American Childhood and Stephen Crane’s Toys

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Playing outside his family’s abandoned hut, the unnamed child in “Death and the Child” (1898) remains oblivious to the Greco-Turkish War because of the intensity with which he plays: “By a striking exercise of artistic license the sticks were ponies, cows, and dogs, and the pebbles were sheep. He was managing large agricultural and herding affairs” (Crane, University 5: 127). By a striking exercise of Stephen Crane’s own artistic license, the production inspired by toys—the fantasized farming economy—displaces the scene of destruction. It is less this fantasy, though, and more the quiddity of the object that finally defends the boy against any military distraction: “The stick in his hand was much larger to him than was an army corps of the distance. It was too childish for the mind of the child. He was dealing with sticks” (5: 128).

In Crane’s America, however, neither such quiddity nor the toy’s fantastic fungibility really seems to count. “An Ominous Baby” (1894) exhibits a “tattered child” who, wandering “in a strange country” of “stolid, brown houses,” discovers a rival, a “pretty child in fine clothes” playing with “a tiny fire engine painted brilliantly in crimson and gold.” He steals the toy, “weeping with the air of a wronged one who has at last succeeded in achieving his rights,” and finally vanishes “down a dark side street as into a swallowing cavern,” back into the anonymity of Bowery poverty (8: 47-50). The toy does not distance human conflict; it provokes conflict and the tragedy of mimetic desire. The ominous baby may succeed in attaining the object, but he cannot succeed in being the rich boy. Ventriloquizing the infant-antagonists—the baby asks, “[I]t’s yours?” and the enemy responds, “Yes . . . it’s mine. . . . It’s mine! My ma-ma buyed it” (8: 49)—the sketch dramatizes how the American child’s relation to the modern toy takes place within inequitable property relations and how the object may very well exist for the child as little more than a commodity, at most a child’s version of cultural capital.

Such commodities were hardly integral to American childhood until the last quarter of the nineteenth century, when their
mass manufacture transformed the "American child's nursery" into "a Barnum's museum of novelties—toys on wheels, toys run by clock work and steam, musical toys, mimic tools and furniture" (Atkins 244). So it is hardly surprising that a toy provides the subject for one of Crane's Whilomville Stories. "The Stove" is the story of a New York family's visit to relatives in the town of Whilomville; a city girl, Cora, known by the neighborhood children as an "outlaw" able to "lead them into a very ecstasy of sin," brings with her to the country her favorite toy (7: 196). Dr. Trescott, whose son Jimmie is the Whilomville Stories' main focus of attention, pictures the toy stove as "a little tin trinket." When the object is "unmasked," it turns "out to be an affair of cast-iron, as big as a portmanteau, and, as the stage people say, practicable" (7: 197). The cast-iron affair is so cathedical that Cora requires the stove in her bedroom when she sleeps and in the dining room when she eats; her father fulfills the requirement by lugging it from room to room (see Fig. 1). On a day when Cora and Jimmie cheerfully cook potatoes in the garden, snow forces them to move the appliance to the cellar, and there, with small sticks as fuel, they begin to cook turnips; they extend their cooking to the "two huge cylindrical furnaces" in the cellar in the effort to imagine themselves in charge of a hotel kitchen, and they end up producing a stench that fills the Trescott home, ruining a Christmas party: "The solemn odor of burning turnips rolled in like a sea-fog and fell upon that dainty perfumed tea-party. It was almost a personality" (7: 204). For Cora, the stove, however fetishized, is always a stove, but as such it already manifests an economic fantasy. Here, where the realist project confronts another realist mass-cultural project—the manufacture of "practicable toys"—the stove in the story represents another stove, the American woman's stove, which in its absence hovers to mark the story's central subject: the gendering of the production/consumption circuit.

Making sense of this stove that entitles "The Stove" will mean making a different kind of sense of Crane's Whilomville Stories. Often disregarded—his most recent biographer calls them "idylls of small-town life," "sentimental stories [written] for money" (Benfrey 258)—they have nonetheless been studied seriously since 1966 (Solomon ch. 8), said to parody Little Lord Fauntleroy, an object of Crane's explicit scorn (Cazemajou 44), and to occupy the genre of "bad boy literature" or the "boy's book" (Lynn 38; Stallman 482–83). Of course, proclaiming this generic affiliation can slight the prominence of Cora, who overcomes the merely supporting role played by characters like Becky Thatcher and who shares the name of Crane's common-law wife, "a rebel figure," whom Crane first met while she ran a hotel in Jacksonville (Gilles 9). More important, the girl's relation to the commodity, her fixation on the toy, begins to disrupt not just the genre of the boy's book but the generic and nationalizing reconceptualization of the child that gained circulation as the century closed. I want to juxtapose this conceptualization to the commercialization of childhood to show that as the latter modernized childhood, the former struggled to efface that modernity. My incremental account of "The Stove" will finally suggest that Crane's text bids us to imagine, over and against the discursive production of childhood, a production of objects that can effectively emancipate children as desiring subjects.

Still, my point is specifically not to abandon the conventional wisdom that understands Crane's stories as part of the bad-boy project (or even as "idylls")). While the stories strive to occupy this genre, however, they leave a material residue, the modern toy, that provokes concerns that the genre typically oc...
cludes. In other words, this essay describes generic syncretism: the use of a dominant genre to record an emerging phenomenon that disrupts that genre’s conceptual precondition. This new materialism, which emerges from the interarticulation of literary, social-scientific, and industrial-material histories, might help us to overcome the (often tacit) literary-critical agreement with Michel Foucault that “we must dispense with ‘things’” and abandon the “history of the referent” (47), an agreement that has beaten “culture” into the airy thinness of discourse. Recalling Georges Bataille’s point that, because capitalism is “an unrestrained surrender to things,” industrial societies “place what is essential” outside “the world of the thing” (136, 129), one can begin to imagine why criticism, no longer interested in the materiality of the signifier, has yet to show much interest in the materiality of materiality—the irreducibility of the commodity object to the epistemological, market, or cultural logic it inhabits. Rather than privileging that object as a more satisfactory ground on which to construct what we call “history,” I want to reprivilege the literary as that which—while assimilable to, or illustrative of, a dominant logic—can also expose a particular illogic: a surplus materiality that frustrates any historicist desire to formalize “culture” just as it once frustrated the desire to formalize childhood.

1. Producing the Child

Steven Mailoux has shown how anxieties about *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, which appeared in the midst of the “bad-boy boom,” had little to do with race and much to do with the literary representation of, or provocation of, “delinquency” (128). Such claims about a historical extraliterary horizon of expectation could account as well for the Nation’s suggestion that Crane’s reputation “might justly be annihilated by *Whitcombville Stories*” (Logan 283). Nonetheless, in the 16 years separating Crane’s work from Mark Twain’s, the horizon had expanded as a result of “Child Study,” most simply defined as “the systematic observation of children” (Cromwell 7). The movement was so popular that *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*, the year prior to publishing Crane’s stories, ran psychological case studies, such as Louise Hogan’s “A Study of a Child” (1898), which she expanded into a book that Harper’s published the same year. When, at the outset of “The Stove,” Dr. Trescoct says to his wife, “I shall be interested to note what form her energy will take this time,” he adopts the physician’s new role of paedological ob-

server, seeing the visit as an opportunity for systematic, scientific observation. His wife finds the attitude intolerable: “You’ll be interested... This is not a scientific question; this is a practical matter” (7: 195). The New York Times writer who reviewed Crane’s book shared Mrs. Trescoct’s view and made much of the coexistence of the “bad boy” and “child study”: “It is not a little odd that while teachers and physicians are making a cult of child study, and are frightening plain-minded parents out of their wits by fine-drawn and microscopic analyses of the complex little psychical organisms to be trained and influenced, the children of fiction are becoming more and more simple, possessing more and more the elemental characteristics we have been wont to ascribe to the Bushman or the South Sea Islander” (“Crane’s Contribution” 276).

While the review helps to situate Crane’s stories at the very conjunction I wish to highlight, it misconstrues that conjunction as a conflict. Indeed, while Horace Scudder had ignored the boy’s book in *Childhood in Modern Literature and Art* (1894), mentioning only Nathaniel Hawthorne as an important American contributor to the literary depiction of the child, the genre is centralized instead by the human sciences in their first stage of professionalization. When G. Stanley Hall addresses “Adolescence in Literature, Biography, and History” in his magnum opus of psychology, *Adolescence* (1904), he describes the boy’s book as working out a logic of exclusion that precipitates a negative ontology, making it clear less what boyhood is, and more what it is not. “The town of Boyville,” Hall generalizes, paraphrasing William Allen White’s *The Court of Boyville* (1899), “was old when Nineveh was a hamlet; it is ruled by ancient laws; has its own rules and idols; and only the dim, unreal noises about it have changed” (1: 536). Although the psychologist explicitly distrusts adult retrospection, he clarifies his interest in the retrospective genre by extrapolating a radical discontinuity between an interiority, real and timeless, and an exteriority that is the temporality within which social and cultural change take place.

This negative ontology participates in what Philippe Aries famously terms “the invention of childhood,” the representa-

tional differentiation of child and adult that, according to Hall, appears belatedly in America because America is “a flat nation”: “[I]n a very significant sense we have lost touch with those stages of [early] life because [the nation] lack[s] a normal developmental history” (1: xvi). The postbellum phenomenon of the boy’s book, however, gets in “touch” with those stages of life and arrests them. Like the adventure heroes whom *Tom Sawyer* and Jimmie Trescoct imitate—heroes whose nobility is “statically inert,” as
Bakhtin would say—the boys remain fundamentally the same in successive episodes of adventure (392). Thus, while the Whilomville Stories and The Court of Boyville formally prefigure a collection like Sherwood Anderson's Winesburg, Ohio (1921), they also mark the moment when the episodicity of the boy's book breaks down into separate stories, the more readily precluding any characterological change. At the close of The Adventures of Tom Sawyer (1876), Twain writes that his chronicle, "being strictly the history of a boy," must stop before "becoming the history of a man" (260). In subsequent novels the chronicle goes on, putting a stop instead to the growth of the boy. Huck's homodiegetic narration of both his own adventures and the adventures of Tom Sawyer, Detective (1896) in the past tense but at no point of remove from his boyhood stands as the most significant narratological preservation of the child. The world of adults (the economics of slavery, American geography) infiltrates the interiority Hall defines, but Huck's naïveté translates that world into a kind of unreality, allowing the book to be read as complying with the laws of the genre it violates.

The genre's simpler and more pervasive strategy, reflected by Hall's comment and by such phrases as "Boyville" and William Dean Howells's A Boy's Town (1890), amounts to spatializing boyhood. This is the strategy adopted as well by Hall's The Story of a Sand Pile (1888) and John Johnson's Rudimentary Society Among Boys (1884), where children are observed interacting with one another in isolation from the adult world, including the world that watches. When Crane chose to write "Whilomville," he explicitly formulated the chronotopic work of the boy's book, identifying place as exhibiting a certain time or timelessness—"whilom," or "once upon a time," as Chaucer's "Whilom as olde stories tellen vs," or Scott's "Where oft whilom were captives pent" (Oxford English Dictionary). The title of Crane's volume strives to confine its contents to the ahistoricity of the tale. When the boys of Whilomville meet on "a maple-lined avenue, a highway common to boys bound for that freeland of hills and woods in which they lived in some part their romance of the moment" (7: 139), their romance takes place within the interiority of boyhood, marked off by what White terms the "impenetrable wall" surrounding "the town of Boyville" (xvii), a wall establishing the fact that, in Howells's formulation, "Everywhere and always the world of boys is outside the laws that govern grown-up communities" (Boy's Town 67).

This spatialization that effects constancy is what facilitates the appearance of the child as a theoretical object—an object of observation and description rather than a subject of prescription and proscription. Although Adolescence addresses "ephebic transformation"—indeed transformations such as "Sexual Development: Its Dangers and Hygiene in Boys," which lie far beyond the threshold of the impenetrable wall—it must stabilize the very instabilities of youth. "[M]an is not a permanent type" because of his "adaptive plasticity to new environments" (1: vii), yet the literature offers a "few silhouettes of representative types" of children—the word "silhouette" importantly underscoring absence (1: 513). The culmination of more than two decades of research, much of which appeared in the journals Hall founded, Adolescence produces "youth" as an object of both physiological and psychological generalization. Perhaps uncomfortable with the child's recent constitution as an object of scientific discourse, Hall turns to literary discourse as a means of certifying the transhistoricity of his conclusions; literary accounts of the child interact, as narrativized and particularized case studies, with the abstract "standard," "average," and "type" provided by the era's wave of statistics to achieve psychology's reality-effect.

Such interaction between the particular and the type, which has recently helped to clarify the American realist mode and Crane's position within the realist project (Halliburton 4, 7; Mizruchi; Seltzer 93–118), is not just inscribed but eventually thematized in the boy's book. Once Twain had satirized a stereotype in "The Story of a Bad Boy" (1865), and once the genre had crystallized in Thomas Bailey Aldrich's The Story of a Bad Boy (1870), the type was individuated and the "bad boy" normalized in the work of Twain, Charles Dudley Warner, Edward Eggleston, Harlin Garland, Howells, Edward Everett Hale, and Crane (that is, in the work of most of the era's best known male writers). Howells delighted in the fact that Aldrich's protagonist represents the "great average" of boys (Rev. of Story 124), and in A Boy's Town he wishes his own protagonist to be "a boy in general, as well as a boy in particular" (2). In turn, Crane formulates general adages about "American childhood," the "conduct of boys," the "boyish view," and the "type of the little chief" (7: 83, 139, 142, 220). Thus, while Hall points to the boy's book as a literary case study, the narrator of the boy's book already assumes something akin to the role of the child psychologist: "Being a boy himself," Crane writes, "he did not understand boys at all" (7: 84). Such a psychologist's pose, out to reveal "childish minds" and "the instinct of childish society" (7: 235, 167), had also begun, at the encouragement of the child study, to insinuate itself throughout American everyday life. Publications, state societies for child study, roundtables, and national conferences pleaded to extend their research into familial life, erroneously
claiming the new science itself to be “thoroughly indigenous to our very soil” (Whitney 4). Child study societies established bibliographies for parents and teachers, published pamphlets for recording information, and, in the effort to scientize parental scrutiny, offered detailed instructions on observation and record-keeping. When the Nation reported that the “air is full of child study,” the metaphor could be taken literally; the child’s daily life was becoming part of a national inquiry (Rev. of Studies of Childhood 223).

A properly Foucauldian account of the boy’s book and its relation to child study might thus emphasize, on the one hand, the shared epistemic premises that allowed the child to appear as a positivity, and, on the other, the prescription for surveillance, fulfilled by the distanced narrator-observer, that helped to normalize surveillance itself in American society and to foster the “mode of information” as a social determinant (Poster). I want rather to emphasize how the joint endeavor also appears as a specifically nationalizing project even in the initial stages of scientific inquiry. Some of the physical statistics culled by Adolescence, for instance, derive from research conducted at Quaker schools outside Philadelphia, where the students were, as the researchers explain, “exceptionally homogeneous as to” “race,” “nationality,” “social and financial condition,” and “sex”; they “presented a higher physical development than is usually found in city schools”; and yet, he concludes, they represent “a true American type” (W Hall 1). The science that was taken to be “peculiarly the product of American genius” (Whitney 4) was determined to produce American products: the national type. Specifically excluding urban life (“city schools”) in order to produce nationality, that project, like the genre of the boy’s book, idealized not the child but the child’s environs, effectively mapping the child/adult dyad onto the country/city grid. In turn, the playground movement, in its effort to Americanize the immigrant (Cavallo), worked, like child study and the boy’s book, to spatialize childhood by momentarily excluding the life of the city from the life of the child.

Whilomville similarly provides a pastoral alternative to Crane’s Bowery sketches and Maggie: A Girl of the Streets (1893), which focus on the deforming growth of urban children (without Horatio Alger’s formula of escape from the Bowery). “Politics,” in Raymond Williams’s formulation, gives way to “retrospect” (83). But retrospect, in Crane’s boy’s book, lacks the clarity it had for the generation immediately preceding him. Admirers of A Boy’s Town, for instance, insist that the text expresses a “desire to make the small-town life of the 1840s serve as criticism of the urban society of the Gilded Age” (Lynn 37). As a manifestation of romantic anticapitalism, the literary return to boyhood stands as a last-ditch effort to establish a “world elsewhere” within a realist mode, requiring the return to an antebellum moment preceding the crises of war, and the political, demographic, and socioeconomic upheaval whose “great casualty,” as Robert Wiebe puts it, “was the island community”: “[The society that had been premised upon the community’s effective sovereignty, upon its capacity to manage affairs within its boundaries, no longer functioning” (44–45). It is the functioning of such a society that the boy’s book portrays, constructing boundaries that create an insoluble and sovereign world, a realist American reality from which postbellum America has been erased.

Boyhood thus becomes a site where a residual America can be preserved, where the American exceptionalist vision can be projected, where nationhood can be embodied outside history. For Howells, moreover, boyhood’s “immeasurable remoteness from the sphere of man” solves the problems of a national literature’s natality: he proclaimed Aldrich’s Story of a Bad Boy “an absolute novelty” that will produce “the work which has so long hovered in the mental atmosphere as a pathetic anti-natal phantom, pleading to be born into the world,—the American novel, namely” (Rev. of Story 124–25). If, as Hall pathologized, the country lacked a “normal developmental history” (1: xvi), the development of the child within that history was meant to resolve both the country’s social and its literary ills. “Boyville,” for White, is a “Free Town in the monarchy of the world” (xxii); this image of childhood freedom as a paradigm for political freedom is one that Dewey begins to develop in 1899, with the publication of The School and Society (10). What we might designate Hall’s own contribution to the boy’s book, “Boy Life in a Massachusetts Country Town Forty Years Ago” (1891), makes the nostalgia particularly explicit, and when he later anthologized the essay, he claimed that his own boyhood represented “the type which was probably very near that contemplated by the founders of our government, but which is now fast passing away.” Progressive pedagogy, he concludes, is fundamentally conservative, “an attempt to restore artificially the vestiges of this vanished or vanishing stage of boy life” (Aspects xii). Producing the boy, then, is part and parcel of preserving the nation.3

While it is possible to enumerate a variety of reasons why producing the girl is not part of this nationalist preservation, A. F. Chamberlain’s The Child: A Study in the Evolution of Man (1900) and Hall’s Adolescence show how contradictory claims overdetermine her inability to bear national subjectivity. Authori-
tico such as Franz Boas, Cesare Lombroso, and Paul Topinard had theorized woman as fundamentally childlike (Chamberlain 397–440), thus restricting the child/adult opposition to one gender. But Havelock Ellis, among others, argued that woman "represents, more nearly than man, the human type to which man is approximating," and "feminisation" appeared to be "one of the marked tendencies of our modern complex civilisation" (qtd. in Chamberlain 392, 417). Thus always the child (puerile) but already grown up (modern), the female subject was also taken to be more cross-culturally and cross-racially generic (Hall, Adolescence 2: 561–647; Chamberlain 397–440), so that girls could hardly serve the same generic function as boys in the nationalizing project imagined by Hall. That is, no young woman could be sufficiently American. In contrast, the girl's "precocity of development" (Chamberlain 410) and her somatic and psychological instability (Hall 1: 494) resist the chronotopic work of producing constancy, as does her ideological intractability: "nearly half our American pubescent girls choose male ideals, or would be men," a fact clearly related to the problem that "modern woman has cut loose from all old moorings and is drifting with no destination and no anchor aboard" (Hall 2: 391). It is as though the problems posed by New Womanhood (see Smith-Rosenberg 245–96) were already latent in the girl, and the appearance of the "American Girl" (see Banta 45–91) could hardly help in the effort to archaicize America through the medium of childhood. But if theorists of the child make it clear how aberrant Cora's presence is in a boy's book, her very arrival from New York with the latest toy also looks like the typical gendering of a consumer culture that cannot help but threaten Whilomville's ahistoricity and allotemporality. The Whilomville Stories, by making no imaginative return to antebellum culture, can stabilize neither the genericity of the child nor their own genericity.

2. Producing the Toy

In an untitled, undated fragment about a toy shop, Crane imagines the life of a toy as hard work, relieved only when a clerk locks the door behind him: "Some tin soldiers on the counter dropped their tin guns with a little tinkling crash and then swung their arms and puffed in the manner of benumbed teamsters in winter. A small wooden horse harnessed to a cart began to wriggle between the shafts and cry: 'I say, you fellows, come and help me out of this, will you?'" (10: 110). The fragment, an unlikely component of any Crane story or novel, evokes a familiar topos from the fairy tale or fable—anthropomorphizing the world of things, as do, in fact, some of Crane's enigmatic poems. But one might also say that the fragment registers, in that moment the clerk leaves the shop, a moment of transition in American toy manufacturing: the production of increasingly animated toys, such as reeling drunkards, sawing fiddlest, and "balking mules," as the Scientific American reported in its account of an East Side factory ("Manufacture" 376). The Chicago Tribune was provoked to account for the new world of playthings as an existentialist matter: "Toys are not content with 'being'; nowadays they 'do' something, or their existence is incomplete" ("Christmas Toys" 42). In Connecticut, the Ives Company became the leading manufacturer of "automatons," "automatic toys," or "mechanical toys," selling such idiosyncrasies in the 1880s as automatized suffragettes, children on velocipedes, and oarsmen in functional boats. In Paris, Thomas Edison, displaying his "photograph dolls" at the 1889 Exposition Universelle, all but transformed the world of the fairy tale into fact. But while Edison and Ives were contributing to the history of ludo-technological marvels, it was the American mass production and mass distribution of mechanized objects for children that made stories about an "immense toy-store" full of dolls "amusing themselves in all sort of ways," or a story about a girl mistaking the new baby for a new mechanical doll, not unpredictable reading in the pages of St. Nicholas (Austen and Austen 285; Wiggin).

Elsewhere, and at the outset of the century, E. T. A. Hoffmann displayed his famous automaton in the fantastic yet quotidian world of the Kunstmärchen (Léo Delibes's Coppélia was not produced at the Met until 1887), but Dickens, in The Cricket on the Hearth (1845), relegated the mechanical toy—"dozens upon dozens of grotesque figures that were ever ready to commit all sorts of absurdities"—to the more purely pedestrian workshop (184). In "The Bell-Tower" (1852), Melville exoticized Banadonna's "daring skill," locating the "great mechanician" and his domino in the "south of Europe" and in "forgotten days" (208), but, by Christmas of 1862, the mass-produced Autoperipatetikos, a key-wound doll with a bell-shaped crinoline, showed up in New York, walking around the shop windows, fascinating crowds, and congesting the city sidewalks. That invention simply irritated Oliver Wendell Holmes: "Wishing to spare her as a member of the defenseless sex, it pains us to say, that, ingenious as her counterfeit walking is, she is an impostor" (571–72). For Holmes, the imposture amounted to a failure of mimesis, to the fact that Autoperipatetikos did not replicate the actual motion of walking as elucidated by another recent invention, the instan-
taneous photograph. By the time the mechanical man was perfected to the point where someone could imagine that the "laboring man" would henceforth "sit around and smoke twenty-five cent cigars," it was still "the simplest form of hand labor working side by side" with the "most ingenious machinery" that was responsible for producing the range of mechanical toys exhibited in the catalogs of the great mail-order houses: Montgomery Ward, Marshall Field, Sears and Roebuck ("Electric Man" 120, "Manufactory" 376; see Schroeder 13-99; see Fig. 2). Less marvelous mechanical marvels, costing as little as 18 cents ("Christmas Toys" 42), had become fully affordable to working-class families, helping the industry to "suffer . . . the last of all" American industries "by the hard times," according to Albert Bolles. "Playthings are a luxury," he explained in his industrial history of America (1881), "but, even if there is retrenchment in the family, the children have to be amused just as much as ever" (366).

Such a statement hastily translates the luxury of playthings into the need for toys, exemplifying capital's requisite multiplication of fantasized needs. It signals less the familiarly touted transition from production to consumption, and more the extension of the production-consumption circuit to the recreational, what Henri Lefebvre would term the capitalist conquest of leisure space (84). Simon Patten's conviction that the country's economic success depended on recognizing that the "primary task of education" was "to arouse" the worker to participate in "amusements and recreations" (125) exemplifies this ideological shift. The sewing machine manufacturers who, losing their share of an increasingly monopolized market, began to produce the bicycles that prompted the craze of the 1880s and '90s (Hounshell 189-215) show the parallel infrastructural shift. Similarly, Milton Bradley's lithography business suffered so severely during the Civil War that he started printing games, and, when Elizabeth Peabody introduced him to the work of Friedrich Froebel, he supported the American kindergarten movement by publishing the first kindergarten manual, The Paradise of Childhood (1869), and by manufacturing the toys the manual prescribed (Faulkner). This economy of play and the American literary economy both began, over and against the ethic of work, to valorize and to semantically the recreational, illustrated no more by the boy's book than by Kate Chopin's The Awakening (1899) or Henry James's The Sacred Fount (1901). When Crane's boy's book represents the toy, it enacts the intersection of those economies.

The mass-produced automatic toy suffused modern life with the rhythm of modernity. Its segmented, repetitive move-
ment, where a traditional literary mode (let us call it the fairy tale) is deployed to figure modern toys.

The toys in Crane's fragment, coming to life not as toys but as subjects released from the condition of being a toy, appear (when out of sight) to be recovering from the seriality of modern life. At first, the lines may seem to offer us a glimpse at commodities assuming a life of their own, but of course, since they are not speaking about how they appear in one another's eyes as nothing but values, they do not really speak as commodities. The wooden horse's plea for assistance works instead toward recovering the coarse materiality of the object that is lost in the abstraction of the commodity form. More importantly—more egregiously—the fragment provides, foremost in its image of the soldiers as "benumbed teamsters," some sense of the work involved in the production of the plaything, figured as the object's (performative) self-production. Teamsters, still working 12- to 18-hour days in the 1890s, remained the very image of unskilled labor and of organized labor, having unionized locally since mid-century and nationalizing as the Team Drivers International Union in 1899 (Leiter 15-19). All this is to say, then, that this scene of the product's disassembly—soldiers swinging their arms, the horse wrestling itself from the harness—inscribes the corporeal strain entailed in the process of assembly. The necromancy of the fragment demystifies the commodity: the anthropomorphism of the toys reveals them to be the incarnation of human labor. Thus, while commodity fetishism obfuscates the process of production, and while the automatic toy of the Gilded Age can be said to repeat the homogenizing proto-Taylorism of the factory (including the toy factory), Crane's animated horse and soldiers expose in contrast a secret life of things that is the concrete life of the laborer.

Farfetched as it may seem to imagine an object revealing the history of its own production, this is just what Walter Benjamin imagined that toys reveal to children: "the entire process of their production and not merely its result." For Benjamin, however, the child "naturally understands" only "a primitively produced object," and he thus regards the Moscow Toy Museum as a "safe asylum" for the labor registered in the folkloric object ("Russian Toys" 123). If we agree with a point made in the early work of Jean Baudrillard—that artisanal objects fascinate from "having passed through someone's hands... whose labor is still inscribed on them" ("Subjective" 37)—then Crane's fragment, in turn, appears as a discursive asylum for postartisanal labor (not naturally understood by the child), the labor inscribed (though illegible) in the mass-produced thing.

Toys do not achieve sentience elsewhere in Crane's work. But while the objects in this fragment live the life of the toy as a life of labor, the "practicable" toy in "The Stove" prompts the children to animate themselves as domestic laborers, performatively figuring the work that supports and is hidden by their mothers' lives of leisure. The scene of polymorphous productivity is at once a pastiche of the child labor that nineteenth-century America liked to imagine as an English problem and a scene that dramatizes a girl's ludic relation to the object that, centerpiece of the American woman's home, had inspired consumerist feminism's dictum to "Go out and buy!" "Go out and buy a new stove," Elizabeth Cady Stanton counseled. "Buy what you need!" (Wendt and Kogan 29; Strasser 50-66; Giedion 527-47; Cowan 53-62). In Cora's fantasy, however, rather than simply modernizing woman's sphere—where "mother-at-home was forced to play hostess to male inventions," as Ann Douglas succinctly puts it (166)—the appliance serves to heterosocialize domestic production. At first, Jimmie is unable "to admire a girl's stove, built on well-known domestic lines," but soon the two work happily together (7: 198). In turn, Cora imagines extending their work beyond the domestic sphere: "Oh Jimmie, let's play we're keepin' a hotel and have got to cook for 'bout a thousand people an' those two furnaces will be the ovens an' I'll be the chief cook" (7: 202). Emblematic as the stove may be of woman's subjection to domestic labor, here it catalyzes a phantasmatic escape from what Charlotte Perkins Gilman called "our division of labor on sex-lines, giving to woman the home and to man the world in which to work" (225). (Indeed, the girl's stove has transformed the American father into a kind of domestic laborer, who hauls the object throughout the house.) "The Stove" extends the license enjoyed by the traditional "bad boy" to the American girl. Cora resembles less a prepubescent Daisy Miller or a Jo March and more a regendered Tom Sawyer, whose fantasized adventures are inspired—crucially—not by books but by things. Her status as a literary countertype, like her idiosyncratic status in the Whitonville community, depends on what we would typically call the homogenizing mass culture of the child.

3. Economies of Childhood

Despite Howells's enthusiasm for Aldrich’s novel, 20 years later, writing A Boy’s Town, he admonishes boys for having "no other idea of property than the bounty of nature" (210). The admonishment becomes especially vituperative when an opening