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“Humming a Little Wandering Air”:

An Introduction to Adelaide Crapsey

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Published posthumously in 1915 in a single, slim volume titled *Verse*, the poems of Adelaide Crapsey encompass a creative and critical aesthetic--indeed, a life--defined by death. Born in 1878, Crapsey suffered from tuberculosis through much of her adult life, and finally succumbed to it in the autumn of 1914. Such a cursory statement, however, belies the vitality with which she tried to live and write. Both letters and personal accounts attest to her intellectual liveliness, good humor, and resiliency. Nevertheless, over the years, the rigors of both teaching and writing in combination with her illness took their toll. As a result, Crapsey struggled through life, just as she struggled through a variety of poetic forms--some of them derivative, many of them original--in an attempt to construct a body of work more perfect and lasting than her own faulty, human form.

Crapsey's interest in form was intense and ongoing. And her point of view was both artistic and scientific. In *A Study of English Metrics* (also published posthumously, three years after *Verse*) she states that “It is my object in the present discussion to venture the suggestion that an important application of phonetics to metrical problems lies in the study of phonetic word-structure.” (13) In that study, Crapsey meticulously explores the complicated relationships between syllables, syllable weight, stress, rhythm, accent, and meter. In her biography of Crapsey, Karen Alkalay-Gut observes that “Progress [in the understanding of metrics] could only be instituted by an understanding of the rules of the music of poetry and a conscious effort to employ them.” (281-2) And it is that kind of understanding, ambition, and effort that Crapsey brought to her own work, both in and out of the classroom. Recalling her days in the classroom, a former student of Crapsey's stated that her teacher had a “passion for accuracy, truth, and beauty. She never let poetry be only feeling. It had form; it had technique.

It, like music, from its very form achieved beauty. A rondel had meaning because of its very form, a ballad became alive like a person--it had its own body." (Smith 11)

In *Verse*, the body of Crapsey's work begins with a poem titled "Birth-Moment". As is the case in many of Crapsey's longer poems, the conceptual over-reliance on the classical ("O Aphrodite, Hear!") works against her own inclination toward the modern, confessional voice, and the resulting gap between form and content gives the impression of a poem being produced rather than organically achieved. Nevertheless, "Birth-Moment" is still an expression of the body and its attending desires, self-reflexive and revealing. Lines such as "Behold Desire new-born", "Need urges her", "Life runs to life", "she who longs", "Towards lover's mouth" all provide the poem with a sense of forward speed and urgency, an almost "breathless" rush toward physical experience. And finally, in the poem's last stanza, the poet exuberantly gives voice to the following heartbreaking plea:

O Aphrodite!
O Aphrodite, hear!
Hear my wrung cry flame upward poignant-glad..
This is my time for me.
I too am young;
I too am all of love!

(18)

Whether we read the final couplet as containing a sense of assertion or resignation, such an admission, such desire, is not only thematically significant in terms of the poem itself, but also in terms of subsequent poems that more successfully explore the relationship between the poet's own body and the artistic forms within which Crapsey chose to work.

The form for which Crapsey is best known is the cinquain, a five-line poem of her own invention that "usually followed a specific stress pattern. The first line had one stress, the second two, the third three, the fourth four, and the fifth was shortened to one. Sometimes, however, syllable count

was the basis for the structure, and still other poems are based on an interplay between stress and syllabic rules." (Alkalay-Gut 8-9) These rules play out in the second part of the first section of *Verse*, which contains twenty-five cinquains written between 1911-1913, the years immediately preceding Crapsey's death. Not unexpectedly, many of the poems deal either directly or indirectly with death:

Moon-Shadows

Still as
On windless night
The moon-cast shadows are,
So still will be my heart when I
Am dead.

(34)

Leaving classical form and allusions behind, the above cinquain allows Crapsey's more modern and confessional voice to manifest, quiet and "windless" as it is, in harmony with the shadowy anticipation of death. And yet, the thematic stillness of the poem is forced inevitably forward toward death through the use of enjambment, particularly in the third and fourth lines. And finally and effectively, the last line links--in a thumping spondee--the active presentness-of-being with the anticipation of the certain static solitude of death.

Similarly, the following cinquain moves forward through its modern syntax and enjambment toward a recognition of the poet's fate:

Saying of Il Haboul

*Guardian of the Treasure of Solomon
And Keeper of the Prophet's Armour*

My tent

(29)

A vapour that
The wind dispels and but
As dust before the wind am I
Myself.

(47)

In this case, the stillness of the previous cinquain gives way to the unsettling wind--this time with less certain assertions of the self--and any illusions the poet might have about her fate are dispelled. Her body a "tent", a temporary, flimsy structure, she is forced to accept the inevitable, evanescent nature of her condition.

There are among the cinquains more defiant assertions that similarly give voice and vent to the poet's frustrations (most notably in "Youth"), but perhaps the most touching and successful cinquain is the one chosen by Crapsey to begin the section:

November Night

Listen..
With faint dry sound,
Like steps of passing ghosts,
The leaves frost-crisp'd, break from the trees
And fall.

(28)

Like the previous two cinquains, this poem also moves forward, but without the enjambment. Instead, more natural, organic, and musical line breaks are utilized, and the forward motion manifests through the use of a simile ("Like steps of passing ghosts") which connects the living world with the dead. And then, after listening to a life nearing its end in a magnificently musical line ("The leaves frost-crisp'd, break from the trees"), there is the final motion both forward and downward toward the last line and the final word, "fall".

Of this same cinquain, Karen Alkalay-Gut observes that "The trick is in perception and structure: like the leaves falling from the trees, her [Crapsey's] entire life, perceived as a cinquain, was not a wasted anticipation of future health and development but an inevitable, artistic arabesque." (9) And along with her own observation, Gut includes a note by another former student of Crapsey's, Louise Townsend Nicholls, whom Gut credits with articulating "the symbolic significance of this form, 'from likeness to her own abbreviated, but perfected life. The five lines, one-stress, two-stress, three-stress, four-stress, and then caught back suddenly again to one-stress, were her life, her young, joyful life, broadening and straining--and then, with a faint gasp of terror at the unfulfillment of promises which life and love and art had made, but still undaunted, caught back again to one.'" (9)

In the final section of *Verse*, Crapsey returns in many ways to her classical roots and inclinations with poems that in some cases move backward rather than forward. (She seems to have chosen a thematic rather than chronological order.) Nevertheless, there are several poems which succeed in transcending intent and reveal Crapsey at her best:

The Lonely Death

In the cold I will rise, I will bathe
In waters of ice; myself
Will shiver, and shrive myself,
Alone in the dawn, and anoint
Forehead and feet and hands;
I will shutter the windows from light,
I will place in their sockets the four
Tall candles and set them a-flame
In the grey of the dawn; and myself
Will lay myself straight in my bed,
And draw the sheet under my chin.

(93)

Once again, the self asserts itself, and in this particular poem, it asserts itself repeatedly and intricately. In the first three lines, both first-person subjective and first-person reflexive are utilized, in addition to the anagram of “shiver” and “shrive”, in addition to the parallel structure. Such linguistic complexity creates the effect of an intense bearing down on both poetic and personal forms. The poet is alone at dawn in an almost religious state. Ritualistically, she prepares herself for death (“I will shutter the windows from light, / I will place in their sockets the four”), as there are not only the “sockets” of the candles to consider, but also those of the eyes of the anticipated corpse. Crapsey, never one to shy away from the reality of her condition, also provides a striking image at the end of the poem, tucking herself into bed with a clean, almost poetically surgical precision.

While not as chillingly cold in its presentation, the cinquain titled “Song” also anticipates death:

I make my shroud but no one knows,
So shimmering fine it is and fair,
With stitches set in even rows.
I make my shroud but no one knows.

In door-way where the lilac blows,
Humming a little wandering air,
I make my shroud and no one knows,
So shimmering fine it is and fair.

(72)

Yet again, Crapsey squarely faces her imminent fate, and in the case of “Song” prepares the garment to be used at the time of her own demise. In the same precise way that the shroud is constructed (“with stitches set in even rows”), the poem is constructed: evenly, rhythmically, musically. In fact, Crapsey even pays herself and her work a compliment in describing it as “shimmering fine” and “fair”. In “Song”, form and technique are as much the body of the poem as are subject and image. While far less gruesome

than "Lonely Death", "Song" is nevertheless a poem of equal achievement and in fact, in terms of tone ("humming a little wandering air"), it suggests a more mature, even elegant acceptance of death.

Crapsey closes *Verse* with the poem titled "The Immortal Residue":

Wouldst thou find my ashes? Look
In the pages of my book;
And, as these thy hand doth turn,
Know here is my funeral urn.

(95)

As we now know (though it was unknown to anyone at the time), Crapsey had placed her collection of poems in her top dresser drawer before her death. Soon after it was discovered, a family friend then facilitated its publication. Accordingly, in "The Immortal Residue", Crapsey addresses the reader directly ("Wouldst thou find my ashes?"), wondering, questioning if her book, her "funeral urn", might posthumously be discovered and recognized.

In the "Foreword" to *Verse*, Claude Bragdon (the family friend responsible for its publication), writes of Crapsey: "She wrote gay verse in the earlier days before the shadow fell upon her, but her rigorous regard for unity banished it from this record of the fearful question of her spirit." (12) The unity that Crapsey craved seems to have guided and even encompassed all aspects of her poetic and personal aspirations. The poem, the song, the music of language expressed in poetic form was Crapsey's overriding aesthetic concern. It was also her personal wish. If a poem could complete and perfect itself, it might have a chance of lasting beyond the imperfect body of mortal existence and instead take on the "immortal residue", the essence of what Crapsey hoped to achieve through the music of language and its accompanying, bodily form.

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