

Alicja Piechucka

## The Past Is a Woman: Hart Crane's, Arthur Rimbaud's and Marcel Proust's Journeys Down Memory Lane

"I don't know when I shall get time or the proper mood to work more on the Grandame poem" (Crane 215). So wrote Hart Crane of the text he was laboring over in November 1919. In the letter to his friend Gorham Munson, from which the above quote comes, Crane elaborated: "Contact with the dear lady, as I told you I feared, has made all progress in it at present impossible" (215). In his subsequent letter to Munson, the mystery is clarified: "Grandma and her love letters, are too steep climbing for hurried moments, so I don't know when I shall work on that again" (216). The poem in question is "My Grandmother's Love Letters," included in Crane's 1926 debut collection *White Buildings*. The line which serves as an epigraph to the volume, "Ce ne peut être que la fin du monde, en avançant" ("The end of the world must be just ahead"; trans. Wyatt Manson), is taken from Arthur Rimbaud's prose poem "Enfance." Crane's fascination with Rimbaud's personality and *œuvre* is incontestable, as I have demonstrated elsewhere (Piechucka, "Dream" 100). In the present article, I would like to focus on "My Grandmother's Love Letters," setting it against "The Sideboard" ("Le Buffet"), a poem Rimbaud wrote a few years before *Illuminations* (*Illuminations*), the cycle from which "Childhood" ("Enfance") comes. In an attempt to further illuminate the meanings of both poetic texts, I have decided to examine them in terms of their affinities with certain aspects of memory presented by Marcel Proust in *Remembrance of Things Past* (*À la Recherche du Temps perdu*). Though Crane's reading of the French novelist's *opus magnum* in 1926 (Fisher 306), which coincided with the publication of *White Buildings*, is posterior to the composition of "My Grandmother's Love Letters," Proust's text creates a useful background against which the notions of femininity and the temporal experience explored by Crane and Rimbaud are amplified.

While we cannot be sure that the author of *The Bridge* was familiar with the particular work by Rimbaud dealt with in this article, the fact that Crane felt a spiritual and artistic kinship with the French poet and that this kinship resurfaces in his own work remains

certain. The aim of my exegesis is to show that the two poems I have chosen have several affinities: not only do Crane and Rimbaud treat similar themes, but, despite the differences between the two poems, which I shall also point out, they seem to follow analogous lines of thought. More importantly, even though in the Rimbaud-Crane relationship the former must be seen as the master, for reasons to do with both chronology and the French poet's stature, it is the Crane poem that strikes me as more complex, as if "My Grandmother's Love Letters" were a continuation of and elaboration on the ideas sketched out by his symbolist predecessor. Though it might be argued that "The Sideboard" is one of Rimbaud's earliest poems, written when its author was barely sixteen, it must be remembered that all of his literary output was produced by the time he turned twenty, the age at which he gave up writing poetry, and that he is arguably the most celebrated example of poetic precocity in the history of literature. It is also worth noting that "My Grandmother's Love Letters" was written by a twenty-year-old Crane, who was only three years into a poetic career that was to span a decade and half. In both cases, we thus have to do with juvenile works, in which young poets reflect on the role of memory and try to establish a relationship with the past, and which complement each other despite—or perhaps because of—the differences as well as the parallels between them.

In his biography of Rimbaud, Graham Robb dismisses "The Sideboard" as "a sonnet on an old sideboard which sounds like a flimsy relative of the scent- and memory-impregnated wardrobes in Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal*" (61). He does, however, note that Rimbaud's friend Georges Izambard, the addressee of one of the two letters alternatively referred to as Rimbaud's famous "Letter of the Seer" ("Lettre du Voyant"), "perceptively" (61) said that the sonnet "had the cheek to be charming" (qtd. in Robb 61). Vague as the adjective may sound, it is appropriate in reference to a poem whose impact on the reader relies heavily on the aura of warmth and sweetness which permeates Rimbaud's lines. A piece of dining room furniture may not be an obvious choice for a poetic topic, but the down-to-earth, homely character of the object unabashedly named in the very title is counterbalanced by the evocative power of the poem itself.

Rimbaud's poem, as we soon understand, is not about the sideboard itself, but about its contents, which the poet unveils to the reader with a characteristic symbolist penchant for catalogue-like poetic structures:

It's filled with a jumble of old knickknacks,  
 Fragrant yellowing linens, women's  
 And children's clothes, faded lace,  
 Grandmotherly scarves embroidered with griffins (*Rimbaud Complete* 33)

In the stanza that follows, the list goes on and includes “medallions” (33), “blonde and white / Locks of hair” (33) as well as “portraits” (33) and “dried flowers / Whose scents mix with the scent of fruit” (33). With a childlike excitement, Rimbaud depicts the inside of the sideboard as if it were Ali Baba’s secret cave. The enthusiasm with which the French poet enumerates the various objects, which “You’ll find... inside” (33) and which are at once worthless and priceless, suggests that examining the contents of the sideboard is a real feast for the eyes. The pleasure one might derive from fingering the old pieces of clothing, locks of hair and dry petals, from handling them and feeling their texture is almost palpable. Importantly, olfactory sensations play a crucial role in building up the overall atmosphere of the poem. Floral and fruity fragrances amalgamate with the smell of old linen inside the sideboard, which “stands open, and sweet scents / Swim in its shadow like a tide of old wine” (33). All five senses are in fact satisfied, for it might even be argued that due to its function, of which the mention of “old wine” reminds us, the sideboard, which typically holds tableware, table linen and victuals, can be associated with the pleasures of the palate. It is even able to produce aural effects, as indicated by the phrase “tu bruis” (*Œuvres* 35), somewhat lost in the English translation (“you... speak”; *Rimbaud Complete* 33) but connoting pleasurable, homely noises in the French original.

It may, however, be inferred that, far from being reduced to the level of sensory stimuli, the visual, the olfactory and the auditory—and, by extension, the tactile and the gustatory—are in fact carriers of bygone days and mediums for recollections, as elusive as the evanescent scents that are central to the poem. The old sideboard is not just a repository of sights, smells and sounds, but also of time and of things past, a vast store of mementos and memories. Inviting and exciting, it has a unique aura, due to the sensual pleasure it gives but also, more importantly, to the sideboard’s enormous yet hidden narrative potential, inherent in the stories it “remembers”:

Old sideboard, you’ve seen more than a little  
And have tales to tell, and speak each time  
Your big black doors slowly swing open. (*Rimbaud Complete* 33)

Like Baudelaire before him and Proust after him, Rimbaud seems to suggest that the senses have the power to resuscitate the past. Though “The Sideboard” does not say so explicitly, its content, with the references to scents recurring in the first three of the sonnet’s four stanzas, echoes such poems by Baudelaire as “Flask” (“Le Flaçon”), which describes how “in a deserted house, some dusty and dingy wardrobe, rank with time’s acrid odor, you may find an old flask that you recall, whence a returning soul springs,

quite alive” (64). In other words, it may be claimed that the charm of “The Sideboard” that Izambard spoke of has a lot to do with what the author of *Les Fleurs du Mal* had in mind when in another poem, “Perfume” (“Le Parfum”), he exclaimed: “Profound and magical charm, the retrieved past intoxicating our present!” (52). Expressed in poetic form by the two French symbolists, the link between sensory impressions and remembrance is expounded in Proust’s prose. The relevant and self-explanatory passage from *Swann’s Way* (*Du côté de chez Swann*), the first volume of *Remembrance of Things Past*, could serve as a comment on the symbolist poems referred to in this article:

But when from a long-distant past nothing subsists, after the people are dead, after the things are broken and scattered, still, alone, more fragile, but with more vitality, more unsubstantial, more persistent, more faithful, the smell and taste of things remain poised a long time, like souls, ready to remind us, waiting and hoping for their moment, amid the ruins of all the rest; and bear unfaltering, in the tiny and almost impalpable drop of their essence, the vast structure of recollection. (37)

The above-quoted fragment is part of an episode in which the narrator of Proust’s *magnum opus* manages to recapture his childhood thanks to the taste of a madeleine, a small, shell-shaped French cake, which he dips in tea on a bleak winter day. It is the narrator’s mother who offers him a cup of tea and, to encourage her son to drink a beverage he is not in the habit of taking, she sends a servant to fetch a madeleine. The taste of the cake brings back the memory of an analogous experience in the narrator’s past: as a child, he spent his summers in Combray, where, every Sunday morning, he visited his elderly, ailing aunt Léonie, who would offer him a morsel of a madeleine steeped in tea or a lime infusion. As has already been demonstrated, sensorial impressions, with particular emphasis on scents, are for Proust—as well as for Baudelaire and Rimbaud—the carriers of the past. However, what is also worth noting is that women are the key agents of the memory-resuscitation process. As we shall see, it is so not only in *Remembrance of Things Past*, but also in the Rimbaud and Crane poems under discussion.

While exploring Rimbaud’s problematic relationship with his mother, the poet’s biographer points to “The Sideboard,” with its mention of “the wonderful weathered air of old people” (Rimbaud, *Rimbaud Complete* 33), as proof of the fact that “though he hated his mother, he was full of filial sentiment” (Robb 62). If we attempt to apply the same biographical point of view to Proust’s *œuvre* and “My Grandmother’s Love Letters,” we shall see that the details of both authors’ life stories resurface in their works with even greater conspicuousness than they do in the Rimbaud poem in question. A reading of both biographical materials and *Remembrance of Things Past* reveal the role his mother

and maternal grandmother played in shaping Proust's character and work. Without elaborating on the tender loving care bestowed on the young and frail Marcel by his closest female relatives, it is perhaps worth quoting an anecdote about a parlor game the future novelist once participated in, later immortalized as the celebrated "Proust Questionnaire." Asked to name the most terrible disaster he could think of, the thirteen-year-old Proust replied: "To be separated from mum" (Grunspan 26). One can recognize a similar pattern in Crane's biography. From a very early age, the hypersensitive American poet was taken care of by his mother Grace Crane and his maternal grandmother Elizabeth Hart, who periodically lived under the same roof with her daughter and grandson. Born Harold Hart Crane, the poet used his grandmother's married name instead of his Christian name when he started writing and publishing poetry. Importantly, he did so at Mrs Crane's suggestion. Early in 1917, his mother wrote in a letter: "[I]n signing your name to your contributions & later to your books do you intend to ignore your mother's side of the house entirely.... How would 'Hart Crane' be" (Crane 743). In August the same year, the poet signed a letter to his father "Hart Crane" (743).

Looking for the traces of female presence in "The Sideboard," one inevitably needs to focus on the poem's second stanza. The phrases "women's / And children's clothes" and "Grandmotherly scarves" indicate that the "mother's side of the family," to use a phrase borrowed from Grace Crane's letter, is the poem's center of gravity. The juxtaposition of *women* and *children* may suggest the mother-child relationship, while the adjective *grandmotherly*, which corresponds to the noun *grand-mère*—French for *grandmother*—in the original, extends the mother-child relationship to the previous generation. Though it is not clear which grandmother, maternal or paternal, is being referred to or what sex the children are, the fact remains that men, though perhaps not totally excluded from Rimbaud's poem, recede into the background. Even when women are not explicitly mentioned, their presence is reified. At the risk of being accused of gender stereotyping, one cannot help thinking that some of the other objects the sideboard contains, such as the "faded lace" or the "dry flowers" in the third stanza, are, like the "clothes" and "scarves," more likely to be female than male belongings.

The very title "My Grandmother's Love Letters" suggests the centrality of the female element to Crane's poem. References to it are both explicit and implicit. The seemingly straightforward and self-evident phrase used in the title is expounded in the poem's second stanza as "the letters of my mother's mother, / Elizabeth" (5). The phrase "my mother's mother," alliterative, based on a repetition and verging on a tongue-twister, is conspicuously placed at the end of the line. Equally—if not more—conspicuous, the name of the speaker's (and the poet's) grandmother occupies a separate line, the only one-word line in the poem, thus becoming its visual and semantic nucleus. Alliteration,

a recurrent device in Crane's poetry, is aimed at "the achievement of the special effect" (Cuddon 25), which, in this particular case, seems to be the emphasis placed on the female presence in the poem. The fact that Crane resolves to employ a periphrastic phrase and says "my mother's mother" instead of "my grandmother" does not result from a desire for "pomp and verbosity" (Cuddon 701). The circumlocution is "used deliberately," but not "for comic effect" or the sake of "propriety and poetic decorum" (Cuddon 701). The result, in Crane's poem, is the repetition of the word *mother*, and the consequent prominence given to the figure of the mother—and the mother figure—in two successive generations. Though the focus is on Elizabeth, the poet's mother is also mentioned, if only *en passant*, and constitutes a link between him and his (grand)mother. Appearing in the poem as the (grand)son, the poet emphasizes the woman-child connection, which, as we have seen, is also found in Rimbaud's lyric. If, in older verse, the basic word which the periphrasis develops typically appears in the title of the poem but not in its body, while modern poets tend to juxtapose the word with its more circumlocutory equivalent within the poem itself (Sławiński 351), Crane combines both strategies in "My Grandmother's Love Letters." Used in the title and then taking the form of periphrasis in stanza two, the reference to Crane's grandmother reappears in the poem's closing stanza, the first line of which runs: "Yet I would lead my grandmother by the hand" (5).

I have already pointed out the importance of "female memory" in another work by Crane, his childbirth poem "Stark Major" (Piechucka, "Religion" 32). There, the male protagonist is made to realize that the richness of his pregnant wife's experience will make his own forever pale by comparison: "Henceforth her memory is more / Than yours" (8), the speaker sadly informs the father-to-be, made inferior by his wife's life-giving power. Within the Crane and Rimbaud poems discussed here, femininity, motherhood and memory become intertwined in a way that makes them the reverse of what Louis Aragon famously wrote in the poem "Elsa's Madman" ("Le Fou d'Elsa"): "Woman is the future of man." For the male speaker of Crane's poem and the (presumably) male speaker of Rimbaud's sonnet, woman is very much man's past. The first two stanzas of "My Grandmother's Love Letters" illustrate this point:

There are no stars tonight  
 But those of memory.  
 Yet how much room for memory there is  
 In the loose girdle of soft rain.

There is even room enough  
 For the letters of my mother's mother,

Elizabeth,  
That have been pressed so long  
Into a corner of the roof  
That they are brown and soft,  
And liable to melt as snow. (5)

There is a close correspondence between the “room for memory” and that occupied by Elizabeth’s letters. This brings us to the notion of space in the two poems, connected, on the one hand, with that of femininity and, on the other, with memory and the passage of time. In both poems, women are referred to explicitly, but their presence is also implied by the way space is presented. In Rimbaud’s poem, the closely circumscribed space, which is in fact that of the sideboard, connotes the home and homemaking, which nineteenth-century popular belief and social practice viewed as feminine fields of activity, opposed to the public sphere of extradomestic preoccupations traditionally reserved for men. Similarly, the lines from Crane’s poem identify the space therein depicted as a feminine territory. The grandmother’s letters were found in “a corner of the roof,” which makes the reader think, in synecdochic mode, of the house in its entirety. The house is—and was even more so in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—traditionally thought of as the female domain, and the strong presence of women in Crane’s poem both reinforces and is reinforced by the woman-home connection. As for the third text I have chosen to examine here, *Swann’s Way*, it is unarguable that the family house in Combray is marked by the conspicuous presence of women: the narrator’s mother and grandmother, his great-aunt, his aunt Léonie and her cook Françoise.

Additionally, the “room for memory” is to be sought—if not necessarily, in the end, found—“In the loose girdle of soft rain.” In his brief comment on the poem, Gordon A. Tapper points out the role of rain as an activator of memory:

The ‘stars of memory’ are at once remembered stars and ‘memory’s stars,’ a figure for memory itself. Absent from the rainy night, the stars exist only in the speaker’s memory of them as remembered stars. But the rainy evening, obscuring the real stars, also brings to life ‘memory’s stars,’ the speaker’s desire to ‘remember’ his grandmother’s erotic experience. ‘Memory’s stars’ embody a phenomenon of consciousness with no actual physical existence. (22)

If the rain sets off the process of remembering, it must be seen as an agent of memory, which, as I have already noted, is “feminized” in the texts in question. As a consequence, we are tempted to search for female qualities in Crane’s “soft rain.” While it may be

argued that the association of softness and gentleness with a woman is stereotypical, the fact remains that it is an association to which Crane was no stranger. Dealing with casual sex between men in “Possessions,” a poem whose composition postdates that of “My Grandmother’s Love Letters” by four years and which is also included in the *White Buildings* collection, Crane speaks of “the mercy, feminine, that stays / As though prepared” (13), which Fisher interprets as a reference to accidental male lovers and “the surprisingly ‘feminine’ gentleness they could show when implored” (191, italics mine). If we analogically interpret the “softness” of the rain as “feminine,” it becomes another element reinforcing the female dimension of the poem. The motif of rain itself is also invested with symbolism which “feminizes” Crane’s text beyond its more explicit references to the woman. Associated with the act of conception, rain functions in all cultures as a symbol of fertility and is regarded as analogous to other fertility symbols, such as woman, the earth and water (Chenel and Simarro 43). Furthermore, though Crane uses the word *girdle* metaphorically, meaning something like “the embrace of soft rain,” it is worth thinking about its literal meaning as well. A girdle is a kind of belt, which may be associated with women and has time-honored denotations and connotations, of which Crane may have been aware. Though worn in the past by both men and women, the girdle has acquired several associations which are gender-specific. “A woman whose girdle is unloosed” is “a woman who has lost her virginity,” of which the girdle itself is “an allegory... implying moral defence and virtue” (Stewart 189). Suggestive of femininity and sexuality, the word also connotes motherhood, since “[c]hildren under the girdle” are “[c]hildren not yet born” (Stewart 190). This association inscribes itself into the notion of generational continuity present, as has already been demonstrated, in both poems discussed in this article, which in turn inscribes itself into the poems’ overall preoccupation with time and memory.

Of all the qualities of memory, fragility is the one that is emphasized throughout Crane’s poem. Elizabeth’s letters are “brown and soft,” and as delicate as snow. The “softness” of the letters, which may again be read as a “female” attribute, corresponds to that of the rain. While such fragility sends us back to the motif of femininity, since women are—or at least were—traditionally believed to be more vulnerable than men, it is crucial to note that the factor that has so “fragilized” the letters, rendering them “brown and soft,” is the passage of time. The fact that the letters were kept in “a corner of the roof” for “so long” reinforces the text’s temporal dimension. The letters “have been pressed” in the literal sense of the word that describes spatial compression, but also, by implication, indicates all sorts of pressure and repression to which memory is subjected, including the threat of marginalization and even erasure. Color symbolism also plays an important role: the letters have turned from white to brown, which suggests aging,

decay, degradation and the attendant fear of annihilation and disintegration. The third stanza of “My Grandmother’s Love Letters” combines the theme of space with the fragility of memory:

Over the greatness of such space  
Steps must be gentle.  
It is all hung by an invisible white hair.  
It trembles as birch limbs webbing the air. (5)

Two images in particular evoke the vulnerability of memory: the “white hair” and the “birch limbs.” Crane seemingly builds the first of these images on the set expression *to hang by a thread*, substituting the human element—hair—for thread, and making it “invisible,” which may be read as an indication of the elusiveness of memory. As for the second image, the white bark of the birch echoes the whiteness of the hair, which inevitably brings to mind old age and its embodiment in the poem, the author’s grandmother. The tree itself is anthropomorphized, because its branches are referred to as *limbs*, a word that may also denote human arms or legs. It is also worth noticing that the speaker’s approach is cautious and his “[s]teps must be gentle.” Traditionally, a man is supposed to be gentle to women. Like a woman, memory is fragile and must be handled with care. The frailty of memory may also be that of an elderly person’s body, trembling the way “birch limbs” do in the wind.

In Rimbaud’s sonnet, the sideboard takes on qualities associated with old age. The piece of furniture is made of “dark, aged oak” (*Rimbaud Complete* 33) and is referred to as “old” (33). The “sweet scents” which “[s]wim in its shadow” are “like a tide of old wine” (33). The “old knickknacks” (33) is Wyatt Mason’s translation of Rimbaud’s tautological phrase “vieilles vieilleries” (*Œuvres* 35), which literally means something like *antique antiquities*. Since a poetic use of pleonasm often serves the purpose of amplification (Sławiński 360), we may assume that Rimbaud wishes to emphasize the notions of aging and old age in the poem. Consequently, we learn that the oak the sideboard is made of “[h]as taken on the wonderful weathered air of old people” (*Rimbaud Complete* 33). While in Crane’s poem elderly people represent at once frailty and the passage of time, Rimbaud’s sideboard seems to be more connected with the latter. Fragility, understood as susceptibility to being marked by the passage of time, is, however, to be found elsewhere: The “lace” is “faded” (33), the “linens” are “yellowing” (33). Additionally, the motif of hair is also used in Rimbaud’s poem, where the “[l]ocks of hair” are “blonde and white” (33). The sideboard holds objects which by definition are carriers of memory, such as portraits, “dried flowers” (33)—whose dryness is itself a mark left by time—or

“médaillons” (*Œuvres* 35) which may be translated, as Mason did, as *medallions*, but which in French may also mean *lockets*, a translation which seems logically connected with the hair Rimbaud mentions in the same stanza. Less metaphorical in his use of hair imagery than Crane, the French poet draws on the fashions and social customs of his day, based on a long tradition of combining hair and remembrance. As Sherrow writes in *Encyclopedia of Hair: A Cultural History*: “Hair also may be saved as a keepsake of someone who has died. Since hair is already dead once it grows from the head, it remains much the same after it has been cut. Saving the hair of deceased loved ones dates back to ancient times and was common in various cultures” (260). It was in the eighteenth century that “more people began to place locks of hair inside pieces of jewelry called lockets, some of which were made with glass windows” (260). According to Goldemberg, “lockets containing mementos of dead or living loved ones” were *de rigueur* in the 1870s, the decade from which “The Sideboard” dates, and “portraits of women of the period nearly always show them wearing such a locket high on their chests” (115). The fact that the case of the locket is supposed to protect its content reminds us that hair, which stands for memory in Rimbaud’s poem, is delicate and that—though the French poet, with a typical symbolist penchant for suggestiveness, does not say so explicitly—this quality may be ascribed to memory itself.

At this point in my analysis, it seems worthwhile to return to Proust. The concept of memory as delicate and fragile underlies the madeleine episode discussed earlier in this article. As he recounts his epiphanic experience, the narrator of Proust’s novel details the various stages of the process he underwent. He begins with the initial extraordinary sensation, the “exquisite pleasure” (35) which overwhelmed him. Intrigued by this “all-powerful joy” (35) and aware that it is due to more than just “the taste of tea and cake” (35), the narrator embarks on an intense self-examination, aiming to determine the source and meaning of that joy:

I drink a second mouthful, in which I find nothing more than in the first, a third, which gives me rather less than the second. It is time to stop; the potion is losing its magic. It is plain that the object of my quest, the truth, lies not in the cup but in myself. The tea has called up in me, but does not itself understand, and can only repeat indefinitely with a gradual loss of strength, the same testimony; which I, too, cannot interpret, though I hope at least to be able to call upon the tea for it again and to find it there presently, intact and at my disposal, for my final enlightenment. (35-36)

The “quest” for memory, to use a word borrowed from Proust (35), can be frustrating because the quester struggles as if in the dark, chasing something elusive, something he

is seemingly close to taking hold of one minute and about to lose hold of the next. The narrator himself admits to being daunted by the formidable task of “remembering things past,” by the disheartening process of recollection: “the natural laziness which deters us from every difficult enterprise, every work of importance, has urged me to leave the thing alone” (Proust 36) in order to avoid “effort or distress of mind” (37). Memory is by its very nature something that eludes us, disquiets and torments us. It is an amalgam of subtle sensations that fade out as we attempt to seize them. Capturing such fleeting impressions, let alone analyzing them, seems to be beyond human reach.

The process of self-scrutiny sparked off by the taste of the tea-soaked madeleine, which represents what is referred to in Proust scholarship as “involuntary memory,” involves difficulty and mental effort, which, as we shall see when we return to Crane, are inseparable from any endeavor to reconstruct memories. Importantly in the context of the present analysis, Proust presents the narrator’s struggle to establish the nature of the unique sensation he experienced in spatial terms: “What an abyss of uncertainty whenever the mind feels that some part of it has strayed beyond its borders; when it, the seeker, is at once the dark region through which it must go seeking, where all its equipment will avail to nothing” (36). Determined to avoid anything that might drive his mind to distraction, the Proustian narrator “clear[s] an empty space in front of it” (36). Closely linked with space is motion, and both concepts serve the narrator as he attempts to verbalize his experience: “I feel something start within me, something that leaves its resting-place and attempts to rise, something that has been embedded like an anchor at a great depth; I do not know yet what it is, but I can feel it mounting slowly; I can measure the resistance, I can hear the echo of great spaces traversed” (36). In the process of what will turn out to be the recapturing of a childhood memory, the narrator has the sensation that some upward movement is taking place inside him and that long distances are being covered. He soon identifies the mysterious “something” as “the visual memory which, being linked to that taste, has tried to follow it into my conscious mind” (36). Before it fully manifests itself, the narrator will experience further anxiety resulting from his being unable to make out the exact shape of the memory, whose “struggles are too far off, too much confused” (36). The obstacle to thoroughly comprehending the meaning of the extraordinary phenomenon is again presented in spatial terms as the distance which separates him from the memory. When “suddenly the memory returns” (37), it too takes a spatial form: that of Combray, the village of the narrator’s boyhood, and “its surroundings” (37), which “taking their proper shapes and growing solid, sprang into being, town and gardens alike, from my cup of tea” (37).

A similar correlation between memory and space informs “My Grandmother’s Love Letters.” In the year that saw the publication of *White Buildings*, Crane famously de-

fended his poetic practice in a letter to Harriet Monroe, the editor of *Poetry* magazine. To exemplify his point, Crane drew an analogy between his work and modern science:

Hasn't it often occurred that instruments originally invented for record and computation have inadvertently so extended the concepts of the entity they were invented to measure (concepts of space, etc.) in the mind and imagination that employed them, that they may metaphorically be said to have extended the original boundaries of the entity measured? This little bit of "relativity" ought not to be discredited in poetry now that scientists are proceeding to measure the universe on principles of pure *ratio*, quite as metaphorical, so far as previous standards of scientific methods extended, as some of the axioms in Job. (169)

The essence of Crane's argument was, as Fisher explains, that in the modern age both poetry and science "resorted to metaphor," which "underlay the new age of 'relativity,' which sought to calculate the extent of the universe as a symbol of time" (266). However, what seems more important in the context of the present analysis is the poet's interest in Albert Einstein's theory of relativity, which was announced three years prior to the composition of "My Grandmother's Love Letters" and to which the interdependence of time and space is central. If we attempt the reverse of what, as Crane claims in the letter to Monroe, is the case with modern science and apply notions derived from physics to poetry, we may, metaphorically speaking, argue that the poem discussed here revolves around its author's variation on the space-time continuum.

The notion of space, which, as I have already shown, may be identified with the female presence in the poem, is instantly combined with that of time when the speaker of "My Grandmother's Love Letters" notes "Yet how much room for memory there is / In the loose girdle of soft rain," a remark symmetrically completed by the beginning of the next stanza: "There is even room enough / For the letters of my mother's mother." The fact that there is sufficient space for Elizabeth's correspondence, through which memory is supposed to be channeled, appears to offer an opening for the poet-speaker's attempt to reconstruct the past. Spatial metaphors recur throughout the poem, in the third stanza of which the word *space* is actually used: "Over the greatness of such space / Steps must be gentle" (5). The question which immediately slides by is: which space does Crane have in mind? It is the "greatness" of the space that is emphasized in stanza three, and the word *space* itself is preceded by the predeterminer *such*, which may mean *like that* or *so great or unusual*. What seems likely is that the great and unusual space that Crane speaks of is the distance the poet-speaker has to cover to successfully recapture the past. The space dealt with in Crane's poem is vast, not least because it stands for the difficulty

encountered by one trying to recreate the past in the present, for the formidability of the enterprise. The notion of space is interwoven with that of fragility on the one hand, and the idea of movement on the other, all three inherent in the “gentleness” of the steps recommended by the speaker. As in Proust, motion comes to represent the process of reaching for the past, of retrieving memories. The speaker, whose presence in the poem has so far directly manifested itself only through the use of the possessive personal pronoun *my*, used in the title and in line six, expresses himself in the first person in line sixteen, which follows the third stanza and, standing alone, is not part of a larger stanza: “And I ask myself” (5). The content of the speaker’s query is enclosed by quotation marks, forming the poem’s penultimate stanza:

‘Are your fingers long enough to play  
Old keys that are but echoes:  
Is the silence strong enough  
To carry back the music to its source  
And back to you again  
As though to her?’ (5)

The passage again revolves around the interplay of time, space and motion. The length of the fingers, which the speaker suspects may turn out to be insufficient, implies the necessity to metaphorically reach out a hand for reminiscences of his grandmother’s youth. The motif of the echo, a phenomenon which requires considerable space to materialize, is also inscribed in the overall framework of a poem in which time is “spatialized” and space “temporalized,” recalling Proust’s “echo of great spaces traversed.” Distances and directions are signaled by Crane as he charts the to-and-fro trajectory of “the music” of the past he attempts to play.

Spatial metaphors also appear in the poem’s closing stanza, which again evokes motion: the speaker declares that he “would *lead*” Elizabeth “by the hand / Through much of what she would not understand” (Crane 5, italics mine). When, in Fisher’s words, the poet-speaker “retreat[s] in the face of his self-appointed task” (100), he resorts to a verb of movement which includes the idea of fall or, on the figurative level, of uncertainty or failure: “And so I *stumble*” (5, italics mine). Interpreting the poem in the light of Crane’s biography, Fisher sees the last stanza as a reference to the poet’s homosexual love life. The speaker of “My Grandmother’s Love Letters” is thus willing “to exchange amorous confidences with” Elizabeth, but ultimately refrains from doing so. Fisher is perhaps right in underscoring the sexual dimension of the poem, since its very title suggests the centrality of three themes: the female, the erotic and the textual. It is at the intersection

of these three elements that the poet-speaker's struggle to reconstruct his grandmother's memories is played out. If we now return for a moment to the Rimbaud poem discussed here, we realize that similar themes appear in it, but the French poet, unlike Crane, merely signals certain possibilities without, however, delving into them. Like Elizabeth Hart's *billets-doux*, the lockets and hair mentioned in "The Sideboard" are mementos of love and tokens of commitment which inscribe themselves into nineteenth-century sentimentalism: "Locketts containing a miniature of the beloved were a popular nineteenth-century engagement gift" (Goldemberg 115). Sherrow similarly describes lockets containing locks of hair as "items of jewelry [which] were worn by loved ones," adding that "[s]ome women gave these mementos to their sweethearts" and that "[l]ocketts and other pieces of romantic jewelry were made with strands of the couple's hair, and both people wore these items to show their attachment to each other" (260). Behind each such object there is a love story; it is thus little wonder that the closing stanza of Rimbaud's sonnet suggests the narrative potential inherent in the sideboard in which the keepsakes are stored:

Old sideboard, you've seen more than a little  
And have tales to tell, and speak each time  
Your big black doors slowly swing open. (*Rimbaud Complete* 33)

Unlike the speaker of "My Grandmother's Love Letters," that of Rimbaud's poem does not directly confront the problems connected with either the painstaking process of reconstructing memories or the equally difficult task of translating them into a literary text. The latter difficulties are at the most suggested by the French poet when he has the anthropomorphized sideboard attempt to express itself. The "speaking" of Mason's translation corresponds, as I have already observed, to a verb denoting noise in the French original, just as the more confident "have tales to tell" of the English-language version is supposed to render the phrase "tu voudrais conter tes contes" (*Œuvres* 35), which literally means *you would like to tell your tales*. The speaking of the sideboard is in fact no more than the squeaking of its doors, which may be read as a suggestion that the titular piece of furniture, a repository of memories and, consequently, narratives, is a hapless story-teller, powerless to verbalize the stories which cannot wait to be shared with others.

The metaliterary dimension which I have just read into Rimbaud's sonnet is, I think, more conspicuous and more dramatic in Crane's poem. Here, the poet-speaker's task is marked—and marred—by explicit self-doubt. The question from the poem's penultimate stanza, quoted earlier in this article, is, as Fisher notes, "unanswerable" (100). Importantly,

however, the question relies on musical metaphors, with the speaker positioning himself as a pianist who confronts the silence-music dichotomy. The analogy between making music and writing poetry, which, as is well-known, has melic origins, is, of course, time-honored: one may “compose” poetry just as musicians “compose” music. It is thus the act of creation that is being referred to, and the poet-speaker questions not just his ability to recapture the past, but also his artistic abilities. In other words, “My Grandmother’s Love Letters” emerges, upon closer analysis, as a self-referential poem whose speaker wonders whether he is able not just to reconstruct his grandmother’s love life, but also whether he is able to do so in poetic form. In fact, artistic creation and memory recreation are inextricably linked by their very nature, not just because a poet or writer might wish to transpose the latter into the former. Recapturing memories is a creative process, as Proust shows in the madeleine episode. When the narrator strives to recall the “unremembered state” and “make it reappear,” he realizes that there is more to his task than searching for the mysterious something hidden “in the depths of [his] being”: “Seek? More than that: create. It is face to face with something which does not so far exist, to which it alone can give reality and substance, which it alone can bring into the light of day” (36). To avoid being distracted, the Proustian narrator makes sure that “the silence is strong enough,” to use a slightly transformed phrase from Crane’s poem: “I shut out every obstacle, every extraneous idea, I stop my ears and inhibit all attention to the sounds which come from the next room” (Proust 36). Importantly, the narrator of *Swann’s Way* recaptures his own memory, while Crane’s poet-speaker sets himself the near impossible task of recreating someone else’s reminiscences. The distinction, however, seems less important when we understand, thanks to Proust, that even the reconstruction of one’s own past demands considerable creativity. In this light, the opposite poles of what Fisher sees as a central dilemma that hindered Crane’s work on the poem, “to imagine or to remember?” (98), may in fact turn out to be two sides of the same coin.

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alicja.piechucka@uni.lodz.pl

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