

Modern Critical Views

HART CRANE

Edited and with an introduction by
HAROLD BLOOM



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Harold Bloom

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Hart Crane, who loved Brooklyn Bridge, and conceived his epic of America in its image, is shown against the background of what he called its "harp and altar, of the fury fused." It was for him the great Whitmanian trope for poetic crossing, for the visionary point of transition between the American past and the uncertain national future.—H.B.

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Modern Critical Views

HART CRANE

Editor's Note

This volume gathers together a representative selection of the best criticism devoted to the poetry of Hart Crane. After my "Introduction," the essays are arranged in the chronological order of publication, from R. P. Blackmur's essay of 1935 to Lee Edelman's analysis of "Voyages," first published in this volume a half-century later. Blackmur's New Critical exegesis is printed here as the best instance of that school's judgment of Crane as a distinguished failure, a judgment that can be traced also in the writings on Crane by Allen Tate and Yvor Winters.

A juster approach is evidenced by Marius Bewley's careful reading of "The Broken Tower," and is carried on by Harvey Gross in his study of Crane's metric, and by Alan Trachtenberg in his analysis of the Brooklyn Bridge as Crane's prime symbol. The new view of *The Bridge* taken by Thomas A. Vogler is High Romantic, and is consonant with the major studies on Crane by Joseph Riddel, R. W. B. Lewis and Sherman Paul, all of whom relate Crane to the American Romantic tradition.

A more dialectical criticism is inaugurated by John T. Irwin's reading of Crane's tropes in a Freudian context, which can be contrasted with my antithetical reading of Crane's gnosis in the "Introduction." The essays by Donald Pease, Allen Grossman and Lee Edelman reflect in very different ways the influence of current advanced modes of criticism upon the reading of Crane.

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Introduction

O Thou steeled Cognizance whose leap commits
The agile precincts of the lark's return. . . .

I remember reading these lines when I was ten years old, crouched over Crane's book in a Bronx library. They, and much else in the book, cathected me onto poetry, a conversion or investment fairly typical of many in my generation. I still have the volume of Crane that I persuaded my older sister to give me on my twelfth birthday, the first book I ever owned. Among my friends there are a few others who owned Crane before any other book. Growing up in the thirties, we were found by Crane's poetry, and though other poets followed (I went from Crane to Blake) the strength of first love still hovers whenever they, or I, read Crane.

The Marlovian rhetoric swept us in, but as with Marlowe himself the rhetoric was also a psychology and a knowing, rather than a knowledge, a knowing that precisely can be called a Gnosis, transcending the epistemology of tropes. What the Australian poet Alec Hope, echoing Tamburlaine, perceptively called "The Argument of Arms" is as much Crane's knowing and language as it was Marlowe's. "Know ye not the argument of arms?" Tamburlaine calls out to his protesting generals before he stabs his own son to death for cowardice. As Hope expounds it, "the argument of arms" is poetic warfare, the agonistic interplay of the Sublime mode:

There is no middle way and no compromise in such a world. Beauty is the rival of beauty as force of force, and only the supreme and perfect survives. Defeat, like victory, is total, absolute, final.

This is indeed Marlowe's knowing, and it would be pointless for a humanist critic to complain that such a vision is human-all-too-human. *Power* is the central poetic concept in Marlowe as it will be in Milton, and as it came to be in the American Milton, Emerson (a prose Milton, granted), and in Crane as a kind of American Marlowe. Hope rightly points to Hazlitt on *Coriolanus* as the proper theorist of the union of the Argument of Arms and the Argument of Poetry. Hazlitt also would not gain the approval of the natural supernaturalist kind of critical humanist:

The principle of poetry is a very anti-leveling principle. It aims at effect,

it exists by contrast. It admits of no medium. It is everything by excess. It rises above the ordinary standard of sufferings and crimes.

But Crane is a prophet of American Orphism, of the Emersonian and Whitmanian Native Strain in our national literature. His poetic of power is therefore best caught by the American theorist proper:

. . . though Fate is immense, so is Power, which is the other fact in the dual world, immense. If Fate follows and limits Power, Power attends and antagonizes Fate. We must respect Fate as natural history. For who and what is this criticism that pries into the matter? Man is not order of nature, sack and sack, belly and members, link in a chain, nor any ignominious baggage; but a stupendous antagonism, a dragging together of the poles of the Universe. . . .

This might be Melville, meditating upon his own Ahab, but of course it is the uncanny Sage of Concord, satirized by Melville as Plotinus Plinlimmon and as Confidence Man; yet the satire was uneasy. Crane is not very easy to satirize either, and like Shelley, with whom his affinities were deep, Crane goes on burying his critical undertakers. Whitman and Dickinson, Frost and Stevens all had time enough, but Crane, perhaps more gifted than any of them, was finished at an age when they had begun weakly or not at all. A Gnosis of man as a stupendous antagonism, Orphic and Promethean, needs time to work itself through, but time, reviled by all Gnostics with a particular vehemence, had its literal triumph over Crane. As with Shelley and Keats, we have a truncated canon, and yet, as with them, what we have is overwhelming. And what it overwhelms, amidst much else, is any privileging of understanding as an epistemological event, prior to being the catastrophe creation of an aesthetic and spiritual value.

I am concerned here with Crane's "religion" *as a poet* (not as a man, since that seems an inchoate mixture of a Christian Science background, an immersion in Ouspensky, and an all but Catholic yearning). But by poetic "religion" I mean American Orphism, the Emersonian or national religion of our poetry, which Crane inherited, quite directly, from his prime precursor Whitman. True precursors are always composite and imaginary, the son's changeling-fantasy of the father that his own poetry reinvents, and there is usually a near-contemporary agon, as well as a struggle with the fathering force of the past. The older contemporary antagonist and shaper for Crane was certainly Eliot, whose anti-Romantic polemic provoked in Crane an answering fury of High Romanticism, absurdly undervalued by Crane's critical contemporaries, but returning to its mainstream status in the generation that receives the recent abundance of poetic maturation in Ashbery, Merrill, Ammons, Hollander and others.

The governing deities of American Orphism, as of the ancient sort, are Eros or Phanes, Dionysus or Bacchus, and Ananke, the Necessity who

appears as the maternal ocean in Whitman and Crane most overtly, but clearly and obsessively enough in Stevens also. Not so clear, though just as obsessive, must be our judgment upon Melville's representations of an Orphic Ananke in the great shroud of the sea. Melville's "that man should be a thing for immortal souls to sieve through!" is the apt epigraph of a crucial chapter on Greek Shamanism in E. R. Dodds's great book *The Greeks and the Irrational*. Dodds traced to Scythia the new Orphic religious pattern that credited man with an occult self of divine origin. This self was not the *psyche*, but the daemon; as Dodds says, "the function of the daemon is to be the carrier of man's potential divinity and actual guilt." Crane's daemon or occult self, like Whitman's, is the actual hero and victim of his own poetry. Crane as American Orpheus is an inevitable image, exploited already by writers as diverse as Yvor Winters in his elegy for Crane and Tennessee Williams in *Suddenly Last Summer*. The best of the Orphic hymns to Crane is the astonishing poem *Fish Food* of John Brooks Wheelwright, except that Crane wrote his own best Orphic elegy in "Atlantis," his close equivalent of Shelley's *Adonais*. But I narrow my subject here of Crane's "Orphism" down to its visionary epistemology or Gnosis. Crane's Eros, his Dionysus, above all his Whitmanian Ananke, remain to be explored, but in these remarks I concern myself only with Crane as "daemon," a potential divinity knowing simultaneously its achievement and its guilt.

The assumption of that daemon, or what the poets of Sensibility called "the incarnation of the Poetic Character," is the inner plot of many of the lyrics in *White Buildings*. The *kenosis* or ebbing-away of the daemon is the plot of the *Voyages* sequence, where the other Orphic deities reduce Crane to a "derelict and blinded guest" of his own vision, and where the "ocean rivers" churn up the Orphic heritage as a "splintered garland for the seer." Certainly the most ambitious of the daemoniac incarnations is the sequence *For the Marriage of Faustus and Helen*, which is Crane at his most triumphantly Marlovian, but so much else is at play there that I turn to two lesser but perfect hymns of Orphic incarnation, *Repose of Rivers* and *Passage*.

Crane is a great master of transumptive allusion, of achieving poetic closure by a final trope that reverses or sometimes even transcends both his own lyric's dominant figurations and the poetic tradition's previous exploitations of these images. So, *Repose of Rivers* concludes:

. . . There, beyond the dykes

I heard wind flaking sapphire, like this summer,
And willows could not hold more steady sound.

The poem's opening stanza gives a more complex version of that "steady sound" because the synaesthetic seeing/hearing of "that seething, steady leveling of the marshes" is both an irony and an oxymoron:

The willows carried a slow sound,
A sarabande the wind mowed on the mead.
I could never remember
That seething, steady leveling of the marshes
Till age had brought me to the sea.

Crane is recalling his version of a Primal Scene of Instruction, a moment renewing itself discontinuously at scattered intervals, yet always for him a moment relating the inevitability of sexual orientation to the assumption of his poethood. The slow-and-steady dance of the wind on the marshes became a repressed memory until "age" as maturation brought the poet to the sea, central image of necessity in his poetry, and a wounding synecdoche here for an acceptance of one's particular fate as a poet. The repressed reveals itself as a grotesque sublimity, with the second stanza alluding to Melville's imagery in his story *The Encantadas*:

Flags, weeds. And remembrance of steep alcoves
Where cypresses shared the noon's
Tyranny; they drew me into hades almost.
And mammoth turtles climbing sulphur dreams
Yielded, while sun-silt rippled them
Asunder . . .

The seething, steady leveling of the mammoth turtles, their infernal love-death, is a kind of sarabande also. In climbing one another they climb dreams of self-immolation, where "yielded" means at once surrender to death and to one another. The terrible slowness of their love-making yields the frightening trope: "sun-silt rippled them / Asunder," where "asunder" is both the post-coition parting and the individual turtle death. Crane and D. H. Lawrence had in common as poets only their mutual devotion to Whitman, and it is instructive to contrast this stanza of *Repose of Rivers* with the Tortoise-series of Lawrence in *Birds, Beasts, and Flowers*. Lawrence's tortoises are crucified into sex, like Lawrence himself. Crane's Melvillean turtles are crucified by sex. But Crane tells a different story about himself: crucified into poetry and by poetry. The turtles are drawn into a sexual hades; Crane is *almost* drawn, with the phrase "hades almost" playing against "steep alcoves." Embowered by steep alcoves of cypresses, intensifying the dominant noon sun, Crane nearly yields to the sexual phantasmagoria of "flags, weeds," and the sound play alcoves/almost intensifies the narrowness of the escape from a primary sexuality, presum-

ably an incestuous heterosexuality. This is the highly oblique burden of the extraordinary third stanza:

How much I would have bartered! the black gorge
And all the singular nestings in the hills
Where beavers learn stitch and tooth.
The pond I entered once and quickly fled—
I remember now its singing willow rim.

What he would have bartered, indeed did barter, was nature for poetry. Where the second stanza was a *kenosis*, an emptying-out, of the Orphic self, this stanza is fresh influx, and what returns from repression is poetic apperception: "I remember now its singing willow rim," a line that reverberates greatly against the first and last lines of the entire poem. The surrendered Sublime here is a progressive triad of entities: the Wordsworthian Abyss of birth of "the black gorge"; "the singular nestings," instructive of work and of aggression; most memorably the pond, rimmed by singing willows, whose entrance actually marks the momentary daring of the representation of Oedipal trespass, or perhaps for Crane one should say "Orphic trespass."

If everything heretofore in *Repose of Rivers* has been bartered for the antithetical gift of Orpheus, what remains is to represent the actual passage into sexuality, and after that the poetic maturation that follows homosexual self-acceptance. Whether the vision here is of an actual city, or of a New Orleans of the mind, as at the end of the "River" section of *The Bridge*, the balance of pleasure and of pain is left ambiguous:

And finally, in that memory all things nurse;
After the city that I finally passed
With scalding unguents spread and smoking darts
The monsoon cut across the delta
At gulf gates . . . There, beyond the dykes

I heard wind flaking sapphire, like this summer,
And willows could not hold more steady sound.

The third line of the stanza refers both to the pathos of the city and to Crane's own sexual initiation. But since "all things nurse" this memory, the emphasis must be upon breakthrough, upon the contrast between monsoon and the long-obliterated memory of sarabande-wind. "Like this summer," the fictive moment of the lyric's composition, the monsoon of final sexual alignment gave the gift of an achieved poethood, to hear wind synaesthetically, flaking sapphire, breaking up yet also distributing the Shelleyan azure of vision. In such a context, the final line massively gathers an Orphic confidence.

Yet every close reader of Crane learns to listen to the wind for evidences of *sparagmos*, of the Orphic breakup, as prevalent in Crane's winds as in Shelley's, or in Whitman's. I turn to *Passage*, *White Buildings*'s particular poem of Orphic disincarnation, where the rite of passage, the movement back to unfindable and fictive origins, is celebrated more memorably in the opening quatrain than anywhere else even in Crane, who is clearly the great modern poet of *thresholds*, in the sense definitively expounded in Angus Fletcher's forthcoming book of that title.

Where the cedar leaf divides the sky
I heard the sea.
In sapphire arenas of the hills
I was promised an improved infancy.

The Fletcherian *threshold* is a daemonic crossing or textual "image of voice," to use Wordsworth's crucial term. Such a chiasmus tends to hover where tropes collide in an epistemological wilderness. Is there a more outrageously American, Emersonian concept and phrase than "an improved infancy"? Crane presumably was not aware that *Passage* centered itself so directly at the Wordsworthian heart of the crisis poem, in direct competition with *Tintern Abbey* and the *Intimations of Immortality* ode. But the American version as established in the *Seadrift* poems of Whitman was model enough. Crane, inland far though he finds himself, hears the sea. The soft inland murmur promised Wordsworth so improved an infancy that it became an actual intimation of a more-than-poetic immortality. But for Whitman the secret of the murmuring he envied had to be listened for at the water-line. Crane quests for the same emblem that rewarded *Repose of Rivers*, but here the wind does not flake sapphire in the arenas of these inland hills, where the agon with the daemon, Whitman's dusky demon and brother, is to take place.

In Whitman's great elegy of Orphic disincarnation, *As I Ebb'd with the Ocean of Life*, the daemon comes to the poet in the shape of a sardonic phantom, "the real Me," and confronts Whitman, who may hold his book, *Leaves of Grass*, in hand, since the phantom is able to point to it:

But that before all my arrogant poems the real Me stands yet untouch'd,
untold, altogether unreach'd,
Withdrawn far, mocking me with mock-congratulatory signs and bows,
With peals of distant ironical laughter at every word I have written,
Pointing in silence to these songs, and then to the sand beneath.
I perceive I have never really understood any thing, not a single object,
and that no man ever can,
Nature here in sight of the sea taking advantage of me to dart upon
me and sting me,
Because I have dared to open my mouth to sing at all.

In Crane's *Passage* the sulking poet, denied his promise, abandons memory in a ravine, and tries to identify himself with the wind; but it dies, and he is turned back and around to confront his mocking daemon:

Touching an opening laurel, I found
A thief beneath, my stolen book in hand.

It is deliberately ambiguous whether the real Me has stolen the book, or whether the book of Hart Crane itself is stolen property. Unlike the abashed Whitman, Crane is aggressive, and his phantom is lost in wonderment:

“Why are you back here—smiling an iron coffin?”
“To argue with the laurel,” I replied:
“Am justified in transience, fleeing
Under the constant wonder of your eyes—.”

But nature here, suddenly in sight of the sea, does take advantage of Crane to dart upon him and sting him, because he has dared to open his mouth to sing at all:

He closed the book. And from the Ptolemies
Sand troughed us in a glittering abyss.
A serpent swam a vertex to the sun
—On unpaced beaches learned its tongue and drummed.
What fountains did I hear? what icy speeches?
Memory, committed to the page, had broke.

The Ptolemies, alluded to here as though they were a galaxy rather than a dynasty, help establish the pyramid image for the serpent who touches its apex in the sun. The glittering abyss belongs both to time and the sun, and the serpent, drumming its tongue upon the beach where no Whitmanian bard paces, is weirdly prophetic of the imagery of Stevens's *The Auroras of Autumn*. The penultimate line glances obliquely at Coleridge's *Kubla Khan*, and the poem ends appropriately with the broken enchantment of memory, broken in the act of writing the poem. It is as though, point for point, *Passage* had undone *Repose of Rivers*.

The Bridge can be read as the same pattern of Orphic incarnation/disincarnation, with every Sublime or daemonic vision subsequently undone by an ebbing-out of poethood. That reading, though traditional, seems to me a weak misreading, inadequate to *The Bridge's* strong misreadings of its precursors. Nietzsche and Pater, both of whom Crane had pondered, taught a subtler *askesis*, and *The Bridge* advances upon *White Buildings* (except for *Voyages*), by mounting a powerful scheme of transumption, of what Nietzsche called the poetic will's revenge against time and

particularly against time's proclamation of belatedness: "It was." Crane shrewdly wrote, in 1918: "one may envy Nietzsche a little; think of being so elusive,—so mercurial, as to be first swallowed whole, then coughed up, and still remain a mystery!" But veteran readers of Crane learn to observe something like that when confronted by the majesty of *The Bridge* at its finest, as here in the final quatrains of the "Proem":

Again the traffic lights that skim thy swift
Unfractioned idiom, immaculate sigh of stars,
Beading thy path—condense eternity:
And we have seen night lifted in thine arms.

Under thy shadow by the piers I waited;
Only in darkness is thy shadow clear.
The City's fiery parcels all undone,
Already snow submerges an iron year . . .

O Sleepless as the river under thee,
Vaulting the sea, the prairies' dreaming sod,
Unto us lowliest sometime sweep, descend
And of the curveship lend a myth to God.

Crane in *White Buildings* is wholly Orphic, in that his concern is his relation, as poet, to his own vision, rather than *with* the content of poetic vision, to utilize a general distinction inaugurated by Northrop Frye, following after Ruskin. The peculiar power of *The Bridge* at its strongest, is that Crane succeeds in becoming what Pater and Nietzsche urged the future poet to be: an ascetic of the spirit, which is an accurate definition of a purified Gnosis. Directly before these three final quatrains of "To Brooklyn Bridge," Crane had saluted the bridge first as Orphic emblem, both harp and altar, but then as the threshold of the full triad of the Orphic destiny: Dionysus or prophet's pledge, Ananke or prayer of pariah, and Eros, the lover's cry. It is after the range of relations to his own vision has been acknowledged and accepted that a stronger Crane achieves the Gnosis of those three last quatrains. There the poet remains present, but only as a knowing Abyss, contemplating the content of that knowing, which is a fullness or presence he can invoke but scarcely share. He sees "night lifted in thine arms"; he waits, for a shadow to clarify in darkness; he knows, yet what he knows is a vaulting, a sweep, a descent, above all a curveship, a realization of an angle of vision not yet his own.

This peculiarly effective stance has a precursor in Shelley's visionary skepticism, particularly in his final phase of *Adonais* and *The Triumph of Life*. Crane's achievement of this stance is the still-unexplored origin of *The Bridge*, but the textual evolution of "Atlantis," the first section of the

visionary epic to be composed, is the probable area that should be considered. Lacking space here, I point instead to the achieved stance of *Voyages VI* as the earliest full instance of Crane's mature Orphism, after which I will conclude with a reading of "Atlantis" and a brief glance at Crane's testament, *The Broken Tower*.

The governing deities of the *Voyages* sequence are Eros and Ananke, or Emil Oppfer and the Caribbean as Whitmanian fierce old mother moaning for her castaways. But the Orphic Dionysus, rent apart by Titanic forces, dominates the sixth lyric, which like Stevens's *The Paltry Nude Starts upon a Spring Journey* partly derives from Pater's description of Botticelli's Venus in *The Renaissance*. Pater's sado-masochistic maternal love-goddess, with her eyes smiling "unsearchable repose," becomes Crane's overtly destructive muse, whose seer is no longer at home in his own vision:

My eyes pressed black against the prow,
—Thy derelict and blinded guest

Waiting, afire, what name, unspoke,
I cannot claim: let thy waves rear

More savage than the death of kings,
Some splintered garland for the seer.

The unspoken, unclaimed name is that of Orpheus, in his terrible final phase of "floating singer." Crane's highly deliberate echo of Shakespeare's Richard II at his most self-destructively masochistic is assimilated to the poetic equivalent, which is the splintering of the garland of laurel. Yet the final stanza returns to the central image of poetic incarnation in Crane, *Repose of Rivers* and its "hushed willows":

The imaged Word, it is, that holds
Hushed willows anchored in its glow.
It is the unbetrayable reply
Whose accent no farewell can know.

This is the achieved and curiously firm balance of a visionary skepticism, or the Orphic stance of *The Bridge*. It can be contrasted to Lawrence again, in the "Orphic farewell" of *Medlars and Sorb Apples* in *Birds, Beasts and Flowers*. For Lawrence, Orphic assurance is the solipsism of an "intoxication of perfect loneliness." Crane crosses that intoxication by transuming his own and tradition's trope of the hushed willows as signifying an end to solitary mourning, and a renewal of poetic divination. *Voyages VI* turns its "imaged Word" against Eliot's neo-orthodox Word, or Christ, and Whitman's Word out of the Sea, or death, death that is the

Oedipal merging back into the mother. Crane ends upon “know” because knowledge, and not faith, is his religious mode, a Gnosis that is more fully developed in *The Bridge*.

The dozen octaves of the final version of “Atlantis” show Crane in his mastery of the traditional Sublime, and are wholly comparable to the final seventeen stanzas of Shelley’s *Adonais*. Crane’s absolute music, like Plato’s, “is then the knowledge of that which relates to love in harmony and system,” but Crane’s love is rather more like Shelley’s desperate and skeptical outleaping than it is like Diotima’s vision. For six stanzas, Crane drives upward, in a hyperbolic arc whose burden is agonistic, struggling to break beyond every achieved Sublime in the language. This agon belongs to the Sublime, and perhaps in America it is the Sublime. But such an agon requires particular contestants, and “Atlantis” finds them in *The Waste Land* and, yet more repressedly, in Whitman’s *Crossing Brooklyn Ferry*, the great addition to the second, 1856, *Leaves of Grass*, and Thoreau’s favorite poem by Whitman.

Much of Crane’s struggle with Eliot was revised out of the final “Atlantis,” but only as overt textual traces; the deep inwardness of the battle is recoverable. Two modes of phantasmagoria clash:

Through the bound cable strands, the arching path
Upward, veering with light, the flight of strings,—
Taut miles of shuttling moonlight syncopate
The whispered rush, telepathy of wires.
Up the index of night, granite and steel—
Transparent meshes—fleckless the gleaming staves—
Sibylline voices flicker, waveringly stream
As though a god were issue of the strings. . . .

A woman drew her long black hair out tight
And fiddled whisper music on those strings
And bats with baby faces in the violet light
Whistled, and beat their wings
And crawled head downward down a blackened wall
And upside down in air were towers
Tolling reminiscent bells, that kept the hours
And voices singing out of empty cisterns and exhausted wells.

The latter hallucination might be called an amalgam of *Dracula* and the Gospels, as rendered in the high style of Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King*, and obviously is in no sense a source or cause of Crane’s transcendental opening octave. Nevertheless, no clearer contrast could be afforded, for Crane’s lines answer Eliot’s, in every meaning of “answer.” “Music is then the knowledge of that which relates to love in harmony and system,” and