

# *Sex and Style in Contemporary American Poetry*

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IN THE OPENING poem of *The Simple Truth*, Philip Levine tells the simple and presumably true story of how his cousin, Arthur Lieberman, arranged the 1929 meeting between Hart Crane and García Lorca.

The young man who brought them  
together knows both Spanish and English,  
but he has a headache from jumping  
back and forth from one language  
to another. For a moment's relief  
he goes to the window to look  
down on the East River, darkening  
below as the early night comes on.  
Something flashes across his sight,  
a double vision of such horror  
he has to slap both his hands across  
his mouth to keep from screaming.

What was Arthur Lieberman afraid of? The “double vision” of horror might be a premonition of Crane’s and Lorca’s deaths, but the lines immediately following the vision suggest that something else is on Levine’s mind: “Let’s not be frivolous, let’s/not pretend the two poets gave/each other wisdom or love or/even a good time.” Why would it be “frivolous” to imagine such interaction between Lorca and Crane? “Some things/you know all your life,” says Levine in the title poem of *The Simple Truth*: “They are so simple and true/they must be said without elegance, meter and rhyme”; he cautions in “On the Meeting of García Lorca and Hart Crane” that we must not even be “eloquent” in judging the significance of this meeting between two “poetic geniuses.” In contrast to Levine, Crane wrote in a style that

was anything but simple—a high poetic decorum that, at least since the time of Whitman, has been associated with insincerity, aestheticism, and femininity. Levine does not dwell on the sexuality of either Crane or Lorca, but the style of his own poem registers their sexuality by warding it away. In the world of American poetry, one cannot talk about “the simple truth” without raising the specter of a style that dare not speak its name.

My interest here is style. More specifically, I want to describe the cultural associations that have accrued around plain and fancy styles in American poetry—not in order to reinforce these arbitrary associations but in order to dispel them, to make stylistic choices more potently stylistic. Consider this well-known story: after swallowing New Critical taste whole, Robert Lowell experienced a kind of psychopolitical breakthrough, emerging as a poet of openness, liberated from the elaborately artificial verse forms he had supposedly inherited from modernism. Lowell often referred to this moment in his career, which began with “Skunk Hour,” the concluding poem of *Life Studies*, as a “breakthrough back into life.” In this story, high poetic rhetoric (fanciness, more than meter and rhyme as such) distances a poet from real experience. At the end of “Skunk Hour,” Lowell seems attractively self-mocking when he associates his own struggle for a focused identity with a mother skunk who “jabs her wedge-head in a cup/of sour cream” and “will not scare.” But the poem is adamant in its preference for dirty scavengers over fussy traffickers in ornament.

And now our fairy  
decorator brightens his shop for fall;  
his fishnet's filled with orange cork,  
orange, his cobbler's bench and awl;  
there is no money in his work,  
he'd rather marry.

Given the way in which *Life Studies* itself tells the story of Lowell's breakthrough (beginning with fancy poems and ending with plain ones), it's hard not to read the “fairy decorator” as the ghost of the poet Lowell might have remained, a poet mired in suspiciously decorative

notions of poetic language. In "Inspiration," an early draft of "Skunk Hour," Lowell uses the lines that would eventually describe the "fairy decorator" to characterize his own thwarted efforts to write: "There is no money in this work,/You have to love it." *Life Studies* tells a story of masculine fortitude: the breakthrough is achieved by a poet strong enough to rend the veils of a ladylike nostalgia for traditional poetic decorum.

Poet after poet has followed Lowell in achieving the breakthrough, moving dramatically from a poetry of interior decoration to a poetry of skunks: think of poets as different as W. S. Merwin, Frank O'Hara, and Adrienne Rich. Yet there are exceptions. Instead of moving from fancy, impersonal poems to plain, autobiographical poems, Richard Howard has appeared to move in the opposite direction. While his first two books contain personal narratives, his third book, *Untitled Subjects*, inaugurated a continuing sequence of elaborate monologues and apostrophes. To anyone who reads Howard attentively, this work seems deeply personal and political. But the knee-jerk response to Howard's career has been predictable: "There is too much of the dandified manner and not enough of the presence of a man," says one recent reviewer; Howard keeps "himself and his life—even when he does write about these things—at such a distance from the poems that they emerge as snowflakes under glass rather than the prowling animals they have every right to be." The assumptions at work in these metaphors are too obvious to bear much elaboration: American poetry required the presence of a man, the prowling animal who will not scare.

Insofar as it is style that triggers these assumptions, the fact that Howard has always written as an openly gay poet is beside the point: any poet—straight or gay, male or female—who violates the decorum of the plain style is sooner or later brought up on charges of sexual ambiguity. Richard Wilbur's career is distinguished by its continuity; unlike many of his contemporaries, he has never remade his style dramatically. One could argue that Wilbur's style has not changed because it has not needed to change; unlike Lowell (but like Elizabeth Bishop), Wilbur did not begin his career by swallowing New Critical dogmatism

whole. Yet for a poet like Robert Bly, Wilbur's poems are "crystallized flower formations" that could only be produced by "intellectual dandies."

Similarly, Randall Jarrell's last book, *The Lost World*, was condemned in the *New York Times* as cute, infantile, self-indulgent, tear-jerking, and marked by a "sentimental Mama-ism." Jarrell's case is slightly more complicated than Wilbur's, because, unlike Wilbur's, Jarrell's career can be wedged only uncomfortably into the "break-through" pattern established by Lowell's. But Jarrell's infatuations with female voices and childhood domesticity have always seemed to some readers embarrassing. As Jarrell recognized early on, he "was writing in an age in which the most natural feeling of tenderness, happiness, or sorrow was likely to be called sentimental." Jarrell wanted more than anything else to be a poet of tenderness, a quality that he himself associated with female personae at least partly in order to protect himself from charges of sexual ambiguity.

Part of the problem for unsympathetic readers of Howard, Wilbur, or Jarrell is that poetry itself (at least since the time of Whitman) has tended in American culture to seem feminized. Looking back at his student years at Harvard, T. S. Eliot once remarked that the example of Jules Laforgue enabled him to write his own poetry because Laforgue possessed "a masculine toughness" that was lacking in most nineteenth-century English writers; James Joyce would later be thrilled that *The Waste Land* laid to rest once and for all the notion that poetry was "for ladies." Wallace Stevens, another young poet at Harvard, wrote in his journal that his writerly habits were "positively lady-like," and he yearned to become what he called a "man-poet" like Homer. These poets seemed afraid of appearing insufficiently masculine because they wrote poetry at all.

Stevens's defensiveness comes across most strongly in the essay called "The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet," in which he insists that if the poet "dwells apart in his imagination, as the philosopher dwells in his reason, and as the priest dwells in his belief, the masculine nature that we propose for one that must be the master of our lives will be lost." Here, as in poems such as "Oak Leaves Are Hands," Stevens

stakes his masculinity on a no-nonsense engagement with the actual world: the ineffectual Lady Lowzen merely “skims the real for its unreal.” But like Wilbur or Howard, Stevens has often been accused of being a poet of prettiness, devoted to the fanciful and the figurative. At the same time, like Lowell, Stevens himself associated fanciness with femininity, and in “The Figure of the Youth” he put himself in the awkward position of needing to reject his own achievement—to reject poetry itself—in order to bolster his masculine credentials.

Richard Howard, who takes Stevens as his mentor, has worked hard to save Stevens the poet from Stevens the man. In his long poem “Even in Paris,” Howard imagines a secret trip to Paris that Stevens might have taken in 1952, when Howard himself was studying at the Sorbonne. Howard spots Stevens in Sainte Chapelle and guides the poet around Paris. At the climactic moment of the poem, Stevens purchases an 1897 volume of the *Mercure de France* that includes Léon Bazalgette’s translation of *Leaves of Grass*. Standing along the Seine, he holds out the book along with a fistful of hundred-franc notes, muttering “*lancer ce livre comme un bateau*” until a boy accepts the proposition and launches the book on the water: “a ceremony bought is a ceremony still,” says Stevens to the young Howard, who has just witnessed the moment that, as Howard imagines it, will inspire Stevens to write “The River of Rivers in Connecticut.” “This must be the one place in the world,” says Howard’s Stevens,

where a man can realize what he writes  
is a river too. It is continuous,  
no burden on the memory, but a way  
—made up of all ways—of reaching the sea.

“Even in Paris” is a colossal wish fulfillment: Howard has imagined himself as a literary historical catalyst, the poet who joins the hands of Whitman and Stevens. Set in 1952, the poem is also a nostalgic account of the interaction of gay men prior to AIDS: “Even in Paris” is made up of a sequence of hilarious letters between Richard, Ivo, and Roderick. Part of Howard’s wish is to draw Stevens into this

world—not literally to seduce Stevens but to alter the poet's relationship to his style, the style that underwrites Howard's own. The wish seems even more powerful once we recognize that, on the evidence of "Decades," the poet whom Howard actually met in Paris was not Stevens but the New Critic Allen Tate, who had once been a close friend of Hart Crane. Speaking of the "proclivity" Howard shares with Crane, Tate remarks in the poem that "such men . . . fare best, as we Southerners say of foxes, when/most opposed."

But if Howard is not interested in being opposed, neither is he interested merely in opposing Tate, author of *The Fathers*: later in the poem, Howard visits Crane's birthplace and discovers "a sidelong grammar of paternity," reaching back for Crane's hand as Crane reached back for Whitman's in *The Bridge*.

We join the Fathers after all, Hart, rejoice,  
not to repel or repeal or destroy, but to fuse,  
As Walt declared it: wisdom of the shores,

easy to conceive of, hard to come by, to choose  
our fathers and to make our history.

This is precisely what Howard accomplishes in "Even in Paris." While André Gide criticized Bazalgette's translation of *Leaves of Grass* for "heterosexualizing" Whitman, Howard "homosexualizes" Stevens, drawing him into a fantasy version of Howard's early life and (more importantly) transforming him into a poet at peace with the cultural implications of his own style—a poet who could love Richard Howard as Howard loves him. "*Criticism will be love, or will not be*," concludes his recent poem "The Job Interview": Howard quotes this line from André Breton, from whose "legendary loathing of queers" he does not otherwise flinch.

Reading Oscar Wilde, Jonathan Dollimore suggests in *Sexual Dissidence* that a homosexual style revels in "the unauthentic, masks, and role playing." A gay poet may well have social reasons for employing stylistic extravagance as a disguise; James Merrill recalled that as a young poet he embraced "whatever helped to complicate the texture"

of his poems in order to “conceal [his] feelings, and their objects.” Still, Dollimore’s characterization of the style suits Stevens or Wilbur as well as Wilde or Howard. It may be tempting to think that gay writers approach literature more as an act of role-playing than of self-expression, but it is nevertheless true that all acts of self-expression are a matter of coding; we think of the self as private, but any articulation of it must of course be social. So while a style that revels in masks and role-playing may carry certain cultural associations, the style is not necessarily the product of specific desires or acts. Neither is a style that embraces plainness and simple truth. Given that an accretion of arbitrary cultural associations determines our sense of what constitutes the poetic style of a straight man, that style is not necessarily restricted to poets who are heterosexual and male.

Throughout much of her career, Adrienne Rich has exhibited a distrust of figurative language. Like Lowell, she came to feel in the late 1950s that received poetic forms were what she called “asbestos gloves,” tools a young poet might require but must eventually discard for a “barehanded” treatment of real experience. Recently, Rich has softened this position, maintaining in *What Is Found There* that she objects not to “form” as such but to “form” that lapses into “format.” But like Lowell, Rich is uncomfortable not so much with form—with meter and rhyme—as with the fanciness that often goes hand in hand with traditional forms; like Stevens, she is sometimes uncomfortable with the metaphorical nature of poetic utterance itself.

In the foreword to her recent *Collected Early Poems*, Rich chastises the young poet who wrote “Storm Warnings,” the first poem in her first book, *A Change of World*: “Nothing in the scene of this poem suggests that it was written in the early days of the Cold War, within a twenty-year-old’s earshot of World War II, at the end of the decade of the Warsaw Ghetto and Auschwitz, Hiroshima and Nagasaki, in a climate of public fatalism about World War III.” While it is true that none of these events are mentioned in “Storm Warnings,” Rich seems ungenerous to herself in her insistence that the poem does not register an awareness of these events through its metaphors.

I draw the curtains as the sky goes black  
 And set a match to candles sheathed in glass  
 Against the keyhole draught, the insistent whine  
 Of weather through the unsealed aperture.  
 This is our sole defense against the season;  
 These are the things that we have learned to do  
 Who live in troubled regions.

I suspect that the poet who published these lines in 1951 was fairly sure that her readers would understand this “troubled region” as an eerily calm postwar world, a world in which the sky still looks black. W. H. Auden was able to speak confidently in his introduction to *A Change of World* of “the historical apprehension expressed in ‘Storm Warnings.’” But for Rich, a legitimately “historical” poem cannot rely on figurative language. It is telling that her sense of the deficiencies of “Storm Warnings” culminates in a list of events—as if to mention history, to name it, is to register an awareness of it. Increasingly, her own poems have taken the forms of lists, exchanging (inasmuch as it is possible to do so) the fanciness of metaphor for the plainness of metonymy.

Catch if you can your country’s moment, begin  
 where any calendar’s ripped-off: Appomattox  
 Wounded Knee, Los Alamos, Selma, the last airlift from Saigon . . .

Compare these lines from “An Atlas of the Difficult World” with the work of a female poet whose work has often been dismissed as decorative:

tallow, rushlight, whale oil, coal oil,  
 gas jet: black fat of the Ur-tortoise  
 siphoned from stone, a shale-tissued  
 carapace: hydrocarbon unearthed  
 and peeled away, process by process,  
 in stages not unlike the stages  
 of revelation, to a gaseous plume  
 that burns like a bush, a perpetual  
 dahlia of incandescence, midway



between Wilmington and Philadelphia  
 gaslight, and now these filamented  
 avenues, wastelands and windrows  
 of illumination, gargoyles,  
 gasconades, buffooneries of neon,  
 stockpiled incendiary pineapples,  
 pomegranates of jellied gasoline  
 that run along the ground, that cling  
 in a blazing second skin  
 to the skins of children.

This history of the use of hydrocarbons—from the Ur-tortoise to napalm—occurs in “The Dahlia Gardens,” Amy Clampitt’s poem about the act of self-immolation committed by Norman Morrison in front of the Pentagon on 3 November 1965. The poem is one of dalliance as much as of dahlias: its prophetic moralism is conveyed through (not in spite of) the turns of its highly figurative language and the movements of its highly digressive structure. Clampitt wants to suggest how the worst kind of human violence (napalm) may be enabled by the same means that provide the humblest modes of human comfort (tallow): by setting himself on fire to protest the Vietnam War, Norman Morrison egregiously merges the horrific with the ordinary. Clampitt’s metaphors (“incendiary pineapples,/pomegranates of jellied gasoline”) do the same thing.

Clampitt’s politics—green, pacifist, feminist—are as clear as Richard Howard’s, yet soon after her poems became prominent in the early 1980s, Clampitt would provoke this response: “The phenomenon represented by this suddenly made and meteorically ascending reputation is an interesting one, suggesting that some readers are almost desperately nostalgic for the good old pre-‘Beat,’ pre-‘Deep Image,’ pre-‘Confessional’ days when poems were well-wrought urns, [and] poets’ personalities were (as T. S. Eliot had recommended) decorously ‘extinguished.’” The intended power of this sentence depends on our mythologizing the breakthrough enacted in Lowell’s or Rich’s career: poets are so smart today because they used to be so

dumb. The key word is “decorously.” Clampitt’s poems are cast in a highly decorated style—a highly figurative decorum—that for certain readers invokes hackneyed notions of impersonal, apolitical modernism so automatically that the content of her poems is overlooked.

Clampitt was a heterosexual woman. The poets who influenced her style most profoundly—Elizabeth Bishop, May Swenson—were lesbians. Like Clampitt, however, both Bishop and Swenson were for a long time excluded from the canon of feminist American poetry; they sometimes took pains to exclude themselves. Emphasizing her more recent rapprochement with Bishop’s poetry, Rich has remembered that as a young woman, she “was looking for a clear female tradition; the tradition I was discovering was diffuse, elusive, and often cryptic.” Part of the problem with Bishop was that she was certified (as Rich puts it) by a “literary establishment, which was, as now, white, male, and at least ostensibly heterosexual.” Yet by searching for honesty and plainness in women’s poetry (rather than what seemed like diffuseness and elusiveness), Rich was sanctioning the style of poetry with which heterosexual men are most often associated. In “Contradictions: Tracking Poems,” from *Your Native Land, Your Life*, Rich responds to Bishop’s villanelle, “One Art.”

acts of parting      trying to let go  
without giving up      yes Elizabeth      a city here  
a village there      a sister, comrade, cat  
and more      no art to this but anger.

Rich is attempting to honor Bishop here, but her discomfort with Bishop’s “art” stands in the way: she wants “anger” instead, just as certain readers of Richard Howard want his poems to be prowling animals rather than snowflakes under glass.

I have no patience for the patrons of fanciness who associate the plain style in poetry with a lack of intellectual breeding: my goal is to allow us to write more freely, less self-defeatingly, in any way we choose. But the devotees of plainness seem to me just slightly more problematic. Open almost any book written by a straight male champion of the plain style and sooner or later you bump into lines like these:

“When a man touches through/to the exact center of the woman,/he lies motionless, in equilibrium.” Or lines like these: “He’s/light up or chewing with/the others, thousands of miles/from their forgotten homes, each/and every one his father’s son.” Such egregiously performative moments of manliness rarely occur in the work of a straight man who writes in a highly decorative style: such a poet is not threatened by the cultural implications of his style. In contrast, poets of the plain style often feel more threatened by the feminized status of poetry as such: they are anxious to show their tenderness, they want to devote their lives to poems, but they consequently need to assure their readers that their habits are not positively ladylike.

Although a concern with sexuality is not much manifest in “On the Meeting of García Lorca and Hart Crane,” Philip Levine champions “the simple truth” for reasons that are more precisely sexual than stylistic. According to Lorca’s biographer, Ian Gibson, the meeting was engineered not by Arthur Lieberman but by Angel Flores, who brought Lorca to Crane’s apartment in Brooklyn: “A party was in full swing, and they found the American poet surrounded by drunken sailors. Crane was interested in things Spanish but did not speak the language, and after Flores had introduced him to Federico and translated the opening phrases of their salutations, it seems the two poets switched to an insufficient French. Flores realized at once that Crane and Lorca had a lot in common, starting with a shared interest in sailors, and withdrew discretely.” None of these details are included in Levine’s poem, but my point is not that they ought to be. Establishing himself as an arbiter of “the simple truth,” Levine must resist the temptation to attribute significance to the meeting of Lorca and Crane. The meeting is made to seem inconsequential, without interest. And as I began by pointing out, the very effort to imagine any meaningful interaction between the poets—either sexual or intellectual—is dismissed as frivolity.

Let’s not be frivolous, let’s  
not pretend the two poets gave  
each other wisdom or love or

even a good time, let's not  
 invent a dialogue of such eloquence  
 that even the ants in your own  
 house won't forget it.

In these lines Levine does register an awareness of the sexual orientation that Lorca and Crane shared. But he is careful to distance himself from these "poetic geniuses," and he does so by relying on the sexual connotations of poetic style. Levine will not be eloquent. He will not indulge in highly figurative language. More specifically, he will not write the kind of poem for which Richard Howard is famous: a poem that details a meeting between two poetic geniuses in the most psychologically elaborate and rhetorically intricate ways—a poem that might seem like the work of an "intellectual dandy" rather than a "prowling animal."

There is, to be sure, a long and venerable history behind a contemporary poet's troubled attitude toward figurative language. "My thoughts began to burnish, spout, and swell," lamented George Herbert, "Curling with metaphors a plain intention." Rather than making poetry out of this conflict, however, poems written in the plain style more often feel conflicted. All poetry is of course figurative: even a line as flat and predictable as "the exact center of the woman" is a metaphor. But by playing down figuration for reasons that are more properly cultural than aesthetic, poets may put themselves in the intractable position of needing to distance themselves from poetry itself. They need to ward off the implications of the very thing they love.

I do not mean to suggest that the plain style is without aesthetic value or that poets ought to avoid plainness as such. But even if a poet has no responsibility to anything except poetry, the sexual connotations of style suggest that a poet's responsibility is figured in terms that are always more than poetic. "The poet's first social responsibility," says Robert Pinsky, "to continue the art, can be filled only through the second, opposed responsibility to change the terms of the art given—and it is given socially." Poets cannot end sexism either by embracing fanciness or by spurning plainness, just as poets cannot make anyone

vote democratic by breaking the pentameter; but they can undo the long association of certain styles with certain social attitudes by employing those styles in counterintuitive ways—by changing the terms of the art given.

Mark Doty writes as an openly gay poet. Several poems in *My Alexandria* celebrate the egregious artifice of the drag routine, equating the “false” with the “splendid,” or assert that the world is “recognizable only as the stuff/of metaphor.” Reading these lines, one might expect the poems to revel in artifice—to sound like Amy Clampitt or Richard Howard; in fact, they more often sound like Philip Levine (who selected *My Alexandria* for the National Poetry Series): “A bookstore in a seaside town,/the beginning of February, off season.” In “Lament-Heaven” Doty describes the garrulous talk of convicts but at the same time he describes the impression created by his own diction: “monologues that keep them/real: *I am here,/doing this.*” But if Doty has been nurtured by earlier poets of the plain style, he has in no way perpetuated the values associated with the style. Some of his poems, especially those written after *My Alexandria*, are built from more elaborate conceits; but the poems are exciting at least in part because they disrupt our expectations, bringing the aesthetic and social ramifications of style into conflict.

Edward Hirsch writes as an openly straight poet. Many of his poems are, like his long sequence “On Love,” inspired by his deep engagement with literary figures; other poems, like “Infertility,” are more easily recognized as personal. Matching this thematic variety is a wide range of formal accomplishment: placed side by side in *The Night Parade* are “My Grandfather’s Poems,” written in rhymed pentameter quatrains, and “Evening Star (*Georgia O’Keeffe in Canyon, Texas, 1917*),” written in luminous free verse. Any poem Hirsch writes is immediately recognizable as his own, but part of his accomplishment is to have embraced a wide range of formal possibilities as his stylistic trademark. The thematic and formal aspects of “My Grandfather’s Poems” and “Evening Star” would seem to many readers mismatched: an authentically personal poem is written, after Lowell

or Rich, in free verse; a poem about an artist and her art is written, after Howard or Clampitt, in elaborate forms. Readers of Hirsch are not at liberty to see these alternatives as mutually exclusive; he refuses to allow the social ramifications of style to limit the possibilities for poetry.

What both Doty and Hirsch have done, in different ways, is to write poems that undermine inherited notions of poetic organicism. Any reader wants the thematic and stylistic aspects of a poem to reinforce each other, working together to create a satisfying linguistic and emotional experience. Yet the ways in which we imagine the links between style and theme—the given terms of poetry—are constituted socially. An unexamined organicism perpetuates the same links (the same associations that certain styles have accumulated) over and over again. But an aesthetically healthy poetry—a poetry that fulfills its responsibility both to enhance and to challenge the given terms—will in this sense be a culturally healthy poetry.

It would also be—to use a word I've avoided so far—a legitimately postmodern poetry. When the word *postmodern* is applied to poetry at all, it is usually used to describe a poetry that invests certain formal strategies with certain ideological imperatives. We think of left-leaning poets as practitioners of so-called radical verse forms. And in so doing, we continue to live in the wake of Robert Lowell's breakthrough. "The sociopolitical complacency and conservatism of. . . Eisenhower's eight-year administration," says one recent champion of postmodern poetry, "finds its match in a poetics overawed by tradition and ruled by its sense of decorum." Common as this assumption is, it will make no sense of the apparently conservative Richard Wilbur, whose associations with the Communist Party were investigated by the FBI. Nor will it make sense of the Robert Lowell who needed to shore up his new style by associating the old one with homosexuality. Wilbur himself has rightly rejected the attribution "of a kind of intrinsic sanity and goodness and even moral quality to received forms. . . . There's nothing essentially good about a meter in itself." To believe otherwise is to transform arbitrary, historically conditioned associations (free

verse and free thought, the plain style and manliness) into transcendental certainties.

Many poets beside Doty and Hirsh have disrupted these associations; in order to explain their perpetuation, I've concentrated more on poets whose work has tended to reinforce them. In this context, Doty and Hirsch are interesting at least in part because their styles are not those associated with postmodernism—with stylistic or cultural disruption—in American poetry; as Jorie Graham has recently said, poets of their generation “don't seem to lift the ideological or political assumptions” once associated with a particular style. I would add that no one—not Pound or Eliot, not Ashbery or Wilbur—has ever lifted automatically the assumptions associated with a particular style: the so-called politics of form is perpetuated in American poetry not so much by an interest in form but in large part by a stake in sexual identity.

Hirsch's fourth book, *Earthly Measures*, contains three poems exploring the Orpheus myth, the last of which (“Posthumous Orpheus”) describes a forlorn figure wandering the vacant landscape of the American midwest. Without even any “Maenads/To envy or ambush him,” Orpheus simply stops singing; the poem suggests that Orpheus requires the ongoing plot of heterosexual desire in order to remain a poet. More recently, in “Orphic Rites (*Hart Crane*, 1899-1933),” collected in *On Love*, Hirsch focuses on an episode in the myth that is often elided: after losing Eurydice the second time, Orpheus “turned to men's bodies for consolation,” refusing the company of women. “Some say the Maenads destroyed him, taking revenge,” continues Hirsch,

But I believe he flung himself into the water  
So that his head could go sailing home, singing  
Under a cloudy sky brimming with erasures.

Unlike the “posthumous” Orpheus of Hirsch's earlier poem, this Orpheus—Hart Crane—keeps singing even after death.

For many years, Crane's homosexuality was (to use Hirsch's

word) erased by champions of Crane's poetry, just as Orpheus's turn to men's bodies has been erased in most retellings of the myth. In contrast, Hirsch recognizes that sexuality is central not only to our thoughts about Crane but to our thoughts about Orpheus, our thoughts about poetry. I don't mean to suggest that poets should necessarily include an awareness of homosexuality in poems where it had previously been repressed—however welcome that awareness might be. But it seems to me that a poet who can be tender without needing to be tough, a poet who embraces all of Crane, all of Orpheus, must also be a poet who no longer sees the plain and the fancy—the open and the closed, the free and the formal—as fighting terms.



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