
Preface to *Transit of Venus: Poems*,
by Harry Crosby

Paris: The Black Sun Press, 1931. Pp. 62; Preface, i-ix.¹

I doubt whether we can ever understand the poetry of a contemporary; especially if we are engaged in writing ourselves. This remark will not seem surprising, or anything more than commonplace, if we stop to try to understand the limited and peculiar sense in which we may be said to “understand” poetry at all. In the senses in which we “understand” a mathematical demonstration, a philosophical reasoning, a legal argument, a variety of scientific demonstrations, an historical account – and I do not say that this is all one kind of understanding either – poetry may have a greater or less understandable element, according to its particular types. The more there is to understand, in this sense, the more easily is the poetry “understood”; which is why the poetry of Pope, let us say, appears easier to understand than that of Rimbaud.² What the public wants, on the whole, is something safely between two extremes. Whatever contains a considerable rational element, as the poetry of Pope and Dryden, of Lucretius, of Sir John Davies – to take a few names at random – is rejected as “prosaic”; whatever consists of too concentrated and exact a sequence and arrangement of image and rhythm is rejected as “obscure.”³ The majority of people can get no emotional excitement, but only fatigue, from intellectual effort; the majority is unable to apprehend any exact emotion economically recorded. These observations, if true, may help to explain why a certain public enjoys the works of Mrs. Wilcox, which give it the pleasure of which it is capable without the comparatively immense mental effort needed to enjoy the work of her masters, Tennyson, Browning and Swinburne.⁴

Harry Crosby’s verse was consistently, I think, the result of an effort to record as exactly as possible to his own satisfaction a particular way of apprehending life. When I first read some of his poems I concluded merely that he was a young man in a hurry; but I must add now that of being in a hurry there are two distinct kinds.⁵ To be in a hurry to get to a clearly conceived destination, a destination which is only clearly conceived because others have already arrived there and charted the country, usually results in a short journey, in the secondhand rhythms and imagery of the facile

half-successes which are common in our and perhaps every time. But Crosby was in a hurry, I think, because he was aware of a direction, and ignorant of the destination, only conscious that time was short and the terminus a long way off. Incidentally he was, it seems to me, unlike most of his contemporaries, indifferent, in his exploring interest, to whether what he wrote on the way should be poetry or not; and I do not see how anyone can go very far in poetry who is not ready to risk complete failure, or, for the most part, who does not in fact commit a great deal of failure on the way. The poet of the greatest possibilities, I believe, is disgusted always with what he has already done: or rather, relatively disgusted, for we must turn even our greatest failures to great account. I cannot admit any easy distinction between *promise* and *achievement*; for the admission of promise is a recognition of something already there; and every real achievement, in spite of the brevity of life, should be a promise of something further. Not, of course, that this continuing promise is anything but disconcerting to the majority even of the most sympathetic readers; we must all be ready to risk the imputation of having gone too far.

Poets arrive at originality by different routes. Some, by progressive imitation; though the word *imitation* is truly applicable only to the successes of the negligible; for those who have something in them, the process is rather towards a finding of themselves by a progressive absorption in, and absorption of, and rejection (but never a total rejection) of other writers. Others, like Crosby, have little of this absorptive and rejective faculty; they feel from the beginning, however immaturely and with however many false explanations and misunderstandings, what they are out for. It would be, I think, premature to speak of Crosby as having had a "philosophy" or even a definite point of view; the theories, or partial theories, which seem to have been implements for him, may only mislead us; and we must be patient to be able to read a man's writing, to perceive a new vitality in it, to recognize that real vitality is never aimless, yet not to speculate upon the aim itself. In this case, we need only admit that there was an aim, a direction. And in such a case we should expect to find, as I think we do find in Crosby's writings, that we do not pick out single poems for enjoyment: if any of it is worth reading, then it all is.

I am far from asserting, it follows naturally, that I understand in the least what Crosby was up to, or that I am sure I should like it if I did. I doubt whether anyone himself engaged in the pursuit of poetry can "like," any more than he can "understand," the work of his contemporaries; if it is

wholly unrelated to one's own efforts it is irrelevant, and if it has some relation it is merely disturbing. But "liking" is itself irrelevant in a serious matter like poetry; though it be appropriate enough in such international amenities as Mr. Hugh Walpole's chairmanly introductions of American novelists to the British public.⁶ The testimony is the more valuable, I maintain, for the absence of this gentlemanly motive. What I do like, in a serious sense, is the fact that Crosby was definitely going his own way, whether I like the way or not. And in spite of occasional conventional phrases – so conventional as perhaps to be deliberate – I am more interested in his work because of its imperfections, its particular way of being imperfect. What interests me the most, I find, is his search for a personal symbolism of imagery. Not that the scheme of imagery which he was using was necessarily exact, or corresponded finally to what his mind was reaching for; he might, I dare say, in time have scrapped it all in favour of some other. But here, I am sure, is a right and difficult method. A final intelligibility is necessary; but that is only the fruit of much experiment and of mature synthesis; but Crosby was right, very right, in looking for a set of symbols which should relate each of his poems to the others, to himself, rather than using in each poem symbols which should merely relate it to other poems by other people. Even to speak of a "set of symbols" is clumsy; for such a phrase suggests a lifeless, not a living and developing scheme.

And the word "*symbolism*" is unfortunately one which must be safeguarded. It suggests, I fear inevitably, (as does the word *metaphysical*) a particular group of poets; and even does these poets, the best of them, an injustice by isolating them from poetry in general. It almost intimates that there is a particular recipe; or that this is merely one way of writing among others; or that poets can be distinguished clearly as symbolist and nonsymbolist. Symbolism is that to which the word tends both in religion and in poetry; the incarnation of meaning in fact; and in poetry it is the tendency of the word to mean as much as possible. To find the word and give it the utmost meaning, in its place; to mean as many things as possible, to make it both exact and comprehensive, and really to *unite* the disparate and remote, to give them a fusion and a pattern with the word, surely this is the mastery at which the poet aims; and the poet is distinguished by making the word do more *work* than it does for other writers. Of course one can "go too far" and except in directions in which we can go too far there is no interest in going at all; and only those who will risk going too far can possibly find out just how far one can go. Not to go far enough is to remain "in

the vague” as surely and less creditably than to exceed. Indeed, the mentors of pseudoclassicism should consistently content themselves with agnosticism, or at most with the simple faith of Islam; for no extravagance of a genuine poet can go so far over the borderline of ordinary intellect as the Creeds of the Church. And the poet who fears to take the risk that what he writes may turn out not to be poetry at all, is a man who has surely failed, who ought to have adopted some less adventurous vocation.

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NOTES

1. Harry Crosby (1898-1929), American poet and World War I veteran, used his wealth to co-found with his wife, Caresse, the Black Sun Press in Paris in 1927. In Dec 1929, Crosby committed suicide in a New York hotel after shooting his lover Josephine Bigelow, possibly in a suicide pact. Caresse Crosby commissioned TSE's preface to a new edition of *Transit of Venus* in 1930. On 10 Sept 1931, TSE sent his preface to her explaining: "I am more than dissatisfied with what I have done and enclose, not so much on account of its brevity (I am always shortwinded) but on account of its poverty of ideas; and I am afraid that it will sound rather listless" (*L5* 658). It was published in November in a limited edition of 500 copies.

2. On 11 Nov 1930, TSE discussed with Caresse Crosby a Black Sun Press edition of Rimbaud, whose poetry and adventurous lifestyle Harry Crosby admired (*L5* 383).

3. In his 1930 introduction to Samuel Johnson's satires, TSE remarks: "We are inclined to use 'prosaic' as meaning not only 'like prose,' but as 'lacking poetic beauty' – and the Oxford and every other dictionary give us warrant for such use. Only, we ought to distinguish between poetry which is like *good* prose, and poetry which is like *bad* prose" (4.170).

4. In "Donne in our Time" (1931), TSE included the deceased popular poet Ella Wheeler Wilcox among the class of poets who can be enjoyed without being admired, since they "can be enjoyed only if we delude ourselves into believing that they give us genuinely that which they are merely imitating" (4.371).

5. TSE met Harry and Caresse Crosby in Paris in Apr 1926 at an exhibition at Sylvia Beach's bookshop. Crosby sent TSE his preface to *Transit of Venus*. On 26 Oct 1927, TSE returned it saying he had read it "with much interest . . . As I did not know the work of the man you are introducing there is very little that I can say about it" (*L3* 781).

6. On 29 Oct 1930, TSE declined an invitation to write an introduction to a reprint of Mark Van Doren's 1920 book on Dryden, commenting: "I feel that I have been writing rather too many introductions and prefaces lately, and one's value as an introducer is very easily exhausted by multiplying this work of chairmanship. Chesterton, for instance, is now about zero and Hugh Walpole, of course, considerably below that degree" (*L5* 365). On 31 Dec 1922, in a letter to his brother Henry, TSE praised Sinclair Lewis's novel *Babbitt*, introduced by Walpole (*L1* 816).