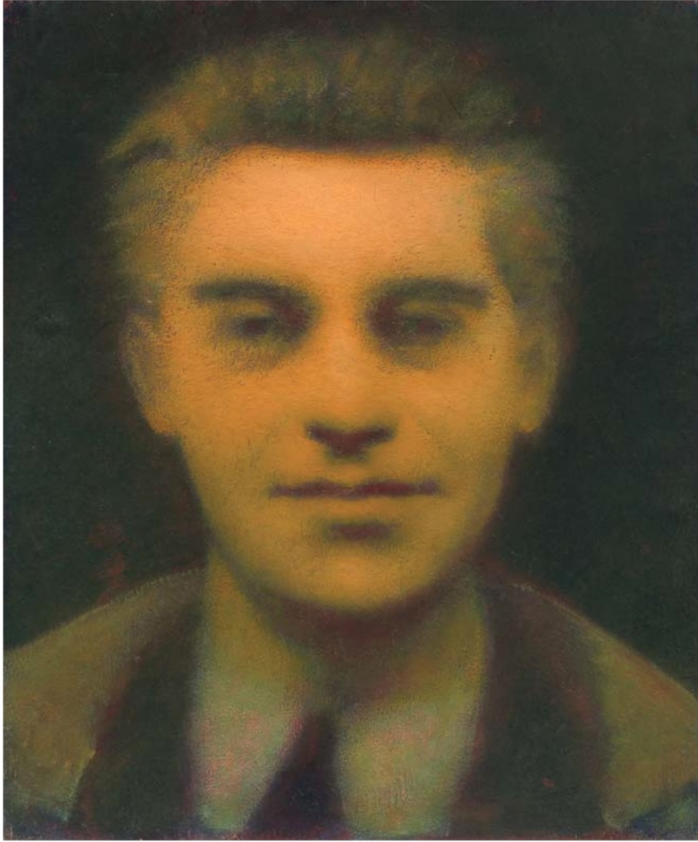

PORTRAIT



HART CRANE
by Carl Schmitt (1889–1989)
After 1917
Oil on metal support
National Portrait Gallery,
Smithsonian Institution; gift of the
Carl Schmitt Foundation

Hart Crane 1899–1933

In 1917, Harold H. Crane fled his parents' disintegrating Ohio home, and his especially acrimonious relationship with his businessman father, for New York City. He attempted to find work and create a life for himself. His early years in Manhattan were tenuous and he frequently had to return to the Midwest when his money ran out, drawn back into the parental orbit that he was trying to escape. In New York he developed relationships with adult mentors, parental substitutes if you will, who served as teachers and guides to the young poet. One among them was a twenty-seven-year-old artist/intellectual named Carl Schmitt (not to be confused with the Nazi jurist of the same name) who took Crane under his wing after being introduced to the aspiring poet by Crane's culturally inclined aunt. Schmitt was Crane's tutor in modernism and Crane quickly developed a dependent relationship on the older man; Schmitt recalls how he sometimes dodged Crane's visits when he became too needy. Nonetheless, Schmitt played an essential role in Crane's transition from Harold to Hart, from unformed aspiring Midwestern writer to Whitman's heir as the most ecstatic

American poet of the modern city.

Late in life Schmitt, who went on to have a minor but interesting career as an artist and writer, painted this portrait of Crane, depicting the writer as he appeared in his late twenties, after he had established himself, and not as the callow teenager whom he had first met in 1916. The painting owes something to the work of the German artist Gerhard Richter who did portraits, based on photographs, in which the likeness is fogged over, becoming indistinct and mysterious. Schmitt's reasons for adopting this technique for his memory-portrait of Crane are unknown. It may be inferred that he was suggesting the mysteriousness of Crane's personality, especially when viewed through the lens of his suicide. The portrait leads us away from the man and back to his poetry through which

it was I entered the broken world
To trace the visionary company of love, its voice
An instant in the wind...

DAVID C. WARD