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Women and Sculptures: Femininity in Hart Crane's Ekphrastic Poems

Abstract: The article explores two poems by Hart Crane, "Interludium" and "To the Empress Josephine's Statue," both of which are examples of ekphrasis. Inspired by two sculptures of women, Gaston Lachaise's *La Montagne* and Vital Debray's statue of Joséphine de Beauharnais, the poems in question are at once representations of works of art and of femininity. It is as such that they are scrutinized in an analysis which focuses on poetry, the visual arts and femininity. The article deals with Crane's use of ekphrasis as a genre, but also with his reflections on time and space, the domains of poetry and sculpture respectively. It also delves into a number of connections evidenced in "Interludium" and "To the Empress Josephine's Statue": the one between creation and procreation, understood as maternity, and thus between art and femininity, as well as the ones between femininity on the one hand, and nature, mysticism, morality and history on the other.

Key words: ekphrasis, femininity, Hart Crane, American modernist poetry, visual arts

Hart Crane's first biographer, Philip Horton, reminds us that painting and sculpture were vital to the author of *The Bridge*: "Throughout his life art had the power to stimulate him tremendously, even to focus and direct his imagination" (110). The same source also tells us that the poet executed "a few drawings and water colors for his own amusement" and "was exhilarated when some of them won the approval of Gaston Lachaise, the sculptor, whom he so admired" (110). Crane, who had met the French-American artist the previous year, was also one of his sitters, "pos[ing] nude for a drawing by Lachaise" (Fisher 207). In a 1924 letter to his father, the poet wrote: "What pleases me is that so many distinguished people have liked my poems (seen in magazines and mss.) and feel that I am making a real contribution to American literature" (371). Among his "distinguished" admirers was Lachaise.

Regarded as the "greatest American sculptor of his time" (Lachaisefoundation.org), the Parisian-born Lachaise "played a critical role in the birth of American Modernism" (Lachaisefoundation.org). Having fallen in love with Isabel Nagle, an American, Lachaise had left Europe to settle permanently in the United States. Crane and Lachaise shared an interest in the visual arts as well as a passion for poetry, in particular

that of the French symbolists (Fisher 201). Circa 1923–1924, the poet repaid the sculptor's appreciation of his literary achievement by composing an ekphrasis entitled "Interludium," dedicated not to Lachaise himself, but to his famous work *La Montagne* (*The Mountain*). The aim of the present article is to examine "Interludium" as well as "To the Empress Josephine's Statue," another ekphrastic poem by Crane, written some three years later, in terms of how they, on the one hand, exploit the possibilities offered by a genre existing at the intersection of poetry and the visual arts and, on the other, examine the notion of femininity, since both poems deal with sculptures representing women. Moreover, the two levels on which the poems function, that is, the ekphrastic one and the one focusing on femininity, meet, overlap and intermingle, making it hard to disentangle the one from the other. Importantly, it was not until 2006, with Langdon Hammer's edition of Crane's complete poems, that the two ekphrases in question, one of which had appeared in a magazine while the other remained in manuscript, were published in book form. As a result, they have received comparatively little critical attention.

The word *work* used in the preceding paragraph is putative, since it does not in fact denote one particular sculpture by Lachaise, but a series of them, produced over a period of twenty years and collectively entitled *La Montagne* (*The Mountain*). "The first work to bear that title was executed in New York City in 1913, and was not shown for at least four years," Lachaise's monographer Gerald Nordland dutifully notes, adding that "[s]ubsequent versions were cut in field-stone, 1921, cast in bronze, 1924, and finally worked up to nine feet for cement casting, 1934. The first *Mountain* was worked in clay, cast in plaster in 1913 and ultimately cast in bronze" (113). Therein lies one of the problems Crane's poem poses: which of Lachaise's *Mountain* sculptures does "Interludium" evoke? While we may safely eliminate the 1934 version, executed not just after Crane wrote the poem, but also after he died, the other versions remain more or less likely "suspects." As Hollander observes in what is a general comment on "unidentifiable images" in ekphrases, "since a good many different versions of the piece exist, it is a matter of acute art-historical and biographical detective work to determine exactly which one Crane had seen before writing the poem" (354). Given that none of the poet's principal biographers seems to have undertaken such investigations, it is perhaps advisable to focus on what Lachaise's variations on the same theme have in common.

While, as noted above, Lachaise used various materials to produce subsequent incarnations of his sculpture, it is largely the same form—albeit differing in size and details—that is recreated throughout the *Mountain* series. Contrary to what the title may suggest, the sculptures represent a woman, aptly described by Hollander as "a bulky, maternal female nude" (354). As such, it corresponds to the female type which recurs in Lachaise's *œuvre* and which runs back to Isabel, "his

model, muse and wife" (Fisher 201). "Gaston Lachaise had one God, and it was a woman, his wife, and he put her on a pedestal, both literally and figuratively," the artist Louise Bourgeois observed (Lachaisefoundation.org). Bourgeois's words seem to echo those the sculptor himself addressed to his spouse in one of his innumerable letters to her: "You are the Goddess I am seeking to express in all things" (Lachaisefoundation.org). The one whom Crane fondly referred to as "fat Mme Lachaise" (361) was seen by her husband as "majestic" and, in artistic terms, as "the primary inspiration that awakened [his] vision and the leading influence that has directed [his] forces" (Lachaisefoundation.org). "Throughout my career as an artist," Lachaise added, "I refer to this person by the word 'Woman'" (Lachaisefoundation.org).

The "Woman" depicted in the *Mountain* series has a soft, rounded, curvaceous body. Even in the small-sized versions of the sculpture, she strikes the viewer as monumental. What attracts our attention is not her face, nor her hair, which is given relatively little prominence by the artist, but her large breasts and belly, frontally exposed and somewhat overwhelming. Equally eye-catching are her immense thighs and arms. The massiveness of the woman's upper body stands in sharp contrast to her lower legs. As Nordland points out, "[f]rom tiny feet through slender calves to expanding thighs and enormous torso the mountain rises to its idealized head" (113–114). The overall shape of the sculpture may be described as horizontal, since the woman is presented in a semi-recumbent position, as if she were sprawled out on a settee. Her expansive, voluptuous body brings to mind the mountain evoked in the title of Lachaise's work. Appropriately, the woman is also leaning against a mountainous landscape, which she dominates, contributing to the impression that she is a mythical giantess of sorts. In fact, she seems to be growing out of or—to put it another way—melting into the slopes which surround her, organically united with them. The title of Lachaise's series, slightly misleading at first, turns out to be justified, since, in his vision, the woman becomes the mountain, and the mountain becomes the woman. The sculpture also validates and illustrates the critical claim that "Lachaise's oeuvre is dominated by Isabel, his most compelling works sculpted elegies to her body" (Lachaisefoundation.org) and explains why "[t]he eroticism and monumentality of his mature sculpture—evocative of the heroic ambitions of Rodin and devoted to a celebration of the female body—convinced the painter Marsden Hartley that Lachaise was 'a lyric architect of the human form'" (Fisher 201). In the *Mountain* series—as well as in many other sculptures and drawings of women—Lachaise confirms his reputation of an artist credited with "pushing the boundaries of nude figuration with his innovative portrayals of the female body" (Lachaisefoundation.org).

In Nordland's words, the work by Lachaise which Crane, so to speak, turned into poetry "embodies a concept of the reclining woman as an invulnerable abso-

lute, rising from the plain of human experience as a great truth of life” (113–114). Broad though it may sound, the comment is perhaps helpful in explaining why Crane, tormented—like most poets—with the idea of expressing the inexpressible, saw ekphrastic potential in that particular sculpture. The relative shortness of “Interludium” and its hermetic nature, which may be seen as one of the hallmarks of Crane’s *œuvre* in general, make the poem worth quoting in its entirety here:

Thy time is thee to wend
with languor such as gains
immensity in gathered grace; the arms
to spread; the hands to yield their shells

and fostering
thysself, bestow to thee
illimitable and unresigned
(no instinct flattering vainly now)

Thysself
that heavens climb to measure, thus
unfurling thee untried,—until
from sleep forbidden now and wide
partitions in thee—goes

communicant and speeding new
the cup again wide from thy throat to spend
those streams and slopes untenanted thou
hast known And blithe

Madonna, natal to thy yielding
still subsist I, wondrous as
from thine open dugs shall still the sun
again round one more fairest day. (104–105)

Elsewhere I have already argued that Crane tends to inscribe the concept of the temporal into that of femininity (Piechucka 25–39). In the opening stanza of “Interludium,” its addressee is similarly associated with time. If, in Lachaise’s work, the woman merges with the mountain, in Crane’s poem, time and the woman become one. Additionally, the notion of time is combined with that of space, since time is to be “wended,” that is traveled. On a purely ekphrastic level, this association also reminds us that sculpture is a spatial, three-dimensional art. The physical aspects of the sculpture evoked in Crane’s poem are further emphasized by the use of words such as “languor” and “immensity.” Both refer to the pleasant, heavy stillness of the sculptures in the *Mountain* series, whose monumentality does not, paradoxically, preclude gracefulness, which the mention of “gathered grace”

seems to suggest. The poem's title points to something that intervenes, be it time or space. The "interlude" Crane has in mind may be, on the one hand, the gap between the visual medium used by Lachaise and Crane's subsequent attempt to capture it in words. On the other hand, it is possible to read the "interludium" of the title as an allusion to the time which elapses—or will elapse—between the present and some imminent event that the poem's speaker appears to anticipate. Immobile by definition, Lachaise's sculpture is pictured by Crane as being about to move, expand and develop: "the arms" are "to spread," "the hands to yield their shells" and the mountain-woman is capable of "fostering" and being "unfurl[ed]." The notion of—potential or imminent—mobility rounds off the motifs of time and space prominent in the poem, since it exists at the intersection of both. In this way, Crane comments on one of the phenomena central to ekphrasis: the "opposition between the spatiality of graphic art and the temporality of verbal art," between "[t]he *stasis* traditionally identified with visual art" and the idea of motion inherent in "verbal art" (Heffernan 18).

Most of the pronouns used in "Interludium" are second person singular personal pronouns. Furthermore, grammatical forms such as "thee," "thou," "thy" and "thyself" are given prominence in Crane's poem, appearing either in isolation, as in line nine, or at the beginning or end of the line, as in lines one, six and sixteen. Their profusion reinforces the second-person address used in "Interludium," but also—and perhaps more importantly—suggests a certain inclination towards self-reflexiveness, detectable in the phrases "thy time is thee" or "bestow to thee." This tendency, however, indicates not so much self-centredness or even self-containment, since there is "no instinct flattering vainly now," as the "illimitable and unresigned" mountain-woman's unrestricted, procreative power, in which the poet sees perhaps an echo of the creative power with which artists like himself and Lachaise are endowed. It is as if, dormant so far, the woman was about to become active, creating new landscapes and being the incarnation of natural powers, of Mother Nature herself. "[H]eavens climb to measure" the female addressee of the poem, who is now "from sleep forbidden" and in whom "wide / partitions" take place as she becomes the source and starting point of the "communicant and speeding new," of "streams" and "slopes." The fact that Crane chooses the archaic forms of the abovementioned personal pronouns—as well as that of the verb "have" in line seventeen—may be seen as one more instance of the penchant for archaisms which marks his poetry. However, it may also be expressive of the poem's overall design: to present the mountain-woman of Lachaise's sculpture as the embodiment of primeval forces. A return to the perennial is in fact inherent in the very notion of ekphrastic poetry, which by definition sets the "powers of writing itself against those of a much older means of representation" (Heffernan 9).

The use of archaisms is a fitting way of evoking the eternal cycle of nature, but also timelessness—that of the natural world, but also of the divine. It is possible to read the catachrestic and solecistic constructions used in “Interludium” in a similar light. In addition to being typical features of Crane’s poetics, they may also be interpreted as symbolic of the difficulty of translating the visual into the verbal, constituting the essence of “[t]he work of poetic conversion” (Heffernan 14) which is ekphrastic poetry and leading to one of the key features of ekphrasis, namely “*representational friction*, which occurs whenever the dynamic pressure of verbal narrative meets the fixed forms of visual representation and acknowledges them as such” (19; original italics). Furthermore, the catachreses and solecisms are perhaps suggestive of a child’s linguistic incompetence and of the primeval nature of the mother-child relationship. The woman in “Interludium”—and thus the woman represented by Lachaise in the *Mountain* series as seen by Crane—is Mother Nature, but she is also a mother figure *tout court*. As such, she is vitality personified. It is worth noting that though Gaston and Isabel Lachaise had no children together, the sitter for the *Mountain* series was a mother, having a son from her first marriage. Allusions to giving birth, nurturing children or producing crop are to be found in the poem inspired by Lachaise’s sculpture, as several phrases used by Crane indicate: “to *yield* their shells,” “*fostering* / thyself,” “speeding *new*,” “*natal* to thy *yielding*,” “from thine open *dugs*” (italics mine). Qualities traditionally associated with maternal love and maternity complete the mother image in “Interludium.” The emphasis is thus on the act of giving, on what is “bestow[ed]” and “spen[t],” on communicating, as the somewhat enigmatic use of the word “communicant” indicates, on bountifulness, suggested by words such as “immensity,” “illimitable,” and the adjective “wide,” which recurs twice in the poem, on knowledge (“thou / hast known”), on joy (“unresigned,” “blithe”), on generosity and readiness to share.

In addition to embodying nature and life, the woman acquires a religious dimension in Crane’s poem. At the beginning of the closing stanza, she is explicitly addressed as “Madonna,” thereby combining the maternal with the mystical. The appellation sheds new light on the fact that, immeasurable, she forces “heavens” to “climb.” “[U]ntried” and holding the key to “streams and slopes untenanted,” the poem’s heroine is pure and chaste, like uncharted territories, but also like the Virgin Mary herself. The mention of “wide / partitions in thee” seems to imply a virgin birth: the woman is to divide, multiply, create something out of herself. Even her beauty, free from vanity or narcissism, verges on the mystical. The religious overtones are emphasized by Crane’s lexical choices. The adjective “communicant” may be read as “communicating,” but may also bring to mind the noun denoting a person who receives Holy Communion. Similarly, “the cup” the adjective “communicant” apparently refers to may be the chalice containing the

wine at Communion. It must also be noted that the word "grace" used in stanza one has a religious meaning in addition to the "bodily" one. In the closing stanza of "Interludium," the speaker reveals his presence by declaring "still subsist I," presenting himself as a son, but also an observer of the cycle of life and natural phenomena the mountain-woman is part of: "from thine open dugs shall still the sun / again round one more fairest day." The word "dugs," associable with the animal world rather than the human one, seems to emphasize the woman-nature connection. The use of the word "again," which sends the reader back to the phrase "the cup again wide" of stanza four, points to the eternal, never-ending character of the cycle as well as to its connotations of completeness and perfection.

In the closing lines of "To the Empress Josephine's Statue," Crane similarly celebrates a woman by virtually deifying her. The poem's eponymous heroine is none other than Joséphine de Beauharnais, née Tascher de La Pagerie, whom her second husband, Napoleon Bonaparte, made empress of France:

I own it still—that sure deliberation—
 Leave, leave that Caribbean praise to me
 Who claims a devout concentration
 To wage you surely out of memory—
 Your generosity dispose relinquishment and care.
 Thy death be sacred to all those who share
 Love and the breath of faith, momentous bride
 You did not die for conquerors at your side
 Nor for that fruit of mating that is widowed pride (129)

The poem's ending presents Josephine's "death" as "sacred," emphasizing her greatness ("momentous bride") and the values she represents ("Love and the breath of faith"), which inscribe themselves into the ideal of permanence, loyalty, fidelity and endurance suggested by the second of the poem's subtitles: "Image of Constancy."

The first of the abovementioned subtitles consists of one word, denoting the location of the statue to which the ekphrasis is devoted: "Martinique." The Caribbean island is evoked in the first of the two stanzas which make up Crane's poem:

You, who contain augmented tears, explosions
 Have kissed, caressed the model of the hurricane
 Gathered and made musical in feathered fronds
 The slit eclipse of moon in palm-lit bonds
 Deny me not in this sweet Caribbean dawn
 You, who have looked back to Leda, who have seen the Swan
 In swirling rushes, urged the appointed charge,
 Outdid our spies and hoodwink sputum,
 Now you may compute your lecheries—
 As well as I, but not with her,— (128–129)

“To the Empress Josephine’s Statue” opens with images of Caribbean flora and weather, familiar to the poet due to his visits to the Isle of Pines, which is situated off the south coast of Cuba and on which his mother’s family had a summer house. The ekphrasis is a direct address to the “you” recurring throughout it, one who has experienced “explosions” and intimately known “the hurricane.” “The slit eclipse of moon in palm-lit bonds” is also part of the poem’s landscape, though it is not clear whether it is the eclipse or the hurricane that is “[g]athered and made musical in feathered fronds.” The connotations of dynamic movement, but also of danger, destruction and disaster have biographical roots: Crane, who himself survived a hurricane on the Isle of Pines in the year which probably saw the poem’s composition, conjures the violence and precariousness of Caribbean weather as well as its loveliness and poetic quality. The opening lines seem to address the statue itself, which is in keeping with the title. Standing amid lush vegetation in Fort-de-France, the capital of Martinique, the monument is apparently immune to the tempestuous tropical weather and even, paradoxically, able to tame it by using erotic (“kissed,” “caressed”) or artistic means (“made musical”).

A much more down-to-earth and prosaic description of the statue and its surroundings is to be found in a modern-day guidebook:

At the heart of town is La Savane, a broad garden with many palms and mangos; playing fields, walks, and beaches; plus shops and cafes lining its sides. In the middle of this grand square stands a statue of Joséphine, ‘Napoleon’s little Creole,’ made of white marble by Vital Debray. Joséphine poses in a Regency gown and looks towards Les Trois-Ilets, where she was born. The statue was decapitated in 1991, probably because islanders felt she championed slavery. (Colón, Lipsitz Flippin and Marino 398)

The last sentence of the passage *loco citato* references an event which constitutes a real-life epilogue to the vision of apparent indestructibility dominant in Crane’s poem. More information on the subject can be found in the prologue to Natasha Barnes’s monograph *Cultural Conundrums: Gender, Race, Nation, and the Making of Caribbean Cultural Politics*, intriguingly entitled “Josephine Beheaded.” Its opening paragraph revolves around the artwork which proved so inspirational to Crane:

There is a spectacle in Martinique’s gracious Savane park that is hard to miss. The statue honoring one of the island’s most famous citizens, Josephine Tascher, the white creole woman who was to become Napoleon’s lover, wife, and empress, is defaced in the most curious and creative of ways. Her head is missing; she has been decapitated. But this is no ordinary defacement: the marble head has been cleanly sawed off—an effort that could not have been executed without the help of machinery and more than one pair of willing hands—and red paint has been dripped from her neck and her gown. The defacement is a beheading, a reenactment of the most visible of revolutionary France’s punitive and socially

purifying acts—death by guillotine. The biographical record shows Josephine born of a slaveholding family of declining fortunes, married into the ranks of France's minor aristocracy, and surviving the social chaos of the French Revolution, which sentenced countless members of the ancient régime to the guillotine. In the form of this statue, she received her comeuppance in twentieth-century Martinique, where she met the fate that she narrowly missed a century [*sic*] earlier. (Barnes 1)

As Barnes points out, "Josephine's symbolic disfigurement is an act of retribution for the cumulative shame of the island's colonial history, a history of slavery and dominion from France that is not yet over. Today, Martinique is still a department of France" (2).

Crane, however, is a poet who can hardly be congratulated on his social sensitivity or suspected of political engagement as either man or artist. He is, nevertheless, susceptible to what may be called the mythmaking potential of history. The imperviousness—debatable, as we have seen—of the statue "memorializ[ing] the Josephine of the coronation ceremony made famous by the court painting of Jacques-Louis David" (Barnes 7), its ability to resist, deal with adversity and show courage in the face of it may also be ascribed to the empress herself. Married to one of the greatest rulers and military leaders in history, she experienced first-hand the tumult of historical change and the pressures connected with her status. Crane does, in fact, go on to emphasize the evil, dangers and meanness the statue or Josephine—or perhaps both—were exposed to, since it/she "urged the appointed charge, / Outdid our spies and hoodwink sputum." Similarly, the words "You, who have looked back to Leda, who have seen the Swan" refer to, on the one hand, the timelessness of myth and art, the mythological allusions fitting in with the Empire period's tendency to take inspiration from the ancient world. On the other, they allude to Josephine's fate, determined by the fact that she married "the god of War." Interestingly, the phrase may also suggest the interplay between an artistic representation and its referent, between the image, itself symbolic of constancy, an abstract quality, evoked in the poem's subtitle, and the real person: the statue "look[s] back to Leda," "remembering," that is, commemorating, Josephine, the bride of "the god of War." The interplay between a work of art and its sitter, which may be a source of representational friction as well, since "this sort of friction also occurs when the poet's language registers the difference between the medium of visual representation and its referent" (Heffernan 19), is, in turn, echoed in the interplay between the work of art and its poetic rendering. The latter interplay is central to ekphrasis, which is in fact a case of a representation within a representation or, as Heffernan puts it, a case of "representing representation" (19).

The lines which close the penultimate stanza of "To the Empress Josephine's Statue," "Now you may compute your lecheries— / As well as I, but not with

her,—” are, like so many passages of Crane’s poetry, problematic. It is so because the referents of the pronouns “you” and “her” are not clear. Does the speaker address—as is the case in most of the poem—the empress’s sculpted representation (“you”), opposing it to the real Josephine (“her”)? Tempting as it may seem, since it would again encourage an analysis of the interplay and discrepancies between the object and its representation, which exist in any art but are, so to speak, doubled in ekphrastic poetry, it appears unlikely. The word “lecheries” seems incompatible with the “[i]mage of Constancy” projected throughout the poem and therefore with the noble values ascribed to the empress and, by extension, to her statue. The interpretation is further complicated by the fact—seemingly ignored by Crane—that Josephine’s loyalty to her second husband is questionable. As one biographical entry reminds us, “Joséphine was an indifferent wife, declining to answer the future emperor’s passionate love letters and, while he was campaigning in Egypt in 1798–99, flirting with another army officer in a most compromising manner” (“Joséphine,” par. 3). On the other hand, Josephine could also be a respectable and supportive spouse, which makes it difficult to unequivocally judge her conduct: “[d]uring the Consulate (1799–1804) she was careful to cause no more scandals and used her social position to advance her husband’s political fortunes” (“Joséphine,” par. 3). Interestingly, the word “lecheries” denotes—according to some lexicographers, at least—men’s improper sexually charged behavior towards women. This, in turn, would suggest that the American poet sees Josephine as the victim of unsolicited sexual advances, a reading of the lines in question which the phrase “but not with her” may confirm. Does the speaker change the addressee for a while, switching from Napoleon’s bride to some vague “others,” those who threatened the empress or the statue, or both, sexual predators and political enemies?

If we return to the poem’s opening lines and the erotic connotations of kisses and caresses, the “lecheries” are perhaps to be associated with the statue’s ability to “seduce” and thus tame the natural powers, a strategy which must have been used by the real Josephine, empowered by her femininity, in order to incapacitate her opponents. An accomplished temptress, at once exotic and sophisticated, she was frequently accused of promiscuity (Barnes 3–4). It is, however, worth noting that the numerous relationships which tarnished Josephine’s reputation were often motivated not so much by a debauched, libertine nature as by economic necessity, since her irresponsible first husband failed to provide for his young family, and then by a desire to escape the fate of thousands of French noblemen and noblewomen executed during the Revolution (3). In fact, her contemporaries saw her attitude to men and love affairs as unsentimental and pragmatic rather than marked by genuine ardor (10). It must also be remembered that Napoleon had his fair share of extramarital affairs, the Polish aristocrat

Maria Walewska and the French bourgeoisie Eléonore Denuelle de La Plaigne, both mothers of the emperor's illegitimate sons, being merely two names on a long list of mistresses. In light of the above considerations, it could be concluded that when Crane gives prominence to fidelity and loyalty in "To the Empress Josephine's Statue," he does so at the expense of historical data, but in accordance with a romantic legend he visibly wishes to uphold, best expressed perhaps by the words Napoleon famously uttered on his deathbed: "France, the Army, head of the Army, Josephine." The statue's physical resistance, emphasized in Crane's ekphrasis, mirrors the qualities which the poet chooses to ascribe to the French empress and which inscribe themselves into the general belief that Josephine was the love of Napoleon's life.

As mentioned earlier in this article, Josephine is presented as a deity towards the end of Crane's poem. It is this godlike, unnamed force, associable with the empress, her statue, or both, that the speaker implores in the stanza in question. The plea, "Leave, leave that Caribbean praise to me," may be read as metaliterary, the "Caribbean praise" being perhaps the poem itself. As if to confirm his right to such exclusivity, the poet-speaker asserts in the preceding line, "I own it still—that sure deliberation—." He thereby refers to his examination of the statue and the reflection prompted by it: after all, as Heffernan reminds us, "Michael Baxendall notes that ekphrasis tends to represent not so much a picture as 'thought after seeing a picture'" (25); it is also often a reflection "on the complexities of representation itself" (20). The line is perhaps also an allusion to the slowness, immobility and majesty inherent in the sculpture. The two lines which follow are somewhat cryptic again, "Who claims a devout concentration / To wage you surely out of memory—." As the relative pronoun *and*, in consequence, the relative clause it introduces seem to refer to the personal pronoun "me" at the end of the previous line, it can be speculated that the speaker needs to make a lot of effort to erase both the statue and its sitter from his mind. It may also be suggestive of the concentration which is necessary to contemplate this and, for that matter, any work of art. The speaker may be self-critical when he deals with memory, with the inevitability of his forgetting what he wishes to remember: art—be it sculpture or literature—would then be a desperate means of opposing the inexorable passage of time and the havoc wreaked by oblivion.

The last five lines of Crane's poem appear to be addressed to the empress herself rather than to her statue. Since "[t]hy death" is mentioned, it is unlikely that the speaker refers to a sculpture unless what he means by "death" is the statue's destruction. However, the poem's opening lines suggest the statue's indestructibility, and thus, by extension, the permanence of all works of art. The poem's final two lines seem to sum up the empress's fate: "You did not die for conquerors at your side / Nor for that fruit of mating that is widowed pride." The two statements

possibly allude to the fact that, Napoleon having divorced her, Josephine did not become his widow, and was thus deprived of the “pride” that she could have taken in widowhood. Nor did the emperor of the French become her widower: Josephine “did not die for [the] conqueror[] at [her] side.” A mother of two children from her previous marriage to the viscount de Beauharnais, the empress did not give Napoleon any offspring, expected to be the “fruit of mating.” The American poet’s overall suggestion is perhaps that, all in all, Josephine was more loyal to the Corsican than he was to her, leaving her in order to marry another woman who would bear him a son as well as be a political asset for him. The heroine of Crane’s poem died abandoned, but somehow victorious for not having compromised the loyalty and faithfulness the author associates her with. The statement, “Your generosity dispose relinquishment and care,” is ungrammatical, which is hardly surprising in a work by a poet known for his solecistic tendencies. It is therefore not clear whether “generosity” generates “relinquishment and care”—in which case the letter *s* would be missing in “dispose”—or whether it is the other way round, which would mean the sentence is an example of idiosyncratic inversion, an inverted version of “Relinquishment and care dispose your generosity.” It is also possible that the statement contains an implicit imperative of the kind that may be found in Renaissance and Baroque poetry. It would then be read as “[May y]our generosity dispose relinquishment and care,” a construction grammatically parallel to the line which follows. Whatever the case might be, all four possible readings imply selflessness, renunciation and affection, which harmonize, on the one hand, with the “[l]ove,” loyalty and “faith” Crane’s poem celebrates, and, on the other, with the bid to struggle with oblivion, an endeavor inherent in all forms of art.

Interestingly, Hart Crane was not the first to commit his impressions of Josephine’s statue to paper. Some four decades before his poem was written, Lafcadio Hearn, the Greek-born Japan-based American *fin-de-siècle* writer, had had the opportunity to view Vital Debray’s sculpture during his two-year stint as a foreign correspondent in the West Indies. The written account of what may, without exaggeration, be called Hearn’s encounter with the French empress betrays his fascination with both the woman and her marble representation:

I went to look at the white dream of her there, a creation of master-sculptors...
It seemed to me absolutely lovely.

Sea winds have bitten it; tropical rains have streaked it: some microscopic growth has darkened the exquisite hollow of the throat. And yet such is the human charm of the figure that you almost fancy you are gazing at a living presence.... Perhaps the profile is less artistically real,—statuesque to the point of betraying the chisel; but when you look straight up into the sweet creole face,

you can believe she lives: all the wonderful West Indian charm of the woman is there.

She is standing just in the centre of the Savane, robed in the fashion of the First Empire, with gracious arms and shoulders bare: one hand leans on a medallion bearing the eagle profile of Napoleon.... Seven tall palms stand in a circle around her, lifting their comely heads into the blue glory of the tropical day. Within their enchanted circle you feel that you tread holy ground,—the sacred soil of artist and poet;—here the recollections of memoir-writers vanish away; the gossip of history so hushed for you; you no longer care to know how rumor has it that she spoke or smiled or wept: only the bewitchment of her lives under the thin, soft, swaying shadows of those feminine palms.... Over violet light, she is looking back to the place of her birth, back to beautiful, drowsy Trois-Islets,—and always with the same half-dreaming, half-plaintive smile,—utterably touching. (qtd. in Barnes 8–9)

Not only were Hearn and Crane similarly captivated by the most famous statue in Fort-de-France, but their literary renderings of it reveal affinities which almost make one wonder whether the latter happened to have read the former's text. Hearn's depiction shows he was under the spell of both the artwork and the beauty of the person who had inspired it. Unlike Crane, Hearn was heterosexual and thus even more susceptible to the erotic aura surrounding Josephine and projected onto her statue. For Hearn and Crane alike, the power of art and that of femininity merge in Debray's work. The exotic flora and sultry climate of Martinique only add interest to the sculpture and the Martinique-born woman it represents. The fact that the statue is surrounded by luxuriant vegetation gives prominence to the connection between womanhood and nature. The particular geographical location of the monument results in it being exposed to the elements, which, however, reveal their powerlessness vis-à-vis the marble beauty. The power of femininity is magnified by the epic power of history: the fact that Josephine was Napoleon's spouse and thus basked in his military glory—albeit only reflected—is important to both Hearn and Crane. For both of them too, Josephine's statue acquires an almost mystical dimension, but only insofar as it is artistically useful and inspirational. Art is akin to, but ultimately superior to any religion, including an idiosyncratic, semi-pagan cult of a beautiful, spellbinding woman marked by History with a capital H. The superiority of art and artistic freedom is also what precludes any enslavement to facts, biographical and historical. Both Hearn's prose text and Crane's poem create the impression that the authors interact with a living, breathing human being, that the medieval terms for sculptors and sculpture, "masters of the living stone" and "the literature of the illiterate," respectively, are more than poetic phrases. This seeming ability to breathe life into stone encourages reflection on the interaction between the real and the artificial, which in turn engenders reflection on the link between literature and the visual

arts, crucial to all ekphrastic writing. It must be remembered that, in addition to representational friction, a key characteristic of much ekphrastic writing is “*prosopopoeia*, the dramatic personification or more precisely the *envoicing* of a mute, inanimate object” (Heffernan 22). Finally, both Hearn and Crane appear to suggest that art, like love, femininity and sexual attraction, is largely the domain of the intangible and the irrational.

In Heffernan’s words, to analyze ancient and medieval ekphrastic poetry is to “see how the word comes to master the painted or sculpted image it represents, and at the same time how the power of this image-mastering word serves to reinforce an authority that is essentially male” (10). In the case of the two ekphrases discussed in the present article as well as Hearn’s prose depiction of Josephine’s statue, the author of the literary text is a man, as are the authors of the two sculptures behind the ekphrastic texts in question. The male gaze is thus multiplied and magnified, its object being invariably women: Isabel Lachaise and Josephine Bonaparte, the mountain-woman and the French empress, respectively. The two Crane poems, coupled with the Hearn passage, celebrate womanhood, doing so in more than purely aesthetic terms. The gaze fixed by the writers on the two sculptures—and by the sculptors on the sitters—may be male, but it does not necessarily “reinforce an authority.” Instead, we have male viewers—sons, lovers, admirers and, above all, artists—looking not just at images of femininity, but at femininity itself, pondering its essence and delving into its arcana. Woman emerges from this act of looking, depicting, thinking and transcribing as an ultimate force and an absolute. In her meet maternal love and erotic passion, the natural and the mystical, moral values and artistic inspiration, the greatness and transience of human history and the timelessness of art. Throughout the centuries, men may have exercised their authority over women and made them feel and appear inferior, but have also been aware that women will always be superior to them in one respect: the ability to give birth. The only men endeavoring to usurp the female gift of procreation—and thus, in a sense, “feminizing” themselves—are artists, involved in a constant battle with themselves, their medium and the world in which they live, which they represent or respond to in their art—and which ultimately responds to them and their art—as well as a battle, or rivalry, with other artists. It must be remembered that not only do the authors of ekphrasis, like its father, Homer, find themselves “aiming to rival the very art [painting or sculpture] [t]he[y] ostensibly salute” (16), but they also enter “a contest stayed not just between the word and the image but also between one poet and another” (23). Arguably, in few literary genres are the artist’s tensions and dilemmas as conspicuous as they are in ekphrasis.

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