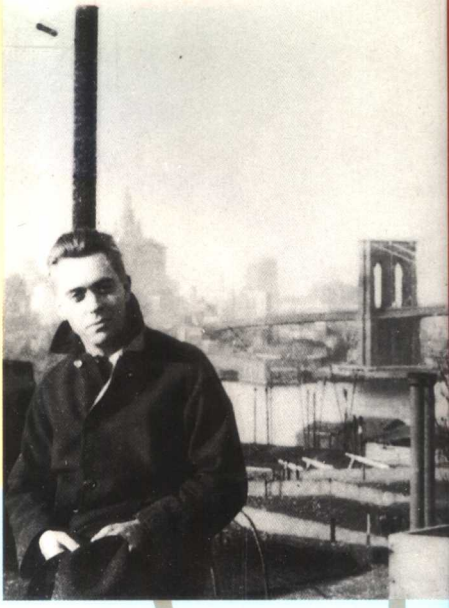

THE BROKEN TOWER

THE LIFE OF HART CRANE

Paul Mariani

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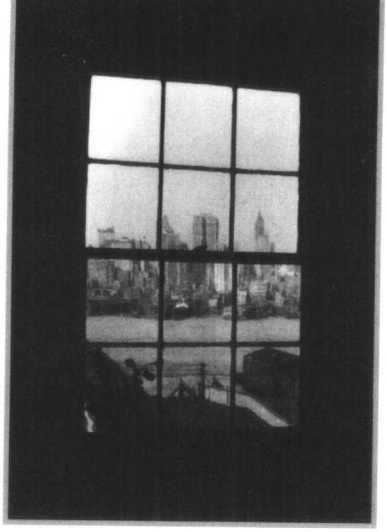

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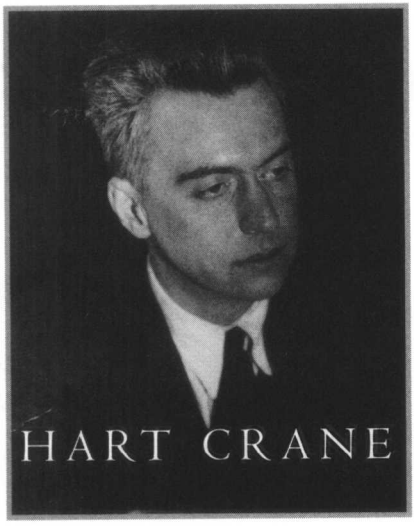

A LIFE *of* HART CRANE

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CONTENTS

PART IV

To Donald Justice
And the sacred memory
of Bill Matthews

The slant light of late afternoons across the backs
Of silent Adirondack chairs. The lovely ghosts
Of those men & women I loved so much, strolling
Across the gold green lawn of Bread Loaf,
Laughing, discoursing lightly as we did
When all the world was young & we were young.

PROLEGOMENON

THERE WAS ONLY ONE CITY for Hart Crane, and that was New York. At seventeen, already on his own with the breakup of his parents' marriage, he left Cleveland to make a go of it in New York. Without a job, he could not hold on for very long, and soon he was back in Ohio, working for his father. Still, New York's rivers and bridges, its towers and brownstones and canyoned white buildings, had already claimed him for their own. Even away from the city, New York was always on his mind: not only when he was in Akron, Cleveland, and Washington, but in the hills seventy miles north of New York, or on the Isle of Pines, or in Hollywood, London, or Paris, Ermononville or Marseilles, or even during his last year in Mexico. Had he lived, it is possible he might have made the old city of Mexico over into his image as well, but hardly without the language, any more than Lorca could finally make New York his own. The fact is that when Crane died, it was to a truculent, depression-ravaged, yet still vital New York that he was returning.

But since the city has ten thousand faces, one particular New York: Manhattan seen from the window of an apartment on Columbia Heights, overlooking the twentieth century's towering skyscrapers as Georgia O'Keeffe and Walker Evans saw them: white buildings rising above the East River, with Liberty off to the left, and his beloved *Goth-*

ic bridge spanning the river off to the right. When the great love of his life, Emil Opffer, brought him to this place in the spring of 1924, it was, Crane said, to discover a scene already in his mind's eye "more familiar than a hundred factual previsions could have rendered it." At the window of Number 110, in a building that has long since disappeared, Crane looked out over New York—his New Atlantis—as it rose majestically before him. *That*, he said, was where he wanted to be remembered most of all, along with "the ships, the harbor, and the skyline of Manhattan, midnight, morning or evening—rain, snow or sun."[1]

It was his city, rising from the confluence of the Atlantic with the Hudson and the East Rivers. Here, he said, the sea that would one day claim him for her own had thrown herself upon him, kissing his eyes with "speech . . . beyond words entirely." And the still majestic, besotted "River that is East," with its ships and tugs plying the river at all hours and seasons, moaning buoys out in the fogged-in harbor, traffic riding "the unfractioned idiom" of the bridge's surface on clear winter nights like the man-made zodiac it is. Or those cyclopean giants standing guard across the way, winking back the light of the rising sun. New York, with its erotic charge and tantalean promise, friends and lovers waiting, the energy of writers and artists, the bon mot, the electric glance, the ecstasy, the sharp dismissal, the great publishing houses that would disseminate the ineffable Word and make him famous.

Crane made New York, made it in his own inimitable image, the majesty and awe of it, breathing its white buildings into white rings of tumult and freedom and ecstasy:

> *How many dawns, chill from his rippling rest*
> *The seagull's wings shall dip and pivot him,*
> *Shedding white rings of tumult, building high*
> *Over the chained bay waters Liberty . . .*[2]

And of course he made New York in the other way as well, all of his lovers and one-night stands emblems of his insatiable drives and desires, as he made one man after another. He made the city, at the height of his powers, before life broke him, made it over into his own image, as every New York artist—driven by eros and invention—must make it over.

Yet, although Poe and Melville both walked its cobbled streets, Walt Whitman turns out to have been New York's first great poet:

The blab of the pave, tires of carts, sluff of bootsoles,
talk of the promenaders,
The heavy omnibus, the driver with the interrogating thumb,
the clank of the shod horses on the granite floor . . .
The excited crowd, the policeman with his star quickly
working his passage to the centre of the crowd,
The impassive stones that receive and return so many echoes . . .[3]

"Song of Myself," 1855, Whitman rendering a New York still familiar to Crane seventy years after, and to us seventy years after that. And other poets too, taking their cue from Whitman. William Carlos Williams, of Rutherford, New Jersey, New York's first suburban town, a busy doctor on his appointed round of house calls, for a moment pulling his flivver over to the side of the bend at the crest above Ridge Road, there by the cemetery, gazing with love at the city with its lights winking back at him. Love and fame and time and money. "In the distance/over/the meadows," he would write, "A dream/a little false/toward which/now/we stand/and stare/transfixed. . . ."[4] Women, smart women, with the arched grace of a beauty driving a man to despair. He too ached to steal—if necessary—his own piece of the city, even as he understood all too well that city's undersides, its defeats, its tabloids speaking cynically of the latest bank hoist, this one pulled off by the guards themselves. Thinking too of the whole root system of that impossible white flower: the rivers, beautiful as they were in the late afternoon sun, become "the foulest/sink in the world," off which Crane's seagulls fed.

New York holds its poets fast. They stare into the vortex and the vortex stares unblinking back. Langston Hughes's jazz-saturated Harlem, Frank O'Hara's brash, fay, midtown Manhattan with its art galleries and pop-art glitz and melancholy, John Ashbery's Manhattan as an experiment in abstract expressionism, white noise and elegy beating against the void, Robert Lowell's Central Park, the expensive apartments with their bad plumbing, the hustlers rubbing up against this improper Bostonian, the *clip-clop* of mounted police in forsythia yellow raincoats writing out tickets on the Upper West Side. Or—a thousand miles away across town—Allen Ginsberg's Lower East Side Manhattan with its bums and angry hipsters, Galway Kinnell's Avenue A. Or, on the Upper West End, Sharon Olds's old men and streetwise kids, Philip Levine's meditations from an apartment overlooking the

Hudson, Bill Matthews's Horatian meditations on a New York superimposed on the in-your-face imperial city of Rome, its twins suckling the dugs of a steel-eyed wolf. Or Donald Justice's haunting image of an umbrella blown down some street, "Whose very cobbles once the young Hart Crane/Had washed with a golden urine mixed with rain."[5]

It has been sixty years since Philip Horton's spirited biography of Crane, fifty since Brom Weber's critical study, thirty since John Unterecker gave us his immensely researched 800-page life. In that last thirty years, new readings and new information have both become available, giving us further access to Crane's brilliant, multifoliate world. The century that ushered Crane in is itself about to be ushered out. And those odd, little culture wars which involved Crane's contemporaries—Munson and Tate and Winters—and their skewed assessments of this magnificent poet have long been fought, to be succeeded by new culture wars.

Finally, as the third millennium approaches, we can begin to take stock of what this phenomenon called modern American poetry was. However we sum up the age, however we read Williams and Stevens, Pound and Eliot, however we read Frost, or Moore, Plath or Bishop, Berryman or Lowell, Hughes or Wilbur, Merrill or Ashbery, Levine or Justice, or so many other extraordinary voices, Crane seems destined to have a central place in any serious assessment of the age. In fact, the hard gemlike flame that burns about his name seems to brighten rather than to dim, as Catullus' does, as Villon's or Baudelaire's or Hopkins's. In short, something in the man continues to draw us irresistibly, and to survive his own self-willed oblivion.

It would be difficult to find a serious poet or reader of poetry in this country today who has not been touched by something in Hart Crane's music. Ask any one of them, and they will tell you that they read Crane—usually when young—and that Crane resonated for them in unexpected ways. When I was Crane's age, I thought about writing his life, only to realize I was not ready to undertake that task. The hand of fire he extended toward me then felt in truth rather like the rapidly vanishing one Keats extended toward his readers in the months before his death. And so I flinched, pulled back, went on to other things. Teaching—thirty years and more of it—and poems, and the lives of

poets, other poets: Hopkins, Williams, Berryman, Lowell. Yet, through it all, Crane winked. Sitting now at his ease on the other side of the great divide, he was no longer in any hurry for this book or, for that matter, any other.

As a New Yorker, raised in the shadow of the Third Avenue El, I think I feel something of what Crane felt about New York. My heart still lifts when I come in view of the Brooklyn Bridge, whether from the Brooklyn side or driving south on the FDR. When I look upon the gray patina of the rotting piers, the tugs wheezing upriver with their garbage scows, the dank, urine-scented subways, the yellow cabs, the long avenues undulating uptown, the incessant traffic, the neon lights, "the nightly sessions,/Refractions of the thousand theatres" along Times Square, Hell's Kitchen, "the glass doors gyring at your right": all of these remind me of the young Crane who sang this maddening, heartbreaking, voluptuous city, and loved it bitterly, ecstatically, until he died.

Once, standing in the middle of Brooklyn Bridge, he watched the U.S. Fleet sail up the East River as if it were streaming between his legs. Such was his fantasy. Love and poetry being part of the same creative drive, it is no wonder he strove heroically, sadly, to make New York. Alcohol and excess exacted its toll on him, and took him much too early. But for a splendid moment we had a poet in the right time and in the right place to grace us with a vision of what God might look like if God should ever visit us as a city, as I must believe he came and came again to Crane.

PAUL MARIANI
Montague, Massachusetts
6 June 1998