

pages 176-78 from Hart Crane's Queer Modernist Aesthetic, Niall Munro

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from Niall Munro, Hart Crane's Queer Modernist Aesthetic (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp. 176-78.

Reading strategies

The queer mode of reading presented in this book adopts the methods of close reading and genetic criticism; two approaches that might be considered as contradictory in their aims, especially if close reading is traced back to the practical criticism of a New Critical approach. As Dirk Van Hulle observes, “[g]enetic criticism presents an alternative to the New Critical machismo that refuses all extratextual help to interpret a work of literature” (6). But these methods have been complementary rather than contrary in my reading of Crane’s poetry, since they both seek to make Crane’s work more transparent. If, as I have been arguing, a reading of Crane’s work that presents it as encoded ultimately limits interpretation, genetic criticism – in Van Hulle’s words – “provides a context that does not only surround the work and delimit its meaning; it also opens it up” (6). In doing so, it adheres to the aesthetic of Crane’s that I have been outlining, particularly in Chapter 3: an aesthetics of transience that is concerned with gaps and spaces between objects and ideas as a way of resisting and avoiding heteronormative temporal and spatial pressures, but suggesting an accordance with some of the interests of literary modernism. In addition, genetic criticism opens up Crane’s work for an analysis of its affective qualities.

As I demonstrated in Chapter 4, tracking the changes made through the drafting process of “Voyages II” helps to show the particularly strong affective background for this sequence and to suggest ways in which the genesis of Crane’s aesthetic can be reconsidered. His experimentation with shifting tenses exemplifies his thought process as Crane attempts to give appropriate weight to a particularly strong emotional moment of loss, whilst the emphasis given to the body, and in particular the way in which the queer body is oppressed by the world around it, helps a reader to understand and interpret the roles that both the human body and the body of the sea play in the published version of the poem. In particular, as I have demonstrated, a genetic analysis of the sequence allied to close reading of the published version of the poems and the poet’s letters, indicate how far Crane was basing the work on his own biography, and the extent to which it prioritized experience, since early drafts show Crane seemingly writing down events almost as they happen. This is not a writer who is attempting to close off his experience of the world in code. In addition, those manuscripts of “Voyages II,” which describe the oppression of the speaker or his assertion “I ask/ wreak hell or worse into this step” (A32), reveal a Crane who actively proposes to resist oppression, a socio-political Crane who is normally more visible in his letters than in his poetry. These examples show that there needs to be a reassessment of the shame and guilt with which Crane is associated by critics.

Embracing surprise

Considering a reparative reading of Crane can also help to develop an understanding of what I have been referring to as the “unexpectedness” of his writing. If, as Sedgwick argues, a paranoid reading forecloses the possibility of surprise, “to a reparatively positioned reader, it can seem realistic and necessary to experience surprise” (*Touching Feeling* 146). On the

one hand, such “surprise” can be experienced in the content of Crane’s work. The queer negativity of his aesthetic, in which the speaker of his poems relinquishes agency or challenges reproductive futurity so as to create alternative spatial and temporal dimensions, is jarring for the reader, but so too is the demand that Crane makes of his reader when getting to grips with his style. As Allen Grossman has argued, “it is the strangeness, the radical unfamiliarity of the thought, the unexpectedness of the cognitive demand that makes Crane ‘difficult’” (“On Communicative Difficulty” 156). (Grossman offers another reason here to make use of genetic criticism: if the “thought” is so unfamiliar, a reader and critic will benefit from seeking out the genesis of that thought in earlier drafts of the poetry.) The source of this “unexpectedness” is Crane’s logic of metaphor, the connotative process which is, as I outlined, improper and disorderly. But what is perhaps most queer and unexpected about it is that, more than any other modernist poet, Crane accords his reader tremendous independence of thought. Crane’s “ontology of accidental attributes” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 32–33), which, drawing on Judith Butler, I identified at the end of Chapter 3 as representative of his logic of metaphor, proposes an engagement with the text that is unlike other reader–poet relationships. The very particular stress that Crane places upon connotation and the extent to which he asserts that “[t]he reader’s sensibility simply responds by identifying this inflection of experience with some event in his own history or perceptions – or rejects it altogether” (*CP* 235), demonstrate the “unexpectedness of the cognitive demand” (Grossman, “On Communicative Difficulty” 156). Rather than being asked to merely read the poem, the reader is invited to take part in it, as if the intervention of their own “event” might somehow change it. Crane therefore sets up an affectivity of connotation, a relationship that I have been identifying as intersubjectivity, and which can also be termed relationality. However, the emphasis Crane places upon the relational does not just apply to the relationship between reader and speaker; it can be considered in terms of modernism more generally, and suggests the creation of a queer community of modernist writers.

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