

R.W.B. LEWIS

The Poetry of Hart Crane

A Critical Study



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THE POETRY OF HART CRANE

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The Poetry of Hart Crane

The Poetry of
HART CRANE
A Critical Study

R. W. B. LEWIS

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For Nathaniel

Preface

THE PREMISE of this book, though nowhere else do I state it so unguardedly, is that Hart Crane is one of the finest modern poets in our language, and one of the dozen-odd major poets in American history. But this is a premise, not a thesis; I do not attempt to prove the unprovable. My purpose is simply to follow the development of Crane's poetry from the apprentice poems written around 1916 to "The Broken Tower," completed within a relatively few weeks of his death in 1932. I have tried to chart the career of Crane's imagination—of his vision, his rhetoric, and his craft. I have sought especially to relate those elements, as Crane consciously and sometimes defensively related them, to the Anglo-American Romantic tradition: in particular, to the work of Blake, Wordsworth, Keats, and Shelley in England; and of Emerson, Whitman, Melville, and Emily Dickinson in America. Late in his short life, Crane remarked to Allen Tate—who, Crane said, had "posit[ed] *The Bridge* at the end of a tradition of romanticism"—that "a great deal of romanticism may persist—of the sort to deserve serious consideration, I mean." The subsequent work of Wallace Stevens, with that of the proliferating heirs of both Crane and Stevens and the ever-mounting critical interest in Romantic writing, suggest that Crane's rather wistful contention was sounder than he could have dared to hope.

This is a long book, and no doubt it should have been longer. The excursions into cultural history—notably in Chapters Three, Eight, and Nine—seemed to me quite necessary journeys, undertaken to show the many affinities between this seeming poetic sport and whole clusters of figures and imaginative tendencies of the near and more remote past. But as to the poems themselves, there are a certain number that I do not even mention, much less gloss.

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More important, there are a good many images, lines, and stanzas over which I might have paused longer—not in exclamatory admiration (though this has often been hard to suppress), but in an effort to find interpretative language for the burgeoning implications they contain; implications which either I have felt forced to pass by, because of space, or which have edged their way into my consciousness too belatedly. As a single example, let me take a phrase I once thought of adapting for my title: “spindrift gaze,” in “Voyages II.” It is not enough to observe, as I do in Chapter Six, that “spindrift” is a Melvillian word meaning “spray-swept,” and that the image is visually precise. It has all too recently occurred to me that what Crane is describing is the *impeded* or *misted over* as well as the searching visionary glance; that this notion too has its discoverable antecedents in Wordsworth; and that such a partly beclouded vision is almost the main subject of Crane’s best poetry, as it is the characteristic property of the poet himself. But a book possibly twice as long would be needed to take account of all these significant enchantments. And in any case, my intention is to open, not to close, the discussion of Crane’s achievement.

I have included a modest amount of biographical material, little of which cannot be found in the biographies by Philip Horton (1937) and Brom Weber (1948), and perhaps none of which will not be found in John Unterecker’s forthcoming book. The materials I have drawn upon have to do entirely with Crane’s productivity, with the ebb and flow of his creative energies and the conditions which subdued or diverted or released them. Upon occasion, too, these materials have been indispensable aids to interpretation. The figure that emerges—the man *and* the poetic voice—is, I suppose, less bedeviled, less emotionally and verbally violent, indeed less self-destructive, than has usually been thought. But it is the figure that, over half a dozen years of mental association, I have come to recognize.

As to other critical studies of Crane, I have frankly learned more from those writers with whom I most strenuously dis-

agree—writers like Allen Tate, R. P. Blackmur, and Yvor Winters, who have variously indicted Crane for dissipating an immense talent out of wilfulness, strategic wrongheadedness, or bad Romantic habits—than from those who have praised him without qualification. More frankly yet, I gave up reading criticism about Crane several years ago. I am sure that I have, thereby, missed some astute and helpful readings, and worse yet I must have laboriously repeated what others have said earlier and better. But it did seem to me increasingly that what I was reading in articles and explications had almost nothing to do with my own experience of the volume of poems that lay open on the other side of my desk. One exception is L. S. Denbo's *Hart Crane's Sanskrit Charge* (1960), an analysis of *The Bridge* with which, as will be evident, I am also in some disagreement, but which has taught me many things. Another is Thomas A. Vogler's essay on *The Bridge* in the *Sewanee Review* (Summer 1965). Other sources of insight or provocation are mentioned in the text.

Given my own encounters with Crane criticism, I think I may be confident that no one will agree with all my readings of the poems. But it may well be that some will disagree with all of them; for my best hope has been to attain a degree of consistency in interpretation—in the identification of theme, in the analysis of poetic method, in the assessment of spiritual aspiration in the various works. Whether I have succeeded or not, the task should not be beyond the possibilities of criticism; for Crane's poetry itself reveals an extraordinary consistency.

The more I think about that poetry, the more I find it characterized by two remarks of Emerson, both appearing on the same page of *Nature*. The first is this: "The invariable mark of wisdom is to see the miraculous in the common." The second is Emerson's comment on the need to satisfy "all the demands of the spirit": "Love is as much its demand as perception. Indeed neither can be perfect without the other." In poems as early as "Meditation" (1917 or there-

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abouts) and somewhat later in "Chaplinesque," and in almost everything he wrote from "Faustus and Helen" (1923) onward, Crane was concerned with the spiritual needs of vision and love, with making manifest their fused power through the remarkable resources of his art, with enacting their miraculous and transfiguring effect upon the common and often discordant and repellent ingredients of life. Even *The Bridge*, for all its length and complexity, can be seen as a vast enlargement of the theme so regularly sounded in the lyrics—the theme of the visionary and loving transfiguration of the actual world. If, as eventually I do, I claim for Crane the role of the religious poet par excellence in his generation, it is because such a combination of love and vision seems to me to partake indisputably of the religious imagination. "And so it was," Crane wrote in "The Broken Tower"—"And so it was I entered the broken world / To trace the visionary company of love." Crane's journey through that broken world and his effort to heal and transform it by poetry are the subject of this book.

A book that takes as long to write as this did incurs many debts along the way, and one of the pleasures of completing the work is the opportunity to acknowledge them.

I am grateful to Professors Newton P. Stallknecht and Horst Frenz for inviting me to give a seminar on *The Bridge* at the School of Letters, Indiana University; and to the late R. P. Blackmur both for permitting me to offer a Christian Gauss Seminar at Princeton University on the same subject, and for the headiest kind of intellectual stimulation over many years. My sincerest thanks are due to the American Council of Learned Societies for a generous grant over the year 1962-1963, as a result of which I made the first substantial progress on the writing of the book. To Smith College, I am beholden for the honor of giving the Jacob Ziskind Memorial Lectures in 1966—lectures for which I drew upon (and was consequently able to improve) my Chapters Eight, Nine, and Twelve. I was fortunate, in addi-

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tion, to be able to try out some of my ideas about Crane in public lectures at Brown and Columbia Universities, and at the Universities of Virginia and Pittsburgh.

Among the many individuals to whom I am indebted for counsel, information, and suggestions, I should like to mention Daniel Aaron, Glauco Cambon, Malcolm Cowley, Charles T. Davis, Ralph Ellison, Richard Ellmann, Paul Fussell, Jr., John Hollander, Philip Horton, Robert Lowell, Norman Holmes Pearson, Mrs. Vivian Pemberton, Alan Trachtenberg, John Unterecker, and Brom Weber. I should make special mention of Harold Bloom, for patiently working through a number of Crane's early poems with me, and for guiding me with much vigor through the domain of Romantic poetry; of Peter J. Conn, for his careful proofreading of the manuscript and for many helpful stylistic and interpretive comments; of Kenneth Lohf, curator of the Special Collections of the Columbia University Library, for his unfailing assistance in making accessible Hart Crane's worksheets, and for placing at my disposal his invaluable bibliography of Crane's published and unpublished writings.

A much abbreviated version of Chapter Three appeared in the Summer 1963 issue of the *Massachusetts Review*; and virtually the entire chapter in *Learners and Discerners*, edited by Robert M. Scholes (University of Virginia Press, 1964). About four-fifths of Chapter Seven appeared in the Spring 1966 issue of the *Massachusetts Review*. I am grateful in all cases for permission to reprint.

The definitive edition of Crane's poetry, edited with annotations by Brom Weber, was published as *The Complete Poems and Selected Letters and Prose of Hart Crane*. This is the text I trust any reader of this book will have on hand. In almost all my quotations, I have adopted the wording, spelling and punctuation as established by Mr. Weber. I gratefully acknowledge permission to quote from *The Complete Poems and Selected Letters and Prose of Hart Crane*, Black & Gold Library, \$5.95, Liveright Publishers, New York. I am grateful again to Brom Weber for permission to

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The person to whom this book is dedicated is not yet quite as old as the critical enterprise itself; I look forward to the time when I can explain to him how much and often how knowingly he contributed to it. But as always the largest, most joyful and least repayable debt is to his mother.

RWBL

Yale University
December, 1966

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THE ESCAPE FROM IRONY

CHAPTER ONE

Geographies

IN DECEMBER 1919, when he himself was twenty, Hart Crane remarked about two recently acquired friends that one was "classic, hard and glossy," while the other was "crowd-bound, with a smell of the sod about him, uncouth. Somewhere between them," he went on in the self-deprecating manner then characteristic of him, "is Hart Crane with a kind of wistful indetermination, still much puzzled."¹ By circumstance and temperament, Crane was almost always "somewhere between" the variously opposing elements that made up his early life and nourished his creative powers. Carl Sandburg noted one of the unlikely combinations in him when he referred to Crane, with a kind of jocose shrewdness, as "the Cleveland Rimbaud." But the opposites between which Crane moved were even larger and more widespread than that; and perhaps the best way to identify Crane during the first two decades or so of his brief life is to trace his actual and imaginative movements among the most important of these opposites—to chart as it were the multiple "geographies" of his early career.

He stood, for example, somewhere between his incompatible and eventually, in Crane's own word, "sundered" parents. The marriage between Grace Edna Hart of Chicago and Clarence Arthur Crane, an increasingly successful manufacturer of chocolate candy and founder of the Crane Company in Cleveland, ended in divorce in 1916. "I don't want to fling accusations, etc., at anybody," Hart Crane wrote his mother several years later, "but I think it's time you realized

¹ *The Letters of Hart Crane*, edited by Brom Weber (New York, 1952), p. 27. All quotations from Crane's letters are taken from this volume. Except in special instances, page references will not hereafter be given.

that for the last eight years my youth has been a rather bloody battleground for yours and father's sex life and troubles." On the whole, he sided with his mother in the marital warfare: at least to the extent of dropping his first baptismal name, Harold, and of signing his publications with his second name, his mother's maiden name, Hart.²

Throughout most of his life, he remained, or rather tried to remain (Mrs. Crane did not always make it easy) close to his mother. And it is worth remarking that, insofar as Crane's epic poem of 1930, *The Bridge*, does invoke the epic convention of the child's search for the parent, it is mainly in terms of the son's search for the mother. Still, as the tough-spirited letter just quoted indicates, Crane was anything but a mother's boy. He was neither effeminate nor maternally smothered, nor was he unable to see his father in a reasonably clear light. Long after the divorce, he wrote that "Probably the truth"—about Clarence Crane—"consists more moderately in the estimate of him as a person of as many good inclinations as bad ones"; and he could even admire his father's business achievements. "Things are whizzing," he reported with detached amusement in 1919, "and I don't know how many millions he will be worth before he gets through growing." In any event, his parents provided the youthful Crane with an unforgettable experience of the violence of feeling and the failure of communication to which the relation between man and woman can be susceptible, and with the knowledge that each party to the struggle may be equally culpable.

Domestic upheavals in the Crane household also affected, in part, the literal geography of Crane's apprentice years. He was born, in 1899, in the small northern Ohio village of Garrettsville, near the Pennsylvania border. In 1903, the family moved to the somewhat larger and nearby town of Warren; but in 1908, the boy was rushed to his grandparents'

² Beginning with the poem "Echoes" in the October 1917 issue of the New York periodical, *The Pagan*.

home in Cleveland after Mr. and Mrs. Crane had explosively separated and the latter had been carried, in a state of collapse, to a sanatorium. A precarious reconciliation followed, and Hart Crane lived and went to school in Cleveland from 1908 to 1916. Then, in December of 1916, after the divorce, Crane felt free to go east to New York City, there to attempt a start on a literary career. He was back in Cleveland for a few months in 1918, taking a job first in a munitions plant and later in a shipyard—with some vague notion of helping the “war effort.” By the end of that same year, he went again to New York. This second eastern venture lasted until November 1919, when Crane was persuaded by his father to return to Ohio and work in Mr. Crane’s Akron store. He was soon transferred to the Crane factory in Cleveland; and when one speaks of Hart Crane’s “Cleveland years,” it is primarily the period from early 1920 to early 1923 that is meant. He quit working for his father in April 1921, but he stayed on in his grandmother’s house during a nine-month jobless interval and later while working for the advertising firm of Corday and Gross. The Cleveland years ended in March 1923, when Crane had completed what was in every respect the major turning-point of his creative life, the three-part poem “For the Marriage of Faustus and Helen,” and left Cleveland to settle permanently in or near New York.

Not surprisingly, Crane felt himself psychologically and culturally somewhere between the Middle West and the East as he shuttled back and forth, over the years, from one to the other. During his first stay in New York, he was very much the big-eyed ambitious young man from the western provinces—boasting to his mother about meeting “one of the principal literary figures in America,”³ but telling his father that he seemed to have lost his identity in the big city and

³ Padraic Colum. In her memoirs, Mary Colum, who does not like Crane’s poetry but who was interested in the young provincial personally, recalled that he pronounced the word “manly” as though it were spelled “mainly.”

that he was "vainly trying to find [it] somewhere in this sea of humanity." Back in Ohio, however, he found that he had become half an easterner, and his letters sometimes bristled with distaste for the vulgarity and hypocrisy by which he felt surrounded: the poem "Porphyro in Akron" (published belatedly by *The Double Dealer* in September 1921) is a rueful account of his situation. At the same time, he had a congenital affection for the rustic and a sympathy for small-town life, balancing those qualities against the ambiguous allure of the metropolitan. This is one implication of the description of his two friends, cited earlier. The hard and classic one, Matthew Josephson, was an intellectually sophisticated resident of Manhattan; his "uncouth" opposite was Sherwood Anderson, whose tales of secreted emotions and lonely strivings in just such a small Ohio town as Crane had known—*Winesburg, Ohio*—Crane, in a reverent review (1919), called "the Bible of the American consciousness."

There was indeed a strong and steady pastoral strain in Crane's imagination. He is sometimes taken as the type of the twentieth-century city poet; but when he inspected the eastern urban scene, Crane—like another fellow Midwesterner, his contemporary Scott Fitzgerald—tended to cast upon it a glance at once western and astonished; and a glance, too, again like Fitzgerald's, that sought to convert that crowded and mechanized setting into a dream of natural purity. Some of his most remarkable lyrics, moreover, enact precisely the escape from the city's oppressions to the inspiring freshness of the hills and the sea: "Passage," for example, and "Repose of Rivers"; and the pastoral retreat westward is a dominant counter-theme in *The Bridge*, where it is salted with phrases borrowed ironically from Shakespeare's most greatly conventional pastoral romance, *As You Like It*.

So imposing a name as Shakespeare's brings us to the question of Crane's actual literary enthusiasms and affinities in his beginning years. Here once more we observe a sort of dialectical geography, as Crane's attachments moved (to

put the case oversimply) between Europe and America; or, to take two individual names as cultural symbols, between T. S. Eliot and Walt Whitman. Those were perhaps the chief poets around whose work and influence the critical battle waged most vigorously when Crane reached New York in 1916; and it was his direct experience of the battle rather than any formal education which was decisive for Crane. He never quite finished high school; and though he contemplated enrolling in some special courses at Columbia University and even tutored for a while in the summer of 1917 to prepare himself, Crane eventually abandoned the notion and turned instead, as he told a friend, to "pursuing the old course of self-culture."⁴ No American writer ever pursued that course—so significantly typical of American writers from Melville and Whitman onward—more persistently and rigorously than Hart Crane; and he did so at a time and in a place where literary doctrines buffeted one another in an enormously stimulating anarchy of opposites.

Out of the welter of would-be new influences that palpitated on the New York literary scene in those years, two of the many periodicals can be taken as expressive of the major contending forces—*The Little Review* that, under the direction of Margaret Anderson, moved from Chicago to Manhattan in 1917; and the *Seven Arts*, founded in 1916 by Waldo Frank, Van Wyck Brooks, James Oppenheim, and Paul Rosenfeld. The former propagated the European aspect,

⁴ Though Crane was mainly self-educated, the notion that he was a sort of cultural sport, emerging from a wholly unlettered family background, is quite groundless. Mrs. Vivian Pemberton, of the Kent State (Ohio) English Department, is making a study of Crane's forbears and relatives; she reports that the Crane family (as against the Harts) had evinced for several generations a strong love of literature and of things artistic. Hart Crane's great-uncle, Frederick J. Crane, for example, was a poet or poetaster in the wake of Longfellow, and he enjoyed reciting his own verses and those of the American Fireside Poets in the Crane Household. Clarence Crane liked to recite long passages of Shakespeare. The Cranes, in short, were recognizably late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Midwestern Americans in their devotion to the arts.

especially French *symboliste* poets like Laforgue and Rimbaud, and those English-language poets, Pound and Eliot in particular, who were absorbing and reflecting that aspect. The *Seven Arts* was all in the American grain: a magazine, as a French admirer, Romain Rolland declared, "in which the American Spirit may seek and achieve consciousness of its nature and its role"; behind it, Rolland heard "the elemental voice of a great pioneer . . . your Homer: Walt Whitman." The opposition established will be readily recognized as another and perhaps more than usually meaningful version of a recurring American phenomenon—the periodic clash between the adherents of European literature and those who are driven to assert an essentially indigenous tradition. Somewhere in between was Hart Crane, moving with determination, much puzzled perhaps but also much exhilarated.

"I'm afraid I don't fit in your group," Crane said to one of the embattled *literati*. "Or any group, for all that." As a person profoundly concerned with the craft of poetry, Crane was drawn to the kind of writing that appeared in *The Little Review*, to its habitual ironies and large erudition, its deft indirections, its articulated sense of the sheer complexities of modern experience, and its resourceful efforts to revitalize the language of poetry in order to give voice to those complexities. But humanly and emotionally, Crane was not much less drawn to the forthright native idealism of the *Seven Arts*, even though he was for a time hesitant about its stress on the "national consciousness" and wondered aloud, in commenting on Waldo Frank's *Our America* (1919), whether writers like Dreiser, Anderson, and Frost had not achieved their successes rather through a "national *unconsciousness*" (*italics added*). As a matter of fact, Crane had a good deal more in common with the American literary tradition—at least as represented by Melville, Whitman, Emerson, Thoreau, and Emily Dickinson—than he was yet aware, or than anyone could have been aware at a time when

it was not yet understood that an American literary tradition existed.

The *symboliste*-Eliot aspect, however, was in the ascendancy in Crane's early creative years, and it reached its peak in 1920 and 1921—which is one reason why certain critics of the Eliotic persuasion sometimes limit Crane's accomplishment to the work of that period: "Praise for an Urn," "Black Tambourine," and a few others. The verbal hardness of these poems, their use of ironic literary allusion, their clear cadences and firm grasp of moral complexities—all this could be admired by the party in fashion. And the poems are indeed thoroughly admirable; Crane learned many invaluable lessons from what we may loosely call the *Little Review* school. But other aspects were always present, not only to Crane's creative purposes but also to his critical sense. And here let it be said that Hart Crane was one of his generation's soundest and most staunchly independent judges of poetry. He was quick to follow up a suggestion, and he was perhaps lucky to receive such radically different suggestions from such different sources; but his responses were entirely his own. "There," he said about Wallace Stevens four years before the appearance of Stevens's first volume, *Harmonium*, "is a man whose work makes most of the rest of us quail." And if in the writing of these years he usually restricted himself to the brief intensities of experience, he was hospitable in his reading to work of every kind of comprehensiveness. In February 1920, for example, he was "deep in Baudelaire's *Fleurs de Mal*," but a month later he was absorbed in Stendhal's *The Charterhouse of Parma*; in July, he was telling Gorham Munson about his enthusiasm for "our Henry James," for James's *The American*, some short stories and his letters, and within weeks he was immersed in "the polyphonic prose" of Conrad's *The Nigger of the Narcissus*; before the summer was out, he had read *Moby-Dick*, *The Possessed* ("one of the most tremendous books I've ever read"), and *The Brothers Karamazov* ("even better"). "Dosty," as Crane took to calling him, was "the greatest of

novelists" and "the nearest type to the return of Christ that there is record of."

But it was one particular kind of poetry that gradually took dominance in Crane's artistic consciousness, something considerably larger and older than the American aspect I have mentioned and which it included. Its ascendancy followed certain psychological experiences during the year 1922, to be considered later; and it was much affected by Crane's excited reading of S. Foster Damon's massive study of the poetry of William Blake.⁵ Crane was always given to listings of writers he admired: for example, of various "English old fellows that are a constant challenge," as he wrote Allen Tate in May 1922—"Donne, Webster, Jonson, Marlowe, Vaughan, Blake, etc." But it was the tradition represented by "Blake etc." which ultimately obtained Crane's deepest allegiance: the Romantic tradition in both its English and its American phases. To this, everything Crane had so valuably learned from Eliot and from the poets whom he had met through Eliot became subordinated and adjusted. The easiest single descriptive adjective for the poetic tradition in question—at least as it was absorbed and modified by Hart Crane—is the word "visionary."

I should be glad to use the word "religious" to define the kind of poetry Crane came most to honor and to write—except that, in Crane's case, the word "religious" is peculiarly beset with semantic and historical difficulties; we shall need, later, to make a number of distinctions before we can usefully employ it. In 1930, in a grateful acknowledgment of a favorable review of *The Bridge* which had emphasized "the essential religious motive" in it, Crane said: "I have never consciously approached any subject in a religious mood." But that is only an example of the semantic problem; in context, it is clear that Crane feared the word "religious" might imply some wrong kind of Messianic impulse in his

⁵ See the letter to Gorham Munson in (apparently) late August 1922.

poetry. Using the word more laxly, though not, I think, irresponsibly, one can as accurately say that from 1922 onward Crane never approached a subject in anything *but* a religious mood. With considerations of this kind, anyhow, we arrive at the last and most important of the geographies by which I have been trying to locate and identify the emergent poet. I mean, here, what we might call the geography of the spirit—the two worlds, the world of the actual and the world of the ideal, between which Crane's imagination moved, as his talent developed, with ever stronger determination and confidence.

We get an early clue to Crane's attitude in this crucial area from a comment he made about Christian Science. His mother had drifted toward Christian Science when Hart Crane was still a boy,⁶ and after the divorce from Clarence Crane, she took it up wholeheartedly. Her son allowed her to believe that he, too, espoused it—because, he told a friend in May 1919, "she seems to depend on that hypocrisy as an additional support for her own faith in it." He admitted to having been "very much interested in Christian Science" at one time, and still found in it an amount of "efficacy"; but only as a psychological attitude. "As a religion, there is where I balk. . . . What it says in regard to mental and nervous ailments is absolutely true. It is only the total denial of the animal and organic world which I cannot swallow."

When Crane later began to talk and write about the actual and ideal or the "quotidian" and the "abstract"—rather than about the organic, animal, and mental—his fundamental convictions about a hierarchy of "worlds" and his evenly distributed affirmation of the value and reality of each had not changed. One primary movement in "For the Marriage of Faustus and Helen," in "Voyages," and in *The Bridge*, as well as in several of the shorter poems discussed below in Chapters Five and Seven, is a "graduation from the quotidian into the abstract," to borrow Crane's phrase about "Faustus

⁶ Professor John Unterecker says: probably in 1900, though he has not found any explicit reference.

and Helen, Part I." It is expressed variously as a movement from the temporal to the timeless, from the ironically irrecconcilable to the perfectly harmonious, from the divided to the united, from the hot and crowded to the cool and solitary, from the physical to the spiritual. Because Crane's poetic gaze was fixed so often and so intently upon the transcendent and timeless sphere, he may properly enough be called a visionary poet. But the label would be utterly misleading if it carried any suggestion of a "denial of the animal and organic world," of the actual and the quotidian. For just as he traveled literally between Middle West and East and just as his literary loyalties shifted back and forth more spaciouly between the American and the European, so his moral and spiritual loyalties commuted between the two grand dimensions of consciousness and (in Crane's belief) of existence.

Crane was, or rather he became, a poet of powerful visionary impulses who at the same time, both as a man *and* as a poet, was a thoroughgoing devotee of the things of this world. Both as a man and as a poet, Crane entered at an early age into an enduring love affair with life itself, this actual life. Like most love affairs, this one could at times become almost unbearably intense, and it was susceptible to alternating fits of ecstasy and exasperation, to an alternating sense of fulfillment and of despair. But it was an affair that really did endure—if only because the life that often betrayed him in the fact could always be redeemed in the poetry. Crane was not a death-haunted author of death-conscious poetry, any more than he was, in the usual meaning of the phrase, a tragic poet. That false stereotype, as I shall insist on more than one occasion, derives from a muddled view of his life, a consequent misinterpretation of his poetry and a series of misleading associations with some of his genuinely tragic-spirited contemporaries.

Crane instinctively felt about the actual world that he should risk the experience of it, and report his findings;

though he knew that it was not his human or poetic business, as it were, to wallow in the actual. The distinction was not, to be sure, always held to. During the Cleveland years, even as Crane's creative excitement mounted, the sheer pace of his behavior quickened. It was then that he began to consume large quantities of red wine, and that he engaged in his first homosexual love affair. He almost never—at least at this time—showed any symptoms of remorse for such conduct, except when these matters interfered with his writing. Critics of a Protestant mentality have attributed to Crane and to his poetry a guilt he simply did not feel; Crane obviously *enjoyed*—that, as Elizabeth Hardwick has remarked approvingly, is the only word for it⁷—both his wine and his affairs with young men. And out of one of the latter, he was to write "Voyages," perhaps the most beautiful love poetry in modern American literature. The fact was that Crane remained immune to that profound sense of human sin that, under the auspices of T. S. Eliot, was providing an indispensable corrective to the flabbily optimistic progressivism of the day, and that was having in some important respects so beneficial an effect upon Anglo-American writing. Crane's attitude to his own conduct was of a piece with his attitude to the fallen world in which it occurred. In both cases, as he put it in "Lachrymae Christi," Crane favored:

Not penitence
But song. . . .

It was William Blake among others (later it was above all Emerson and Whitman) who helped Crane discover how to arrive at that impenitent song. One had not only to *see* the actual in all of its fallen condition, but to *see through* it; to see an ideal condition in the same glance, and to see the actual thereby irradiated. One of Blake's couplets in particular was cherished by Crane as the true, if negative, formulation of the problem:

⁷ *A View of My Own* (New York, 1962), pp. 10ff.

THE ESCAPE FROM IRONY

We are led to believe in a lie

When we see *with* not *through* the eye.

It was a question of vision: of somehow seeing the two different worlds at one and the same time; but countless writers over the centuries have attested to the overwhelming difficulty of the question—no one more poignantly than one of Crane's American ancestors, Emerson, who said that the trouble with "this double consciousness of ours" was that the two halves of it never "meet and mingle," never "measure each other." In this regard, too, Crane was lucky; or to use an older vocabulary, he was touched by something like grace. It happened early in 1922, and of all places, in a dentist's chair. There, as Crane later described it, "under the influence of aether and *amnesia* my mind spiraled to a kind of seventh heaven of consciousness. . . . I felt the two worlds. And at once." The experience served to release the visionary genius latent in what had until then been a very fine but a relatively earth-bound poet; and Crane moved on into the larger phases of his career, where it was his sustained purpose to show in poetry the two worlds meeting and mingling, the dimensions of consciousness measuring one another.

CHAPTER TWO

Poetry and the Actual

CRANE'S DEVELOPMENT from apprentice to genuine poet may be measured by comparing a poem of 1917, "Annunciations," with "Black Tambourine," written early in 1921. Crane said about the latter, some months after it had been published in the New Orleans *Double Dealer*, that it had become for him "a kind of diminutive model" that at least "point[ed] a direction"; and we cannot do better than follow his lead. "Annunciations" is short enough to quote in its entirety:

The anxious milk-blood in the veins of the earth,
That strives long and quiet to sever the girth
Of greenery. . . . Below the roots, a quickening shiver
Aroused by some light that had sensed,—ere the shiver
Of the first moth's descent,—day's predestiny. . . .
The sound of a dove's flight waved over the lawn. . . .
The moans of travail of one dearest beside me. . . .
Then high cries from great chasms of chaos outdrawn—
Hush! these things were all heard before dawn.

As even a hasty reading will show, this is a very odd combination of the muted and the headlong: the faint and painful quickening-into-life of nature and the human psyche and possibly, in some vague way, of the cosmos in general (with the murky hint of a Christian implication in the title)—all this conveyed in a series of runaway anapests. The combination reflects faithfully enough the two chief influences—Wilde and Swinburne—that Crane had to escape before he could arrive, as he unmistakably did in "Black Tambourine," at an idiom and a melody of his own.

The first of Crane's poems to see print (in the New York *Bruno's Weekly*, September 1916) was indeed a tribute to

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Oscar Wilde and took as its title Wilde's identification as a numbered convict in Reading Gaol: "C 33." In it he spoke of Wilde as weaving "rose-vines / About the empty heart of night," and attributed to him a "penitence" leading to "pain"—"and with it song of minor, broken strain." Nothing could be less congenial to Crane's natural poetic impulse than a minor, broken strain, unless it be the wistful whispering that pervades the diction of the poem—or the motif of painful remorse. In all of this we recognize at once the borrowed melancholy of the aspiring young. The more expansive rhythms of Swinburne did not serve him much better, as "Annunciations" indicates; one line in the latter, "Then high cries from great chasms of chaos outdrawn" reminds one indeed of Swinburne's entertaining self-parody "Nephelida" ("Gaunt as the ghestliest of glimpses that gleam through the gloom of the gloaming," and so on). In a curious allegorical ballad composed about the same time, however, Crane deployed that rushing meter to a slightly more pleasing effect.¹ "The Moth that God Made Blind," as it was called, is interesting because of the promising flicker of its imagery, but even more because of its subject: it is the first time, so far as I know, that Crane dealt with the question of poetic vision.² This poem tells, in four-line

¹ This poem is included in Brom Weber's new edition, for Doubleday, of Crane's poetry. In January 1916, Crane wrote his grandmother that he was "grippingly interested in a new ballad of . . . six hundred lines"—perhaps an early reference to "The Moth," which, however, was happily kept to forty-two lines.

² Since the above was written, Kenneth A. Lohf has made available a group of Crane's early and hitherto unpublished poems, in a pamphlet called "Hart Crane: Seven Lyrics" (New York: The Ibis Press, 1966). These were written between 1916 and late 1918; and the last and by far the best of them, "Meditation" not only engages the theme of vision, but does so in a way that astonishingly anticipates the visionary thrust of much later work. The poem consists of three six-line stanzas, each with a rhyme scheme of aabbcc. It begins:

I have drawn my hands away
Toward peace and the grey margins of the day.
The andante of vain hopes and lost regret
Falls like slow rain that whispers to forget. . . .

stanzas with alternating rhymes, of a race of moths whose eyes were too weak to look upon the "gorgeous" world about them by day, and dared open their eyes only in moonlight. But then a moth was born totally blind, and yet by recompense equipped with unusually strong wings. One day he ventured to fly up toward the blazing sun—and vision was suddenly granted him:

When below him he saw what his whole race had shunned—
Great horizons and systems and shores all along.

Inevitably, though:

A little time only, for sight burned as deep
As his blindness before had frozen in Hell;

his wings wither; he falls and disappears. In a final stanza, Crane underscored the obvious: his eyes, too, "have hugged beauty and winged life's brief spell," but now his eyes are dim and his hand withered.

"The Moth that God Made Blind" may have been one of the poems Crane read to Matthew Josephson, when they met in the office of *The Little Review* on West 16th Street, early in 1919. Josephson, anyhow, pronounced the poems that Crane did read to him "old fashioned" and "Swinburnian" and at once set to giving Crane a course of literary instruction that hastened the process of Crane's liberation

And it ends:

I have drawn my hands away
Like ships for guidance in the lift and spray
Of stars that urge them toward an unknown goal.
Drift, O wakeful one, O restless soul,
Until the glittering white open hand
Of heaven thou shalt read and understand.

Mr. Lohf observes that the second line above was adapted for "Faustus and Helen I"; and it can be added that the whispering slow rain will be heard again in "My Grandmother's Love Letters." But the last stanza contains strung-out versions of motifs that would recur, highly animated, in *The Bridge*—especially in "Ave Maria" and the "Sanskrit charge" passage in "Cape Hatteras." "Meditation" almost certainly post-dates "The Moth that God Made Blind" by a year or so.

from the Edwardians.³ As a matter of fact, the process had already begun. A year before, in July 1918, Crane had dispatched a letter to *The Little Review*, replying briskly to a critic who had lumped Baudelaire and Joyce with Wilde and Swinburne "as rivals in 'decadence' and 'intellect.'" On this occasion, Crane pretty much rejected Wilde and Swinburne: Wilde because he amounted to little more than a "bundle of paradoxes"; Swinburne because his poetry was limited to "beautiful" but "meaningless mouthing." In praising Baudelaire and Joyce for their "penetration into life," Crane was moved to call *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* "aside from Dante . . . spiritually the most inspiring book I have ever read. It is Bunyan raised to art, and then raised to the ninth power."⁴ The Bunyanesque "Moth that God Made Blind" was thus a token of the future, as well as an act of piety toward the past. For all its Swinburnian trappings, we detect in it the same myth of the ill-fated but admirably daring flight of Icarus which had provided a central symbol for the artist in Joyce's novel.

According to Crane's biographers, the process had started earlier yet. In 1917, during his first New York stay, Crane had a number of useful sessions with a former Warren, Ohio neighbor, the painter Carl Schmitt—sessions aimed precisely, as Philip Horton has put it, at "breaking down the formal patterns" of Crane's apprentice verse. Crane's progress in this regard—that is, in his handling of meter and rhyme—was in no way an unfamiliar one in the history of poetry; but it was in every way important, for later, in his best work, Crane could sometimes get out of sheer metrical pressure an amount of communicable "meaning" that a very different kind of poet might get from a classical literary allusion. It was a progress from the employment of metrical conventions that were dead or dying or, for Crane, irrelevant; through

³ Josephson, *Life Among the Surrealists* (New York, 1962).

⁴ Brom Weber, *Hart Crane* (1948), pp. 402-403. The Dante reference was fashionable bravado. Crane almost certainly did not read Dante until after he had published *The Bridge*.

an exploratory wandering in the open field of free or unpatterned verse; to the firm possession of a metrical scheme which, though conventional and dating from at least the early seventeenth century, Crane could freshen and revitalize until it became the exact musical realization of his personal idiom—the very music of his saying. These three stages are evident in sets of poems written, conveniently enough, at two-year intervals; “Annunciations” and “The Moth that God Made Blind” in 1917; “Forgetfulness” and “My Grandmother’s Love Letters” in 1919; and, in 1921, two poems handsomely characteristic of Crane’s first really accomplished phase, “Black Tambourine” and “Chaplinesque.”

As against the muffled gurgling and dubious rhymes of “Annunciations,” “Forgetfulness” has an unplanned and thoughtful air:

Forgetfulness is like a song
That, freed from beat and measure, wanders.
Forgetfulness is like a bird whose wings are reconciled,
Outspread and motionless,—
A bird that coasts the wind unwearyingly.

Here, in this amiably youthful poem, a release from conventional metrical control is itself a source of metaphor; not only is it exemplified in the poem, it is the very subject of the poem. But even in the passage quoted, Crane did not wander “freed from beat and measure” for long; the last line has a quite regular stress, if a soft one. The same kind of free wandering interspersed with soft regularity is apparent in the poem addressed to his grandmother, Mrs. Elizabeth Belden Hart:

There are no stars to-night
But those of memory.
Yet how much room for memory there is
In the loose girdle of soft rain.

There is even room enough
For the letters of my mother's mother,
Elizabeth. . . .

This was much better; but such gently melodic musing was not Crane's natural bent. He began to hit his metrical stride, and he knew it, with "Black Tambourine":

The interests of a black man in a cellar
Mark tardy judgment on the world's closed door.
Gnats toss in the shadow of a bottle,
And a roach spans a crevice in the floor.

In the letter quoted at the start of this chapter, where he cited "Black Tambourine" as a diminutive model for future work, Crane said that he was trying "to work away from the current impressionism." The context indicates that he meant by "impressionism" the then popular experimentation with the poetical random, with non-meter and non-sense. "I may even be carried back into 'rime and rhythm,'" he continued. "I grow to like my 'Black Tambourine' more, for this reason, than before." Almost the whole story of Crane's prosodic development up to 1921 is represented in the change of a single line in the above stanza: from

Mark an old judgment on the world
(in the worksheet) to

Mark tardy judgment on the world's closed door.

A rhyme has been thereby introduced; and the rhythm, shaking off its original looseness, braces itself into the grave, distinctive beat that the poem deserves.

The change also importantly enhanced the poem's diction and hence its content: the added words "tardy" and "closed door" are indispensable to the final version of "Black Tambourine." It is of course impossible to talk about a poet's purely technical resources, as I have seemed to do, without considering his language; and without considering

the subject or the reality which all those elements seek to bring into being. Once he came into his own, Crane—to borrow R. P. Blackmur's fine remark about Melville (whom Crane in this as in other ways so much resembled)—“habitually used words greatly.”⁵ It was because he did so that he needed to employ ever more forceful rhythms: a peculiar adaptation of the most literally dramatic of English metrical forms—the blank verse of Elizabethan and Jacobean drama (and especially perhaps of John Webster)—converted, often though not always, into vigorous four-line stanzas with strong alternating rhymes. As to language itself, Crane made his way haltingly from the conventional through the unpatterned to the intensively personal, in a manner similar to but more difficult than the metrical process.

For the most part, the language and phrasing of “Annunciations” are either conventional in the bad or lifeless sense (“the veins of the earth,” “one dearest beside me”); or they are merely discrete. The latter is the more serious flaw. The milk-blood, the greenery, the roots, the light, the moth, the dove, the moans, the high cries: these have perhaps a logical connection and can all be imagined as belonging to the same place and time; but they have been invested with an insufficient *poetic* connection. We are moved from one item to the next by decree, rather than by the irresistible creative energy of the language. Crane grew acutely aware of the problem. In a review of Maxwell Bodenheim's book of poems, *Minna and Myself* (in February 1919),⁶ Crane pointed out that Bodenheim's “poems are often little heaps of images in which the verbal element is subordinated, making for an essentially static and decorative quality.” “Little heaps of images” is a fair description of many of the poems Crane wrote during the intermediate stage, once he had gotten away from conventionality in the choice and arrangements of words; and in these poems,

⁵ See the discussion of “At Melville's Tomb” in Chapter Seven.

⁶ Weber, *Hart Crane*, p. 404.

too, "the verbal element"—Crane seems to have meant by this the design-making power of which words are capable—was unduly "subordinated." Crane was in fact detained longer by the question of verbal pattern than of metrical pattern; the flirtation with free verse was relatively brief, as we have seen, but he struggled for years with verbal scraps and isolated images, seeking to fit or force them together into various wholes. This was due in part to the habit he had at some time acquired (as had many other poets before him) of beginning not with a story or an event or even, occasionally, with a discernible subject, but merely with an image, a cluster of words, a line or two that had struck his fancy.

In January 1921, for example, he wrote Gorham Munson that "my sum poetic output for the last three months" was "two lines—

"The everlasting eyes of Pierrot / And of Gargantua,—the laughter.' Maybe," he added, "it is my epitaph, it is contradictory and wide enough to be. But I hope soon to turn it into a poem. . . ." The poem in which the lines were first used is Crane's most astonishing effort at the enforced combination of scraps: a thirty-two-line poem of uncertain versification, called "The Bridge of Estador."⁷ As it turned out, this was a kind of storeroom for themes and images of poems to come. It is the first overt treatment of that visionary search for beauty which would motivate the action, two years later, of "For the Marriage of Faustus and Helen"; and it offers the first vague use of the major

⁷ Research by several hands has yet failed to come up with a source of the name "Estador." In the poem, of course, it is a place of visionary fantasy; but one is curious whether Crane borrowed or simply coined the word. Brom Weber has hazarded the guess, in conversation, that Crane may have heard it or something like it from his friend Harry Candee, in the latter's reports on his travels in the Far East. It has a naggingly familiar sound, perhaps because it punningly suggests the Gateway to the East—e.g., to Cathay. In his ecstatic letter to Waldo Frank in 1924, about a newly begun love affair, Crane wrote that he and his lover would "take a walk across the bridge to Brooklyn (as well as to Estador, for all that!)."

symbol of *The Bridge*. It throws into proximity, without at all managing to yoke them together, such eventually familiar images as these:

High on the bridge of Estador
Where no one has ever been before,—
I do not know what you'll see,—your vision
May slumber yet in the moon, awaiting
Far consummation of the tides to throw
Clean on the shore some wreck of dreams. . . .

But some are twisted with the love
Of things irreconcilable,—
The slant moon with the slanting hill:
O Beauty's fool, though you have never
Seen them again, you won't forget.
Nor the Gods that danced before you
When your fingers spread among stars.

And you others—follow your arches
To what corners of the sky they pull you to,—
The everlasting eyes of Pierrot,
Or, of Gargantua, the laughter.

Brom Weber, who made this poem available, has noted that lines four to six were reworded into "At Melville's Tomb"; that seven and eight turn up almost intact in Part I of "Faustus and Helen"; and that lines nine and sixteen and seventeen, originally independent jottings, were thrust into "Praise for an Urn." There are also clear anticipations of the ironic attitudes and cadences of "Chaplinesque" and "Locutions des Pierrots" in the passage; and the dancing gods of line twelve are perhaps rehearsing for their much wilder performance in Section II of *The Bridge*. Against the latter work as a whole, the charge has often been leveled that it is little more than a display of exciting but incompatible fragments. The charge can hardly withstand a sensible reading of *The Bridge*; but as regards "The Bridge at Estador" it is instructively correct.

"Oh! it is hard," Crane lamented in the letter about "Black Tambourine." "One must be drenched in words, literally soaked with them to have the right ones form themselves into the proper pattern at the right moment." So, in all simplicity, the immense challenge was stated. Crane felt that in a poem of July 1921, called "Pastorale"—which he regarded as "thin, but rather good"—the verbal miracle had occurred. It is true that in this unstressed and dusky meditation on the passing of time, the words do drift toward each other, and the atmosphere is thickened a bit by a mildly incantational tone, to the extent that the poem has a character if not a shape. But "Pastorale" seems limp when set beside the work from which it probably derived, Emerson's "Days." Crane's poem ends with the poet's scornful address to himself:

'Fool—
Have you remembered too long;
Or was there too little said
For ease or resolution—
Summer scarcely begun
And violets,
A few picked, the rest dead?'

Emerson's final lines sound the same self-accusing note of opportunity lost; but at the same time, they bring to fulfillment the verbal pattern that winds through the poem like the very image it composes—that of days (the "daughters of Time") marching silently across the horizon, offering each man such gifts of life as he is able to take:

I, in my pleached garden, watched the pomp,
Forgot my morning wishes, hastily
Took a few herbs and apples, and the Day
Turned and departed silent. I, too late,
Under her solemn fillet saw the scorn.

Not until "Black Tambourine" did Crane arrive at so resolute a diction.

If in "Black Tambourine" the right words did in some modest (or, as Crane said, "diminutive") way "form themselves into the proper pattern at the proper moment," it was in part because the poem's subject induced them to do so. Before inspecting the verbal activity of this little landmark in Crane's career, we should pause over the question of Crane's subject matter and the sources of it, especially since it has sometimes been maintained that he did not have any subject matter, but only a highly charged rhetoric.⁸ According to Northrop Frye's recent and influential argument, the poetry of any composition comes out of the traditional structures and devices of poetry itself, that is, of other poems; by implication, however, the immediate subject of a poem and the peculiar slant of its perception come out of the poet's own experience.⁹ From this viewpoint, we might say that both the poetry *and* the subject in works like "Annunciations" were untimely ripped from existing literature. Beginning with "My Grandmother's Love Letters" and "Garden Abstract" in 1920, Crane turned much more to his personal experience and sense of life as sources of creative material; and—it was a matter of degree, but of considerable degree—"Black Tambourine" was more graspingly personal yet.

Probably nothing in English is more ambiguous than the word "experience." Talking about the relation between feeling and thought in poetry, T. S. Eliot once remarked—in a much-quoted but, when one thinks about it, rather singular and revealing sentence—that at one and the same

⁸ For example, Edmund Wilson, reviewing *White Buildings* in May 1927, felt that Crane possessed "a great style," but that it was a great style "not merely not applied to a great subject, but not, so far as one can see, to any subject at all" ("The Muses out of Work" in *The Shores of Light*, 1952).

⁹ *The Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton, 1958). The immediate subject, be it noted, not the general or universal subject toward which it may grow: the death of Lincoln, in Whitman's "When Lilacs Last in the Door Yard Bloom'd," for example, and not that poem's larger theme of death and poetry.

time, a man may "fall in love or read Spinoza"; and that in the best kind of poetry, these two dimensions of experience—the emotional and the cerebral—were wholly fused. Eliot, of course, was then making a subtle case for the *impersonal* as against the personal element in poetry; but one can easily imagine that Eliot could during the same period fall in love and read Spinoza; as one imagines that Wallace Stevens might have fallen in love and read or even listened to the Harvard lectures of George Santayana. For both poets, that is (though much less so for Stevens), a systematic body of thought, including a view of the nature of reality and a theory of knowledge, could in all honesty be a part of their individual experience and hence a source for their writing. Hart Crane fell in love periodically; but for better or worse (I am not disposed to say that it was for worse), he did not at the same time read Spinoza or Santayana—or any other writer of formal philosophy or theology.¹⁰ He read imaginative literature; in particular, as the years went by, an increasingly definable group of poets—including (in chronological order) Donne, Webster, Blake, Keats, Whitman, Melville, for a time Baudelaire, Laforgue, and Rimbaud; and his contemporaries, especially Eliot. Crane had at his poetic disposal no sort of systematic interpretation of the universe, neither an inherited one nor (like Blake's) a privately assembled one. What he did have was his experience of actual life and his experience of poetry, both the reading and the writing of it. And that, in a sense, is what "Black Tambourine" is about.

It is a poem about the American Negro in the modern world that becomes a poem also about the American poet in the modern world—and about the destiny of poets generally.

¹⁰ The exception may be the *Dialogues* of Plato, which Crane began to read with great care in 1915-1916, underscoring some of the passages. The alleged importance for him of other "philosophers"—Nietzsche, for instance, and P. D. Ouspensky—is considered briefly in Chapter Four.

The interests of the black man in a cellar
 Mark tardy judgment on the world's closed door.
 Gnats toss in the shadow of a bottle,
 And a roach spans a crevice in the floor.

Aesop, driven to pondering, found
 Heaven with the tortoise and the hare;
 Fox brush and sow ear top his grave
 And mingling incantations on the air.

The black man, forlorn in the cellar,
 Wanders in some mid-kingdom, dark, that lies
 Between his tambourine, stuck on the wall,
 And, in Africa, a carcass quick with flies.

When he wrote "Black Tambourine," Crane was himself hobnobbing with Negroes in a cellar—Negro chefs and waiters, in fact, in the basement of his father's tea-room and candy shop in Cleveland; he was also busy composing an article on Sherwood Anderson in which he expressed the hope that Anderson might some day "handle the Negro in fiction."¹¹ Crane's feelings, however, were mixed. A Negro had been dismissed by Mr. Crane to make room for his son; and, as Philip Horton tells us, "It became a certainty in [Crane's] mind that his father wished to make a humiliating comparison by this move." Crane associated himself, and by extension the modern poet, with the Negro, as victims of a comparable persecution and exclusion; the world closed its door equally on both—such, anyhow, had been Crane's experience. The chances are, however, that Crane had never formulated the matter with any such clarity prior to writing the poem; and more than likely, "Black Tambourine"—to quote again from Blackmur's essay on Melville—was "an adventure in discovery."

¹¹ This was a review of Anderson's *Poor White* for the *Double Dealer*. "I would like to see Anderson handle the Negro in fiction. So far it has not been done by anyone without sentimentality or cruelty, but the directness of his vision would produce something new and deep in this direction." Weber, *Hart Crane*, pp. 408-11.

The connection between Negro and poet comes unmistakably into being—and via the technique of indirection Crane was learning from both Eliot and Whitman—when the black man of stanza one is quietly juxtaposed to the archetypal poet and fabulist Aesop in stanza two. The black man is physically surrounded by gnats and roaches; Aesop is poetically surrounded by those animals through fables about whom he expressed the highest truths about man (“mankind was his care,” Crane had written in a line he later deleted), and his grave, somewhat like the black man’s tomb-like cellar, is littered with animal remains. Even the “mingling incantations” that Aesop bequeathed to an implicitly deaf world link ironically with the black man’s tambourine in stanza three; and as a result of such clustering suggestions, the language of the final lines can scarcely help but refer at once to Negro and poet. Even after finishing “Black Tambourine,” Crane did not know as much as the poem itself knows. He described it to Munson as “a description and a bundle of insinuations bearing on the Negro’s place somewhere between man and beast,” and said that “the value of the poem is only, to me, in what a painter would call its ‘tactile’ quality,—an entirely aesthetic feature.” But the poem’s aesthetic feature greatly enlarged upon the initial subject; and out of the urgency of his personal feelings plus his newly achieved ability to release and then control the energies of language, Crane in “Black Tambourine” created a complex and living image of multiple victimization.¹²

The verbal element, as Crane called it elsewhere, is dominant here. I have mentioned the revision of “Mark

¹² It is an image that in part resembles and anticipates the one elaborated in Ralph Ellison’s novel *Invisible Man* (1952) and already denoted in Ellison’s title: the Negro as psychologically invisible to the rest of mankind; and at the same time as representing that crucial portion of man’s humanity which is invisible to himself. Crane’s poem may have been at the back of Ellison’s imagination when he was writing the book; he tells me, anyhow, that he remembers reading Crane’s poetry during those years.

an old judgment on the world" into "Mark tardy judgment on the world's closed door." This was a move toward Crane's characteristically compressed line, in which, by packing the rhythmical space with "positive" (as against neutral) language, Crane could allow words to exert their maximum effect upon each other. Meanwhile, what began as almost a sociological report ("Black Tambourine" is the most overtly socially minded of Crane's lyric poems) becomes, in the musical sense, transposed by the supple play of allusion. Perhaps the most telling example of the poem's verbal element is the final phrase, "a carcass quick with flies." "Carcass" is used to designate the body of an animal; and also the body of a human being, when a human is regarded as an animal. Normally, moreover, it means the body of a dead animal. The central human figure in "Black Tambourine" is made to resemble an animal corpse, attacked by flies, not only because the world sometimes regards him so (when it does not regard him—Negro and poet—in the stereotype of a tambourine player); but also because, within the poem, the black man's cellar is conjoined with the poet's grave, to the point that the gnats and roaches that swarm about the living figure seem like flies buzzing at a corpse. It is just possible that a closing twist of meaning is intended, one that would accord with slight hints earlier in the poem; namely, that the Negro-poet, however brutally treated, is nonetheless alive—"quick"—after all.

• II •

Crane was on the whole a sharp-eyed judge of his own writing. When he erred, it was rather because he was overly modest than otherwise, and sometimes, as with "Black Tambourine," because he was insufficiently aware of what his imagination had built for him. But his modesty only increased in proportion to his accomplishment, as indeed it should have done with so ambitious, devoted and ever-more knowing a poet. Late in 1921, he wrote Munson

that "I am not at all satisfied with anything I have thus far done, mere shadowings, and too slight to satisfy me." The remark followed Crane's invocation of such huge literary names as Donne, Webster, Marlowe and Ben Jonson, as well as moderns like Laforgue and Eliot; and Crane might well feel that his work *to date* was shadowy by comparison with the poets mentioned. Even so, it was a hard saying for a man who had followed "Black Tambourine" with "Chaplinesque," and had, before that, written several durable if more lightly toned items—including "My Grandmother's Love Letters" and "Garden Abstract," not to mention some still slighter poems that Crane was willing, later, to gather up into *White Buildings*.¹³ I shall reserve discussion of "Chaplinesque" until the next chapter. The other two titles mentioned deserve some limited comment here.

"My Grandmother's Love Letters" is itself a love letter of sorts. Crane was deeply attached to his grandmother, "that dear old lady," and he only feared that in seeking the necessary distance to express his feelings in verse he would make her seem "too sweet or too naughty." The creative problem here was part of a more general one—how to convey any emotion in a "suitable personal idiom." Against the then current belief in "impersonality" in poetry, and the then current tone of wry or witty detachment, Crane knew that he risked sounding, as he said, "silly and sentimental" when he attempted to articulate a strong personal emotion. Long after he had written "My Grandmother's Love Letters," Crane could remark to Munson that "I have never, so far, been able to present a vital, living and tangible,—a positive emotion to my satisfaction. For as soon as I attempt such an act I either grow obvious or ordinary, and abandon the thing at the second line." In the poem in question, Crane provided himself at the end with a protective and fashionable self-irony, as though to wave away the whole emotional enterprise:

¹³ "In Shadow," "North Labrador," and "The Fernery."