

CRANE CENTENARY PRESENTATION

Sunken Garden, N.C.P.A, Bombay, 18-5-1999

Of all the American poets of the twentieth century- with the singular exception of the much-quoted Robert Frost- Crane, oddly enough, happens to be the only one who first reached me, not through the printed page, but by word of mouth. I remember the precise manner of it- to use a quaint archaism Crane might have relished. Late evening. Yet another weary ending to yet another burnt-out day; and my friend and fellow-poet Deepankar Khivani, at the corner between Elphinstone College and what was then Hope Lane, chiming the words slowly to himself, suddenly and for no apparent reason-

‘And yet this great wink of eternity.....’

A simple enough line, as lines go, but I stood momentarily transported from myself, no longer the ‘Time-harried prisoner of shall and will’ I had supposed myself to be. It was a sense of escape instantly achieved and the line, quoted wholly out of context, just lay there, sprawling majestically across the silence that ensued, and wholly valuable both for the way it sounded and what it meant to me then; the juxtaposition of ‘eternity’ against the fragile brevity of a ‘wink.’

I was subsequently to discover, through my own extensive reading of Crane’s poetry and with the help of numerous detailed textual analyses by critics like Bloom, Leibowitz and Unterecker, that Crane was in fact a rare master of seemingly unintended double-entendre, of an apparently involuntary sort of paronomasia which at once seduced the ear and baffled the intellect. But what I had discovered then- at the moment at which that line had been uttered- was infinitely more significant. The opening line of a superbly lyrical poem by a uniquely gifted poet, long dead, cited completely out of the blue, by a young poet, very much alive, had suddenly made me aware of something that my rich musical upbringing and several years of formal training in music, hadn’t; that words, if given a chance, can do what music does.

I would now like to read the whole poem aloud. It is the second part of the ‘Voyages sequence’ and perhaps the most frequently anthologised of Crane’s poems, which is perhaps why it is the first Crane poem I ever read.

Reading- ‘Voyages II’

What, I ask myself ten years later, did that poem do to me?-a poem I had at the tip of my tongue within the first few readings, though I couldn’t make more than a few stray threads of literal sense out of it. I remember swaying to its rhythms and cadences entranced, delightfully surprised at every turn of syntax and diction, submitting myself to

the power these words had over me, yet utterly bewildered as to what they meant. Had I learnt to stop being a merely passive listener and become the keyboard itself, to allow the master music-maker to play upon me whatever tune he wished? Had I, to use Crane's own idiom, acquired that 'competence' which only 'wine talons' may 'distil', the competence, 'to travel in a tear/sparkling alone/within another's will.'?

Actually, I think that whole verse from 'the wine -menagerie', a poem that deals quite clearly with consciousness expansion, in this case, under the influence of alcohol, deserves to be quoted;

'New thresholds,.....'

Hitherto, words were to be loved, more than anything else, for what they meant. If they happened to sound good as well, this was purely incidental. Music, on the other hand could be experienced, even if devoid of deeply meaningful tonal and rhythmic structures, purely for its appeal to the heart and the sensual ear- at the level, that is to say, of feeling and pure sound. Suddenly things changed. I felt like Keats looking into Chapman's Homer; but it was not the finely tuned harmonies of distant spheres, not the musicality of pure music that I was listening for; I was listening for the slow oozings of noteless vowels, the crisp crunch of consonants, the music that had lain hidden all these years in the common rough stuff of daily speech; the music of words we use all the time, without quite knowing why. 'Thou hast thy music too', I found myself saying with Keats all over again- though I was addressing neither Autumn nor a spectre of death, but verbal language itself. Crane, more than any poet I have ever read, was responsible for this. He cured me of a particular sort of tone -deafness which some of the world's finest musicians still suffer from; a deafness to the music of words.

During the course of our literary sessions at the sunken garden, Adil Jussavala once suggested we meet to read and discuss poems that dealt with the relationship between the city and the sea. A fine theme, of course, to mull over, sitting here, at the poetry circle, stifled by Urban congestion, a few hundred feet from the Arabian Ocean. The city fascinates us with all its varied enchantments. We celebrate its numerous achievements as if they were our own. But we are also repulsed by it, and when we turn away from it to look at the sea we become suddenly aware that the city has been encroaching upon something very deep within us which it simply will not leave alone. The sea allures us in all its vastness and yet we can live neither in, upon nor by means of it. Adil's suggestion set me thinking about Crane all over again, for the exploration of that relationship, is a fundamental theme in Crane's poetry, involving, at a very broad level, an inquiry into the connection between everything pre-emminently manifest in nature, and that which human effort has brought into being. This is not, of course, a theme unique to Crane. Romantic critics from Wordsworth to Harold Bloom have asserted that the search for the missing link between nature and culture is a basic reason for the existence of poetry. In the context of what may be called Modern American verse, however, -which I take very

broadly to begin with Whitman- Crane seems to be one of the most versatile and thorough-going explorers of this paradigm.

I would now like to read one of the most mature of Crane's Early poems. One that is at once deeply nostalgic and prophetic; nostalgic, and deeply so, because it is an attempt to recapture at once the experience of sight and vision, of sensory perception and dream, and the shadowy no-man's land in between; prophetic, because it contains all the elements essential to Crane's later work; his concern with his own divideness between city-love and sea-longing; and between the material world and the world of his own imagination; his overwhelming desire to look beyond the mutual separateness of objects, the rifts in human experience, unifying them synaesthetically, into one continuous perception of life. Regardless of all this, of course, like much of Crane's work, it is a poem that can be read purely for its flawless tonal architecture, and imagery.

Reading- 'Repose of rivers.'

It is not a matter of minor importance, that the last word in this poem is the word 'sound'. It is entirely legitimate, of course, to read the last line merely as a statement added to what has been said in the penultimate line, implying 'That was the steadiest sound it is possible for willows to hold'. But I am tempted to believe that what Crane is doing in the last two lines, is comparing one kind of sound to another, the criteria by which he does this being 'steadiness'-the degree of continuum achieved, the purity of the sound. We have on the one hand the plain sound of willows- a natural sound empirically perceived.; and juxtaposed against this is the sound of 'Wind flaking Sapphire' which is not a pure sound at all, but a complex synaesthetic compound, at once aural, visual and haptic.

When I informed Adil that I had been writing about Crane, he told me he would like to explore certain related issues like whether there were similar arguments in Sanskrit Kavya-Shastra (poetics) to the kind Eliot raises about how the sound of a poem may well reach and stir us before the sense is satisfactorily apprehended. I am mentioning this because when I first began to read Crane, I was studying Sanskrit poetics at Elphinstone, and certain concepts, which, I admit were largely derived from theory, made Crane more accessible to me. The 'Dhvani' school of Sanskrit poetics seems to be obsessively concerned with the way words sound, emphasizing the importance of 'naad' (i.e. pure sound -not necessarily musical) at an almost primeval level. They seem to have almost reached the point of saying that in poetry, the sensory reception of sound, because it precedes the intellectual apprehension of meaning, plays a primary and not a subordinate role in the aesthetic experience. I doubt however, that the 'Dhvani' theorists would have propounded an aesthetic theory that sought to justify the extreme subordination of meaning to sound that Crane's poetry involves. The 'Dhvani' school came to be identified with the 'Rasa' school of Sanskrit poetics which seriously explored the sensual

and emotional impressions that words make upon the human mind- one of Crane's obsessive concerns. The 'Dhvani' theorists argued that poetry could appeal to all the senses, but it could do so solely through the sense of sound, through the 'gateway of the ear', for this is the essential nature, the 'mool tatva' of words themselves. But the most striking connection between Sanskrit poetry and Crane seems to be with regard to his favourite poetic trope- metaphor. Crane is perhaps the most obsessively metaphorical poet in American History. His refusal to confront objects upon their own terms, his overwhelming need to perceive similitude where the differences are obvious, to yoke together often by violence the most heterogeneous of ideas, and constantly speak of one thing in terms of another seems like an extreme twentieth-century re-enactment of the ancient Sanskrit obsession with 'utprekshhya'. One of the most basic metaphorical conceits in Sanskrit literature and linguistic thought- as well as in Hindustani and Carnatic music- is that of 'Naadsagar' a simple compound word meaning 'Sea of sound'. Related to this is the concept of 'Naad -bhakti'- 'devotion to or through sound' and 'Naad-brahman'- which I will not venture to translate. The Hindustani and Carnatic music traditions have numerous compositions that involve the kind of linguistic auto reflexivity that characterise most of Crane's poetry- though the 'Voyages' sequence is a case in point; these are songs about song, music that is concerned only with the exploration of the sea of music, with what Crane inimitably described as 'The silken skilled transmemberment of song'

'Transmemberment.....' There we have it. A word coined and consciously compounded by Crane to imply 'coming together' and 'transcendence' in a single quadrisyllabic breath. If I were asked at gunpoint to say in one word what Crane's poetry was about I would certainly use that word- for Crane, thankfully, has himself provided us with the answer to that most tedious question. Crane's quest is at once a quest for the unification of his own dismembered psyche and for the world that lies beyond material differences. He says, in a line amply supplied with those Latinate inversions of syntax he so whimsically cherished;

'There is the world dimensional for those untwisted by love of things irreconcilable'

And his own poetry involves an attempt to outleap this world and achieve the kind of 'reconciliation of remotest mind' which he experienced during adolescence in the verse of Emily Dickenson, whom he addresses passionately in one of his earliest poems. Right from his earliest attempts to capture in verse what sea and city meant to him, neither sea nor city are permitted to have a purely geographical or physical presence. The notion that either may be perceived as pure object is utterly at odds with the passionate demands of his romantic sensibility. While he is an acute observer of physical detail, his primary concern is to bring city and sea to life; with personification and identification. His attempt is at once to internalise his surroundings and to see them as extensions of his own being. Both Sea and city, thus assume deep and complex symbolic dimensions in his work. The city -whether he confronts it in the New York subway, trapped in its bowels, as it were, or at outermost promontory of the harbour, the

precise point at which it becomes the sea- is more than an exterior presence- it is an extension of his own body. The sea for all it offers the sensual ear and eye, is also the sea of poetry itself, the sea of sound, or if one prefers, his 'Naadsagar'

Our voyager upon the sea of sound seems to have a distinctly sensual and aesthetic vision of paradise. His is not the silent paradise of the buddhists that lies beyond the senses. It is the paradise of the singer when he merges with his song. It is not silence, he envisions, but the rapt ciarosquoro of silence and sound; the utopia of love, music and sensuality. Let us meet him once again when he seems to have put the city temporarily behind him, and surrenders himself to the power of paradisal vision;

Reading-Voyages III

-love in that last line, could of course(- forgive me for making such a delicate stroke sound so blatant) imply both a specific human lover or love itself; this is not a particularly unusual event in the English language. And yet Crane achieves in one of the simplest yet most memorable of his lines, a depth of tone hitherto not plumbed; a 'transmemberment', so to speak, of the concrete and the abtsract. The 'Voyages' sequence ends with one of the most harmonious verses in the English language, one in which assonance seems to have finally come to terms with consonance and which incorporates what I choose to perceive as Crane's vision of 'shabda-brahman'-the embodiment of the divine in the spoken word- or as Crane would have it-'The Imaged word';

'The imaged word it is that holds
Hushed willows anchored in its glow-
It is the unbetrayable reply
Whose accents no farewell can know.'

We hear once again the sound of the willows with which Crane had ended an earlier poem; but this time their sound is 'hushed' for they have found shelter in the light of 'The imaged word'-that primeval sound from which all sound may be supposed to have emerged, and which is present though itself unheard, in all the broken sounds we encounter. This is Crane finally saying 'Aum, Shanti, Shanti, Shantih'. There is in these lines a tone of serenity and unquestioning faith, of saying yes to life, and to life as a poet; a tone very rarely heard in any of Crane's later work. The 'Bridge' sequence which followed was stunningly ambitious-sometimes triumphantly, sometimes catastrophically so; but when it is which I will not presently venture to distinguish.

The mode in which I began this piece was plainly autobiographical. One reason for this is that all of us have been concerned about our sessions at the sunken garden turning into mere lectures outside the classroom, where for some reason, purely personal viewpoints seem to be studiously disregarded; secondly, and more importantly, most people who write about Crane, seem to begin with an extended biographical note, or a character-sketch of the poet- a trap I did not want to fall into. Most attempts at textual criticism seem to borrow heavily, and often unnecessarily from biographical material. So I thought it wiser to speak of my life in Crane's work rather than Crane's own life. The fact is that Crane's life was sensational in every sense of the word. His biography, written with great pain and love by professor Unterecker, is fascinating reading material in itself even for people who would not take the trouble to read the poet's own work. Both Freudian and Jungian psycho-analysts have found his life a Pluto's mine of issues to quibble about, of stray strands to weave together into a single thread. The adolescent dichotomies he never outgrew thus get traced back to the marital tensions between his parents, which culminated in divorce; his bisexuality has been accounted for in several ways- as an attempt to overcome his own sense of sexual dichotomy and ultimately sexuality itself; to harmonise the male and female aspects of his personality. His obsessive alcoholism and discomfort with material reality seem to emerge from the same state of perpetual schizophrenia, of not knowing whether he was his father's son or his mother's- as if at a very deep level he found it impossible to believe that anyone could be both of those things at once.

Much has been said of Crane's bisexuality, most of it wholly ineffectual in enriching our reading of his work, in fact I believe largely misleading. In spite of the obscurity of his verse, Crane himself, was deeply committed to the notion of universal appeal; he would have wanted his poems to reach beyond the limited readership of those who empathised with his particular sexuality. I certainly believe that his best poems achieve this and this brings me to a problem I had raised at a Feminist seminar at Poona University some years ago, concerning the gendering and possible re-gendering or de-gendering of archetype. I was wondering why Hindustani composers, including myself, constantly feel the need to return to the feminine voice or rather a feminine persona, in order to capture a tone of supplication; why in khayal and thumri, it is always Radha or one of the Gopis addressing Krishna, not the other way around. There is a sort of innate linguistic bisexuality in this- because the composers have mostly been men, though how a particular use of language connects with the user's own sexual habits at the biological level is not the least bit clear. To believe in equality between the sexes at a social and political level is one thing; to re-structure one's own, encultured gendering of archetype is quite another, and for the classical artist, at least, involves a total overhauling of one's imaginative processes. Nobody seemed interested in my question about whether it was legitimate to perceive the sea as being either male or female, except a Feminist Critic from Hyderabad, who later told me that she also sang Hindustani music.

Crane certainly uses a female personification in his treatment of the sea, though how much this arises from linguistic convention, and how much from personal association remains a mystery. It is interesting to note that in Sanskrit, 'Sagar' is masculine, and therefore all compounded nouns that end with sagar – like 'naadsagar' or 'sursagar' follow suit. However, to come back to Crane I would only like to say that a systematic classification of all his images into masculine and feminine categories seems an utterly redundant pursuit; one that might be interesting as a passtime either for sexist or feminist psycho-analytical critics when they have nothing better to do; yet one which only takes us further away from our experience of Crane's poetry, and possibly, I suspect, from our understanding of ourselves. Take for instance, John Logan writing about ' Voyages' in 1972;

Reading- para II pg. Xxxii

In the next paragraph, Logan says something useful to our understanding of Crane at a general level; though he doesn't seem to demonstrate the same wisdom when confronted directly with the text.

Reading Para III

To reduce City to father and Sea to mother, is perhaps the worst thing one could do to Crane's poetry.

Crane's death, of course, was no less mysterious and sensational than his life was and has come to be seen in several different ways. Whatever may have happened, it is clear from eye-witness accounts that he jumped overboard and was lost at sea. At the age of twenty, desperately in love, and momentarily seized by the power of my own death-wish, I conceived of the event as a grand 'transmemberment' in itself; a merging of the singer with the theme of his song; of the lost son with a universal mother. What resulted from this was an irremediably melodramatic poem of which I think only the following two verses worth retaining;

'Message in a bottle '

- To Hart Crane

Dear hart when your voice laps my heart's shores,
I sense compassion in the sound and think-
Such echoes falling on a young heart like mine,
What sounds must there be in the heart of the sea?

Did she take you, tell me, or you her,
Or was it both, one for the other,
Tell me will I ever hear
Sounds concealed in the bosom of the sea?

Well, so much for that. Today I prefer to think that he was simply drunk, badly beaten up, and that he temporarily lost hold of his senses. Jeet Thayill's far more mature poem on the same theme suggests that Crane was living his life to its fullest on that ill-fated morning. His loving description of the sumptuous breakfast Crane might have eaten just before he jumped seems to suggest that it was merely a sudden fit of hysteria under the influence of too much drink that made Crane do it. That it was not a planned contemplated act but an utterly spontaneous loss of control

A lady who was on deck that morning happened to read Unterecker's biography years later and wrote to him saying this-

Reading- letter

I read this letter out to Jeet over the telephone on the morning after he read his poem at a soiree in Dadar. He described that minute detail about the overcoat as uncanny. I would like to conclude with one of Crane's later short poems and I chose this one because it deals with a vision of death as ecstasy- which seems a good enough way to end anything, even a presentation.

Reading- 'The hurricane'

I know those last lines sound utterly conclusive, and I shudder to open my mouth after hearing them, but I would like to set today's discussion going with a question. What does Crane's poetry, or very broadly speaking, Crane's kind of poetry, mean to us today? How deeply are we willing to submit ourselves to the power of verbal sound, when the meaning of the words is not immediately intelligible to us? How prepared are we to look beyond the world of empirical perception into the private realm of a poet's visionary imagination? Personally, I like to believe there is only one way to listen to poetry of any kind- with the ears of a child when he hears a word for the first time and does not know what it signifies, but delights first in the uniqueness of the sound, the way a group of syllables (or more precisely phonemes) seem to have come together in an entirely new way. The child's pleasure in being able to mimetically reproduce this sound and the cerebral pleasure of associating it with a certain concept, seem to follow from the experience of hearing, not precede it. When I first started to type out this essay, my four year old cousin ran into my room and asked me if I were 'playing computer.' If only we could conceive of the act of reading poetry, or writing it, primarily as an act of play, of 'playing language' as it were, the stiff doors of poetry would open themselves to us more frequently- What do you think?

