Crane, Harold Hart (1899-1932)

Generally considered one of a half-dozen major American modernist poets, Hart Crane produced during his short, nomadic life some of the twentieth century’s most impossibly obscure verse alongside its most intensely visionary.

Born June 24, 1899, Hart Crane grew up in a bourgeois household in Garrettsville, Ohio. His mother and father fought often, divorced, and reconciled, a relationship which often cast the Crane’s only child on an opposing side. June Hart, a noted beauty, was controlling and hypochondriac, often calling her son home from his travels to lavish attention on his nervous, ailing mother. Crane’s attempts to win his father’s love were tempered usually with a desire for acceptance and financial support. Amid a chaotic upbringing, Crane on occasion spent time with his grandmother, the first in the young poet’s life to acknowledge his poetic gift.

Although not published until 1926 by Horace Liveright, Crane’s first book of poems, *White Buildings*, exhibits in 1920-22 a penchant for densely symbolic verse. *White Buildings* concludes with a sequence of six erotic poems, penned 1921-26 and inspired by Crane’s love affair with sailor Emil Oppfer; critics disagree, however, on the extent to which a queer approach grasps the opus. Most confer the best of this early work is “For the Marriage of Faustus and Helen,” a poem which immerses classical figures into a milieu of contemporary urban imagery and declares, “The imagination spans beyond despair,/Outpacing bargain, vocable, and prayer.” Here, amid war-torn images of “blown blood” and “bleeding hands,” Crane’s perhaps naive vision of nineteenth century sentiment—the influence of Whitman and Emerson—becomes an antidote for the pessimism of his contemporaries Pound and Eliot.

By 1924 Crane had begun work on *The Bridge*, a hopeful response to *The Waste Land*’s “fragments I have shored against my ruins.” Where Eliot’s central symbol of a postapocalyptic landscape riddled with corpses and fractious desire fails to resurrect any useful historical mythology, Crane with this long sequence sought to “lend a myth to God” and bridge past, present, and future (recalling the expansive Whitman of “Song of Myself” and “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry”) into a vision for the whole of American experience: titles from The Bridge include “To Brooklyn Bridge,” “Powhatan’s Daughter,” “Virginia,” “Indiana,” “Quaker Hill,” “Ave Maria,” “Cape Hatteras,” “Cutty Sark,” and “Atlantis,” the uplifting language in this last section of the sequence, undertaken first, figures Atlantis “Unspeakable Thou bridge to Thee, O Love.”

Indeed Crane’s dense, emotional poetry responds to another Eliot text, “The Metaphysical Poets,” in which Eliot claims that English poetry going forward from the seventeenth century suffers from a “dissociation of sensibility,” namely of the unity of thought and emotion in the difficult syntax and conceits of Metaphysical Poets like John Donne and George Herbert. While Crane’s elusive sentence structures and symbols became his hallmark, such obscurity brought his poetry mixed critical reception. A prolific letter writer, Crane often sought to explain himself and his poetics to critics and supporters alike, as in an epistle to *Poetry* Editor Harriet Monroe, who had asked “by what process of reasoning you would justify this poem’s [“At Melville’s Tomb”] succession of champion mixed metaphors.” Crane’s response explains a “logic of metaphor” not bound to the dictates of scientific reason and that may be “obscure, excessive, etc., until by some experience of [the readers’] own the words accumulate the necessary connotations to complete their connection.” In addition to Crane’s brief exchanges with various editors and literati, notable among his correspondences are extensive conversations with modernist figures such as Allen Tate, Gorham Munson, Yvor Winters, Otto Kahn, and Waldo Frank.

Throughout his poetic career, Crane became known for periods of drunkenness, a habit that estranged him from several of his close friends. In 1931-32, Crane was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship and traveled to Mexico, where his alcoholism and carousing continued, and he experienced the only heterosexual affair of his life with Peggy Cowley, former wife of his friend Malcolm Cowley. On April 27, 1932 (Emil Opffer’s birthday), Crane reportedly flung himself from the helm of the steamship *Orizaba* into the Gulf of Mexico, and his body was never recovered.

References and further reading:

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Crane, H., Hammer, L., & Weber, B. (1997) *O My Land, My Friends: The Selected Letters of Hart Crane*, New York: Four Walls Eight Windows.

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Crane, H., and Tate, A. (1926) *White Buildings: Poems*, New York: Boni & Liveright.

Crane, H. (1930) *The Bridge: A Poem*, New York: H Liveright.

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Paratext:

A discussion of Hart Crane’s work, produced by PennSound:

<http://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Crane.php>