

Hart Crane comes from Cleveland, Ohio; Tennessee Williams from Columbus Mississippi. So, for me at least, the playwright's Southern drawl – though easy on the ear, and eminently suited to the poem's five beat lines – rather cedes to a lyricism that Crane's own particular Ohioese would, I suspect, have quietly worked to distort: "I am no vocalist" he told his mother in November 1924, just before a poetry reading in front of an intimidating gathering of New York Literati including Marianne Moore, Georgia O'Keeffe, Alfred Stieglitz, and Jean Toomer. "Pray with me that the tongue be less stubborn than usual in conveying my intentions from the written page."¹ Crane apparently rose to the occasion that night, reading 'more deliberately and distinctly' than he ever thought he should be able to – but an enchanting Tennessee Williams he definitely wasn't.

So what if we were to refuse the incantations of a Williams (or treated them with a healthy dose of scepticism) and replaced them with a slightly less rapturous effort? Perhaps we could then begin to get at the impasse that I see replaying itself throughout Crane's career; because in contra-flow to his often-undeniable lyric fluency on the page, much of Crane's poetry also radiates a struggle to synthesise a dissonance between poetic aspiration and some significant personal limitations. I'm thinking specifically here of the problem of wanting to be a poet in Manhattan and having to work as an advertising underling to pay the bills; or the desire to be part of the transatlantic network of donnish modernist superstars without any formal education to speak of. How indeed does the son of a Mid-Western confectionary manufacturer (inventor of the Life-Saver or Polo mint) – who expects his son to take over the family business – go about becoming the next 'American Poet'? Was the next Whitman or Melville really going to hail from Akron or Cleveland? The only big thing ever to hail from Akron was Alcoholics Anonymous in 1935, which was three years too late for this particular drunk.

You can see him intuiting the difficult road ahead in the charmingly awkward early poem 'Porphyro in Akron': 'The plough, the sword,/ The trowel, —and the monkey wrench!/ O City, your axles need not the oil of song.' His poetic career continually measured the straining discrepancies between where he came from and where he wanted to go. In fact I think he's an important Modernist poet exactly because he's always playing catch-up – providing an insight into the importance of the necessary infrastructural trappings and personal consistencies that a Moore or an Eliot or a Stevens organised relatively seamlessly. So what does happen when a 1920s poet is gay, or an alcoholic, or the only child of well-meaning idiots, or an autodidact, or incapable of holding down a job?

At its very best, Crane's poetry successfully converts these shortfalls into some serious poetic dividends. His principal skill is to successfully direct his reactionary impulses, and set them singing against one another. He'll catapult an idea into manifold, discordant directions and then set to work tirelessly scaffolding these initial compulsions into convulsive accord. The manuscripts at Columbia University testify to this – it took him hundreds of rewrites to get at a

¹ Letter to Grace Hart Crane 30/11/24

poem like 'Atlantis' or 'Voyages II'. Look over those crossings out, and you see the drafts working themselves up into such a state that, perhaps inevitably, they start speaking in apocalyptic vortices and shaking suspension bridges. Often, the outcome is pretty awful; 'Cape Hatteras' is a plane crash of a poem (in part because it is about a plane crash): 'The forked crash of split thunder parts/ Our hearing momentwise; but fast in whirling armateurs,/ As bright as frog's eyes, giggling in the girth/ Of steely gizzards'. Too much? Whatever provisional balancing acts certain poems manage to achieve, others fall victim to their master's folly.

Take the bridge motif itself, that supposedly 'great mythic synthesis of America' – it really was a very dubious idea from the off wasn't it? And Crane knew this – his letters are filled with doubts concerning the idea's validity. And I don't think I'm being harsh when I state that his treatments of Native American and African American history are often embarrassing. Thank God he didn't go through with his Guggenheim-funded threat to write a 'verse epic' on the rise and fall of the Incan Empire.

And yet somehow – through some process of sheer bloody-mindedness or dubious good or bad fortune – he remained faithful to this initial, burdensome 'vision', and over the next ten years, managed to torture a series of conceptual idiocies into some fabulously weird, and often unforgettable semantic arrangements. This film does a wonderful job of aiding an understanding of the fluidity of Crane's associational metaphoric strategies (the sun turning into the crown of Liberty was particularly neat). And it is also so refreshing when the screen suddenly floods with the colour of stained glass that had but moments before been a black and white elevator shaft in one more cathedral of commerce.

Which is all to say that Crane's poetry and Crane's reputation urgently need a bit less lyric sanctity and a bit more life. Harold Bloom, who currently serves as gatekeeper for Crane's poetry (having written that introduction to the Liveright *Complete Poems*) helps sustain the dominant popular Crane mythology – the one that ends with the fulfilment of an 'orphanic doom-eagerness' or proto-Shelleyian drowning: 'Hart Crane, at thirty-two, leapt into the sea evidently because he had concluded that his poetic gift had died already' (CP XXXII). Give me a break. Crane jumped into the sea because he had succumbed to starting each morning with a bottle of whiskey – and because, in his smashed state, he often cringingly misjudged the passes he made at good-looking sailors. God only knows what the world must have looked like to this addled, sea-sick, depressed alcoholic on the morning of his death. But of course this death leaves him exposed to sentimental colonisation. James Franco, a couple of years ago, released a film biopic replete with meandering shots of the ocean, Franco's own achingly sombre face, and a series of his own ever so mooooooving lyrical recitals. And watch Williams's performance of the recording we hear in this film (he actually wanted to be buried at sea in the spot where Crane drowned) – half-cut, on the Bill Boggs show, lifting his closed eyes towards the heavens after each line break, trying to imbue every stress with as much quivering emotion as he can muster <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FScWlr5qZUY>>. And ask yourself, does Crane's poetry really need pseudo-religious incantation? Does his poetry

necessarily have to be co-opted – again and again in an endless procession of hammy white men who also happened to have difficult relationships with their mothers? Hart Crane’s fascinatingly precarious achievement doesn’t need to be aided, or overwritten, or embellished in this way. So when hearing this voiceover – which accompanies this otherwise really excellent, and thoughtful film – bear in mind the ways that Hart Crane also resists the consecrated status of ‘Lyric Poet’, and especially the affections of a Williams, a Bloom, or a Franco.