

## Raising Kane: Clifford Kane and the Poetics of the Crime Scene

Michael Kelleher and Christopher W. Alexander

Dear Chris,

I was just reading through your *Admonitions*, in the hope of generating a topic for our Rust Talk, when I came upon the following line in the poem, “for Nembutol”: “a face of pure cardboard despite bruises.” I was surprised to find this line in your poem because it so closely echoes a line I had read the day before: “his cardboard visage / shot full of holes,” which comes from a poem called, “Public Enemy”, by Clifford Kane. Is this a deliberate echo of Kane’s poem? Are you a fan? If so, perhaps we have a starting point for our correspondence.

Truly, Mike

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Dear Mike – This, I take it, is one of those moments when a movement *otherwise* implicit becomes manifest in a poem – that ‘magpie’ effect, as Susan Howe calls it – that is, when some vector inherent in the work – by way of citation, or else – becomes active. Odd that it should have been this one, both because I wouldn’t have thought to find, at this late date, another reader of Kane’s work in the company here present already; and, too, in that I draw so much the sense of that vector-*ing* from Kane: i.e., of a material fleeting under gaze. Unqualifiedly not in the old eighties consensus of the prized ‘materiality of the signifier’: though, being when we are, perhaps too It is difficult to speak without that thought. But what I mean is something more, and more properly Emersonian, where Emerson will say ‘Man feels the dignity of the life that exults around him... yet is baulked when he tries to fling himself into this enchanted circle where all is done without degradation.’ [*Journals Z[A]* 160, 1842; VIII p. 313] Kane seems to me principally to excite in his language a happy degradation. This line cited, for instance: I have to read in it a face ‘so shot full of holes,’ that is, a grotesque doubling of the image that arrives in ‘shot full of holes.’ Not only is Kane’s line shot full of holes – by which I mean, the O’s – but the inverted repetition of s-o o-s in the ‘shot’ and ‘holes’ for example calls forward those characters in a way that makes it difficult to read the line simply and for image. It is riddled with bullets – no longer a ‘global’ reference – comprised at irregular intervals of holes or dents or indentations that quicken the line; the effect is like that a reticle: refocusing in terms of the glass, what lies in its aperture. The imagination here is of the line, printed, and not only or not even the *face* – hence the poetical ridiculousness of ‘visage’; the words, degrading under scrutiny, serve to intensify the image and serve also to counter it. Kane leaves the reader staring over the page, at its surface, her own face staring back perplexedly. In other words – and I acknowledge that saying as much will be no clarification – Kane’s work seems to me perfectly to bridge the unlikely [i.e., likely retrospective] pun in Emerson’s lines: ‘Our experience would teach us that we thrive by casualties. Our capital experiences have been casual.’ [*Journals Z[A]* 150, 1842; VIII p. 317]

Chris

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Dear Chris,

Happy Inauguration Day, indeed.

One of the first books I remember seeing on my parent's shelves was *Cagney by Cagney*, the autobiography of the actor. My father read it over and over. This probably meant that there was something of himself he recognized in the story being told. Likely not in the Hollywood part, but in the Irish-Immigrant-Dysfunctional-Family-Circus, which circus he himself had lived and of which I myself am a second generation representative. When I was a bit older, he often took me to see Eugene O'Neill plays. I had seen both *The Iceman Cometh* and *Long Day's Journey Into Night* several times by the age of 10.

Point being that my "vector," so to speak, is a dark theater, where I'm watching Tom Powers (a.k.a. Cagney) fall dying into the gutter, thinking to myself, "my father is dead." As I leave the movie house, aptly named the Biograph, a woman on each arm, these two guys approach me with their hands in their pockets. I make a break for it down the alley, but by the time I've got my gun out of my coat I've got a body full of bullets and I'm lying dead on the Chicago sidewalk.

"I ain't so tough."

That final line of the poem being also the auto-epitaph of Tom Powers in *The Public Enemy*, whence the title. As this poem was written in 1934, I can't help thinking this doubling of which you speak is also the folding of Tom Powers into reality over the still-warm corpse of John Dillinger, Public Enemy Number One. Interesting also that this is the film that led to the first real pressures of the Hays Office against violence and the glorification of criminals in films. About the same time Dillinger is "shot full of holes," Hollywood has turned from Gangsters to G-Men, making of Hoover's thugs the next generation of celluloid heroes.

Best, Mike

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Dear Mike - It may be worth recalling that Kane himself probably died 'shot full of holes' three years later, in Madrid; shot full of one, at least, which would have been plenty. I hadn't thought to join 'Public Enemy' to *The Public Enemy*, but it's useful, this image of Kane writing in light of the flickering ephemera given of the movie house, rather than from an infused relation[s] to more 'solid' things:

The mantis, then,  
Is a small incident of one's physical vision

- from Zukofsky's early poem "'Mantis,' An Interpretation.' Zukofsky is, of course, concerned with what the mantis indicates of interpretation; his poem contains presciently a micro-history of this insect, a meandering catalogue of what the mantis gestures toward in who fashions it: entomology, biology, airships, 'the economics of the very poor' are unified here in a manner that could be understood startlingly to unhinge Marxian hermeneutics from political economy as such. What would be class relations reconceived in the genera of insects? What does entomology, say, tell us of capital that *Capital* doesn't? But this remarkable moment in Zukofsky is something quite different than would be - in fact, the inverse treatment of the same problem - the affirmed, 'solid' depiction of what is acknowledged not to be there except through representation: the pretended immediacy of what is actually taking place at a remove. In Kane, there seems to be no remove. Picture him winking at us through Dillinger's holy 'visage.' The vision is lewd, but possible.

Oppen, in *Discrete Series*, has a piece that treats a 'Civil war photo'; but like everything in the book - and quite beautifully - it remains a *still*, seen by steps over the surfaces presented

momentarily in stasis. Kane, rather, would take on the cinema's 'panoramic sleights' [Hart Crane] in the spirit with which Wyndham Lewis animates them. Lewis:

The only thing that the average man has brought away from his primitive state is an admiration of *ferocity*. The little photographic god whose yellow orb pours out light at the upper end of the Cinema Chapel – and as he gazes scenes of intense vulgarity and foolishness stream forth one after the other, as though they were his thoughts – this god is the civilized monkey's god. His worshippers sit in smoky silence beneath him. [italics mine]

So Lewis opines in *Blast* no. 2: July 1915; the War Number. But rather than derogation, what Kane presents us with – ambivalently – is the *affirmation* of ferocity, an image of our own graspingness as an essential trait. Hence it would be perfect for him to demonstrate our unthinking dislocation of material things – film, a screen, electric light – into image and narrative; and to do so by an act of further dislocation, solidifying the 'error' of image and narrative in the shape of a poem. Kane is not troubled by our desire to have things be what they seem; or, rather than attempting to transcend that desire in the name of a quasi-Heideggerian openness, he produces it, troublingly. Under Zukofsky's influence, Kane seems to have been aware that the Objectivist project is not so much attention to detail as attention to attentiveness itself. But rather than understand attention as a grace, Kane's work demonstrates in it a species of force: ferocity over veracity. This attitude is plain in the difficulty the poems make for the reader – the tendency for Kane's lines, words, and images not to cohere except by effort of will – and, too by their preponderance of violent themes – e.g., the photograph-like depiction of crime scenes in his series of 1934 called simply 'Scenes,' and its complication by elements of pastoral, the step-child of Renaissance humanism:

a kerchief  
left by the left hand  
bearing  
stains –  
the rug as

greenly, paradise

So ends Kane's poem, 'Landlord.' Here, the reader is asked to reconstitute a Scene that is frankly of violent import: the quarters of a murdered landlord, complete with his overweight corpse. But the task is easier given than done, because – owing to line breaks and syntax – the details have a peculiar manner of sliding away under gaze. What, for instance, is stained? the kerchief – which, by the way, one can hardly read without seeing 'handkerchief' – the dead hand, or the rug. Are these blood stains, or is it the stains that are green? Or is *stains* a present-tense verb in the phrase 'bearing / stains' – perhaps indicative that our turning toward the scene, or even the poem, in the interpretive act is impure? Maybe even to see it, we take some small part in the murder; which, then again, might be *paradise*.

Zukofsky, writing in 1931 – the year after Kane made his acquaintance – framed the Objectivist program in terms of Sincerity and Objectification:

In sincerity shapes appear *concomitants* of word combinations.... Writing occurs which is the detail, not mirage, of seeing, of thinking *with* things as they exist, and of directing them along a line of melody.

Objectification is, by contrast, a 'rested totality' fashioned in counterpoint to the perceived object: Writing that will 'resolve into a structure... to which the mind does not wish to add; nor does it, any more than when it contemplates a definite object by itself.' [italics mine; all quotations from Zukofsky's 'Program: "Objectivists" 1931' in *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse* for March 1931]

Assuming for a moment these definitions pertain, we can see that Kane – despite his worshipful student relationship with Zukofsky – makes serious difficulties for the Objectivist program. First of all: who wants to ‘think with’ the dead body of a slumlord? And then: Kane’s slipperiness can hardly be characterized as ‘rested totality.’ While one has to acknowledge that there never was really an Objectivist Movement, if we read in Movement a sharing of aesthetic means and ends – though why not something less herd-like, more of the pack? – there’s no doubt that Kane represents in many ways the undermining of those means and ends by their own operation, carrying them somewhere in all fairness they had to go, but for which they were never intended. In retrospect, this entry seems awfully dark, which distorts the point that I had intended to make about the poet’s ‘ferocity.’ And that is: that [what keeps me coming back to this work] the sense that Kane is not simply morbid – and certainly not cynical – but that he acts with a Child’s fascination for what is proscribed. There’s a humor in all of this, a delight that I’ve really failed to convey. ‘Landlord,’ for instance, could as well be regarded the-game-with-the-kerchief as a stark representation of the human pettiness of death or an instruction-book for proletarian vengeance. The humor isn’t black: it is a genuine, child-innocent concern for what the adult world prefers not to see: which is both whimsical and a genuine, child-innocent malice. Chris

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Dear Chris,

I love “Landlord.” It’s one of my favorite *Scenes*. I think you are right to point to humor in the work. Kane’s got what can only be characterized as a dark, nasty sense of humor. It’s the kind of humor that makes you laugh and then makes you feel bad for having laughed. My favorite *Scene* is the one called “The Suicide”:

that dog  
distracts  
the camera’s  
eye

so dead

and you  
not even cold  
upon  
the bed

Suicide being a crime in many states, this is again a kind of crime scene photo. Suicide photographs are not the usual place to look for humor, but then there’s the punch line. I’ll get back to that in a second, after we take it “seriously” for a minute. If he had ended the poem on “dead”, it would still be complete, but incredibly stark. The image of a suicide, and possibly worse. Not the “pettiness” of death, but the callousness of living. What hurts is the act of seeing – here is the dead dog, there is the Cyclopean camera, forced to witness through an “eye” that cannot blink. As in the presence of a lynching photo, one looks because one cannot stop looking. But one also looks because one, “child-innocently”, hopes that staring at it long enough will cause the scene to change. It reminds me of that song on “Nebraska” where Springsteen says:

Seen a man standin’ over a dead dog  
lyin’ by the highway in a ditch  
He’s lookin’ down kinda puzzled,  
pokin’ that dog with a stick.

Got his car door flung open  
out on Highway 31  
Like if he stood there long enough  
that's dog'd get up and run.

But of course he won't. He's dead. That's the joke. Get it?

Kane, like Springsteen, refuses to leave us with the self-satisfaction of our moral outrage. The joke starts to unfold with the pun on "eye" at the end of the first stanza. If the "eye" is an "I", and we read the lines like so:

I/so dead

Now we have a suicide on our hands. This is no laughing matter. Or is it? If "I" is dead and the dog is dead, then is this a murder/suicide? Is it a perricide? And who is taking this picture? Who is looking at it? How many "eyes" are looking on at this scene of desolation? What crimes are these "eyes" guilty of? And who is "you"? Is "you" the "eye" of the camera? Of the beholder? Is you the photographer? Is "you" the "I" of the poem addressing itself from the grave? "You" is "not even cold". Does this mean that "you" is still alive? Or is "you" freshly dead, thus not cold yet? Could this possibly be a triple whammy – a homicide/perricide/suicide? The corpses are piling up and its starting to smell pretty funny around here.

Reminds me of that Marx Brother's schtick where they keep cramming people into the smallest room on the ship. Every time a person shows up, they let her in. That's the joke. Add another body. Add three more. It just keeps getting funnier – just when you think you can't fit another person into the room, along comes another, and somehow, they fit into the room. The punch line happens when the room gets so full that the door bursts open and everyone falls through it and onto their asses. "The Suicide" works the same way. First the dog, then the author, then "you" are dead, and all of it captured by "the camera's eye", all of it observed by "I's" and "yous," by "yous" with "eyes". The punch line is the rhyme: "dead" and "bed," another near-cliché relating sleep to death. It's the goofiness of rhyming in a situation like this that makes this the punch line. If the poem ends, "you/not even cold," the humor is lost, there is no punch line. Amazing to find slapstick within these bare, "Objectivist" *Scenes*. It's a vaudeville routine, when you get right down to it.

Kane is one of the few artists I know of who is willing to laugh in the face of the unthinkable, to realize that the more horrible or unjust something is, the more it needs to be stripped down to the cruel joke at its heart.

Truly,

Mike

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Dear Mike – 'What hurts is the *act* of seeing': quite.

Kane's virtue, as some species of younger Objectivist, is the uncertainty of his Objective; and his certain cognizance of entertaining one: his delight in it. He exhibited what we could call – whimsically – a clear sense of vision; that is literally a developed sense of the eye's movement in the visual organization of space – and the capacity for rhetoric, even its tendency, to mime that organization. Hence, the gracefully bi-focal quality of 'The Suicide': a shifting of attention – eliciting the perhaps-ironical comparison – between the 'dog' and the 'you.' The ambivalencies

are as you say: we are left only presuming 'that dog' and-or that 'you' is dead. But what is by no means dead, what is active, we could say *gently* in its grace, is 'the camera's / eye.' Its force is material, that is, relevant and necessarily a constituent. In this, betrayed at close range by the possessive, it differs from John Dos Passos' 'Camera Eye' of *U.S.A.*, which is turned on the world, as it were, anonymously and without bias to discern the world's truth. The subtle irony of Dos Passos, too, is to have turned that machinery where it would not otherwise go – his is in some wise a mock-up of the tabloid photographer, having discovered the greater abuses that were-are routinely 'kept out of the papers.' But Dos Passos makes less a point of this manoeuvre within the poems: except by reference to its situation, *U.S.A.* presents unequivocally a *use* of the machine in question. In contrast, the little-*c* camera of 'The Suicide,' by the punctual addition of an apostrophe, enters into rhetorical Apostrophe: turns winkingly on the reader. It can little see but by direction, whoever or whatever is directing it.

A few years ago, I did some looking into tabloid photography of the thirties and forties; research that, for this exchange, I've tried to duplicate, but with not much success owing to the resources available to me now. *tsk tsk*, as we say. What drew me, then, was a desire to find the broader cultural coordinates for the visual affect [yes, not 'effect'] of film noir: the characteristic 'bright lights, dark city' gloom projected at the viewer. My dimly-imagined project fell by the way, but I did happen to learn a bit about what a news-stand would have looked at the time of Kane's return to New York in 1932, or indeed something of what they looked before he left, given that the biggest and most fulsome of the tabloids – New York's [*Illustrated*] *Daily News* – took to the presses in 1919. One possible synopsis would be a famous photograph, taken by William Klein in 1955, entitled "Gun, Gun, Gun, New York"; never mind that's twenty-odd years after the matter of our concern: the celebrated photo was taken perhaps thirty years too late. In any case, Klein's title suffices to say: not only was the Public of the thirties fascinated – and here, the verb may be, after a style, transitive – by the grand spectacle of gangland violence and the common murder alike, but it was fascinated repeatedly in paper after paper, and day after day. To say as much barely does justice to the situation, with five or more NYC tabloids, rough equivalents to *The Post* or, say, a black-and-white *Toronto Sun*, glaring from every street-corner. The wide-spread influence of the tabloids could be stated most accurately in saying that they developed a style of image-making so fundamental to the imagination of the photographic image that it persisted – in photojournalism as in 'film noir' – thirty years and more beyond its technical necessity, so-called. The topical import of this milieu to Kane's poems is early and obvious; it could scarcely have been otherwise, given, for instance, a front page like that of the *Daily News* – by this time, it was subtitled *New York's Picture Newspaper*, complete with a tiny, accordion-style camera for *insigne* – for Friday, 13 January 1928. Only months before Kane's departure to attend the University of Wisconsin, the *News* had cobbled together one of the most famous events in the history of journalism: a full-page photograph of Ruth Snyder – the first woman ever to be so executed – strapped to the electric chair. The headline was succinctly **Dead!**, supplemented only by the photo's caption: the perfect, prurient outcome to a case that had kept the national public in vengeful suspense for over a year. With this photo, the *News* sold half a million 'Extra' [i.e., non-subscription] copies over two days.

But a more technical bearing on Kane's work is also apparent: I mean the poet's keen sensitivity to the visual plane 'within' the made image, and by extension to the rhetoric of image-making. In the early thirties, a number of technologic advances were introduced that partook of a change in the style of newspaper photography, including the flash-bulb in 1930 and, soon after, the Speed Graphic, a light-weight camera for use with acetate-based films – the which made it more portable than the heavy, glass-plate cameras that predated it, and allowed, too, for faster film speeds. By virtue of a change in speed, it suddenly became possible to shoot at night or in very poor lighting. The result is familiar to us as a signal component of the 'noir' style: near-black backgrounds or heavy shadows dis severed from a foreground image that is sharp-focussed, but flattened and distorted by the bulb flash. Such things are widely to be found, but since you have mentioned Dillinger, I've included a reproduction of the front page of the *Chicago Herald and*

*Examiner* – a somewhat more ‘respectable’ paper – for Tuesday, 24 July 1934: Dillinger in his ‘last public appearance,’ at the city morgue. This piece is not ‘typical’ in that it is brighter than many, the image fore-shortened by a white wall; but notice, of the crowd viewing his young corpse, those front-most form a washed-out plane so much without depth that they and the coroner and the bright body in front of them appear to be of one surface, and of one surface, too, with the page itself. ‘The apparition of these faces in the crowd’ is such that only by studying the arrangement of their bodies can one derive the subtleties of depth. It is a planar effect of a comparable sort that Kane exploits in ‘The Suicide’ – down to the elegantly gaudy rhyme that emphasizes a roughly symmetrical differentiation between the two stanzas: two planes. Likewise, in both of the poems so far cited from *Scenes*, the difficulty of sorting out the relations between words draws the eye effectively to the surface of the page – which has the salutary consequence of destroying any reality-effect. To pick up a neglected point: Kane’s work exhibits a sense of rhetoric’s directedness in the organization of experience, and its ability to calcify direction into ‘fact’: the *act* of seeing that is an active process but a feigned truth. He shows his hand, so to speak, syntactically: in a manner more reminiscent of dead Dillinger’s photograph than of the traditional alliterative means to be found in the accompanying headline: HUNT DILLINGER HOARD; NELSON ESCAPES TRAP! Please note that by ‘shows his hand,’ I don’t mean to invoke the principle of honesty and fair play.

But if [IF] we can agree that these are Kane’s methods, still I’m not sure we agree on their use. As I said before, I don’t understand his humor as ‘black’ – OR, not without regard to another sense, *viz.* sinister or unprincipled; at least, un-sympathetic. ‘Black humor’ seems to me in its general circulation to imply some proto-Existentialist awareness of the ‘absurdity of life’: a principle ultimately hopeful in the ideal sense, since this is a shared absurdity, the Human condition so-called. It offers a guarantee of communication. This is an assurance that one cashes in only at the cost of the ‘experience’ of Absurdity itself, which is L. *ab-* utterly + *surdus* deaf: by this humanizing, we are conditioned to lose the indifference of events, their truly catastrophic power – which ought to give pause. As you say, ‘one... hopes that staring at it long enough will cause the scene to change’ – or, say, changes the scene by introducing a sympathetic identification, even if only among the survivors. Certainly, humor *can* serve for this: every joke about the disastrous malfunction of the space shuttle Challenger was a joke and also a classic consolation, retrieving the guarantee of communicability in the face of Loss; and the Springsteen that you mention does similar duty in the face of misapprehension. There’s that old wake song:

Let’s not have a sniffle  
Let’s have a bloody good cry  
Always remember, the longer you live  
The sooner you bloody well die.

But these forms pretending to simplicity are actively duplicitous: they work to domesticate the singular ‘experiences’ of death, arationality, and Incomprehension – to make of them shared experiences, that is, to shepherd them back into the Human fold. Within this structure, events that separate us – humanly – are re-produced as the very basis of our union. But this is only half-duty, for humor is much less stable than ‘structure’ implies, and gestures more or less equitably – depending on content and delivery – toward consolation and disconsolation, or sympathy and indifferent glee. Sympathy, by itself, is what I didn’t mean, exactly, when I characterized Kane’s work as having ‘a genuine, child-innocent concern for what the adult world prefers not to see: which is both whimsical and a genuine, child-innocent malice.’ For it seems to me that Kane’s work suggests and also resists consolation: it is humor enough to entertain both, and in a manner quite uncomfortable. Malice – a term preferable to ‘ferocity,’ which I took on chiefly for the expediency of communicating an idea of the literal force of vision – is what ghosts and children demonstrate; and some poets. **MALICE** Concise OED n. Active ill-will; desire to tease. [(F., f. L.

*malitia* (*malus* bad)]. A malicious child is essentially a troublesome child – perhaps only curiously prone to trouble, that is, out of curiosity; a malicious ghost is something fundamentally different from us, driven beyond the capacity for understanding – even to say ‘vengeful’ is too much sympathetic, since ghosts are not Human. This is sometimes called a ‘hungry ghost,’ which is good for its simple avarice. But what I like in the term *malice* is the antimony it contains between childishness and irreconcilable force – both of which are a kind of innocency – just as I like *concern* for abridging ‘solicitous regard’ and ‘self-interest.’ This is where I think much of Kane’s humor rests unsettled: in the interstice between badinage, as a form of sympathetic tussling, and – something else. My inclination is often to read a Kane poem as one sees a flower: it comes from a long way off and explodes – but beautifully – in one’s face. A result of the poems’ rhetorical poise as much as their rhetorical scatter: of what is apparently a balanced comparison between ‘you’ and ‘dog,’ taken with the inability to decide who or what merits the epithet ‘so dead’ – and in what sense one is to understand the relish with which that epithet is offered. The poems, beautiful and repulsive, give us pause over their indelicate matter. But it is not only that the work eludes our attempts to give order to the *Scenes* it supposedly depicts. Rather, Kane’s work places ‘him’ in a position that is not simply Admirable, not to be gazed on in ‘pleased contemplation,’ because not clearly or not only – onely, as C. S. Lewis would say – sympathetic. If it is to be recuperated by the reader – that is, restored to a safer, more sincere communication [from the Latin *sincerus* pure, whole, sound] – intention will have to be ascribed; and yet, this is precisely where the work is quite elusive. Far from eradicating what is human in the Human – that is, fallibility – Kane’s work extends the little-*h* human into the act[s] of reading and writing. So much does it exploit the ambivalency of humor, that to make of Kane a fully sympathetic character, one has to force the reading: a gesture the work invites and also discloses as the most unsympathetic – the most forceful – operation of Human sympathy. So it is decorous to shush a child in pain – or a child laughing: for at the same time, it is by no means clear this humanest of situations is a tragedy, or that Kane’s work is a protest against the force of the Human: only an indication that it *is* force. Chris

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Dear Chris,

I find the temptation to read suicide notes into every scribble from the pen of a Poet Who Died Young almost irresistible. Probably a response to the “arationality and incomprehension” of which you speak. I want the truth, goddammit. But what truth am I looking for? Will a pronouncement of “death by suicide” console me? Will it make me ache a little less at the thought that Clifford Kane died at 27? Likely not. I comb through the work in search of that one line which proves that death was no accident. It’s like reading the tabloids. But there is so little of Clifford Kane to comb through. No manifestos, no memoirs, no diaries. Just a handful of poems and a couple of letters. One such letter, a postcard mailed to his wife from Madrid shortly before his death in 1937, is suggestive. It reveals that at the very least he went to Spain burdened with a kind of futility. He writes:

“I am a capitalist. I am a killer. It was this realization that brought me to the front, not my childish political vanity. I am not outside.”

Considering that for the five years prior to his departure for Spain he had been a member of the Communist Youth Organization, this is something of a turnaround. He dies fighting for the Republican cause without any sense of purpose at all, except perhaps to do just what he did. Even when he is at his most self-righteous (as in the early poem, “Pigface”), Kane is aware that neither politics nor morality, the nearly synonymous objects of his merciless wit, can protect him from his own culpability. Ultimately, his is a poetics of self-condemnation. Humor undermines

its object and then undermines itself. Or rather, undermines The Self. I don't think he is comfortable with this position. But I don't think he was ever able to find a way out of it. The equation was always one of subtraction. Self minus self equals nothing, the final synthesis being despair.

This obsession with death reminds me of Emily Dickinson in its relentless refusal to look away. Like her, like the "camera's eye," he stares and stares at the specter of death until at last that "plank of reason" breaks and he falls "down and down." But whereas this is a moment of insight for Emily, a "break-through," it is for Kane something else. Like you, I don't see this as morbidity, exactly. Neither do I see it as some kind of existential challenge, a la *The Seventh Seal*. I think he's afraid that if he looks away, the ghost will disappear forever, leaving him without anyone to talk to. A poetics of loneliness, then, with death as consolation, Death as muse. These lines from Kane's paean to Hart Crane, "Legend of Youth," are probably my best conclusion in this regard, so I'll end with them:

The  
home run  
arc

In silence  
its parabola  
must kill.

Play on,  
Children.  
Play.

Truly, Mike

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Dear Mike – What could I add?

Your word – This word Culpability is one of those in English whose loveliness is not immediately evident: but which is lovely. Blameworthiness, let's say, or Responsibility: but rarely prospective, typically in the past, and almost always for some 'breach of conduct.' That one is culpable for one's actions gives fair assurance they are unacceptable – whether so designated by accusation or confession. The etymology points to Latin *culpabilis* (*culpa* fault) through Old French *coupable*. Read in it: *guilty*; but also, *that which could be struck* or *what deserves a blow*. But with regard to Kane, I can't hear that *mea culpa* grammatically; always it is soundly *my fault*, but, too, *I am a fault* – a break in the continuity of a stratum. Kane was probably unsettled by what he 'discovered,' but he respected it enough to have foundered on it, to have been exhausted by it – or perhaps not: I still can't find my way to sift out the tragic dimensions of his work from its good humor. Somewhere in the back of my mind plays on that tune from Lisa Robertson's *XEclogue*: 'Violence and contempt, deceit and envy, sabotage my method and I learn to love it.' The quotation is taken out of context, and in this context – after the suggestion of suicide – it may well ring false. But if Culpability is the admission of Involvement, I am reluctant to say that Kane's postcard indicates more. What he calls his 'childish political vanity' may be diminutive only before the larger, lovely recognition of Involvement in the forces that move him, and with which he moves.

I should finish with a poem – that's what one wants to leave in the air on these occasions. But I can't help turning to Culpability once more. The Old French *Coupable* is also Modern, and

suggests to me Bataille's book of the same title. There one may read, under the heading 'Friendship':

There's the universe – and in the dead of its night, you discover its parts, and in so doing you discover yourself. But always it is an incomplete discovery. When a person dies, his or her survivors are doomed to dismantle whatever that person believed in, to profane what he or she respected. I came to see the universe in a certain way, but inevitably [*à coup sur*] those who follow me will see me in error. Knowledge rests on completion; incomplete, it is not properly Knowledge, but only the inevitable and giddy product of the will to know.

With Kane, it seems to me, it's that *inevitably* rings most true – and possibly *giddy*. As in your lines tonight, but mildly: 'He didn't like his fortune, but he accepted his fate.'

Your Friend, Chris

--

from **Admonitions** Christopher W. Alexander

**Mickey Deutschland.** this recording from the 1920s represents the pinnacle of and - it was in grand old Opryland Mickey was called a . Behind that cigarette case lies - what did you say your name was? Dis ingenuous. 'Ein Berliner.' / Actually I own the furniture; I write it down. inanimate objects and he could never live in peace.

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toothbrush by Alan Stuart of New York: ewwww she said when she saw the marks deutschmarks. I cld tell you were a real winner. Written in char, it's - sure, it's under erasure. the hair that smells like hair.

**Jenny Mondiale.** a machine is involved with itself.- a poem is not striated and understands the principle of desegregation beyond that of executive Order. "ka-*chung!* whatever is replaced / is placed inside a place / that requires no earthly force to tell us is a place of terror. whatever order it is placed in / is placed in a profound

---

estomach paired with insulin. years though history's perfection cease. Robert Duncan, you become pre-occupied with your body.

**Reciprocity.** *four tennis shoes named like wish-on-a-star the chest brushes the shoulder-blades before he arches his back to push harder - or, any soft part of a body thrusts itself eagerly forward: tongue popping its chewing gum against the roof of my mouth. Who can say what is a fiction the way things happen: three white tablets, tomorrow I could wake like the Black Dahlia: one lovely eye in a jar in some suburb. A friend from Massachusetts [sic] tells a man found suffocated in some SM bit with cellophane, and I'm thinking*

*urban myth? Probably not. But what were the details his hands his mouth, forehead. this body's memory's had it.*

**for Nembutol.** Mike modano, wrist shot full of some pain-killer just like Kirchner in reverse / skates out through dry fog off to Hatcher in the crease. Mike Modano, fat thumb off to hell - a face of pure cardboard despite bruises.

---

les phénomènes physiques artificiellement isolés, or one less goal for one less cup.

**Always the Gentleman, except on Occasion.**

TRACI LORDS, KH: snatch or swatch I couldn't remember the word. it was all like a small pool at the back of my head, that greenery.

C.K. DEXTER HAVEN, CG: when you hear the green light light please please be careful. How about that Drink? I wanted something to unhinge my pink limbs without shame or reciprocity.

TRACI LORDS, KH: it came. Oh, do watch from behind you like a mallet - Mother will be furious about your getting all over the carpet. Oh, Dexter . . .  
I'm such an unholy mess of a girl.

--

CUBA  
Michael Kelleher

1

I go to her apartment to have my fortune told. I am without an invitation. Each morning I wake afraid the hot water will be gone. Today there was no hot water.

Perhaps if I could eat a little less.

From the room in her apartment the city looks like Paris. It is not Paris.

This game is played by amateurs.

She hands me a bag of stones. I take a stone out of the bag. I put it on the floor. She tells me my fortune.

I do not like my fortune. She records my dreams instead. Others come to record their dreams. She records their dreams and I listen. I do not understand them. They are speaking Half-Russian.

Let me give you a piece of advice.

Today I saw a man with blue eyes. He wore a hooded sweatshirt and his eyes were blue. In his public confession he confessed to being what he confessed. He confessed to being that. He didn't like his fortune, but he accepted his fate.

On the hill across the bay stands a tower.

Her lover went away to seek his fortune. She prayed before the temple beneath a tree. There are stories about the tree, about the temple, about the tower. *Tienes que relacionarte con el dolor.*

This is meant as solace.

3

And then one of them left. And then another. And then another. And then three more. And then five more. And then hordes and hordes of them left.

Yesterday the water was lukewarm.

She waited in the tower for her lover to return. She waited and waited until one day he returned. He didn't find his fortune. She told him to call again tomorrow.

The phone rings. I pick it up. *Tienes que relacionarte con el dolor.* There is no light in this room.

On the hill across the bay is Christ. He is tall and white. He is made of stone. He is afraid there will be no hot water.

Today the water is freezing cold. It makes the bumps on my skin stand up. I can't turn it off. It is freezing cold and I can't turn it off. I am afraid I am going to freeze to death. I am afraid I am going to die.

And then it stops. And there is no more water. And there is no more water for many days to come.

Perth is the rune of mystery.

6

The phone rings. It rings again. It rings again. It stops ringing.

There are stories about him. About who his father was. He is the child of the father of many. There is a family resemblance. We do not like to talk about it, but it is true. It is true and we do not like to talk about it.

We must continue to resist our hunger. For instance.

He went away for two years. He went away for fourteen years. And then he came back. He never came back. And then he came back. He didn't find his fortune. From the room in his apartment the city looks like Paris.

It is Paris.

8

There is a picture on a wall. A man smiling.

There is a picture of him on another wall. Shaking hands with another man.

There is a picture of him on a third wall. Fishing.

On the fourth wall there is a door. A man walks through the door. He smiles. He shakes my hand. He asks if I like fishing.

And now there isn't anyone left except them. And they are left. And they have been left. And they are all that is left.

10

I know a woman who lives in a cave in the mountains. She mumbles. She beats a drum.

I go to her. I give her something. She gives me something in return.

I go away. I go away for many years.

And then one day I return. I carry a pouch beneath my pants. It contains a small fortune.

On the hill across the bay stands a tower. It is tall and white. It is made of stone. This game is played by professionals. We do not like to talk about it, but it is true. It is true and we do not like to talk about it.

She takes a stone out of a bag. She puts it on the floor. The stone is blank.