

22 CRITICS DISCUSS

Hart Crane

(1899-1932)

“You find me testing metaphors, and poetic concepts in general, too much by logic, whereas I find you pushing logic to the limit in a painfully intellectual search for emotion, for poetic motive.”

Harriet Monroe, Editor
Poetry (1926)

“The poetry of Hart Crane is ambitious. It is the only poetry I am acquainted with which is at once contemporary and in the grand manner. It is an American poetry. Crane’s themes are abstractly, metaphysically conceived, but they are definitely confined to an experience of the American scene.... Crane’s poems are a fresh vision of the world, so intensely personalized in a new creative language that only the strictest and most unprepossessed effort of attention can take it in....Melville and Whitman are his avowed masters. In his sea poems...there is something of Melville’s intense, transcendental brooding on the mystery of the ‘high interiors of the sea.’...Crane’s poetry is a concentration of certain phases of the Whitman substance, the fragments of the myth.”

Allen Tate
Introduction
White Buildings (1926)
Hart Crane

“Mr. Crane has a most remarkable style, a style which is strikingly original—almost something like a great style, if there could be such a thing as a great style which was, not merely not applied to a great subject, but not, so far as one can see, applied to any subject at all....One does not demand of poetry nowadays that it shall provide us with logical metaphors or with intelligible sequences of ideas. Rimbaud is inconsecutive and confused. Yet, with Rimbaud, whom Mr. Crane somewhat resembles, we experience intense emotional excitement and artistic satisfaction; we are dazzled by the eruption of his images, but we divine what it is that he is saying. But, with Mr. Crane, though he sometimes moves us, it is in a way curiously vague.”

Edmund Wilson
New Republic
(11 May 1927) 320

“What is divine about the poetry of Crane is the energy which fills it, that intense, dionysian, exalted energy that by sheer pressure lifts him to heights unattainable by less titanic poets....One can say this: at sixteen he was writing at a level that Amy Lowell never rose from and at twenty-eight he is writing on a level that scarcely any other living American poet ever reaches.”

Gorham Munson
Destinations
(Sears 1928) 162-64

“It is in single grand passages, rather than whole poems, that Crane reveals the power and sweep of his concentric vision. One cannot condone the obscurities in toto, nor entirely subscribe to a style which is often more grandiose than a given occasion demands.”

Alfred Kreymborg
Our Singing Strength
(Coward-McCann 1929) 604

“[I] could hardly understand a single line—of course the individual lines aren’t supposed to be intelligible. The message, if there actually is one, comes from the total effect.”

Tennessee Williams (1930)

“Crane labored to perfect both the strategy and the tactics of language so as to animate and maneuver his perceptions—and then fought the wrong war and against an enemy that displayed, to his weapons, no vulnerable target. He wrote in a language of which it was the virtue to accrete, modify, and interrelate moments of emotional vision—moments at which the sense of being gains its greatest access—moments at which, by the felt nature of the knowledge, the revealed thing is its own meaning; and he attempted to apply his language, in his major effort, to a theme that required a sweeping, discrete, indicative, anecdotal language, a language in which, by force of movement, mere cataloging can replace and often surpass representation. He used the private lyric to write the cultural epic.”

R. P. Blackmur
The Double Agent
(Arrow 1935) 126

“His world has no center, and the compensatory action that he took is responsible for the fragmentary quality of his most ambitious work. This action took two forms, the blind assertion of the will; and the blind desire for self-destruction. The poet did not face his first problem, which is to define the limits of his personality and to objectify its moral implications in an appropriate symbolism. Crane could only assert a quality of will against the world, and at each successive failure of the will he turned upon himself....By attempting an extreme solution of the romantic problem, Crane proved that it cannot be solved.”

Allen Tate
Reactionary Essays
(Scribner 1936) 40-42

“Although Pound and Eliot had been largely responsible for reviving an interest in the poetry of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, they were themselves temperamentally incapable of doing more than adapting, imitating, and assimilating certain of its characteristics....It remained for Crane, unschooled, unspoiled by scholastic nostalgia and self-consciousness, to use the medium in a completely modern way, easily and naturally combining in it rhetoric, conversation, and discursive thought, and sounding afresh the grand note so rarely heard in modern times....In the process of renovating blank verse Crane also revived the poetic language of his time. He was able to discover words, and use them, almost as things in themselves, prized their colors, sounds, and shapes as more meaningful than their strict definitions.”

Philip Horton
Hart Crane
(Norton 1937) 309-10

“Most of Crane’s thought, and this is especially true of *The Bridge*, was derived from Whitman. This fact is generally recognized. It is my personal impression likewise, and my personal impression is derived not only from a study of the works of Crane and of Whitman, but also from about four years of frequent and regular correspondence with Crane and from about four long evenings of uninterrupted conversation with him. Crane and I began publishing poems in the same magazines about 1919; I started quarreling with Harriet Monroe about 1925 or 1926 to get Crane’s poems into *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*; Crane and I started corresponding shortly thereafter; I spent a few evenings talking to Crane during the Christmas holidays of 1927; our correspondence ended as a result of my review of *The Bridge* in 1930; and about two or two and a half years later Crane committed suicide....

He told me once that he often did not understand his poems till after they were written; and I am fairly confident that this kind of experimentation was common in Crane’s generation and earlier, and in fact that it is still common in certain quarters. I know that I myself engaged in it with great fascination when I was young, and I know that certain other persons did so. The result is likely to be a poetry which frequently and sometimes wholly eludes paraphrase by at least a margin, but which appears constantly to be suggesting a precise meaning....Whenever the poet’s sensibility to the connotations of language overbalances his awareness of the importance of denotation, something of the kind is beginning...

He was unfortunate in having a somewhat violent emotional constitution: his behavior on the whole would seem to indicate a more or less manic-depressive make-up, although this diagnosis is the post-mortem guess of an amateur, and is based on evidence which is largely hearsay. He was certainly

homosexual, however, and he became a chronic and extreme alcoholic. I should judge that he cultivated these weaknesses on principle; in any event, it is well known that he cultivated them assiduously; and as an avowed Whitmanian, he would have been justified by his principles in cultivating all of his impulses. I saw Crane during the Christmas week of 1927, when he was approximately 29 years old; his hair was graying, his skin had the dull red color with reticulated grayish traceries which so often goes with advanced alcoholism, and his ears and knuckles were beginning to look a little like those of a pugilist. About a year later he was deported from France as a result of his starting an exceptionally violent commotion in a bar-room and perhaps as a result of other activities. In 1932 he committed suicide by leaping from a steamer into the Caribbean Sea.

The doctrine of Emerson and Whitman, if really put into practice, should naturally lead to suicide: in the first place, if the impulses are indulged systematically and passionately, they can lead only to madness; in the second place, death, according to the doctrine, is not only a release from suffering but is also and inevitably the way to beatitude. There is no question, according to the doctrine, of moral preparation for salvation; death leads automatically to salvation. During the last year and a half of Crane's life, to judge from the accounts of those who were with him in Mexico, he must have been insane or drunk or both almost without interruption; but before this time he must have contemplated the possibilities of suicide. When his friend Harry Crosby committed suicide in one of the eastern cities, I wrote Crane a note of condolence and asked him to express my sympathy to Mrs. Crosby. Crane replied somewhat casually that I need not feel disturbed about the affair, that he was fairly sure Crosby had regarded it as a great adventure.

In the course of my correspondence with Crane, I must somewhere have made a moralizing remark which I have now forgotten but of which Crane disapproved. I remember Crane's answer: he said that he had never in his life done anything of which he had been ashamed, and he said this not in anger but in simple philosophical seriousness. This would be a sufficiently surprising remark from any son of Adam, but as one thinks of it and of Crane in retrospect, one can understand it, I believe, only in one way, as an assertion of religious faith, neither more nor less....

Crane...had the absolute seriousness that goes with genius and with sanctity; one might describe him as a saint of the wrong religion. He had not the critical intelligence to see what was wrong with his doctrine, but he had the courage of his convictions, the virtue of integrity, and he deserves our respect. He has the value of a thoroughgoing demonstration. He embodies perfectly the concepts which for nearly a century have been generating some of the most cherished principles of our literature, our education, our politics, and our personal morals....We shall scarcely get anything better unless we change our principles."

Yvor Winters
In Defense of Reason
(Alan Swallow 1937-47) 577, 585, 589-90

"Crane's poems often have a hypnotic power about them which marks them out as among the most extraordinary performances with language to be found in American poetry. One may call it genius or one may say that he has a wholly exceptional mediumistic power to set on paper the contents of the subconscious carrying with them still a kind of inhuman quality."

Amos N. Wilder
The Spiritual Aspects of Poetry
(Harper 1940) 124

"Crane was incapable of a sustained irony, which might have produced an inclusive attitude harmonizing his vision of actuality, his romantic transcendentalism and his personal neuroses. His natural power of poetic expression was prodigious, but its effectiveness was defeated by his uncertainty of technical control. This accounts for his essential 'patchiness,' his exasperating combination of the meritorious and the meretricious....His most extraordinary stirring and kindling power with words is most manifest in scattered lines which shoot suddenly like a rocket from dark surroundings."

Elizabeth Drew
Directions in Modern Poetry
(Holt, 1941) 69-70

"Although he published only two books during his lifetime, [he] is recognized as an outstanding poet of his era. *White Buildings* (1926), despite its lack of a single theme to synthesize the author's experience of the American scene, is distinguished by a sonorous rhetoric and concrete imagery, revealing by tangential suggestion an acute mystical perception. The promise of this early work is fulfilled in *The Bridge* (1930), a long mystical poem concerned with the American background and the modern consciousness to which it gives rise. Crane finds in America a principle of unity and absolute faith, through the integration of such symbols as Columbus, Pocahontas, Rip Van Winkle, Poe, Whitman, the subway, and, above all, Brooklyn Bridge, an image of man's anonymous creative power unifying past and present. The lack of discipline in the poet's personal existence, and his belief that his creative ability had been dissipated, caused him to commit suicide by jumping from a ship that was bringing him home from a year's residence in Mexico."

James D. Hart
The Oxford Companion to American Literature, 5th edition
(Oxford 1941-83)

"The most striking evidence of Eliot's pervasive influence upon even the most vigorous younger imagination of the 1920's is provided by Hart Crane's *The Bridge* (1930)... He was soon to declare that he considered Pound second only to Yeats among living poets in English, and was then to share in the contemporary excitement about the symbolists and the Elizabethan dramatists, with a particular taste for Rimbaud and Marlowe. His first poems, collected in *White Buildings* (1926), reveal the extent to which he had been affected by the French poets' experiments with handling language plastically, with the 'color' and 'weight' no less than the sound of words. He spoke of wanting to capture the 'illogical impingements' of connotations, and of depending only upon the 'logic of metaphor.' He aimed to express the kind of heightened consciousness that he evoked in 'Wine Menagerie,' the ecstasy that hovered between music and drunkenness. The resulting poems were very dense and obscure, though some of them, like his elegy 'Praise for an Urn,' were sustained by a compelling rhetoric. In his series of 'Voyages' this rhetoric took on a deep sonority in response to his feeling for the sea and Melville....

But he was already concerned with 'an almost complete reverse' of Eliot's direction. Instead of disillusion and renunciation he was bent upon 'a more positive goal,' and he defied his skeptical generation by affirming his belief in 'ecstatic vision.'...Unlike Rimbaud, as Allen Tate remarked, Crane did not cultivate 'derangement'; his disorder was ingrained and almost inescapable. No matter how strong his admiration for Whitman, his tortured sensibility was far more akin to Poe's, whose ghost he invoked in his hallucinated passage portraying the subway. He knew that the modern poet needs 'gigantic assimilative capacities,' and he struggled hard over his structure. But he came to depend more and more on an exaltation difficult to capture."

F. O. Matthiessen
The Literary History of the United States, 3rd edition
(Macmillan 1946-63) 1344-45

"His efforts to create an artistic 'shorthand,' to rid poetry of the rigidity of logical sequence and make his language the equivalent of a state of consciousness and immediate experience, led him to employ the methods of displacement familiar among contemporary artists in music and painting...The unit was the word, and, like the spot of color in pointillism, that word could be altered in various ways by the other words placed around it."

Barbara Herman
Sewanee Review
(January 1950) 61

"Essentially Crane was a poet of ecstasy or frenzy or intoxication; you can choose your own word depending on how much you like his work. Essentially he was using rhyme and meter and fantastic images to convey the emotional states that were induced in him by alcohol, jazz, machinery, laughter, intellectual stimulation, the shape and sound of words and the madness of New York in the late Coolidge era. At their worst his poems are ineffective unless read in something approximating the same atmosphere, with a drink at your elbow, the phonograph blaring and somebody shouting into your ear, 'Isn't that great!' At their best, however, the poems do their work unaided except by their proper glitter and violence."

Malcolm Cowley
Exile's Return
 (Viking 1951) 230-31

“Crane’s fame, it now appears, rests securely upon *The Bridge*, perhaps the most ambitious poem in English since ‘The Waste Land,’ to which it is in some ways similar, though it is neither as well unified nor as firmly sustained as Eliot’s masterpiece. In *The Bridge*, Crane was attempting a modern synthesis of the American experience....Crane’s aim was a noble one. If the poem does not entirely succeed, the chief reason may be found in the almost insuperable difficulties imposed by the conflicts and skepticisms of the ‘modern consciousness’.”

Walter Blair
The Literature of the United States 2
 (Scott, Foresman 1953-66) 1085

“The thirty-three years of Hart Crane’s dark and troubled life were not sufficient to develop the genius that was in him, but when he put an end to his life he left a small collection of lyric masterpieces and an American epic of major stature, *The Bridge*. His emotional disintegration resulted from psychological disturbances probably personal in origin rather than reflections of the spiritual disillusionment which prevailed among the literary generation of the first World War. He was only fifteen when the war began in Europe, and when he planned *The Bridge*, it was with the expressed determination to celebrate the unbroken stream of humanistic idealism that he saw in the American historical experience, in contrast with Eliot’s obituary for Western culture in ‘The Waste Land.’...”

His first volume, *White Buildings* (1926), established his reputation as a poet’s poet—not the same thing as winning an audience. He wrote slowly, a perfectionist painfully conscious of his relative lack of formal preparation for his task....Waldo Frank reports that the idea of taking Brooklyn Bridge as his basic symbol was suggested by the accident of his residence on Brooklyn Heights, in a mean room which nevertheless commanded a view of the great span from land to land, with the tides of humanity water-borne beneath it and flowing across it in ceaseless traffic. This conception of unity in diversity has obvious connections with American myth, and it occurs so often in Crane’s lyrics as to suggest that it had in addition a private emotional significance for him. The sea and the city also persist as symbols of unity—the sea, which merges the individual identity in the universal solution; the city, an aggregate of individuals coming together in meaningful relationships. With these, in *The Bridge*, he associated the stream of history and the stream of time.

The plan of the poem is simple: in a succession of cantos we follow the westward thrust of the bridge—our history and time-stream—into the body of America, the body of Pocahontas, twin symbol with the bridge of ‘the flesh our feet have moved upon.’ ‘Powhatan’s Daughter,’ the second poem, establishes the fertility myth; and a poem of Pocahontas, printed as a marginal gloss throughout the epic, is an idea in counterpoint to each successive theme. In ‘Van Winkle’ Pocahontas ‘like Memory...is time’s truant’ among the shades of our history and its myth. In the fourth canto, ‘The River’...Pocahontas merges with ‘the din and slogans’ of modern America, and takes us backward through time, down the rails, trails, and rivers to the first explorers and their legends. In the fifth canto, a wild and beautiful Indian dance-phantasy, the continental nature myth emerges, and the final canto of this sequence, ‘Indiana,’ is the idyl of the settled land of homes, farms, towns, and families. *The Bridge* acknowledges Man the creator, generic, anonymous, and, in the American experience, master of a wild continent, architect of its dream.”

Sculley Bradley, Richmond Croom Beatty, E. Hudson Long, eds.
The American Tradition in Literature 2, 3rd edition
 (Norton 1956-67) 1341-43

“Drawing back from the Poundian vortex, insisting mistakenly that Eliot had plunged all the way into it and was lost forever, Hart Crane and William Carlos Williams discovered that they were as a consequence in danger of falling under Whitman’s spell. They struggled to break free, to establish not only their own identities but those of their modern readers—who, if only they realized the claim that the dominating influence of Whitman’s poetry put upon them, would find that they also might be too easily spellbound.

The record of that struggle is in *The Bridge* (1930) and *Paterson* (1946-51), in which Whitman's hero—the simple separate person, yet democratic, en masse—tries to come of age....

For all his talk of 'myth,' he was really interested in magic—the magic of the word. He discovered that the possibilities for 'inflection' were limitless; he could put words in unusual contexts, work variations on their usual syntactic functions, create a grammar of his own. But he steadfastly believed that in this attempt to transform language, his role was passive. He was only bringing to realization a potential already in the words. He claimed to be working with a new and higher logic—anti-rational, freely associationist, powered by the dynamics of metaphor. Actually, he had just discovered the fact that making poems involves making linguistic innovations, and was totally unprepared for this discovery. Undisciplined as he was, impatient, possessed of a linguistic sensibility so powerful that it often evaporated his intelligence, he confused innovation with revolution. The references to philology and anthropology in the statement quoted above [from letter to Harriet Monroe, Editor of *Poetry*, on "At Melville's Tomb"] are pathetic—since it is such historical sciences which demonstrate that language, even in the machine age, has as one of its chief laws a form of the conservation of energy. Crane, we must surmise, came to feel that the power and the yearning in himself was actually in language. At the end he was still seeking what he called in the closing section of *The Bridge* a 'multitudinous Verb'."

Roy Harvey Pearce
The Continuity of American Poetry
(Princeton 1961) 101, 103-04

"In 1933 appeared Crane's *Collected Verse*. Incorporated in this, the earlier *White Buildings* signalizes at once both his debt to T. S. Eliot and his revolt against that Missouri Oxonian. Crane looked upon "For the Marriage of Faustus and Helen,' the major piece in this first volume, as 'an answer to the cultural pessimism' of Eliot. The Fausti of the world—its poets—are bidden to enjoy the evanescent yet perdurable beauty of its Helens. Bathing in the 'gleaming tides' cleanses one of pessimism and makes one newly generative, as it did Erasmus....Passionate perception rather than intellectual scrutiny is the proper character for the 'vision' of the poet. This idea is central in Crane and is his meaning when elsewhere he writes that 'wine redeems the sight.'...Rimbaud's methods and his effects were closely studied by the American—in technique Rimbaud was Hart Crane's master. But...Crane struggled to fuse more disparate impressions than Rimbaud ever brought together; he sought to reach the ultimate in aesthetic economy.... He is the Palinurus of American poets."

Max J. Herzberg & staff
The Reader's Encyclopedia of American Literature
(Crowell 1962)

"In his conclusion [Introduction to *White Buildings*], Tate admits what he considers a fault in the poetry he has defended so vigorously: an obscurity that 'is structural and deeper.' The reason for it, he believes, lies in 'the occasional failure of meeting between vision and subject. The vision often stains and overreaches the theme.' He finds the fault common since Baudelaire. 'It appears whenever the existing poetic order no longer supports the imagination. It appeared in the eighteenth century with the poetry of William Blake....' It was not the existing 'poetic' order that failed to give Blake support, but eighteenth-century rationalism and its way of getting at the true and the real. It was not the existing 'poetic' order that failed to support Crane's imagination—indeed, on the contrary, he felt very much a part of the *poetic* order, drawing heavily on Eliot, for example, for his style—it was early twentieth-century scientific naturalism that made him try to define and exemplify a 'logic' of the imagination that would be independent of the claims of 'ordinary' logic and 'fact.' Tate is prevented here from following up his insight by his devotion to Eliot and the idea of 'autotelic' art....

What we keep waiting for Tate to say, that never comes, is that Crane belongs in the tradition of nature mysticism defined for modern times by Blake and Wordsworth, Emerson and Whitman...In his best and most lasting work, Crane is a poet of mystic experience. The mystical tradition to which he turned in an attempt to articulate his experience was the typically American, and Romantic, and Transcendental 'way up'...This was what was available to him, chiefly through Whitman. If it did not entirely fit the needs of his temperament and the implications of all his experience, particularly in his last years, still it provided a

sufficient rationale for the best poems in *White Buildings*, particularly for 'Repose of Rivers' and most of the 'Voyages,' which seem to me the greatest mystical poems in America since early Whitman....

He is not, he says, an 'impressionist' (Imagist?), for the impressionist is not interested in the metaphysical causes of his material. He is not a 'realist (of the Zola type)' either, or a 'classicist.' He cites Blake in an effort to explain himself....Impressionists and the others, Crane believes, see only *with* the eye. (We recall Emerson's early definition of himself as a 'transparent eyeball.').....To have as one's purpose as a poet the discovery of 'spiritual illuminations' is to place oneself within the visionary and mystical tradition in poetry. To trust these illuminations to imply 'a morality essentialized from experience directly, and not from previous precepts or preconceptions,' is to continue to Emersonian adventure—though Crane was presumably not aware of it....'The Broken Tower' places Crane squarely within the Emerson-Whitman tradition. To return to the poems in *White Buildings*. Many of them are only experimental, several, like 'Chaplinesque,' are sentimental, and quite often they make the simple seem mysterious by leaving it obscure....

Along with 'Repose of Rivers,' 'Voyages II,' and the 'Proem' to *The Bridge*, 'Voyages VI' seems to me to be among the great poems of mystical experience in our literature. Crane never wrote quite so well again. The 'Proem' to *The Bridge* is a magnificent poem, but what it attempts is nowhere near so difficult as the attempt in 'Voyages VI.' *The Bridge* as a whole, though it is surely one of the several finest long poems in our literature, has been felt by almost all its readers to be uneven in the quality of its parts and to fail, despite its brilliance, to achieve the purposes Crane himself stated, and elaborated, for it. Insofar as the poem *does* fail to achieve its intention, perhaps it is partly because no poem could be expected to achieve all that Crane said he 'intended' in this poem. Crane's life was falling to pieces in the late 1920's. Alcoholism and inversion, increasingly rapid swings from exaltation to despair, a deepening sense of guilt, and a growing distrust of the experiences of illumination that had enabled him to write 'Voyages,' all put him very much on the defensive... He explained too much, claimed too much."

Hyatt H. Waggoner

American Poets: From the Puritans to the Present
(Houghton 1968) 494-501

"In his short life, Hart Crane left a small legacy of highly worked and powerfully thought-through poems in which the legacy of the modernist French poets Rimbaud and Mallarmé first entered our literature. Like Rimbaud in his 'Bateau Ivre,' Crane wrote a poetry of headlong momentum, his precipitous current flowing, like the Mississippi, toward a revelatory ocean. Like Mallarmé, Crane pressed syntax to its utmost compression, and by transferred epithets and paraphrases he made up a heady texture rich with music and light. Crane's poems name Emily Dickinson, Herman Melville, and Walt Whitman as his predecessors, but Robert Lowell was right in calling Crane 'the Shelley of our age'; Crane had learned from Shelley the ecstatic hope and incandescent love that opposed themselves to skepticism and irony, which they both nonetheless knew well....

Although the surface of Crane's poetry is difficult, behind his opaque texture lie careful reasons for his choice of words, as his patient letters to his friends show and as close reading will confirm. He had epic ambitions (fulfilled only partly by his sequence *The Bridge*), and many of his poems attempt epic scope within a lyric compass as they retell a decisive journey or voyage. They do this with a profound commitment to modernity. The modern poet must, Crane thought, 'absorb the machine.' In opposing himself to Eliot's more conservative Europeanizing of American poetry, Crane looked resolutely not eastward to Europe but westward to America's frontiers....

In 1930, after the publication of *The Bridge* (to mixed reviews), Crane received a Guggenheim fellowship and traveled to Mexico, but it became increasingly difficult for him to write. In the brief peaceful period with Peggy Cowley, he completed his last lyric, 'The Broken Tower.' In it what Crane called 'the logic of metaphor' appears fully coherent, and the poem becomes an example of the sort of verse that would assemble itself into one great organized 'single new word, never before spoken.' At their best, Crane's assimilative powers produce a poetry that is at once rapidly cumulative and disintegrating, in which atmospheres dissolve as fast as they are created. This instability of essence in Crane affronted

conservative critics, among them Yvor Winters, who argued that Crane's suicide was the logical result of his Emersonian and Whitmanesque individualism.

Crane's ambition was halted by his rapidly worsening alcoholism. But he left, besides the uneven *Bridge*, many exquisite smaller pieces (from the tender 'Chaplinsque' to the symphonic *Voyages*) by which he will be remembered, and in his essays and letters he bequeathed a strict body of working aesthetic theory. Its chief tenet is the forsaking of a discursive or expository appearance to the poem. The logic of the poem must be impeccable, but it is not the explanatory or instructional logic of versified prose. Instead, the logic of the poem is associational, governed by the succession of feelings acted out by the words of the poem. Crane often uses transferred epithets—for example, 'adagios of islands'—to combine two ideas—here, moving slowly (as in a musical adagio) and an ocean voyage through islands. Such writing conveys much information in a small compass, and subsequent poets (especially Robert Lowell in his sonnets and Allen Ginsberg in his telegraphic descriptions) have learned to write in Crane's rapid notation. In turning poetry away from the instructional and toward the associational, Crane taught other poets how to render brilliant impressions, in language duplicating the dazzling multiplicity of human sensations and thoughts."

Helen Vendler
The Harper American Literature 2
(Harper & Row 1987) 1689-91

"Hart Crane was a poet of lyric intensity and power who aspired to write an American epic. He wanted to stretch language beyond simple referentiality; at the same time he aimed to make his poetry convey a positive vision of American life and history. In method, he was drawn to the verbal complexities of the French symbolists and the English metaphysical poets; in subject, he was attracted to a Whitmanesque vision of America, to the spiritualizing union of love, and to the perfection of art....Crane's poetry is marked by visionary power, verbal difficulty, jammed syntax. Among modernist poets, Crane is remarkable for the affirmation of his cultural vision and the density and richness of his language."

The subject of his first poems was the poet or the artist victimized by society, and two of his best early poems, 'Black Tambourine' and 'Chaplinsque,' treat the poet as an outcast—like the black man in America or the tramp portrayed by Charlie Chaplin. Crane's next major project was inspired by a reading of T. S. Eliot's 'The Waste Land,' which he judged as good but 'so damned dead.' His ambition was to take Eliot as a point of departure in a different direction and to write about twentieth-century industrial and urban America as a place of spiritual vision....His hope is personal as well as cultural; he longed for a private dimensional world that could accommodate his love of beauty, his homosexuality, his need for financial and emotional support."

Margaret Dickie
The Heath Anthology of American Literature 2
(D. C. Heath 1990) 1433-34

Michael Hollister (2015)