

READING HISTORY AS FIGURATION IN HART CRANE'S FOR THE MARRIAGE OF FAUSTUS AND HELEN¹

For The Marriage of Faustus and Helen orchestrates some themes which appeared in the shorter lyrics of *White Buildings*. Though the poem, as R. W. B. Lewis points out, resembles Keat's *Endymion* in both its quest motif and its ideal of reconciliation between the poetic soul and essential beauty, *Faustus and Helen* is in many respects the most Eliotic of Crane's long poems. Here, as in his theoretical statements, Crane situates himself between the romantic and the modern. Writing to Gorham Munson, Crane noted of Eliot and his followers:

Everyone, of course, wants to die as soon as painlessly as possible! Now is the time for humour, and the Dance of Death. All I know through very much suffering and dullness ... is that it interests me still to affirm certain things. That will be the persisting theme of the last part of 'F and H' as it has been all along.²

Two weeks later, nearing the completion of his poem, Crane complained to Charmion Wiegand:

Eliot and others have pronounced that happiness and beauty dwell only in memory... I cry for a positive attitude!³

¹ Texto da comunicação apresentada no XXIII Encontro da APEAA, Faculdade de Letras, Universidade de Coimbra, 18-20 de Abril de 2002.

² CRANE, Hart – *Complete Poems and Selected Letters and Prose of Hart Crane*, ed. Brom Weber, Garden City, N.Y., 1966, p. 115.

³ *Idem*, p. 117.

Crane's efforts to dissociate himself from Eliot and what he saw as the Eliotic school of irony must be understood as a gesture that conceals strong affinities at the same time as it shows important ideological differences. Although praise, not elegy, is the central speech act of *For the Marriage of Faustus and Helen*, and although it chooses affirmation over Eliotic disaffection, Crane's poem takes as its subject the theme of memory that Crane himself saw as all too prevalent in the work of T. S. Eliot. Crane will interpret memory, of course, in ways which have very little in common with Eliot's mixing of 'memory and desire'. The similarity of theme, however, is significant, as are a number of stylistic correspondences that follow from Crane's own declaration that he had taken «Eliot as a point of departure for an almost complete reverse of direction».⁴

Faustus and Helen may justifiably be regarded as Crane's answer to *The Waste Land*, but in answering Eliot, Crane echoes his projection of a phantasmagoric urban scene, his reliance on literary allusions and his introduction of a contemporary idiom into the poetic text. Most importantly, however, Crane's poem responds to Eliot's by reading memory as an active, creative force that makes possible an affirmation of the present and a fulfilment of poetic desire. Offering a vision that leads beyond what he, like William Carlos Williams, saw as the retrogressive nostalgia of *The Waste Land*, Crane radically reinterprets Eliot's notion of temporality. *The Waste Land*, in Crane's view, places history in an elegiac perspective, suggesting that the contemporary poet can hope, at best, to play among the ruins of literary culture by creating a poetry of parody and pastiche. *Faustus and Helen* reads history otherwise, in a way that allows the poet to win originality by turning time back and stealing a «legend of... youth» in a «caper» that makes him literally, in his words from the poem's last section, a «thief of time».

Completed in January 1923, *Faustus and Helen*, like *The Waste Land*, is almost a symphonic poetic sequence. The first and last of its three sections resemble one another in their rhetorical intensity and in their evocation of a modern sublime, while the second section resonates to tones of seduction. In a letter he wrote to Waldo Frank after finishing the poem, Crane identified what he called «a few of the planks of the scaffolding» around his verbal structure.⁵ Like *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* section I begins in an environment of urban desolation and alienation and then moves, as Crane himself put it, «from the quotidian... to evocation, ecstasy and statement».⁶ The next section, he goes on to explain, offers the

⁴ *Idem*, p. 114.

⁵ *Idem*, p. 121.

⁶ *Idem*, p. 120.

«sensual culmination» represented by the dance of Helen, «the symbol of this abstract sense of beauty» and Faustus, «the symbol of myself, the poetic or imaginative man of all times». ⁷ The final section, according to Crane's synopsis, «begins with *catharsis*, the acceptance of tragedy through destruction», and ends «in a re-statement of the imagination as in part I» (*Letters*, 121). In reality, the architecture of Crane's poem as a whole is far more complex than Crane suggests. Its intricate figural constructions and the persistence with which it allegorizes Crane's poetics demand that we approach it with great patience and care.

Both *Faustus and Helen* and *The Waste Land*, as noted above, are poems of memory and desire, but their differing attitudes toward the past can illuminate Crane's quarrel with the Eliotic notion of memory. The relation of each poem to its literary past can be studied to interesting effect by seeing how it situates itself historically through its distinctive citational practice – that is, through the strategy governing its use of allusions to earlier literary texts. *The Waste Land* is consistently – even notoriously – allusive, and its citations are explicitly thematized in the final stanza of the poem. There the poet offers a chorus of passages from Dante, Nerval that are identified, in Eliot's famous phrase, as «fragments I have shored against my ruins». *The Waste Land* thus serves as a manifesto for a modernist poetry that knows itself to be fragmentary because it explicitly constitutes itself out of fragments. It acknowledges the moral and intellectual authority, the temporal and qualitative priority of the past and of those earlier works on which the modern poet can only partly rely.

As its title suggests, *For the marriage of Faustus and Helen* also recognizes and seeks an accommodation with literary history, but its citational attitude has an entirely different relation to the literary past. This can be seen in the epigraph from Ben Jonson's comedy *The Alchemist* with which Crane prefaces the poem:

And so we may arrive by Talmud skill
 And profane Greek to raise the building up
 Of Helen's house against the Ismaelite,
 King of Thogarma, and his habergeons
 Brimstony, blue and fiery; and the force
 Of King Abbadon, and the beast of Cittim;
 Which Rabbi David Kimchi, Onkelos,
 And Aben Ezra do interpret Rome.⁸

⁷ *Idem*.

⁸ *Idem*, p.45.

While Eliot characterizes his quotations as «fragments I have shored against my ruins», Crane, by means of this epigraph, voices concern with «rais[ing] the building up/ Of Helen's house». If Eliot includes anterior texts because his own disintegrating structure needs their support, Crane turns to those texts in order to reconstruct or reinterpret them. Perhaps this reconstruction was what Crane had in mind when he described to Munson what he saw as the alternative to Eliot's «archaeology»: «After this perfection of death – nothing is possible in motion but a resurrection of some kind».⁹

The citation from Johnson, as Crane must have perceived, is quite specific about the form such a resurrection or reconstruction of «Helen's house» must take. Rebuilding of beauty incarnate, this temple of imagination, requires that the poet exercise the equivalent of «Talmud skill/ And profane Greek». The epigraph thus points to a rabbinical school of interpretive reconstruction; it defines a mode of allegorical reading best exemplified by the sort of Biblical exegesis that finds references to the present and the future in the scriptures of the past. In *The Alchemist* of, course, this passage serves as a mockery. Dol Common, a scheming whore whose ravings parody the scriptural commentaries of Hugh Broughton, the Puritan scholar and theologian, speaks the lines that Crane cites. In their dramatic context these lines are clearly intended to be misunderstood, not only because the phrases parody the rhetoric of erudition, but also because Dol recites this speech at the same time that Face and Sir Epicure Mammon are offering a commentary on it. And as it is intended to produce misunderstanding, so the erudition of the speech is fraught with misunderstandings of its own. Dol bungles her allusions to Broughton's commentaries; indeed, the very reference to Helen that provides the only connection between her utterance and Crane's poem is merely an error, a slip of tongue: Dol means to say «Heber», not «Helen».

If this mistake provides the apparent link between Crane's poem and Johnson's play, they are joined on a deeper level in a more significant relationship. Crane's epigraph evokes, at the outset of his text, the ambience of *The Alchemist* by recalling the comedy's serious concern with questions of textuality and interpretation. In the same scene from which Crane takes his citation, Dol speaks of the desire «to comprise/ All sounds of voices, in few marks of letters», underscoring *The Alchemist's* focus on the quest for a primal or original language that is juxtaposed against the pathos of a textual materiality. *Faustus and Helen* also addresses issues of originality and language, and it does so with as close an attention to the materiality

⁹ *Idem*, p.115.

of rhetoric as that seen in Dol Common's reference to the «few marks of letters» in which voices might be comprised. Crane's use of the epigraph from Johnson, then, foregrounds its rhetorical self-consciousness; and by severing it from its context, Crane imposes a new interpretation on it, much as the Talmudic scholars referred to in the passage itself might do. For the raising of «Helen's house» demands a revisionary reading of the past and rests upon an authoritative gesture of interpretative appropriation.

Crane's concept of interpretation, then, clearly has little to do with conventional notions of the exegete subservient to the text. Rather, the relationship between the epigraph and the poem suggests that of an earlier to a later poet. For Dol Common, in the midst of her rhetorical «fit », likens the interpretative method practiced by «Rabbi David Kimchi, Onkelos/ And Aben Ezra» to that of medieval Biblical hermeneutists, who read Old Testament incidents as portents or allegorical figurations of New Testament revelations.¹⁰ According to such a reading, Old Testament figure is subordinated to New Testament fulfilment, the former deriving its intelligibility from the latter, which effectively unfolds its meaning. One of the more significant consequences of such an interpretive tactic is to suggest a hierarchy in which the present seems to function as the literal referent and the meaning of the past. The figural thus precedes the literal in time, but the literal has interpretive priority. Although the past in such a schema, as Erich Auerbach notes, «does not become a mere sign» – which is to say, it retains its historical authenticity – its status changes from that of an autonomous to that of an auxiliary reality.¹¹ Interpretation that views past events as prefiguring those of the present thus asserts the inclusion of that past within a present that always already comprehends it. It asserts, in other words, the subsumption of the figural within the literal.

The relationship between past and present, however, cannot be reduced so easily to this relationship between trope and referent. When «Rabbi David Kimchi» and his colleagues interpret the Old Testament as allegorising the Roman threat to Hebraic culture in their own time, they enact a transference that is more than the literalization of one historical phenomenon into another. Indeed, that transference or carrying across is literally, as it were, a kind of metaphor (*metaphorein*, to carry across). By inferring a correspondence between the two events, they necessarily

¹⁰ Here again Dol is wrong. See Douglas Brown's edition of *The Alchemist*, New York, 1965, p. 108n: «David Kimchi or Kimhi was one of a family group of Jewish grammarians and Biblical scholars who worked at Narbonne in the twelfth century, Onkelos was a first century scholar and translator, and Abraham ben Meir Ibn Ezra (1092-1157) a Biblical critic and poet.»

¹¹ AUERBACH, Erich - *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask, Princeton, N.J., 1968, p. 96.

perform a reading of history as figuration, even as they literalize the figurality of the past event by finding its specific reference in the particularity of the present one. As Auerbach writes of this relationship between figure and fulfilment: «They are both contained in the flowing stream which is historical life, and only the comprehension, the *intellectus spiritualis*, of their interdependence is a spiritual act»¹². In other words, this intellectual activity, this mode of reading history, is itself a figuration, or as Auerbach puts it, a «spiritual act». For Crane this act of interpretative mastery is essentially poetic. It confirms his belief in the necessity of a creative memory or poetic vision by engaging in the imaginative process of revisionary interpretation. The paradox that enables the present, by reading itself as the literal referent of the past, to affirm its figural authority over history itself, is the governing insight that Crane brings to bear in *For the marriage of Faustus and Helen*.

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¹² *Idem*, p.73.