

Gustavo Pérez Firmat

*IDLE FICTIONS: THE HISPANIC VANGUARD NOVEL, 1926-1934.*

Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1982. Pp. 174.

\$25.75.

Reviewed by Jerry Phillips Winfield

With this study, Pérez Firmat provides a penetrating and intellectually rigorous examination of the Hispanic vanguard novel and the critical tension it generated. Undertaking a study of the relationship between language and metalanguage, or fiction and criticism, he organizes his work into two parts: "Criticism" and "Novels." While the first part provides a reception study of the vanguard novel for the years between 1926 and 1934, the second part develops a critical reading of these novels contextually based on this reception. In his search for a new hermeneutical perspective, Pérez Firmat views the avant-garde movement in Hispanic fiction both "as an on-going critical debate that sought to redefine the novel, and as a group of novels that ostensibly embodied the new definition" (p. xi).

The "idle fictions" of the vanguard novel represented an interlude or literary parenthesis—a vacation—from the traditional novel. Pérez Firmat interprets such representative works as Salinas's *Víspera del gozo*, Torres-Bodet's *Margarita de Niebla*, and Benjamín Jarnés's *Locura y muerte de Nadie* and *El profesor inútil*, of which the latter's first and second editions bracket the beginning and end of vanguard fiction. Self-conscious of its subordinate nature, vanguard fiction created a world closed upon itself, yet constantly impelled by the opposing forces of literary tradition and rebellion. The critical problem of definition is centered in the complex interrelationship of the vanguard novel with the "canonical" novel of the nineteenth century.

The *novela nueva*, typified by a deconstructive characterization, a seemingly meaningless plot, and an intrusive author represented a moment of vertigo in its confrontation with traditional fiction. Pérez Firmat offers unique and provocative critical strategies in his study of a "forgotten past." For while avant-garde Hispanic poetry—that of Lorca, Guillén, Alexandre and others—has received considerable attention, avant-garde fiction has been critically neglected. Particularly revealing is the consideration of literary influence, notably that of José Ortega y Gasset in *La deshumanización del arte y Ideas sobre la novela*.

The notes and bibliography of the work are models of precision and thoroughness. Occasionally Pérez Firmat, in his search for *le mot juste*, obscures the reader's vision with such technical renderings as "pneumatic aesthetics" (p. 40) "the palimpsest effect" (p. 70), and "the novel as mattress." Conceptually the work is difficult reading yet clearly deserving of the effort. Pérez Firmat has exceeded an attempt of mere labeling in his successful explication of the contextual nature of the movement. With fresh insight and sound scholarship, he has made a valuable critical contribution to an intriguing area of twentieth-century Hispanic fiction.

Chester L. Wolford

*THE ANGER OF STEPHEN CRANE: FICTION AND THE EPIC TRADITION*

Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983. Pp. xvi + 148.

Reviewed by Richard A. Cassell

Chester L. Wolford's *The Anger of Stephen Crane* offers another rescuing of Crane from the constrictive level of naturalist and determinist. He shows us that Crane's creative imagination has a larger scope and makes deeper soundings than such recognized, or at least observed, currents as Naturalism, Symbolism, Impressionism, Existentialism, Nihilism, and

even Marxism. Crane, Wolford suggests, was an artist with a heroic ambition to create a contemporary epic and who, at the same time, not unlike Thoreau, dared to corner life to see it for what it is.

The intriguing question is what would a man of epic imagination see who believed heroism to be no more than "one man's limited but perhaps illusionless vision" (p. 63). Since epics cannot be written without illusions or idealistic visions, Crane, when he wrote within the epic tradition, created epic situations without the heroes to conquer them. Given Crane's conviction that humanity has been left to flounder in an impersonal universe, Homeric *areté*, the ideal of attaining individual excellence, Virgilian *pietas*, the ideal of sacrificing all for sake of home, country, and the gods, and the Dantean and Miltonic faiths in the centrality of God and a life dedicated to achieving salvation, prove meaningless. Indeed, Crane could write to Wyndham Lewis that hope is "the most vacuous emotion of mankind" (p. 5). Ideals persist in the human imagination; reality denies them. It is not surprising that Crane, gifted with an inborn ironic twist of mind, made use of the epic tradition in order to undermine it.

After establishing that Crane was familiar with myth, classical tragedy and comedy, and the epic tradition, Wolford explains how Crane made use of these traditional heroic genres as instruments of irony. But Wolford is even more intent upon showing that only when Crane adapts epic analogues did he achieve his best work or, indeed, greatness. Stories like "The Monster" are among Crane's finest, since Dr. Trescott's tragic struggle combines the mythic and epic connections. The most celebrated stories refurbish the epic "The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky" and "The Blue Hotel" are comic and tragic anti-epics of the West, and "The Open Boat" "has epic proportions and epic significance but no epic outcome" (p. 21). On the other hand, Crane's fictions that shatter classical or romantic myths but lack the epic scope are denied greatness, like *Maggie*, for example, which inverts the Persephone myth and offers Maggie no escape from hell.

*The Red Badge of Courage* dramatizes an epic struggle with "the blood-swollen god," has the structural trappings of the epic, but, supervised by Crane's ironic vision, creates an anti-epic of a protagonist with dreams of heroic acts who momentarily is stripped of illusions and glimpses reality only to revert in the final chapter to conventional hopes and end where he began. That glimpse occurs shortly after he is able to see with "new eyes" and understand he is "very insignificant." As he charges across the field to the battle in which he is to seize the flag, he can see each blade of grass, each tree trunk, the eyes and faces of the running soldiers, and the "heaped-up corpses," all of which he "comprehends . . . save why he himself was there (chp. 19)." Wolford asserts that these impressions free of illusion are for Crane "all one can ever hope to see" (p. 62), and the perception for Henry becomes a heroic feat, since in those moments he has conquered, if not completely, over two thousand years of secular and religious teachings embodied in the Western epic tradition that had glorified individual excellence or communal devotion or spiritual humility before God. Yet, in the end, beset by guilt and comforted by his rationalizations, Henry goes forth from battle to blinding illusions of "an existence of soft and eternal peace" that are seemingly confirmed by the ray of sun emerging from "leaden rain clouds," but it is a sign clearly misread.

*The Red Badge* and Crane's other fiction of epic scope reveal that as an anti-Christian and an anti-transcendental "classicist who fought for consciousness and waited for revelation" (p. 33) he "decreate[d] the imagination" (Preface, p. xiii) and repudiated the epic tradition. His quest for a "supreme fiction" of the consciousness was destined to fail, since, as he came to realize, only limited revelations of what is are possible. Wolford sees Crane not only as a pioneer preceding Wallace Stevens and the Modernists' attempts to capture objectivity, but also as an artist who previewed the retreat to subjectivity of the post-Modernists in their portrayal of a universe of "triumphant chaos and successful deceit" (p. 69). The direction is evident in "Death and the Child," where Peza is defeated by the irrational realities of battle and can only escape, and without the sustaining illusions Henry Fleming could muster. Crane's anger, inspired by his failure to achieve transcendence, had been expressed in mocking the epic struggles he dramatized. But near the end of his life, after the Greek experience and ill and in debt, Crane abandoned the epic stance and escaped into the subjective, personal battle to win self-mastery. It seems as though his denials of the epic values of Western culture gave way to his acceptance of some "subtle brotherhood" sustaining humanity that he could neither comprehend nor relinquish. He was left with only his feelings.

What emerges from this book is another testimony of Crane's honesty. Possibly a more appropriate title might have been "The Courage of Stephen Crane," since anger is a product

of his courage not to play false to the integrity of his perception. Wolford respects that integrity, as he must. At the same time, he respects earlier critics even when he disagrees. He particularly acknowledges his debt to previous studies of Crane's Impressionism, from Sergio Perosa to Milne Holton and James Nagel, who recognize Impressionism as a mode of consciousness that well-served the realist teller of tales in dramatizing the authenticity of successive moments of usually fallible human perceptions. Wolford is equally honest in acknowledging the ambiguities the still elusive Crane puts in the way of those who would probe the secrets of his mind and art. Crane leaves challenges yet to be met or even perceived, but Wolford has met the challenge he faced and may be said to have subdued it. He offers an argument subtle and sensitive to shadings and shiftings that students of Crane will now have to contend with.

Edward J. Hughes

*MARCEL PROUST: A STUDY IN THE QUALITY OF AWARENESS*

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983. Pp. 212,  
\$39.50

Reviewed by Patrick Brady

In this study, much space is devoted to such minor, juvenile works of Proust as *Les Plaisirs et les jours* and *Jean Santeuil*: a quarter of the volume is devoted to them. This has the effect of de-emphasizing the primacy of *A la recherche du temps perdu*: the focus is placed less on the one great masterpiece (which Hughes calls simply "the main novel," p. xii) than on the author as source of a number of works. Such an approach is related less to New Criticism (Murray Krieger's "contextualism") than to the *critique d'identification* of the Geneva School. Moreover, the emphasis on the sixty-two *Cahiers* and other manuscripts relevant to the *Recherche* displaces the treatment away from criticism towards scholarship and the narrower, professional public willing to take an interest in the composition of the work. The approach is markedly genetic.

Hughes shows an admirable rigor in avoiding the suspect appellation "Marcel" for the narrator, whom he calls simply "the Narrator." However, he fails to distinguish between the narrator and his younger self, the protagonist, and this results in unfortunate expressions such as "the young Narrator" (p. 162), "the adolescent Narrator of Balbec" (p. 167). The adolescent was not a narrator, nor is the narrator an adolescent.

Scant attention is given not only to the *madeleine* and other catalysts of *moments bienheureux* (this is defended by reference to the work of Roger Shattuck), but also to such crucial incidents as those involving the good-night kiss and the steeples of Martinville (pp. 70, 76, 89, 170).

Greater rigor might have been applied to the investigation and use of previous Proust criticism. On the one hand, critics are quoted saying things that are obvious and banal (e.g. Cocking, p. 61). On the other, knowledge of the critics is regrettably incomplete. A familiarity with René Girard's recent study of narcissism would have contributed to a more subtle understanding of the protagonist's idolatry of the girls of Balbec, which Hughes deals with many times (pp. 59, 104, 108, 112, 127, 129, 132).

Much that is said here has been said before by others. The discussion of the use of botanical imagery for women the Narrator (like the protagonist) is attracted to (pp. 135-37, 140, 145-52) is one example. Moreover, one regrets the apparent failure to realize that this is part of a general reification of people, which has its pendant in the anthropomorphizing of things.

Statements like the following are somewhat baffling: "Commentators have often gone only as far as Proust's own theorizing will take them" (p. 7); the statement would be untrue except for the use of "often"—which makes it quite uninteresting.

Finally, the book smacks too much of the thesis—there are too many (and too lengthy) statements as to what will be done later and recapitulations of what has been done earlier.