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Clive Fisher. *Hart Crane: A Life*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002.  
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This is a wonderful book for anyone who is interested in American poetry of the early twentieth century. Fisher has documented the life of Hart Crane in the most meticulous detail: it is as if we know, mainly from the voluminous correspondence, every time Crane picked up a book, a pen, a glass, or a sailor. Yet at the same time the narrative miraculously maintains a clear sense of direction as it sweeps us through the poet's history, flowing from his forebears to his nuclear family, from youth to achievement to the disintegration that the biography foreshadows from its beginning. The effect, through, rather than in spite of, the masses of detail, is panoramic as the poet's drive to exploit and actualize his gifts propels him toward catastrophe as inevitable, Fisher suggests, as any in Greek drama.

Crane was born in 1899 and grew up with the twentieth century and all its promises and threats. Fisher begins with the historical backgrounds of the Cranes and the Harts and situates the poet in relation to the two families in their Middle Western background and specifically in relation to the turbulent marriage that overshadowed his childhood and the conflicts between his parents and between them and him from which he was never able to escape, although late in his life he and his father managed to enjoy a period of reconciliation. There is a detailed account of Crane's thorough, eclectic, and idiosyncratic lifelong self-education, in spite of which he always felt anxiety among the university graduates who were his literary associates, although it may have strengthened his alliances with the sailors to whom he was drawn.

Crane was both an outsider and an insider among his fellow outsiders because of his sexual predilections and because of his determination to be an artist in commercial America. At eleven Crane looked at the volumes of poetry on the shelves of his Aunt Alice, who taught him piano, and said: "This is going to be my vocation. I'm going to be a poet" (19). Fisher has given us an extensive and detailed account of the literary and artistic circles that Crane frequented in New York, Cleveland, Paris, and Mexico. The book will be helpful to readers interested in all those worlds in the 1920s, in Waldo Frank, Malcolm Cowley, Yvor Winters, Allen Tate, Harry and Caresse Crosby, Marsden Hartley, Roy Campbell, and David Siqueiros. The cast of characters is so vast that it is hard to keep track of it. The index is a great help.

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Crane's loneliness and isolation and his incessant need for care and cash endlessly impelled him toward others, but he was an intolerably inconsiderate guest and a formidable financial risk. People who knew him likened Crane to "a mad howling dervish" (404), a hurricane (401), a tornado (219), an "erupting volcano" (479), and "a youngster who has been making a nuisance of himself and felt badly about it" (468). Sooner or later self-protection constrained the friends whom he drew to him and who wanted to help him to turn him away. One exception was Aunt Sally Simpson, immortalized in "The River," who looked after Crane during a highly productive summer on the Isle of Pines in 1926. She gave him the kind of maternal support of which his own mother was incapable, and maybe any other mere mortal might have been incapable too. In fact only Crane's departure from Cuba may have preserved Aunt Sally's relentless loyalty.

Fisher situates a number of poems, for instance "Voyages," "The Tower," and the lyrics that make up *The Bridge*, in their biographical context and uses that context to illuminate Crane's verbal mosaics. Of course interpretation is always a speculative enterprise, and the nature of Crane's writing makes interpretation even more speculative than it normally is. Along with others, Crane consistently violates lexical and syntactical laws, and it's not surprising that he was unable ever to acquire the use of a second language and, in spite of his travels, remained an "incurable monoglot" (396), one of the many endearing attributes that situate him in his American background, although at one point he optimistically considered supporting himself by translation from Spanish and French (356). Fisher connects Crane's notorious obscurity with a need for concealment within and from his family:

to read many of Hart Crane's mature poems is to apprehend some truth or sense that lies beyond explicit utterance. This reticence is integral to the elusive beauty of his lyrics but it also functions as a reminder of the early world the poet knew, a world where parental actions were unsettling as well as bewildering and where explanations, if supplied, seemed to leave a lot unsaid. (15)

Crane aspired to a form "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" (122). He awaited inspiration: "Oh! it is hard! One must be drenched in words, literally soaked with them to have the right ones form themselves into the proper pattern at the right moment" (136-37).

To do so requires time, and earning a living was an intractable problem for Crane, whose practical and successful father wrote to him poignantly: "If your writing could only be a side line, a sort of pleasure to be taken up in the evening ... if you would only think of it just as men play golf, then I would see things differently" (211). Crane's boyhood friend and creditor William Wright suggested

that Crane support himself by teaching (436), as had Winters, but the option wasn't available to a high school dropout (324).

Fisher writes of Crane with the greatest sympathy and manages to avoid being drawn into the poet's emotional maelstrom by balancing his sympathy with a cool irony and detachment that keep the biography balanced and contribute to the sense of an inexorable trajectory that holds its complexities together. He comments for instance of "Recitative" that "if Tate was unable to understand the poem, at least its author could console himself with the thought that his parents would never grasp it either" (204), and later that "it was dull to think of sitting in a library, especially when he could carouse around Mexico City with a newly befriended drunk" (455). The poems are the major events of the life, and *The Bridge* is its climax as a life that was much too short and peaked much too early in a pattern that, in Fisher's account, fuses the intricacies of life and those of art. ✨