Language and vision in the poetry of Hart Crane

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LANGUAGE AND VISION
IN THE POETRY OF HART CRANE

by
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Chapter I
CRANE: POET AND HERO

Since Hart Crane disappeared into the waters of the Caribbean on April 27, 1932, numerous evaluations of his work have appeared, but none of the critics has been able to ascertain with finality exactly how great Crane's contribution to poetry was. It is generally conceded that Crane possessed one of the most extraordinary poetic talents of the twentieth-century; however, the critics agree that in his most ambitious work Crane failed, and many feel that, as a whole, his accomplishment is not commensurate with his talent.

It has been almost impossible for the critics to discuss Crane's poems without also discussing Crane as a man. Although Crane's talent matured rapidly, his ambition as a poet expanded even more rapidly. In 1920, when he was twenty-one, Crane wrote, "What I seem to want to do more and more as time goes on, is to preserve a record of a few thoughts I've had in as accurate colors as possible for at least private satisfaction,"¹ but by 1923, he was contemplating writing, in The Bridge, "a mystical synthesis of 'America.'"² That no

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². Ibid., p. 124.
one else has been more, and, at the same time, less suited for such an undertaking is not as paradoxical as it appears.

Allen Tate has said, "If Crane is not our twentieth-century poet as hero, I do not know where else to look for him."3 Although Crane had but a very limited education and was not, in practical matters, particularly intelligent, he was extremely sensitive, and no one could have been more alive to the multitude of forces that were shaping the destiny of the individual and the world in the years after World War I. His sensitivity enabled him, to a greater degree than most men, to react to these forces, but his personality made it impossible for him to assimilate the forces, and, in the end, added to his personal problems, their effect was poisonous. Crane, as hero, is a peculiarly American type. It is not difficult to see him as the real-life incarnation of Melville's Captain Ahab. At least, there are obvious analogies in their problems. In 1917, when he was only eighteen years old, Crane was already determined to achieve "something of a realization of life,"4 and he was only twenty-three when he began creation of

a work that demanded thorough reassembling of the history and the spiritual consciousness of the past and present, not to mention a vision of the future. To a great extent, Crane's failure as both a man and as an artist can be attributed to his refusal to accept limits to his knowledge and power. He was, of course, eventually forced to recognize that such limits existed, but it was too late for him to adjust to the realization, for the process of dying had already begun within him. The vigor and sincerity behind Crane's attempt to comprehend his world endow his failure with real elements of tragedy. Awareness of what he had to overcome to finally achieve as much as he did has often made even Crane's harshest critics appear to be his apologists.

From his early teens Crane planned for a career in poetry. At thirteen he was seriously composing verse, and at sixteen, according to Gorham Munson, "he was writing on a level that Amy Lowell never rose from." The seriousness of his intent can be seen in a letter he sent to his father in 1917:

I realize more entirely every day, that I am preparing for a fine life: that I have powers, which if correctly balanced, will enable me to mount to extraordinary latitudes. There is constantly an inward struggle, but the time to worry is only when there is no inward debate, and consequently there is smooth sliding to

5. Gorham B. Munson, Destinations, p. 164.
the devil. There is only one harmony, that is the equilibrium maintained by two opposite forces, equally strong. When I perceive one emotion growing overpowering to a fact, or statement of reason, then the only manly, worthy, sensible thing to do, is build up the logical side, and attain balance, and in art,—formal expression.^

In a letter written to Munson in March, 1923, Crane displayed the confidence he felt in his ability as a poet whenever he was actively creating. In this letter he also stated the most important elements in his approach to poetry:

Modern music almost drives me crazy! I went to hear D'Indy's II Symphony last night and my hair stood on end at its revelations. To get those, and others of men like Strauss, Ravel, Scriabin, and Bloch into words, one needs to ransack the vocabularies of Shakespeare, Jonson, Webster (for theirs were the richest) and add on scientific, street and counter, and psychological terms, etc. Yet I claim such things can be done! The modern artist needs gigantic assimilative capacities, emotion,—and the greatest of all—vision. "Striated with nuances, nervosities, that we are heir to"—is more than a casual observation for me. And then—structure!...Potentially I feel myself quite fit to become a suitable Pindar for the dawn of the machine age, so called. I have lost the last shreds of philosophical pessimism during the last few months. O yes, the "background of life"—and all that is still there, but that is only three dimensional. It is to the pulse of a greater dynamism that my work must revolve. Something terribly fierce and yet gentle.^

6. The Letters of Hart Crane, p. 5.
7. Ibid., p. 129.
An examination of Crane's vision and his handling of language will point out the major strengths and weaknesses of his poetry, and will make clear the difficulties which face the critics who try to judge his work.
Chapter II
THE DEVELOPMENT OF CRANE'S TECHNIQUE

Despite his attempt to capture a world, Crane remained a personal poet. Even The Bridge appears to best advantage when viewed as a collection of personal reactions (although this, necessarily, destroys what unity does exist in it as a whole). Because he was, to an extreme degree, a personal poet, many critics have damned his work as "obscure." In many instances it would be difficult to defend Crane against this charge. Because of their personal significance many of the obscure passages demand reference to the facts of Crane's life for clarification. However, an understanding of Crane's technique erases many other apparent obscurities.

Crane was an exacting artist, but when the method of composition of his most representative works is examined, it seems almost impossible that a certain amount of apparent obscurity should not exist. He knew that his work would interest only a very small audience, and he implied that he did not expect even these to comprehend his work fully. Malcolm Cowley, recalling Crane composing a poem, has stated that only the reader who can achieve the same attitude and the same conditions

8. The Letters of Hart Crane, p. 68.
that Crane experienced while writing a particular poem will be able to understand the full implications of the poem. Crane believed that "If you ARE an artist then, you will create spontaneously," without conscious attention to aesthetics, but he also was certain that nothing can be gained in any art without conscious effort. "There is," he wrote, "only one way of saying what comes to one in ecstasy. One works and works over it to finish and organize it perfectly--but fundamentally that doesn't affect one's way of saying it." The first drafts of Crane's poems were usually written when he was in a highly emotional state, too often stimulated by alcohol and exciting music. Later, he would rework the poems until he was satisfied that they were perfect, or as nearly perfect as possible. Because of the way in which they were usually produced Crane's moments of exaltation were as artificial as his "vision."

Crane's poems, the shorter lyrics in particular, are essentially emotional. He was not content merely

11. Ibid., p. 52.
12. Ibid., p. 128.
to record observations and sensations. Sensations are the immediate reactions to what is observed, but Crane's ultimate goal was to capture in his poems emotion, the reactions to the sensations. In Crane's best work the emotion is not stated but exists implicitly in the words.

Crane's poems exhibit no violent experimental shifts from the direction his work took from the time he began to write poetry; rather, a gradual expansion in complexity of technique and vision is indicated. "The Hive," published in 1917, clearly demonstrates the most important characteristics of Crane's early work:

Up the chasm-walls of my bleeding heart
Humanity pecks, claws, sobs and climbs;
Up the inside, and over every part
Of the hive of the world that is my heart.

And of all the sowing, and all the tear-tendering
And reaping, have mercy and love issued forth;
Mercy, white milk, and honey, gold love--
And I watch, and say, "These the anguish are worth."

In most of Crane's early poems the logical structure carries more weight than the poetic structure in rendering the theme of the poem. The imagery in "The Hive" is used primarily as decoration or illustration. In the line "Mercy, white milk, and honey, gold love," the imagery is even placed in apposition to the statement of the poem. The poem does not so much contain emotion as it states it with such over-sentimental phrases as "bleeding heart" and "tear-tendering." In these earlier
poems Crane depends greatly on rhyme in achieving a poetic structure. The first stanza of "Echoes," one of his first published poems, shows this to an extreme degree:

Slivers of rains upon the pane
Jade-green with sunlight, melt and flow
Upward again: they leave no stain
Of storm or strain an hour ago.\textsuperscript{14}

When he left his home in Cleveland and went to New York in 1916, Crane was exposed for the first time to the new movements arising from the resurgent vitality in all the arts. Although he never allowed himself to become identified with any one movement, he participated in all of them and took from them what was most consistent with his artistic sensibilities. Within a very short time he was introduced to a great number of contemporary poets and directed for the first time to many important poets of the past. Enthusiastically, yet with overtones of complaint, he wrote, "New theories are filling my head every day."\textsuperscript{15}

Imagism was the first of the new movements to attract his attention. "To Potapovitch," which in most respects does not greatly differ from "Echoes" or "The

\textsuperscript{14} Brom Weber, Hart Crane, p. 381. (Unless otherwise noted all the poems quoted are in The Collected Poems of Hart Crane.)

\textsuperscript{15} The Letters of Hart Crane, p. 25.
"Hive," shows in its opening line, "Vault on the opal carpet of the sun," how Crane responded to the Imagist demand for clarity, hardness, and exactness. The use of color which was so successful in the Imagist technique was especially attractive to Crane who delighted in all things appealing to the senses. He fully exploited his love for color in "October-November," and strayed for the first time, in this poem, from conventional verse forms to free verse:

Indian-summer-sun  
With crimson feathers whips away the mists,—  
Dives through the filter of the trellises  
And gilds the silver on the blotched arbor-seats.

Now gold and purple scintillate  
On trees that seem dancing  
In delirium;  
Then the moon  
In a mad orange flare  
Floods the grape-hung night.

Further experimentation with Imagism gained for Crane the ability to use the technique not only to record his observations vividly, but also to create an entire emotional complex. "In Shadow" is Crane's most successful poem using the Imagist technique:

Out in the late amber afternoon  
Confused among chrysanthemums,  
Her parasol, a pale balloon,  
Like a waiting moon, in shadow swims.

Her furtive lace and misty hair  
Over the garden dial distill  
The sunlight,—then withdrawing, wear  
Again the shadows at her will.
Gently yet suddenly, the sheen
Of stars inwraps her parasol.
She hears my step behind the green
Twilight, stiller than shadows, fall.

"Come, it is too late,--too late
To risk alone the light's decline;
Nor has the evening long to wait,"--
But her own words are night's and mine.

Like most of Crane's most representative poems, "In
Shadow" cannot be paraphrased with any degree of accu-
racy. However, it is possible to examine the poem and
see how Crane achieved some of his effects. With this
limitation in mind, the following paraphrase is offered:
the "she" of the poem walking in her garden late on an
autumn afternoon, herself in shadow, casts shadows in
the garden; she is unaware of the coming of night until
the change from light to dark is complete, and her
realization that night has arrived fills her with
surprise. (It should of course be understood that this
is merely a superficial summary of the poem's content.)
Change from light to dark is recorded in the reddish-
yellow brilliance of the "amber afternoon" becoming the
"green twilight." The color of the afternoon is the
color of chrysanthemums; being confused among the
flowers, her parasol is also like them. Furthermore,
the parasol is "a pale balloon,/ Like a waiting moon";
the real moon actually is waiting to display itself.
Otherwise imperceptible, the decline of day is indicated
by having the parasol confused and swimming in shadow. Although the adjective "furtive" is applied to the lace, it is also applicable to the stealth with which the night descends. In a like manner, "misty" describes not only the hair, but the entire atmosphere of the poem. The change from day to night is further indicated in the references to the parasol, which in the first stanza swims in shadow, but in the third is inwrapped in the "sheen of stars." Now the parasol no longer swims but is immersed (perhaps drowned) and hidden by the stars whose illumination is not great enough to make light and shadows distinct.

At the end of 1920, in a letter to Munson, Crane wrote, "More and more am I turning toward Pound and Eliot and the minor Elizabethans for values."16 Through Eliot, Crane was directed back to the Elizabethans and to the French Symbolists and their successors. A listing of the poets Crane read with special care clearly shows the influence of Eliot and Pound: Poe, Whitman, Shakespeare, Keats, Shelley, Coleridge, Donne, Webster, Marlowe, Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Mallarmé, Vildrac, Laforgue, Dante, Cavalcanti, Jonson, Blake, and Li Po. In addition to his study of the great poets

16. Ibid., p. 28.
of the past, Crane followed the work of his contemporaries in the little magazines. He was quick to recognize Eliot's importance. In Eliot's work he saw many of the qualities he hoped to achieve in his own poetry, but he wrote, "I don't want to imitate Eliot, of course,—but I have come to the stage now where I want to carefully choose my most congenial influences and, in a way, 'cultivate' their influence."\(^{17}\) Of the many poets he studied carefully, Donne, Marlowe, Jonson, Baudelaire, and Rimbaud had the most influence in shaping his technique. Among the twentieth-century poets, besides Eliot, he was especially impressed by Wallace Stevens, whose "technical subtleties alone," Crane felt, "provide a great amount of interest."\(^{18}\) Crane's style contains the verbal richness and emotion (and sometimes, the irony) of the Elizabethans and the oblique structure of the Symbolists.

More than most poets, Crane was concerned with the individual word. For him, words were both the material and the tools for the creation of the poem. He wondered if there was not

\(^{17}\) Ibid., p. 71.

\(^{18}\) Ibid., p. 25.
in the minds of people who have sensitively read, seen and experienced a great deal,... a terminology something like short-hand as compared to usual description and dialectics, which the artist ought to be right in trusting as a reasonable connective agent toward fresh concepts, more inclusive evaluations.19

He admitted that

as a poet I may very possibly be more interested in the so-called illogical impingements of the connotations of words on the consciousness (and their combinations and interplay in metaphor on this basis) than I am interested in the preservation of their logically rigid significations at the cost of limiting my subject matter and perceptions involved in the poem.20

Crane's concept of the poem as a whole stems from his view of the importance of the individual word:

The motivation of the poem must be derived from the implicit emotional dynamics of the materials used, and the terms of expression employed are often selected less for their logical (literal) significance than for their associational meanings. Via this and their metaphorical interrelationships, the entire construction of the poem is raised on the organic principle of a "logic of metaphor," which antedates our so-called pure logic, and which is the genetic basis of all speech, hence consciousness and thought-extension.21

Its paradox, of course, is that its apparent illogic operates so logically in conjunction with its context in the poem as to establish its claim to another logic, quite independent


20. Ibid., p. 36.

of the original definition of the word or phrase thus employed. It implies (this inflection of language) a previous or prepared receptivity on the part of the reader. The reader's sensibility simply responds by identifying this inflection of experience with some event in his own history or perceptions—or rejects it altogether. The logic of metaphor is so organically entrenched in pure sensibility that it can't be thoroughly traced or explained outside of historical sciences, like philology and anthropology. This "pseudo-statement," as I. A. Richards calls it..., demands completely other faculties of recognition than the pure rationalistic associations permit.22

What Crane wanted to achieve was "an 'interior' form, a form that is so thorough and intense as to dye the words themselves with a peculiarity of meaning, slightly different maybe from the ordinary definition of them separate from the poem.23 The individual word or image was to Crane like a piece of glass or stone to be used in a mosaic design; its effect in the total design is dependent upon its position in the design and upon the units which surround it. This can be illustrated by examining Crane's use of two lines which, at one time, were his total poetic output for a period of three months:

The everlasting eyes of Pierrot
And of Gargantua,—the laughter.24

24. Ibid., p. 53.
These lines were incorporated into one of Crane's unpublished poems, "The Bridge of Estador":

Walk high on the bridge of Estador
No one has ever walked there before.
There is a lake, perhaps with the sun
Lapped under it,—or the dun
Bellies and estuaries of warehouses,
Tied bundle-wise with cords of smoke.

Do not think too deeply, and you'll find
A soul, an element in it all.

How can you tell where beauty's to be found?
I have heard hands praised for what they made;
I have heard hands praised for line on line;
Yet a gash with sunlight jerking through
A mesh of belts down into it, made me think
I had never seen a hand before,
And the hand was thick and heavily warted.

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 consummations 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:
0 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 the 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.25

The lines finally appear in "Praise for an Urn":

It was a kind and northern face
That mingled in such exile guise
The everlasting eyes of Pierrot
And, of Gargantua, the laughter.

His thoughts, delivered to me
From the white coverlet and pillow,
I see now, were inheritances—
Delicate riders of the storm.

The slant moon on the slanting hill
Once moved us toward presentiments
Of what the dead keep, living still,
And such assessments of the soul

As, perched in the crematory lobby,
The insistent clock commented on,
Touching as well upon our praise
Of glories proper to the time.

Still, having in mind gold hair,
I cannot see that broken brow
And miss the dry sound of bees
Stretching across a lucid space.

Scatter these well-meant idioms
Into the smoky spring that fills
The suburbs, where they will be lost.
They are no trophies of the sun.

Standing alone, the two lines simply juxtapose the two extremes of the sad-eyed, servile clown and the giant king with his resounding laughter. The change from "and" to "or" in "The Bridge of Estador" emphasizes the difference, and the two images parallel the lake and warehouses earlier in the poem as "places where beauty's to be found." In addition to the lines incorporated into "Praise for an Urn," "The Bridge of Estador" is the source of lines to be found in other poems by Crane, which gives further evidence of his mosaic method.
lines, "Awaiting/ far consummations of the tides to throw/
Clean on the shore some wreck of dreams," are reworked
into the first two stanzas of "At Melville's Tomb," and
the two lines which follow those just quoted reappear
in "For the Marriage of Faustus and Helen" as "There is
the world dimensional for/ those untwisted by the love
of things/ irreconcilable."

More startling evidence of Crane's method of
fitting pieces together to form a poem was discovered
after his death when most of the lines of "Emblems of
Conduct" were found scattered in the poems of Samuel
Greenberg, an unpublished poet whose work in manuscript
was found among Crane's possessions. Only three of the
lines in "Emblems of Conduct" cannot be traced to the
Greenberg manuscripts. Early drafts of the second of
the "Voyages" poems indicate that several lines in that
poem, although they are completely changed in the final
version, were originally taken from lines written by
Greenberg.26

Even on first reading, when the meaning may
be obscure, Crane's poems provide a definite aural im-
pact. Besides increasing his vocabulary, Crane's study

pp. 148-159.
of the Elizabethans also resulted in his mastery of their meter, the iambic pentameter line. After he had been introduced to free verse, he used it to create effects that could not be contained successfully in the traditional metrics. Crane visualized even metrical effects in terms of language. When he wanted to create the jazz rhythms for Part II of "For the Marriage of Faustus and Helen" he wrote, "Let us invent an idiom for the proper transposition of jazz into words! Something clean, sparkling, elusive!" 27

Crane's preoccupation with the individual word is one of the primary causes of both the density and the obscurity in his poems. He claimed never to be "wilfully obscure or esoteric"; rather, he stated, "'Make my dark poem light, and light'... is the text I chose from Donne some time ago as my direction." 28 Although he was striving for more perfect lucidity, he did not see a decrease in complexity as the answer. Clarity, for Crane, meant exactness, and exactness usually involved employing the oblique method of the Symbolists which contributed to the density of the poem. The

27. The Letters of Hart Crane, p. 89.
28. Ibid., p. 176.
oblique method required utilizing to the fullest extent the "logic of metaphor," "the so-called illogical im­
pingements of the connotations of words."

Because of Crane's method, he achieved so much condensation that it is impossible to separate texture and structure in his poems. "Lachrymae Christi" offers many examples of the results of Crane's technique:

Whitely, while benzine
Rinsings from the moon
Dissolve all but the windows of the mills
(Inside the sure machinery
Is still
And curdled only where a sill
Sluices its one unyielding smile)

Immaculate venom binds
The fox's teeth, and swart
Thorns freshen on the year's
First blood. From flanks unfended,
Twanged red perfidies of spring
Are trillion on the hill.

And the nights opening
Chant pyramids,--
Anoint with innocence,--recall
To music and retrieve what perjuries
Had galvanized the eyes.

While chime
Beneath and all around
Distilling clemencies,--worms'--
Inaudible whistle, tunneling
Not penitence
But song, as these
Perpetual fountains, vines,--

Thy Nazarene and tender eyes.

(Let sphinxes from the ripe
Borage of death have cleared my tongue
Once and again; vermin and rod
No longer bind. Some sentient cloud
Of tears flocks through the tendoned loam:
Betrayed stones slowly speak.)
Names peeling from Thine eyes
And their undimming lattices of flame,
Spell out in palm and pain
Compulsion of the year, O Nazarene.

Lean long from sable, slender boughs,
Unstanched and luminous. And as the nights
Strike from Thee perfect spheres,
Lift up in lilac-emerald breath the grail
Of earth again—

Thy face
From charred and riven stakes, O
Dionysus, Thy
Unmangled target smile.

The subject of "Lachrymae Christi" is redemption, and
the principal image is Christ's tears. Death and rebirth
is also a controlling theme. These themes necessarily
involve purification. The first stanza depicts a kind
of cleansing of the world in which everything is dis­
solved in the light of the moon except the windows of
the mills which reflect it. The light described as
"benzine rinsings" suggests that the mills may be wool
mills where benzine would be used to clean the new wool.29
"Mills" suggests smoke and dirt and all the ugliness of
the world, that which shuts out beauty. Within the
mills, the machinery, which is "sûrë" because it is
precise and does not demand faith in its efficacy, is
"curdled" or coagulated into shape out of the darkness
only where the light comes through the sluice of the

29. Martin S. Shockley, University of Kansas City Review, vol. 16, no. 1, p. 32.
window. The sill reflecting the light perhaps has the appearance of a smile. "Whitely," the first word of the poem, actually modifies "binds" in the second stanza, but as it is placed in the poem its force also applies to "dissolve." This use of a modifier is one of Crane's most commonly used syntactical devices.

"Immaculate venom" presents a paradox, but perhaps the poison is pure in that it "binds the fox's teeth." The venom may also be the blood of the lamb that the fox has killed, the innocent lamb whose blood would be pure. In the reawakened life of spring, the "year's first blood," the swart thorns regain freshness; they are upon the "year's first blood," which may again be seen as the innocent, newly-born lamb, as the crown of thorns, is on Christ, the Lamb. The "red perfidies of spring" are the sacrificed lambs, flowers and drops of blood, "twanged" in that they are wrenched from the unfended flanks of the lambs by the thorns. They are "perfidies" because Christ was killed in an act of faithlessness. As flowers, they mean life, but their source is the blood drawn in death.

The pyramids which the nights chant suggest the glories of past ages, an imposing structure of song that rises to an apex, and a perfection of form. The nights contribute to the act of purification by anointing
with innocence, and by recalling to music "what perjuries had galvanized the eyes." Here Crane has introduced music as the means of redemption. By recalling to music, the nights regain the beauty that had been hidden by lies. The eyes are "galvanized" in the sense that they are coated by the perjuries so that they cannot see beauty.

The redeeming quality of music is made more explicit in the next sentence. It is Christ's eyes that chime and distill clemencies; the clemencies are both mercies and His tears. The mercy is that the inaudible activity of the tunneling worms is song and not penitence. The worms do not tunnel to gain salvation but because it is the nature of worms to tunnel through the earth; this is the worms' beauty and consequently their song. (The worms are also a reminder of death.) Likewise, the fountains and vines, in their beauty have the redeeming quality of song. Redemption, for Crane, is to know beauty. The use of "tinder" in the line, "Thy Nazarene and tinder eyes," is another peculiarity of Crane's technique. He often gives a word a new function and thereby an expanded meaning. Here "tinder" suggests a source of fire and light, and, as a pun on "tender," recalls Christ's mercy. Another example of this transfer of function is to be seen in the use of
"chevron" in the "Ave Maria" section of The Bridge, in which Columbus sees "the first palm chevron the first lighted hill."

Crane's syntax is confusing in the first sentence of the fourth stanza. It is not clear whether sphinxes are let from the ripe borage of death, or whether the tongue has been cleared from the ripe borage of death. Actually, this is not important since both possibilities work in the poem. Sphinxes represent the mysterious, the unknown, and these being "let sphinxes" are both released and permitted; they are released from death, and permitted to transmit to the poet the knowledge they have gained in death. With reference to the Oedipus legend, the sphinxes take on further meaning. Although the sphinx in the Oedipus legend is not an exact parallel of Christ, the two are similar in as much as Thebes was saved by Oedipus's answering the sphinx's riddle which resulted in the sphinx's death, and man's salvation was gained through Christ's death. The word "let" may be applied further in the same sense as blood being let to continue the imagery in the second stanza; the letting of blood can be extended to include the falling of tears. With all these possibilities considered, the sphinxes become Christ and His blood and tears in addition to their
meanings as sphinxes. The poet's tongue is no longer bound by "vermin and rod." The rod is both the bacteria which feed on the body in death, and the tool of self-castigation. His tongue cleared, the poet finds redemption in song, and penitence through exposure to the vermin and rod is no longer necessary, or even the proper path to redemption. In the next sentence, "sentient" modifies both cloud and tears, in the same way that "whitely" modified both "dissolve" and "bind." The use of "flocks" to indicate the action of the cloud of tears reinforces the idea that lambs have been the sacrificial victims. It is obvious that "tendoned loam" refers to flesh, but this image has the further purpose of identifying the flesh with the earth to indicate the unity of man with all of nature. This idea is carried further by "betrayed stones." The stones are betrayed by the perjuries mentioned earlier in the poem, but now, having been purified by the cloud of tears, they can speak and achieve their redemption.

The names peeling from Christ's eyes are, of course, the tears. The eyes' "undimming lattices of flame" refers back to their being "tinder" eyes. The names spell out "compulsion of the year," the force which controls the cycle of the year--or death and rebirth. The palm in which the force is spelled out is both the
palm of Christ's hand torn by nails on the cross and
the palm of His triumph.

In the last stanza Christ is depicted on the
cross. Neither the flow of His blood or of His tears
is checked and His eyes are "luminous" with their flam­
ing quality. As Christ is on the cross, the nights,
which have already been seen to perform purifying acts,
"strike" from Him "perfect spheres," the tears, as if
they were striking chords of music. The poet asks that
Christ lift up the grail of earth "in lilac-emerald
breath." The colors describing the breath are the
colors of spring and rebirth, but lilacs are also con­
nected with death, so that the death and rebirth theme
is again reinforced. The "grail of earth" can be seen
as both the ultimate goal of earth and as the grail
made of earth, Christ's face made of the "tendoned loam."
Finally, the grail, Christ's face, becomes His "unman­
gled target smile." As the grail is a goal, Christ's
smile is also a goal, the target of redemption. "Lift
up" carries the idea of Christ raising his head and
also of raising the earth to new life. By suddenly
referring to Christ as Dionysus, Crane has provided a
shock that lifts the intensity of the poem. Since Dio­
nysus was also a god of spring, who was killed in order
that he might be reborn, the poem gains universality by
It must be obvious that such an examination of one of Crane's poems as that just completed destroys the poem. The multitude of cross-currents and the multiplicity of connotations of each word can only be suggested. Crane did not want his poems to be apprehended intellectually, but to be experienced. The poems are as much experiences in themselves as they are records of experience. This is a basic fact in Crane's approach to poetry:

Poetry, in so far as the metaphysics of any absolute knowledge extends, is simply the concrete evidence of the experience of a recognition (knowledge if you like). It can give you a ratio of fact and experience, and in this sense it is both perception and thing perceived, according as it approaches a significant articulation or not. This is its reality, its fact, being.

Judging the success of articulation in Crane's poetry presents a problem. It should not be necessary to provide a new standard or special standards for judging any poet, but Crane's work almost demands a new approach if not new standards. If one wanted to defend Crane against all attacks, he could argue that the critic who finds fault with one of the poems is not qualified to criticize the poem since he must be misreading it if he does

not understand it. Crane, undoubtedly, would have thought such a defense ludicrous since he was striving for lucidity; when he is successful, the direction of the poem is clear even if the reader cannot apprehend all the meanings that a particular image renders. Critics have been able to point to many places in Crane's poems where even the direction of the poem is obscure and in these cases, the poems must be called failures. It is difficult to ascertain the extent of Crane's success when he is successful because only through numerous readings does the extreme density of his work reveal itself.

The tightness of structure in Crane's shorter poems is a feature of his longer works also. He conceived the form of these longer works as "symphonic." The symphonic form involves the weaving of major symbols throughout the texture of the long works. "For the Marriage of Faustus and Helen" was Crane's first work employing the symphonic form. The poem presents three variations of the theme of beauty and knowledge. Part I is the evocation of beauty, Part II the desecration of beauty, and Part III the triumph of beauty in conjunction with knowledge. Although a basic thread runs through all three parts, each is different in tone and intent, and, to an extent, complete in itself. The three parts
together form an over-all structure in which each part affects the others, just as the contrasting movements of a symphony contribute to a musical entity.

In his handling of language Crane achieved his greatest success. Even those poems which are failures have an undeniable grandeur in their force of language and sound. Crane's harshest critics (notably Yvor Winters) concede that he was a magnificent failure and that he did produce two or three perfect works; however, his most enthusiastic supporters, such as Allen Tate and Waldo Frank, seem to agree with those who take the same stand as Winters. The difference of opinion narrows down to the difference between a positive and negative approach: critics such as Winters argue that Crane was a failure because his accomplishment did not equal the talent his works exhibit; critics such as Tate feel that Crane's place in American poetry remains secure on the basis of the few completely successful poems he did write and lament his not having achieved full success in his most ambitious work.
Chapter III
THE FAILURE OF CRANE'S "VISION"

The cause of Crane's failure is generally seen to be his "vision." In the letter to Gorham Munson quoted earlier, Crane pointed to vision as the most important faculty a poet must have. Nowhere does he say what the term means, but he seems to be referring to the poet's total view of the cosmos. Crane desperately felt the need of some integrated view of the world in which he could work, but which would not be so strongly organized as to cause him to write automatically:

The spiritual disintegration of our period becomes more painful to me every day, so much so that I now find myself baulked by doubt at the validity of practically every metaphor I coin. In every quarter...a thousand issues are raised for one that is settled and where this method is reversed—as with the neo-Thomists—one has nothing as substitute but an arbitrary dogmatism which seems to be too artificial to have any permanence or hold on the future.31

While writing "For the Marriage of Faustus and Helen," Crane turned to the past, but even then he felt that a new system of thought was needed:

It is a terrific problem that faces the poet today—a world that is so in transition from a decayed culture toward a reorganization of human evaluations that there are few common terms, general denominators of speech that are solid enough or that ring with any vibration or spiritual conviction. The great mythologies

of the past (including the Church) are deprived of enough facade to even launch good raillery against. Yet much of their traditions are operative still—in millions of chance combinations of related detail, psychological references, figures of speech, precepts, etc. These are all a part of our common experience and the terms, at least partially, of that very experience when it defines itself.32

Because there was no existing system that Crane's personality would allow him to adopt, he attempted to create one.

In the introduction to The Collected Poems of Hart Crane, Waldo Frank writes, "Crane was a mystic. The mystic is a man who knows, by immediate experience, the organic continuity between his self and the cosmos."33 The evidence in Crane's writings demands that this statement be modified if not denied entirely. Crane wanted to be a mystic but he could not believe fully in his mystic experiences, if, indeed, they were actual experiences. Crane felt the need for a vision in both his life and his work, because he was painfully aware of their disorder. He was able to assemble a vision that seemed valid enough in the abstract, but which invariably failed him in practice.

A consideration of Crane's motives in developing the cosmic view he held and of the elements which

shaped it will point to some of the major reasons for the failure of the vision. The essential purpose of the vision, for Crane, was to provide him with an impetus for creation. Because he could create only when "inspired" (this, at least, was his belief and practice), the vision was necessarily optimistic.

Crane continually refused to submit to the pessimism rampant among his contemporaries. Repeatedly, almost as though he were trying to convince himself, he affirmed the technical aspects of Eliot's approach to poetry but denied his view of the world. In 1926, he asked Munson

Is the last statement sentimentally made by Eliot,

"This is the way the world ends,
This is the way the world ends,—
Not with a bang but a whimper."

is this acceptable or not as the poetic determinism of our age? I, of course, can say no, to myself, and believe it. But in the face of such a stern conviction of death on the part of the only group of people whose verbal sophistication is likely to take on interest in a style such as mine—what can I... expect? However, I know my way by now, regardless. I shall at least continue to grip with the problem without relaxing into the easy acceptance (in the name of "elegance, nostalgia, wit, splenetic splendor") of death which I see most of my friends doing. O the admired beauty of a casuistical mentality! It is finally content with twelve hours sleep a day and archeology.34

34. The Letters of Hart Crane, p. 236.
That Crane could not be "content with twelve hours sleep a day and archeology" is of prime importance. His life and his works offer irrefutable evidence that Crane was a sensualist in both his ethics and aesthetics. In assembling his vision, Crane seems to have deliberately sought arguments that would condone his sensualism.

In February, 1923, writing to Allen Tate, Crane remarked that he had been reading P. D. Ouspensky's Tertium Organum, and added, "Its corroboration of several experiences in consciousness that I have had gave it particular interest." Crane had described one of his experiences to Gorham Munson in June of the previous year:

At times, dear Gorham, I feel an enormous power in me—that seems almost supernatural. If this power is not too dissipated in aggravation and discouragement I may amount to something sometime. I can say this now with perfect equanimity because I am notoriously drunk and the Victrola is still going with that glorious "Bolero." Did I tell you of that thrilling experience this last winter in the dentist's chair when under the influence of aether and amnesia my mind spiraled to a kind of seventh heaven of consciousness and egoistic dance among the seven spheres—and something like an objective voice kept saying to me—"You have the higher consciousness—you have the higher consciousness. This is something that very few have. This is what is called genius."? A happiness, ecstatic such as I have known only twice in "inspirations" came over me. I felt the two worlds. And at once. As the bore went into my tooth I was

35. Ibid., p. 124.
able to follow its every revolution as detached as a spectator at a funeral. O Gorham, I have known moments in eternity. I tell you this as one who is a brother. I want you to know me as I feel myself to be sometimes. I don't want you to feel that I am conceited. But since this adventure in the dentist's chair, I feel a new confidence in myself. At least I had none of the ordinary hallucinations common to this operation. Even that means something.36

In his study of Crane, Brom Weber has pointed out that the mention of *Tertium Organum* in the letter to Tate probably was an indication that Crane was returning to that book, since the phrase, "the higher consciousness," used in describing the experience in the dentist's chair is one frequently employed in Ouspensky's treatise.37

*Tertium Organum* provided Crane with affirmations not only of his "experiences in consciousness," but also of his view of poetry and his actions as an individual. Crane was excited by Ouspensky's "view of art as the beginning of vision and the artist as the visionary."38 Furthermore, Ouspensky's claim that the poet can most effectively reveal spiritual realities through the use of an analogical method, which would require a revolution and expansion of language, had for some time been Crane's view.39

36. Ibid., pp. 91-92.
39. Ibid., p. 154.
Ouspensky had conceived four forms of consciousness: the lowest form of consciousness being that experienced by inanimate matter; the second form, that of the lower animals; the third, that of man; and, the fourth, the "higher consciousness" known only to the few who can transcend the three-dimensional world. The differences between the third and fourth forms of consciousness as expressed by Ouspensky indicate that in some ways Crane had achieved the "higher consciousness" or that, at least, he thought and acted as though he had. According to Ouspensky, the morality of the ordinary man is basically the division of all things into good and evil; his morality is "the submission to the group consciousness of the family, of the clan, of the tribe, of the nation, of humanity, of the class, of the party, of a custom, of a fashion, etc." The possessor of the fourth form of consciousness, realizing that he is an independent unit, is free of submission to the group consciousness and acts according to the "law inside" himself.\(^{40}\) In connection with differences in morals, a distinction in the forms of action of the two levels of consciousness is made: although the ordinary man may be conscious of the purpose of actions he performs and may possibly be conscious of their results, his actions...\(^{40}\) P. D. Ouspensky, Tertium Organum, p. 306 f.
require an impulse from outside, whereas a person with the fourth form can initiate actions of himself with awareness of their cosmical meaning and purposes.\textsuperscript{41} These views provided Crane with approval for his alcoholism and sexual deviations, and gave some purpose to them in his eyes.

\textit{Tertium Organum} promises extraordinary knowledge to the person who can reach the fourth state of consciousness. The ordinary person can gain only the knowledge of experience and experiment, but the possessor of the "higher consciousness" gains mystic knowledge and experiences the sensation of infinity and a new sensation of time in spatial terms, the fourth dimension. These "men of cosmical consciousness" also attain a "knowledge of the hidden substance of things by their outer signs," and "the sensation of the unreality of the phenomenal, visible world."\textsuperscript{42} It was, no doubt, this knowledge that Crane referred to in "The Wine Menagerie":

\begin{quote}
New thresholds, new anatomies! Wine talons
Build freedom up about me and distill
This competence--to travel in a tear
Sparkling alone, within another's will.
\end{quote}

The superior knowledge of the person who attains the fourth form of consciousness evolves to a "coordination

\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., p. 306 f.

\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., p. 306 f.
in a complete whole of religion, philosophy, science, and art," which for the ordinary man are always separated by "deep division and mutual misunderstanding."  

Even before he had read Tertium Organum, Crane had been attracted to the idea of a "superman." While still in his teens he had read and admired Nietzsche. In writing to a friend about Ernest Nelson, in whose memory he had composed "Praise for an Urn," Crane praised him as "One of the best-read people I ever met, wonderful kindliness and tolerance and a true Nietzschean."  

As was noted earlier, Crane was disturbed by the pessimism exhibited in the poetry of Eliot and other modern poets. Although he couldn't find a weak spot in Eliot's armor, he felt that he had "discovered a safe tangent to strike which, if I can possibly explain the position,--goes through him toward a different goal." This goal was, in a sense, the same one Eliot reached when he adopted Anglicanism. Crane, earlier than Eliot, saw a religion as the only way to combat the pessimism, but, unlike Eliot, he created his own religion. For Crane, "The true idea of God is the only thing that can give happiness,--and that is the identification with all

43. Ibid., p. 306 f.  
45. The Letters of Hart Crane, p. 93.  
46. Ibid., p. 90.
Because he felt it necessary to identify himself with all of life, Crane could not accept the tenets of Christian Science, the religion which his mother practiced and which she urged him to follow. In a letter to William Wright, one of his boyhood friends, he explained his attitude toward Christian Science:

I frankly was very much interested in Christian Science at the time of my exit from home, I have not made any distinct denial of it to her since, and for the aforementioned reasons. However, Bill, I have unbounded faith in its efficacy. Not that a normal optimism will not accomplish the same wonders,—it is a psychological attitude which will prevail over almost anything, but as a religion, there is where I balk. I recommend it to you if you are nervous, etc., though, as a cure, and the best and only one to my knowledge. 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.

In Walt Whitman, Crane found a literary precursor of his own ideas. When conceiving the plan for The Bridge, Crane thought of Whitman as "the Spiritual body of America"; Whitman's ideal, a spiritual democracy, seemed to offer hope from the ruthlessness of

47. Ibid., p. 140.


49. Crane believed that his mother would not maintain her faith in Christian Science if she could not believe that he too practiced the religion; he did not want her to lose her faith because her beliefs seemed to him to have helped her in the crisis of her divorce from Crane's father.

50. The Letters of Hart Crane, p. 16.

51. Ibid., p. 241.
American industrialism. Although Crane's personality often alienated his friends, he was, like Whitman, a lover of mankind. Philip Horton, in his biography of Crane, says,

The crowds in the street were for him very much what they had been for Whitman—a source of continual inspiration and vigor; and though he suffered the inevitable reactions against the strain of metropolitan life and from time to time fled to the country for rest, he always returned to the massed motions of life. If they often represented the chaos and the materialistic madness of the world in which he lived, they also, and more importantly, represented the incalculable energy and spirit which fed the anatomy of his faith.52

That Crane did have this attitude can be seen in his remark that "We must somehow touch the clearest veins of eternity flowing through the crowds around us—or risk being the kind of glorious cripples that have missed some vital part of their inheritance."53

The core of ideas held by Nietzsche, Ouspensky, and Whitman is virtually the same for each man. Yvor Winters is only the latest writer to demonstrate convincingly that almost all of Whitman's thought was derived from Emerson. Winters's summary of Emerson's ideas seems to be a rewording of Ouspensky's ideas:

God and his creation are one. God is good.
Man, as part of the creation, is part of God.

52. Philip Horton, Hart Crane, p. 130.
and so is good. Man may therefore trust his impulses, which are the voice of God; through trusting them absolutely and acting upon them without reserve, he becomes one with God. Impulse is thus equated with the protestant concept of conscience, as a divine and supra-rational directive; and surrender to impulse, which unites one with God, becomes equivalent in a sense to the traditional and Catholic concept of the mystical experience. We are confronted here with an illogicality, for our first principles tell us that man is a part of God whether he trusts his impulses or not; but this is merely a part of the illogicality which denies the validity of Reason. For Emerson, as for other Romantics, Reason is the source of all evil, is the adversary of Impulse, and is that which has no part in God in a universe in which everything is a part of God and in which everything is good. In life and in art the automatic man, the unreflective creature of impulse, is the ideal; he is one with God and will achieve the good life and great art.

Some sort of unity with the entire cosmos was one of Crane's primary aims. (In this sense, his death can be seen to have symbolic significance.) This pantheism is reflected in his life and in such of his works as "Sunday Morning Apples," "Garden Abstract," "Voyages," and throughout The Bridge.

In spite of almost overwhelming doubts, Crane clung to his vision. To Waldo Frank, he wrote,

I am certain that a number of us at last have some kind of community of interest. And with this communion will come something better than a mere clique. It is a consciousness of something more vital than stylistic questions and "taste," it is vision, and a vision alone that not only America needs, but the whole world.

55. The Letters of Hart Crane, p. 127.
Perhaps it was by clinging to his vision intact rather than trying to adjust it to the very real doubts that were torturing him, that Crane failed. At any rate, the doubts caused him to hold a mass of contradictory views, which tended to nullify the positive effects of the vision.

Again and again in his letters he wrote, "Perhaps Spengler is right." Crane had read Oswald Spengler's *Decline of the West* and in it found arguments which he found difficult to refute. These arguments seemed to destroy the hope he found in America at one time:

> I am concerned with the future of America, but not because I think that America has any so-called par value as a state or as a group of people....It is only because I feel persuaded that here are destined to be discovered certain as yet undefined spiritual quantities, perhaps a new hierarchy of faith not to be developed so completely elsewhere.56

Spengler outlined the growth and decay of cultures and saw the imminent death of Western culture. Although Crane found it difficult to accept this view, he found himself in agreement with other statements Spengler had made; that there was some area of agreement made it difficult for Crane to doubt any of Spengler's thesis. Like Crane, Spengler held the analogical technique in high regard and saw "intuitive perception" as the only possible means of comprehending metaphysical reality and the

human future. Spengler did not so much present Crane with new doubts as he crystallized the doubts that were already troubling him.

Crane was never able to achieve completely the coordination of religion, philosophy, science, and art, which Ouspensky had seen as possible for the possessor of the "higher consciousness." He was continually battling the world in behalf of his art. As he wrote to Alfred Stieglitz in 1923:

"What is now proved was once only imagined," said Blake. I have 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. They cannot go a foot unless to merely catch up with some predetermined and set boundaries, nor can they realize that they do nothing but walk ably over an old track bedecked with all kinds of signposts and "championship records." Nobody minds their efforts, which frequently amount to a great deal,—but I object to their system of judgement being so regally applied to what I'm interested in doing. Such a cramping cannot be reconciled with the work which you have done, and which I feel myself a little beginning to do. The great energies about us cannot be transformed that way into a higher quality of life, and by perfecting our sensibilities, response and actions, we are always contributing more than we can realize (rationalize) at the time. We answer them a little vaguely, first, because our ends are forever unaccomplished, and because, secondly, our work is self-explanatory enough, if they could "see" it. I nearly go mad with the intense but misty realization of what can be done if potentialities are fully freed, released.


58. The Letters of Hart Crane, pp. 138-139.
Science, which by nature denies the pertinence of intuitions, although opposed to his views, in Crane's eyes seemed to offer support for them if people would only recognize it. "Indeed," he wrote, "some of Blake's poems and Emily Dickinson's seem more incontrovertible than ever since Relativity and a host of other ideologies, since evolved, have come into recognition." 59

Crane's vision failed because it was not a genuine, mystical revelation. In the final analysis, the "vision" was a loose system of ideas designed less to shape than to support his poetics and way of life. Although the "vision" did provide him with a direction once he had escaped the three-dimensional world, it did not provide him with a means of escape. The artificiality of the "vision" is evidenced by the fact that Crane continually had to resort to alcohol to reach a state of inspiration. When Crane was drunk the "vision" operated successfully, but its effect was not so noticeable when he was in the world of reality, and Crane recognized the importance of reality in measuring the effect of his vision:

The validity of a work of art is situated in contemporary reality to the extent that the artist must honestly anticipate the realization of his vision in "action" (as an actively operating principle of communal works and faith).

59. Ibid., p. 324.
and I don't mean by this that his procedure requires any bona fide evidences directly and personally signalled, nor even any physical signs or portents. The darkness is part of his business. It has always been taken for granted, however, that his intuitions were salutary and that his vision either sowed or epitomized "experience" (in the Blakeian sense).60

Buffeted as he was by his doubts Crane could not "honestly anticipate the realization of his vision in 'action,'" and he could not create with success a work that required of him full belief in his vision. Although the ideals behind Crane's works were not sound, and point to failure in his work as a whole, Crane did preserve in accurate colors "a record of a few thoughts and reactions" for the satisfaction of anyone who reads his poems.

60. Ibid., p. 260.
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