Poetry

CRITICISM

VOLUME

99

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Preface

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- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author and the critical debates surrounding his or her work.

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Glen, Heather. "Blake's Criticism of Moral Thinking in *Songs of Innocence and of Experience.*" In *Interpreting Blake,* edited by Michael Phillips, 32-69. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978. Reprinted in *Poetry Criticism.* Vol. 63, edited by Michelle Lee, 34-51. Detroit: Thomson Gale, 2005.

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Hart Crane
1899-1932

(Full name Harold Hart Crane) American poet and essayist.

For additional information on Crane's life and career, see *PC,* Volume 3.

INTRODUCTION

Crane is regarded as a major figure in American literature, especially praised for his lyric use of language and myth. In his two collections of published poetry, *White Buildings* (1926) and *The Bridge* (1930), he sought to convey a new poetic consciousness that would incorporate elements of European Romanticism, Modernism, and visionary American optimism. While critics often consider his poetry obscure, overly personal, and difficult, they laud his rich imagery and his attempts to express the quest for meaning and beauty in everyday life.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Crane was born in Garrettsville, Ohio, in 1899, the only child of Clarence A. and Grace Crane. Both parents came from old, wealthy mercantile families, and Clarence's syrup and candy business—which necessitated the family's relocation to Warren, Ohio, in 1903—provided a comfortable, suburban life for the Crane family. The Cranes' marriage was an unhappy one from the beginning, however, with Grace, a devout Christian Scientist, suffering from recurring bouts of mental illness. It was while she was at a sanitarium recovering from such an episode that Hart was sent to live with his maternal grandmother in Cleveland in 1908. There he discovered a love of reading, writing, and music which was further developed when he entered the prestigious East High School in 1914, with its program that emphasized literature, composition, and languages. While his studies were frequently disrupted by family conflicts and long vacations with relatives, Crane voraciously read American and European classics—especially Ralph Waldo Emerson, Walt Whitman, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Algernon Charles Swinburne, and Oscar Wilde—as well as the avant garde literature of his day, and began to compose poetry around this time.

When his parents separated in 1916 (to divorce the following year), Crane was sent to New York City, ostensibly to study with a tutor in order to prepare himself for entrance into Columbia University, since he never finished high school. Setting himself up in a flat in Greenwich Village, Crane immediately immersed himself in the literary and artistic life around him, doing away with the pretense of study and devoting himself to writing and promoting his poetry. For most of the remainder of his life, Crane would struggle financially; his father was reluctant to support his writing career, so Crane worked on and off for the *Little Review* and *Seven Arts* literary journals, in sales and advertising capacities. He took a job, from 1919 to 1921, as a reporter for the *Cleveland Plain Dealer,* and then returned to New York to work in advertising at the J. Walter Thompson agency, but his restless nature and ambition to write poetry never allowed him to stay on a job for very long. Aware of his homosexuality from a young age, Crane had become actively gay in New York City, but his personal life was also full of disappointments stemming from short-lived relationships with transient men. In 1924, however, he met and began a fulfilling relationship with Emil Opffer. It deteriorated within a year, though, due to jealousy, bouts of drinking, and fear of venereal disease.

Crane's first major poem, "For the Marriage of Faustus and Helen," was published in 1923 and he began work on his epic poem, *The Bridge,* that same year. After receiving a grant from art patron and friend Otto Kahn in 1925, Crane was able to devote himself to writing and in 1926 published his first collection of poetry, *White Buildings.* The deaths of his mother, his father, and his grandmother, in combination with hostile reviews of his work and his usual state of restlessness and dissatisfaction, produced a personal and professional crisis for Crane toward the end of his life. He was writing little and traveling aimlessly in Europe, helped by an inheritance from his grandmother, before again returning to New York. In 1931 he received a Guggenheim Fellowship intended for the study of American poetry but, rather than begin work on that project, Crane moved to Mexico. There, amid extensive drinking bouts and homosexual adventuring, he was able to write again for a brief time; "The Broken Tower," Crane's last poem, is considered among his finest. He also fell in love with Peggy Baird, an old friend from New York. The two were sailing back to New York in April 1932 when, after a night of heavy drinking, Crane jumped from the ship *Orizaba* and drowned. His body was never recovered.

MAJOR WORKS

Crane published only two volumes of poetry and some essays during his lifetime. *White Buildings* includes twenty-eight early poems, written between 1917 and 1926, most notably the acclaimed "Faustus and Helen" and the series of romantic poems titled "Voyages." In "Faustus and Helen" Crane uses the well-known mythological figures of the title to explore the search for beauty and meaning in modern life. The six poems of "Voyages," inspired by his relationship with Emil Opffer, examine the nature of modern love and its loss in mythical terms. The collection also presents, among others, the highly praised lyric "My Grandmother's Love Letters"; "Lachrymae Christi," Crane's only religious poem; the elegy "At Melville's Tomb"; and "Passage," a meditation on the difficult choice of the creative life. Critics praise the poems in *White Buildings* for their lyricism, extravagant imagery, and modernist sensibility, but they also fault Crane's obscure language and overly personal symbolism.

The Bridge, which Crane intended as a celebration of American life and history that would refute T. S. Eliot's pessimistic view of it in *The Wasteland,* is organized into eight sections: "Ave Maria," "Powhatan's Daughter," "Cutty Sark," "Cape Hatteras," "Three Songs," "Quaker Hill," "The Tunnel," and "Atlantis," as well as an opening proem dedicated to the Brooklyn Bridge. In every section, Crane emphasizes the aspirations and idealism that for him characterized the American experience. Starting with the heroism of Christopher Columbus in "Ave Maria," the poem moves through history toward the building of the Brooklyn Bridge, which Crane transforms in the final section, "Atlantis," into a spiritual symbol of the entire myth and history of America. Early critics recognized the merit of some passages from *The Bridge,* but considered the poem as a whole a failure, citing Crane's deficient knowledge of American history and society, a lack of unity in the poem, and his unwieldy, sometimes incoherent, symbolism and structure. Later critics have recognized the poem's vision, its "logic of metaphor," and its motif of spiritual quest. While there is still no consensus on its ultimate merit, *The Bridge* is now regarded as a major poetic achievement on Crane's part and an important contribution to American literature.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Critics have continued to be interested in Crane's poetic vision as presented in his works. Harold Bloom has described Crane as an American Orpheus, and Alfred Hanley, writing of "For the Marriage of Faustus and Helen," praises Crane's "perfect vision of the holy." Eric Ormsby concludes that Crane's optimism in *The Bridge* continues to have resonance for readers today. Countering this view somewhat, Jeffrey W. Westover points out that while in *The Bridge* Crane manages to merge the personal with the public, the poem also reveals the negative aspects of American history, notably its inherently exploitative economics and rampant imperialism. Studying Crane's poetics in social and historical context, critics David Yaffe and Brian Reed, respectively, have explored Crane's relationship to the music of his day, with Reed noting that like the jazz music he was fond of, Crane's *Bridge* exhibits "broken, dismembered, unraveling, [and] incomplete" rhythms. In the late twentieth and the early twenty-first centuries, the focus of Crane criticism has overtly turned to the influence of his homosexuality on his work. Thomas E. Yingling demonstrates how "the homosexual body is a site of sublimity" for Crane as he tries, mostly unsuccessfully, to reconcile his homosexuality with Emersonian social idealism. Tim Dean looks at Crane's poetics of privacy as an alternative to a closet gay life, while Robert K. Martin speculates about how Crane's homosexuality influenced his choice of themes and styles. Michael Snediker (see Further Reading) analyzes Crane's optimism in the context of queer theory, questioning why critics have been so reluctant to acknowledge what he calls "smiles" in Crane's poetry. Stephen Guy-Bray focuses on the "Cape Hatteras" section of *The Bridge,* in which Crane establishes Whitman as a "foundational homosexual poet," and he concludes that Crane is a "pivotal figure in the process by which American literature came out and is still coming out."

PRINCIPAL WORKS

Poetry

White Buildings 1926
The Bridge 1930
**The Collected Poems of Hart Crane* 1933
**The Complete Poems and Selected Letters and Prose of Hart Crane* (poetry, letters, essays) 1966
Poems of Hart Crane 1986
The Complete Poems of Hart Crane: The Centennial Edition 2000

Other Major Works

O My Land, My Friends: The Selected Letters of Hart Crane (letters) 1997

*These two works contain posthumously published poems collected as "Key West: An Island Sheaf."

CRITICISM

Sherman Paul (essay date 1972)

SOURCE: Paul, Sherman. "Lyricism and Modernism: The Example of Hart Crane." In *Hart Crane: A Collection of Critical Essays,* edited by Alan Trachtenberg, pp. 163-79. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1982.

[*In the following essay, originally published in 1972, Sherman surveys the opinions of such early critics of* The Bridge *as Allen Tate, Yvor Winters, and R. P. Blackmur, noting that their negative assessments of Crane's work demonstrate a lack of understanding of the poet's reliance on metaphor, myth, and other elements of modernism.*]

Hart Crane was nothing if not a lyric poet, a poet of intensity, and to some of the critics who meant most to him, nothing but a lyric poet. That is the crux of the matter. [. . .]

Crane was not untroubled, as his friend Susan Jenkins Brown says, by the critical response to ***The Bridge.*** He did not begin to study Dante for idle reasons—he took up the corrective so highly regarded by his critics. Nor was the following remark, in a letter written shortly before his death asking for an opinion of **"The Broken Tower"** ("about the 1st [poem] I've written in two years"), merely casual: "I'm getting too damned self-critical to write at all any more."[1] Criticism, we must remember, was part of the milieu of his work, and he closely attended it because much of it, written by poets and writers (Pound, Eliot, Williams, Tate, Winters, Frank), addressed the difficulties of poets in the modern world. Having learned so much from it—having made the issues it defined so much the substance of his work—he could not easily dismiss its strictures, and all the more so since his intelligence was of the healthy kind that admitted doubt.

To read the criticism of ***The Bridge***—of Hart Crane—from our present vantage is, to say the least, an astonishing experience. How could Allen Tate, Yvor Winters, and R. P. Blackmur, the critics whose opinions of Crane and his work went almost uncontested until recently, have been so unaware of the merits of the *poem* and the tough genius of its maker? How could critics so well versed in Eliot's work find it so difficult to make formal sense of ***The Bridge,*** and, being poets themselves, to enter the dimensions of the poem? They had the "time and familiarity" that, Crane told a reviewer of ***The Bridge,*** had helped him discover the unity of *The Waste Land* and would help others discover the unity of his "complicated" poem. But then, though Tate and Winters knew Crane's "too well-known biography," of more importance in understanding their response is the fact that criticism is always of its moment—that the criticism as much as the writing of ***The Bridge*** belongs to the history of modernism.[2]

Crane never disputed Eliot. Eliot was his teacher, a "beloved predecessor," to borrow Pasternak's generous phrase. As Crane told Tate at the beginning of their correspondence, Eliot, "our divine object of 'envy,'" was not someone to reject but to "absorb," to work "*through* . . . toward a *different goal.*" He was especially pleased when Eliot accepted "The Tunnel" for *The Criterion,* and Eliot, he said, inspired his reading of Dante. By placing him within his poem—and from the beginning he is a significant voice in Crane's work—Crane honored him.[3] Yet, Eliot, ironically, had prepared the generation of critics who discounted Crane's achievement.[4] He had given them the idea of dissociation of sensibility, a psychological idea that served the purposes of immediate cultural description—it was witnessed by much in "modern" life—and of historical interpretation. Like "lowbrow" and "highbrow," Van Wyck Brooks' terms for what Santayana called the "two mentalities" in America, it was a ready critical instrument and equally useful in dramatizing the "ordeal" of the artist. Adopting this idea, Tate and Winters, Crane's first critics, treated him as a representative figure whose "ordeal"—he was said to suffer the limitations and failure of the romantic sensibility—provided an instructive, "cautionary" example.

The chief objection to ***The Bridge*** is already present in Tate's Foreword to ***White Buildings.*** It is Crane's ambitiousness, which we learn by the end of the essay has nothing to do with a poetry "at once contemporary and in the grand manner" but with a fault "common to ambitious poets since Baudelaire," the fact that "the vision often strains and overreaches the theme." What this means exactly, in terms of the poems in ***White Buildings,*** is never made clear because Tate, as his reference to Whitman indicates, is looking ahead to Crane's uncompleted poem ("The great proportions of the myth [of America] have collapsed in its reality. Crane's poetry is a concentration of certain phases of the Whitman substance, the fragments of the myth"). But what he means in this respect is clear, at least to readers of *The Sacred Wood,* in his conclusion: "It [the common fault] appears whenever the existing poetic order no longer supports the imagination. It appeared in the eighteenth century with the poetry of William Blake."[5]

Eliot's short essay on Blake is in some ways the model for much of the criticism of Crane. Take, for example, the assignment of praise and blame: Blake is "only a poet of genius" where Dante is a "classic." This distinction rests on Eliot's view of Blake as a "naked man,"

one whose "philosophy, like his visions, like his insight, like his technique, was his own"; it rests, even when Eliot acknowledges the historical necessity, on his distrust of the poet who "needs must create a philosophy as well as a poetry." Dante wisely "borrowed" his philosophy and so was spared "the certain meanness of culture" Eliot notes in Blake, a poet outside "the Latin traditions." Blake remained only a genius because "what his genius required, and what it sadly lacked, was a framework of accepted and traditional ideas which would have prevented him from indulging in a philosophy of his own"—a deficiency that contemporary poets may avoid because, as Eliot observes, "we are not really so remote from the Continent, or from our own past, as to be deprived of the advantages of culture, if we wish them."[6]

If we wish them. Crane's early critics seem as much disturbed by what they consider needless balkiness as by the challenge of his genius. They address him as a schoolboy who, as Munson, citing Arnold and Eliot, says, "'did not know enough.'" Blackmur summarizes their objection when he says that Crane was an extreme case of the "predicament of immaturity." His genius is indubitable ("of a high order," Winters says) but its "flaws"—in a muddy yet transparent statement—"are . . . so great as to partake, if they persist, almost of the nature of a public catastrophe." "Poetic order" (Tate), "system" (Munson), "adequate ideational background" (Winters)—deficient in these, Crane, according to Munson, is "a 'mystic' on the loose," and his work, according to Winters, is "a form of hysteria."[7] So much, in sum, for individual talent without tradition.

Of course it was not that Crane was wholly without learning—though his meager formal education is usually noted—but that he had, as Blackmur claims, the "wrong masters," had submitted to deleterious influences. Yes, he had read Eliot but "not, so to speak, read the Christianity from which Eliot derives his ultimate strength. . . ." The advantages of culture, of all that Crane might have gained from the Continent, from Latin traditions, from philosophy, are reducible to Christian culture—the kind of culture or "system of disciplined values" that would have provided him the "faith [and] discipline to depend on" he was said to lack.[8] And that Crane, whose poem has its foundation in an awareness of the bankruptcy of all "systems"—he said that "the great mythologies of the past (including the Church) are deprived of enough facade to even launch good raillery against"—that he refused the advantages and subscribed instead to the radical American modernism associated with the "tradition" of Whitman and Stieglitz is chiefly what accounts for the vehemence of his critics.[9] More than a decade ago, Gordon Grigsby put the matter of orthodoxy in criticism with salutary directness: "Criticism of ***The Bridge*** has been strongly affected from the start by the simple fact that Crane does not share the ethics or the religion of the majority of his critics."[10] And not only the ethics and the religion but allegiance of place. For Crane stands with Paul Rosenfeld, a cosmopolitan critical spokesman of the Stieglitz circle, who concluded *Port of New York* by offering another reading than Eliot's of the "Falling towers" of *The Waste Land,* one more in accord with Crane's "Atlantis": "We had been sponging on Europe for direction instead of developing our own, and Europe had been handing out nice little packages of spiritual direction to us. But then Europe fell into disorder and lost her way, and we were thrown back on ourselves to find inside ourselves sustaining faith."[11]

Now this is heresy too, and fatal, as Tate argues in an obituary essay on Crane. Alluding to Brooks' thesis about the failure of American artists, Tate maintains the contrary:

> If there is any American life distinct from the main idea of western civilization, their failure has been due to their accepting it too fully. It is a heresy that rises in revolt against the traditional organization of the consciousness—for which the only substitute offered is the assertion of the will. We hear that Americans are not rooted in the soil, that they must get rid of the European past before they can be rooted. That is untrue: the only Americans who have ever been rooted in the American soil [Southerners, according to Southern Agrarians] have lived on the European system, socially and spiritually.

That Crane was not a Southerner Tate points out elsewhere, though he may have had this in mind when he said that Crane's early life and education fitted him to be the "archetype of the modern American poet"—a role, we are told, he filled with admirable "integrity" and "courage" by carrying his work to "its logical conclusion of personal violence." Crane's suicide, Tate believes, was "morally appropriate" and significant as "a symbol of the 'American' mind," because, like Crane's, this mind, as the quotation marks indicate, is dissociated or isolated from *the* tradition. And Tate believes—it is the real point of contention—that Crane misunderstood the grounds of Eliot's pessimism and that instead of refuting him exemplified Eliot's "major premise": "that the integrity of the individual consciousness has broken down."[12]

This conclusion was arrived at in another way by Winters, who said that Crane's master and model was Whitman and that "Mr. Crane's wreckage" (***The Bridge***) demonstrates "the impossibility of getting anywhere with the Whitmanian inspiration." Tate attributes the failure of ***The Bridge*** and Crane's inability to continue his work to the "framework" of the poem, which, he believes, Crane himself knew was "incoherent." Such views, even granting Winters' and Tate's attention to the poem, are compromised by the threefold assumption

that a poem (especially one of epic proportions) must have a framework, presumably outside of itself, that there is a correct framework ("framework of accepted and traditional ideas," to cite Eliot again), and that in choosing the wrong framework (if anything romantic or Whitmanian can be called a framework) one is sure to fail. (***The Bridge,*** Winters said, not knowing he was pointing in the direction of a different truth, "has no more unity than the *Song of Myself.* . . .") Tate assumes an "intellectual order"; like the "framework," it is there for those disposed to take it. And his account of Crane's place in recent literary history, where Crane is set against but in a succession from Rimbaud, follows from it. For Crane, he says, coming "at the end of the romantic movement, when the dissociation [of the inherited intellectual order] is all accomplished, struggles with the problem of finding an intellectual order. It is the romantic process reversed, and the next stage in the process is not romanticism at all." The futility and failure of misdirection are the burden of these remarks on the struggle of the modern. Yet seen from another side these remarks might be said to define and approve the courageous enterprise of one who understood and fully accepted the modern condition.[13]

Crane's sensibility, aesthetics, and poetry are decidedly modern, for they are all characterized by distrust of absolutes (intellectual orders or systems) and respect for experience and by an intelligence both intelligent and resilient enough to remain skeptical and to include skepticism in its "stab at a truth."[14] The "confusion" in Crane's work is not inadvertent, as Tate and others believe, but deliberate; it belongs to that "extraordinary insight into the foundations of his work" that in other respects Tate said Crane had.[15] To those in quest of certainty, Crane's vision is disturbing because it is "doubtful" or double; it is not a vision of either/or but of both/and. As Gordon Grigsby maintains, in a study of ***The Bridge*** that in many ways remains the essential pioneering work, "this doubtful vision, far from ruining the poem, is in fact one of its chief sources of strength"; and as Eugene Nassar insists, in a recent study that considers only the "posture toward experience" presented in the verbal texture of ***The Bridge,*** the poem "dramatizes a dualistic experience of life," a complex response to complexity that is not "'idealistic,' or 'affirmative,' or 'platonic,' or 'mystic,' or 'epic,' or, for that matter, wholly 'tragic,'"—though these elements may be included in it.[16] [. . .]

Crane's summary statement of this crucial issue is his best, delivered with the declarative force of a poet for whom aesthetics and ethics, poetry and being are one, and with the assurance of a poet who has informed himself and put what he knows to the test. The third paragraph in an article on "Modern Poetry," this statement is the logical conclusion to brief descriptions of the situation in poetry—of the rebellion, already over, that had moved in "a classic direction," and of the tradition of rebellion (he has in mind the early phases of what Harold Rosenberg calls "the tradition of the new") that is now, he feels, of little importance to the "serious artist." What matters to the serious artist is outlined in the following:

> The poet's concern must be, as always, self-discipline toward a formal integration of experience. For poetry is an architectural art, based not on Evolution or the idea of progress, but on the articulation of the contemporary human consciousness *sub specie aeternitatis,* and inclusive of all readjustments incident to that consciousness and other shifting factors related to that consciousness. The key to the process of free creative activity which Coleridge gave us in his *Lectures on Shakespeare* exposes the responsibilities of every poet, modern or ancient, and cannot be improved upon. "No work of true genius," he says, "dares want its appropriate form, neither indeed is there any danger of this. As it must not, so genius can not, be lawless: for it is even this that constitutes its genius—*the power of acting creatively under laws of its own origination.*"[17]

This is Crane's reply to his critics, to those who perhaps did not appreciate, as much as he did, the view of poetry advanced by I. A. Richards in *Principles of Literary Criticism*; who had not fully grasped, as he had, that the "architectural" aspect of poetry, like that of a cubist painting, refers not only to the way an art-work is made but to the artist's conception, the imagination of the work, which Coleridge's notions of genius and organic form confirm; and who did not value, to the extent that he did, the "process of free creative activity" nor accept so willingly as a responsibility of art the "articulation"—the double meaning is intended—of "the contemporary [immediate, always changing] human consciousness."[18] Here, as in the work of Williams, whom Crane's declaration calls to mind, the poet is given the fundamental tasks of "unbound thinking" and of bringing the immediate world to form.[19]

Crane's definition of the poet's concern—"self-discipline toward a formal integration of experience"—also tells us of the function poetry had for him. He was a poet by necessity, having need of a discipline, not of denial but of inclusion, that provided enough security to permit the risk of growth. The first lesson of art and psychology he reports having been taught by Carl Schmitt was one of balance ("There is only one harmony, that is the equilibrium maintained by two opposite forces, equally strong"), a lesson, it seems, that did not omit the caution to maintain the vital or dynamic condition of constant "inward struggle."[20] For the discipline respected experience, required, as he told William Wright, the "development of one's consciousness even though it is painful."[21] The moments of equilibrium that Crane reports are those ecstatic ones of love (a "thrilling and inclusive" experience that "reconciled" him), of "inspiration" (as, when under

ether, he "felt the two worlds . . . at once"), and of art, when, by inward struggle, he achieved a "consistent vision of things."[22] Balance, integration, synthesis—interchangeable words for Crane—characterize these moments and provide the touchstone of his appreciation of Donne ("at once sensual and spiritual, and singing rather the beauty of experience than innocence") and, to cite another example, of Fielding, whose attitude toward society and life he found "more 'balanced'" than Hardy's.[23] They explain his quarrel with Matthew Josephson, who refused "to admit the power and beauty of emotional intensity" (both means and end where "fury fused"). And they also explain his reservations concerning Eliot, whose "poetry of negation [was] beautiful" but one-sided in not acknowledging that "one *does* have joys," that there are "positive" emotions.[24] To balance Eliot's pessimism by presenting "these other moods" was one of Crane's objectives in ***The Bridge.*** "I tried to break loose from that particular strait-jacket, without however committing myself to any oppositional form of didacticism," he told Selden Rodman, who had reviewed it. "Your diffidence in ascribing any absolute conclusions in the poem is therefore correct, at least according to my intentions. The poem, as a whole, is, I think, an affirmation of experience [that is, of the possibility of a more inclusive experience and of experience itself as an 'absolute'], and to that extent is 'positive' rather than 'negative' in the sense that *The Waste Land* is negative."[25]

How well this statement substantiates itself by demonstrating the quality of mind it declares—a quality of mind that put Crane in opposition to most of his friends and critics. What he objected to early in Josephson became the prominent theme of his letters and essays on art: "he tries to force his theories into the creative process. . . ."[26] To Munson, who asked that his poems provide philosophical and moral "knowledge," Crane answered that he had misunderstood his "poetic purpose" and had proposed "such ends as poetry organically escapes. . . ." For poetry, he said, does not provide knowledge unless by knowledge one means simply "the concrete *evidence* of the *experience* of a recognition." His intention was neither to oppose "any new synthesis of reasonable laws which might provide a consistent philosophical and moral program for our epoch" nor to use poetry "to delineate any such system." But he was disinclined to follow Munson in search of system because system itself was, in fact, the chief obstacle to poetry. "The tragic quandary . . . of the modern world," he said in a statement that accords with the central idea of Ortega's *The Modern Theme,* "derives from the paradoxes that an inadequate system of rationality forces on the living consciousness."[27] When Crane told his mother—this context is also significant—that "the freedom of my imagination is the most precious thing that life holds for me,—and the only reason I can see for living," he spoke his deepest truth. For system, too, betrays, and poetry is prior to all system.[28]

Crane's replies to Winters and Tate cogently argue this point. To Tate he protests Winters' "arbitrary torturings—all for the sake of a neat little point of reference," and to Winters he protests Munson's desire for "some definite ethical order." He tells Winters that in his own case he has not attempted "to reduce" his code of ethics "to any exact formula"; that he cannot trust, as Winters does, "to so methodical and predetermined a method of development"; that to do so makes a "commodity" of experience and frustrates "the possibility of any free realization. . . ." In response to Tate's review of ***The Bridge,*** he tells him that critics like Genevieve Taggard and Winters are no longer interested in "poetry as poetry" but in finding some "cure-all," and, with evident weariness, simply remarks that "so many things have a way of coming out all the better without the strain to sum up the universe in one impressive little pellet."[29]

Though Crane withstood the arguments of his friends, he never convinced them that "truth has no name," a lesson they might also have learned from his poetics and, explicitly, from **"A Name for All,"** a late poem available to them in *The Dial.* In this neglected poem he treats the naming, inevitable to writing, whose limitations the "logic of metaphor"—or more evocatively, the "dynamics of inferential mention"—enabled him to overcome.[30]

> Moonmoth and grasshopper that flee our page
> And still wing on, untarnished of the name
> We pinion to your bodies to assuage
> Our envy of your freedom—we must maim
>
> Because we are usurpers, and chagrined—
> And take the wing and scar it in the hand.
> Names we have, even, to clap on the wind;
> But we must die, as you, to understand.
>
> I dreamed that all men dropped their names, and sang
> As only they can praise, who build their days
> With fin and hoof, with wing and sweetened fang
> Struck free and holy in one Name always.

In this poem the poet's dream of redeemed mankind is a dream of poetry as a liberating field of natural life. We name, but what we name, having the winged life of spirit and imagination, escapes us, cannot be fixed. We name—in the name of rationality—out of envy of freedom, for rationality is vindictive, a will to power feeding on what Nietzsche called *ressentiment.* We even try to imprison the wind! And as the negative condition implied by "sweetened fang" tells us, our own fury to name makes nature red in tooth and claw. And only when we ourselves become the objects of a similar

death do we begin to "understand"—not know, but understand—an understanding, alas, that, coming too late, is irremediable. And so the poet dreams of a better world and a better poem, of the peaceable kingdom of life ("For every thing that lives is Holy"),[31] where men drop their names of chains, or, rather, are "Struck free" by doing so *and* by entering a different realm of being and language, the totality of interpenetrated freely living things, or the poem whose form, paradoxically, is all-inclusive, a "Name" for all.[32] [. . .]

The central importance of Crane's quarrel with his friends becomes clearer when we realize that he is repudiating the notions of mimetic form and correspondence truth. For him the poem is not to be judged by anything external to it: its form is organic in the primary sense of self-originating and its "truth" is nothing absolute but the coherence of meanings generated by its language. He explained this to Munson when he told him that "Plato doesn't live today because of the intrinsic 'truth' of his statements: their only living truth today consists in the 'fact' of their harmonious relationship to each other in the context of his organization. This grace partakes of poetry." And he indicated what he meant by "architecture"—how it relates to organic form, to "logic of metaphor," to the use of "build" in **"A Name for All"**—when he spoke of the "architecture of [Plato's] logic" as "poetic construction."[33]

Crane first employed the phrase "logic of metaphor" in a letter to Stieglitz, the import of whose work for his own he had begun to understand at the time he was beginning ***The Bridge.*** The phrase occurs in a passage praising Stieglitz for being an "indice of a new order of consciousness" and is connected with freedom of the imagination and the need, in using the imagination to transform "the great energies about us," of "perfecting our sensibilities" and thereby "contributing more than we can realize (rationalize). . . ." [. . .] Crane complained to Stieglitz that he had "to combat every day those really sincere people, but limited, who deny the superior logic of metaphor in favor of their perfect sums, divisions and subtractions." [. . .]

The phrase "superior logic of metaphor" refers to an earlier letter in which Crane had tried to describe Stieglitz's art—how he used the camera as an instrument of "apprehension," how the speed of the shutter enabled him to make the moment eternal, to arrest the essences of things by suspending them on "the invisible dimension whose vibrance has been denied the human eye at all times save in the intuition of ecstasy." He, too, by means of this logic, would make poetry an instrument of "consciousness," of an "absolute" experience, of radiant apprehension or illumination—that "peculiar type of perception" which, he said, was capable of "apprehending some absolute and timeless concept of the imagination with astounding clarity and conviction." In the previously cited passage on Plato the "fact" is just this presentness, the direct communication of the thing itself made possible by "poetic construction," or by the two aspects of the "logic of metaphor" that permit the poet who employs it to make this stunning impact: the fact that this logic is "organically entrenched in pure sensibility"—in the reader's as well as the poet's—and the fact that the poem it constructs is "a name for all"—strikes the reader as "a single, new *word,* never before spoken and impossible to actually enunciate, but self-evident as an active principle in the reader's consciousness henceforward." This logic operates at a deeper level than "pure logic" and transcends its limits. By using it the poet not only serves the "truth of the imagination" and gives form to its "living stuff" but lives, like the soaring bird of "Forgetfulness," in the fullness of its freedom.[34]

The overreaching and incoherence that Tate found in Crane's poetry—in particular in ***The Bridge***—have their ground in Tate's failure to appreciate or grant the nature of the "logic of metaphor." This logic is the means by which the poet builds the poem from the inside out, creates the field of meaning upon which its coherence depends—the field of meaning, however, whose "expanding resonances of implication" also keeps the poem forever open.[35] Whether excluded from the poem by their own beliefs or by insufficient attention, Crane's early critics were confused by the fact that "poems . . . are steadily engaged in the work of con-fusing, for the paradigm of poetry—metaphor—pervades its every act." They forgot, it seems, that what Crane called the "logic of metaphor" is the logic of the imagination and that the imagination, expressing our deepest being, always seeks unification, always seeks "a name for all," for the reason Crane did: because "The poetries of speech / Are acts of thinking love. . . ."[36]

Even before the assumptions underlying the early criticism of ***The Bridge*** were questioned, close examination of the poem proved untenable the verdict of its incoherence. The poem was found to have the structural elements of other large modern works: a persona or central subjective consciousness, lyric design or thematic form, and symbolic narrative. Crane himself called it an "epic of the modern consciousness," spoke of its symphonic form, identified the architectural aspect of the "logic of metaphor" ("reflexes and symbolisms," "interlocking elements," "strands . . . interwoven") and of its episodic construction, and noted in the sequence of poems "a certain progression." Criticism has substantiated him and shown him to be "'a master builder,'" as Otto Kahn hoped he would be, "'in constructing ***The Bridge*** of your dreams, thoughts and emotions.'"[37]

Though such characterizations of ***The Bridge*** as Otto Kahn's or Crane's ("epic of the modern consciousness") have embarrassed critics, they are accurate and valuable

in indicating the deliberate building-up or construction of the conception of the poem—that in which its form is cubist or "synthetic"—and its special modernity—that, say, where it differs from *The Waste Land,* a poem in which modern elements of form are also employed.[38] The poem is an epic of *modern* consciousness. It is that epic, first, in an antiepical sense, for the modern poet is no more the hero of an epic action than he is a discoverer like Columbus. If we follow the progression of the epic hero from the *Aeneid,* with which Crane compared ***The Bridge,*** to recent "epic" works, we arrive, as Thomas Whitaker says, "at the modern poet's often ironic celebration of himself as hero-everyman, who performs universal imaginative acts . . . in an ambiguous cosmos where history must be discovered and values renewed."[39] But the very scope of this enterprise deserves to be called epic. The space in which the poet journeys is an infinitely larger space than any traversed before—the space of consciousness, at once of self, world, and word, a new field of discovery. Here the heroic deed, the culturally redemptive act, the particularly modern exploit is performed. Crane called it the "conquest of consciousness," meaning also that the conquest is achieved by consciousness alone.[40]

The poem itself is the imaginative action that performs this daring exploit. By means of the "logic of metaphor" the poet creates the space or world of the poem, the field of meaning through which he journeys. "Proem," which establishes the bridge as an artifact of the real world as well as the center of the space of the poem, calls the field of meaning into being. As the poet moves within the field, which he also continues to create (explore) as he goes and which, in turn, permits us at each stage to possess all of the poem at once, each episode, or state of consciousness, is actualized (like a Whiteheadian "event") out of the field.[41] (Crane was true to the nature of the poem when he said that there might be additional episodes: the materials are already there, in the field of meaning.) Each episode presents directly rather than symbolizes a different kind or stage of consciousness. All contribute to the "world dimensional" of the poem, the world in which the poet, after the fashion of Satan in the epigraph from *The Book of Job* that prefaces ***The Bridge,*** goes to and fro in the earth and up and down in it, enacting in his movement the doubleness and balance that distinguish so many elements of the poem. To follow him is to learn of heaven and hell, of vast continents and seas, of immense elemental energies (nebular, volcanic, meteorological) and processes (diurnal, seasonal, vegetative), of evolutionary and human history.[42] It is indeed to know the constituents of chaos—and of cosmos.

[. . .] When we recall **"Porphyro in Akron"** and **"The Bridge of Estador"**—even **"For the Marriage of Faustus and Helen"**—we realize better the difficult resolution of modernist allegiance Crane achieved in ***The Bridge.*** To be reminded by it so often of Williams is a measure of the distance Crane had come as well as an indication of his particular modernity. We think of ***The Bridge*** less in relation to *The Waste Land* than to *Paterson* and chiefly for the reason that both offer us a myth of the imagination, and one that is inalienable from place: the "myth" of America is itself "modern," for it is a myth of discovery, of discovering (entering) our world, the ground of our being—or recovering it, making new. Like *Paterson,* ***The Bridge*** reminds us that "again is the magic word" and that for a culture as for art the difficult thing is "to begin to begin again, / turning the inside out. . . ." Both poems represent the making by which we begin ("To make, that's where we begin"); they invite "the recreators."[43]

[. . .] For neither poet, finally, are the imperatives of imagination religious or visionary. Cubist better describes them. The poet of *A Voyage to Pagany,* who, in meditating on making new, not only remembers Whitman but confesses his envy of modern French painters might as readily be Crane as Williams. For Crane employs the "logic of metaphor" more in the manner of a cubist than a symbolist.[44] Condensed metaphor is not used to evoke a reality beyond the senses but to present an object clearly to the senses by way of simultaneous perspectives of meaning. In this fashion Crane moves around the object. (Ideally, by completing the circle, he would make the word a Word—though not quite in Mallarmé's sense.) Or he uses this logic to achieve the "interpenetration of dimensions" one finds in cubist painting.[45] And Crane's vision is also cubist, comporting with the kind of apprehension and presentation he found in Stieglitz's photographs, the kind of vision for which he turned for corroboration to Blake, and, in considering his lyricism, we may too: "vision represents the total imagination of man made tangible and direct in works of art."[46] [. . .]

Notes

1. *Robber Rocks* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1967), p. 120; *The Letters of Hart Crane,* ed. Brom Weber (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1965), pp. 356, 406 (September 30, 1930; Easter Sunday, 1932); hereafter cited as *Letters.*

2. *Letters,* p. 350 (April 22, 1930); *The Complete Poems and Selected Letters and Prose of Hart Crane,* ed. Brom Weber (Garden City: Doubleday & Co., 1966), p. 21. Hereafter cited as P. Nine sections of *The Bridge* appeared in periodicals prior to the publication of the book. There is no evidence that time and familiarity altered the early opinions of these critics.

3. *Letters,* pp. 90, 308, 356.

4. Crane anticipated their response when, speaking of Eliot, he told Munson: "But in the face of such stern conviction of death on the part of the only group of people whose verbal sophistication is likely to take an interest in a style such as mine—what can I expect?" *Letters,* p. 236 (March 5, 1926).

5. Reprinted from *White Buildings,* poems by Hart Crane, with the permission of Liveright Publishing Corporation. Copyright 1926 by Boni and Liveright, Inc. Copyright renewed 1954 by Liveright Publishing Corporation. Copyright © 1972 by Liveright Publishing Corporation.

6. "William Blake," *Selected Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1951), pp. 317-22; originally published in *The Sacred Wood* (1920).

7. Munson, "Hart Crane: Young Titan in the Sacred Wood," *Destinations* (New York: J. H. Sears and Co., 1928), pp. 160-77; Blackmur, "New Thresholds, New Anatomies," *Language as Gesture: Essays in Poetry* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1952), pp. 301-16 (originally published in 1935); Winters, "The Progress of Hart Crane," *Poetry,* XXXVI (June, 1930), 153-65.

8. Blackmur, "New Thresholds, New Anatomies"; Tate, "American Poetry Since 1920," *Bookman,* LXVIII (January, 1929), 507; F. O. Matthiessen, "Harold Hart Crane," *Dictionary of American Biography,* Supplement One, Vol. XXI (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1944), p. 207.

9. "General Aims and Theories" (1925-26), P, 218.

10. *The Modern Long Poem,* doctoral dissertation, University of Wisconsin, 1960, p. 251.

11. *Port of New York: Essays on Fourteen American Moderns* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1924) p. 295. In reply to Munson, with whose awareness of "spiritual disintegration" he was in sympathy, Crane said that he doubted "if any remedy will be forthcoming from so nostalgic an attitude as the Thomists betray, and moreover a strictly European system of values, at that." *Letters,* p. 323 (April 17, 1928).

12. "American Poetry Since 1920"; "Hart Crane and the American Mind," *Poetry,* XL (July, 1932), pp. 211-16. Tate had also developed these views in reviewing *The Bridge*: see "A Distinguished Poet," *Hound and Horn,* III (July-September, 1930), 580-85.

13. "The Progress of Hart Crane" by Yvor Winters. From *Poetry* XXXVI (June 1930), pp. 153-65. Copyright © 1930 by the Modern Poetry Association. Reprinted by permission of the Editor of *Poetry* and Ms. Janet Lewis, executrix of the estate of Yvor Winters; Tate, "Hart Crane and the American Mind." Leslie Fiedler points out that "the failure of *The Bridge* was interpreted not as Crane's failure, but as Whitman's" and that Whitman was regarded "not only as a bad 'influence' but even as a bad poet, the founder of an inferior tradition." "Images of Walt Whitman," *Leaves of Grass: One Hundred Years After,* ed. by Milton Hindus (Stanford University Press, 1955), p. 70. See also Karl Shapiro, *Essay on Rime* (New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1945), pp. 51, 66.

14. P, 220. Crane may be said to be modern in the sense employed by Irving Babbitt, who identified the modern spirit with "the positive and critical spirit, the spirit that refuses to take things on authority." *Rousseau and Romanticism* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1919), p. xi.

15. "Hart Crane and the American Mind." P. 211.

16. *The Modern Long Poem,* p. 254; *The Rape of Cinderella* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1970), pp. 144-45.

17. P, 260. The quotation is accurate except for the italics.

18. For Crane's appreciation of Richards' book, see *Letters,* p. 314 (December 19, 1927).

19. *Selected Essays of William Carlos Williams* (New York: Random House, 1954), p. 163. For Williams, "the poet thinks with his poem . . ." see *The Autobiography of William Carlos Williams* (New York: Random House, 1951), pp. 390-91, and for a characteristic criticism of systems, pp. 360-61. And see Stanley Burnshaw, who says that poetry is "an open area . . . the only field of discourse in which thought can participate in its entirety." *The Seamless Web: Language-Thinking, Creature-Knowledge, Art-Experience* (New York: George Braziller, 1970), p. 107.

20. *Letters,* p. 5 (January 5, 1917).

21. *Letters,* p. 19 (June 17, 1919). Giving up the therapy of Christian Science and having fewer "denials" was part of it. See *Letters,* pp. 14, 15 (March 11; April 2, 1919).

22. *Letters,* pp. 49, 92, 267 (December 22, 1920; June 1922; July 16, 1926). See also, on the need for "a strong critical faculty," *Letters,* p. 245 (April 5, 1926).

23. *Letters,* pp. 68, 300.

24. *Letters,* pp. 106, 89, 71 (November 1922; May 16, 1922; November 26, 1921); P. 46. In the passage on Eliot, Crane may be referring, in "it is hard to dance in proper measure," to Williams' *Kora in Hell,* an appropriate book. For intensity, see *Letters,* p. 302.