

Address of Hamlin Garland in memory of Ernest Howard Crosby, at Cooper Union, New York, 7 March, 1907

I AM to speak to you to-night upon Ernest Crosby as a writer, and I am very glad that his college friend, the Rev. Mr. Williams, has preceded me in throwing some little light upon Crosby's early history. I have known Crosby only since his return from the Orient, and since his acceptance, in part at least, of Tolstoy's theories of life. So far as I am aware, his career as a writer began late in his life. At any rate, the books which I have read have been written since his return from Russia, and, so far as my reading goes, his last work is his best.

I am constrained to say that his place as a poet is overshadowed by his rank as a reformer. Profoundly influenced by Whitman, George, and Tolstoy, his writings from first to last are the utterances of a man who took life very seriously — that is to say, on the ethical side. He is always the philanthropist, the reformer, the gentle satirist.

I do not find it easy to characterize this man's writings. In his prose you will meet with manly scorn of meanness and sham and injustice, and from his verses you will derive aspiration, toleration, and love, toleration of everything in the world except bloodshed and cruelty. Love is there, too, but never sex love. He is no parlor poet; he has no themes of the gallant; no word of the romantic lover is to be found, so far as my knowledge goes, in Ernest Crosby's work.

He is conscience articulate. Beauty of itself did not profoundly interest him. Born, as we have been told, of a long line of cultured ancestry — American ancestry — son of a clergyman, it was natural that he should concern himself with the sufferings and the wrongs of the world, rather than with the mere craftsmanship of the versifier, or with the pursuit of beauty. He sought rather the glory of truth, and yet he was by no means careless or slovenly in his literary method. His words are never banal, or empty, or indirect; they are always significant.

A glance at a page of "Plowshares," or "Broadcast," will show the profound influence which Whitman exercised over the matter, as well as the method of his unrhymed lines, and yet, he was much more than a copyist. He was too busy a man, and too profoundly in earnest, to imitate any master whatever. The things he had to say were too vital, too specific, and too revolutionary to find utterance in ordinary forms. He naturally and inevitably took up what may be called the rhythm of phrase rather than the beat of the syllable. And, what is more to the point, he managed to remain himself in this form, whereas in prose he fell short of distinction.

There is a singular power in his lines. At their worst they are unrhymed arguments,

lofty calls to duty, or deeply prophetic aspirations. At their best they attain a sort of stern majesty; individual in thought and phrase, big of import, and full of altruistic conceptions of man's duty to man. In the lines called "Moods," he reaches, in my judgment, his highest mark, coming near to Henley and to Whitman in a certain originality of design and an almost equal firmness of execution.

On every page sentences flame with meaning, as where he says: "I am no patriot; I love my country too well to be a patriot." His hatred of injustice, of war, was a fierce passion. Over and over again — like Whitman, like Tolstoy — he cries out: "Hate cannot conquer hate; love alone can conquer hate." In another place he writes: "It is well to rise above violence; it is well to rise superior to anger; but if peace means final acquiescence with wrong, if your aim is less than justice and peace forever one, then your peace is a crime."

He was at first something of a socialist, but toward the last he grew to be like Whitman — an individualist:

Where are the cowards who bow down to environment? he cries,  
Who think they are made of what they eat and must conform to the bed they lie in?  
I am not wax, I am energy. I refuse to be ruled.

His sympathies were always for the weak, the cheated, the oppressed of all lands, the men who suffer. Taking Whitman's lessons to heart, he finds in every sin-sick soul a certain tragic innocence.

As you read his lines you do not find a single one of the themes of the conventional poems or of the man of letters. But this does not mean that he is prosaic or lacking in fervor; on the contrary, his lines fulfill their purpose, expressing his love, his scorn, and his hope with unerring precision. Whether they are to be called poems or not depends on the point of view of the reader. For example, let me quote:

I am homesick.  
Homesick for the home I never have seen,  
For the land where I shall look horizontally into the eyes of my fellows.  
The land where men rise only to lift.  
The land where equality leaves men to differ as they will.  
The land where freedom is breathed in the air and courses in the blood.  
Where there is nothing over a man between him and the sky.  
Where the obligations of love are sought for as prizes,  
And where they vary as the moon.  
That land is my true country.

I am here by some sad cosmic mistake,  
And I am homesick.

He was critical of his time. To him America was "drunk with rapid transit"; New York a city without a face. He was often bitter and harsh, but not for long. Mainly his utterances are those of an optimist, strong and sweet. To him America was "a vast, vigorous, boastful, untidy mother." "I dwell on your faults, not as an unfilial son," he says, "but as an anxious father, for you are my daughter too. You have made me what I am, and now it is my turn to make you what I would have you be." "What nobler task is there on earth than shaping the soul of a people?"

At another place he says: "I am tired of being a creature; I will be a creator." "I am tired of adapting myself to environment; I will make an environment to my own will." "The world no longer satisfies me, and forthwith I set to work in the workshop of my soul, on a new heaven and a new earth."

Now, whether you agree with me concerning the poetic value of such words, you must admit a certain originality of thought in them. He was not careless of opposition. He knew how dangerous it was to set sail on the ocean of truth; he had tasted of its essential loneliness, "its whispers of icebergs and maelstroms," but he was a man, and he set sail.

As I look back upon him now I can see that he had a certain shy reticence of soul. I did not understand him because I did not study his lines, but you may know him better than I if you will read those books of his, for they are an almost perfect revelation of the man, and I do not know a higher test of literature than that.

You must listen to me for I have something to say:  
You will not like my form of speech, but I know no other.  
You will resent my sharp words, but I have no blunt arrows in my quiver.

Like Shelley, he was an intellectual aristocrat, and like Shelley, too, he was born to ease and culture. His home was ideal in its refinement, comfort, and democracy of rule, and yet from this home he did not hesitate to sally forth to do knightly warfare against greed and privilege. Speaking, writing, careless of return, almost careless of appreciation, satisfied with his duty done, eager only to leave the world better than he found it. And yet he expressed a little disappointment, and was sometimes dispirited, if we may take these lines as a reflection of an occasional mood:

I played my lute to the world,  
But the world danced not and went on its way unheeding.

Only here and there I saw a solitary dancer,  
Unnoticed of the rest in an obscure corner.  
And I grieved at the world for I loved my music.  
But when I looked again to see who they were who danced to my music,  
Forsooth, I sorrowed no more,  
For they were the children of the new day.