10-1-1965

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K. L. Goodwin
Balliol College, Oxford

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K. L. GOODWIN

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In discussing the work of William Soutar it is almost impossible to avoid mentioning the physical condition that kept the author bed-ridden for almost the whole of his literary career. It is not just that one must admire the tremendous courage of the man and acclaim it; this is, no doubt, the main source of biographical interest, but there is also the consideration that Soutar's infirmity was of a kind unparalleled in literary history. Other writers have, of course, written important works while bed-ridden or confined to a single room (bed-room, prison, or mad-house), but no other writer has produced virtually his whole output while in such a condition.

This attitude lies behind almost every appreciation of Soutar's work. By a strange coincidence, however, one other writer of English produced work in very similar circumstances. It is almost certain, furthermore, that Soutar was aware of this writer's work, and modelled some of his own poetry on it.

The writer in question was Adelaide Crapsey (1878-1914), a minor American poet and theorizer about prosody. The similarities between her life and Soutar's are extraordinary. She came from a religious home, her father being an Episcopalian clergyman; she was a university graduate in English literature (from Vassar College); she was struck by debilitating illness at the end of her university course; she was prescribed rest and extended holidays as a cure; but her illness eventually confined her to bed (for the last year of her life), where she wrote all the poetry that she wished to be published, and impressed her family and friends with her cheerfulness and courage; and before she died of tuberculosis at the age of thirty-six she had been aware for many months of the inevitability and imminence of death.

It would be tiresome to trace each of these analogies with Soutar's life, especially as almost any essay on Soutar gives a summary of his

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life. On the matter of Miss Crapsey's and Soutar's reactions to illness it may, however, be worth while to set down two parallel tributes. Claude Bragdon wrote of Miss Crapsey:

When [her family and friends] came to cheer and comfort her it was she who brought them cheer and comfort. With magnificent and appalling courage she gave forth to them the humor and gaiety of her unclouded years, saving them even beyond the end from knowledge of this beautiful and terrible testament of a spirit all unreconciled, flashing "unquenched defiance to the stars."

In his Introduction to Soutar's Collected Poems, Hugh MacDiarmid wrote:

Despite the fact that he was bedfast for so many years, his demeanour generally evoked tributes to his amazing serenity of spirit, the fineness of his character, and his freedom from the slightest trace of rancour or repining. (p. 9)

And MacDiarmid, like Bragdon, goes on to suggest that the appearance of resignation was merely the façade adopted by a disturbed and troubled soul.

It is obvious that Soutar would have been interested to learn of Adelaide Crapsey and her poetry. The poetry that he himself wrote between about 1935 and 1939 indicates that he had in fact read her work. It seems likely that he read the third edition of Miss Crapsey's Verse, published in 1934; it may well have been brought to him by one of the many friends interested in poetry who visited him.

Certainty regarding Soutar's having read Miss Crapsey's work rests on the fact that he adopted for many of the poems he wrote between 1935 and 1939 an unusual verse form invented by her and not adopted by any other writer that he is likely to have read. This form, called by Miss Crapsey the cinquain, consists of five iambic lines containing,


in order, 2, 4, 6, 8, and 2 syllables. Miss Crapsey's Verse contains dozens of examples, such as the following:

RELEASE

With swift
Great sweep of her
Magnificent arm my pain
Clanged back the doors that shut my soul
From life.  (3rd ed., p. 32)

Like Soutar, Adelaide Crapsey was a miniaturist in verse. Pain and exhaustion probably dictated a characteristic brevity to both of them. The form of the cinquain, used so much by Miss Crapsey, was taken up by Soutar in the second half of the 'thirties with such enthusiasm that he became an even more prolific practitioner of the form than she had been. Several of his specimens were collected in his 1936 volume, A Handful of Earth; others can be found under the heading of "Epigrams" in Collected Poems.

I have suggested that Soutar must have read Miss Crapsey's work because there was no other source for discovering the form of the cinquain. (The possibility that he invented it independently is almost negligible if one takes into account the complex syllabic pattern of the lines and the similarity of the syntactical patterns used by both poets.) Yet it is strange that Soutar was the first to make use of Miss Crapsey's discovery, for the cinquain is a form eminently suited to Imagist poetry and seems, in fact, to have been derived from one of the same sources, namely Japanese poetry. Miss Crapsey apparently read Japanese tanka and haiku in French translations, as did many of the Imagists; but whereas the Imagists either translated Japanese verse into an English syllabic equivalent or wrote their original poems in free forms, Miss Crapsey designed what might be called an English "imitation" of the Japanese forms, the cinquain. But her example was not followed by Richard Aldington, H.D., Ezra Pound, Amy Lowell, D. H. Lawrence, T. S. Eliot, Herbert Read, Edwin Muir, or any other poet affected by Imagism, though it is true that H. D. and Herbert Read made a few experiments in using a two-syllabled line, and going on to increase or decrease subsequent lines by two syllables at a time. Nor was it followed by such miniaturists outside the Imagist camp as W. H. Davies and Walter de la Mare.

Soutar's use of the form sometimes has, nevertheless, an Imagist tinge. Almost all of Miss Crapsey's cinquains are, on the other hand, expressions of self-pity: they are either similes or metaphors that begin with a description of nature and then relate it to the state of the poet's
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body and soul. The one poem I have quoted serves as an example; another is:

MOON-SHADOWS

Still as
On windless nights
The moon-cast shadows are,
So still will be my heart when I
Am dead. (Verse, 3rd ed., p. 37)

Soutar's use of the form is much more varied. In the Collected Poems one can find examples of cinquains being used in Miss Crapsey's typical method, as in "Happiness" (p. 323), but one can also find them being used for epigrams, as in "The Fool" (p. 321), for observations about life, as in "Healing Moment" (p. 302), for vignettes "characters," as in "The Boaster" (p. 303), for moral sententiae, as in "Fruitage" (p. 304), and for descriptions of nature, as in "The Craftsman" (p. 247). Sometimes he uses the form for an Imagist poem, as in

THE BUTTERFLY

Full sail
The butterfly,
With hurrying unhaste,
lightly surmounts the silent surge
Of air; (p. 326)

or in "Sea-serpent" (p. 244) or "Words" (p. 326). These poems have the frozen, picturesque quality of Imagist poetry; they catch in a moment of time the brilliance of a small object or scene, without any awareness being shown of poet or audience. As such, they avoid the sententiousness that creeps into some of Soutar's other verses. In one way, however, they depart from the strictness of Imagist rules: although they capture a small scene vividly in a moment of time, they lack the absolute stillness of Imagist poems; instead they almost always contain a sense of movement, especially of languid, graceful movement. It is probably not too fanciful to see in these poems a projection of Soutar's wish to be active and mobile again. The dreams that he recorded often depict the same languid and graceful movement. It is as if he did not wish to be a vigorous, active sportsman again, as he was in youth; a gentler, less energetic movement would have satisfied him. His physical immobility may also have affected the rhythm of his verse; MacDiarmid complains that "the movement of his verse is almost always too tame—the Scots Muse has a wilder music and a far more complicated and unexpectable movement."8

8 Introduction to Collected Poems, p. 17.
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Soutar’s Imagism is a minor aspect of his work. It is found chiefly in his cinquains, though a few Imagist poems, such as “Contrast”⁴ are in other forms. As Soutar found the work of Eliot and Pound distasteful,⁵ it is probable that he was affected by Imagism through reading the work of D. H. Lawrence, whom he greatly admired, or possibly the work of MacDiarmid, Edwin Muir, or Herbert Read. Yet he was not affected to any great extent, for several of his poems with Imagist subjects would have been improved by being recast in a typical Imagist form: examples include “Daffodil,” “The Arch,” and “Necessity.”⁶ As they stand, they are too discursive, their impact is blurred because they explain too much; as simple, unexplained images, they would have been sharper, and quite as meaningful. Again the fault lies in Soutar’s tendency to sententiousness.

By bringing together the cinquain and Imagism, Soutar instinctively produced a most effective combination of form and subject-matter. Yet he did so at a time when neither the cinquain nor Imagism had much future in literature; his work in this respect represents a dead-end, but one that is interesting and little-known.

BALLIOL COLLEGE, OXFORD

⁵ See Diaries of a Dying Man, pp. 55–58 (3 July 1933); and Scott, Still Life, p. 191.
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