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Art (and) Criticism: Hart Crane and David Siqueiros

ABSTRACT

The article focuses on an analysis of Hart Crane's essay "Note on the Paintings of David Siqueiros." One of Crane's few art-historical texts, the critical piece in question is first of all a tribute to the American poet's friend, the Mexican painter David Siqueiros. The author of a portrait of Crane, Siqueiros is a major artist, one of the leading figures that marked the history of Mexican painting in the first half of the twentieth century. While it is interesting to delve into the way Crane approaches painting in general and Siqueiros' *œuvre* in particular, an analysis of the essay with which the present article is concerned is also worthwhile for another reason. Like many examples of art criticism—and literary criticism, for that matter—"Note on the Paintings of David Siqueiros" reveals a lot not only about the artist it revolves around, but also about its author, an artist in his own right. In a text written in the last year of his life, Hart Crane therefore voices concerns which have preoccupied him as a poet and which, more importantly, are central to modernist art and literature.

Keywords: Hart Crane, David Siqueiros, painting, art criticism, poetry.

One of the final scenes of *The Broken Tower*, the biopic about Hart Crane, directed by and starring James Franco, shows the poet of *The Bridge* attacking his own likeness in a house he inhabited in Mexico. The author of the painting in question is David Alfaro Siqueiros, a Mexican artist and friend of Crane's. The biographical context makes it clear why Franco chose to include this incident, dramatic but by no means exceptional in the life of a troubled and tormented man who was one of America's prime *poètes maudits*, in his film. Crane's ominous Dorian Gray-ish gesture, made in the last month of his life and preceding his suicidal death, which occurred three months short of his thirty-third birthday, must inevitably be read as "self-destruction by iconoclasm" (Fisher 495). The poet's biographer recounts the event in terms which would not be out of place in the script of Franco's biopic: "suddenly he was before them [Peggy Cowley, Mary Doherty and Louise Howard], ravaging in fury at the portrait by Siqueiros, the surface of which had begun to flake, and before anyone could stop him he slashed the canvas repeatedly with a razor" (495). Another piece of information is added by one of Crane's monographers, Paul Giles, commenting on the poet's word choice in *The Bridge*: "We know Crane used 'gull' in this way because in one of his drunken rages he spurned the portrait of himself by David Siqueiros, saying he wouldn't be 'gulled into buying that piece of junk'" (152).

Brian M. Reed's observation that "Crane was an avid proponent of such contemporaries as Walker Evans, David Siqueiros, Joseph Stella, and Alfred Stieglitz" (199) finds confirmation in the numerous occasions on which Crane refers to the visual arts in general and to Siqueiros in particular in his correspondence. However, the connections between the American modernist and the fine arts are not limited to epistolary expressions of his admiration for certain painters, photographers or sculptors. As the current state of research on Crane shows, the importance of these connections has been noted by the poet's scholars. A review of the literature on Crane published in the last decade reveals the existence of several sources which situate the poet's *œuvre* within the context of the *beaux-arts* and visual representation. One particularly relevant example is John T. Irwin's extensive and illustrated 2011 monograph on Crane, which draws on references to the painterly tradition and the Old Masters, with particular emphasis on medieval and Renaissance art. More recently, Niall Munro included a chapter devoted to ekphrasis and abstraction in his 2015 book-length study *Hart Crane's Queer Modernist Aesthetic*. To these may be added scholarly articles, such as Langdon Hammer's 2009 "Lost at Sea: Jasper Johns with Hart Crane" or Brian M. Reed's 2010 "Hand in Hand: Jasper Johns and Hart Crane," both concerned, as their titles suggest, with the inspiration the American Pop artist found in his compatriot's poetry.

Unlike Hammer and Reed, who explore the way in which a painter of the next generation refers to Crane's legacy, I propose to look closely at Crane's perspective on the work of Siqueiros, his contemporary and friend. This perspective is worth examining for at least three reasons. Firstly, it gives us an insight into Crane's approach to the visual arts and presents his lesser-known facet, which is that of an art critic. Secondly, it sheds light on Crane's "Mexican" period, which, with some exceptions, such as Susan E. Hall's 2013 article "Hart Crane in Mexico: The End of a New World Poetics," has not attracted much scholarly interest, recently prompting the Hart Crane Society to encourage exegetes of the poet's work to change this state of affairs. Thirdly, Crane's take on Siqueiros uncovers the poetic concerns which preoccupied the author of *The Bridge* and shaped his own art.

Despite what Crane's destruction of his portrait by Siqueiros may suggest, the American poet did in actual fact admire the Mexican painter's work. Siqueiros is mentioned on numerous occasions in Crane's correspondence; so is the painting the American poet was eventually to annihilate. For some time, in Crane's Mexican abode, "hanging from a wall, serene yet disturbing above the *ménage*, was the portrait the poet had commissioned from Siqueiros" (Fisher 481). As the biographer is quick to add, in the words of Peggy Cowley, Crane's last life partner, the only woman he had a romantic and sexual relationship with and his travel companion on the journey which turned out to be—both literally and metaphorically—his last one, the painting "showed him reading, the luminous light focussed on his silver hair" (qtd. in Fisher 481). Crane's own comments seem even more appreciative and enthusiastic. In October 1931, the poet writes to Solomon Grunberg: "David Siqueiros, a Mexican painter, whom I regard as superior to both Rivera and Orozco, has painted a magnificent portrait of me, that I'm sure you'll like. But as it hasn't been photographed yet, I can't send you a reproduction" (698). Around the same time, in an undated note, he urges Peggy Cowley to "come out and see [his] Siqueiros portrait before [he has] to take it away to the photographer!" (699). In a letter to Samuel Loveman written in Mixcoac, a neighborhood of Mexico City, in November of the same year, Crane calls Siqueiros "certainly the greatest painter in Mexico" (701) and devotes an entire paragraph to his friend's *œuvre* and his own penchant for local art:

I bought two fine paintings of S. which I hope someday you will see. I guess I wrote you that he painted a portrait of me (about 4 by 2½ ft) which is causing much favorable comment. Besides which I have a splendid watercolor of an Indian boy's head. You have never seen anything better by Gauguin, which, however, doesn't describe the

originality and authenticity of these works. Then I have about a dozen small watercolors, mostly landscapes, painted by Mexican children none of whom are older than eight—these for about 20 apiece! (702)

Three months later, Crane starts enclosing photos of the portrait to letters he sends to friends, rhapsodizing about both the artwork and the artist behind it.

Contrary to Crane's predictions, David Siqueiros has not made his way into popular consciousness—at least not outside of his native Mexico—to the same extent as some of his better-known fellow artists who were both his compatriots and contemporaries. He has not managed to outshine Diego Rivera, commonly regarded as the greatest Mexican painter of the twentieth century. Nor is he as easily identifiable by laymen as Frida Kahlo, who, despite being by definition at a disadvantage because of her sex, has enjoyed a revival in recent decades, riding the wave—and deservedly so—of feminist criticism and scholarship. From October 5, 2016, to January 23, 2017, a hundred and twenty years after Siqueiros' birth, a major exhibition of Mexican art of the first half of the twentieth century was held at the Grand Palais in Paris. Though it comprised Siqueiros' work, his name was not mentioned in its title, *Mexique 1900–1950—Diego Rivera, Frida Kahlo, José Clemente Orozco et les avant-gardes*. The poster for the exhibition included a reproduction of a fragment of Diego Rivera's *Río Juchitán*, while the write-up advertising it referred to the event as an opportunity to view “a panorama of *famous artists* such as Diego Rivera, Frida Kahlo or Rufino Tamayo” (*Mexique 1900–1950*, translation mine, italics mine).

Nevertheless, Siqueiros' place in art history is more than secure. Officially recognized as “one of the three founders of the modern school of Mexican mural painting (along with Diego Rivera and José Clemente Orozco)” (“Siqueiros”), commonly known as “los tres grandes” (Cumming), he is also described as one whose aim was “to dynamize and renew the visual arts” (*Mexique 1900–1950*, translation mine). Siqueiros was three years Crane's senior, but outlived him by over forty years. A colorful character, the painter led an accordingly colorful existence, marked and determined by his extreme leftist views. He defended his convictions with a gun in his hand, taking part in the Mexican Revolution of 1910 and, two decades later, in the Spanish Civil War, during which he, predictably, supported the Loyalist faction. In addition to armed combat, Siqueiros' radical activism encompassed unionism, journalism and, most importantly perhaps, the art theory he promulgated (“Siqueiros”; Fisher 466). Larger-than-life, the artist “was later rumoured to have been involved in an attempt to assassinate Trotsky” (Fisher 466). “[A] life of protest and dissent” (466) inevitably resulted in spells of imprisonment and forced

emigration, but, most importantly, in the creation of an *œuvre* which was in keeping with his political, social and economic views:

the work which made him internationally famous spoke with gaudy palette of the passions of the man: tirelessly experimenting with new media and techniques, Siqueiros produced canvases and murals which exalted the suffering poor and the downcast Indian and constituted a body of New World proletarian art unrivalled by any other painter. (466)

As Crane's biographer speculates, the American poet may have seen something of himself in Siqueiros, a "volatile and flamboyant man" (Fisher 466), at once difficult and charismatic: "With his New World ardour and pedigree artistic temperament, he certainly delighted Hart" (467). The sense of kinship the author of *The Bridge* felt with the Mexican artist did not limit itself to the personal level; it translated into his critical writings. In the middle of his stay in the Mexican capital as a Guggenheim fellow, in October 1931, the month when he mentioned his portrait by Siqueiros in his correspondence with Grunberg, Crane produced an essay entitled "Note on the Paintings of David Siqueiros." As Langdon Hammer, the editor of an authoritative collection of the poet's works, explains in a note, it was "written for an exhibition of Siqueiros' paintings in Mexico City" (773). In Fisher's words, Crane "contribute[d] to a pamphlet published by the Salon Espagnol to mark its exhibition in honour of Siqueiros, thus joining Elie Faure and Sergei Eisenstein, among others" (482). Out of the fourteen texts included in the "Selected Prose" section of the aforementioned volume edited by Hammer, only two are devoted to the visual arts, the other being a brief comment on the work of photographer H. W. Minns. The critique of Siqueiros' art is not, however, the only instance of Crane exploring the *œuvre* of an artist whom he also happened to know personally and be on friendly terms with: elsewhere I have written about Crane's poetic ekphrases, one of which was inspired by Gaston Lachaise's work (Piechucka, "Women and Sculptures" 35). Both the poems and the essay prove the validity of Reed's point that "Crane, like O'Hara, took a partisan interest in the visual arts of his era" (199), made in a monograph chapter which examines the connections between the two poets.

It was also in 1931 that Siqueiros, himself a participant in the Mexican Revolution, painted a bust portrait of one of the revolt's key figures, the legendary Emiliano Zapata. Now in the Smithsonian Hirshhorn Museum's permanent collection, the canvas depicts a close-up of the peasant leader, shown full face, but looking up rather than establishing eye contact with the viewer. Wearing a dark sombrero, a dark suit, and a white shirt, buttoned

to the neck but tieless, the Mexican revolutionary, with his unseeing eyes and his upper lip covered by a characteristic moustache, strikes us as somewhat stiff or, in the words of one critic, “hieratic as an Aztec statue” (Cumming). The sitter being presented in a drab interior, with a brick wall in the background, this darkly hued oil painting, dominated by black, brown, beige, russet and golden tones, is “a . . . potent image of Zapata walled into a cell” and emphasizes the “strong sense . . . of the new wave of Mexican art emerging out of a strange fusion of modernism and pre-Columbian art” (Cumming). While we cannot be sure that Crane was familiar with that particular painting by Siqueiros, it is highly probable, since the portrait dates from the period during which the poet lived in Mexico and socialized with the artist. Nevertheless, what Crane says of his friend’s sitters in “Note on the Paintings of David Siqueiros” is largely applicable to “Zapata”:

Soil mingles with expression in the pigment of their skins. The contour of a cheek, though only the head need be shown, can adequately imply the flexions and natural movements of the body they surmount. A very elusive and difficult feat, but one that particularly distinguishes Siqueiros. It is hard to explain all the inferences of latent drama that Siqueiros’ brush can indicate beneath the closed eyelids of a sleeping Indian mother, painted withal in colors so suave and sombre and against a background so dark that such dramatic contexts would seem anything but obviously proffered. (174)

As is evident from the passage *loco citato*, Crane sees Siqueiros’ color scheme and his frequent use of earth tones as a vitally important visual characteristic of his *œuvre*. Earth and “soil” are crucial to his perception of the Mexican artist’s work: at one point in his correspondence, Crane remarked that “the very soil of Mexico seems spread on his canvases” (qtd. in Fisher 467). In the essay central to the present article, he refers to Siqueiros’ work as “ground[ed] on those persistent earth-problems” (Crane 173). Knowing him closely, the American poet must have been aware of the essence of Siqueiros’ artistic program, focused on “an art of the New World in which painters would exploit indigenous cultures and traditions” (Fisher 466). The portrait of Zapata, a man of the people and a half-Amerindian whose motto was “Tierra y Libertad,” is symbolic in this respect.

Another quality of Siqueiros’ style that Crane points out is due to the artist’s ability to take painting, a two-dimensional art, to another level: that of three-dimensional, sculptural forms. In that, the poet anticipates modern-day commentators of Siqueiros’ legacy, who observe that he “relies on solid drawing, oversized volumes and on motion rendered through the use of perspective” and that “[h]e also uses his own ‘polyangularity’

approach, which takes account of the movement of the viewer observing his murals,” and does so “not only in his murals, but also in his numerous portraits” (*Mexique 1900–1950*, translation mine). This is undoubtedly what Crane has in mind when he states that “[r]eticence amplifies accent in the magnificent plastic control and finesse of a hand and eye that seem to create statically, certainly sculpturally, —but with this presumable advantage—that the brush permits a greater play of dynamic inference within the confines of a rigidly defined design than stone does” (174). The fact that Siqueiros’ representations of his sitters—and thus representations of the human body—are not flat makes them more life-like. This, in turn, makes the bodily aspect of his painting, so to speak, more palpable. It is the same palpability—for want of a better word—that strikes the American poet when he writes of the way the sitters’ facial features “imply the flexions and natural movements of the body they [the heads] surmount” (174). The metonymical nature of the fragment from “Note on the Paintings of David Siqueiros” quoted in the previous paragraph confirms that Crane pays attention to the corporeal dimension of the Mexican artist’s work. The poet turned art critic—albeit for the sake of one critical piece—perceives the sitters in terms of the parts their bodies consist of. What strikes him are the “skins,” “a cheek,” “the head” and “the closed eyelids.”

In addition—and most importantly—Crane draws a parallel between the land and its inhabitants, who seem to grow out of their “soil,” and almost literally so. Earlier in the essay, the American poet refers to Siqueiros as “organic” (173). Though he does so in a slightly different context, to which I shall return, the other possible meanings of the adjective are also applicable to the points he makes about his friend’s art. Like the earth, the body is “organic”: living, breathing and growing. A natural bond unites the macrocosm and the microcosm, the land and the human beings on Siqueiros’ canvases: in Crane’s words, “Throughout his murals, portraits, aquarelles and lithographs there speaks the same prophetic sense of humanity—the Mexican masses—in permanent and elemental relationship to their mountains, burros, misery, their elation and resignation. . .” (174). In Siqueiros’ paintings as viewed by Crane, the earth is maternal. Appropriately, of all the themes and motifs that recur in the artworks in question, the author of “Note” selects motherhood and iconography related to it: to him, the Mexican artist is the portraitist of the “sleeping Indian mother,” of “unspectacular [sic] madonnas” and “pensive children” (174). Together with Siqueiros’ other subjects, of whom Crane mentions “miners, [and] workmen,” the mothers and offspring are the sources of “profound commentaries,” of “real emanations, deeply racial, rockbound in the past of Mexico and ‘shadowed forth’ into the future, far beyond the mere superficies of ordinary action” (174).

When Crane speaks of his Mexican friend's "organicity," he means first and foremost a general quality of his painting, namely its completeness and integrality. This may be Siqueiros' claim to greatness, about which Crane has no doubts. The poet's reflections on the subject are important because they bring up an issue central not only, as Crane points out, to Siqueiros' *œuvre*, but also to modernism as a whole: the state of being suspended between figurative and nonfigurative art, or, in other words, between representation and abstraction. Therein lies a dilemma common to both painters and poets. Maurice Samuels' comments on Mallarmé's contribution to modernism, among whose forerunners the French symbolist counts, are a good illustration of this problem:

Hérodiade ends with a lyric fragment entitled "The Canticle of Saint John," told from the perspective of the Baptist's head at the very moment it is severed from the body. Critics have read the poem as a manifesto for a kind of abstract or pure poetry that would detach itself—like John's head—from the mundane task of representing objects in the material world. And indeed, the dense syntax and abstruse imagery of much of Mallarmé's poetry frustrates any form of mimetic reading.

Nearly all of Mallarmé's poems lend themselves to such allegorical readings: poetry itself becomes his primary subject even when the surface of the poems contain [sic] references to nature or history. This turning inward, wherein art concerns itself with the conditions of its own production, is a typical modernist gesture. (20)

In his text on Siqueiros, Crane, whose relationship with Mallarmé is among the important connections that bound him to other literary masters, past and present, makes it clear that one had better beware of art which, to borrow Samuels' expression, "detach[es] itself . . . from the mundane task of representing objects in the material world." The American poet begins by placing the Mexican painter in the larger context of modernist visual art on the other side of the Atlantic, with particular focus on the achievements of abstractionists. Crane cites Spanish, French and Italian artists such as Pablo Picasso, Georges Braque and Giorgio de Chirico respectively, only to confirm Fisher's statement that "[w]andering the great museums, he [Siqueiros] saw how European art both inspired and constricted the painting of the Americas" (466). As Crane sees it, faced with a potentially overwhelming, intimidating and paralyzing influence, Siqueiros emerges victorious in the battle between the authority of European luminaries and his creative individualism, "his own essential vision and ultimate mastery" (173).

While dismissing "[p]ure abstractionism" as "a species of mechanics" (Crane 173), the poet of *The Bridge* is, however, careful not to throw the

baby out with the bath water. The Mexican painter's approach to his art, his views and the way he puts them into practice are remarkable precisely because Siqueiros may rely on figurativeness, but not at the expense of cutting himself off from nonfigurativeness altogether:

Painting need not become mere illustration, he [Siqueiros] said practically, in order to convey a rich and human concept in direct and natural forms, terms and arrangements. Nor by incorporating these "documentary" elements consistently need any of the underlying abstract beauty of design be relinquished. Siqueiros is organic enough to convey them both in a single impact. And some ideas besides. (173)

Given its wide spectrum of meanings, the word *organic* may be synonymous not only with "living," as well as "simple" or "close to nature," but also with "fundamental" and "interconnected" ("Organic," ahdictionary.com) or "having systematic coordination of parts" ("Organic," merriam-webster.com). It seems that what Crane especially admires about Siqueiros is precisely a capacity for interconnectedness: earlier in his text, the poet praises the visual artist for the way he combines "a coordinated human content and a spiritual axis" (173) in his *œuvre*. By expressing his appreciation for a painter in whose work reality is represented without being simply reproduced, the more realist aesthetics do not exclude the aesthetics of abstraction and the visual is not devoid of the conceptual, the author of "Note" may be voicing a yearning for a kind of artistic expression that is multifaceted and multidimensional, all-encompassing and all-inclusive. The task undertaken by the Mexican artist appears to be larger than life: it is, as Crane observes, "[a] very elusive and difficult feat, but one that particularly distinguishes Siqueiros" (174). Importantly, as the poet points out, his friend's art is far from being straightforward and literal. Having listed the crucial elements of Siqueiros' iconography and his artistic DNA, Crane adds: "And all this implicitly; not in a pictorial way" (174). The painter may rely on "direct and natural forms," but behind them is "a rich and human concept," which is to be "convey[ed]" or "impl[ied]." Siqueiros operates by suggestion rather than explicit statement in order to create an *œuvre* whose "inferences" are "hard to explain."

Reflections on the aesthetics of abstraction are crucial not only to modernist—and, for that matter, modern—painting, but also to the poetry of the period, not least the imagist school. Eighteen years before Crane wrote his art-critical piece on Siqueiros, Ezra Pound had published his celebrated essay "A Few Don'ts by an Imagiste," warning poets that they should "[g]o in fear of abstractions" (Pound). A mere five years earlier, in 1926, William Carlos Williams, another exponent of high modernism, had

started working on his poem *Paterson*, eventually published in the 1940s and 1950s and arguing for “no ideas but in things” (Williams 6). Inevitably, Crane himself was no stranger to similar preoccupations, though not necessarily leading to identical conclusions. The various meanings and implications of the term *abstract* are important to an examination of Crane’s poetics for the same reason that “Note on the Paintings of David Siqueiros” is: because they point to dilemmas which transpire in his own poetry and his own thinking about poetry.

In his discussion of the parallels between Crane’s poetics and the visual arts, Niall Munro undertakes the topic of abstraction, looking mostly at *White Buildings*, the collection of poems Crane published prior to *The Bridge*. Focusing on two ekphrastic poems, “Sunday Morning Apples” and “Interludium,” inspired by the work of two friends of Crane’s, the painter William Sommer and the sculptor Gaston Lachaise respectively, the scholar argues that both ekphrasis and abstraction are part of “Crane’s queer project” and as such they are “to challenge normative representation” (Munro 41). Munro notes analogies to imagism in the former poem, as well as Crane’s treatment of the motif of fertility in both lyrics, seeing in it “a challenge to normative versions of fertility” (48) and a way of “question[ing] heteronormative reproduction” (50). Analyzing the use of abstraction in “Sunday Morning Apples” and “Interludium,” Munro points to Crane’s reliance on fragmentation on the level of both imagery and language, and links it to cubism: “Crane takes the sense of Cubism further than just the perspectives that can be seen, and offers his reader access to the unseen—at times spiritual—dimensions of the object” (51). At the same time, “Crane’s attraction to techniques of abstraction like ekphrasis—literally a ‘speaking out’—and his connecting of abstraction with ecstasy—a state outside oneself—suggests an attempt by Crane to step outside his work and connect with his reader” (51). This brings the author of *Hart Crane’s Queer Modernist Aesthetic* to the notion of intersubjectivity. Munro shows that because “in aspiring towards ‘absoluteness,’ the poem becomes hermetically sealed and fixed, incapable of evolution” and “total subjectivity would render any dissidence resulting from his impression, and any affirmation of Crane’s sexuality, meaningless, since it would have no connection to the ‘outside’ or the normative world” (56), “Crane actually proposes a far riskier poetics: just as his abstract style sought intimacy with the unknown reader, so here he makes a deliberate attempt to relate his own subjectivity to his reader’s, by fusing his own ‘experience’ with that of his reader” (57).

“In doing so [using ekphrasis and abstraction], Crane highlighted the process of creation and echoed other modernists’ concerns with *representation* and the limits of language. In his use of ‘metaphysical,’ Crane

intended to suggest that poetry seeks to represent something beyond our comprehension of reality,” Munro points out (42), referring to a fragment of “Modern Poetry,” an essay by Crane, in which the poet mentions impressionist and cubist painting, as well as French symbolist poetics. The emphasis Crane puts on indirectness and suggestiveness as a quality that characterizes great art inscribes itself into the affinity he felt with the symbolist school, a subject which I have discussed in several essays and articles on the connections between the American poet’s *œuvre* and the legacy of French symbolism. The question of poetic heritage inevitably entails the Bloomian notion of “anxiety of influence,” to which Crane had been exposed a half-century before the term was coined. The author of *The Bridge* looked towards the great masters, American and otherwise. Among them were the aforementioned French symbolists, including, but by no means limited to Arthur Rimbaud and Stéphane Mallarmé, and— or perhaps, given the intensity of the “nativist” aspect of “the anxiety of influence,” first and foremost—Walt Whitman, the unquestionable giant of nineteenth-century U.S. poetry, and T. S. Eliot, the über-modernist, whom American poets—regardless of their attitude to his work—found virtually impossible to ignore or circumvent for at least the first half of the twentieth century. The list of “influencers” is, of course, longer, and could be extended to include other modernists, such as William Carlos Williams, Ezra Pound or Wallace Stevens, as well as Edgar Allan Poe, the romantic precursor of both symbolism and modernism. This tendency to look up to poetic mentors came up against Crane’s desire to become a major national poet and the author of a *tour-de-force* epic, referred to by one scholar as “his ambition to create the ‘Great American Poem’” (Baym 1647):

He defined himself as a follower of Walt Whitman in the visionary, prophetic, affirmative American tradition. His aim was nothing less than to master the techniques of modernism but also to reverse its direction—to make it positive, celebratory, and deeply meshed with contemporary American life—without sacrificing technical complexity or richness. For him as for the somewhat older William Carlos Williams, Eliot’s *The Waste Land* was both threat and model. That poem could become an “absolute impasse,” he wrote, unless one could “go *through* it to a different goal,” leaving its negations behind. This was the task he attempted in *The Bridge*. (1648)

In this context, Crane’s statement about the extent to which Siqueiros could have been influenced by the colossi of modernist visual art acquires a new dimension: “Perhaps the abstract preoccupations of Picasso, Braque and others taught him considerably; but it is quite certain that they can have contributed but little to his own essential vision and

ultimate mastery” (173). It is not only Siqueiros’ possible dilemmas, but his own that Crane most likely had at the back of his mind when writing the sentence *loco citato*.

Similarly, the nativism of the Mexican painter’s work, his particular relationship with the land, understood broadly as the realm of nature, a macrocosm of which the human body is a microcosm and a motherland, must have resonated not only with Crane the art critic, but also—and perhaps more importantly—with Crane the poet. Corporeality is an important aspect of Crane’s *œuvre*, as are the motifs of maternity and femininity in general. All three—the land, motherhood and womanhood—are encompassed by America, the woman-continent, central to Crane’s *opus magnum*:

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The Bridge is a visionary poem made up of fifteen individual sections of varying lengths. It encapsulates a heroic quest, at once personal and epic, to find and enunciate “America.” Like Walt Whitman’s *Song of the Open Road*, which also focused on a symbol of expansion and dynamism, *The Bridge* moves westward in imagination from Brooklyn to California. It also goes back into the American past, dwelling on historical or legendary figures like Columbus, Pocahontas, and Rip Van Winkle. It moves upward under the guidance of Whitman; down in *The Tunnel* it meets the wandering spirit of Edgar Allan Poe. . . . Like his model Whitman, Crane wrote from the paradoxical, conflicted position of the outsider claiming to speak from and for the very center of America. (Baym 1648)

To paraphrase his own remark on Siqueiros’ art, made in a letter and quoted earlier in the present article, Crane’s aim in writing *The Bridge* is to make sure that the very soil of the United States seems spread on his pages.

Commenting on the formal features of Crane’s best-known poem, Baym mentions that “the syntax [is] complicated and often ambiguous,” while “the references [are] often dependent on a personal, sometimes inaccessible train of thought” (1648). When, in his essay on Siqueiros, Crane reflects on how his painter friend positions himself vis-à-vis abstraction, he clearly has in mind not only the visual, but also the philosophical sense of the term: “the . . . abstract beauty of design,” as well as “ideas.” In fact, it turns out that the numerous meanings of *abstract* which a dictionary entry for the word customarily lists may nearly all be applicable to the American poet’s understanding of it: “disassociated from any specific instance,” “difficult to understand” or “abstruse,” “insufficiently factual” or “formal,” “expressing a quality apart from an object,” “dealing with a subject in its abstract aspects” or “theoretical,” “impersonal” and “detached,” and, inevitably, “having only intrinsic form with little or no attempt at pictorial representation or narrative content” (“Abstract”).

It is true that Crane's poetry is deliberately difficult and demanding, a quality which he shares with, for instance, Mallarmé. As I have argued elsewhere, the American poet and his French symbolist predecessor "produced verse whose nature is often challenging, ambiguous or downright hermetic," "opted for idiosyncratic lexis, grammatical structures and syntax," and "set themselves unrealistic, larger-than-life poetic goals: the 'Book' to end all books in Mallarmé's case, the über-epic poem in Crane's case" (Piechucka, "The Sound" 25). Like Mallarmé, Crane was involved in "chasing often impossible poetic ideals" and in "the painful pursuit of the Absolute" (25). However, unlike the French poet, whose "'Un coup de dés n'abolira jamais le hasard' ['A Dice-Throw Will Never Erase Chance']" (1897), carries the idea of a pure, non-representational poetry to its logical extreme: nominally about a shipwreck, [it is] the almost abstract poem" (Samuels 20), Crane does not go so far into the realms of self- and non-referentiality, abstraction and pure poetry.

In an article-length study which set Hart Crane against André Gide, a French writer who also gravitated towards symbolist aesthetics, I observed that, in the American poet's view, poetry was "to communicate some deeper truths" rather than stop at "a surface created by language or preconceived notions" and the poet was supposed "to reveal the truth and spread the word rather than be content with merely arranging words" (Piechucka, "Images and Ideas" 15). Drawing on Gide scholarship and scholarship dealing with the connections between Crane and imagism, I concluded that both Crane and Gide were careful not to let images and symbols take precedence over ideas and the truth or to reduce symbols to the level of pure decoration. Gide's and Crane's wariness when it comes to the fact that "[i]n modernist literature, the focus often shifts from content to form, and from the reality referred to by language to language itself" (15) resurfaces in the latter's essay on Siqueiros' *œuvre*, in particular in its preoccupation with abstraction, mimesis and conceptuality, as do its author's other poetic concerns.

"Note on the Paintings of David Siqueiros" confirms that there is often a thin line between art criticism and art *tout court*, especially when the art critic happens to be an artist in his own right and remains so even when producing critical writings. In February 1932, two months before his suicide, Crane wrote to Grunberg:

Under separate cover I'm sending you a photo of the portrait that David Alfaro Siqueiros painted of me recently. He's having a one-man show now in the Sala Española here, and I've never seen such a show before. The picture I'm sending you is a sensation—and, I think, deserves to be. Not only is it a marvelous likeness of me—it's besides, a tremendously

powerful piece of work, that Picasso would—and well might envy. The head is about 2 ½ times life-size, so you can imagine the dimensions. (715–16)

To the letter Crane attached a transcription of the opening stanzas of the first version of “The Broken Tower.” It is the last poem he ever composed, to which the biopic directed by James Franco, mentioned at the beginning of this article, as well as Crane’s biography by Paul Mariani, on which Franco’s film is based, owe their identical titles. For both chronological and artistic reasons, “The Broken Tower” is a textbook example of a poetic *chant du cygne*. It is customary to give considerable attention and attribute particular significance to poets’ swansongs. It is also tempting to regard them as poetic testaments. Unlike “The Broken Tower” and like much of Crane’s “Mexican” output, “Note on the Paintings of David Siqueiros” receives little critical attention in Crane scholarship. While it would be farfetched to overestimate the importance of Crane’s criticism of Siqueiros’ art, one of the last texts the poet of *Voyages* produced, it may be argued that the essay with which the present article is concerned is worthwhile because it sums up not only the Mexican painter’s artistic accomplishments, but also the author’s. In it are reflected the lifelong concerns of an ambitious poet who wanted to make a significant contribution to the literature of his country, the questions concerning poetry which preoccupied and tormented him, and the inevitable awareness of the existence of great masters, of poetic Picassos, a source of fascination, as well as fear.

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