired by Bob Brown, insofar as the title of the book “suggested to him ‘the dash of inky words at full gallop across the plains of pure white pages’” (qtd. in McGann, *Black Riders* 91). If we carefully observe how this poem calls attention to itself as writing, we might see how this poem also “depicts” “differance,” like *BR* 44:

Black Riders came from the sea.  
 There was clang and clang of spear and shield,  
 And clash and clash of hoof and heel,  
 Wild shouts and the wave of hair  
 In the rush upon the wind:  
 Thus the ride of Sin.  
 (Crane 1)

Of course, “the sea” parallels the “darkness” of *BR* 44 in this poem,<sup>79</sup> and the “Black Riders,” as writing, parallel the quoted speech of the same poem, to similar effect – but in this poem, we also encounter “Sin,” which has too often been back-tracked only to

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<sup>79</sup> The “sea” is also often a symbol of the unconscious, as described by depth psychology. If my reading of the poems, without “intention,” has made some readers uncomfortable, then a compromise could maybe be reached by appealing explicitly to the notion of Crane’s unconscious, and maybe not only “his” unconscious, but also the unconsciousness of the subject in language, culture, etc. Thus, one might say the black riders of this poem (the writing) really do come from the sea (of language), in addition to other kinds of unconsciousness.

Crane's upbringing in the scholarship on his poetry. In fact, the word "Sin" does not refer to any actual wrong-doing in this poem. Although this word could very well have served to titillate 1890s readers, there is no direct moral reference. The word appears quite mysteriously (although sonorously) at the end of the poem. To the extent the word calls to mind theological associations, though, we might think of "Original Sin" – the idea that the first people were excluded from a Judeo-Christian Paradise because of a wrong committed. That is, we might think it especially relevant that these first people found themselves "outside" as the result of "Sin," in the cruel world, so to speak, and apart from the God that had created them (... they were no longer in the "presence" of that God). The reference to "Sin" here thus seems to coincide very much with "differance," insofar as "differance" is "originary" of the problem of "presence" so often explored in the poems that follow from this first poem.

This interpretation, appended as it is to the end of this chapter, hopefully shows that further work might be done. In fact, in my mind, I can already start sketching a new interrelationship through the poetry, again merely in terms of "presence." Thus, I might proceed from *BR* 1 to *BR* 9 possibly, in which some devils "carousing in sin" recognize the narrator and call out "Brother!" (Crane 10), to *BR* 46, in which the narrator squashes the "red devils" of his heart "upon the page" (Crane 49), and onward, to parts as yet untried. Indeed, it seems to me, the poems are begging for further engagement, not merely in terms of the "presence" I have found in these poems, but on the basis of the interrelationship of the poetry, which I have also tried to expose here, as an aspect of the poetry relatively untouched, at least explicitly, by scholars.

In fact, the poems have been altogether too easily dismissed by previous scholars, or read simply, as if they are simple, when the reality is that the poems, taken together, suggest a combinatorial complexity evocative of literary endeavors to follow later, such as Raymond Queneau's *Cent Mille Millions de Poèmes*, perhaps – although I think *The Black Riders* is much more interesting actually to read. The multiplicity of interpretation available in the poems certainly evokes the postmodern preoccupation with multiplicity<sup>80</sup> and, to the extent this multiplicity leads to uncertainty, one might also think of metafiction.<sup>81</sup> Although the poems were received in their time as if they were a challenge to the definition of poetry, that lesson has never been learned well enough by Crane's critics.

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<sup>80</sup> Italo Calvino, for example, discusses the value of multiplicity in *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*. He can be taken to describe the interrelationship of the poetry pursued here: "... the least thing is seen as the center of a network of relationships ... Whatever the starting point, the matter in hand spreads out and out, encompassing ever vaster horizons ..." (Calvino 107).

Actually, *The Black Riders* is suggestive, at least to me, of a deck of Tarot cards. I have spread the poems out in front of me, in varying sequences, interpreting the poems much as a Tarot reader might read individual cards, depending on the order of reading. Engaged in this process, mentally narrating an interrelationship, I was reminded of the narrator of Calvino's *The Castle of Crossed Destinies*.

<sup>81</sup> Thomas Kent draws attention to the "extratextual" effects of *The Red Badge of Courage*. The poetry similarly leads to "extratextual" effects ("Epistemological Uncertainty" 622). We could pursue how the working of this "extratextuality" compares to the working of metafiction.

### Conclusion

In this essay, I have explored one particular theme through several poems of *The Black Riders and other lines*, although I have also taken pains to indicate the multiplicity of interpretation available in the poems, as that multiplicity informs the possibility of tracing a variety of interrelationships through the poetry. The theme I have traced, the problem of “presence,” undermines some of the previous scholarship on the poetry, especially as that scholarship relies on the “metaphysics of presence” to interpret the poems. However, my analysis also cooperates with some of the previous scholarship, as I’ll indicate briefly below, and my reading can certainly co-exist with much of the previous scholarship.

I do not insist that my analysis is the only possible analysis – in fact, I insist that the poetry can support multiple analyses, even contradictory analyses, and these analyses can each be “right” to the extent they are supported by textual evidence. That is, there are multiple interrelationships available, as paths through the poetry, and, insofar as none of these interrelationships can be privileged, the interpretation of the poetry is fundamentally uncertain – just as Thomas Kent found that several passages of *The Red Badge of Courage* lead to “reader uncertainty” as “epistemological uncertainty” (Kent 625, 622).<sup>82, 83</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Reading a passage of *The Red Badge of Courage*, Kent compares two available interpretations: “both interpretations are feasible; both are coherent depending on the mode in which the story is read...” (“Epistemological Uncertainty” 627). To the extent neither interpretation could be preferred to another for this passage, or a handful of others he considers, he finds the text to lead to “the disturbing possibility that a knowable, interpretable universe may well be nonexistent” (“Epistemological Uncertainty” 628). Clearly, his insight into *The Red Badge* complements my reading of *The Black Riders* to some extent, although he reads uncertainty ultimately differently from me, not as the simultaneous availability of many meanings,

I have found previous analyses of the poetry to be frankly “wrong” only insofar as the critics responsible for those analyses have assumed the poems are “not hard to interpret” (Barnett 2), and have not doubted themselves in this judgment, as any good Crane reader should – at least to distinguish themselves from the characters in his fictions and poetry, who are so often depicted holding “false” viewpoints. Similarly, I object to those critics who have dismissed the “import” of the poems (Miller 349), as though that “import” was fixed, when, in actuality, that perceived “import” has depended, in very large part, on the readers themselves. And, in any case, the “import” can be seen to vary, substantially (or even profoundly), with the interrelationship of the poetry, so that any given poem might mean differently depending on how that poem is read to interrelate with other poems in the text.

If my work doesn’t exactly lead to a re-assessment of *The Black Riders*, I hope some readers will at least question their own immediate presumptions about this poetry, to entertain the possibility that there might be more going on in the poetry than they first think, which they can’t quite “get” at a glance and a quick referral to their favorite “critical assumptions” (LaFrance 130). In fact, I consider my explicit attention to the multiplicity available in the poems to be one of my contributions to the scholarship – in addition to the following:

(1) The analysis of the theme of the problem of “presence” has led to new interpretations of several individual poems. Further, my overall approach, although I do not seek to encompass every single poem in *The Black Riders*, might stand alongside

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but as the cancellation of meaning, I think, especially in his related essay, “The Problem of Knowledge in ‘The Open Boat’ and ‘The Blue Hotel’.”

other approaches which seek to establish the coherence of the poetry, such as Westbrook's reading for the "two voices" or Spofford's reading for the stages of a persona's development. Of course, as I have indicated, more work could be done to develop my analysis or to expand it to encompass other poems and other interrelationships. For that matter, I might also explore how the problem of "presence" underlies the multiplicity of interpretation, and the variety of interrelationships, available in this text, as if, in fact, the problem of "presence" necessitates this multiplicity (and the resulting uncertainty).

(2) The treatment of the *The Black Riders* as if it is a set of multiply interrelating poems, although not unique in the scholarship, as I tried to indicate in the first chapter, has been pursued here with an explicitness, maybe even an aggressiveness, that is new to the scholarship on this poetry. In fact, I went so far, in the conclusion to the third chapter, as to suggest that the poems might precede the work of postmodernists such as Raymond Queneau and Italo Calvino, given the multiplicity, and especially the combinatorial complexity available in the poems. Because I have resisted any appeal to "intention" throughout this essay, some might object that I somehow can't make the claim that the poems interrelate as I pursue that interrelation here. I think that objection could lead to a discussion beyond the scope of this project, on meaning itself and on the literary critical endeavor, although I'll consider the issue briefly.

That is, I wonder if somehow the distinct concepts of "meaning to" and "meaning" somehow cross paths in the brain somewhere, so that we keep thinking one must mean to mean, when, in fact, we know quite certainly that meaning cannot be controlled – and meaning can, in any case, be found. My own thoughts are complicated

(and self-contradictory) on this topic, and I do give Stephen Crane the person a great deal of credit for his work, but I don't think he controlled either his sub-conscious or "his" "unconscious" – which, as I mentioned in a footnote, is not "his" anyway, to the extent he is the subject of language, culture, and so on.<sup>84</sup> The funny thing, however, is that I find myself hesitating over Crane's "intention." In fact, it seems to me, if I could prove that Crane "intended" to write a work explicitly to support multiple interrelationships, I would be justified to proclaim him a "genius" unrecognized for the depth or extent of his poetic innovation. But I don't think the biographical documentation is sufficient to prove Crane "himself" was "present" to "found" the multiplicity of interpretations and interrelationships I have found here, although I wouldn't put the multiplicity apparent in these poems past Crane's "intention."

Of course, one might pursue the question of Crane's "intention" in these poems without relying on biographical documentation or construction. I have referred several times to Thomas Kent's contention that Crane's work must lead to "reader uncertainty" ("Epistemological Uncertainty" 625). Further research would involve studying how other scholars have similarly pursued this uncertainty through Crane's fiction and to study, as well, how Crane's irony has been analyzed. To what extent has his irony been recognized to encompass his readers? It seems to me that one might argue that Crane, across his work, consistently positions his readers to make interpretations, just as he positions his characters to embrace viewpoints, which are wrong, or could be wrong, to the extent alternative interpretations are available.<sup>85</sup> Thus, the greater irony of his work could be

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<sup>84</sup> The "unconscious" is not contained by a skull.

<sup>85</sup> ... or might be available, if the reader were to learn more, either by thinking through the possibilities more carefully, or by pursuing an interrelationship – like Henry Fleming wandering around and about the

that a reader might come away from a reading of Crane's work thinking that he has found *the* right interpretation of the work (I use the masculine pronoun here in order to implicate myself).<sup>86</sup>

Finding some consistency of uncertainty and irony across his work, I might argue from that consistency that Crane "intends" the multiplicity of interpretation available in this poetry – because he must intend that multiplicity if the certainty of any one interpretation is "meant to" be ironic. If the poems are seen to support multiple interpretations, intentionally, then it is just a small step to seeing that the resulting combinatorial complexity of this slim tome might also be "intentional" (or, at least, we might see that the author very well could have imagined the possibilities, and written to them; we can almost see the cunning smile in his eyes, as the black riders under his hand struggle to keep pace with his "vision").<sup>87</sup> Personally, however, I just don't see the

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battlefield in *The Red Badge of Courage*. Kent similarly says that *The Red Badge of Courage* "casts the reader into the role of one of its characters," because, "like Henry, the reader, on the extratextual level, struggles to comprehend a polysemous text" (Kent 628).

<sup>86</sup> Patrick K. Dooley, in *The Pluralistic Philosophy of Stephen Crane*, also pays attention to multiplicity in Crane's work, and to a limited extent the positioning of the reader, but his analysis is somewhat different from the approach considered here: "Crane makes demands upon his reader, hinting at correct interpretations while the reader puzzles over data as they become available to the participants. Gradually, we vicariously acquire the experiences needed to gain the skilled seeing of knowledgeable, expert witnesses." (32). Dooley writes from a Pragmatic philosophical perspective, following William James especially, so while he acknowledges that "there is no single Truth" in the poems (119), or Crane's work more broadly, he also insists that "the world" can be known (29), which is why he can affirm the possibility of a "correct interpretation." He comments: "Crane's epistemology suggest[s] the advantages of evaluation from the widest possible context" (44), as if rightness is a hierarchy, and the "height" of rightness correlates with the width of the base ("of evaluation"). While I think his notion of "epistemological competence" (38) does apply to the poems, as if the poems imply that some views are better than others (as "right views," for example), I think the poems also undermine even this provisional affirmation, which is not to say that the poems are nihilist. Yes, the poems might imply that "Relatively true accounts are either better or worse" (Dooley 30), but the poems do not imply that one account is absolutely more true than another, regardless of how "wide" the view underlying the "account" might be. The notion of "epistemological competence," however useful and applicable that notion might be, calls to mind the confidence of the narrator of *BR 36*. In the poetry, and as a reader of the poetry, it seems to me, one can hold a view (after all, one must), but only absurdly, acknowledging one's absurdity (like a "creature" eating of its heart and liking it) – and this approach is both honest and pragmatic, if the problem of "presence" underlies knowing.

<sup>87</sup> Such speculation is an example of why one should distrust reliance on "intention," of course.

necessity of proving Crane's "intention."<sup>88</sup> I do think Crane was an innovator, and a "genius" at that, in poetry as well as fiction, whether or not he recognized the extent of his own innovation,<sup>89</sup> but I also think such evaluative comments are personal (reflective of the reader). As we've seen, not many scholars have considered Crane's poetry worthy of sustained attention, so my evaluation would seem to be very personal, although I respect the company I have chosen to keep, regardless of how my reading might conflict with some of the readings that have preceded my own.

Of course, my analysis does conflict with the analyses of those scholars who have found "truth" to be attainable in Crane's poetry. If the problem of "presence" underlies the pursuit of "truth," then clearly, that "truth" cannot be attained, except possibly as self-deception. In addition, my analysis conflicts with the analyses of those scholars who have described the means of attaining "truth" in the poetry as an interior progress or process, because the notion of a privileged interiority is both "logocentric" and "phonocentric." Thus, I conflict with LaFrance and Spofford certainly, as well as Westbrook, to an extent, and maybe Itabashi, as they describe the attainment of "truth."

Although my analysis of the problem of "presence" conflicts with how these scholars have analyzed the "truth" of these poems, I don't think those readings, overall, are invalidated. I certainly agree with those critics who have found *The Black Riders* to be coherent, on whatever grounds, and who have treated the poems as if they interrelate, including Westbrook, LaFrance, Itabashi, Spofford, and Barnett (in chronological order). LaFrance's analysis is, in my mind, especially strong, to the extent he looks long at the

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<sup>88</sup> I do, however, recognize that such proof could be interesting – so I see the value, if not the necessity, of the proof.

<sup>89</sup> T.S. Eliot almost certainly did not recognize the extent of his innovation in "The Wasteland," at least until Ezra Pound "edited" it.

poetry, as well as the scholarship available at his time, and ultimately sees clearly an issue underlying the poetry broadly, although, of course, his binary of internal/ external misses the “differance” underlying that binary.

I also appreciate how LaFrance describes the ethos of the poetry, because the poems do describe how one might best respond, behaviorally and morally, to the conditions described by the poems. I can certainly agree with LaFrance’s take on the “common-sense stoic humanism” (LaFrance 149) of the poems, in the face of “grim externality” (139). In fact, it might be possible simply to substitute the phrase, “the problem of ‘presence’,” for “grim externality” above, to arrive at my own view of the ethos of the poetry, although this is another area for further research.

In my own analysis, I have focused on the ontological and epistemological aspects of the poetry, leaving aside the ethos expressed by the poems. Several scholars have addressed the ethos of the poetry directly and, not surprisingly, there is fundamental disagreement about that ethos, because, again, the poetry leads to multiple interpretations. In addition to agreeing with LaFrance, as above, I agree with that strain of scholarship which finds the ethos of the poems, or Crane’s work more broadly, to be “basically affirmative” (Westbrook, “Stephen Crane” 219). Thus, I also agree with J. Edwin Paschke-Johannes, who considers Crane’s work to call for “moral effort” (34), although he doesn’t elaborate at any great length on this insight. In general, I think, the poems describe “an ethical framework” (Westbrook, “Stephen Crane” 225), which is remarkably “modular,” because this framework can stand up to, or cooperate with, a range of ontological or epistemological possibilities.

As an area for further research, the study of the ethos of the poetry might lead to complications in the analysis of the problem of “presence” in the poetry. It seems possible that the “ethical framework” apparent in the poetry could ultimately depend on the “metaphysics of presence” insofar as that framework implies interiority, as integrity “within” oneself. At the end of the long poem, *BR 53*, for example, the narrator confesses:

Withal, there is one whom I fear;  
 I fear to see grief upon that face.  
 Perchance, friend, he is not your God;  
 If so, spit upon him.  
 By it you will do no profanity.  
 But I —  
 Ah, sooner would I die  
 Than see tears in those eyes of my soul.  
 (Crane 59)

Certainly, the “soul” at the heart of this poem seems to imply “logocentrism” and “phonocentrism” insofar as that “soul” vouches for, or serves as the basis of, an interior “truth.” However, one might wonder whether this poem actually (or absolutely) privileges the narrator’s interiority (“Perchance, friend, he is not your God”). Of course, this question would best be addressed by pursuing another, or a bigger, more complex, interrelationship through the poetry, to discover how this poem interrelates with other poems and how the meaning of this poem is thus modified by those other poems. The availability of yet another interrelationship, yet another interesting problem to pursue

across the poems, is, I think, inevitable in *The Black Riders*, so long as the poems are being read.

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