

INTRODUCTION



Hart Crane

(1899-1932)

Hart Crane was a suicidal Romantic Modernist who wrote a few poems such as “Black Tambourine” outstanding for their metaphorical brilliance, musical rhythms, lyrical power and a density of implications comparable to that in James Joyce. At his best, Crane’s compression, intensity, cryptic syntax and mystical inclinations make him comparable to Emily Dickinson. Like Ezra Pound he rejected exposition in poetry. Pound advocated that poetry be musical in progression rather than logical, whereas Crane advocated “associational” poetry governed by a succession of feelings—“the logic of metaphor.” Crane thought that in a poem figurative meaning did not have to make literal sense, an argument for Expressionism. In his major effort, he set out to counter T.S. Eliot’s “The Waste Land” (1922), which he saw as pessimistic, with *The Bridge* (1930), an optimistic epic of America in the tradition of Walt Whitman. Though the work contains passages of great visionary power and vivid detail, he faltered when he lost faith in his vision and succumbed to despair. In the end, ironically, he confirmed the vision of Eliot.

BIOGRAPHY

Crane was born an only child in Cleveland, Ohio, the son of the candy manufacturer who invented Life Savers. His father wanted to make a man of him, but his mother wanted to possess him. Neither of his parents were life savers. They quarreled violently, made his home life chaotic and got divorced when he was a teenager. Crane began writing poetry at age 13 and dropped out of high school in his junior year after his mother kept interrupting his schooling by taking him along with her on trips. Tennessee Williams, seeing a parallel to his own life, wrote a dramatic piece about Crane’s troubled relationship with his mother, “Steps Must Be Gentle.” At age 17 Crane left home and worked for 6 months on his grandfather’s fruit ranch, then he moved to New York City to write.

He promised his parents he would go to college later, but he kept postponing his formal education, working irregular jobs and depending on relatives for support while he educated himself by reading Marlowe, Donne, Poe, Melville, Whitman, Rimbaud, Laforgue, Dostoevski, Edgar Lee Masters, Sherwood Anderson, Yeats, Pound, Eliot, and other poets in the current experimental literary magazines. He published his first poem at the age of 17 and then began publishing poems in some of the most prestigious little magazines, including *Little Review*, *Poetry* and *The Dial*. Harriet Monroe and Marianne Moore published his work, though both were critical of his aesthetics. In his poetry Crane cites his affinities with Dickinson, Melville and Whitman, while critics have emphasized Rimbaud and Mallarmé as influences. The subject of his first poems was the poet or artist as a victim of society. As a homosexual, he had an additional reason to feel victimized. He may also have been affected in his behavior by the examples of the fatalistic Poe and the reckless Rimbaud.

CAREER

From 1917 to 1924 he moved back and forth between New York City and Ohio, writing ad copy and working for his father, but he failed at business and was a poor salesman. He settled in New York, still dependent on his family for support and moving from one friend's apartment to another. In 1923 the dramatist Eugene O'Neill took his weekend houseguests Hart Crane and the literary critic Malcolm Cowley down into the cellar of his house in Connecticut, where they drank pitchers of homemade hard cider from three 50-gallon casks. Cowley went to bed after midnight. O'Neill and Crane drank all night and through the next day. In 1925 Crane completed *Voyages*, a sequence of love poems for a sailor he lived with on Brooklyn Heights, where he had an inspiring view out the window of the Brooklyn Bridge. His first book *White Buildings* (1926) contains most of his best poems and made his reputation. He spent the summer of that year living in his grandmother's home on the Isle of Pines, Cuba. His creativity peaked and he wrote 10 of the 15 separate poems of his epic *The Bridge*.

Back in New York the poet also became known for dismaying his many friends with violent alcoholic rages and for getting beaten up by sailors on the waterfront. He often threatened to kill himself. In response to his appeal for support, the businessman Otto Kahn became Crane's patron. In addition to contributions from family and friends, a capitalist made possible the writing of *The Bridge* (1930)—“a mystical synthesis of America”—one of the three epic poems attempted by the Modernists, following Pound's ongoing *Cantos* (1919-70) and preceding Williams' *Paterson* (1946-58).

In 1929, the year of the stock market crash, Crane visited Paris while struggling to finish *The Bridge*. Mostly he drank and crashed. At a Left Bank café he argued over the tab and got into a fight with waiters, who called the police. Then he got into a fight with the police, who arrested him. He spent 6 days in jail before his publisher Harry Crosby paid his fine. In the end he got deported. While he was the house guest of Crosby and his wife, he cruised. Crosby wrote in a letter: “Hart C. back from Marseilles where he slept with his thirty sailors and he began again to drink.” One morning Mrs. Crosby went into his room after he had left for the day and found black smudges all over the room: “On the wallpaper and across the pale pink spread, up and down the curtains and over the white chenille rug...the blackest footprints and handprints I have ever seen, hundreds of them.” Crane had picked up a chimney-sweep.

HANDICAPS

Crane had too many handicaps to overcome: (1) lack of much ordinary life experience; (2) lack of education; (3) misreading of ‘The Waste Land’; (4) alcoholism that quickly ruined his health; (5) guilt for repeated outbursts of drunken violence; (6) need to proposition sailors in dockside bars; (7) feeling inauthentic for not being a true mystic like Whitman; (8) loss of faith in his own vision; (9) mixed and poor reviews of *The Bridge*; (10) self-destructive, impulsive Romanticism as described by the Neoclassical critic Yvor Winters, who knew Crane.

DEATH

After publication of *The Bridge*, Crane was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship. He moved to Taxco, Mexico, into a community of artists, where he began a poem about Montezuma. He soon got into trouble with authorities there for public drunkenness and homosexual encounters with young Indian boys. Then the estranged wife of the prominent critic Malcolm Cowley showed up in Taxco. Peggy Cowley had agreed to give Malcolm a divorce and now she became involved with Crane, who felt elated by (presumably) his first heterosexual relationship. The two even planned to return to New York and get married—but they soon quarreled. Crane was often violent, picking fights and smashing anything. After fights he would go out hunting for an Indian boy. Then he felt guilty, then he drank more, then he went out hunting for boys again and then he felt guilty.

On one occasion when Peggy Cowley had women guests, Crane got drunk and threatened suicide. He would drink iodine. He tipped up the bottle—but the women stopped him. Another time he succeeded and had to be taken to a hospital and have his stomach pumped to remove Mercurochrome. The evening before he and Mrs. Cowley were to take a steamship to New York and get married, he tried to pick up a sailor in

the crew's quarters and got beaten up. Drunk on the return voyage, he got upset with Mrs. Cowley. He tried to climb the railing of the ship but was pulled back by a steward and locked in his cabin. He kept drinking. Before lunch he escaped and went to Mrs. Cowley's cabin wearing pajamas and a coat. She asked him to get properly dressed. "I'm not going to make it, dear. I'm utterly disgraced." When she urged him to prepare for lunch, he uttered his last words: "All right, dear. Goodbye."

Just before noon he threw off his coat, stepped up onto the steamship railing and jumped overboard into the Gulf of Mexico. Passengers rushed to the railing and watched him swim rapidly away from the ship. Four lifeboats were lowered. The search went on for two hours. Crane was never seen again. According to John Dos Passos, the last his friends on deck saw of him was a cheerful wave of his hand before he sank out of sight. "That last friendly wave was very like Hart Crane."

Michael Hollister

CRANE DISCUSSES *THE BRIDGE* (1930)

"The more I think about my *Bridge* poem the more thrilling its symbolical possibilities become.... I begin to feel myself directly connected with Whitman. I feel in myself currents that are positively awesome in their extent and possibilities...."

Hart Crane

Letter to Gorham Munson (2 March 1923)

Letters, 1916-1932

(New York, 1952) 128

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"The form of my poem rises out of a past that so overwhelms the present with its worth and vision that I'm at a loss to explain my delusion that there exist any real links between that past and a future destiny worthy of it.... Rimbaud was the last great poet that our civilization will see—he let off all the great cannon crackers in Valhalla's parapets, the sun has set theatrically several times since while Laforgue, Eliot and others of that kidney have whimpered fastidiously. *Everybody* writes poetry now—and 'poets' for the first time are about to receive official social and economic recognition in America. It's really all the fashion, but a dead bore to anticipate. If only America were half as worthy today to be spoken of as Whitman spoke of it fifty years ago there might be something for me to say—not that Whitman received or required any tangible proof of his intimations, but that time has shown how increasingly lonely and ineffectual his confidence stands."

Letter to Waldo Frank

(20 June 1926)

"Very roughly, the poem concerns a mystical synthesis of America. History and fact, location, etc., all have to be transfigured into abstract form.... The initial impulses of our people will have to be gathered up toward the climax of the bridge, symbol of our constructive future, our unique identity, in which is also included our scientific hopes and achievements of the future...."

What I am after is an assimilation of this [the American] experience, a more organic panorama, showing the continuous and living evidence of the past in the inmost vital substance of the present.... What I am really handling, you see, is the Myth of America.... I am really writing an epic of the modern consciousness.... The subway is simply a figurative, psychological 'vehicle' for transporting the reader to the Middle West. He lands on the railroad tracks in the company of several tramps in the twilight. The extravagance of the first twenty-three lines of this section is an intentional burlesque on the cultural confusion of the present—a great conglomeration of noises analogous to the strident impression of a fast express rushing by. The rhythm is jazz. Thenceforward the rhythm settles down to a steady pedestrian gait, like that of wanderers plodding along. My tramps are psychological vehicles, also. Their wanderings, as you will notice, carry the reader into interior after interior, all of it funneled by the Mississippi. They are the leftovers of the pioneers in at least this respect—that abstractly their wanderings carry the reader through certain experiences roughly parallel to that of the traders, adventurers, Boone and others. I think I have caught some of the essential spirit of the Great Valley here...."

Letter to Otto Kahn
(12 September 1927)

“The spiritual disintegration of our period becomes more painful to me every day, so much so that I now find myself balked by doubt at the validity of practically every metaphor that I coin.”

Letter to Munson
(April 1928)

