

The Isthmus of Samuel Greenberg

SAMPLER



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Samuel Greenberg

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Foggy Days

I grew up in a foggy teal-blue bubble, facing out into the hazy waters of the Gulf of St Malo on the north coast of Jersey, and the English Channel on the south, the iridescent dissolve of sea into sky filtered into everything I wrote, as a sort of fuzzy molecular glow. I was offshore, off-world, part of the Îles de la Manche, the remnants of the Duchy of Normandy. Totally supportive from my early teens that I should just write, and pursue no other future, my mother encouraged me in what I formatively wrote as a schoolboy, most often sitting out alone on deserted beaches, bought me random anthologies of modern poetry. Through accidental reading I discovered the elusive, metaphorically dense poems of Hart Crane, rinsed with hallucinated sea-imagery, and built out of what seemed the collision of a coded sexuality with big city life pushed to extremes, as though its author in the process of attempting to overtake himself was sent propulsively back from the future into the crisis of the present. My enthusiasm for Crane led to my mother ordering me his *Collected Poems*, the OUP 1968 edition, with a compelling Walker Evans photo of Hart Crane, disconcertingly staring from the jacket, his hair prematurely silvered at thirty, the rashed vesicles on his face pointing to what I was to learn later was his incurable alcoholism. I was quickly absorbed into the Crane mythology, intensified in my mind by his spectacularly heroic suicide in jumping from the stern of the SS Orizaba into the Gulf of Mexico, dead at noon on 27 April 1932. The image of his unrecovered body orbited my hyperactive imagination as I hung out, moody, confused, needing to get away from Jersey, but at the same time polarised to my own local seas morphing through every variant of blue, green and grey, according to the seasonally interfacing sky.

The love of Crane's romantically enthused, dynamically energised poetry took me out of curiosity to his letters as a biographical resource to enhancing my understanding of the poems. It was there I encountered the name of a little-known

poet, Samuel Greenberg, who died of aggressive tuberculosis at the age of 23 on August 17, 1917, at the Sea View Hospital on Staten Island. Crane, who compared Greenberg to the likes of Rimbaud, had read his poems in manuscript form and picked up on dazzling verbal clusters that connected with his own electrifying impulse to write poetry as new.

Alienated, head full of David Bowie's Ziggy Stardust, as identifiable alien humanoid, and writing afternoons at the low-life Harbour Café, I began this sequential poem in the attempt to integrate my own local geography into the lives of Hart Crane and Samuel Greenberg, working no differently to how I do today, with a sign pen and lined notebook. And not knowing what to do with my work, and having for some time dosed up on his romantically transgressive elegies, I decided impulsively to send a packet of my juvenilia, including *Isthmus* to George Barker, care of his publishers. To my astonishment, George replied, telling me how much he liked the poems and that I'd 'clearly been bitten in the calf by the Muse,' and that he was sending my poems on to Asa Benveniste of Trigram Press, who had published a recent book of his, *At Thurgarton Church*. George also suggested I visited him at his home in the tiny village of Iteringham in Norfolk, and that together we should throw salt over the Devil's tail'.

Some weeks later I received a letter written in China black ink on Trigram-headed cream handmade paper from Asa Benveniste, comparing my Crane-influenced pyrotechnical start-outs to Rimbaud, and telling me that not only did he want to publish a book by me, but that he was very fortuitously visiting Jersey for two days to stay with Michael Armstrong, who was considering buying into Trigram as a partner, and that he very much wanted to meet me. Three weeks later, the two came to my mother's house, Asa dressed head-to-toe in black: black shirt, black jeans, black Chelsea boots, his right hand a fist of cloudy moonstones and opals. Thin, maybe 140lbs, chain-smoking Camels, wired, his voice sharing affinities with Leonard Cohen, Asa brought me a packet of Trigram books, Tom Raworth's *Big Green Day* and *Lion Lion*, Nathaniel Tarn's *October*, his own *AtoZ*

Formula, George Barker's *At Thurgarton Church*, all in his own beautifully idiosyncratic designs, to help me try get acquainted with the new modalities of poetry. He suggested at first he publish a book of thirty of my poems to be called *Neurocans in Deserted Swimming Pools*, but later decided he would start with *The Isthmus of Samuel Greenberg*, choosing sea greens and purple for the cover, and a photo of the Statue of Liberty, as a thrown allusion to Hart Crane having lived at Columbia Heights looking out over the harbours, and waiting for drunken wedges of sailors to disembark and fill the dockside bars. In addition, Asa guided me towards doing a degree in American Poetry at the University of Essex to help liberate me from Jersey's inhibitive, cultureless milieu, and as the first step towards coming to live permanently in London.

American poetry was so much ahead of its conservative British counterpart; Ed Dorn, John Wieners, Robert Duncan, John Ashbery, Frank O'Hara, James Schuyler, all injected an imaginative, image-driven, freed-up schematic into a poetry contemporaneous with change, rather than working backwards, which was how I saw most British poetry, with the exception of J.H. Prynne and his alumni, who were crunched into a cryptic language prism. Being a student at Essex also allowed me to visit Asa regularly at his Leverton Street house in Kentish Town, where, growing progressively disillusioned with publishing – he used to complain there was nobody he wanted to publish – and with his marriage to Pip disintegrating, he was often resorting to drinking a bottle of scotch a day, starting sometimes at 10 a.m. and continuing to drink steadily through the day. He'd accepted for publication a 200-page poem of mine called *Logoin* – I suspect the manuscript is lost – but lacked the funding to bring this out, or the later books he'd contracted. He was to honour the dying Louis Zukofsky's *A 22 and 23* as his final serious Trigram commitment.

With Asa caring little for distribution, outside of Compendium, Bernard Stone and Foyles, most of the later Trigram titles, including mine, joined the long queue of missing books retrieved only by a dedicated cult. Asa largely took the view that

the sort of poetry he published migrated in time to the right readers. He was a serious adept of Kaballah and believed in the motivations of magic and synchronicity, and that poetry was an active part of that intuitive process.

I haven't read *The Isthmus of Samuel Greenberg* since I wrote it, mostly in a shabby harbour café, where two store thieves would meet regularly over tea and compare each other's tacky shoplifting for the day. There was always a smell of distance and sea fog in the air, and to me it became associated with the sniff of the future that was already happening in the moment of realising it. I was trying to travel with it and this little book happened along the way, and outside it always seemed to be raining.

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To the memory of Hart Crane

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Note

The 'Greenberg manuscript', a body of poetry written by a tubercular boy who died, at twenty three, in Manhattan State Hospital for the destitute, on Ward Island.

Did you ever see some of the hobbling yet really gorgeous attempts that boy made without any education or time except when he became confined to a cot? No grammar, nor spelling, and scarcely any form, but a quality that is unspeakably eerie and the most convincing gusto.

—Hart Crane in a letter to Gorham Munson

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Distal 1

Season of close. The carmine thawfrost numbs
the excitation of such calentures
as fixture gulls into the wind's blueclimb,
outposting the tubercular
in a State Hospital on Ward Island.
A congealed crimson, then exstase issue,
inducts my febrilely posthumous hand
to engender notebooks of imagery.
Dying pricks with snow's sensitivity
on Manhattan's needlepoint mercury

'Unschizophrenic only in writing
my lung
resuscitates, restirs the green whirlpool
where the drowned oscillate on current-wings,
electrified by a scarlet systole
synonymous of depth-clairvoyancy –
a white hand immersive in memory.
Who rises, becomes nerve, reclaimed by sea.

Flotant to orientate anatomy,
invest your reliving this diary,
I fuel some brain exposure's aqualung,
and filter blood through a storm's instomat

of a white skin stripped from a persian cat
deluded by water's blue riffled string,
as now,
from Manhattan Harbour a winch cable
steels gear,
I re-instate your new writing-table.'

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2 First Entry Blue Snow after half a century

The floor's green-tiled. Zeroic cold-storage
depilates the fellic rigor-mortis
of bodies enveloped in apron-smocks –
a percolation of fugitive age
amplified to a quill's fibrillous timbre
in a metronome's oxygenized rondure.
Blue denims, a brandyflask, astrakhan snowcoat
attire my rising, as rift-wind, scuffed smoke
dropscreams from the evacuative wake
of a ship's riposte to the estuary.
A scaled letter awaits in secrecy

– an acute arteriosclerosis
generates to a migraine nucleus
nodal in the glastonbury-blue tide
excinding the white feelers of a head
dichotomously viewed, by hands reclaimed
from shadow hands around a bottle-neck –
hours without sleep, and the engine-room's tack –
a nihilistic ideation;

sixteen
years Stern outlived. Your opening, the respite
between asphyxiation and white throat.

Pseudonymous reassume a name,
the words compressed between the rail and stem.
Hart Crane'

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