PREFACE

"Of the poets who came into prominence during the 1930's in America, none is more likely to achieve an immortality than Harold Hart Crane." So write Horace Gregory and Marya Zaturenska in their recent, authoritative *History of American Poetry*. The extraordinary quality of Crane's poetry and the tense drama of his brief life make such an observation valid and inevitable. It is amply supported in an indirect sense by the amount of devoted attention which Crane has received in the twenty years since his death by drowning in 1932. Waldo Frank's edition of the *Collected Poems* appeared in 1933. The first full-length book on Crane, Philip Horton's *Hart Crane*, came in 1937. Eleven years later, in 1948, the editor's *Hart Crane* was published. Meanwhile, magazines, anthologies, and critical volumes have given substantial space and consideration to the poet.

It seems fitting then, and necessary too, that the correspondence of this outstanding writer be presented now. Crane's letters exist in scattered condition: some in magazines, others in the appendices of books, still more in libraries and private collections. Many have already been lost, because of carelessness, wartime events, or other factors. But apart from such matters as preservation and compilation, there are the human revelations and literary merits which distinguish Crane's letters and make this collection desirable. Seldom has a man laid his heart bare as does Crane in these documents, seldom with the passion and skill which he so masterfully infused into his poetry as well. It seems undoubted that many of these letters will before long find their way into anthologies of great letters and prose.

The large quantity of letters written by Crane may be ascribed in part to the geographical gulf which separated him from those to whom he believed he could honestly announce his thoughts, emotions, and meaningful experiences. As soon as it became possible to

enjoy closer contact with once-distant friends, he stopped writing to them. Thus scores of letters were sent to Gorham Munson from November 1919 to the early spring of 1923, at which time Crane joined Mr. and Mrs. Munson in New York. Thereafter, few letters were received by Mr. Munson, except in rare instances when either of the two men had left the city, or when Crane had an urgent need for communication which could not be satisfied with speech. In the case of friends like Slater Brown and Malcolm Cowley, where friendship was initiated and continued with social intercourse hardly ever broken by physical separation, only a handful of letters exist as a result.

As happens with some of us, many letters were the perfunctory expressions of a sense of obligation. An explanation of this character must often be assigned to a series of letters written to one person, or to a particular letter. It is as mundane sometimes as insistence by the poet's mother that he write her several times a week and make sure to send her a special delivery letter timed to reach her punctually each Sunday morning. In this class, too, must be placed those letters occasioned by Crane's failure to pay a debt, his desire to make amends for a squabble, and similar causes.

But far more compelling than distance or propriety as the dominant force behind Crane's prolific composition of letters was an emotional impulse which drove him to discharge so much expressive energy in a non-poetic form: his acquisitive need for sympathy, pity, understanding, affection . . . a need accompanied by the belief that these responses could be evoked with a persuasive explanation in words. Let us not confuse this poignant situation with dishonesty or a huckster's fraudulency. Crane was, after all, a poet to whom language was paramount. The outcome was that even those of his letters which had been intended as geographical bridges, or as duties, speedily found themselves converted into detailed and uninhibited recitations and exhortations. Examining the letters to his mother in this light, to choose one instance, we can understand why, despite the profound mutual misunderstanding of which each was aware, Crane persisted in alternately cajoling, threatening, and informing a basically-unresponsive correspondent.

The resultant rich character of Crane's letters, in terms of factual data and emotional subtleties, has enveloped them with a completeness calling for little amplification or clarification in the form of notes. These have consequently been held to a minimum. When Crane, for example, announces a decision, he bathes it in such a sea of rationalization and background that its origins, its validity, and

its likely conclusion are all too evident to the reader. One is, indeed, encouraged to speculate whether the tremendous amount of energy involved in the production of so vast a profusion of details for even the most trivial of communications did not drain away some of the feeling and thought that might more happily have been incorporated in poems.

Strangely enough, however, it is apparent that the quantity and quality of Crane's letters were not negatively, but positively related to his poetic output. A correlation of the letters with the history of Crane's productivity reveals that it was precisely during periods of great poetic fertility and well-being that his most evocative and profound letters were composed. An illustration of this symbiotic relationship between the poetry and the prose, surely a phenomenon which demonstrates how organic and deep-seated was the urge for literary expression animating him, is the remarkable series of letters written to Gorham Munson between 1919 and 1923, when Crane perfected his control of a mature, individual language and music and composed some of his most striking lyrics. The highly-charged group of letters which Crane sent off to Waldo Frank from the Isle of Pines in 1926, while so feverishly engaged in molding several brilliant sections of *The Bridge*, is another relevant example.

The self-sufficiency of Crane's letters has made it less disappointing for the editor to be unable to include correspondence addressed to him, or to make extracts from it, as a complementary balance and check. Because of Crane's peripatetic career, letters he received were left behind in the boarding houses, steamship cabins, and hotels wherein he spent his days. A more drastic reduction in the number of remaining letters was apparently accomplished by his impetuous habit of destroying letters from people with whom he had severed relationships on an unfriendly note. Finally, the irregular and careless storing and handling of Crane's papers after his death has had its own inevitable results.

The responsibility to be exercised in the task of organizing the letters of a tempestuous and controversial man like Hart Crane, is as much a matter of human judgment as it is a familiarity with the canons of scholarship. Crane conformed less, overtly at least, to the dominant mores of his age than probably any of his contemporaries. The leitmotif was restless deviation—whether aesthetic, social, religious, or sexual. The record of his days vibrates with an explosive terror and repose—elated, wretched, violent, Rabelaisian—which find dynamic outlet in his letters. Insofar as Crane's letters will serve to develop a self-portrait and contribute toward an understanding of

three decades of our American past, no harm can be accomplished by a forthright presentation.

The editor, therefore, has not suppressed any portions of Crane's letters which might disturb the genteel or excite the prurient. Those who have studied Crane's poetry with perception know how richly studded it is with the imagery, symbolism, and themes of love. As this preface was being put into final form, the editor received a copy of Dr. Paul Friedman's "The Bridge: A Study in Symbolism" (*The Psychoanalytic Quarterly*, Jan. 1952). After discussing such writers as Wilder and Kafka, Dr. Friedman, one of the few psychoanalysts who displays a genuine concern for literary values, goes on to say: "It implies no irreverence toward Crane's poetic sensibility to introduce these [psychological] concepts. The sexual imagery in his poetry is overt, undisguised." Of the "Voyages" series, Dr. Friedman writes: "Here the psychoanalyst could hardly be more explicit than Crane himself." Under no circumstances could the wealth of background experience and emotion which produced the alternately-pessimistic and ecstatic love poems of Crane conscientiously be omitted from a volume of his letters. One of the great love-poets of our time, few men have been so tyrannically governed by a chronic need to love and be loved. One need only observe in these letters how Crane's disinterest in poetry and his torpid creativity after 1929 were affected by a new and surprising love relationship. Miraculously rejuvenated, as it were, he wrote "The Broken Tower," one of his best poems.

The course of a man's life is inextricably linked with his fellows. For Crane in particular, relationships with other people were among the most weighty problems with which he had to cope. The letters uncover a pattern of tragic and repetitive failure which cannot help but influence our response to his statements about men and women. As one views the past with the advantage of hindsight, the fact is inescapable that almost everyone with whom Crane had close contact eventually became estranged from him in greater or lesser degree, though from a distance they may have continued to admire certain of his qualities. This held true for his literary as well as non-literary associates. All too often, it was Crane's vigorous egocentricity, his self-destructive behavior, which impelled a shocked and helpless friend to seek protective cover, to avoid Crane as gracefully as possible. Yet, far more frequently, those who drifted within Crane's orbit became the unwitting centers of emotional dramas in which fantasy was as powerful a constituent as reality. The fantastic dis-

tortion which blurred some people for Crane must be attributed to his insecurity, his sexual inversion, his resentment against those who could or did help him, his alcoholism, his paranoiac misrepresentation of motives and events, his hysterical existence . . . in short, to the complex of neuroses which finally burgeoned forth during the last year of his life into what was probably a full-scale psychopathic state. Of course, this does not deny that Crane was probably also the victim of envy, misunderstanding, and distaste for his poetry and personality.

With these considerations as a guide, the editor has not thought it necessary to delete those of Crane's comments which reflect unfavorably upon the works or persons of artists or other public figures, especially where such comments are balanced elsewhere in the letters by favorable remarks. History, in any event, does not take kindly to being expurgated or twisted for special purposes, no matter how laudable the intention. The editor has been encouraged in his respect for honesty and frankness by Gorham Munson, Editor of Hermitage House, who has interposed no stipulations although he figures prominently in a variety of ways in the letters. The procedure has been different if it seemed that Crane's observations would psychologically or socially harm any living person or the close surviving relatives of a dead man. In such cases, and they have been few, either the offensive material, or names and data which might identify an individual, were omitted.

A few words of caution about some of the conclusions to be drawn from the letters are in place. The editor has expanded space and tried his publisher's spirit, in order to include every important letter. But he has, of course, selected. Therefore, no ultimate conclusions, particularly those involving the personalities of Crane's contemporaries or the nuances of relationships, are implied by the arrangement which follows.

Further, the poetry of Hart Crane ought not to be hastily judged by his life or letters, though the latter should no doubt be studied to support an understanding and appreciation of the poetry. Art is not subservient to the man; it has a life of its own which may be related but never subordinated. For example, the Brooklyn Bridge as conception and poem will be seen to have occupied a compulsive position in Crane's experience and thought. Granted that *The Bridge* was a failure as a unified, major epic; this should not lead us to conclude that Crane failed as a poet too, even though he did not succeed as a latter-day Dante or Virgil. Various sections of *The Bridge* are individually magnificent; in addition, Crane wrote other

poems before, during, and after his work on *The Bridge* which suffice to give him first rank among contemporary poets. Nor should we, at the same time, assume that Crane's poetic gift was gone because he said so, or because he didn't write much in his last years. "The Broken Tower" was completed little more than a month before he died in the Caribbean Sea. With only one such poem to his credit, a poet would deserve and gain the immortality predicted for Crane. Finally, Crane was admittedly not a thinker, rather a creative being who depended on sensation, intuition, taste. It would be unwise to characterize his poetry as valueless expression simply because he was neither a logician nor a pundit preoccupied, sensibly or otherwise, with questions of ideology and systematic knowledge. In his own valid and fruitful manner, Crane illuminated recesses of the human mind and heart with pregnant clarity.

The editor has prepared a chronology of Crane's life and works. The last chapter in the Crane biography occurred in 1947. On July 30th of that year, Mrs. Grace Hart Crane, the poet's mother, died in Teaneck, New Jersey. Before her death, she told Samuel Loveman that she wished to be cremated and her ashes to be cast into the East River from the Brooklyn Bridge. The necessary arrangements were made, and the editor was one of a small party which proceeded along Brooklyn Bridge on a windy, sunlit afternoon in Fall 1947. At intervals on the Bridge, there are signs warning pedestrians not to throw anything from the structure. By the time the party reached the center of the Bridge, considerable trepidation existed about the feasibility of respecting Mrs. Crane's last wishes. It remained at last for the editor to grasp the small, undecorated tin can and shake the ashes into the air, where they swirled about for a few moments and then fell mistily into the water below. Thus Crane's mother joined him in the element which had claimed him fifteen years earlier.

Crane's father had died in the Summer of 1931, bringing to an end a similarly complex relationship with his son. Though each bore a great and genuine love for the other, there is little doubt that the divorce of his parents in 1917 tended to separate father from son. Mrs. Crane's proximity, her emotional nature and her evaluation of her ex-husband's motives and actions, made it impossible for Crane to suspend himself impartially between both parents as he wished. Instead, he swam into the aura of his mother's beliefs and reactions. The resulting alienation from his father was not fully surmounted until almost a decade later, for it was not until then that each man grew reconciled to the other's personality and values. However, it seems unwarranted, if one can say so on the basis of

their extensive correspondence, to perpetuate Crane's own misconceptions of the older man's values and attitudes in relation to his son prior to 1927. From an early date, the elder Crane was apparently profoundly interested in his son's choice of a literary career and anxious to have him prepare for it. During 1916 and 1917, for example, he pressed insistently for Hart to enter college, so that the latter might obtain the educational background expected to assist him in functioning as a writer. Although the elder Crane had only studied for a few years at Alleghany College, he had no contempt for education or culture such as marks some self-made practical men. When Hart refused to attend college, Mr. Crane recognized no realistic alternative for his son other than adjustment to the business world and development of his poetic life as an adjunct of his mercantile life. From a non-romantic point of view, Mr. Crane was unfortunately justified. Even in our advanced age, most full-time poets unsupported by private incomes, relatives, or philanthropic gifts either cease writing poetry at all or become embittered producers of occasional pieces. Perhaps Mr. Crane should have supported Hart from his adolescence onward with an allowance sufficient to enable him to write poetry and do nothing else. The moral and psychological results of such beneficence are mixed and problematical. In any event, his young son's early poetry did not yet reveal the merit which would have called forth a clamorous and effective acclaim to which Mr. Crane might have acceded; furthermore, Mr. Crane did not stem from a wealthy aristocracy to whom a life of cultured leisure is natural rather than phenomenal. Finally, the immediate outward signs of Mr. Crane's success were somewhat illusory; his business enterprises partook of the overblown quality of 1920-ish prosperity, and were underlaid with an insecurity not conducive to the assumption of a unique personal and financial responsibility. Once Mr. Crane recognized the impossibility of shaping his son's values, once he accepted the fact that Hart was (as he not unkindly wrote him) a poetic "vagabond," he generously supplied him with money to the best of his ability and understanding, continually offered him the security of his home, and ultimately left him a large cash bequest and an annual allowance that would have sustained his son under normal circumstances.

Crane was in great part responsible for creating the time-worn legend of a hard-hearted father. During the years from 1917 to 1925, less so afterward, he wrote or informed countless friends of the brutality of his father's behavior, his lack of kindness and generosity, and the suffering this caused. Yet it was during these years that

Crane was most uncompromising, patronizing, intransigent, prone to distortion of his father's image. The correspondence between them, not all of which is included here, is a tragic record of misunderstanding for which neither is to be adjudged guilty. It shows that they were temperamentally alike in many ways: in their humor, their warmth of spirit, their reckless pride, their strong need for freedom.

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The letters have been assembled chiefly from original manuscripts, as well as microfilm and photostat copies, generously made available by their recipients, libraries, and collectors. Herbert Weinstock and William Wright furnished typed copies of letters to them; Samuel Loveman gave typed letters to William Sommer. The editor has been able to examine the papers of Crane and his mother; these provided Crane's own carbon copies of typewritten letters to his father, Otto H. Kahn, Yvor Winters, Edgell Rickword, Thomas Seltzer, and his stepmother . . . letters to his mother and grandmother . . . typed copies of several letters to his father and stepmother. Despite the hazards of transcribing manuscript, the editor has striven to attain maximum faithfulness to the original.

The major portion of the letters were obtained by the editor when he collected material for his book on Crane. Since then, he has made every reasonable effort to collect additional letters from people to whom Crane might have revealed himself fully and uniquely. The result is an edition which makes available the letters evoked by Crane's most important literary and personal relationships.

As a general rule, only those letters which are routine in nature, of little general interest, or which deal with subjects more intensively and significantly treated in other letters, were excluded. In this connection, it is pertinent to note that it was Crane's habit, when he wrote several people at about the same time, to write the same things in almost identical phraseology to each of his correspondents. This has made it necessary to delete portions of letters as repetitious. Another feature of Crane's letter-writing has required some editorial excision. Though he wrote lengthily and often, his letters were usually prefaced and closed with excuses for writing briefly and infrequently. These apologies are corollaries of his insatiable desire for affection and his fear of hostility. Though he acknowledges their psychological meaning, the editor has acted on the assumption that an excess of such material is bound to distract the reader from more valuable sections. He has accordingly deleted most of it, together with conventional greetings, regards, and other closes, though a few

letters were left intact so that the flavor of Crane's apologetics might be communicated.

The editor has strengthened the punctuation, corrected obvious slips of the pen and the spelling of names and words when there seemed no advantage to letting them remain as Crane hastily set them down, supplied dates and addresses for letters which did not bear them or were incorrectly headed, italicized names of books and periodicals, enclosed titles of poems, etc., in quotation marks, and made a few insertions to supply missing words or to explain initials. Brackets indicate the editor's insertions; omissions of 1-25 words are shown with — — — —, omissions of over 25 words with —/—/; names deleted except for initials are given as J—, though Crane often used initials himself. Recurrent details were reduced to uniformity by placing address and date on left and right respectively, allowing no indentations at the opening, and transferring all postscripts at top or side to the end.

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