

“A questing light”: The sonnet as a form of criticism

“For poetry is an architectural art, based not on Evolution or the idea of progress, but on articulation of the contemporary human consciousness *sub specie aeternitas...*”

Hart Crane¹

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The American poet Lindley Williams Hubbell (1901-1994) came to Japan in 1953, and never left. He took Japanese nationality and lived for many years in Kyoto, teaching at a university there until retirement. He then moved to Kobe and taught at another university, from which he had also recently retired when I met him to conduct an interview for a newspaper in 1986.² He was a remarkable man, with whom I continued to exchange letters and postcards until his death, though I met him only once.³ It is from one of his letters that the subject of this essay has been taken. The question of sonnets had come up: “I’ve always had a special interest in sonnets. My first few books contained lots of them, but now for many years I haven’t been able to write them.” The evidence of that interest was then merrily explained:

In my last semester at Culture Club, before I got sick and had to retire, they asked me to teach a course in criticism. I am completely unqualified for such a task but anything goes at Culture Club and I knew that nobody would know or care what I did, so I chose 15 sonnets on poetry and used each sonnet as the substance of a class.

He listed the titles next, adding: “This was my course in criticism! I enjoyed

it. The girls sat there patiently waiting for their degrees..."⁴ What I wish to do here is to assemble and explore these poems, to see what meaning they might yield. As preparation I have read through all of them with some Ferris graduate students, who have kindly indulged my interest without complaint.

Hubbell is a little disingenuous when he claims to be unqualified to teach criticism, since he was a distinguished Shakespearean scholar, and had also written widely on English lyric poetry, as well as on Modernism. What he probably meant was that he did not approach literature in terms of modern theory, to which literature had almost become hostage in the 1980s. "I read Shakespeare every day," the poet told me when I met him, and he could quote long passages by heart, so it is a little surprising that there are no poems by Shakespeare on his list.⁵ He begins instead with one by a close contemporary of the Bard, Sir Philip Sidney (1554-1586), which I quote in full:

Loving in truth, and fain in verse my love to show,
That she (dear she) might take some pleasure of my pain;
Pleasure might cause her read, reading might make her know;
Knowledge might pity win, and pity grace obtain;
I sought fit words to paint the blackest face of woe,
Studying inventions fine, her wits to entertain;
Oft turning others' leaves, to see if thence would flow
Some fresh and fruitful showers upon my sunburn'd brain.
But words came halting forth, wanting Invention's stay;
Invention, Nature's child, fled step-dame Study's blows;
And others' feet still seem'd but strangers in my way.
Thus great with child to speak, and helpless in my throes,
Biting my truant pen, beating myself for spite,
'Fool,' said my muse to me; 'look in thy heart, and write.'

Sidney is not only the first important author of sonnets in this selection, but one of the most significant early critics, whose essay *An Apology for Poetry* made the case for imaginative literature, exemplified not only by the classics, but across many different cultures, from Hungary to Ireland. It is hard not to imagine that Hubbell would have made some reference to all this in introducing the poem. Its main significance, however, is that it was the opening piece in a sonnet sequence called *Astrophel and Stella*,⁶ which in both content and manner consciously imitated the Italian poetic form, and thus helped to domesticate it as an English one.

As is often recounted, the sonnet began in thirteenth-century Sicily, then a cultural crossroads between the Islamic culture of North Africa, and the Troubadour poets of Provence, whose work was at once formally complex, subjective and much preoccupied with erotic longing. Taken up by Dante Alighieri (1265-1321) in a more elevated form, to express his idealised love for Beatrice, its greatest exemplar was Francesco Petrarca (1303-1374), or Petrarch, whose numerous sonnets of unrequited love for the once-glimpsed Laura set the standard for composition. Translation of the form to English presented certain difficulties, however, though the number of lines remained generally the same, at fourteen. In Italian the poem divided into an octet and a sestet, and was generally composed in lines of eleven syllables, with only four or five rhymes, on a pattern such as *abbaabba* and *cdecde*, or perhaps *cdcdcd*. But in English fewer rhymes are available, often making greater variation necessary. Furthermore, the iambic pentameter natural to English meant that a decasyllabic line was much easier to accomplish.⁷ There was also the question of the *volta* or ‘turn’ in the Italian or Petrarchan sonnet, whereby the content or manner or idea changed in the second part, and this too was difficult to replicate. Other poets before Sidney had begun to experiment with an alternative form, of three quatrains and a couplet, in what has now become known as the English or Shakespearean sonnet, after its greatest practitioner.

Sidney's sonnet, opening a sequence of poems that falls somewhere between the Italian masters and the English Bard, has unusually long, dodecasyllabic or twelve-syllable lines, which are not typical of the entire work. The rhyme scheme cleaves more or less strictly to the Italian form, as *abababab* and *cdcdee*, though ending with a couplet. The division between the octave and sestet has also been retained. The burden of the poem, however, is that Astrophel has struggled to find a means to express his love for Stella convincingly, until his Muse rebukes him in the last line. The argument is apparently not to be unduly concerned about elegant precursors or niceties of style, but just to "look in thy heart and write": if you have something to say, then you will find a means to say it. It is a salutary thought from which to begin, the idea that poetry emerges simply from an impulse toward expression. The other poems vary somewhat in form, sometimes ending in a couplet, and sometimes not. Mostly they are in decasyllabic lines, as indeed the first and last lines of the one quoted above might easily be, were two words omitted from each ("in verse" and "to me").

There is a large gap between this poem and the next one that Hubbell chooses, but since it and also some of the others cast a backward look, it is only a gap in seeming. Shakespeare's sonnets somewhat resemble Sidney's in their subject matter, and undoubtedly they represent a peak, as we shall see, but the form that he developed has been less influential: "The majority of English-language poets after Shakespeare have relied on the Italian sonnet form, though some have also written Shakespearean sonnets: the octave-sestet division, rather than quatrain breaks, provides the basic feature of most sonnets."⁸ After the seventeenth century, which saw some of the greatest achievements in this form, there was a short lull in the eighteenth century, until the revival that took place in the early nineteenth century, leading to a renewed and widespread popularity that continues unabated to the present day. The second poem on the list, "To Milton" by William Wordsworth (1770-1850), is generally given under the title "London, 1802":

Milton! thou shouldst be living at this hour:
 England hath need of thee: she is a fen
 Of stagnant waters: altar, sword, and pen,
Fireside, the heroic wealth of hall and bower,
Have forfeited their ancient English dower
 Of inward happiness. We are selfish men;
 Oh! raise us up, return to us again;
And give us manners, virtue, freedom, power.
Thy soul was like a Star, and dwelt apart:
 Thou hadst a voice whose sound was like the sea:
 Pure as the naked heavens, majestic, free,
 So didst thou travel on life's common way,
In cheerful godliness; and yet thy heart
 The lowliest duties on herself did lay.

Like Sidney, Wordsworth uses only two rhymes in the octave, and three in the sestet, but he avoids the closing couplet. Disappointed at the failure of the French Revolution, and alarmed by the rise of Napoleon and the dangers that threatened England, the poet looks back to the example of John Milton (1606-1674), a great moral force in the history of England, as well as the author of resonant and powerful sonnets. It is this moral authority that the newly conservative Wordsworth, attentive to tradition, seeks to invoke and restore. The declamatory opening of the poem is memorable, while the sestet strikes a different note from what has gone before, one of lonely but righteous independence. The quietening down toward the end introduces a certain modesty to the poet's declared admiration, and almost makes the poem seem unfinished. Yet it is a strong, dignified sonnet, nearly the equal of Milton's own, and which embodies in its language the coherent vision that it praises, Wordsworth's "hope that England will be a godly, virtuous nation".⁹

Alone of the eleven poets in Hubbell's selection, Wordsworth has three

sonnets, the other two addressing themselves to neither romantic agony nor political concern, but to the sonnet form itself. Often considered together, and anthologised under one title, “The Sonnet”, by Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch¹⁰, the first one appears to have been written the same year as the sonnet on Milton, and published as “Prefatory Sonnet”, and the other one much later, in 1827. Despite this twenty-five year gap, they join in praising and defending the poetic form itself:

Scorn not the Sonnet; Critic, you have frowned,
Mindless of its just honours; with this key
Shakespeare unlocked his heart; the melody
Of this small lute gave ease to Petrarch's wound;
A thousand times this pipe did Tasso sound;
With it Camöens soothed an exile's grief;
The Sonnet glittered a gay myrtle leaf
Amid the cypress with which Dante crowned
His visionary brow: a glow-worm lamp,
It cheered mild Spenser, called from Faery-land
To struggle through dark ways; and, when a damp
Fell round the path of Milton, in his hand
The Thing became a trumpet; whence he blew
Soul-animating strains—alas, too few!

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Nuns fret not at their convent's narrow room,
And hermits are contented with their cells,
And students with their pensive citadels;
Maids at the wheel, the weaver at his loom,
Sit blithe and happy; bees that soar for bloom,

High as the highest peak of Furness fells,
Will murmur by the hour in foxglove bells:
In truth the prison unto which we doom
Ourselves no prison is: and hence for me,
In sundry moods, 'twas pastime to be bound
Within the Sonnet's scanty plot of ground;
Pleased if some souls (for such there needs must be)
Who have felt the weight of too much liberty,
Should find brief solace there, as I have found.

The first is less smoothly accomplished than the second, though both follow the Italian model. The first, more urgently defensive, offers a roll-call of great sonneteers from the past, and in so doing offers a history of the poem. Besides Dante, Petrarch, Shakespeare and Milton, we also have Edmund Spenser (1552-1599), author of *The Faerie Queene*, another early contemporary of Sidney and Shakespeare and a major poet of the English Renaissance. The other names, the troubled Italian Torquato Tasso (1544-1595), and the exiled Luís Vaz de Camões (1524-1580), known as Camões, both nationally regarded, further enhance the rich history of the poem, and taken together they all represent a Golden Age of sonnet composition. The irrefutable weight of argument in this list does, however, do something more, in that it employs certain refinements that Wordsworth had learnt from Milton. Though the rhymes are more strained (“wound” is at best a visual rhyme) in the first poem, which also relies on a concluding couplet to emphasise its point, albeit resonantly, the second is constructed with consummate skill in the Italian pattern. Both, furthermore, make use of enjambement, as Milton also does, reflecting his general example. This is more notable in “Nuns fret not”, where the *volta* or ‘turn’ is effected by repetition of the word “prison” with an altered meaning, one that enhances the lovely imagery. The easy, gentle tone of the poem confirms what it has

to say. The next two poems are somewhat different from this.

The poet and critic Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834) comes most readily to mind as a founder of the Romantic movement, and especially for his collaboration with Wordsworth in compiling the *Lyrical Ballads* (1798). Hubbell's next poem, however, predates this association, and is dedicated to another friend. "To Robert Southey" appeared as one of a series of early poems on "Eminent Characters", published in a newspaper in 1795. Coleridge and Robert Southey (1774-1843) had become friends the year before, married two sisters, and planned to establish an ideal, egalitarian community in the United States. The Pantisocracy they envisioned never actually took form, but the ideas were important for a time. In this poem Coleridge praises his friend warmly, and perhaps Hubbell shared this admiration for the now relatively neglected poet whom it addresses:

SOUTHEY! thy melodies steal o'er mine ear,
Like far off joyance, or the murmuring
Of wild Bees in the sunny showers of Spring—
Sounds of such mingled import, as may cheer

The lonely breast—yet rouse a mindful tear:
Wak'd by the Song doth Hope-born FANCY fling
Rich showers of dewy fragrance from her wing,
Till sickly PASSION'S drooping Myrtles sear

Blossom anew! But O! more thrill'd, I prize
Thy sadder strains, that bid in MEMORY'S Dream
The faded forms of past Delight arise;
Then soft, on LOVE'S pale cheek, the tearful gleam

Of Pleasure smiles—as faint yet beauteous lies

The imag'd Rainbow on a willow stream.¹¹

It may be that Hubbell chose this for its link to the idea of Pantisocracy, the possibility that these two great poets might have removed to another continent, and things have turned out differently than they did. The whole notion has had poetic consequences for the contemporary Irish poet Paul Muldoon (b. 1951), who now lives in the United States.¹² But Coleridge's poem, while appropriately rhymed and with a pretty closing image, is still unremarkable, and the poet never reprinted or collected it.¹³ One can't help wondering whether, hidden somewhere within Coleridge and Southey's broken friendship and abandoned project, lies something of the hidden disappointment with his own country that caused Hubbell to leave it permanently for Japan. Be that as it may, the next choice is much less perplexing.

Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822) was perhaps the most passionately idealistic of all the Romantic poets. His sonnet “To Wordsworth” rebukes the older poet, whom he regarded as having become reactionary:

Poet of Nature, thou hast wept to know
That things depart which never may return:
Childhood and youth, friendship and love's first glow,
Have fled like sweet dreams, leaving thee to mourn.
These common woes I feel. One loss is mine
Which thou too feel'st, yet I alone deplore.
Thou wert as a lone star, whose light did shine
On some frail bark in winter's midnight roar:
Thou hast like to a rock-built refuge stood
Above the blind and battling multitude:
In honoured poverty thy voice did weave
Songs consecrate to truth and liberty,—

Deserting these, thou leavest me to grieve,
Thus having been, that thou shouldst cease to be.

The first four lines respectfully encapsulate themes in the early work of the older poet, while the fifth line ambiguously diminishes these by referring to them as “common”, meaning of course shared, but also inconsequential. The break after the sixth line turns the sonnet on its head, into a sestet followed by an octet, and the subsequent reference to the “lone star”, echoing Wordsworth’s sonnet on Milton, mocks the older poet in bitter disappointment. The poem was evidently a response to Wordsworth’s long poem *The Excursion* (1814), which Hubbell also held in low regard.¹⁴ With this, however, the critical note vanishes from the selection, and the distance in time between the authors of the sonnets and those whom they address becomes much greater.

John Keats (1795-1821), the shortest-lived of all the great Romantics, has two entries on Hubbell’s list. “On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer”, is perhaps the better known, but both are about reading:

Much have I travell’d in the realms of gold,
And many goodly states and kingdoms seen;
Round many western islands have I been
Which bards in fealty to Apollo hold.
Oft of one wide expanse had I been told
That deep-brow’d Homer ruled as his demesne;
Yet did I never breathe its pure serene
Till I heard Chapman speak out loud and bold:
Then felt I like some watcher of the skies
When a new planet swims into his ken;
Or like stout Cortez when with eagle eyes
He star’d at the Pacific—and all his men

Look'd at each other with a wild surmise—
Silent, upon a peak in Darien.

Shown a more earthy and vigorous Elizabethan translation of Homer's works than the familiar eighteenth-century version, by a friend in October 1816, Keats wrote this out of gratitude and excitement. “On Sitting Down to Read King Lear Once Again” brings an equal revelation:

O golden-tongued Romance with serene lute!
Fair plumed Syren! Queen of far away!
Leave melodizing on this wintry day,
Shut up thine olden pages, and be mute:
Adieu! for once again the fierce dispute,
Betwixt damnation and impassion'd clay
Must I burn through; once more humbly assay
The bitter-sweet of this Shakespearian fruit.
Chief Poet! and ye clouds of Albion,
Begetters of our deep eternal theme,
When through the old oak forest I am gone,
Let me not wander in a barren dream,
But when I am consumed in the fire,
Give me new Phoenix wings to fly at my desire.¹⁵

The riches of Keats's own poetry draw much from his readings of such works by other writers, and it is thought that the language of his great odes owes a good deal to his engagement with *King Lear*. The tragedy of Keats's own life is hardly less poignant than that of the eponymous king, in the questions he must “burn through”, and the foreshadowing of his own death. Yet from both his readings the young poet draws strength and inspiration, and so it is perhaps appropriate to end the second sonnet with a resounding

couplet. Following the god of poetry Apollo, he will leave Albion, or England, to die in Italy, whence the sonnet originally came.¹⁶

Praise and admiration also inform the next poem, by Matthew Arnold (1822-1888), entitled simply "Shakespeare":

Others abide our question. Thou art free.
We ask and ask—Thou smilest and art still,
Out-topping knowledge. For the loftiest hill,
Who to the stars uncrowns his majesty,

Planting his steadfast footsteps in the sea,
Making the heaven of heavens his dwelling-place,
Spares but the cloudy border of his base
To the foil'd searching of mortality;

And thou, who didst the stars and sunbeams know,
Self-school'd, self-scann'd, self-honour'd, self-secure,
Didst tread on earth unguess'd at.—Better so!

All pains the immortal spirit must endure,
All weakness which impairs, all griefs which bow,
Find their sole speech in that victorious brow.

As in the work of Keats before him, and like most sonnets in English, Arnold's rhyme is imperfectly achieved if we consider it in terms of the Italian model, but the rhythm and repetitions, and other rhetorical devices, build in power to a strong conclusion, that raises the Bard above all others, as Hubbell also would have seen him. Twice Professor of Poetry at Oxford, and the first to deliver his lectures there in English, Arnold was much concerned with literary evaluation, and there is a tone of exhortation to this

poem that makes it different from Keats’s keen and immediate engagement, but even so it is high praise.

Today Arnold is more remembered and discussed as a critic than as a poet, except for one key modern poem, “Dover Beach”. That evocation of declining religious faith has echoes of the ancient past, and of classical Greece especially. So too does “To a Friend”:

Who prop, thou ask’st, in these bad days, my mind?
He much, the old man, who, clearest soul’d of men,
Saw The Wide Prospect, and the Asian Fen,
And Tmolus hill, and Smyrna bay, though blind.

Much he, whose friendship I not long since won,
That halting slave, who in Nicopolis
Taught Arrian, when Vespasian’s brutal son
Clear’d Rome of what most shamed him. But be his

My special thanks, whose even-balanced soul,
From first youth tested up to extreme old age,
Business could not make dull, nor passion wild;

Who saw life steadily, and saw it whole;
The mellow glory of the Attic stage,
Singer of sweet Colonus, and its child.

“The Wide Prospect” means Europe, as opposed to Asia, though Greece abuts both of these,¹⁷ and the men referred to in the first two verses are the poet Homer and Epictetus, a legendary philosopher and slave, while the playwright Sophocles is the subject of the remaining lines. As elsewhere, the value of literature is suggested, and upheld, most firmly and famously in the

line “Who saw life steadily and saw it whole”. Arnold’s poetry is often dense and awkward, as the first line is, and sometimes positively clogged, so that when he breaks through, the effect can be even more stunning. To see life steadily and to see it whole, is a much-repeated phrase down to the present day, and speaks for the importance of traditional education, in the classics particularly. Hubbell himself twice began an essay by declaring: “There is no progress in the arts. No one has ever written a better poem than the *Iliad*.”¹⁸

In view of Hubbell’s high regard for the Greek poet, it is not surprising that he returns to him again, with a sonnet by Andrew Lang (1844-1912), called simply “The Odyssey”:

As one that for a weary space has lain
Lull’d by the song of Circe and her wine
In gardens near the pale of Proserpine
Where that Aeaen isle forgets the main,
And only the low lutes of love complain,
And only shadows of wan lovers pine—
As such an one were glad to know the brine
Salt on his lips, and the large air again—
So gladly from the songs of modern speech
Men turn, and see the stars, and feel the free
Shrill wind beyond the close of heavy flowers,
And through the music of the languid hours
They hear like Ocean on a western beach
The surge and thunder of the Odyssey.¹⁹

The name of the author most readily comes to mind nowadays for the series of popular fairy tales he published, but he was a reputable novelist and scholar, who wrote prolifically and made important contributions in the field of anthropology. He was laid to rest at St Andrews in his native Scotland.

Deftly invoking an episode from Homer, where Odysseus and his men reach the island inhabited by Circe, who uses magic potions to turn his men to swine, and Odysseus himself is only able to rescue them, and save himself, after receiving advice from Hermes, the poet has this soporific episode serve as a symbol of modern life. It is only one stage on the long dangerous journey back to Ithaca, but Lang effectively creates a feeling of expectation and the open sea at the close of the octet, resuming and strengthening his point in the sestet, to close memorably. After this, we cross the ocean too, since the three remaining poets are American.

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807-1882) travelled to Europe and was known in England, above all for long narrative poems, like “Hiawatha”, that were enormously popular in his lifetime. Of the two well-known sonnets by this prolific poet,²⁰ Hubbell chooses “Chaucer” (probably because the other, “The Cross of Snow”, so painfully recalls the death of the poet’s wife in a conflagration):

An old man in a lodge within a park;
The chamber walls depicted all around
With portraitures of huntsman, hawk, and hound,
And the hurt deer. He listeneth to the lark,
Whose song comes with the sunshine through the dark
Of painted glass in leaden lattice bound;
He listeneth and he laugheth at the sound,
Then writeth in a book like any clerk.
He is the poet of the dawn, who wrote
The Canterbury Tales, and his old age
Made beautiful with song; and as I read
I hear the crowing cock, I hear the note
Of lark and linnet, and from every page
Rise odors of ploughed field or flowery mead.

In introducing the *The Art of the Sonnet*, Stephen Burt and David Mikics note this as an example of a poet whose “later sonnets encompass literary criticism”.²¹ The octet tries to imagine the fourteenth-century author of *The Canterbury Tales* at work in a room of the period, and this tribute is well imagined, and evenly composed. The antiquated usage (“writeth”) and the reference to the word “clerk”, which in Chaucer means a scholar (like the “Clerk of Oxenford”), set the tone for this tribute. That Chaucer is “the poet of the dawn” pays homage to him as the first important poet writing in the newly minted English language. Once more we are shown, in this unique course of critical appraisal, that reading is the best means of connecting imaginatively with the past. Chaucer was the first poet to be buried in Westminster Abbey, where there is also now a bust of Longfellow in Poets’ Corner.

Like Hubbell and Longfellow, and a good number of other American writers of the period, our next poet, Edwin Arlington Robinson (1869-1935), has three names. Like Keats and Arnold, he gets two poems. The first of these, “Many Are Called”, is a hymn to poetry itself:

The Lord Apollo, who has never died,
Still holds alone his immemorial reign,
Supreme in an impregnable domain
That with his magic he has fortified;
And though melodious multitudes have tried
In ecstasy, in anguish, and in vain,
With invocation sacred and profane
To lure him, even the loudest are outside.

Only at unconjectured intervals,
By will of him on whom no man may gaze,
By word of him whose law no man has read,

A questing light may rift the sullen walls,
To cling where mostly its infrequent rays
Fall golden on the patience of the dead.

Many are called to the vocation of a poet, but few are actually chosen and succeed. This is true, and Robinson had to struggle for recognition as a poet, though it came to him later in full measure. His language, as has sometimes been observed, is curiously old-fashioned, yet it has a clarity that readers recognise, and a sincerity that they respond to. Dedicated entirely to his art, the poet never married. Here he acknowledges the uncertainty of success and, despite any poet's yearning, the unpredictability of achieving what he or she wishes. The language in which Robinson expresses the urge to poetry, and the defeated rhyme of “read/dead”, has a finality that the ancient Greeks would have understood, as indeed he must have known. A “questing light” there may be, but oftentimes no more. The other poem by him, “George Crabbe”, is a deal more specific, equally skillful and yet critical of modern values:

Give him the darkest inch your shelf allows,
Hide him in lonely garrets, if you will,—
But his hard, human pulse is throbbing still
With the sure strength that fearless truth endows.
In spite of all fine science disavows,
Of his plain excellence and stubborn skill
There yet remains what fashion cannot kill,
Though years have thinned the laurel from his brows.

Whether or not we read him, we can feel
From time to time the vigor of his name
Against us like a finger for our shame

And emptiness of what our souls reveal
In books that are as altars where we kneel
To consecrate the flicker, not the flame.

The “shame” and “emptiness” are surely the fads of contemporary fashion, as opposed to the real and enduring values of literary achievement, and of moral worth. George Crabbe (1754-1832) had a high reputation in his day for his honest and sympathetic portrayals of the lives of villagers and townfolk. Robinson writes with great lucidity of human character as well, despite the grammatically awkward ending of the sestet of this poem, composed as a full sentence but where we are initially uncertain as to whether he is upholding or condemning Crabbe as a bearer of the flame. But it is the “flame” that matters, flicker as it will. Both sonnets are well achieved, and celebrate the true poetic impulse, passed down from the poet’s great European forebears. Yet how can we define the true “flame” that only flickers now, and no longer burns vigorously? Alas, this is an impossible question, though we know the impulse will remain.

If the poem on George Crabbe introduces the idea of what is buried and obscure, then the final sonnet, by Hart Crane (1899-1932) explores that further. But, whereas many of Robinson’s poems about individual lives bear the fictional names of men, this one carries a real name in its dedication, and it is that of a woman: “To Emily Dickinson”

You who desired so much—in vain to ask—
Yet fed your hunger like an endless task,
Dared dignify the labor, bless the quest—
Achieved that stillness ultimately best,

Being, of all, least sought for: Emily, hear!
O sweet dead Silencer, most suddenly clear

When singing that Eternity possessed
And plundered momentarily in every breast;

—Truly no flower yet withers in your hand.
The harvest you descried and understand
Needs more than wit to gather, love to bind.
Some reconcilment of remotest mind—

Leaves Ormus rubyless, and Ophir chill.
Else tears heap all within one clay-cold hill.

Ostensibly a Shakespearean sonnet, three quatrains and a couplet, this poem is in fact an artfully arranged set of heroic couplets. Crane’s diction, a mixture of Elizabethan, Romantic and Modernist, a fusion as it were of Shakespeare, Keats and Eliot, is uniquely expressive, yet often does not admit a clear meaning. Its vague impressionism contrasts markedly with the precision and lucidity of Hubbell’s own writing, particularly his prose, but the subject of the poem, Emily Dickinson (1830-1886), was one close to his heart. The story of her reclusive life is well known today, and while Crane’s poem seems to imitate her curiously broken style, in the use of dashes, he may not have been aware of this in fact.²² Dickinson was one of two American women whom the troubled Crane represented in his epic poem *The Bridge* (1930), the other being the dancer Isadora Duncan. He was struggling to create the epic when he wrote the sonnet in 1927.²³ The longing and appeal in his words, besides a keen awareness of what poetry is and can achieve —“that stillness ultimately best”— eluded Crane finally, it seems, for he committed suicide five years later.

Burt and Mikics describe Crane’s poem thus, comparing it to one mentioned earlier here:

It is a poem of vocation, like John Keats's famous sonnet "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer," in which one poet honors another's achievement and tries to learn from it for his own work. Yet it is also a poem about spiritual and artistic failure, about obscurity, silence, and the abandonment of impossible projects...²⁴

Hubbell had intense admiration for the poet Emily Dickinson (1830-1886), and rated her among the finest, on a par with Shakespeare. He knew twenty-five of her poems by heart, and recited them every few days during his final period in hospital, when he wanted to take a break from his usual habit of reciting Shakespeare.²⁵ We might surmise that he was sympathetic to her withdrawal from the world, which parallels in some ways his own withdrawal from the West, but he never said as much himself. That Dickinson's "quest", as Crane evokes it, found some echo in Hubbell's search for an equivalent "reconciliation of remotest mind", is a natural assumption at the conclusion of this series.

If many of the sonnets in Hubbell's list, particularly from Keats onward, pay tribute or homage to great writers of the past, we may take this as the connecting theme. Of Ezra Pound, Hubbell wrote: "He has raised criticism to new professional levels, adhering inflexibly to the consideration of literature as literature, not as an adjunct to something else."²⁶ Here, I believe, we can discover the thrust of the whole course in literary criticism that the poems represent: a profound valuation of the best literature on its own terms. The poems, embodying the qualities of good writing that they praise, themselves act as signboards to further reading, and may open the reader's mind to what lies beyond. The only puzzling inclusion is the sonnet by Coleridge, which was written at the end of a weak phase in sonnet composition, before its robust renewal at the hands of Wordsworth. That the selections are not in chronological order precisely, we may note as well, but Hubbell's choice of fifteen, on close and careful examination, opens out into a kind of extended

sonnet sequence, almost an exploded sonnet, in praise not only of poetry, and of this singularly enduring form of it, but in celebration of literature itself.

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- 1 See the essay “Modern Poetry” in Hart Crane, *The Complete Poems & Selected Letters and Prose*, edited by Brom Weber (New York: Liveright, 1966), p. 260.
 - 2 The interview-article was published in the *Mainichi Daily News*, 30 June 1986.
 - 3 When I wrote an essay on his work before for this journal in 1991, he was still living. See “Defiant and Alone: The Poetry of Lindley Williams Hubbell” by DB in *Ferris Studies* No. 26, March 1991, pp. 167-178.
 - 4 He makes light of his scholarship and teaching, but was a profoundly knowledgeable man, especially about poetry. Culture Club was the name of a well-known pop group.
 - 5 The late John Haylock (1918-2006), who also taught in Japan, told me he once heard Hubbell begin an illuminating lecture on Shakespeare’s sonnets by apologising first that he might have to refer to the text if memory failed him, but never had to do so.
 - 6 The names of course mean “Star-lover” and “Star” in Greek and Latin respectively.
 - 7 The hendecasyllabic or eleven-syllable pattern is not easily accomplished in English, and the dodecasyllabic one has also met with small success, though it forms the basis of the alexandrine widely used in French.
 - 8 *The Art of the Sonnet* by Stephen Burt and David Mikics (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press, 2010), p. 62.
 - 9 *Ibid.*, p. 110. David Mikics provides an excellent discussion of this poem, and “how it shows us Wordsworth’s own poetic capacity, as well as his admiration for Milton’s upright vigor.” p. 112.
 - 10 *The Oxford Book of English Verse 1250-1919*, edited by Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1919), was a standard anthology for much of the twentieth century. The order is reversed from that given here, for entries numbered 533-534
 - 11 There are variant versions of this in terms of orthography, and I have basically followed one edited by a descendant of the poet. However, the last line there has “willowy” instead of “willow”, and since this seems to disrupt the rhythm, I have left it as “willow”. The poem is dated “January 14, 1795”. See *The Complete Poetical Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* edited by Ernest Hartley Coleridge, Vol. I, p. 87.
 - 12 His long poem *Madoc: A Mystery* (New York: Farrar Strauss Giroux, 1991) is built around this idea, though it has many other layers of possible interpretation.
 - 13 It seems almost to belong to the poetry of Sensibility, that made gentle reading for the heroines of Jane Austen’s novels: “By the time of Austen’s death – by the time of John Keats and of Keats’s epigones – the sonnet had almost become, thanks in part to Wordsworth, what pentameter couplets were for the eighteenth century, a default form into which poets could pour almost anything.” Burt & Mikics, *op. cit.*

pp. 17-18.

- 14 In “Beer Bottles”, a poem mainly about forgotten poems and poets, he writes:

As for me, for *The Light of Asia* and *Towards Democracy*
I would gladly sacrifice:
Paradise Lost
Paradise Regained
The Prelude
and *The Excursion*

- Works by Sir Edwin Arnold and Edward Carpenter are thus set above Milton and Wordsworth. *Climbing to Monfumo* (Kobe: The Ikuta Press, 1977), p. 19.
- 15 The poem was included in a letter to his brothers of 23 January 1818: “I sat down yesterday to read King Lear once again the thing seemed to demand the prologue of a Sonnet.” *The Letters of John Keats 1814-1821*, edited by Hyder Edward Rollins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958), p. 214. The Shakespeare plays most often mentioned in his letters are *King Lear* and *Hamlet*.
- 16 But it was not only in his poetry that he showed this appreciation. In a review of some books on Shakespeare by the English poet John Masefield, Hubbell notably praises them as “the most sensitive appreciation of Shakespeare that has appeared since the letters of John Keats.” See Lindley Williams Hubbell, *A Second Miscellany* (Kobe: The Ikuta Press, 1975), p. 61.
- 17 Arnold himself added: “The name Europe ([Greek], *the wide prospect*) probably describes the appearance of the European coast to the Greeks on the coast of Asia Minor opposite. The name Asia, again, comes, it has been thought, from the muddy fens of the rivers of Asia Minor, such as the Cayster or Maeander, which struck the imagination of the Greeks living near them. (*Author’s Note.*)”
- 18 In fact the first time he said “Nobody”, amending it then to “No one”. See *A Second Miscellany*, op. cit., pp. 64 & 126.
- 19 The poem formed an “Epigram” at the head of Lang’s version of *The Odyssey* (1879). Hubbell quotes the closing line in an essay on “Poetry and Prose in Modern Literature”, *ibid.*, p. 90.
- 20 I take this to be so since both the anthologies of American poetry on my shelves contain either “Chaucer” (*The Penguin Book of American Verse* ed. Geoffrey Moore, 1985, p. 84) or both poems (*The Mentor Book of Major American Poets* ed. Oscar Williams & Edwin Honig, 1962, pp. 80-81).
- 21 Op. cit., p. 19.
- 22 See Burt and Mikics, op. cit., p. 270.
- 23 See Paul Maraini, *The Broken Tower: The Life of Hart Crane* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999), p. 255.
- 24 *Ibid.*, p. 269.
- 25 See the interview Yoko Danno conducted with him, where the titles of the twenty-five poems are also given. *Autumn Stone in the Woods: A Tribute to Lindley Williams Hubbell* edited by David Burleigh and Hiroaki Sato (Vermont, USA: P.S.,

A Press, 1997), pp. 63-64.

26 “The Age of Pound” in *A Second Miscellany*, op. cit., p. 99.