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Carl Sandburg as a Modernist

“Chicago” and “Fog,” written before World War I, and “Grass” and “Cool Tombs,” published after America joined the war, exemplify Carl Sandburg’s early contributions to the Modernist literary movement. Some might argue that these poems belong in the category of Modern literature because they focus on the social and political climate of the time, voice concerns about the war, or describe elements of current industry. But Sandburg reaches beyond modern consciousness. By evaluating these poems in relation to modernist manifesto points taken from Ezra Pound’s “A Retrospect,” one can understand why and how these poems are more modernist than simply modern.

Sandburg wrote poetry for years as a sideline to his primary work as a journalist and as a social Democrat party worker. Following a significant downturn in fortune and the loss of his first child in 1913, he shifted more attention to his poems. His biographer explains: “Working alone late into the night, with no friends or mentors there who were poets, no audience other than his wife and his own need, he was experimenting, and before he knew the term or the theory, crafting some poems very like those the Imagists would make famous” (Niven 234). He was composing modernist poems at the same time other writers were beginning to experiment with new forms on new topics, but he was not a member of the avant-garde expatriate artist clique.

The problem with experimentation is getting it published. Paula Sandburg strongly supported her husband by repeatedly mailing his manuscripts to New York

magazines and journals, but they were rejected because, “as Sandburg knew, they were ‘so unconventional in style and subject that they might not be considered poetry at all’” (Niven 235). Finally, in 1914, Carl and Paula decided to send a package of poems to Harriet Monroe’s little magazine *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*, even though Sandburg doubted the two-year-old publication would last. When Monroe published Sandburg’s “Chicago,” she helped him reach a more appreciative audience and welcomed him to her circle of other avant-garde creative writers. (Niven 238)

“Chicago” is an instant favorite of the local *Poetry* magazine editors studying Sandburg’s packet of submissions, and the first of his poems published in that magazine. Ezra Pound, a member of those *Poetry* contributors in Monroe’s circle, serves as foreign editor and critic for the magazine. *Poetry* publishes his modernist manifesto in 1913, a year before Sandburg submitted his first packet of material.

Several elements of “Chicago” meet the modernist tenets of Ezra Pound’s manifesto. The opening stanza satisfies Pound’s edict for “direct treatment of the ‘thing’ whether subjective or objective” (Pound 1506) by naming the kinds of rough Chicago industry and production ‘things’ such as “Tool Maker” or “Stacker of Wheat” famous there in the early 20th century. Sandburg’s direct treatment makes a headline, a loud broadcast that grabs attention with capitalized nouns to lure readers into the rest of the poem.

Hog Butcher for the World,
 Tool Maker, Stacker of Wheat,
 Player with Railroads and the Nation’s Freight Handler;
 Stormy, husky, brawling,
 City of the Big Shoulders: (Sandburg 1437)

Ezra Pound also tells writers “to use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation” (Pound 1506). Put another way by the editor of The Norton Anthology of American Literature, “...modernist literature is notable for what it omits: the explanations, interpretations, connections, summaries, and distancing...” (Loeffelholz 1184). There is no preface, prologue, or introduction for Sandburg. He jumps right to the heart of the subject, the city he loves, by addressing it as though talking to a sentient being:

They tell me you are wicked and I believe them, for I have seen
 your painted women under the gas lamps luring the
 farm boys.

And they tell me you are crooked and I answer: Yes, it is true I
 have seen the gunman kill and go free to kill again.

And they tell me you are brutal and my reply is: On the faces of
 women and children I have seen the marks of wanton
 hunger... (Sandburg 1437)

In this poem, Sandburg is an admiring subjective observer, addressing the city in first person voice. He speaks with a declarative style of plain words anyone can understand. (In this regard, his style is not high art or intellectually difficult the way some modernist purists would prefer.) He does not mince words and does not shy away from the bad things he has observed while living there, as in “Yes, it is true I have seen the gunman kill and go free to kill again.” In line with Pound’s admonition “Go in fear of abstractions” (Pound 1507), Sandburg uses specific nouns and verbs to convey concrete

images. He describes realistic scenes such as “your painted women under the gas lamps luring the farm boys” (Sandburg 1437).

As Pound advises, Sandburg composes “in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of a metronome” (Pound 1506). Sandburg is not concerned about traditional sonnet forms or other alternating rhyming patterns. The spare free verse style of the poem shows the influence of Walt Whitman, whom Sandburg admired, studied, and talked about for many years. His writing also reflects the bold public speaking experience of his young adult years as an advocate of socialist causes. In this stanza, one can also sense a percussive chanting rhythm in its pattern of present participles:

Fierce as a dog with tongue lapping for action, cunning as a
 savage pitted against the wilderness,
 Bareheaded,
 Shoveling,
 Wrecking,
 Planning,
 Building, breaking, rebuilding,

Under the smoke, dust all over his mouth, laughing with white teeth... (1437)

Sandburg writes to create emphasis and carry the emotions of the piece. He is not worried about making the lines equally long, which is another “rule” according to Pound’s edict “Don’t think any intelligent person is going to be deceived when you try to shirk all the difficulties of the unspeakably difficult art of good prose by chopping your

composition into line lengths” (Pound 1507). Sandburg’s line lengths vary according to the number of words he needs for conveying the message.

The last stanza is not a standard story ending; there is no story. Sandburg repeats phrases from the beginning but not in the same separated-line format. The poem is a proclamation, a blast of feeling, a modernist complex of fragmented drama.

Laughing the stormy, husky, brawling laughter of Youth, half-
naked, sweating, proud to be Hog Butcher, Tool Maker,
Stacker of Wheat, Player with Railroads and Freight
Handler to the Nation. (1438)

In “Chicago,” we see how Sandburg’s poetry speaks loudly for ordinary people who cannot obtain much education, who must work hard and long to barely survive, who form the bedrock of American industry. He is sympathetic to their needs and still believes in many of the principles of the Social Democrat movement active before World War I. But the people of Chicago are not his only concern, and his poems are not all the same style and content.

Sandburg writes poetry in Chicago while also working for *The Day Book*, a daily tabloid paper for the masses. In his reporter role, he scours the city for stories and interviews. His biographer, Penelope Niven, describes a poetry inspiration that comes while he waits to interview a juvenile court judge. After “watching the fog settle over the Chicago harbor... he took out a pencil and scrawled some words in a haiku form on a piece of newsprint...” (Niven 249).

The fog comes

on little cat feet.

It sits looking

over harbor and city

on silent haunches

and then moves on. (Sandburg 1438)

Sandburg's unique metaphoric way of describing fog is short but effective. His poem adheres to Pound's definition of an image: "that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time." Pound wants the reader to understand the poet's image instantly, like a revelation or a "sense of sudden growth" (Pound 1507). Influenced by the nature-based form of haiku, Sandburg gives the fog a feline personality. His poem evokes a feeling of momentary anxiety about the fog, as a mouse might feel when sensing the stealthy forward-creeping movement of a cat stalking it. This fog (cat) finding nothing to pounce upon, waits and watches as it "sits looking...on silent haunches" before quietly moving away.

To compare Sandburg's fog against the fog of another poet's description, consider the traditional rhyming patterns in *White Fog* by Sara Teasdale. Her first stanza describes fog as what it is-- "waves of mist," and shows how it transforms the landscape.

Heaven-invading hills are drowned

In wide moving waves of mist,

Phlox before my door are wound

In dripping wreaths of amethyst. (Poetry.net)

This is the start of a poem three times longer than Sandburg's "Fog." Sara Teasdale's softer feminine approach presents a different kind of image, one that develops more slowly and would not meet Pound's requirements of brevity and instant impact.

Teasdale, like other modern poets, also writes about the war.

When Sandburg writes about war, he describes the futility of it in "Grass." He speaks as the grass itself, referencing locations of WWI, the Napoleonic Wars, and the American Civil War, where countless bodies are buried.

Pile the bodies high at Austerlitz and Waterloo.

Shovel them under and let me work—

I am the grass; I cover all.

And pile them high at Gettysburg

And pile them high at Ypres and Verdun.

Shovel them under and let me work.

Two years, ten years, and passengers ask the conductor:

What place is this?

Where are we now?

I am the grass.

Let me work. (Sandburg 1439)

Sandburg's metaphoric grass demonstrates the correct modernist poetic direction to take, heeding Pound's advice, "Use no superfluous word, no adjective which does not reveal something." Pound wants writers to realize "that the natural object is always the

adequate symbol” (1507). Sandburg uses the natural object, grass, to say that in the history of man, wars really make no difference (“What place is this? Where are we now?”) to the landscape. Over time, the grass covers graves and hides the ravages of war.

In addition to Pound’s writing standards, Sandburg’s poems also meet some aspects of modernism described by Mary Loeffelholz in “American Literature 1914-1945.” Even though he does not draw from “world literature, mythologies, and religions” to force his non-intellectual readers into deep analysis or comparison of classical material with newer content, some of his work does consist of “fragments of ... history, fragments of experience or perception...” (1184). Pieces of history appear in “Cool Tombs,” where Sandburg looks back decades to the Civil War and back further to the settlement of Massachusetts in order to again talk about death and decay and loss of importance:

When Abraham Lincoln was shoveled into the tombs, he forgot the copperheads
and the assassin ...in the dust, in the cool tombs.

And Ulysses Grant lost all thought of con men and Wall Street, cash and
collateral turned ashes ...in the dust, in the cool tombs.

Pocahontas’ body, lovely as a poplar, sweet as a red haw in November or a
pawpaw in May, did she wonder? does she remember? ...in the dust, in the
cool tombs? ... (Sandburg 1438)

Sandburg does not explain his references to history or political terms of the period like “copperheads” or local vegetation such as “pawpaw” to the reader; in modernist fashion, he leaves it to the reader to find meaning and fill in the blanks between fragments. He is,

again, not using any “superfluous word...which does not reveal something” as Pound’s manifesto dictates (1506).

Sandburg’s biographer tells us that by 1915, Ezra Pound is giving advice to Sandburg (and many others) while admiring his work. Pound believes Sandburg might “come out all right” even though he “needs to learn a *lot* about *How to Write*” (Nevin 260). We see that Sandburg is a modernist writer accepted as such by his peers.

Sandburg’s poetry meets the three main points of Pound’s manifesto: direct treatment of the subject, economy of words, and rhythm of the musical phrase. He avoids traditional story and poetry forms, offers subjectivity in different voices, and is published in a little magazine—all elements of Modernism. Fellow artists in the community as well as ordinary working-class people like his work. He says himself that he writes “simple poems for simple people” (Sandburg 1436). Even though his work is not difficult to understand, that quality alone does not bar his poems from the Modernist category of literature. A writer can produce modernist work without matching absolutely all criteria of the genre.

Works Cited

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