

UNIVERSIDADE FEDERAL DO RIO GRANDE DO SUL
INSTITUTO DE LETRAS
DEPARTAMENTO DE LÍNGUAS ESTRANGEIRAS MODERNAS
TRABALHO DE CONCLUSÃO DE CURSO

HART CRANE

His Poetry in Presence and Meaning

Adriano Moraes Migliavacca

Porto Alegre

Novembro de 2010

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Monografia apresentada à banca examinadora como requisito parcial para a obtenção do grau de licenciado em Letras, ênfase em Língua Portuguesa e Literaturas de Língua Portuguesa, Língua Inglesa e Literaturas de Língua Inglesa, pela Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul.

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RESUMO

Este trabalho visa a oferecer uma análise da obra de Hart Crane, um dos mais importantes poetas modernos norte-americanos. Influenciada pela imagética da poesia simbolista francesa e do romantismo inglês, bem como a retórica de dramaturgos e poetas elisabetanos, a poesia de Hart Crane foi vista como ambiciosa e difícil desde seu surgimento. Devido à complexidade de sua linguagem e temas, esta obra sempre apresentou desafios a leitores e críticos, resultando em opiniões conflitantes sobre seu lugar na literatura moderna. Neste estudo, sua poesia lírica é analisada com respeito aos seus temas, sentidos e recursos linguísticos, em uma tentativa de oferecer uma forma mais produtiva e abrangente de se ler e entender esta obra importante da poesia moderna.

Palavras-chave: Poesia moderna. Hart Crane. Presença e sentido.

ABSTRACT

This study aims at providing an analysis of the work of Hart Crane, one of the foremost North-America modern poets. Influenced by the imagery of French Symbolist poetry and English Romanticism, as well as the rhetoric of Elizabethan dramatists and poets, the poetry of Hart Crane was seen as ambitious and difficult since its appearance. Due to the complexity of its language and themes, this work has always presented challenges to readers and critics, resulting in disparate views regarding its place in modern literature. In this study, his lyrical poetry is analyzed with regard to its themes, meanings, and linguistic resources, in an attempt to provide a more productive and comprehensive form of reading and understanding this important work in modern poetry.

Keywords: Modern poetry. Hart Crane. Presence and meaning.

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INTRODUCTION

The poetry of Hart Crane has never stopped presenting challenges. Appearing in the United States during the 1920s, a period of intense renovation and rebellion in the arts and letters, it stood in an unclassifiable mid kingdom between tradition (with its Elizabethan vocabulary and traditional metrics) and innovation (with its illogical associations of words). This duplicity was responsible for the ambiguous critical reception received at the time.

Hart Crane, in the tumultuous 32 years he lived, produced a very small body of work, consisting of one collection of poems, *White Buildings* (1926), a long narrative poem called *The Bridge* (1930), and a book called *Key West: An Island Sheaf*, which would appear only in posterior compilations of his works, apart from a number of unpublished poems and others which were scattered through literary magazines of his time. Crane's poetry, very ambitious in scope and style, was conceived partly as a response to the work of the most influential English language poet of his time: T. S. Eliot. Relying on Eliot's erudition and technical mastery, Crane decided to write against his pessimistic view of modernity. This very ambitious enterprise resulted in a work that was far too radical for its age.

Nevertheless, throughout the 20th century his poetry did not lose, but actually gained in interest and attention, although his methods and aesthetics always remained a challenge to those critics who attempted to decipher it. In recent years, however, different areas of literary theory and criticism have presented approaches that open fields of possibility for studying Crane's work. Theoreticians and critics seem to be paying more attention to different aesthetic dimensions of a work of art.

Among those developments, the works of a particular theoretician, Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, and of an equally particular literary critic, Lee Edelman, seem to me especially privileged for the study of Crane's poetry. Gumbrecht has been developing an approach to aesthetic experience that takes into consideration both its material (presence) and immaterial (meaning) elements. Curiously, Lee

Edelman addresses Hart Crane's poetry with a similar approach, although his work was published almost twenty years before Gumbrecht's investigations. In this coincidence of points of view, I have found what seems to me an interesting path for analyzing this ambitious and meaningful poetry.

This paper provides an analysis of Crane's poetry in the two dimensions referred to above. For this aim, the theoretical views of the authors mentioned will be discussed and evaluated against Hart Crane's own theory of poetic construction, and his theoretical works will be confronted with those authors who were thinking in an opposite way, such as T. S. Eliot and Allen Tate.

Afterwards, I will focus on the reading of some of Crane's poems taking into consideration both aspects of presence and meaning. Although Crane's creative output was very small, it is of extreme density; therefore, I decided to focus on his first collection of poems, *White Buildings*, using those texts which, in my opinion, display interesting aesthetic constructions to be analyzed. Of these lyrics, the six-poem suite "Voyages" is of particular interest, for it summarizes most of Crane's characteristics and themes that appear throughout his first volume, and, therefore, special attention will be given to it here.

The objective of this paper is obviously also very ambitious, and, therefore, it faces important limitations. To conduct the study in a way that I thought would be satisfactory I had to concentrate my analyses and, therefore, leave some important things aside. I regret not discussing poems like "Praise for an Urn," "Recitative," and "For the Marriage of Faustus and Helen," but the former, although one of Crane's most beautiful, is more conventional in its construction, therefore less typical of the creative techniques I am intending to study; and the two latter, though clearly very important in his work, are excessively extent, and to include them I would have to considerably increase the size of this work. The "Voyages" suite, with its 140 intricate lines spread in six poems, also proved too long and detailed to be included in its entirety; therefore, I decided to limit my scope to the three first poems of the group, which present a coherent movement and can be analyzed as a group without greater problems. From the fourth poem on, the tone, the form and the

emotional attitude change considerably, almost constituting another group of poems.

Finally, I would like to say that, although my main objective was to analyze the aesthetic construction of the poems, I did not refrain from studying their possible meanings and did not make any effort to avoid engaging into interpretative exercises. A work of art is a combination and mingling of these two dimensions, so both of them must be contemplated. For the most part, I let the poems guide my attention. In a discontinuous poetics such as Crane's, some parts (or even some poems) do not display particularly interesting aesthetic constructions but reveal important meanings; likewise, some parts are extremely productive in aesthetic terms, but are too obscure in terms of meaning to permit an interpretation. For the most part, his verses present both dimensions, and I tried to focus on them and their interconnection.

SOMEWHERE BETWEEN TRADITION AND INDIVIDUAL TALENT

The problem posed by the poetry of Hart Crane, as well as much of its value, was perceived and stated as early as the appearance of his first book *White Buildings*, in 1926. A collection of various seemingly discontinuous and puzzling lyrics, the volume counted with an introduction by the poet and critic Allen Tate, knowingly one of Crane's best friends and most perceptive evaluators. In this brief and invaluable essay, Tate lays many of the main questions that would occupy Crane scholars.

Already in the beginning, Tate spots the dual nature of Crane's poetry acknowledging in it "the first poetry I am acquainted with that is at the same time contemporary and in the great manner," as well as the double nature of his themes, "abstractly, metaphysically conceived," but confined to "an experience of the American scene." (Tate, 1982, p. 18) He perceives the influence of imagism in Crane's poetry, but rapidly states that this influence had already been overcome, reminding us that "a series of Imagistic poems is a series of worlds. The poems of Hart Crane are facets of a single vision; they refer to a central imagination [...]" (p. 19)

Here the problem of Hart Crane's poetry starts to take shape. If his poetry consists of the facets of "a single vision," "a central imagination," which, we are compelled to ask, is this single vision or imagination?

Tate does not present an answer to this question, which, it seems, was still obscure to him. In fact, in most of the essay he elaborates on the difficulties Crane's poetry presents to its reading and understanding. Those difficulties are in line with a dissociation of sensibility that had systematically visited poetry since Baudelaire, consisting of, according to Tate, the separation of vision and subject. Tradition, Tate says, was no longer present to the contemporary poet in a unitary way, as it was at the time of Dante; it had to be partly construed and then assimilated. Situated in this crossroad, Crane's poetry failed to present its themes with clarity, or even lacked a suitable theme. Although it has one central

imagination, themes and meanings are still scattered and oblique, and in this character Tate compares it to the work of the exponent of the Symbolist movement, Arthur Rimbaud. "The poem," says Tate, "does not convey; it presents; it is not topical, but expressive." (p. 21)

Finally, among the many interesting remarks Tate makes in these four pages, he ascertains, somewhat puzzlingly, that Crane's poetry "is likely to be appropriated by one of the several esoteric cults of the American soul. It tends toward the formation of a state of mind [...]" (p. 21) and warns about the dangers of transferring the states of mind in poetry to moral and social aspirations. In other words, besides a single vision and imagination, Tate recognizes a religious, or spiritual for that matter, substance in Crane's poetry, although he could not say exactly what it was, and his assertion about its possible religious appropriation shows that this spiritual substance was still undetermined.

This short introduction would provide the axis for the bulk of early critical views concerning Crane's poetry. The puzzlement felt in face of his work would become even deeper after his dramatic suicide in 1932, at the age of 32, for two main reasons. First, because the confusion and seeming disorganization of his poetic visions would be frequently intertwined with the confusion and clear disorganization of his personal life that ended in such a disgraceful way; second, because his work would appear for the critics contemporary to Crane as an eternal work in progress, an oeuvre that was never finished, but actually interrupted before its author could develop it in a way that provided us with the means to solve its "problems."

One year after Crane's death, in the first collection of his complete work, Waldo Frank, another of Crane's friends, in his introduction, would identify Crane's work with what he calls the "great tradition," the tradition arising from Greek and Roman culture and developed through the Christian outlook, which, according to Frank, was brought to the United States by the Puritans. Frank believes that Crane's work was "a deliberate continuance of the great tradition in terms of our industrialized world." (p. ix) For this author, Crane's "language problem" results from the difficulty the poet had to find the right words to

communicate visions attuned to the “great tradition” in a dissolute world, hostile to any transcendent experience. Crane was a mystic, i.e., “a man who knows, by immediate experience, the organic continuity between his self and the cosmos,” (p. xiii) in chaotic surroundings. Moreover, Frank subscribes to Tate in that Crane, in his brief career, had not found a suitable theme.

Ten years after the publication of *White Buildings*, Tate would return to an evaluation of his friend’s work. Instead of a shift of opinion, what we see is a further development of the views he had presented in his early essay. In this second essay, Tate more clearly places Crane in the romantic tradition. Once more comparing him to Rimbaud, he reminds us that

Rimbaud achieved “disorder” out of implicit order, after a deliberate cultivation of “derangement,” but in our age the disintegration of our intellectual systems is accomplished. With Crane the disorder is original and fundamental. That is the special quality of his mind that belongs peculiarly to our own time. His aesthetic problem, however, was more general; it was the historic problem of romanticism. (Tate, 1999, p. 310)

Tate explicitly states that his judgments were influenced by the fact that he knew Crane personally as a friend and much of the information he had of his friend’s life participated in his rendering of the “Hart Crane problem.” He reminds us of the slight formal education Crane had and that his readings of “the great poets” were made with “the instinct of genius,” but not with the systematic discipline required for one to master a literary tradition. This problem resulted in a poetry that had defects, both of surface and of vision. His poetry, undoubtedly of great artistic quality, was more successful in its least philosophical moments, when he “writes from sensation.” (p. 318) Beyond its periphery of sensation, it is only a dead abstraction.

Perhaps the most interesting development in this 1937 essay is his elaboration about the spiritual and philosophical background of Crane’s work. Knowingly Crane took as starting point the poetry of T. S. Eliot, for whom Crane had an immense admiration (an admiration he shared with Tate). However, beyond his wonderful artistry and poetic energy, Crane saw in Eliot’s work, especially in *The Waste Land*, an utter pessimism he felt as erroneous. According to Crane’s biographer Paul Mariani (2000), Crane was focused on

assimilating Eliot's technical mastery and erudition and directing it to "a more positive and, yes, ecstatic goal." (p. 109) For Tate, Crane's dismissal of Eliot's pessimism was his "fundamental mistake," (Tate, 1999, p. 314) This pessimism results from an awareness of the decadence of the "individual consciousness and its fixed relations to the world;" from this Tate concludes that "far from 'refuting' Eliot, his [Crane's] whole career is a vindication of Eliot's major premise—that the integrity of individual consciousness has broken down." (p. 321)

Having denied Eliot's pessimism and his orthodox Christian background (two aspects consciously adopted by Tate), what was left for Crane as mystical substance was, according to Tate, an "implicit pantheism," (p. 313) which "rose out of the collision between his own locked-in sensibility and the ordinary forms of experience" and could be characterized as "necessarily a philosophy of sensation without point of view." (p. 319) In the 1952 encomium *Crane: The Poet as Hero*, Tate draws even more on happenings of his personal life to identify his development as a poet and as an example of the modern consciousness.

The relationship between these two men and their diverging points of view is so complex and rich that it became the mainstay of a whole book. In *Hart Crane and Allen Tate: Janus-Faced Modernism* (1993), Langdon Hammer offers a broad vision of the modernist scene, encompassing social and aesthetic issues. In the center of his argumentation lies the duplicity of Hart Crane and Allen Tate, illustrating modernism as a double-edged phenomenon, pointing forward, toward innovation, and backwards, toward tradition and eventual institutional sanction. Hart Crane clearly took for himself the role of the "outlaw" genius, the innovator, a role Hammer pairs with Crane's social (as underemployed) and sexual (as homosexual) identity; on the other edge, Allen Tate adopted the role of the poet-critic, which is properly paired with his increasing professional prestige as an educator and one of the most influential literary critics of his time and his heterosexual identity.

This marked contrast helps us understand the place assigned to Crane's poetry during the first half of the twentieth century, as a mysterious and

undecided body of work, whose artistic beauty undisputedly put him among the greatest poets of his generation, but whose difficulty and supposedly unfulfilled ambition renders it almost impossible to determine where he stands in the poetic scene of his country and time. Even his role as a vanguard poet is not clear, for much of his poetics relied on traditional forms and rhetoric akin to that of the Elizabethan poets.

Although its place in North-American literature has always been difficult to delimit, the poetry of Hart Crane has never stopped to be broadly discussed, neither has it become a work of solely historical interest. In fact, throughout the century, the interest over his work has grown, reaching many different tendencies in literary criticism, and many aspects of his work have been revised. Harold Bloom (1982), for instance, in *Hart Crane's Gnosis*, reevaluates the spiritual background Tate had already started to sketch. Bloom stresses the American roots of Crane's poetry, linking him directly to his contemporary Wallace Stevens and to the three main 19th century authors who worked toward the establishment of a North-American philosophy and spirituality Bloom called "American Orphism": Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman. Not only articles and chapters have been dedicated to Crane, but also whole books devoted to his poetry have appeared in the last decades.

One study of particular interest is Lee Edelman's *Transmemberment of Song: Hart Crane's Anatomies of Rhetoric and Desire* (1987). Based on modern deconstructionist theory, Edelman revises the critical reception of Hart Crane's poetry, producing a brilliant reevaluation of its importance. According to this author, after these already mentioned early negative criticisms, Hart Crane's oeuvre underwent a period of revision, in which many critics drove their efforts into finding the thematic unity whose absence was the core of early reprimands. Interestingly enough, Edelman ascertains that these studies, however well meant, failed by focusing on a thematic unity and by considering Crane's complex rhetoric as an obstacle to the grasping of this unity. Edelman believes that what early detractors saw as flaws and late defenders saw as an obstacle are exactly the qualities that should be focused on in studying this poetic work and proposes to analyze it based on the rhetorical resources employed by the poet. According to this author, Crane's originality and contribution lies in his

opaque rhetoric and syntax and, therefore, the linguistic structure of his poetry is to be analyzed and researched rather than a supposed thematic unity.

Of course this very intelligent approach does not exclude the grasping of themes and symbols that punctuate this amazing rhetorical construction that is Hart Crane's work. Throughout this essay, I will try to elaborate on both dimensions.

DIFFERENT POETICS AND LOGIC

The difficulty of his work was perfectly known by Crane, as well as its impact in its very acceptance in the literary scene of his time. Before the publication of his first book, some of his poems had already appeared in newspapers and magazines of the time, and they often aroused puzzlement or sheer rejection in the editors and evaluators. Even for a time of brewing avant-garde movements and literary innovations, his poetry seemed strange and inaccessible.

The problem with Hart Crane's poetry, as ascertained by Tate, was the seeming conflict between the extreme ambition of his poetic scope and plans and the supposedly few resources his poor formal education had provided him with to fulfill his goal, matched with an instinctive and visionary genius. In other words, there seemed to be a huge distance between what he envisioned and what he was capable of expressing.

However, once we examine Crane's few theoretical texts, his poetry and its difficulties start to be seen in another light. The sensibility or frame of mind within which he was writing was actually quite different from that of the cultural and intellectual scene of his time. Crane had strong and well defined views on the role of poetry within its culture, as well as on the principles for its construction. A reader and admirer of T. S. Eliot, he agreed with his master about the extreme importance of tradition in the work of a poet. He clearly ascertained that "the deliberate program of a 'break' with the past or tradition seems to me to be a sentimental fallacy..." (Crane, *General Aims and Theories*, 2006, p. 161) and that "I put no particular value on the simple objective of 'modernity.' The element of temporal location of an artist's creation is of very secondary importance." Notwithstanding, he diverged from Eliot on the possibilities in an issue of time and even space.

For Eliot, it seemed, a poet writing in English in the 20th century was, first and foremost, a European poet, and the tradition in which he or she was placed was the long Western tradition in literature. He obviously did not dismiss the

poetry produced in the United States or even the role of his native land in his own literary formation, but those elements could only be of value if sifted through the criterion the artist earns with his or her past.

In his famous essay *Tradition and the Individual Talent* (1919), Eliot, elaborating on the binomial that gives the essay its title, arrives at the curious conclusion that

One of the facts that might come to light in this process is our tendency to insist, when we praise a poet, upon those aspects of his work in which he least resembles anyone else. In these aspects or parts of his work we pretend to find what is individual, what is the peculiar essence of the man. [...] Whereas if we approach a poet without this prejudice we shall often find that not only the best, but the most individual parts of his work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously. (pp. 37-38)

Eliot believed that a poet's value could only be judged in relation to the dead poets that preceded him or her, not in one period, but in the whole tradition of his or her literature and, actually, in the whole of European literature. It was an indispensable task for the poet to obtain the whole of his or her tradition within an equally indispensable historical sense. An historical sense included "the timeless and the temporal and the timeless and temporal together" (p. 39), which was the one thing that could make a poet contemporary. This obtaining of tradition and its historical sense is associated with "a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality" (p. 40) which was the very progress of an artist. Eliot tops his theory on tradition with that which is probably his most famous quotation:

Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality. But, of course, only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things. (p. 43)

In order to make sense of these ideas, we have to be aware that Eliot had a particular view of what it meant to be an individual, and this view is not an easy one to grasp in our times (as it probably was not in Eliot's own time). Eliot's view of individuality was in perfect opposition to the view of individuality adopted by our liberal democratic society, and this is the reason for its particular

difficulty: the idea of individuality is the center of the liberal democracy in which we live and in which Eliot himself lived. The liberal democratic notion of individuality, adopted by many contemporary authors, in Eliot's opinion, was a fallacy, and the world of liberal democracy "simply does not exist," (p. 104) as he states in *Religion and Literature*. The only possible way to be an individual in this or any other age was adopting the Christian outlook. Spiritual values that could constitute a wholesome individual, the spiritual values that should be conveyed by any literature worth its name, were no different from the spiritual values of any other generation: they were the Christian values, which were, for Eliot, eternal. With this outlook and in face of the meteorically progressive abandoning of Christian values by his contemporaries, it is no wonder Eliot saw modern times as times of sheer spiritual decadence, and *that* is exactly where Crane differed from him.

The core of Crane's disapproval of Eliot's pessimism is that he believed Eliot dismissed some important spiritual events which were particular to modern times. Modern age, the machine age, the modern democratic American society, which Eliot saw as decaying, had a kind of spirituality of its own, which should, in Crane's opinion, be explored by the poet were he to produce a contemporary poetic work which could contribute to the spiritual enrichment of human kind. Now, these spiritual values were not exactly different values from the traditional ones, but they presented themselves differently in our age, and this difference should not be dismissed, but actually welcomed by the poet. Right after he states his suspicion about the idea of a break with the past, he develops, in the same text:

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. And in this process I like to feel myself as a potential factor; certainly I must speak in terms and what discoveries I may make are situated in its experience. (p. 161)

The word "quantities" is of huge significance, as will be explored later. Now let us just remark that this word reinforces the notion that the new spiritual

events to be discovered in America were not really *new* values, but eternal, absolute values presenting themselves in a different intensity. The absoluteness of some values or experiences is ascertained by Crane in the following words:

[...] It seems evident that certain aesthetic experiences can be called absolute, inasmuch as it approximates a formally convincing statement of a conception or apprehension of life that gains our unquestioning assent, and under the conditions of which our imagination is unable to suggest a further detail consistent with the design of the aesthetic whole. (p. 162)

In a letter to his friend Gorham Munson, Crane discusses his poem “Black Tambourine,” affirming that its value was only “in what painters would call its “tactile” quality,—an entirely aesthetic feature.” (Crane, 2006, p. 249) Pointing that the poem deals with the symbolic figure of the negro and its position of isolation and discrimination in the new world, Crane ascertains that “a propagandist for either side of the negro question could find anything he wanted in it.” Taking into consideration the highly polemic and morally-laden character of the theme, it becomes clear how much Crane valued the aesthetic experience as absolute. The morality of his poem about the figure of the negro should not be put there by him, but reflected in its texture by the feelings and ideas of the person who was reading it.

Quickly returning to his differences with Eliot, in the essay mentioned above, *Religion and Literature*, Eliot criticizes the liberal view that “if everybody says what he thinks, and does what he likes, things will somehow, by some automatic compensation and adjustment, come right in the end;” (Eliot, 1975, p. 103) the logical corollary of his critique is that “the ‘greatness’ of literature cannot be determined solely by literary standards.” (p. 97) Crane seemed to believe that it is exactly this kind of literary freedom that Eliot seems to attack that could contrive poetry capable of leading readers through new areas of consciousness to new emotional and sensorial experiences, and ultimately create “spiritual illuminations.” For such a poetry, new methods would have to be devised and a new technical vocabulary would have to be put into work. That is exactly what he does:

As to technical considerations: the motivation of the poem must be derived from 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 meaning. Via this and their metaphorical inter-relationships, 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. (Crane, 2006, p. 163)

In a letter to Harriet Monroe, editor of the *Poetry* magazine (2006), he is even clearer about the importance of this theoretical/technical construct in the very role of poetry. There he affirms that the target of this type of poetry, as well as the key to its comprehension, lies not in a discursive logic, but in the readers' emotional and sensitive experiences. Poems would provide a series of unusual associations between words and symbols which could only be understood if the reader paid attention to previous experiences. And he goes further:

If the poet is to be held completely to the already evolved and exploited sequences of imagery and logic—what field of added consciousness and increased perceptions (the actual province of poetry, if not lullabies) can be expected when one has to relatively return to the alphabet every breath or so? In the minds of people who have sensitively read, seen, and experienced a great deal, isn't there 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? (p. 168)

As an example of this associational practice, he cites a verse by T. S. Eliot featured in the poem “Rhapsody in a Windy Night”: “Every street lamp that I pass beats like a fatalistic drum,” in which a reader would have to rely on his or her emotional experience and sensibility to arrive at the association of a street lamp and an anxious heartbeat; or, in his poem “Voyages,” the famous image of “Adagios of islands,” inspired by the slow moving of boats through thickly clustered islands. Crane believes that this association could provide a more effective image than any more logical rendering, “besides ushering in a whole world of music.” (p. 164)

It is very difficult to say what exactly Crane knew about the philosophical and anthropological developments of his own time, but it must be remarked that in his interest for this “metaphorical logic,” previous to what became known as

pure logic, he was not alone. Margaret Uroff, in her *Hart Crane: the Patterns of his Poetry* (1974), links the descriptions of these aesthetic and mystical experiences to Ernst Cassirer's ideas about the origin of myths. Cassirer describes a sort of mythic thinking which differs from our theoretical-conceptual thinking characterized by the sequential elaboration of experiences into discursive concepts. The mythical thinking, on the other hand, is thus described by Cassirer:

When, on the one hand, the entire self is given up to a single impression, is "possessed" by it and, on the other hand, there is the utmost tension between the subject and its object, the outer world; when external reality is not merely viewed and contemplated, but overcomes a man in sheer immediacy, with emotions of fear or hope, terror or wish or fulfillment: then the spark jumps somehow across, the tension finds release, as the subjective excitement becomes objectified, and confronts the mind as a god or daemon. (Cited by Uroff, p. 185)

This mythical consciousness, instead of analyzing the experience in subject and object, assigning a word which provides it with a symbolic form, as discursive consciousness does, merges subject, object, word and symbol into one thing, and the word which expresses it becomes itself the experience, the word is energized with symbolic and emotional force. Wittingly or not, Crane in his poetry and theory was moving in the same direction, toward a mystical experience that had no name yet and was still to be studied and developed. The origins of this kind of thinking were actually archaic, lying in the experience of traditional societies. Not surprisingly Native American tribes progressively came to interest Crane throughout his short career.

In recent literary theory, Crane's ideas find resonance in the work of German author Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, who has been dedicating his efforts to investigating a possibility of studying and understanding aesthetic experience that moves beyond the purely hermeneutical tradition, for which material objects of which the world is constituted possess an inherent metaphysical meaning, which should be grasped by the task of interpretation. The work of art is an articulation of symbols mainly based on their meanings, and the objective of literary criticism is precisely to discover the inherent meaning of this symbolic construction.

Without disregarding the importance of meaning in aesthetic experience, Gumbrecht, in the book *Production of Presence* (2004) investigates what he calls “materialities of communication,” (p. 6) a material, non-hermeneutic aspect of the communicative act that he identifies with the “presence” dimension of a work of art, which has been effaced or at least deemphasized by Cartesian tradition of thought. This presence dimension would refer to the very tangibility, materiality, of the communicative act, or, as the author would say,

[...]to speak of “production of presence” implies that the (spatial) tangibility effect coming from the communication media is subjected, in space, to movements of greater or lesser proximity, and of greater or lesser intensity. That any form of communication, through its material elements, will “touch” the bodies of the persons who are communicating in specific and varying ways may be a relatively trivial observation—but it is true nevertheless that this fact had been bracketed (if not—progressively—forgotten) by Western theory building ever since the Cartesian cogito made the ontology of human existence depend exclusively on the movements of human mind. (p. 17)

And he adds on the next page that

Poetry is perhaps the most powerful example of the simultaneity of presence effects and meaning effects—for even the most overpowering institutional dominance of the hermeneutic dimension could never fully repress the presence effects of rhyme and alliteration, of verse and stanza.

The concept of presence and materiality is closely associated to the idea of space, of the presentification of something in the world and its act of occupying a certain space in its material, physical aspects. In this very light, the organization of symbols in a work of art could be identified as the spatial relationship between things and the world and things among themselves. It is easy to see in what way this paradigm differs from the hermeneutic paradigm. When we say that a symbol “means” something, we automatically relate it to something that is different from this symbol and that is obviously not present. Therefore, the idea of “meaning” implicitly and necessarily brings within itself the idea of absence. A word means an object because the object itself is absent.

The concept of “presence” implies that the symbolic value lies not in something that is absent and which is evoked by the presence of the symbol, but in the very presentation of the thing and its material occurrence in space. Meanings, in this paradigm, are inherent to the material existence of the things in the world. Although both meaning and presence structures exist in any culture, some cultures tend to emphasize one or the other, which permits Gumbrecht to talk of two different paradigms. The Western modern culture, as already elaborated, is predominantly a meaning culture. Archaic traditional societies and the European Middle Ages are examples of predominantly presence cultures.

The meaning paradigm is based on the idea of an eccentricity of the subject (identified with the mind) in relation to the object (identified with the world and material things). From this eccentric position, the subject attributes (or extracts) meaning from the world of material objects (here the word “object” is used both as “material object” and in its grammatical sense). Classically the meanings of material objects are primarily attributed by God. The hermeneutic work consists of discovering this primordial meaning attributed by God. The capacity of doing so gives men the ability and even the duty of altering the objects in the world in order to improve them, i.e. approximate them to how God has conceived them.

In a presence culture, however, “subjects” are actually bodies that move in space in relation to the things that surround them; the bodies, the persons, are *part* of a cosmology and not its external observers. Knowledge, then, is not the discovery of a secret meaning attributed by God, but a revelation, the concrete presentation of a god. The gods are in the world, in the things that present themselves, the objects around us have a godly nature; therefore, the action that can alter the natural configuration of the surroundings is identified with magic and seen as a possibly harmful and even sinful.

In the development of this typology, Gumbrecht arrives at a problem. In a presence culture, the gods are always present in the environment they share with humans. Yet, peoples who live within these cultures usually perform highly elaborate religious rituals in which the presence of the same gods is evoked

and brought forward. What, then, would be the point of an elaborate ritual to evoke a god that is already there?

The response Gumbrecht arrives at is of great interest for us. He believes that these rituals are not meant to evoke the gods that are already there, but actually to intensify their presence, their existence. It seems an absurd idea in a meaning-based culture, but according to him, there is the tendency in presence-based cultures to quantify things that are not usually quantified in meaning-based cultures, such as feelings.

This concept will be easier to understand if we contrast it with our better known meaning-based culture. In this kind of culture, the meaning of a symbol, a word, for example, simply cannot be intensified. According to the system of oppositions of Saussurian linguistics, whether a word means something or it does not. In a presence-based culture the existence of words is very much like what was characterized above as mythical thinking by Cassirer. A word does not acquire meaning, it is energized to the point where its physical presence, its phonetic realization, becomes the object itself.

As we have seen before, this is the very idea of Crane's poetics. Words, for him, would have to be placed in poetic contexts which could appear obscure, or incomprehensible for the reader until "by some experience of their own the words accumulate the necessary connotations to complete their connection." (p.167) Thus the importance Crane attributes to the "spiritual quantities" he imagined could be found in American experience becomes even more logical. Gumbrecht believes that aesthetic experiences are firmly based on what he calls "moments of intensity," in which "what we feel is probably no more than a specifically high level in the functioning of some of our general cognitive, emotional, and perhaps even physical faculties." (p. 98) For Crane, these moments of intensity could lead to the experience of ecstasy, which would lead the reader to what he described in his poem "Voyages IV" as "the incarnate word."

THE INCARNATE WORD

After this theoretical discussion, it is important to read the poems themselves. In accordance with the views just expressed, the reading of the poems here presented will try to focus mainly on aesthetic qualities, especially the organization of the symbols in the poem's body, which Gumbrecht calls "presence effects," without discarding, obviously, the meaning effects; as the same author said, "objects of aesthetic experience are characterized by an oscillation between presence effects and meaning effect" (Gumbrecht, 2004, p. 107). Presence effects will be emphasized here. My intentions will be clearer in the discussion of the texts.

Hart Crane left a very small body of work; however, his poetry displays an extreme concentration, an extreme density of symbols, thought, and language. It would not be productive, in a short essay, to analyze aspects pertaining to his three main works. The poems that will be analyzed here belong to his first volume, the collection of lyrics "White Buildings."

Many Crane scholars point to a kind of paradox concerning the reception of the two works that have been published throughout his life. Since its publication in 1926, "White Buildings" was unanimously approved, with reviews ranging from a "welcome" to a new talented poet to enthusiastic praise. "The Bridge," on the other hand, was harshly criticized, especially concerning its supposed epic nature. Many critics seem to agree with Tate (1999), for whom the book is "a collection of lyrics, the best of which are not surpassed by anything in American literature," (p. 318) but as a narrative poem, it fails to integrate its many beautiful moments in a coherent whole. Surprisingly, throughout the years, "The Bridge" has been the subject of loads of critical

study, while Crane's beautiful debut volume seems to have been almost forgotten by examiners.

Tate informs us that many have wrongly considered the poems in his early volume as a "rehearsal," a preparation for his longer, more ambitious poem. Actually, as it becomes evident in Paul Mariani's biography of Crane, many of the lyrics were written long after Crane had already advanced a great deal in his epic. Margaret Uroff (1974), on the other hand, thinks that the main error was to consider the two volumes as completely separate works and not to search for the continuities between them.

Ernest Smith brings forth another default of critics concerning the book. *White Buildings* is always taken as a collection of separate lyrics, but no one ever tried to grasp a sequential organization in it. This is exactly what he attempts to do in his *The Imaged Word: the Infrastructure of Hart Crane's White Buildings* (1990). Smith organizes the 23 texts which constitute the book in five moments, arising from the relationship of the artist to the external world in the first six poems, an indifference of external nature toward men in a second group, a third and intermediary moment depicting an intense relation to this same external world, a search for resolution and finally the integration of tones and themes established in the six-poem sequence "Voyages," generally privileged by critics, three poems of which will be the center of this paper.

Smith's enterprise is actually extremely valuable and welcome, yet, in reading his book one senses a limitation of his mostly thematic approach. His effort to draw clear moods or outlooks out of rather opaque poems sometimes is unconvincing. As was seen in the theoretic material examined in the previous section, the "oblique presentation" of Crane's themes Tate sensed is actually a major characteristic of his poetics. Using Gumbrecht's terminology, the theme of a work of art is unquestionably positioned in its "meaning" dimension, a dimension that should never be overlooked, but should also not be the only point examined.

The aforementioned critical work of Lee Edelman seems much more in line with this view. Extremely attentive to Crane's own theories, Edelman bases his analysis on the linguistic material of his poetry in its various dimensions:

from the sound of words to their combination into rhetoric figures. With a particular attention to the latter, Edelman discovered the predominance of three poetic processes paired with three classical, although little studied, rhetorical figures: the processes of breaking, bending, and bridging and their corresponding rhetorical figures, anacoluthon, chiasmus and catachresis.

The presence of anacoluthon, the process of breaking, is seen in the grammatical and syntactic violations and innovations characteristic of his poetry. Chiasmus, the process of bending, is a constant presence in Crane's syntactic and symbolic associations and is seen as a link between the processes of breaking and bridging. Finally, the latter is perceived as the way Crane tried to explore new territories of consciousness and provide readers with distinct poetic experiences. His "logic of metaphor" would be grounded on this process; however, Edelman says, the image that dominates Crane's poetry is not metaphor, where a thing already bearing a name receives another name, but catachresis, where a name is borrowed to something that has no previous name. His poetry would be informed not by a "logic of metaphor," but by what Edelman calls an "ideology of catachresis." Coincidentally or not, this view is extremely attuned to the already mentioned commentary by Waldo Frank where he says that Crane's language problem would be due partly to the difficulty of finding words to communicate his visions, with the difference that, here, it is not a language problem, but an innovative procedure.

What is extraordinary in Edelman's analysis is the fact that throughout his reading, he discovers that these processes, these figures, do not appear in Crane's work only as linguistic techniques, but actually are consistent in the various levels of his poetry. It could be said that the world that appears to us in the mirror of Crane's poetry is conformed by the logical structure of these three processes. It is obvious that Crane hardly knew the names of these very specific figures, referring to the logic that dominated his work generically as metaphorical. However, Edelman shows us that these processes continuously appear in his poetry. As Edelman says:

His "absolute" poetry undertakes self-consciously to recover a rhetorical or figural logic that precedes and produces both speech and consciousness—a figural logic that, consequently, is responsible for the production of theme as well. Specific "terms of expression" appear in

Crane's poetry primarily to the extent that they figure the underlying rhetorical processes from which his subject matter springs. In other words, his poetics rests on the principle that the structure of verbal association, the logic of figural expression is interpreted[...] (p. 14)

The assignment of Crane's poetry to an "ideology of catachresis" instead of a "logic of metaphor" has profound implications. According to Edelman, the figure of metaphor "claims a necessary or palpable correspondence" between the two terms that are being identified (p. 9). An ideology of metaphor then "grants a privileged status to organicism over contiguity, necessity over accident, transcendence over materiality." (p. 10) Metaphor, then, is more attached to the pole of "reason" or, to use our terminology, meaning. The radicality of catachresis would be, for Edelman, much more attuned to the violent associations of Hart Crane's poetry. Therefore, an ideology of catachresis would function as a way of escaping a kind of poetic authority and presenting original visions, or, to draw from Crane's objectives, a way of exploring new areas of consciousness.

Although catachresis seems to be the figure privileged throughout his work, in his first book we see an exhaustive reiteration of chiasmic patterns, or double patterns in general. The duplicity appears to dominate much of Crane's texts in this first phase. The poem that opens *White Buildings*, "Legend," begins with two lines typographically and semantically detached from the rest of the poem:

As silent as a mirror is believed

Realities plunge in silence by...

The ambiguity is not suggested, it is forced in these lines, making it almost impossible to be interpreted in only one way. Edelman points to two possible interpretations, I would say there are three:

1. A mirror is believed as a reality (in the act of plunging by in silence) is silent.

2. Realities, in plunging in silence, are silent as a mirror is silent in being believed – here there is an important contrast between the predicate to the subject of the second line, “realities” (plunge by – active) and that of the subject of the first line, “mirror” (believed – passive) – another way of writing this, according to this interpretation would be, like Edelman says, “As silently as a mirror is believed,” i.e. the adjective “silent” here has an adverbial function.
3. Realities are silent as a mirror is believed to be (also pointed by Edelman), i.e. a mirror is not necessarily silent, it is only believed to be silent; the realities that plunge in silence display the silence that we usually attribute to a mirror; it is also possible to write: “realities are silent when they plunge in silence, and mirrors are silent when they are believed.”

The multiplicity of interpretations here seems to point to the precedence of presence over meaning. From the three interpretations listed above, no one is really favored by the syntax, and therefore, there is no possibility of drawing *one* exact meaning from it. On the other hand, the pure *presence* of the symbols of mirrors, reality, and silence does not lie. The dialectic between the mirrors and the reality they reflect is evident here. The comparative “as silent” puts a kind of equal sign between them. And remembering the remark upon the passivity/activity of the predicates, the passivity of a mirror in being believed is actually indiscernible from the activity of a reality, for both of them are silent, and the real act of the realities is an almost passive plunging into silence, into indeterminacy. It is also important to point the resonance between the silence of these two lines and the whiteness from the title of the book, which actually is repeated throughout the book.

These two lines are perfectly prefatory to the rest of the book and a whole paper could be dedicated to them. Let us continue to the rest of the poem:

I am not ready for repentance;

Nor to match regrets. For the moth

Bends no more than the still

Imploring flame. And tremorous
In the white falling flakes

Kisses are,--

The only worth all granting.

It is to be learned—

This cleaving and this burning,

But only by the one who

Spends out himself again.

Twice and twice

(Again the smoking souvenir,

Bleeding eidolon!) and yet again.

Until the bright logic is won

Unwhispering as a mirror

Is believed.

Then, drop by caustic drop, a perfect cry

Shall string some constant harmony,--

Relentless caper for all those who step

The legend of their youth into the noon.

The first two lines indicate a personal tone to the poem, not only in the use of the personal pronoun “I,” but in their confessional nature. After that, one of Crane’s strongest images: “For the moth bends no more than the still imploring flame.” The chiasmic pattern again brings forth the dialectic between passivity and activity, although both attitudes are attributed to both subjects: the moth is active in its flight for the flame, but passive in being destroyed by it; likewise, the flame is active in destroying the moth, but passive because this destruction is solely determined by the act of the moth, thereby the flame’s passive imploring.

If this image seems strange at first, it becomes quite clear later on in the same poem. Crane says that “this cleaving and this burning” is to be learned “only by the one who spends out himself again.” Here as a perfect mathematical equation is the explanation for the image: this destruction the moth goes through is actually something to be learned, but only by those who, as the moth, are brave enough to suffer this destruction.

Margaret Uroff identifies two impulses that appear to her as the main patterns of Crane’s poetry—the impulse to violence and the impulse to possession—, which are expressed by three recurrent symbols: fire, wind, and general acts of breakage. In “Legend,” fire, which according to the same author, has a destructive and also purifying character, is the central symbol. Those who “face the fire,” who repeatedly (twice and twice again, as he says in the third stanza) undergo the tough learning of “this cleaving and this burning” are finally rewarded. But what is actually the reward?

Until the bright logic is won
unwhispering as a mirror
Is believed.

The reward is a “bright logic,” which, according to Uroff again, is a transcendent understanding of reality, the main objective of poetry. This bright logic will reveal reality as a mirror “is believed.” The last stanza confirms again that by the repeated suffering (drop by caustic drop) will result a “perfect cry”

that will produce a “constant harmony,” welcoming all those who “step the legend of their youth into the noon.”

The quest for a bright logic, as well as the methods of achieving it, which seem to be the leitmotif of the book, are both already presented here. In this sense, an almost “didactic” character is drawn from the book, Crane is there to point to the reader the way to achieve the “bright logic,” but the way he intends to do it is really that of a poet—his texts are not really didactic, but experiential: the bright logic might be achieved not by a logical reading of a logical text. Crane’s poetry rejects any attempt to this logic; one must experience his poems, struggle, and accept its challenges to achieve the desired logic.

In this poem it is also clear the “incarnation” of the “meaning” into the “presence” of the poem. The poetical self emphasizes that this “spending out” must be repetitively experienced. Likewise, the poem repeats and emphasizes, rather than develops, its motives. The main idea of the poem—the need of the repeated suffering to lead to knowledge—is repeated throughout the stanzas through different metaphors of different intensities, not actually discursively and progressively developed. Repetition is an important process in Crane’s poetry.

As we can remember, Ernest Smith believes that the first poems by Crane deal with men in a hostile world. This is not so clear in “Legend” actually, but it surely appears in the second poem of the book, “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.

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.

As we have seen, Crane said in a letter to Gorham Munson that the only merit he saw in this poem was its “tactile” quality, its aesthetics. What would be this “tactile” quality? Probably Crane is referring to the placing of images throughout the verses. We have a black man as a dominating symbol surrounded by the images of different animals (a roach, gnats, the flies in the last stanza). Aesop comes in the second stanza as an analogous character, surrounded by animals (again we see the repetition, reiteration and coordination in place of the discursive progression). The tambourine stands, according to Uroff, for the expressive powers of the black man, the artistic powers, which appear, in the poem, “stuck on the wall,” mute.

In the same letter to Munson, Crane said that the key word to this poem is “mid-kingdom,” for he explores the figure of the negro placed, as he says, “somewhere between man and beast.” (p.249) In the text, the mid-kingdom actually lies “between his tambourine, stuck on the wall, and, in Africa, a carcass quick with flies,” in other words, between his muted, useless expressive means of expression and his ancestry, dead (a carcass), in Africa.

The meaning is, then, presented mainly by the distribution of symbols in the body of the poem, as occurs in a painting. In “Garden Abstract” this idea becomes clearer:

The apple on its bough is her desire,
Shining suspension, mimic of the sun.
The bough has caught her breath up, and her voice,

Dumbly articulate in the slant and rise
Of branch on branch above her, blurs her eyes.
She is prisoner of the tree and its green fingers.

And so she comes to dream herself the tree,
The wind possessing her, weaving her young veins,
Holding her to the sky and its quick blue,
Drowning the fever of her hands in sunlight.
She has no memory, nor fear, nor hope
Beyond the grass and shadows at her feet.

This poem displays a clarity of image and language rarely found in Crane's work. If, as Edelman says, Crane's poetics is informed more by catachresis than metaphor, in this poem he seems to open space for the latter. It consists of one long metaphor operated by a series of similes. These similes are of a rare clarity in Crane's oeuvre. The syntax, more straightforward than usual, also concurs for the poem's relative accessibility.

Obviously the poem bears strong references both to the myth of Daphne as that of Eve in Paradise. What concerns me here is the construction and organization of it. It is noticeable that, describing a tree identified with a woman, Crane alludes to many elements of the tree (the fruit, branches, the grass at its bottom). If we compare the first and the last lines, we will see that they refer respectively to the top element of the tree (the one unreachable apple) and to the bottom of the tree (the shadows and grass at her feet), as if the poet were painting the figure of the tree in the body of the poem. The progression of the sentences is also in perfect accord with her transformation in the tree. In many sentences, an element of the tree is presented side by side with an

element pertaining to the woman, both physical and psychological, with the type of relation they bear to each other standing in the middle:

Apple -(is equal to)- desire

Bough -(has caught)- breath

Voice -(articulated by)- the moving of the branches

She -(dreams herself as being)- the tree

Wind -(weaves)- her veins

Memory, fear hope -(ends in)- grass and shadow at her feet

Smith places this poem in the group where “the focus shifts toward an increasing awareness of the indifferent, impersonal nature of the external universe.” Paul de Man (1985) reminds us that the Romantic imagination is characterized by an identification of mind and nature, where moral and emotional elements are projected from the person to nature (the poem to Shelley’s “Triumph of Life” is a striking example among many more). Symbolist poetry sometimes presents the opposite movement. One example is Rimbaud’s sonnet “Le Dormeur du Val,” where the description of a beautiful valley teeming with assorted plants is matched with the description of a young soldier who sleeps on the grass, until, in the last line, we discover that the soldier, expressionless, is actually dead. In this situation the human element (the soldier) is subordinated to nature. In Crane’s “Garden Abstract,” nature completely absorbs the humanity of the woman, to the point where her psychological features are limited to the tree (the apple is her desire, her hopes, memory, and fear go no further than what lies at the bottom of the tree).

VOYAGES

“Voyages” is probably the most ambitious of Crane’s lyrical achievements. Accordingly, it is frequently appointed by critics as a work in which Crane achieves a kind of integration of theme and vision which is often hard to find in his book. Waldo Frank suggests that, among the chaotic, abstract, and unclear lyrics that constitute *White Buildings*, “Voyages” represents a move toward a thematic synthesis. Ernest Smith seems to agree with that idea, noting that in this work, “Crane threads together the major tones and themes established by all preceding poems.” Joseph Warren Beach (1982) and Harold Bloom (1982) point to the paramount influence of *Moby Dick* in its construction, and the latter also compares it to Walt Whitman’s “As I Ebb’d with the Ocean of Life.”

The integrative character of the piece is actually, in my opinion, its construction and style. Crane displays in it his main characteristics, as his rich and textured language, with rare and archaic words as well as neologisms; an inventive and often obscure syntax; the use and exploration of traditional verse forms, such as the iambic pentameter; and the complex and ingenious use of rhetorical figures; his “addressings” to an implicit reader, among others. Moreover, many symbols that punctuate his lyrics are resumed here in their full strength. Its animism and the unusual placing of words, clearly based more on their emotional and sensorial qualities than in their logical meanings, make it perhaps the most privileged example of the “logic of metaphor.”

Crane considered it a “sea poem” and also a “love poem.” Inspired mainly by a love affair, “Voyages” is actually a series of six different, but

interconnected poems which were written separately for the most part, in different moments in Crane's life. Therefore, this love affair seems not to be the inspiration for the composition of the work, but actually a kind of emotional matrix that permitted Crane to unite works that were already being developed around one of the most significant images for Crane: the sea. R. W. B. Lewis (1967), inspired on a judgment by Gorham Munson, produces maybe the most precise definition of *Voyages*: a suite, "in the technical musical sense of a collection of songs on a common theme: or perhaps, cluster of themes—love and death, the sea, time and eternity, song itself and vision." (p. 150)

But more than anything, "Voyages" is a poetic work of almost unbelievable beauty. It was said before that in this suite Crane displays his main poetic characteristics. In addition to that, the main literary schools and individual authors he discusses with are here: it has the visionary imagery of Symbolism, the ornate and complex rhetoric of the Elizabethans, the animism and fusing of nature and human of the Romantics. Whitman, Rimbaud, Marlowe, Shelley, Blake, Melville and others of Crane's heroes are all present in it, as one of the most beautiful lines of the suite says, "close round one instant in one floating flower."

Voyages I

Above the fresh ruffles of the surf
Bright striped urchins flay each other with sand.
They have contrived a conquest for shell shucks,
And their fingers crumble fragments of baked weed
Gaily digging and scattering.

The first stanza of the poem presents us a typical *locus amoenus*: on the shore, children play with the sand, shells, and weed. The innocence and safety this scene suggests will be of major importance for the development of the poem.

And in answer to their treble interjections
The sun beats lightning on the waves,
The waves fold thunder on the sand;
And could they hear me I would tell them:

Here I must rely on Edelman's comments. As he says, these four lines reveal a perfectly chiasmic pattern: the first and the fourth lines refer to the act of addressing the kids who play—in the first nature responds to them, in the fourth it is the poet that reveals his desire, unachievable, to answer to them; the two lines are also coordinated by the conjunction "and." The second and third lines, which describe nature's answer, are also coordinated by the article "the," confirming the correlation between them.

Edelman also warns us that this stanza presents for the first time the interplay between sky and sea, which will recur as a major element of the suite. Actually the interplay presented here is not double, but triple. If we consider that the shining message the sun sends to the sea is delivered by the waves to the sand, then we have an interplay of sky, sea, and earth. The children are on the earth, this is fundamental, for the earth attends here as the "human" element. The sky is inaccessible, the sea is mysterious and not fit for human living. Earth here symbolizes life, ordinary human living, which is seen as safe. The sea, as we will see, is connected to death and love, horrifyingly dangerous but irresistible. And the sky is unreachable, dialoguing only with the sea, and it is through the sea that this majestic unreachable element can become significant to human being. If we think that the sea here is a metaphor for love (and death), we are not too far away from Plato, for whom love was the "genius" connecting human existence (earth) to the world of ideas (sky).

O brilliant kids, frisk with your dog,
Fondle your shells and sticks, bleached
By time and the elements; but there is a line
You must not cross nor ever trust beyond it
Spry cordage of your bodies to caresses

Too lichen-faithful from too wide a breast.

The bottom of the sea is cruel.

The poet addresses the children, warning them to avoid the risks they will inevitably take. The sexual connotations of these images has been appointed by many commentators.

Voyages II

—And yet this great wink of eternity,
Of rimless floods, unfettered leewardings,
Samite sheeted and processioned where
Her undinal vast belly moonward bends,
Laughing the wrapt inflections of our love;

The critics unanimously draw attention to the syntactic continuity between the end of the first poem and the beginning of the second: the bottom of the sea is cruel, and yet... The concessive conjunction “yet” here shows that what will be further presented is in contradiction to what has been said before. There is also a particularity to this “And yet”: as a subordinating conjunction, it should introduce a clause, and a clause obviously needs a verb with tense. If we examine the syntactic units that constitute the first stanza, we see that none of them can function as a predicate for the subject “this great wink of eternity.” What we have here is a series of appositive elements. If we keep on through the rest of the poem we see that this pattern of presenting of images is predominant. In other words, the whole poem functions as a complement to the concessive conjunction. This is an example of syntactic violation with expressive quality. Moreover, the appositive character of the whole poem, where successive images rock against the reader’s eye, combined with the slow

rhythm of Crane's idiosyncratic iambic pentameter, succeeds in producing a sensation analogous to the motion of the waves.

The first image is amazing: the smallness of a wink is insulated, surrounded by the vastness of "great" on one side and "eternity" on the other. In its greatness, the sea is just a small portion of the eternity that waits after death. Second and third lines point respectively to the wild (rimless, unfettered) and noble (samite sheeted) nature of the sea, besides presenting also a ritualistic image in the procession. The sea is samite sheeted and processioned, i.e. royal and sacred, where "her undinal vast belly moonward bends." Who is "her"? The sea, obviously, that presents itself here as a goddess, whose belly, pregnant with water spirits (undines), bends toward the sky, in an animistic fantasy. Notice also that in the first section the sea related to the daylight sky (the sun), now in the second it is under the nightly sky (the moon). For this goddess, human love seems laughably confusing.

Take this Sea, whose diapason knells
On scrolls of silver snowy sentences,
The sceptred terror of whose sessions rends
As her demeanors motion well or ill,
All but the pieties of lovers' hands.

The imperative "Take this sea" is mysterious. For Edelman, it is an invitation to sexual transgression directed to a lover; Uroff, on the other hand, sees that as a realization of what she terms Crane's impulse to possession; Eric Selinger (1991) sees in it "a gesture towards stability." (p. 93) In any sense, it is a gesture of domination toward the sea. What all critics seem to agree with is that the addressings are directed toward a human lover. The knelling of the diapason over the "scrolls of silver snowy sentences" is a synaesthetic incidence of a musical, auditory element over a visual and discursive one. In this stanza we see also the powerful, violent, and terrifying aspect of the sea, whose domains include everything but love. The expression "well or ill" with its mirroring liquid consonants reinforces the analogy with the motion of the waves pointed before.

And onward, as bells off San Salvador
Salute the crocus lustres of the stars,
In these poinsettia meadows of her tides,—
Adagios of islands, O my Prodigal,
Complete the dark confessions her veins spell.

The crocus lustres of the stars provide the perfect visual equivalence to the ethereal sounds of the bells in San Salvador, which according to Lewis (p. 157), refers to a legendary sunken city.

Adagios of islands, O my Prodigal

The famous line Crane picked up as an example of his associational practice. In his “General Aims and Theories,” as we have already seen, these Adagios of islands refer to the slow movements of boats through thickly clustered islands. Here they function as another important element of music in the functioning of the sea. The dark confessions of the last line echo the silver snowy sentences of the previous stanza. The sea’s communication can be both white, clear and cold; and dark, confessional, and visceral.

Mark how her turning shoulders wind the hours,
And hasten while her penniless rich palms
Pass superscription of bent foam and wave,—
Hasten, while they are true,—sleep, death, desire,
Close round one instant in one floating flower.

This stanza is another invitation to the lover. Now he is warned to hurry, the hours wind through the goddess’s shoulders, foam and wave will not last forever. The two last lines can be a perfect metaphor for poetry itself. Sleep, death desire, three realms of abstraction, can be enclosed in one small and frail flower, just as poetry concentrate the vast and abstract into the brief and concrete.

Bind us in time, O Seasons clear, and awe.

O minstrel galleons of Carib fire,
Bequeath us to no earthly shore until
Is answered in the vortex of our grave
The seal's wide spindrift gaze toward paradise.

Finally, in the last stanza, the sea is associated to death. Here the poet asks the Carib fire not to deliver him and his lover to the earth before the mystery of death is answered. The last line also has an interesting mirroring effect with the first line of this lyric. The wink of the beginning reflects itself in the gaze of the last line.

Voyages III

Infinite consanguinity it bears—
This tendered theme of you that light
Retrieves from sea plains where the sky
Resigns a breast that every wave enthrones;
While ribboned water lanes I wind
Are laved and scattered with no stroke
Wide from your side, whereto this hour
The sea lifts, also, reliquary hands.

If "Voyages II" is marked by the tension between the comely/maternal and the horrifying/tyrannical facets of the sea, pointing to an anguished doubt about death and destiny, "Voyages III" is a theme of love conquered, revelation and peace. In the end of the previous poem we see the poet wondering about death, here we see him involved in a tender poetic/musical rendering of the loved one. The theme he refers to is, I think, on the one hand, the poem being read, or, on the other, a synecdoche for poetry itself, which shares its nature with infinity, eternity. The "theme," "the poem," or more generally "poetry" is actually

The poet is admitted through the black mysterious gates. The blackness of these gates and the darkness of the sea's confessions seem to me no coincidence; the confessions, the secrets of the sea, are dark. Here penetrating the black threatening gates, the poet is admitted in the sea's innermost realms. Contrasting with the blackness of the gates through which the poet was accepted, the place he discovers now is beautiful, adorned by graceful pillars and pediments, and extremely bright, where light, stars, and waves relate with themselves. The actions attributed to the light and the stars (symbols that have already appeared), wrestling and kissing, seem to illustrate both the violent and the tender facets of the act of love (or sex). In this holy place death is also not violence, but transformation. The poet seems to find an integration of love and death, the result of which can only be joyful. The two lines before the last one display Crane's alliterative sonority which reinforces the overall duplicity of the section (the alternating use of italics and underlined letters are to divide the different pairs of sounds):

Upon the steep floor flung from dawn to dawn
The silken skilled transmemberment of song;

In the first of the lines above, besides the alliterations in "p" and "f" (which are already paired as voiceless labiodentals), there is the alternation of liquids in identical phonetic contexts (floor and from) and obviously the pairing of dawn with dawn. The second of these lines is undoubtedly one of the most beautiful verses Crane wrote. Phonetically, the pair of adjectives "silken skilled," in their mirroring sounds, glide and really dance in the ear of the reader; the neologism "transmemberment," as Augusto de Campos (2006) says, collapses into the word "song." Semantically, it sums up the whole movement of the lyric, the song throughout *Voyages III* is transmembered, transmuted, as the poet and his lover in the revelation they underwent.

Finally the last line shows the poet serenely asking permission to voyage in love's hands (would those be the same "reliquary hands" the sea lifts in the end of the first stanza?).

Taken successively, these three poems present a perfect movement from doubt to discovery, from infancy to maturity. In the first poem the harmlessness of the *locus amoenus* paired with the innocence of the children's play symbolize a safe though naïve life, a life that is content to stay in the safety of the sand and does not want to enter the menacing, mysterious realm of the sea/love. In the second poem, we are no longer on safe ground, we are inside the sea with all its beauty and terror, discovering the ephemeral character of love, which will be ended with the whirling towards death. In the third poem, the poet discovers that this ephemeral love, when "transmembered" into song, into art, actually bears an "infinite consanguinity." More secure now, in possession of his creative powers, he is able to wind the sea's lanes and penetrate her black swollen gates, being admitted in a place where death no longer means the end of love, but actually a transformation. He ends addressing no longer the lover, but love itself.

Along with this movement we see a repetition of symbols, as the light and the hands. The light, appearing in the first poem and in the last is clearly an active being; it answers to the children, it retrieves a theme from the sea, and it wrestles with itself. The hands are connected to holiness and acceptance in "the pieties of lover's hands," the reliquary hands the sea lifts, and the hands of love, where the poet wants to voyage. In the fourth poem the movement reverses. I think we can stop our voyage here, at least temporarily.

CONCLUSION

The close reading of a poem through its meaning and presence, its immaterial and material elements, is a very productive and rewarding task. The cooperation of these dimensions is what characterizes poetry in any age. However, it is undeniable that in many modern poets, the formal, material elements seem to take the forefront.

The problems posed by Hart Crane's oeuvre seem to be an especially intense presentation of issues common to the whole of modern poetry. The disintegration of intellectual systems that Tate had referred to is a characteristic of modernity, an issue to which poets writing in these times could not escape. This disintegration leads to questioning possible forms of symbolization and representation of reality by the human consciousness as well as its relation to language. Responsible and intelligent poets like Eliot, Tate, and Crane were aware of these problems as central in their production and found different paths for their elucidation.

Eliot and Tate resorted to Christian values as a reaction to modern spiritual decadence, trying to find a pathway back to religious experience in their poetic and critical works. Crane, adopting what he saw as a more positive attitude, welcomed modern experience, however chaotic it seemed, and saw in it a possible source of new spiritual events and experiences to be explored and presented by the poet to readers. As we could see, he was perfectly aware that his investigations of these yet unknown areas of spiritual and conscious experience would inevitably lead to difficulties in his poetry. He truly believed, however, that these difficulties were worth facing.

To a Christian and traditional critic as Allen Tate, Crane's sophisticated aesthetics seemed to cover dead abstraction under sensorial experience. The spiritual background of his work, although never denied by Tate, seemed to lie in what the critic saw as an "implicit pantheism."

My hypothesis in this work was that, following Crane's theories and recent literary investigations discussed before, an insight into this implicit pantheism, as Tate called it, or into the spiritual foundations of Crane's work, could be reached by examining the aesthetic construction of his poems, the organization and presentation of sensorial symbols throughout the text's surface, as well as a pantheist (to use Tate's expression) will search for the presence of God (or the gods) spread through all material things, instead of trying to discover it in an immaterial reality. As we have seen, Gumbrecht identifies this tendency of thought with what he names the presence paradigm, in which meanings are not hidden inside material things, but actually present in their material existence. Edelman, in analyzing Crane's rhetoric and syntax, points toward the same direction. Edelman's critical views (and the ones adopted in this work) are actually in no contradiction with Tate's opinions.

The poetry of Hart Crane is challenging because it forces us, in order to fully experience it and win its "bright logic," to read in a different manner than the one we are used to. In his poetry, words are energized up to the point that they overflow their own meaning and logic. In face of this challenge, we can either dismiss this poetry as an incoherent product of a late romantic sensibility, or accept it to see what its obscure paths hold for us in the end. I hope that this paper can provide an encouragement, for those who read it, to go on and face this challenge.

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