
Brian M. Reed. *Hart Crane: After His Lights*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2006. 295p.

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As much a literary critic's manifesto as a reading of 20th-century poetics, *Hart Crane: After His Lights* sets out to resurrect monographs devoted to single authors, a scholarly form that Brian Reed believes to have fallen out of favor over the past two decades. A more prevalent contemporary approach is to establish an apparatus through which the works of a number of writers are subsequently filtered, and Reed finds such an approach to scholarship critically impoverished and limited in its view of the achievement of individual artists. As researchers have abandoned many constituent queries about authors and their backgrounds, incomplete readings of creative achievement have barely been questioned. This development is particularly galling in the case of Hart Crane, who has come to be read as the representative gay American modernist male while being given single chapters in studies of queer poetics. *After His Lights*, however, does not seek to expand criticism of Crane simply by revisiting the work of the poet's biographers; rather, Reed sets out to analyze the poet's achievement from a number of different theoretical perspectives, sequentially. Careful never to appear dilettantish, the critic here chooses to question received knowledge in but a number of important areas, examining Crane's credentials as a modernist poet, a queer poet, and an American poet, reexamining the foundation and durability of such labels.

Throughout *After His Lights*, Reed positions Crane as a mannerist, deeply indebted to Georgian and Victorian models. What it means to call the poet a modernist is reassessed in light of the realization that he was essentially bullied into abandoning his *fin-de-siècle* sensibilities by his friends and collaborators, and Reed's analysis of his resulting aesthetic positions Crane closer to postmodern attitudes than anything countenanced in London, New York, and Paris in the 1920s. Such heterogeneity also guides the consideration of gender studies here, as Reed wonders whether any one individual from this cohort could be seen as representative of a group that included both Natalie Barney and Marsden Hartley. At the very least, Crane's reliance on symbols of hyper-masculinity, a body of recurring images of sailors and boxers whose use in other contexts might be read as pure camp, belies the more subtle approach to corporeality that defined the work of his contemporaries. But the most interesting analysis is perhaps that which questions Crane's credentials as an American. Clearly, his lineage cannot be debated, but it is still difficult to reconcile his aesthetics and his influences with the widespread perception that American poets of this age rejected

roundly the achievements of the late 19th century. Ironically, Reed discounts the common reading that Crane should be seen as the heir of Walt Whitman, his one seemingly suitable 19th-century predecessor, an assumption that has previously allowed a critic as eminent as Harold Bloom to draw an unbroken line forward from the transcendentalists. While the above may sound simply quarrelsome to many readers, the effect actually speaks to the complexity of literary influence and spuriousness of the dichotomies that define this field of enquiry.

The latter sections of the study turn to a consideration of form in Crane's poetry, as Reed points out that contemporary readings of the *œuvre* have done a poor job assessing questions of genre. The ecstasy of physical love seems like the appropriate subject matter of the lyric, for example, but his shorter verse is still characterized by the absence of a traditional speaker. What defines Crane's lyrical poems, in fact, is how his emphasis on sound draws upon musical influences like Maurice Ravel's *Boléro*, and musical metaphors may assist further in the appreciation of longer works like the epic, *The Bridge*. While the poet encouraged people to read its various fragmented sections as individual canvases, Reed posits that understanding the work as a symphony or even an opera might unlock Crane's most important poem, as recurrent images converge in leitmotif for patient readers. Indeed, a review of how others have seen Hart Crane allows Reed, in some sense, to conclude this study where he begins. The critic finds here a role for post-structuralism, finally, as the tired concept of influence, shown to be so problematic in determining Crane's predecessors, is abandoned in favor of the multitude of connections that define intertextuality. While influence often points to a linear process that privileges ones immediate antecedents, Reed understands Crane's legacy as a particular manner of intertextuality encountered amongst the Black Mountain poets, New York school, and Beat generation. To finish with a discussion of tradition thus seems most appropriate, as Brian Reed's *Hart Crane: After His Lights* is in many ways a willful departure from traditional literary criticism. But while this appreciation of an unconventional poetic sensibility may itself appear doggedly argumentative, no one can dispute the nuanced sensitivity of its rich detail. ✱