

HART CRANE

HART CRANE:  
A STUDY OF  
THE BRIDGE

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## INTRODUCTION.

We can begin a study of Hart Crane's The Bridge by an examination of his poetics. However obscure they may appear to be to decipher, his various statements do present a consistent attitude to the nature of poetry; and as we shall see, what Crane considered it possible for poetry to do, his faith in the powers of poetic language, is very much relevant to the understanding of his major poem.

It has always been granted that Crane pressed his medium to the limits, if not beyond the limits, of its capacities. He ignored the syntactical, though not usually the grammatical, forms of language and defended the practice by an appeal to what he called "the logic of metaphor". In fact, to trace the development of Crane's poetic style, the making of his characteristic idiom, is to trace his growing faith in the connotative and metaphorical usages of words and his belief in the revelations they could afford, not from the centre, so to speak, but from the periphery. The method held its dangers as Crane well knew - and as we shall see in examining its effects in The Bridge, but they were dangers that Crane was willing to face. We can go further than this, I think, to say that Crane felt himself bound to take the risks he did in so far as he believed that language held within it the meanings

he wanted, if only they could be dislodged. He believed, too, that words could work on the reader's sensibility organically or directly, to be apprehended rather than comprehended. In such a theory, words are understood to have a pre-cognitive significance; they rise from some realm of being where feeling is absolute.

On a lesser level, this connects with Crane's adherence to imitative form, the form whereby the movement and often the typography of the verses is intended to suggest the movement of what is being described: in "Chaplinesque", the pantomime of Charlie Chaplin, in "Cutty Sark"(the final lines of which Crane called "a cartogram"), the zig-zagging of the clippers; in "The River" and "The Tunnel", jazz rhythms were intended to create an impression of the whirl and disturbance of contemporary life. Dembo argues that Crane might have "justified these exercises . . . by referring to his metaphysics; after all, he did believe that jazz was the modern form of Dionysian music, the narcotic by which the poet was put in tune with the Absolute." On the other hand, it seems as likely that Crane believed that the form was a means of dramatizing his perceptions, one means by which his meaning could be carried whole and uninterruptedly into the consciousness of

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L.S.Dembo, Hart Crane's Sanskrit Charge: A Study of The Bridge, Ithaca; Cornell University Press, 1960;p.41

the reader. That Crane was hopeful for the form may be seen in this statement about "Atlantis":

I have attempted to induce the same feeling of elation, etc.-like being carried forward and upward simultaneously - both in imagery, rhythm and repetition that one experiences in walking across my beloved Brooklyn Bridge.<sup>2</sup>

The phrase "being carried forward and upward" is perhaps as important as the mention of the Bridge; for it suggests the major movement of the poem, or rather its dual movement forward in the quest for the absolute and upward to transcend the merely phenomenal world.

One of the early criticisms of the poem as a whole was that the varied forms of versification worked against any unity it might have claimed. But Crane's belief was simple: that the perceptions and the materials of each of the sections demanded their own form. T.S.Eliot and Ezra Pound offered precedents for the technique; and there are, of course, echoes of both these poets in The Bridge. Crane wanted his words, not solely to describe, but to enact the meanings of his poem. He wanted to transcribe the act of perceiving itself. Such a hope for the capacities of language may be explained, in part, by his reaction to what he called "impressionistic poetry": imagism. This reaction reminds us of Ezra Pound's progress from the "Amygist"

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The Letters of Hart Crane, 1916-1932, ed. Brom Weber, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1965; p.232.

syndrome. Imagism provided only a temporary solution for all the major poets who dabbled with it. For Pound, its primary failure was that it could present only "the thing", pictorially and statically. What Pound wanted, finally, was not presentation of the object but the dynamic registration of the emotions.

The Image is not an idea. It is a radiant node or cluster; it is what I can, and must perforce, call a VORTEX, from which, and through which, and into which, ideas are constantly rushing.<sup>3</sup>

The conception of an image being constantly invaded is seminal to Pound's development of the ideogram, but it may also help to understand Crane's own methods: his desire to get out of words their inherent "illuminations". In another statement, Pound distinguishes three types of poem which he had written at the time of Personae; it is the third type that may interest us.

Thirdly, I have written "Heather", which represents a state of consciousness, or implies, or implicates it. . . . A Russian correspondent, after having called it a symbolist poem, and having been convinced that it was not symbolism, said slowly: 'I see, you wish to give people new eyes, not to make them see some particular new thing.'<sup>4</sup>

It is in relation to such poems as "Heather" (and to the second type which dealt, he said, with "an objective reality"), that Pound speaks of an absolute, or permanent metaphor. And it may be relevant to note that Canto VII,

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<sup>3</sup> Ezra Pound, Gaudier-Brzeska, a Memoir, London and New York, John Lane, 1916; p.106.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p.98.

in which the technique of "Heather" seems to be developed, has as one of its motifs the condition of language, in this case a language unstirred by a passion for beauty, love and the absolute (or at least these concepts as absolutes):

Thin husks I had known as men,  
 Dry casques of departed locusts  
   speaking a shell of speech ...  
 Propped between chairs and table ...  
 Words like locust-shells, moved by no inner being;  
 A dryness calling for death. <sup>5</sup>

It appears then that Pound's quest for the perfection of metaphor and rhythm was motivated by a desire to go beyond the imagist technique of rendering the thing in all its quiddity to a point where the poem might revive the perception, quicken the "inner being".

Whilst attempting to define the difference between the aims of the "impressionist" poets, and his own aims, Crane called himself an "absolutist":

The impressionist creates only with the eye and for the readiest surface of the consciousness, at least relatively so. If the effect has been harmonious or even stimulating, he can stop there, relinquishing entirely to his audience the problematic synthesis of details in terms of his own personal consciousness. It is my hope to go through the combined materials of the poem, using our "real" world somewhat as a spring-board, and to give the poem as a whole an orbit or predetermined direction of its own. I would like to establish it as free from my own personality as from any chance evaluation on the reader's part. Such a poem is at least a stab at

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Ezra Pound, The Cantos, London, Faber and Faber, 1964; p.30.



a truth, and to such an extent may be differentiated from all other kinds of poetry and called "absolute". Its evocation will not be towards a decoration or amusement, but rather toward a state of consciousness, an innocence (Blake) or absolute beauty. In this condition there may be discoverable under new forms certain spiritual illuminations, shining with a morality essentialized from experience directly, and not from previous precepts or preconceptions. It is as though the poem gave the reader as he left it some single, new word, never before spoken and impossible actually to enunciate, but self-evident as an active principle in the reader's consciousness henceforward.<sup>6</sup>

It will be clear that the passage is as much a statement of and aspiration as it is an elucidation of method. In referring to Blake (always one of the poets to spring to his mind when Crane was defending himself, or characterising his work), and in his complaint against the impressionist poet that he is "not really interested in the causes (metaphysical) of his materials, their emotional derivations or their utmost spiritual consequences", Crane is, of course, building up the picture of the poet as seer, with the imagination as his primary tool.

The imagination was understood by Crane as both a faculty of perception and a means by which the apprehension might be represented in words. But, to Crane's way of thinking, in so far as words had been previously ordered and defined in terms of the logical or rational

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Hart Crane, "General Aims and Theories", in Philip Horton, Hart Crane, New York; Viking Press, 1957; p.326.

understanding, they would tend to betray the "spiritual illuminations" afforded to the poet through his imagination. Thus, he wrote to Gorham Munson, in a letter that purports to justify his poetical method and at the same time to explain his refusal to join Munson in an attempt to systematize their "mysticism", that "the tragic quandary (or agon) of the modern world derives from the paradoxes that an inadequate system of rationality forces on the living consciousness." (Letters, p.238). Crane suggests that if he followed the course Munson urged on him, and wrote accordingly, "the abstract basis of my work would have been familiarised to you before you had read a word of the poetry." And he goes on:

But my poetry . . . would avoid the use of abstract tags, formulations of experience in factual terms, etc.,- it would necessarily express its concepts in the more direct terms of physical-psychic experience. If not, it must by so much lose its impact and become simply categorical.

(Letters, p.239).

Crane may not have accepted entirely the Rimbaudian "disordering of all the senses" - though he seems, at times, to have been the victim of it - but he certainly rejected the possibilities of systematic philosophy and the niceties of rational observation as falsifications of his intuition. The more direct terms of physical-psychic experience clearly necessitated a symbolism of one sort or another (possibly the Poundian "vortex", or "permanent metaphor"),

articulated, or "inflected", by a logic of metaphor.

By now it will be clear, I hope, that Crane's claims for metaphorical language, for poetic language itself as he conceived it, extend beyond any claim for mere surface effects. Poetry was not simply to startle and delight, but to reveal. Crane's statements on the nature of poetic language, as we have seen, are thoroughly dyed with metaphysics and give evidence of a profoundly religious sense of life.

Poetry, in so far as the metaphysics of any absolute knowledge extends, is simply the concrete evidence of the experience of a recognition (knowledge, if you like). It can give you a ratio of fact and experience, and in the sense that it is both perception and thing perceived poetry may well give you the connective experience, the very "sign manifest" on which rests the assumption of a godhead.

(Letters, p.237).

The statement requires some explanation. The "experience of a recognition" is related to the "spiritual illuminations" we have already met with: the intuitive apprehensions of the absolute; and "the concrete evidence" of this is what Pound called the permanent metaphor, the "single, new word, never before spoken", it is the "sign manifest" and what figures in the poem "Voyages VI" as "the imaged Word" which is man's only revelation of the transcendent reality, and makes belief in it possible. The "connective experience" that poetry provides is not only that of relating the intuitions to the poet's more

quotidian self (in Crane's terms, the sufferer and the clown), but also of relating the poet more fully to his society.

Yet the theory of poetry which we have been developing so far presupposes and, to a great extent, welcomes a predominantly subjective, solipsistic vision and an idiosyncratic mode of expression. If, as he said in a letter to Harriet Monroe defending "At Melville's Tomb", he was "more interested in the so-called illogical impingements of the connotations of words on the consciousness" than in "the preservation of their logically rigid significations at the cost of limiting my subject-matter and the perceptions involved in the poem"; if Crane's primary perceptions were in spiritual illuminations of an absolute reality, then one would think that his talent was pre-eminently that of a recluse and his course of action ought to be to withdraw from society in order to pursue his contemplation of the ideal world of his imagination. Whilst he might feel all the more, in retreat, his isolation and loneliness, yet he would be able to build the bridge between himself and God. But the condition of the poet-visionary, for Crane, was not peace in seclusion, it was an exasperating and often painful exile; and the overwhelming motivation was not withdrawal from, but

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<sup>7</sup> Horton, op.cit., p.330. This letter is not given in Weber's collected edition.

admittance to, the community.

Indeed, the most consistent persona of Crane's poetry in White Buildings is one who suffers, in one form or other, the condition of exile. In "Black Tambourine", he is the "black man" who "wanders in some mid-kingdom"; in "Emblems of Conduct", he is a wanderer who, without the apostle's impulse to preach or the demagogue's desire for political action, can justify his existence only with "memories of spiritual gates"; in "Praise for an Urn", he wears the "exile guise" of Crane's Nietzschean friend, Ernest Nelson, blending the comic-sad "everlasting eyes of Pierrot" with the yea-saying laughter of Gargantua. And in Chaplin, of course, Crane found the perfect example of the artist acting out his "buffoneries" in an essentially tragic situation (Letters, p.68); and still, the "meek adjustments" made, and the "fine collapses", are merely part of the game, a masking interchange above which the poet may yet assert that both he, and the absurd figure with whom he identifies, "have seen/ The moon in lonely alleys make/ A grail of laughter of an empty ash can." And as these images of the poet-visionary intensify, exile becomes not only a matter of misery and misunderstanding, but of suffering actively inflicted. Thus, the figures of "Possessions" and "Lacrymae Christi" in particular present images of the martyr rather than just the outsider.

Crane needed a programme that would reconcile his

solipsistic inclinations with his "cultural" ambitions, and he may well have found that in Rimbaud's scheme for the seer. Beginning in "For the Marriage of Faustus and Helen" and "Recitative", and culminating in The Bridge itself, we can recognize in Crane the impulse Rimbaud defined as characteristic of the poet-visionary: that he should consume in his own vision all the poisonous matter of the world in order to reach, and to keep, only the essences. Certainly, Crane's attempt to reconcile an ugly contemporary actuality with eternal beauty, to integrate a personal vision with the social reality, can be related, in terms of poetic method, to the French poet's belief in "the hallucination of words" by which he might see "a mosque instead of a factory, a drummers' school consisting of angels."

The project is idealistic and optimistic (even in Rimbaud, despite the irony and bitterness): to transform in the process of imparting the vision. In the words of Ezra Pound's Russian correspondent, it was to give the people new eyes. Reconciliation was not, for Crane, an admission of compromise. Thus, as late as May, 1927, Crane defended the subjectivity of his poetry, its lack of explicit social and political comment, its bent towards metaphysical

meaning, in a letter to Yvor Winters:

I am interested in recording certain sensations, very rigidly chosen, with an eye for what according to my taste and sum of prejudices seems suitable to - or intense enough - for verse. . . . One should be somewhat satisfied if one's work comes to approximate a true record of such moments of "illumination" as are occasionally possible. A sharpening of reality to the poet, to no such degree possible through other mediums.

(Letters, pp.301-2)

Crane's defence is in much the same terms as he expounded to Gorham Munson: that the poet might have much to lose by any systematization of his perceptions, that though he might appear to be following a socially irresponsible and morally reprehensible course, he believed that he had good justification. Possibly the best outlook we can place on the statement is that Crane advocated, for the poet at least, some sort of inner check. Both Weber and Horton accuse Winters of being unnaturally nasty in his later criticism of Crane's work. They suggest that his changed attitude, between the enthusiastic review of White Buildings in 1927 and the review of The Bridge in 1930, was occasioned by Winters' shock at Crane's "dissolute" life; in particular, his alcoholism and homosexuality. The charge is speculative, and tends to take the place of a proper examination of Winters' criticism. We shall note some of detailed criticisms later; for the present two points can be raised. First, that Winters sees Crane, as he is, in the Emerson- Whitman tradition; and this is condemnation in

itself in that it implies a moral relativism and a pantheistic reliance upon impulse. Thus, the poet is open to the major delusion of Romantic poetics: the faith in divine inspiration. From Winters' point of view this argues for a dangerous dependence which may lead the individual to deny himself all freedom of choice and so become an automaton.<sup>9</sup>

A further point relates more closely to the present discussion. It is here that the fundamental split between Crane and Winters can be understood.

Crane's attitude . . . often suggests a kind of theoretic rejection of all human endeavour in favor of some vaguely apprehended but ecstatically asserted existence of a superior sort. As the exact nature of the superior experience is uncertain, it forms a rather uncertain and infertile source of material for exact poetry; one can write about it only by utilizing in some way more or less metaphorical the realm of experience from which one is trying to escape; but as one is endeavouring to escape from this realm, not to master it and understand it, one's feelings about it are certain to be confused, and one's imagery drawn from it bound to be largely formulaic and devoid of meaning. That is, in so far as one endeavours to deal with the Absolute, not as a means of ordering one's moral perception but as the subject itself of perception, one will tend to say nothing, despite the multiplication of words.<sup>10</sup>

Winters' attack on Romanticism is thorough and often devastating. If he tends to over-emphasise the paraphrasable content of the poem and the importance of a

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<sup>9</sup> Ivor Winters, In Defense of Reason, Denver, Alan Swallow (A Swallow Paperback), 1965. See pp.7-II, pp.582-3.

<sup>10</sup>

Ibid., pp.28-9.



strictly connotative use of words to the extent of arguing for the superiority of what seems to me to be minor poetry, yet his arguments demand respect. As his almost obsessive references to Crane demonstrate, he did not reject Hart Crane's poetry out of hand but only after he was convinced that its tendencies presupposed and exacerbated a profound spiritual confusion and dissipation.

It is rather pathetic to find Crane, in the same letter to Winters, answering the charges of narrowness and solipsism by saying that if he were writing prose he might be able to include "a much thicker slice" of himself, that "the poetic focus" was a necessary limitation. For this was simply to underscore Winters' basic point and not to refute it. In a similar way, L.S. Dembo's interpretation of The Bridge in terms of the Nietzschean theory of tragedy,<sup>II</sup> and Vincent Quinn's introduction of Jacques Maritain's principle of "creative intuition"<sup>I2</sup> only serve to make the doctrine and methods seem more intellectually respectable. Ultimately, they represent versions of the aesthetic, and ethic, which Winters characterises as Emersonian, and they would have to be defended on similar grounds.

We have already noted Crane's dictum that poetry is "the concrete evidence of the experience of a recognition",

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Op.cit. The opening chapter sets out the argument.

I2 Vincent Quinn, Hart Crane, New York, Twayne, 1963. The final chapter "answers the critics".

that it provides the "connective experience". Crane saw words as both the materials of his craft and, in so far as they could be re-worked into a logic of metaphor, as metaphysical entities. As such, they could present not simply a language of observation and rational perception, but also a language of consciousness, or as Crane said, of "physical-psychic experience". Crane did believe, then, that he could deal directly with the absolute "as the subject itself of perception". At least, Crane thought that poetic language was the means of realizing and communicating the visionary experience. His method was distinct from the traditional poetic of correspondences which sees the world as a temple full of the symbols of the godhead. Crane worked in the reverse direction, so to speak, not from the actual to the real, but from the real to the actual. In what might be reckoned a typically modern reverse, he was not carrying man to God, but bringing God back to man, seeking to solve the Word in words.

Winters' judgement raises the related problems of the nature of Crane's "mysticism" and his seemingly contradictory ambition to write "an epic of the modern consciousness". We have already, I hope, come some way to an understanding of Crane's poetic, and the epistemology related to it; and we might well agree with Philip Horton that it suits the expression of intense lyric mood rather

than the articulation of a poem of the dimensions of The Bridge.<sup>I3</sup> If Crane was to go to historical materials, it is clear that he must use them in a unique way. As we shall see, Crane approached history as legend or myth; he demanded not the documented and verifiable past of the historian, but a past accessible to his imaginative intuition, a past that rendered the sign, illuminations, "the imaged Word".

In "For the Marriage of Faustus and Helen", out of which The Bridge was developed, Crane saw himself as "building a bridge between so-called classic experience and the many divergent realities of our seething, confused cosmos of today".<sup>I4</sup> An ideal world - in which Faustus, the type for the man of knowledge and vision, and Helen, the type of beauty, unite - is merged into the contemporary scene by what Crane described as "a kind of grafting process".<sup>I4</sup> The "lone eye" of the poet, the Faustus-figure, is fixed on the plane of beauty and, the "steel and soil" of mortality, the false "metallic paradises" offered by the contemporary world, the "speediest destruction" of the machine, his imagination "spans beyond despair". (CP., pp. 97-103). The poem anticipates much of the symbolism and argument of The Bridge, and in "Recitative" (written only a

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I3

Op.cit., p.171.

I4

From Crane's essay in Horton, op.cit., pp.323-4.

few months after Crane's original conception of the longer poem), the bridge symbol is used explicitly for the first time. It is seen as a vision of unity and transcendence, and so symbolizes again the capacity of the poet, and his audience if it will, to go beyond the pain and isolation of the "atrocious sums/ Built floor by floor on shafts of steel": the hell of the modern city. Yet the poem and, as a symbol in the poem, the bridge, represents only "an echo of these things". The vision itself is not the end but the beginning of a "walk through time in equal pride". The play on "equal" suggests not only a pride in the shared experience of the poet and audience ( the audience is addressed throughout in the intimate terms of a lover), but also the justified pride of those who may live equal to the sign of their manifest, transcendent destiny. "Recitative" (the Whitmanesque word for title may indicate the theme) is Crane's earliest attempt to write the Song of the Answerer.

Apart from the image of the bridge, the poem also holds suggestions that Crane developed in the course of writing the major poem. For example, the image of "white buildings" itself prefigures the constant use of the colour to carry the idea of transformation in The Bridge; and the invocation to "defer though, revocation of the tears/ That yield attendance to the crucial sign" carries the seed of an idea that begins to pervade Crane's work: that only through suffering can the absolute vision of unity be

"captured". (CP., pp.95-6).

From this brief survey of "For the Marriage of Faustus and Helen" and "Recitative" we have an indication of the direction of Crane's ambitions. By examining Crane's "mysticism", the desire "to keep saying YES to everything" (Letters, p.148), and his attitude to Eliot and the American machine wasteland, we shall be able to understand the nature and scope of Crane's effort in The Bridge.

By whatever means Crane induced his "mystical experience" - drink, exciting rhythical music or the passion of a love affair, - it is clearly important to his development as a poet. The earliest recorded experience, however, was not induced by any of the intoxicants already mentioned, but by ether and the dentist's drill. After explaining how "something like an objective voice" had told him that he had the "higher consciousness" (like Yeats', Crane's voices seem to have told him what he wanted to hear), Crane continues:

A happiness, ecstatic such as I have only known twice in inspirations, came over me. I felt the two worlds. And at once. As the bore went into my tooth I was able to follow its revolutions as detached as a spectator at a funeral. O Gorham, I have known moments in eternity . . . I feel a new confidence in myself.

(Letters, pp.91-2).

However doubtful one may feel about the nature, quality and

ends of such experience, its intensity and the evident sincerity with which Crane reports it makes it difficult to deny the importance of the experience to Crane himself. In a later letter to Waldo Frank, he wrote in the exaltation of a love affair: "I have seen the Word made Flesh," and continued:

I have been able to give freedom and life which was acknowledged in the ecstasy of walking hand in hand across the most beautiful bridge in the world, the cables enclosing us and pulling us upward in such a dance as I have never walked and never can walk with another.

(Letters, p.181).

What is curious about the experiences as Crane relates them is that the confidence and joy they gave were usually conjoined with a renewed sense of himself and of an objective world. Crane seems to have felt that these "mystical experiences" both defined him and re-affirmed his contact with the world and others. They also permitted, of course, his faith in an absolute reality.

It is accepted that the mystical experience is ineffable. The poet can tell "about" it, but not say what it is; thus, if it is expressed at all, it is through the analogical, or symbolic, and rhythmical qualities of words. In a sense, this may be one other justification for Crane's use of imitative form, of his desire to give "the concrete evidence of the experience of a recognition". It may relate also to his belief in inspiration. In a letter to Frank, he described how his reading of Spengler's Decline of the West, an early cause of disillusion, had somehow

helped to "ripen" parts of The Bridge; and he goes on to ask:

Isn't it true - hasn't it been true in your experience, that beyond the acceptance of fate as a tragic action - immediately every circumstance and incident in one's life flocks towards a positive centre of action, control and beauty?

(Letters, p.274).

Such an attitude bears some relation to Crane's claim that the poet must possess "gigantic assimilative capacities", and it is significant that Crane should be asserting here that he has overcome the despair occasioned by his reading of Spengler. For Spengler's theories seemed to confirm the pessimistic analysis of Western civilization that Crane saw reflected, whether mistakenly or not, in the work of T.S. Eliot. The concept of mysticism worked out by Crane with the aid of readings of Nietzsche, Whitehead, and under the tutelage of Waldo Frank, made him confident that he could provide an "answer" to Eliot's "perfection of death". Even though the "properness" of Crane's "mystical experience" may be in doubt (certainly we must admit that it remained largely undisciplined), still it <sup>is</sup> worthwhile to note that the experience contributed greatly to Crane's conception of himself as a poet-visionary and the prophet of a regenerated America.

Apparently, one of the after effects of the mystical experience is a sense of power, even omnipotence, such that the mystic wants not solely to speak, but to

include all of life in his vision. This, at any rate, seems to have happened to Crane. "I feel more and more that in the absolute sense the artist identifies himself with life," he wrote to Alfred Stieglitz. The concept of mysticism that developed was a kind of idealism which demanded that there should be a transformation, or "synthesis", of quotidian existence; or, to use Evelyn Underhill's terms, "an illuminated vision of the world".<sup>15</sup> This idealism is evident in "For the Marriage of Faustus and Helen". But the affirmation is, perhaps, not strong enough; despite what is "said", the final lines of the poem are elegaic in their cadence. The full "illuminated vision" was to be The Bridge: "a mystical synthesis of 'America'. History, fact and location, etc., all . . . transfigured into abstract form".

When Crane spoke of the poet's need for "assimilative capacities" he meant, I think, that he should be able to respond positively to an environment that was hostile to his vision. Crane's fundamental objection to Eliot was that, in The Waste Land, he appeared to play an entirely passive role; this, I suspect, is what Crane meant by "pessimism". As it happens, Eliot may well have agreed with Crane's remark that "after this perfection of death -

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Evelyn Underhill, Mysticism, London, Methuen (University Paperbacks), 1960; pp.254-65.



nothing is possible . . . but a resurrection of some kind". (Letters, p.115). Eliot's importance, in so far as it can be gauged, was that he stirred Crane to determine his ambitions as a poet. Writing of Eliot to Allen Tate, Crane said that he felt confident that he could go "through him to a different goal". And he continued: "Having absorbed him enough we can trust ourselves as never before, in the air or on the sea". (Letters, p.90)

For Crane, "assimilation" suggested that the poet must both draw life to him, and transfigure it, making a powerful assertion of vision. Thus, in one of his most famous statements about Eliot, Crane says:

I would apply as much of his erudition and technique as I can absorb and assemble toward a more positive or . . . ecstatic goal. I should not think of this if a kind of rhythm and ecstasy were not (at odd moments, and rare!) a very real thing to me. I feel that Eliot ignores certain spiritual events and possibilities as real and powerful now as, say, in the time of Blake.

(Letters, pp.114-5).

The representation of moral and cultural chaos, the frail possibility of belief, the passivity and - perhaps most important - the disgust with life that Crane saw in The Waste Land, made Eliot the almost perfect antithesis to his hopes. He was continually urging his friends, and most particularly, Allen Tate, to break away from what he considered to be the debilitating effect of Eliot's work. He appealed to Tate to "launch into praise" since Tate,

after "a couple of damnations", seemed best able to "give praise an edge and beauty". In calling for what Josephine Miles names "a poetry of praise"<sup>16</sup> Crane was not simply and naively asking that the poet should celebrate and applaud even when there seems no reason to do so; he was not asking that the poet should ignore the contemporary reality. He was seeking a poetry of human warmth and love rather than niggardliness and hesitation, a poetry that admitted potency and elation instead of, or as well as, meanness and degradation. Crane's programme suggests not a withdrawal into the quiescence of disillusion and despair; rather he calls the poet to be, in Whitman's phrase, "afoot with his vision". It would be a poetry that welcomed experience and sang the power of creativity. Again after Whitman, Crane rejected wit and elegance as incompatible with his vision and espoused an enthusiastic openness for a poetry with full confidence in its powers to transform the quotidian. This is, ideally, the poetry Crane wanted to write, and wanted to see written. It requires that the poet affirm order, harmony and love beyond the chaos and bewilderment about him.

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Josephine Miles, "The Poetry of Praise", Kenyon Review (23), 1961; pp.105-125. Professor Miles traces the course, and suggests the causes, of the tradition of "sublime diction" in American Literature. She argues that its survival into the modern age is peculiarly American, and that it distinguishes the American from the English poet. It is seen, of course, as part of Crane's inheritance.

But the poet does not find his voice solely in relation to his tradition, he must find it primarily in the world in which he lives. For many poets and intellectuals of the Twenties, the Machine symbolized the materialism, industrial oppression and spiritual destitution of the age. The attitude may seem somewhat naive but Crane, urged on by Munson, believed it important enough to be accounted for in his poetry. As Philip Horton points out, neither Crane nor Munson indulged "the machine-worship of the Dadaists"; instead, they began to see in it "symbols and analogues of human life which would enrich and condense . . . art".<sup>17</sup> Even Waldo Frank, who in 1923 was opposed to Munson's enthusiasms, could speculate four years later that the machine might become "a means towards achieving wholeness, of fusing man's control over nature with his control over self. At once, it would be a symbol of growth".<sup>18</sup>

Thus, we find Crane arguing that poetry must "acclimatize" the machine before it can arrive at an adequate synthesis of values.

This process does not infer any program of lyrical pandering to taste of those obsessed by the importance of machinery; nor does it essentially involve even the specific mention of a single mechanical contrivance. It demands, however, along with the traditional qualifications of the poet, an extraordinary capacity for surrender,

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<sup>17</sup>

Cp.cit., p.135.

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Waldo Frank, The Re-Discovery of America, New York, Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1947; pp.42-3. These essays appeared first in New Republic during a period from 1925 to 1927.

at least temporarily, to the sensation of urban life. This presupposes, of course, that the poet possesses sufficient spontaneity and gusto to convert this experience into positive terms.

("Modern Poetry", CP., pp.181-2).

The Machine, so the argument ran, far from contributing to the dislocation of values and beliefs, could be seen as one of the thresholds of a cultural regeneration, representing not a base and disintegrative scientism, but a sort of higher technology.

As we shall see in the consideration of "Cape Hatteras" Crane did not effect the acclimatization of the machine to the extent, as he hoped, that "its connotations emanate from within", providing symbols of the most profound human responses. The machine remained the monster Frank feared it to be. He warned in 1927: "The machine does not engage man's depths. It engages only his surfaces - his personal power, his cult of personal will, his need to master time and space - all surfaces of action".<sup>19</sup> However Crane might try to convince that the power of the machine represented a metaphysical potentiality, the strain of his verse in "Cape Hatteras" is sufficient evidence that he could deal with it only as he wanted it to be seen, and not as he felt it to be.

Such a judgement will need to be qualified when we come to the analysis of the poem itself; for the moment it

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<sup>19</sup>

Ibid., p.42.

is enough to say that Crane's attitude to the machine was not uncritical (though it may appear naive); he was blind neither to its horrors nor its accomplishments. The attitude is a function, so to speak, of his desire to affirm, to "identify with all of life" and say yes. The contemporary discussion of the machine, at any rate, demanded that Crane take a stand, and incorporate it into the vision of The Bridge.

The discussion so far has suggested something of how and why Crane hoped to launch into praise, to answer Eliot's passivity and despair with a vision of beatitude. The task required a poet of "spontaneity and gusto", a Dionysian who could give flesh and spirit to the dry bones of the waste land. But, to put it baldly, Eliot could not be answered on the grounds of a few semi-mystical experiences and the Nietzschean desire for the affirmation of life. The celebration of Brooklyn Bridge as the symbol of past and present accomplishment, and of American hopes for the future, could be written off as lyric afflatus unless it were documented further. In his desire to affirm the absolute, the revelations of the Word - and through that the unity of man, nature, the machine and God,- Crane turned not to the re-institution of the orthodox myths of Christianity, but, in pantheistical enthusiasm, to the dream and promise of America. The last phrase is Waldo Frank's, and Frank's conception of a "mystic tradition" in American

history provided crucial sustenance for Crane, buttressing his original vision of the Bridge.<sup>20</sup>

I have suggested already, however, that Crane's use of historical materials was idiosyncratic. When he spoke of The Bridge as "a mystical synthesis of America" he was being true to the nature of his impulse as well as to the poetic techniques at his command. It is the "mystical" that should be emphasised, and it will be apparent from the conclusions we have reached concerning Crane's aesthetic and his conception of the ways of imaginative truth that he was both unprepared for, and perhaps unwilling to attempt, the historical poem. A poem in which a narrative containing historical events and figures provided objective structure for the poet's speculations and dramatizations was outside of, or beyond, Crane's peculiar talents. When Crane took over the materials for a poem it was only to express his own intensely subjective meaning. In a sense, though The Bridge is not a historical poem, yet it does seem to be a poem that dramatizes the poet's feeling for the ancient potentialities of America.

Crane's explanation of the line: "Frosted eyes there were that lifted altars" ("At Melville's Tomb") gives the clue to his subjectivity, his disposition to relate all materials in the terms of self. He wrote that the phrase

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The books of Frank to be referred to here are: Our America, New York, Boni and Boni, 1919; Virgin Spain, New York, Boni and Liveright, 1925.

"refers simply to a conviction that a man, not knowing perhaps a definite god yet being endowed with a reverence for deity - such a man naturally postulates a deity somehow, and the altar of that deity by the very action of the eyes lifted in searching".<sup>21</sup> By making a complicated metaphorical reference to the formal rites of worship, Crane was hoping to give some validity to the unsystematized rituals of the self. In fact, the recurrence of "body" imagery in Crane's work signifies his belief that only the inner illuminations of the self could receive the evidences of "a deity somehow". The conviction reaches its fullest expression, I should say, in what was probably Crane's final poetic testament, "The Broken Tower", in which the "voice" of the bells (symbolizing the poet's own voice raised in ecstasy) breaks down the actual tower "and builds, within, a tower that is not stone". The Bridge, too, was to be built within. In the final version of "Atlantis" it is evoked as the "intrinsic Myth/ . . . iridescently upborne/ Through the bright drench and fabric of our veins", but it is worth noting that the phrase "intrinsic Myth" was a revision made at some time after he sent the version to Waldo Frank in August, 1926.<sup>22</sup> The revision is a measure of Crane's final understanding of the poem, and of his candour.

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See Horton, op.cit., p.334.

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Cf. Brom Weber, Hart Crane: A Biographical and Critical Study, New York, Bodley Press, 1948; pp.437-40. The appendix contains several versions of "Atlantis".

In calling his poem a "myth" and especially in relating it to the "epic" form Crane was, inadvertently perhaps, misleading the many friends to whom he wrote about the poem. He was much closer to being correct when he made the qualification that it was "at least a symphony with an epic theme" (Letters, p.309). If Crane's use of the term "epic" registers his elation at the growing symbolic possibilities of the Bridge, it may be that "myth" defines his attitude to history. In The Bridge we have the evidence of an incorrigibly unhistorical imagination working its way into historical, or pseudo-historical materials.

To handle the beautiful skeins of this myth of America - to realize suddenly, as I seem to, how much of the past is living under only slightly altered forms, even in machinery and such-like, is extremely exciting.

(Letters, p.274).

Crane's focus was always the present and always himself, or some form of himself as poet. His point in going to the American past was not to bring out its pastness, a distinct reality. Crane's point, rather, was to find there a correlative experience which might confirm his belief in the "certain as yet undefined spiritual quantities" <sup>23</sup> of the American present. He did not attempt to maintain a dual focus of past and present, for his purpose was not to demonstrate discrepancies but to reveal an essential unity. Despite and all, the underlying reality remained the same.



and it required only the voice of the poet-visionary, who had seen the absolute, to re-announce it. It was thus that Crane wrote to Otto Kahn, in his final plan of the poem, that he had decided not to approach his material "from the purely chronological angle", beginning with Columbus or the landing of The Mayflower and moving through to the opening up of the West; instead, he said, he wanted "an assimilation of this experience, a more organic panorama, showing the continuous and living evidence of the past in the inmost vital substance of the present" (Letters, p.305).

The point can be extended if I suggest that whether or not Crane went to his historical materials for some sort of objective foundation for his present faith, in the process of handling them they became extensions of himself. With the American past, as with the machine (and more successfully I think), Crane wanted the "connotations to emanate from within". The words to Kahn could be seen not only as an explanation but as a justification of the method he was inevitably committed to. "Mine own true self has been chewing its cud, mostly, i.e., trying to imagine itself on the waters with Cristobal Colon and trying to mend the sails so beautifully slit by the Patterson typhoon", Crane wrote to his mother in June, 1926, from the Isle of Pines to which he had retreated in order to complete The Bridge. The "true self" was that which sang the rhapsodical hymn to Brooklyn Bridge in "Atlantis", and the typhoon was the pessimistic, Eliotese talk that he had had to listen to, and protest against, in the company of Allen Tate and others at

their country cottage near Patterson. Reading through Columbus' journals of his voyage, as well as Melville and books on whaling and merchant shipping,<sup>24</sup> Crane prepared himself for the "Ave Maria" section of the poem. Finally, he sang out to Waldo Frank:

My plans are soaring again, the conception swells.  
 Furthermore, this Columbus is REAL . . . observe  
 the waterswell rhythm that persists until the  
 Falos reference. Then the more marked and absolute  
 intimation of the great Te Deum of the court,  
 later held, - here, in terms of C.'s own  
 cosmography.

(Letters, p.208).

Crane had found in Columbus the perfect lyrical dramatization of his "own true self"; there need be no ironic suggestion in the fact that this Columbus was real because Crane had been able to "assimilate" the experience and quest of Columbus to that of himself. Whatever the fidelity of historical reference, and however Crane found it possible to bend to his materials, the voice of Columbus is a version of the rhapsodical voice of "Atlantis".

Crane had a faith in the ideal and a vision of the absolute. In going to the past he hoped to show that this was, in fact, typical of the American experience. In Columbus, he found (created) the man who had first spanned the ocean to return with the idea of America as a New World, a Cathay of the spirit; he accepted Frank's almost Laurentian belief that "our root is the red man", that the

Indian was "the spirit of ourselves";<sup>25</sup> even in the wanderings of the western pioneers, he found echoes, however faint, of the original spirituality; and, of course, the figures of the nineteenth century literary Renaissance were made to bear witness to the dignity and worth of his vision of the Bridge.

But Crane also understood, I think, that his vision was ultimately subjective, that it did not come, as Allen Tate was to say later, "whole from the people".<sup>26</sup> Between the initial writing of "Atlantis" and the completion of the poem, Crane accepted, unwilling and even painfully, that the contemporary actuality did not sustain his expectations of it. In a letter to Waldo Frank, Crane gives his own most complete analysis of his motives and purpose. The letter is one of the most eloquent documents to have come out of modern American literature and, properly considered, might answer any claims that Crane ignored the contemporary situation and was, for the most part, deceived about his capacities and what he was doing.

The letter can be read as one of the ways by which Crane purged himself of the disillusionment and despair thrust on him by "the Patterson typhoon". In the face of both evidence and argument that the modern world was chaotic

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Frank, Re-Discovery, p.230.

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Allen Tate, Reactionary Essays on Poetry and Ideas, New York, Scribner's, 1936; p.35.

and corrupt Crane took what Ortega y Gasset has called "the stand within the self" (ensimismarse). After admitting that it is "the Spengler thesis", again, that has precipitated his discouragement and self-examination, Crane says:

"Emotionally I should like to write The Bridge; intellectually judged the whole theme and project seems more and more absurd". He reiterates his characteristic argument that, although the poet must immerse himself in the contemporary experience ("The darkness is part of the business."), he must be able to transform that experience in terms of his absolute vision of things. Crane contrasts the poet-visionary (in this statement, Blake, Rimbaud and Whitman) with the modern poets who have "whimpered fastidiously" at the prospect of contemporary society and have contented themselves with "the cult of 'words', elegancies, elaborations" which can make their appeal only to "an inner circle of literary initiates". It may be noted that the antithesis Crane offers rather distorts the possibilities, that Eliot's voice, hesitant and quiet though it may be, is somewhat steadier than a whimper, yet Crane's point should not be missed: that it has been, and should be still, the purpose of the poet to sing the "one song" of the ideal and absolute, and that this is possibly the most effective preparation for action. The argument, and it is

perhaps a typically Romantic one, is that the poetry of disgust and hesitation may only intensify the disgust and confirm the hesitation; it may not alleviate the situation, nor inspire actions to change it.

Thus Crane's major complaint against the present was not that it did not give the "signs and portents" for the poet's vision, but that even when these had been articulated it was incapable of accepting them. It was this that seemed to make the materials he had gathered seem meaningless and ineffectual.

These "materials" were valid to me to the extent that I presumed them to be (articulate or not) at least organic and active factors in the experience and perceptions of our common race, time and belief. The very idea of a bridge, of course, is a form peculiarly dependent on such spiritual convictions. It is an act of faith as well as being a communication. The symbols of reality necessary to articulate the span - may not be where you expected them, however. By which I mean that however great their subjective significance to me . . . these forms, materials, dynamics are simply non-existent in the world.

. . . The form of my poem arises out of a past that so overwhelms the present with its worth and vision that I'm at a loss to explain my delusion that there exist any links between that past and a future destiny worthy of it. The "destiny" is long since completed, perhaps the little last section of my poem is a hangover echo of it - but it hangs suspended somewhere in ether like an Absolom by the hair.

(Letters, p.261).

The significance of the letter, it seems to me, is that Crane is here accepting his isolation, or rather realizes most clearly the implications of the fact that his poem depends largely, if not wholly, on its subjective significance. The poem would present an "intrinsic Myth",

the faith of the visionary poet and his struggle to bring that faith to the life of the community. "If only America were half so worthy to be spoken of today as Whitman spoke of it fifty years ago there might be something for me to say" (Letters, p.261-2). What Crane reconciled himself to was that The Bridge was to be a struggle for, not an expression of, the "myth".

If Crane accepted something of Whitman's faith, it is clear that he could not adopt his methods. <sup>28</sup> Crane was disposed, not to contain and encompass the actuality, but to intensify it for its symbolic possibilities. His poetic and his understanding of the position of the poet in society might have disposed him to relinquish the responsibility he had accepted in conceiving of The Bridge; but the development of the symbolist aesthetic effected by Rimbaud and Pound (which suggested that the poet's "epiphanies" could be of a permanent and absolute value and reality), joined with the "signs" of a spiritual regeneration Crane believed he saw in America, encouraged him to translate his personal vision of harmony, of the absolute into the terms of his society and so escape his "exile" in becoming the prophet. Crane accepted that "Atlantis" was, in so far as it expressed his vision of the absolute, "a little transcendent in tendency"; but he expressed his hope that "the pediments of the other sections will show it not to

have been" (Letters, p.233). By taking examples from the American past as well as the present, by demonstrating a dynamic continuity between the two, Crane intended to show that his vision of the Bridge simply fulfilled the implicit destiny of the nation.

But, as we have noted already, the scope of The Bridge is not that of a national epic, and we should not judge it to be a failure because it is not so. The poem was to "lend a myth to God", or, as Crane put it in "Cape Hatteras", to articulate a "span of consciousness". The problems Crane faced may be related, again, to those of Ezra Pound. In the Cantos, Pound, too, is writing for a vision of order, harmony and love which should at least be "conceivable on earth". Yet, as he said in an interview:

It is difficult to write a paradiso when all the superficial indications are that you ought to write an apocalyse. It is obviously much easier to find inhabitants for an inferno or even a purgatorio. I am trying to collect the record of the top flights of the mind. . . . to resist the view that Europe and civilisation are going to Hell.<sup>29</sup>

Crane's vision is apocalyptic rather than paradisal; it seeks to announce fulfilment, the revelation of the Word, rather than celebrating the sublime possession. Thus, the actual achievement of The Bridge is a dramatization of the poet's struggle to substantiate the "mystical", idealistic vision which Crane had virtually realized in "Atlantis",

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<sup>29</sup> Writers at Work (Second Series), New York, The Viking Press (Compass Books), 1965; p.56.

before he began work on the preceding sections. Each of the sections of The Bridge, with the possible exception of "Quaker Hill", ends in affirmation; but what is affirmed is the continuing validity, rather than the fulfilment, of the quest. After the annunciation of "the bridge" and of purpose in the proem, we follow the poet's explorations of a mythic past and a chaotic present during each of which he seeks to assert "the crucial sign" (CP., p.95) that will be his own redemption and, by implication, the redemption of the society to which he returns.

The Bridge, as a whole, attempts to relate the spiritual development of the poet to that of his country. But the primary "location" of the poem is neither historical nor geographical; it is the poet's own awareness. The events of the past recorded, or alluded to, serve to order, assuage and, in a special sense, idealize the present experience; and the figures of the past themselves are to be understood as exemplars of the poet's own quest. This seems to be what Crane meant when he suggested that the poem was to give "a more organic panorama" than the strictly "chronological approach" would allow. And this seems to explain, too, why the poem is a sequence of lyrical excursions organized around the poet, who is himself a somewhat elusive figure who speaks rather than acts. In fact, when we come to consider the symbol of the bridge itself, it is necessary to understand that, besides its



significance as a representation of modern technological advances, and of spiritual wholeness and the absolute, it is also the "song" of the poet: that by which he speaks. This latter may be, I think, the primary meaning of the symbol; and the object of the poet's quest may then be understood as the desire to perform the act of "bridging"; an act which would be also "the articulation of the contemporary consciousness sub specie aeternitatis" (CP., p. 179).

Once it is understood that "the bridge" (or the act of "bridging") is more important than the Brooklyn Bridge itself, the several metamorphoses of the major symbol become more acceptable. Thus, although the poem purports to tell of Columbus' discovery of America, of the poet's wanderings through the continent and the burlesque shows and subways of its largest city, the actual development of the poem is to be found in the growing possibilities of the bridge symbol itself. In the letter to Waldo Frank, already quoted at some length, Crane affirmed that the bridge was "a symbol of all such poetry as I am interested in writing"; in the examination that follows it will be hoped to show why.

## AN ANALYSIS OF THE BRIDGE.

In this analysis of The Bridge I shall be concerned both to suggest the relationship of the poems to each other, and to clarify certain obscurities within the individual lyrics. The Bridge was written over an extended period of time and not all the poems are of equal quality. "Quaker Hill", for example, has been recognized as a work of lesser intensity; but even this seems to be appropriate when it is understood that it is preparative to the more powerful and excruciating vision of "The Tunnel". The lapses of judgement and inspiration in the poem are obvious enough but they do not, I think, impair our understanding of the whole.

### Proem: To Brooklyn Bridge

The composition of the proem marked the beginning of the most prolonged period, of two months, during which Crane worked towards the completion of The Bridge. "Hail Brother! I feel an absolute music in the air again, and some tremendous rondure floating somewhere - perhaps my little dedication is going to swing me back to San Cristobal again" (Letters, p.267). Crane thought the poem to be one of the best things he had written - "something steady and uncompromising about it" - and a prelude to the rest of the work. This introductory poem clearly relates to the

ecstatic evocation of the Bridge in "Atlantis", but as it is less grandiloquent so it is more subtle in its presentation. Whatever the excitement in which Crane wrote the poem, it evidently did not exclude his capacities as a maker of poetry.

The poem announces the Bridge's career as a symbol of the absolute and of spiritual wholeness. As "harp and altar", "Terrific threshold" (as a pun, this might designate the poem itself), "Unfractioned idiom", the "immaculate sigh of stars" and the condensation of eternity, the poet asks that the Bridge should "lend a myth to God". It is to be a "myth" at this point, it seems to me, in that it will be distinguished from the poet's own "spiritual illuminations"; as a myth, that is to say, it will have significance to others besides the isolated visionary. Thus the poet suggests: "we have seen night lifted in thine arms", and the Bridge is asked to sweep "unto us lowliest". The plural usage signifies the poet's desire that the Bridge should symbolize not only the poetic vision, but a universal spiritual endeavour - "How could mere toil align thy choiring strings!" - and, most particularly, the spiritual endeavour of the typical American.

The metamorphoses of the Bridge so far considered are arrived at of course in the last four stanzas of the poem; they clearly prefigure later developments, not only in the Atlantis-bridge, but the whole gamut of "bridgings" which occur throughout the poem. The poem itself is

addressed specifically to Brooklyn Bridge; and thus the poet places it in its "natural" setting in order to evaluate it, so to speak, and its contemporary significance. This "evaluation" is made imagistically, by a contrast of symbols, and, in the seventh stanza, by a more explicit interpretation. In one sense, the first method is the means by which Crane dramatizes his perception of the Bridge's transcendental possibilities; the second marks the transition from the quotidian understanding to the poet's prayer and plea.

The poem opens, then, with an image of a sea-gull rising from New York harbour waters, and curving away over the Statue of Liberty; the image was probably suggested by a painting by Gaston Lachaise, a print of which the painter sent to Crane.

How many dawns, chill from his rippling rest  
 The seagull's wings shall dip and pivot him,  
 Shedding white rings of tumult, building high  
 Over the chained bay waters Liberty -

Then, with inviolate curve, forsake our eyes.

Apart from the visual and kinesthetic fidelity of the lines, the sense of frustration implicit in the opening exclamation is intimately related to the meaning; the gull's flight, at dawn, represents that glimpse of freedom and transcendence that will not be made permanent. (It seems likely, by the way, that "Liberty" here stands for the false freedom of a materialistic America.) By a sort of poetic legerdemain, the gull's flight is related to "apparitional sails" which, in their turn, move across "a page of figures"

(perhaps a clerk's ledger, more likely the poet's work-sheets); at any rate, these reflections suggest further insubstantial images. A cinema audience is imagined "bent toward some flashing scene"; we can compare the situation of these "multitudes" to that of the poet: "Under thy shadow by the piers I waited;/ Only in darkness is thy shadow clear", but whatever is hoped for from the cinema screen is "never disclosed" no matter how often returned to. The cinema, in fact, answers expectations even less satisfactorily than the gull; but the poet can turn to a more abundant faith:

And Thee, across the harbour, silver-paced  
As though the sun took step of thee, yet left  
Some motion ever unspent in thy stride,-  
Implicitly thy freedom staying thee!

The Bridge represents an equilibrium, the freedom of the gull's "inviolate curve" made permanent. the conception of the Bridge here is splendid or, as Crane himself might have been pleased to say, Marlovian. But the succeeding stanza halts any false, over-optimistic aspirations:

Out of some subway scuttle, cell or loft  
A bedlamite speeds to thy parapets,  
Tilting there momentarily, shrill shirt ballooning,  
A jest falls from the speechless caravan.

The bedlamite may well prefigure the deranged sailor of "Cutty Sark" and the image of a distraught Poe in "The Tunnel"; and the image reminds one of "The Idiot" (CP., p.123) in which another bedlamite shames the poet into considering his vision a "trespass". The recognition here, I think, goes some way to answering Yvor Winters' suggestion that

Crane was indifferent to suicide,<sup>30</sup> and allows too that Crane's "optimism" was qualified by an understanding of human suffering. It is not altogether clear why the bedlamite is also "a jest", but the epithet may imply the indifference of the society to its misfits, and connote something of the "buffooneries of the tragedian" which Crane rehearsed in "Chaplinesque".

Whatever the case in that, the poem continues its images of the distracted and violent life of the city. The sun, which has already been seen striding the Bridge, is now "a rip-tooth of the sky's acetylene", one of Crane's most remarkable images of urban existence. In coming to rest again with the tranquillity of the Bridge - "Thy cables breathe the North Atlantic still" - the analogy between the Bridge and Columbus' ship is suggested, and not for the last time of course. The Bridge's significance is now explicitly interpreted:

And obscure as the heaven of the Jews,  
Thy guerdon . . . Accolade thou dost bestow  
Of anonimity time cannot raise:  
Vibrant reprieve and pardon thou dost show.

The reward afforded by the Bridge is "obscure" because it is hidden from the peering eyes of the multitudes (though revealed to the visionary). But the word also seems to suggest an uncertainty; it is "obscure as the heaven of the Jews" because its rewards may be given by an inscrutable

and terrible God. We might remember that the motto to The Bridge is from The Book of Job; he too discovered the obscure rewards of his faith. The "anonimity" bestowed by the Bridge, and received by the poet, is that unity and cohesion of self with the world and with the divine which is achieved when all hours are "clapped dense within a single stride" ("Recitative"), beyond the "iron year" and the "labyrinthine mouths of history" ("Atlantis"). The reprieve and pardon are thus "vibrant" - an epithet Crane usually associates with the "mystical" experience - because it is the perception of "moments in eternity" when the self perceives "the two worlds. And at once". The poet recognizes that the significance of the Bridge depends on his own "spiritual illuminations", the unique workings of his imagination; thus, as we have noted, the magnificent final four stanzas record a call that it should also be made, or accepted as, a universal myth. Only then would the poet be able to take up his proper role in society.

Crane once explained that in the course of the poem as a whole, the Bridge was to become "a ship, a world, a woman, and a tremendous harp" (Letters, p.232). In fact, we have noted, "bridging" was Crane's primary means of arranging the materials of his poem, and thus of ordering his perceptions. As Glauco Cambon writes: "The bridge does not appear in Crane's poem merely as its literal protagonist (despite the invocations he addresses to it), but because it concretely expresses the inner structure of the world Crane

set out to explore".<sup>31</sup> It is fitting however, as well as indicative of Crane's method, that the poem should begin with an acknowledgement, so to speak, to the initial inspiration of Brooklyn Bridge itself. The proem states the central symbol and also anticipates its later developments. It is one of these developments that must be considered before continuing.

L.S. Dembo has pointed out that in such phrases as "immaculate", "beading thy path" and "lifted in thine arms" Crane attempts to relate the Bridge to the goddess figures<sup>32</sup> of the poem: the Virgin Mary and Pocahontas. By equating the Bridge with Columbus' Madre Maria and with the primitivistic, supposedly Indian conception of Pocahontas Crane was attempting to substantiate his belief that the faiths of the past could be shown to be operative in "the inmost vital substance of the present". Nevertheless, Crane's vision was of a regeneration in modern rather than primitivistic terms. After the "mythical marriage" in "The Dance", the woman-figure is consistently seen either as a sort of elegiac "echo", as in "Indiana" and "Cutty Sark", or as a grotesque parody, as in "Three Songs". In other words, Crane accepts the loss of "the mythical body of the continent" and yet goes on to assert that, though iron has dealt cleavage, has destroyed the ancient mythologies, it

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Glauco Cambon, The Inclusive Flame, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1963; p.135.

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Dembo, op.cit., pp.48-9.



also makes possible the new. As Frank writes in Re-Discovery: "Religion is culmigrant from its base in science, in the exact way that the sense of the Whole is culmigrant from the lower physical senses"<sup>33</sup>. If science could analyse and dissect, its discoveries might also prove the grounds of a new synthesis. It is a faith with which Crane, I think, would have concurred. The mythical body of Pocahontas was to the Indian, Crane seems to suppose, the symbol of spiritual wholeness, the Word made Flesh, and is thus analogous to what he wanted of the Bridge; but not identical to it, for the Bridge must effect the "acclimatization" of the machine, of science and technological progress.

The proem calls into being the subsequent explorations of the poem which culminate in the ecstatic vision of "Atlantis". Here, presented dramatically against its urban setting, the Bridge is still a private vision recognised only in "the prophet's pledge,/ Prayer of pariah, and the lover's cry", which are the voices of Crane's exile; to the multitudes of America, as Crane said, the Bridge had no symbolic significance whatsoever "beyond an economical approach to shorter hours, quicker lunches, behaviorism and toothpicks" (Letters, p.261).

Ave Maria

In a letter to William Carlos Williams in 1908, Ezra Pound explained what he was trying to do in his "dramatic lyrics", lyrics that concentrated on "the poetic part of the drama" and left the rest "to the reader's imagination":

I catch the character I happen to be interested in at the moment he interests me, usually a moment of song, self-analysis, or sudden understanding or revelation. And the rest of the play would bore me and presumably the reader. I paint my man as I conceive him.<sup>34</sup>

So far as Pound is concerned, the situation and action, and character itself, are either to be taken for granted or implicated in the poem only to the extent that they can be made to function symbolically, or analogically. Pound's statement may remind us of Crane's explanation that he was ignoring "the chronological angle" to his materials because it seemed ineffective "from the poetic point of view". In "Ave Maria", certainly, Crane has assumed that it is necessary to catch the character at a moment of song, self-analysis or sudden revelation. What is being attempted is the dramatization of a lyrical mood.

If we remember that this was the only section for which Crane made any attempt at "historical" documentation, it is all the more significant that Columbus is seen on the return voyage to Spain. The truth of his vision is already

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The Letters of Ezra Pound, 1907-1941, ed. D.D. Paige, London, Faber and Faber, 1951; p.36.

proved. Columbus has "seen what no perjured breath/ Of clown nor sage can riddle or gainsay". Still, he "invokes the presence of the two faithful partisans of his quest" to bear witness to his vision "before the tides can wrest away/ The word I bring". These lines are ambiguous since "the tides" are not simply those of the sea, the third world that "tests the word" (if that were the case, there would be no reason to call on Luis and Perez), they are also the forces in Spain itself that he fears may yet doubt or, worst still, mistake his discovery. As Crane was eager to point out, Cathay represents "an attitude of spirit rather than material conquest" (Letters, p.232) and this attitude is identified as Columbus' own. This was not without justification, of course, for Columbus did believe that he was being guided in his voyage by the hand of God as well as by the compass; the Senecan motto which Crane uses is, in fact, taken from Columbus' journals in which it is cited as "evidence" that his voyage fulfils an ancient destiny.<sup>35</sup> In the poem, Columbus fears particularly the desire for material riches and imperialistic expansion that he believes may motivate Fernando's (Ferdinand's) exploitation of the discovery:

-Yet no delirium of jewels! O Fernando,  
Take of that eastern shore, this western sea,  
Yet yield thy God's, thy Virgin's charity!

Rush down the plenitude, and you shall see  
Isaiah counting famine on this lee!

This prophesy makes overt the apprehension expressed in earlier lines, in an imagery that unites the dangers of the court with those of the sea. In the second stanza the "waves climb into dusk on gleaming mail", and are likened to "troughing corridors/ That fall back yawning to another plunge"; such images inevitably recall the court, and the suggestion that Columbus is moving back towards the dark seems to be confirmed in the lines that follow:

Slowly the sun's red caravel drops light  
Once more behind us . . . It is morning there-  
O where our Indian emperies lie revealed,  
Yet lost, all, let this keel one instant yield!

Columbus remembers his first sight of the continent when dawn cleared the "dim frontier" and his ships were greeted as The Great White Birds, descending like Zeus on the virginal, New World. This latter image demonstrates the baroque ramification of symbols that Crane was able to work. Crane had said that Columbus' ship was one of the "bridges" of the poem (probably we should take this to mean that the voyage of the "Santa Maria" formed the bridge; thus noting that "bridging" is a process of becoming as much as a state of being); this transmutation of the ship itself suggests not only the white swan in the form of which Zeus raped Leda (the swan being thus a sort of mediator, like the Bridge, Mary and Pocahontas, between divine and human, eternal and temporal), the image seems to perform also the apotheosis of the sea-gull of the proem and prepares for the aeroplanes in "Cape Hatteras".

But this reminiscence only enforces the fears and perils of the present (Columbus' torment is in the paradoxical "revealed/ Yet lost") and Columbus' struggle is presented in one of Crane's most epic-like similes:

Bewilderment and mutiny heap whelming  
Laughter, and shadow cuts sleep from the heart  
Almost as though the Moor's flung scimitar  
Found more than flesh to fathom in its fall.

The lines are densely packed with connotative meanings. Following the mention of the time when he was "exile" in the streets of Genoa, the image contributes much to the conception of Columbus as hero: solitary, visionary, embattled. The three forces that seem to oppose his vision are present: the sea, his mutinous sailors, and the enemies of the virgin Spain to which he hopes to return. The confused syntax of this passage results, I think, from the fact that Crane wanted to imply all these levels whilst yet maintaining the basic equation. The forces of darkness which have disturbed the rest and tranquillity of Columbus' spirit are equated with the Moors' disturbance of the peace of Spain. The simile seems to imply that Columbus' conquest of chaos and darkness should be repeated in his country. Crane's only hint that this may be so comes in the transitional stanza in which Spain is referred to as "a land cleared of long war"; the brevity may be some measure of the uncertainty (as to whether the private vision will become a public belief). At any rate, the theme is pursued no further in this section.

But the forces of chaos and darkness are within as

well as external to the visionary voyager. Confronted by the test of the third world, by "tempest-lash and surfeitings", a spiritual and moral disorder, Columbus accepts this "bewilderment" as part of the nature of things. The trial is necessary. Yet,

Some inmost sob, half-heard, dissuades the abyss,  
Merges the wind in measure with the waves,

Series on series, infinite,-till eyes  
Starved wide on blackened tides, accrete, enclose  
This turning rondure whole, this crescent ring  
Sun-cusped and zoned with modulated fire.

We may recall that in "Recitative" the poet advises:

Defer though, revocation of the tears  
That yield attendance to the crucial sign.

It is only through the recognition of pain, of suffering in a disharmonious world that the full affirmation can be made. Columbus has entered a dark night of the soul; but this period is not merely a relapse, it is also, and perhaps pre-eminently, a preparation: the final tempering of the spirit. Crane gave what is probably his finest expression of this in "Voyages VI" (CP., p. II3):

My eyes pressed black against the prow,  
-Thy derelict and blinded guest

Waiting, a fire, what name, unspoke,  
I cannot claim: let thy waves rear  
More savage than the death of kings,  
Some splintered garland for the seer.

And just as in "Voyages VI" the goddess "rose/ Conceding dialogue", so Columbus' plea to Mary is answered; the "starved eyes" discover - or recover - their proper vision of harmony, wholeness and the absolute. The "blackened

tides" give way to the ageless blue mantle of the Virgin. Behind the chaos, the voyager perceives the poetic vision of unity. Though the sea has tested the word on the return journey, it has also demonstrated the wholeness of "this turning rondure" and thus, of course, formed the bridge between the Old and the New Worlds, and between time and eternity.

Although there are echoes of Whitman's "Passage to India" here, the symbolism is basically traditional. The voyage itself, as well as the circle and fire, are virtually archetypical of spiritual purgation and development, and certainly Crane explored the "dark night" more thoroughly than the older poet. This may be connected with his near-Kimbaudian programme of revelation. "Whilst there is danger, and a good deal of it . . . in my position, I have also felt that in yours, Gorham, lurked the possible blindfolding of certain recognitions . . . To a certain extent, one must be broken up to live. Which I defend myself by interpreting - the artist must have a certain amount of "confusion" to bring into form. But that is not the whole story either" (Letters, p.196). The rest of the story, for Crane, was that although the background of life was tragedy the idea of God would grant an ultimate vision of life and happiness as at once "fierce and humble", a "glorious sorrow" (Letters, p.140). As he wrote in another letter to Munson, announcing his excitement at the growth of The Bridge: "It is to the pulse of a greater dynamism that my work must

revolve. Something terribly fierce and yet gentle" (Letters, p.129). Although there is at times a disturbing note of bravado and cliché in Crane's several statements as to the purifying and enervating capacities of suffering, it was one of the recognitions he held to, and it may be that it was this which, in part, made him continue work on The Bridge. At least, this conception of the span of human experience enters vitally into the poems of The Bridge and into his final organization of them. Pound said that he painted his man as he conceived him, and it is clear that Crane identified his own struggle and dilemmas with those of Columbus.

Columbus is seen in two ways: he represents the beginning of a tradition according to which America is "a promise and a dream", the "mystic Word"<sup>36</sup>; but the poem also sets a paradigm case to the spiritual voyages of the protagonist throughout the poem. In terms of the whole poem, Columbus initiates the action; in terms of the vision, he represents the consummation. L.S.Dembo has emphasized the importance "Ave Maria" section, and of Columbus. "Ave Maria", he says, serves as "an introduction to and summary of all that follows. . . . Columbus is redeemed by Christ's Hand of Fire and the poet by that of the Bridge"<sup>37</sup>. In fact, "Dark waters onward shake the dark prow free" echoes the insight of the poem: "Only in darkness is thy shadow clear".

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<sup>36</sup>

See Frank, Our America, pp.9-10.

<sup>37</sup>

Cp.cit., pp.30-31.



The poem concludes, then, with what Crane called a "climacteric vision" (Letters, p.306): Columbus manages the resolution of the fierce and the gentle. In recognition of the dreadful paradox of his faith, Columbus intones his angelus, the servant departing through anguish to "kingdoms/ naked in the/ trembling heart".

O Thou who sleepest on Thyself, apart  
 Like ocean athwart lanes of death and birth,  
 And all the eddying breath between dost search  
 Cruelly with love thy parable of man,-  
 Inquisitor! incognizable Word  
 Of Eden and the enchained Sepulchre,  
 Into thy steep savannahs, burning blue,  
 Utter to loneliness the sail is true.

Columbus attains "the pure possession, the inclusive cloud/  
 Whose heart is fire" (CP., pp.86-7); "burning blue" fuses the blue mantle of Mary with the terrible hand of God "who grindest oar and, arguing the mast,/ Subscribest holocaust of ships". The transition from the dramatization of Columbus' fears and doubts to the culminating rhapsody is not so well handled as in the proem perhaps; nevertheless, the reconciliation to God's purpose and the renewal of faith this involves is admirably executed in the symbols of voyaging, the sea, fire and circle, that have been won from the earlier stanzas.

In these final stanzas, the Virgin is discarded, so to speak, in the more direct contemplation of God Himself. And it is recognized, again, that science (in this case, the new navigational knowledge) can sustain and even direct belief in, and intuition of, the deity:

Yielding by inference and discard, faith  
 And true appointment from the hidden shoal:  
 This disposition that the night relates  
 From Moon to Saturn in one sapphire wheel:  
 The orbic wake of thy once whirling feet,  
 Elohim, still I hear thy sounding heel.

The combination of science and faith revives Columbus' sense of God's meaning to man. God is both inquisitorial judgement and love, and the earth, sea and sky are His "teeming span": the seemingly chaotic world that veils the unity. The reflection of God in earth, sea and sky is given of course in the imagery: God extends "like ocean"; His whirling feet describe an "orbic wake" across the heavens; and Cathay, Columbus' America, is envisioned as a continent of "hushed gleaming fields and pendant seething wheat/ Of knowledge" towards which the "white toil of heaven's cordons" directs "all sails". The vision carried by the lone sail is vindicated in a prophesy of cultural fertility and fulfilment.

Still, there is "one shore beyond desire"; the significance of the parable of man is ultimately not in the completion but in the process of the quest. We may recall, at this point, Yvor Winters' fundamental objection to The Bridge: its embodiment of the Emersonian "glorification of change as change", with the accompanying conception of man as "an endless seeker", a voyager who must "farther, farther, farther sail" ("Passage to India"). The result is a pantheistical idea of the nature of the universe: God is revealed in the changing shapes of the world, and thus man

never comes to rest in Him because each stage demands a renewal, and another step to perfection. "We have no way of determining where we are going, but we should keep moving at all costs and as fast as possible; we have faith in progress. It seems to me unnecessary to dwell on the dangers of such an attempt".<sup>38</sup> The dangers are that, in such a programme of restlessness, vitality might become neurosis and spiritual energies, instead of gathering to a centre, become dissipated. We must recognize this as an important motivating principle of The Bridge, but at the same time understand that it was, for Crane, the only possible means of ascension.

The means necessarily condition the achievement. The broken lines at the end of "Ave Maria" are a "recitative", the proposal of fulfilment: "The sea's green crying towers a-sway, Beyond". Weber is wrong, I think, to see the placing of the adverb as an attempt merely "to heighten the emotional tension of the stanza".<sup>39</sup> It may well accomplish this, but it seems more important to see that the capital letter suggests a personification and that, without punctuation, the line mimics the action. Weber also notes that the "sea's green crying towers" were "blue" in an earlier version, and maintains that the change demonstrates Crane's arbitrary method.<sup>40</sup> There is another possibility

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<sup>38</sup> Winters, op.cit., p.589.

<sup>39</sup> Op.cit., p.345. <sup>40</sup>

Ibid., p.345

however; besides being visually just as accurate, "green" recalls the "gleaming fields . . . and pendant seething wheat of knowledge", and thus prefigures the exploration of the land, the mythical body of the continent, that lies "beyond". In this way, Crane prepares for Pocahontas; as Weber later says, "the poet is the bearer of the 'seed' that Columbus brought to the new World".<sup>41</sup> He carries it from the crying towers of the sea.

#### Powhatan's Daughter

In a chapter called "The Grave of Europe", in The Re-Discovery of America, Waldo Frank says this of the modern American:

The American of the emerging twentieth century was the loneliest man in the world: the world of his fathers had vanished, and no America had been created to replace it.<sup>42</sup>

After the Civil War, Frank continues, the great regions of America did not cohere into the Union of Lincoln's vision, but became "a flat, atomic formlessness"; even regional unity was disrupted. The American became an individual, but at a cost. He was almost totally separated from his heritage, unrelated to his land, to his society and his family, and so ultimately divided from himself. It is this situation that Crane exemplifies in "Emblems of Conduct":

<sup>41</sup>

Ibid., p.352.

<sup>42</sup>

Frank, Re-Discovery, p.65.

Orators follow the universe  
 And radio the complete laws to the people.  
 The apostle conveys thought through discipline.  
 Bowls and cups fill historians with adorations,-  
 Dull lips commemorating spiritual gates.

(CP., p.68).

Frank might have been stating the theme of the poem when he wrote, in his own context, that "politicians and pulpiteers mouthed memories" to the twentieth century American, "but their words appealed to a body of ideas no longer in existence"<sup>43</sup>. The spiritual gates are no longer open to the people, the sense of wholeness is lost, and the poet himself must depend on his imagination (symbolized in the poem by the dolphins) "arching the horizons/ But only to build memories of spiritual gates". This poem represents one of Crane's most balanced articulations of his theme of the poet's isolation, and the disruption of modern life. This is what is explored in the poems that make up "Powhatan's Daughter"; the poet seeks to build the bridge from "Rockaway to Golden Gate", another "spiritual gate", presumably, that will open to a "Pacific . . . at time's end" ("Atlantis").

This section is separated into five poems, four of which represent a journey and quest to the "interior" of the continent. As we shall see, the fifth poem presents a special case. There are, in a sense, two journeys. There is the journey from the present into the past (and thus, as

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Ibid., p.65.

Whitman put it in "Passage to India", to "primal thought", a "voyage of the mind's return,/ To reason's early paradise"); and there is also the journey from "the long, tired sounds" of New York harbour to a mythical hinterland, the centre of the continent. In the journey through time, the protagonist discovers his origin, and the origin of the continent; in the journey through space he seeks to discover the bridge that leaps "from far Rockaway to Golden Gate"; in all, to find the unity of the continent and its continuity with a mythical past.

But presiding over these quests, and directing them, is the roving of a mind that is searching for that "span of consciousness" that Crane was only to define two years later whilst writing "Cape Hatteras". It is this ranging consciousness that makes possible the other journeys, and permits Crane the perspective of the continuous present. Weber is condemnatory of this use of historical materials: "Those parts of the poem which seem to deal most obviously with history . . . are actually studies of emotional consciousness, and the historical facts are little more than historical trappings".<sup>44</sup> We can agree with Weber's point without accepting his judgement. He seems to ignore, at this point, one of Crane's most important conceptions of the poem: that it was to show "the living evidence of the past in the inmost vital substance of the present". Whether the

synthesis is adequately realized in the poem itself or not, the technique certainly explains the cavalier use of history and the fact that the materials that seem to Weber to belong to "The Tunnel" are woven into the scheme of Crane's exploration of the mythical body of the continent.<sup>45</sup>

The central symbol of the section is Pocahontas, the Virgin of the Americas. For Crane, the relationship between the past and the present was also a relationship between the imagination and reality, between the ideal and the actual, and certainly these polarities, and Crane's desire to fuse them, explains much about the basic technique and meaning of this second major section of the poem. The passage from Thomas Morton's The New English Canaan which Crane added as preface to the poem after reading W.C. Williams' In the American Grain<sup>46</sup> may be interpreted as a late ironic admission that his transformation of "a well-featured but wanton yong girle" into a goddess of the soil was somewhat factitious, but it also serves the basic polarities we have noted. (I wonder, too, whether the image of the cart-wheeling Pocahontas may not have suggested her relationship to the circle symbols of the poem: "and wheele so herself".)

It will be clear that the "natural" and "spiritual"

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<sup>45</sup>

Cp.cit., p.354.

<sup>46</sup>

William Carlos Williams, In the American Grain, New York, A New Directions Paperbook, 1956; p.78.

are not much distinguished in Crane's work; in his pioneering of the natural body of the continent, Crane was, in fact, spiritualizing the earth in a conventionally pantheistic way. Pocahontas was to be "the mythological nature-symbol" of America, playing "the same role as the traditional Hertha of ancient Teutonic mythology" (Letters, p.305). As the earth mother of America, Pocahontas merges the natural and the divine. Yvor Winters may be correct to suggest that Pocahontas represents only "a feeling of mythicalness",<sup>47</sup> but this was enough for Crane and perhaps as much as he could achieve. One of the basic arguments of Frank's books, Our America and The Re-Discovery of America, was that the European cultures that had migrated to the New World had never taken root, and that this was signalized by the Europeans' failure to understand and assimilate the aboriginal culture. The denial of the Indian was the denial of wholeness, of spiritual development. The European will become a whole man only when he possesses the land "as the Indian possessed it".<sup>48</sup> Thus, this section sees the apotheosis of Pocahontas, just as "Atlantis" projects the apotheosis of the Bridge; and, in his search, the poet possesses the land like the Indian and thus prepares for the assertion of his faith in the present.

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<sup>47</sup>

Op.cit., p.52.

<sup>48</sup>

This is Williams' phrase. It is taken from the chapter on Daniel Boone, in In the American Grain, who is seen as the first to take the Indian "as master"; see pp.136-7.



The poet catches first sign of the goddess' presence in contemporary life in "a waking dream" in New York harbour. The poet continues the quest of Columbus; his vision, however, vaulting not the sea but "the prairies' dreaming sod".

Crane suggested that "The Harbour Dawn" made "an admirable transition between the intervening centuries"; the images "blur as objects only half-apprehended on the border of sleep and consciousness" (Letters, p.306). The poem creates a sort of dream-scape in which the sights and sounds of the actual world recall and project the symbols of the imagination. Thus the lines are interspersed with the questions we ourselves might well be asking: the poet merges his seed "with whom?", and "who is that woman with us in the dawn?" Just as Columbus, the poet waits "Till dawn shall clear that dim frontier". It will not be until "The Dance" that the real dawn clears and the poet's faith "surges him witless"; for the present he must be content with the intimations of "this wavering slumber":

And you beside me, blessed now while sirens  
Sing to us, stealthily weave us into day-  
Serenely now, before day claims our eyes  
Your cool arms murmurously about me lay.

While myriad snowy hands are clustering at the panes-

your hands within my hands are deeds;  
my tongue upon your throat - singing  
arms close; eyes wide, undoubtful  
dark  
drink the dawn-  
a forest shudders in your hair!

The siren-voices the poet hears are the same that sing

"transmuted" in "Cutty Sark" through the nickelodeon, awakening "clipper dreams". But this dream evokes also a sort of cultural memory; the italicized lines represent a "thinking back" into the primordial world which it is the poet's task to recover. Although the goddess has appeared only in an hallucinatory illumination and then, like the sea-gull of the poem, forsaken the eyes, still,

Under the mistletoe of dreams, a star -  
As though to join us at some distant hill -  
Turns in the waking west and goes to sleep.

The actual woman at the poet's side recalls Pocahontas; and the fading star (in "The Dance", identified as Maquokeeta, Pocahontas' Indian lover) and "the waking west" arouse the poet to his quest.

It will be useful, at this point, to note another of the analogical relationships by which Crane hoped to structure this section of the poem. The imaginative journeys into the American past and across the body of the continent represent also a journey towards the consummation of love. Crane explained to Otto Kahn that there is a love-motif, beginning with the italicized lines of "The Harbour Dawn", which "carries along a symbolism of the life and ages of man (here the sowing of the seed)" (Letters, p.306); the subsequent sections of the poem develop this symbolism in relation to the poet-protagonist's childhood, youth, manhood and age. The technique goes some way towards justifying the several autobiographical fragments to be found throughout

the whole section. Passing through the "ages of man", the poet records his growing awareness of the goddess-mistress. Or, to put it another way, the fading of the waking dream of the harbour dawn stirs the poet to re-construct his life in terms of a progressive apprehension of the goddess and, thus, of his developing sense of purpose and fulfilment as a poet. In "Van Winkle", signs of the goddess are detected in:

- the rapid tongues  
That filtered from under the ash-heap day  
After day whenever your stick discovered  
Some sunning inch of unsuspecting fibre -  
It flashed back at your thrust, as clean as fire.

Or, it may be, she was discernible in "the Sabbatical, unconscious smile/ My mother brought me once from church". In "The River", the poet follows the path of the hoboes who "lurk across her, knowing her yonder breast/ Snow-silvered, sumac-stained or smoky blue - / Is past the valley-sleepers, south or west". And thus he becomes more assured of what he is seeking:

I knew her body there,  
Time, like a serpent down her shoulder, dark,  
And space, an eagle's wing, laid on her hair.

Though she is still remote, the image prefigures the appearance of Pocahontas in "The Dance" when the poet "shall see her truly", his "blood remembering its first invasion of her secrecy, its first encounters with her kin, her chieftain lover" (This marginal note is clearly intended to recall the dream-union with the goddess in "The Harbour Dawn"). The love motif, as Crane emphasised, is made "implicit in the imagery rather than anywhere stressed"; he evidently wished

to give the appearance of a gradual growth of awareness, the signs of the goddess emerging from the context of the poet's explorations rather than being forced into it by his pre-disposition to the visionary.

Nevertheless there are two images at least which only take on full significance in the light of the whole poem: "the whip stripped from the lilac tree" with which the poet is beaten in childhood anticipates the painful metamorphosis and recognition in "The Dance"; and in "The River" there occurs an image that might well be cited in any attempt to vindicate Crane's style:

Trains sounding the long blizzard out - I heard  
Wail into distances I knew were hers.  
Papooses crying on th wind's long mane  
Screamed redskin dynasties that fled the brain.

The wail of the Pullman trains' hooters as they traverse the continent (through a winter storm significantly) are equated with the young Indians' screams that witness the tragedy and yet continuing vitality of the race, or, rather, the vitality of their spiritual legacy (Focahontas). And, as Dembo perceptively remarks, "the very image of the white man's cleavage of the continent, the train, is the one thing that helps the poet recover the goddess".<sup>49</sup> Although the train is never permitted the same apotheosis as the Bridge, the rail-road itself may be understood to be the bridge that vaults "the prairies' dreaming sod"; and when we read: "From

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<sup>49</sup>

Cp.cit., p.71.

tunnel into field - iron strides the dew", it is to be inevitably reminded of the subway train that carries the poet through hell towards the ultimate vision.

It is a measure of Crane's grasp of his materials, and of his sureness of purpose during the summer of 1926 at least, that the symbols, and the larger rhythms, of these first four poems of "Powhatan's Daughter" should be handled with such tact. Two further remarks should be made as to the effect of the love motif Crane claimed for the poems before we go on to consider the poems individually. The first point is that, although this section may be taken as a sort of Wordsworthian "prelude", the growth of the poet's mind, Crane was primarily concerned with an analogy. He was attempting to mythicize his experience: to relate reminiscences of his - the poet-protagonist's - childhood, youth, etc. to the "childhood" of the continent. In this sense, the journey into the past is merely a means of articulating the eternal presence of the goddess; by his penetration of the temporal, of history, the poet reveals the eternal. Thus, time is either given depth rather than extension, or else it is perceived spatially: as a span instead of a sequence of events (the "span" itself is internalized to become "a span of consciousness"). This is the fundamental directive of the journeys into the past and across the body of the continent. Crane's hint that the various personae of the section are "psychological vehicles" suggests further evidence (they carry the reader, he says,

"into interior after interior"); and this introduces a final point.

The choice of personae in these poems mirrors a significant development which, again, runs parallel to the conception of the gradual maturation of the poetic vision. Rip Van Winkle and the hobo-trekkers are the "heroes" of the protagonist's childhood and youth, but they are also versions of the many "exiles" in Crane's work. The comic-pathetic Rip is compelled to face an unfamiliar and alien actuality and the hoboes - "ancient clowns" - seem, like the immature poet, to be "holding to childhood like some termless play"; both masks are relinquished for the greater stature and dignity afforded by the identification with Maquokeeta, even though he, too, suffers an exile of a sort. It will be noted that the values of the outcasts, as well as their inadequacies, are neatly balanced. "Rip was slowly made aware/ that he, Van Winkle, was not here/ nor there. He woke and swore he'd seen Broadway/ a Catskill daisy chain in May"; the ballad stanza makes a slightly mocking assertion of Rip's knowledge of the goddess, and the last warning to him is to "hurry along . . . its getting late!" Similarly, Crane describes one of the hoboes: "Possessed, resigned,/ He trod the flame down pensively and grinned,/ Spreading the dry shingles of a beard . . . ". The last image should be taken, I think, to suggest Whitman; that is, so far as the poem is concerned, Whitman is the prototype and final justification for these other men of the Open Road.

Nonetheless they are judged: "Blind fists of nothing, humpty-dumpty clods". The main point to make, however, is that if one of the principal themes of The Bridge is the desire to escape isolation, then the assumption of a tragic and heroic role in the identification with Maquokeeta might at least dignify the situation. It is only exacerbated by the postures of the clown.

We can now pass to a more detailed examination of the poems of this section. In "Van Winkle", reminiscing about the "copybook" characters of his childhood, the protagonist makes his way from the harbour room towards the subway to catch the Twentieth Century Limited for his trans-continental tour. The rhythm is quickened, Crane wrote, "it is a transition between sleep and the immanent tasks of the day. Space is filled with the music of the hand organ and fresh sunlight, and one has the impression of the whole continent - from Atlantic to Pacific - freshly arisen and moving" (Letters, p.306). The hand organ grinds out messages of the quest not only "down gold arpeggios" of the western route, but also "backward" into "Memory". Rip is something of a hindrance: "Is this Sleepy Hollow, friend?" he asks, as if to tempt the protagonist with the dream-world he has just left instead of encouraging him to the tasks of the day. Thus, the poem ends with a repetition of the first lines, a re-assertion of purpose,

and advice to "keep hold of that nickel for car-change, Rip". The coin is the means of access to the contemporary hell from which the poet only finally emerges at the end of "The Tunnel". Furthermore, if Glauco Cambon is right, the coin leit-motif that runs throughout the poem suggests more than the infernal, "it is also the symbolic tribute exacted by poetry, of which one gets an ironic adumbration in the mechanically reproduced music of 'Cutty Sark' ".<sup>50</sup>

In "The River" the protagonist leaves the city in a journey towards the Middle West, towards the confluence of the Ohio and Mississippi at Cairo where the iron stride of the rail-road converts into the "ancient flow" of the river of time. One imagines that Crane's copywriting experience provided some practice for the "din and slogans" of the first two stanzas of the poem. The lines represent, Crane suggested, "an intentional burlesque on the cultural confusion of the present" (Letters, p.306), a culture in which "SCIENCE - COMMERCE and the HOLYGHOST/ RADIO" constitute a modern Trinity. Crane is following what has become a characteristic technique of the modern poet: allowing chaos to mirror chaos. As verse, this particular stanza has only minimal appeal, but the function is clear: it is the world that needs the ordering vision of the poet. It is a world that Crane had faced before "in Akron", in 1921:



C City, your axles need not the oil of song.  
 I will whisper words to myself  
 And put them in my pockets.  
 I will go pitch quoits with old men  
 In the dust of the road.<sup>51</sup>

In "The River" the old men are replaced by the hoboes and the poet, now, does not conclude that "poetry's a bedroom occupation"; it is rather the redeeming grace.

Once out of the city the poet imagines himself joining the hoboes, and the poem progresses in an account of their life and their "wanderings". They are men who have rejected, or have been rejected by, modern society:

Time's rendings, time's blendings they construe  
 As final reckonings of fire and snow;  
 Strange bird-wit, like the elemental gist  
 Of unwall'd winds they offer.

Although they are "wifeless or runaway", have given over their full responsibilities, still they suggest to the poet some connexion with the body of the continent and guide him in his quest. They, too, "search/ An empire wilderness of freight and rails". Twentieth century civilisation with its "keen instruments" that "bind town to town and dream to ticking dream" can represent, despite its "vast precision", only an illusory hold on time and space unless it is able to recognise the goddess whom the hoboes, though without knowing her name, live close to. It is only because his quest can be identified with theirs that the poet's admiration of the wanderers is justified (and, by the way,

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See Weber, op.cit., p.386. The echoes of an early Pound, here, are unmistakable.

it is thus that Crane's attitude is saved from the charge of sentimentality). Despite their limitations, the hoboes "touch something like a key perhaps". They are men who possess an intuitive knowledge of the mysteries of the land. Thus, leaving behind the "ticking dream" of the cities, the poet shares their elemental vision; in the "rumcurcus midnights" he comes to some apprehension of the goddess who will fuse time and space, dealt cleavage by the iron progress of the white man.

Crane intended his journey "into interior after interior" (both spiritual and geographical) to match the historical journey of the pioneers. He wrote to Otto Kahn that the hoboes "are leftovers of the pioneers in at least this respect - that their wanderings carry the reader through an experience parallel to that of Boone and others. I think I have caught something of the essential spirit of the Great Valley here, and in the process have approached the primal world of the Indian" (Letters, pp.306-7). As will be clear, allusions to "the last bear shot drinking in the Dakotas", to the songs of the pioneer days and to a town called "Fooneville" scarcely represent an adequate treatment of the pioneer period. As with the allusions to Cortez, Pizarro and Smith in "Van Winkle", the poet hopes to evoke the presence of the pioneers by re-enacting their journey in the context of the present. For the poet's journey into the interior is a search for the eternal:

Under the Ozarks, domed by the Iron Mountain,  
 The old gods of the rain lie wrapped in pools  
 Where eyeless fish curvet a sunken fountain  
 And re-descend with corn from querulous crows.  
 Such pilferings make up their timeless eatage,  
 Propitiate them for their timber torn  
 By iron, iron - always the iron dealt cleavage!  
 They doze now below axe and powder horn.

The true heritage of the land is denied to the white settlers because its plenitude has been violated as Columbus predicted. The old gods of fertility and wholeness have retreated - or have been driven - into the depths of the mountain lakes where only the "pilferings" of the poet perform proper, though inadequate, homage and thus appease their wrath. The "fish" here, I should say, must be related to the dolphins of "Emblems of Conduct"; they are "eyeless" because they represent some sort of "blind" impulse towards redemption (note that the River flows "like one whose eyes were buried long ago"), and the corn they carry back may be the "seething wheat of knowledge". The images are obscure, but this seems to me the correct way to relate them to the theme of the section. Thus, in a sense, the poet's quest involves here an act of propitiation, and this may explain Crane's claim that "the conflict between the races" was thematically implicated, to be resolved as far as it could be in "The Dance".

The poem continues in a plea to the passengers of the Twentieth Century Limited to "lean from the window, if the train slows down" in order that they can receive a more intimate acquaintance with the land. The passengers on the



The River "flows within itself, heaps itself free", but submission to it will be, like Columbus' submission to his God, an acceptance of suffering. The eternity it makes towards is a "stinging sea" that suggests purgation as much as fulfilment. But it is a purgation that must be undertaken before the goddess can be truly seen.

If, in "The River", the poet concludes with an invitation to all to acknowledge and participate in the course of time ("tortured with history") plunging towards the eternal, in "The Dance" he demonstrates the way. The conflict of the races is resolved, the guilt of the white man is expiated as the poet identifies with Maquokeeta and revives the old gods in the union with Pocahontas. As will be apparent, Crane used the historical fact of the conflict of the races symbolically: to suggest the white man's separation from nature, from the true spiritual potentialities that the Indian gods might have lent.

In "The Dance" the poet sets out to possess the continent as the Indian possessed it. The Indian is seen, of course, as a type of Dionysian intuition and passion, and Crane's claim that the identification with the Indian was to have a cultural significance (Letters, p.307) is consistent with his beliefs as to how wholeness was to be attained. But when we come to the poem itself another explanatory remark becomes of paramount importance:

Pocahontas . . . is the common basis of our meeting,

she survives the extinction of the Indian who finally, after being assumed into the elements of nature . . . persists only as a kind of "eye" in the sky, or as a star that hangs between day and night - "the twilight's dim perpetual throne".

(Letters, p.307)

The ritual of the dance is one of sacrificial death and transfiguration. In the process the poet finally comes to know, and in the person of Maquokeeta, to marry with the goddess who first appeared to him in the harbour dawn. The identification with the Indian chief forms the bridge between the past and the present, between the Indian and the white man, and thus releases the goddess. As a consequence to this, the continent resumes its fertility and the poet himself comes of age. Involved in this union, too, is the fusion of time and space, performed in terms of the symbols of the serpent and the eagle. The significance of the fusion is that the plumed serpent <sup>51</sup> represents the unified perception of reality in which the flux of time is "stayed" by the permanence of space. From the fusion, concepts of the eternal, the infinite and immortal may become again a part of the rhythm of human life since time will be understood, not as sequential, but as cyclical repetition (this idea can of course be related to the imagery of the seasons in the poem).

The poem opens with what is almost an elegy for the separation of the goddess and her lover. Maquokeeta is

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See Weber, op.cit., p.358.

already seen as remote as a star in "the twilight's dim perpetual throne". In a sense, it will be through the poet that he makes his return to the final rite and thus gains his immortality. The spring goddess herself, "whose brown lap was virgin May", has retreated "loth,/ Disturbed and destined" before the might of the white man's iron. The poet's questions seem to imply his situation in a waste land from where he asks if there is any possibility of the goddess' revivification. His own answer is to set out on a further journey: into the "denser green" of mythical nature, and thus in hope to span the years that lie incorrigibly between, that have divided the poet and his society from the Indian heritage.

On this journey - along the mountain stream and then up "the portage climb" - the poet is lead by some force greater than himself: "I/ Drifted how many hours I never knew", "I could not stop"; this develops into a sense of almost complete disorientation which makes the transition into the "pure mythical and smoky soil" psychologically more accountable. The state of mind of the poet hovers close to dream, or some sort of hallucination, so that he sees the goddess' hair in the crescent moon and is guided by her until the vision fades and "one star, swinging, takes its place, alone,/ Cupped in the larches of the mountain pass - / Until, immortally, it bled into the dawn". We may recall the star of "The Harbour Dawn" and appreciate the

pun in the predictive statement that it will "join us at some distant hill". The poet now reaches the "Appalachian Spring" which is both the intensified apprehension of the natural world and, as such, suggests that the poet has returned to an earlier age ("And knew myself within some boding shade"). It is at this point that Maquokeeta is called from his twilight throne, and the poet witnesses the return as a violent cosmic disturbance:

A distant cloud, a thunder-bud - it grew  
That blanket of the skies: the padded foot  
Within, - I heard it; 'til its rhythm drew,  
- Siphoned the black pool from the heart's hot root!

A cyclone threshes in the turbine crest,  
Swooping in eagle feathers down your back;  
Know, Maquokeeta, greeting; know death's best;  
- Fall, Sachem, strictly as the tamarack!

The frenzy increases as Maquokeeta's dance approaches the earth, and thus Pocahontas. He becomes "snake that lives before, / That casts his pelt, and lives beyond", "pure serpent, Time itself" and the poet watches the metamorphosis:

Like one white meteor, sacrosanct and blent  
At last with all that's consummate and free  
There, where the first and last gods keep thy tent.

The poet, however, is no longer mere spectator to the ritual ("I, too, was liege"); he suffers the transfiguration with Maquokeeta:

And buzzard-circleted, screamed from the stake;  
I could not pick the arrows from my side.  
Wrapped in that fire, I saw more escorts wake -  
Flickering, sprint up the hill groins like a tide.

I heard the rush of lava wrestling your arms,  
And stag teeth foam about the raven throat.

And thus, in the ecstatic union with Pocahontas ("groins",



"rush of lava", "wrestling", of course, continue the erotic images of "brown lap" and "bridal flanks"), the poet enjoys the same "vibrant reprieve and pardon" as the Indian sachem. The "winter king" attains a Whitmanesque vision of the "infinite seasons", gazing across the "bivouacs of thin angered slain" - accepting human mortality, in the knowledge that Pocahontas has returned "immortal to the maize". Pocahontas herself, who had been locked in a North Labrador where there is "journey toward no Spring - / No birth, no death, no time nor sun/ In answer" (CP., p.82), is "stirred again" to resume her ancient fecundating power:

She is the torrent and the singing tree;  
And she is virgin to the last of men . . .

West, west and south! winds over Cumberland  
And winds across the llano grass resume  
Her hair's warm sibilance. Her breasts are fanned  
O stream by slope and vineyard - into bloom!

This "largesse" of the goddess is attained by the death and resurrection of the Indian Chieftain. In his identification with Maquoqueeta, the poet also gains his "freedom": the mastery of time and space, the knowledge of the soil, and the understanding that from the "eventual flame" of the sacrificial fire he has emerged as the "lone eye", capable of spanning beyond despair.

Nonetheless, the request to "dance back the tribal morn" is frustrated; the ecstatic dance of love, death and resurrection has occurred in the past and the poet's questioning - in the penultimate stanza - admits that the goddess can no longer appear as she did to the Indian-poet

of the Dance:

We danced, O Brave, we danced beyond their farms,  
In cobalt desert closures made our vows.

Crane had said that this section was to be "the antecedent of all motion - 'power in repose' " (Letters, p.271); the poet's explorations have given knowledge of the body of the continent and of its mythical past, but this is the necessary preparative not the fulfilment of the quest. Thus, although the poem ends in affirmation, what is affirmed is the "vows made" and not the consummation effected. The vow is that the poet will carry the legacy of spiritual wholeness, the vision of the absolute, from the tribal morn into the present.

Following the power and intensity of "The Dance", "Indiana" appears slight and often sentimental. It was not completed until 1928, and this may be why it is so distinct from the other sections. The poem seems rather to be a link in the historical chain than an organic section in the psychological span.

The poem develops the idea that the white man inherits the spiritual legacy of the Indian and attempts to dramatize what Crane explained as "the transference of the role of Pocahontas to the pioneer white woman . . . the absorption of this Pocahontas symbolism".<sup>52</sup> In the early stanzas of the poem there seems to be some suggestion that

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See Horton, op.cit., p.338. The version of the letter to Kahn printed here is different to that in Weber's collection. Cf. Letters, p.307

the birth of the pioneer woman's son is related to the (re-)birth of the poet in "The Dance":

And bison thunder rends my dreams no more  
 As once my womb was torn, my boy, when you  
 Yielded your first cry at the prairie's door . . .  
 Your father knew

Then, though we'd buried him behind us, far  
 Back on the gold trail - then his lost bones  
 ( stirred.

Though the tenses are confused, it could be understood that the union of Pocahontas and Maquoqueeta is paralleled by the union of the pioneer parents: to bring forth the poet who will continue the quest.

However, as the woman tells the story, the transference occurs "on the long trail back" from the gold fields of the West which had promised "a dream called Eldorado", but had yielded only "gilded promise" and "barren tears". The pioneer woman and her husband had "rushed down the plenitude" and discovered nothing but "famine". On the painful and disillusioned journey back, the woman sees "bent westward, passing on a stumbling jade/  
 A homeless squaw" whose look "lit with love shine", and smile suggests to the white woman that, although the white settlers have despoiled the land and uprooted the Indian, the possibility of a true possession of the continent still offers in the next generation. This, presumably, is why the son's "eyes" are important: "There's where the stubborn years gleam and atone". The son's act of atonement will be

to pursue the absolute ("You'll keep your pledge;/ I know your word!") into the twentieth century chaos caused by the "iron cleavage". The land that had appeared to offer material wealth has shown, to the white man, little but spiritual dessication. Yet there remains some hope that the young sailor's voyage and re-discovery of America may see the fulfilment of Columbus' vision of "Cathay".

#### Cutty Sark

Although Crane was doubtful of the use of "the calligraphic tricks and slang used so brilliantly at times by an impressionist like Cummings"<sup>53</sup> he was not above using them when he thought that the need arose. It seems to have done so for the composition of "Cutty Sark". Crane would have excused the technique perhaps by arguing that the "impressions" in the poem have a symbolic rather than a merely "retinal" significance; he was not content to give just the "temporal location", but attempted to relate the experience to "a postulated eternity".<sup>54</sup>

Thus Crane explained that there were two voices in the poem: "that of the world of Time, and that of the world of Eternity" (Letters, p.307). These two voices compete with each other in the rambling talk of the derelict sailor

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See Horton, op.cit., p.325.

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Ibid., pp.324-6.

and the tune played on the "nickel-in-the-slot-piano". It is uncertain whether the sailor is an aged "Larry" or not but it seems to be implied, at least, that he has had some contact with the "navies old and caken", with a time before iron dealt cleavage. The sailor's experience at sea has not been altogether salutary: it has frustrated him and disturbed his sense of the temporal.

I ought to keep time and get over it - I'm a  
Democrat - I know what time it is - No  
I don't want to know what time it is - that  
damned white Arctic killed my time.

The sailor wears "a nervous shark tooth on his chain", and - as a good Melvillean - has come into contact with the Leviathan, but it is only under the influence of drink that he comes anywhere near to understanding these terrible mysteries ("rum was Plato in our heads") in their eternal aspect. Certainly he does not hear the voice of eternity in the pianola (as, we suppose, the narrator does) that sings of the "coral Queen", of the Atlantis that underlies the apparent chaos of the waves.

The derelict sailor is obviously not an encouraging figure but his last words before stumbling out into the Bowery ("I can't live on land!") suggest that, for whatever desperate motive, he will continue his quest. The poet is left to ponder the significance of the sailor's experience. Like the pioneer woman's meeting with the "homeless squaw", the encounter has suggested the end of the quest but more ambiguously and indecisively. The "frontiers gleaming of

his mind" have offered some apprehension of "some white machine that sings", but also "entrances to cooler hells". Before it stops, however, the pianola gives out an interpretation of the dilemma: "the star floats burning in a gulf of tears". That is, the absolute will only be attained in "the stinging sea"; or else, if the imagination is to span beyond despair, it must nonetheless span it - gathering into it the poisons of the world in order to transcend them.

In a letter to Edgell Rickword, Crane suggested that if the three poems - "O Carib Isle!", "Cutty Sark" and "The Harbour Dawn" - he had submitted for publication were read in that sequence they would "chart an interesting curve of the underlying element" (Letters, p.283). The curve, in fact, would ascend from the devastated landscape of the island where "death's brittle crypt" and the "dry groins of the underbrush" leave the poet's imagination "bound like those huge terrapin/ Each day-break on the wharf, their brine-caked eyes;/ Spiked, overturned; such thunder in their strain!" (CP., p.II8), through the alleviating possibilities suggested by the clippers of the ideal past, to the signs of the goddess given in the harbour dawn. Without wishing to disrupt the sequence of the poems (though it seems possible that Crane at some time planned to have "Cutty Sark" follow "Ave Maria"), to order them in this way does allow us to see the extent to which Crane intended the

poem to be transitional. The images present some signs of the goddess: the ships are called "savage sea-girls/ that bloomed in the spring" (We might recall the last lines of Eliot's "Prufrock" here). But the total impression is given in "clipper dreams"; the poet seems to be vacillating between nostalgic reverie and the immanent tasks of the day.

### Cape Hatteras

Brom Weber has argued that "Cape Hatteras" is the poem in which Crane's lack of faith is most thoroughly exhibited. The strained evidence of the desire to affirm makes all the more poignant the failure to do so. Crane believed however that The Bridge could not be complete without it (Letters, p.345), and we have noted earlier the extent to which Crane was encouraged to see the scientific advances of the twentieth century as a sign of an imminent re-birth of the spirit. Ivor Winters' objection to the poem is that it is "an invocation to Walt Whitman and an explicit acceptance of his doctrines",<sup>55</sup> and Weber develops his point by stating, without claiming that Whitman is a false prophet, that "the bridge symbol should not have to depend on the significance of Whitman".<sup>56</sup> Crane, he is suggesting, should be able to stand alone. The general

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<sup>55</sup> Winters, op.cit., p.594.

<sup>56</sup> Weber, op.cit., p.367.

consensus at present, however, seems to follow the claim of H.H.Waggoner: " 'Cape Hatteras' is . . . the most explicit clue to the meaning of the poem".<sup>57</sup> And Albert Van Nostrand, in an extremely interesting essay, argues that if the various journeys of the poem are seen in the order of their composition, rather than the printed sequence, they "bespeak a kind of therapeutic itinerary of Crane's, to arrive - in 'Cape Hatteras' - at some definition of his visionary idea".<sup>58</sup> It seems, nevertheless, that our understanding of the poem, and our acceptance of its function in the design of the whole, will depend in part on what we conceive Whitman's role to be.

Crane originally wrote the poem as "a kind of ode to Whitman" (Letters, p.308), and it is clear that Whitman is invoked to aid the poet in his celebration of the "Years of the Modern": the conquest of space in particular which has been made possible by the invention of the aeroplane. To understand the appeal to Whitman we should note the reasons Crane gave for his admiration. Whitman "was able to co-ordinate those forces in America which seem most intractable, fusing them into a universal vision" (CP., p.183); and, after the publication of The Bridge, he wrote

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H.H.Waggoner, The Heel of Elohim: Science and Values in Modern American Poetry, Norman, University of Oklahoma Press, 1950; p.177.

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Albert Van Nostrand, "Hart Crane's Span of Consciousness", in Aspects of Modern American Poetry, ed. R.M.Ludwig, Ohio State University Press, p.193.



to Allen Tate:

Its true that my rhapsodic address to him in The Bridge exceeds any exact evaluation of the man. I realized that in the midst of composition. But since you and I hold such divergent prejudices regarding the value of the materials and the events that W. responded to, and especially as you, like so many others, never seem to have read his Democratic Vistas and other of his statements decrying the materialism, industrialism, etc., of which you name him the guilty and hysterical spokesman, there isn't much use my tabulating the qualified yet persistent reasons I have for my admiration of him, and my allegiance to the positive and universal tendencies implicit in nearly all his best work.

(Letters, pp.353-4).

Although Crane accepted that the Whitmanian faith in America as a promise and a dream had not been realized, he would not deny the relevance of the vision. We have said that Crane did not doubt the vision but the ability of the society to accept it. The contemporary conquest of space seemed to be directed, in a blind impulse for power and speed, towards destructive ends; only the poetic vision could save this impulse from insane, nihilistic catastrophe by offering a "span of consciousness" that would relate the "new verities, new inklings" to an understanding of the soil, of the mythic past and the eternal.

The opening lines of the poem suggest the collapse of some antediluvian land mass and, rising in its place (from "combustion at the astral core"), a new land "in the west". There may be hints of an Atlantis here: the land that "sinks slow" beyond "the eastern Cape" is the old

Atlantis, replaced in geological convulsion by another, America itself (See Letters, pp.255-6). However this may be, these early lines certainly reproduce the basic descending-ascending movement of this section. The poet has returned from his voyaging "round the Horn/ to Frisco, Melbourne . . ." and re-asserts his faith in "the red, eternal flesh of Pocahontas" (America) which "surcharged/ With sweetness below derricks, chimneys, tunnels - / Is veined by all that time has really pledged us". The real pledge of time is the legend of Pocahontas, but this has been forgotten in the "thin squeaks of radio static", in the illusory capture of the "fume of space". But the equivocal nature of time's revelations are suggested in the lines that follow:

- time clears  
 Our lenses, lifts a focus, resurrects  
 A periscope to glimpse what joys or pain  
 Our eyes can share or answer - then deflects  
 Us, shunting to a labyrinth submersed  
 Where each sees only his dim past reversed.

Time, which in "those continental folded aeons", conducts the rhythms of the goddess, also leads to the subway-labyrinth where one sees, not into the essence of things, but the evidence of "sundered parentage".

Crane indicated a break after these lines, and in what follows he attempts, in admittedly often unrelated poetic forays, to translate modern man's technological advances in terms of the Whitmanian vision.

After the seas are all cross'd (as they seem  
 already cross'd),  
 After the great captains and engineers have  
 accomplished their work,  
 After the noble inventors, after the scientists,  
 the chemist, the geologist, ethnologist,  
 Finally shall come the poet worthy of that name,  
 The true son of God shall come singing his songs.

The whole of "Passage to India" is, of course, pertinent to Crane's work, and particularly to our understanding of "Cape Hatteras"; and not least because there the poet is declared "the true son of God" (perhaps the Word) who will fuse all the "separations and gaps" of human experience into a vision of "the passage to more than India". Again, it is no accident that something of the spirit of "Ave Maria" extends into "Cape Hatteras". Just as Columbus' eyes "starved wide on blackened tides" were to "enclose/ This turning rondure whole", so the modern aviator ("Corsair of the typhoon") must arrive, after "the benediction of the shell's deep, sure reprieve", at the "conjugation of infinity's dim marge anew". But Columbus was a man of faith and science, and the two were not to be distinguished. The twentieth century pilot's "tournament with space", on the other hand, awaits the "syllables of faith" given in the poetic vision. Columbus' conquest of "space, chaos" had extended "new reaches" to the soul, had formed a bridge between the human and the divine. Crane's argument is that modern scientific discoveries should, and could, be given a similar direction.

Crane recognises the symptoms of the age in which



"Tellurian wind-sleuths", "Up-chartered choiristers of their own speeding" (Recall "the choiring strings" of the Bridge; the image suggests the direction of Crane's aspirations for the aeroplane), "shear Cumulus", "Cetus-like" and "enormous Lounger" (Cf. "the lounged goddess" in "Voyages VI") - Crane also admits that their flights have only "splintered space", in the same way that iron dealt cleavage to the body of the continent. Indeed, the aeroplane threatens man not only because of the destructive ends to which it can be put, but also because it can divide him from his natural heritage, blinding him ("eyes bicarbonated white with speed") to the possibility of spiritual wholeness. Like science in general, the achievements reflected in the conquest of space by the aeroplane can only "wrap us with theorems" if exploited without regard for broader emotional and spiritual needs.

But Crane was committed to a "positive" view; thus, though he warns the pilot that "thou sowest doom thou hast nor time nor chance/ To reckon", still he urges him that he has in his control "a Sanskrit charge" which, like Columbus' "incognizable Word", will utter to him that the way is true to God. As L.S.Dembo points, "the Sanskrit charge was really the assignment to plumb beneath death to resurrection and thereby 'conjugate infinity' or define the Word".<sup>60</sup> Again, Columbus' acceptance of the "holocaust of ships" to

which his God "subscribes" is similar to the narrator's acceptance here that the aviator's "sure reprieve" will come only after he has plunged "down gravitation's/ vortex into crashed/ dispersion". Although it is possible to acknowledge, with Dembo, that "the proposition that resurrection always follows suffering and death"<sup>61</sup> is one of the basic rhythms of The Bridge, it is difficult to accept that the pattern is fully realized here. In a sense, he seems more concerned to affirm the re-birth than to register the catastrophe.

In this, Crane's allegiance to Whitman is important. Although Crane had not been affected by the world war as had Whitman by the Civil War, he recognized that their situations could be considered analogous. Thus, it is Whitman and not the aviator who rises out of the "mashed and shapeless debris", for his hand

Is plummet ushered of those tears that start  
 What memories of vigils, bloody, by that Cape,-  
 Ghoul-mound of man's perversity at balk  
 And fraternal massacre! Thou, pallid there as chalk,  
 Hast kept of wounds, O Mourner, all that sum  
 That then from Appomattox stretched to Somme!

It is Whitman who can "plummet" into the poet's despair, and help those seduced by Eliot's "whimperings" to make an affirmation. Out of "fraternal massacre", Whitman - or the Whitmanian poet - can assert "a pact, new bound/ Of living brotherhood". In a sense, too, Whitman is the real "Falcon

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Ibid., p.16

Ace" ("who has held the heights more sure than thou, O Walt!") since, as "Vedic Caesar", he promulgates the "Sanskrit charge" with all the vigour of a conquering general and equals the aviator's perception of space with a knowledge of the soil, of nature: "thou at junctions elegiac, there, of speed/ With vast eternity, dost wield the re-bound seed!/ The competent loam, the probable grass". He inspires "ascensions" and answers "deepest soundings"; and it was Whitman who first drew the poet to his "deep wonderment" in the "red, eternal flesh of Pocahontas":

Cowslip and shad-blow, flaked like tethered foam  
 Around bared teeth of stallions, bloomed that spring  
 When first I read thy lines.

L.S.Dembo has pointed out the similarity of imagery here to that in "The Dance",<sup>62</sup> but in any case it is readily apparent that the whole of this stanza is a sort of interior allusion to the landscape of the Appalachian Spring. Certainly, it reproduces something of the quality of the writing in that poem. The images suggest, I think, the progression of the search: from the "tethered foam" of spring to the point when the laurel "broke through green" and assured the poet of his destiny; then, to the mystic bewilderment of "Klondike edelweiss of occult snows", and ending in the Keatsian fulfilment of "gold autumn, captured, crowned the trembling hill". The "occult snows" might also





to the Whitmanian vision; the poet takes it upon himself to pursue it after the proper consideration of the task.

Afoot again, and onward without halt,-  
Not soon, nor suddenly.

The end suggests the continuation of the search; just as for Columbus, there is still "one shore beyond desire" which will be reached only when the poet arrives at "Atlantis". In other words, conclusion is attained not in the reclamation or resuscitation of Whitman's Open Road, but when the poet asserts his own rhapsodic vision of the Bridge.

### Three Songs

In a letter to Waldo Frank, Crane wrote that two songs had "just popped up", and that "the last 'Virginia' (virgin in the process of being built) may be along at any time" (Letters, p.274). In style, the first two of the songs at least relate to such poems as "Paraphrase", "Possessions" and "Lacrymae Christi", but they are more readily understood than these poems, I think, substantiating Crane's claim that he had found some liberation for his "condensed metaphorical habit" in the "symphonic" form of The Bridge (Letters, p.272).

Glauco Cambon has praised the section: "The remarkable triptych gives us woman in her three manifestations: Eve, Magdalene, and Mary; the mother of the

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 race, the seducer, and the redeemer; sea, earth and air".  
 It will be clear that the three women are facets of the Pocahontas for whom the poet searches as he did in the second section of the poem, but now with a greater measure of despair, with less hope of success. In a sense, like the poet himself, they are exiled from their true functions. Nonetheless, the poems are not utterly despairing; if Crane's note on "Virginia" can be taken as indication, they suggest building rather than collapse: like the "white buildings" ("Recitative") the nickel-dime tower seems to rise to "answer day". There is a sort of "stone" motif in the poems; beginning, in fact, with the pioneer woman of "Indiana" ("I'm standing still, I'm old, I'm half of stone"), the motif progresses to the Medusa allusion in "Southern Cross", to the strip-tease dancer in "National Winter Garden" who shows herself "sandstone grey between", to the final "Cathedral Mary" in "Virginia". The progress of the images seems to imply some sort of ascent; but we should note perhaps the "tower that is not stone/ (Not stone can jacket heaven)" in "The Broken Tower" (CP., p.139) and the "hush of lava" in "The Dance": the molten mineral representing the release of the goddess. The stone motif may also suggest the constricted spirit, dead matter.

The first lines of "Southern Cross" contrive to

present imagistic anticipations of the three women of the section: the woman who appears in the "slowly smoldering fire" of the Cross itself, the lewd stripper of the burlesque lifting her girdles, and the "high, cool" maiden of the Woolworth Building. Somewhere among these fragments is the goddess. The poet's anguish is that, after his "Cutty Sark" voyaging, he can no longer identify her. He calls out: "Eve! Magdalene!" and appeals pathetically: "or Mary, you?" But "whatever call - falls vainly on the wave": unlike Columbus, he receives no assurance from the Virgin.

Concentrating on Eve, the poet finds her a "simian Venus, homeless Eve,/ Unwedded stumbling gardenless to grieve". The "long wake of phosphor" caused by the reflection of the Southern Cross on the waters mocks the poet's ardours and disrupts his vision:

Eyes crumble at its kiss. Its long-drawn spell  
Incites a yell. Slid on that backward vision  
The mind is churned to spittle, whispering hell.

As in "The Dance", the poet understands that the goddess can only be reached and released through suffering in the flames of the sacrificial fire: "It is blood to remember; it is fire/ To stammer back". But the goddess does not now appear to him as a spring bride; the creature that creeps out of the "black insolence" of the water is part "simpering, accomplished" whore, part Medusa whose "rehearsed hair" suggests rather a return to than a return from hades. She is a wraith created out of the poet's

frustration (his "unloved seed"). So, as the Southern Cross itself fades, the poet sees the petrified trillions of this demonic Eve's spawn drown into the light: "man sees himself an atom in a shroud".

The poet's search for the goddess brings him to a strip-tease club; here, the woman he finds offers neither gentle mediation nor ecstatic union, death and regeneration. The poet is assailed by "Outspoken buttocks in pink beads" that suggest to "bawdy eyes" that the world is "one flagrant, sweating cinch". The poem parodies the ritual of "The Dance". L.S. Dembo has noted that the "glacial queen" has been transported to the National Winter Garden and that the title itself is ironic: "the mountain spring garden has become frozen and artificial; the American myth has become national only in a burlesque house, and the dancing fertility goddess nothing more than a tease".<sup>65</sup> The extent of this Magdalene's fertility is to "waken salads in the brain". The "fire-works blare" and the "tom-tom scrimmage" give the "cheapest echo of them all" of the rites of the Appalachian Spring.

The twentieth century dancer holds hints of the mythic Pocahontas, but the ideal has become perverted and artificial. The "red, eternal flesh" and "dancer green" of the goddess is evident only in the "ruby" and "emerald" of

the spot-lights, but "a caught slide shows her sandstone grey between". Her eyes, which in the homeless squaw of "Indiana" had appeared "like twin stars . . . lit with love shine" despite apparent defeat, now "exist" in a surrealist fantasy of fascination and repulsion, "in the swivellings of her teats"; and the only evidence of the "snake that lives before" is the "silly snake rings" that the dancer uses as a motif for her dance; perhaps they are made from the "cast pelt", but in any case they are recognized as "turquoise fakes in tinselled hands". As distinct from the "stirred" torrent released with the goddess, the stripper ends in a "writhing pool" of flesh - "her belly buried in the floor" - and the "lewd trounce" of the climax leaves the poet feeling beaten and spent. With the rest of the "multitude" bent toward this "flashing scene", the poet experiences consummation as flight through "a fleshless door". The night-club dance burlesques not only the lusts of the flesh but the faith in the ideal love itself.

Yet, to the empty trapeze of your flesh,  
O Magdalene, each comes back to die alone.

In his poem "To a Common Prostitute", Whitman says: "My girl I appoint with you an appointment, and I charge you that you make preparations to receive me". Without Whitman's imperiousness, the poet maintains his faith even though consummation and regeneration are frustrated. As the "fallen" Magdalene came to Christ, so the goddess may again appear to the poet.

Though not the object of a mature faith, the "blue-eyed Mary" of the last song does inspire a youthful, light-heartedly idyllic love. The "high wheat tower" she works in suggests the "green crying towers" that Columbus prophesied for America, but it is also a skyscraper of twentieth century commercial enterprise where she must avoid the "advances" of her boss. The poet is still "waiting for someone else though, always", and the golden haired girl suggests that the goddess may be found. Among the "pop-corn bells" and "crap-shooting gangs" of the modern city, the captured princess suggests the light:

Out of the way-up nickel-dime tower shine,  
Cathedral Mary,  
shine! -

### Quaker Hill

Crane wrote to Caresse Crosby that this poem was not one of the major sections of The Bridge, and suggested that "it is by way of an 'accent mark' that it is valuable at all" (Letters, p.347). "Quaker Hill" is a preparation for the descent into the purgatorial tunnel. Just as Whitman's vision of the Open Road had inspired the poet to seek an affirmation of his own, so here Isadora Duncan and Emily Dickinson (if not embodiments of the goddess, at least carriers of the ideal like the poet himself) are understood as artist who maintained their faith even though "no ideals have ever been fully successful on this earth".

In this poem, the poet considers three attitudes towards the contemporary situation. First, there are those who have rushed down the plenitude of "the Promised Land" and, in total disregard for the past, have despoiled it by their avarice and vulgarity. These are the "weekenders avid" who chase up to New England with the quick money they have won at the race-track to spend it "in boot-leg roadhouses where the gin fizz/ Bubbles in time to Hollywood's new love-nest pageant"; they are the tyrannical and brashly arrogant "Czars of golf", and the real-estate agents who are the only ones for whom the promise of the land has paid dividends. Upon these, the poet looses a charge of sarcastic scorn:

What cunning neighbors history holds in fine!  
The woodlouse mortgages the ancient deal  
Table that Powitzki buys for only nine-  
Ty-five at Adams' auction,- eats the seal.

They exploit and destroy, and seem bound to erase the record of the American Dream.

Another attitude is that of those who "are but cows that see no other thing/ Than grass and snow". They accept the anonymous alternation of the "seasons fleeting" so that, as for the watcher in "North Labrador", there is "journey towards no Spring". For them, there is no hope, but neither is there any pain. Their docility is not so much an active faithlessness as an enforced despair.

The third attitude is represented by the group, among them the poet himself, who want to discover some





The poet who has "seen death's stare in slow survey", has taken the "sheaf of dust" (the image suggests a demonic communion), may still "uphold some dream through mapled vistas":

While high through dim elm-chancels hung with dew,  
 That triple-noted clause of moonlight -  
 Yes, whip-poor-will, unhusks the heart of fright,  
 Breaks us and saves, yes, breaks the heart yet yields  
 That patience that is armour and that shields  
 Love from despair - when love foresees the end.

With characteristic insight, L.S. Dembo notes that, "in the context of tragedy, the term 'whip-poor-will' is an adequate enough description of the poet's experience".<sup>66</sup> And we may note too that the whip-poor-will is a night bird, seldom seen, that sings mainly at dusk and dawn: keeping, like the poet, a vigil in the "rumourous midnights". In any case, the last lines suggest that dissolution, both the ritual "breaking up" of the poet and the autumnal "fall", will be followed by regeneration.

#### The Tunnel

In "Quaker Hill", as I have suggested, the poet makes preparation for the descent by a reconciliation to the view that it is the acceptance of human suffering that "unhusks the heart of fright". But a stoical patience, of course, was not enough for Crane. The affirmation of Dionysian joy demanded a correspondingly abandoned "surrender to the sensations of urban life". The elegiac

"Quaker Hill" represents a sort of withdrawal before the plunge through Hades' turnstile and the culminating rhapsody of "Atlantis". In the earliest plan sent to Otto Kahn, Crane explained that the subway was to represent "the encroachment of the machine on humanity; a kind of purgatory in relation to the open sky of the last section" (Letters, p.241). Apart from the clear Dantian archetype, the journey through the subway tunnel provides appropriate material for comment on contemporary chaos and disaffection and, of course, a seemingly perfect antithetical curve to that of the Bridge. The poet sets out to embrace the terrors of the modern city; the journey is the last trial of faith, the twentieth century counterpart to the "tempest-lash and surfeitings" suffered by Columbus.

In "Quaker Hill" the poet had posed the question of the need to "descend as worm's eyes". At the entrance to the subway, he again hesitates as he watches the harassed faces of those who, like himself, seem to search the "flashing scene" ("refractions of the thousand theatres") for some disclosure of purpose and direction. But the poet has already discovered the search to be hopeless ("You'll find the garden in the third act dead"); rather than maintaining unlikely expectations it would be better to "wish yourself in bed/ With tabloid crime-sheets perched in easy sight". As in "The River" ("Breath-taking as you like it

. . . eh?"), the poet gibes at the faces in the crowd: "Or can't you quite make up your mind to ride?" This time, however, he includes himself and decides, with the rest, that "the subway yawns the quickest promise home". The nostalgic walk across the Bridge - see "Cutty Sark" - is no longer possible.

The poet cautions himself to prepare for the underground world he is about to enter and, as he moves towards the turnstile, receives his first intimations of its horrors.

Be minimum, then, to swim the hiving swarms  
Out of the Square, the Circle burning bright -  
Avoid the glass doors gyring to your right,  
Where boxed alone a moment, eyes take fright  
Quite unprepared rush naked back to light.

In "The River", the poet demands "Patience! and you shall reach the biding place", but such sufferance is hard to hold to in the initial panic that seizes him here. He feels exposed and seeks feverishly to return to "the Circle", "the kindled Crown" of Columbus' vision which assured him of his ultimate voyage into the Hand of Fire. But that voyage must follow the "kiss of agony", as the Job-Columbus-poet learns.

Relating also to "The River" is the imagery of water, the continuation of the "liquid theme". We see the poet "preparing penguin flexions of the arms", which suggests that he is again to give himself to the river of time (the subways are described as "rivered under streets") in order to embrace the "stinging sea" of eternity. The distracted

modern man ("the bedlamite") does not, this time, throw himself from the Bridge, but prepares to "swim" beneath the river to arrive, "beyond extinction", at the place where he hears "a sound of waters bending astride the sky/ Unceasing with some Word that will not die". The "River that is East" recalls the Great River itself that "lifts itself from its long bed" and cascades towards the Gulf. (But tracing this development only serves to remind us of the extent to which the imagery of water pervades the whole poem. To take another example from this section, the Atlantis song of "Cutty Sark" - "drums wreath the rose" - is recalled by the phrase: "the oily tympanum of waters" from which the poet begins his final apostrophe.) In journeying under the river, as in being caught up in it, the poet seeks to fuse the tortures of history and the chaos of the modern world into an assertion of vision.

The trial of the vision is severe. The girls - the modern Eve, Magdalene, Mary - no longer "shape up" to the poetic ideal, to such an extent that ("repetition freezes") it is becoming almost impossible to articulate. Love, which had once appeared to the poet "among slim skaters of the gardened skies" (CP., p.101), now appears in an image of waste and repulsion: "A burnt match skating in a urinal", an image all the more violent for its illogicality. The twentieth century Pocahontas ("She is the torrent and the singing tree") derides the poet's desire for transformation: "fandaddle daddy don't ask for change", and his complaints

at the pain he suffers for her sake: "if/ you don't like my  
gate why did you/ swing on it, why didja/ swing on it/  
anyhow". Or else, the burlesque queen giving way to the  
Saturday Mary, the seduction of the virgin brings her, not  
into "bloom", but to barren and only half-guilty tears. The  
voices of these three women are artificial and distorted, as  
if played on "the phonographs of hades in the brain", which  
"re-wind themselves" in an endless aggravation. And the  
aggravation is all the more tormenting because it stirs  
some primal memory, "in back chasms of the brain", of an  
earlier consummation and transfiguration. But the body  
"wrapped" in the sacrificial fire of "The Dance" seems now  
"a smoldering bundle far behind".

It is in these "interborough fissures of the mind"  
(the image convincingly relates the poet's distraction to  
that of the city) that the face of Edgar Allan Poe appears.  
In images that connect Poe with the martyred outcasts of  
"Possessions" and "Lacrymae Christi", the poet represents  
the agonized and desperate situation of the artist in  
American society which he has himself inherited.

And why do I often meet your visage here,  
Your eyes like agate lanterns - on and on  
Below the toothpaste and the dandruff ads?  
- And their riding eyes right through your side,  
And did their eyes like unwashed platters ride?  
And Death, aloft, - gigantically down  
Probing through you - toward me, O evermore!  
And when they dragged your retching flesh,  
Your trembling hands that night through Baltimore  
That last night on the ballot rounds, did you  
Shaking, did you deny the ticket, Poe?

The last question of the stanza, however ineptly phrased, - is

an important one. L.S. Dembo has defined its significance: "Crane seems to be asking whether or not Poe was able to maintain his moral strength, even at the time of his most obvious humiliation; that is, did he have an integrity despite his apparent outer disintegration".<sup>67</sup> By implication, the poet is asking too if "the idea of the bridge" can even survive, let alone resuscitate, a "broken world".

The question requires no answer; it represents the poet's torment and uncertainty as the subway train takes the final "dive/ Under the river". The descent of the train is analogous to the poet's own Dionysian embrace of the darkness where he will receive the "kiss of agony". As the poetry intensifies, we realize that the personal and urban chaos has a cosmic dimension. The tunnel is now personified as "the Daemon", which is presumably the active and universal principle of the chaotic dark. The image of Poe vanishes, and his place is taken by the ironically conceived Genoese washerwoman who seems to connote something of both Columbus and Pocahontas. It is accompanied by this figure that he addresses the Daemon, and the paradox of his religious experience.

Daemon, demurring and eventful yawn!  
 Whose hideous laughter is a bellows mirth  
 - Or muffled slaughter of a day in birth -

Cruelly to inoculate the brinking dawn  
 With antennae towards worlds that glow and sink; -  
 To spoon us out more liquid than the dim  
 Locution of the eldest star, and pack  
 The conscience navelled in the plunging wind,  
 Umbilical to call - and straightway die!

The passage is difficult to interpret, but the major recognitions seems to be that although the Daemon mocks and tortures and debases men, frustrating their aspirations, yet it is also a source of energy. We have seen earlier Crane's defence of the Rimbaudian programme of spiritual illumination and have noted the importance, in the proem, of the statement: "Only in darkness is thy shadow clear". And with this in mind it seems possible to accept that the "eventful yawn" of the Daemon has an ambivalent significance. Brom Weber puts this straightforwardly:

In the end, the poem reveals the complete helplessness of man in his machine jungle, a situation comparable to Columbus' predicament when caught by the storm in "Ave Maria". In that section, as in "The Tunnel", God is a "Hand of Fire" who sears us and gathers from us the "kiss of our agony". The real issue, then, is not the destructive potentiality of Machinery, but rather our faith that the deeds and plans of God are always justifiable.<sup>68</sup>

Within the context of the whole of The Bridge, we need not, I think, identify God and the Daemon: we can, after all, distinguish the Tunnel from the Bridge. Nonetheless, Crane seems to have recognized the terrifying paradox of his faith: that the God Himself enforces the kiss of agony, that it is the suffering individual who attains the vision and

the perfect peace.

Crane's vision is vindicated, and Weber's point answered, only when we understand that the Daemon "takes all"; it is envisioned as draining men, like a succubus, of the "shrill ganglia" - the nodes of human energy - which are "impassioned with some song"; it leaves them speechless and therefore dead. After succumbing to the despair of such a view, the poet feels himself rising again towards the "Word that will not die". He has confronted the probing of death and begins to hear again "the echoes assembling, one after one": echoes of the mythic past, of Whitman's "syllables of faith", of the "sibylline voices" of the harp-bridge that is to resound with his vision. But the poet is not yet ebullient in his re-birth; like Lawrence's "The Man Who Died" (a story that greatly affected Crane; see Letters, p.395), the poet is bewildered and still pained by his experience of death. Unlike the poem of Columbus, the poem of the subway poet does not end in a praise to God even though it accepts a dedication to His purposes. The poet is to escape from memory, the "curse of sundered parentage", and time, both past and future, in a vision of the everlasting presence.

#### Atlantis

In "Atlantis", Crane attempts to make a synthesis of his total vision. A study of the available versions of the poem shows that Crane's revisions were determined



not only by his developing understanding of its place in the design of the whole, but also by the growing possibilities of the bridge symbol itself.<sup>69</sup> Related to this development is the fact that, though in the earliest version of the poem the dramatic situation of the poet is presented in a way comparable to the presentation in the proem, the final form finds the poet seeking to subsume his voice to that of the Bridge. It is significant, then, that the poet does not announce himself at all until the penultimate stanza; up to that point he is, so to speak, only at most the anonymous voice of rhapsody. In fact, as we noted in considering the proem, one of the rewards of the bridge was "anonymity": to be interpreted as the identification with all of life that would permit spiritual wholeness. So the justification for the often congested metaphorical traffic of the poem is that it attempts to fuse the many to its "One Song", to make "one arc synoptic of all tides below". In "Atlantis", that is, the poet expresses his vision of the absolute in a logic of metaphor.

The primary manifestation of the bridge here, of course, is the bridge as "harp". As the motto to the poem suggests, it is music that will relate all "to love in harmony and system". The poet understands Love to be the "Everpresence" to which the bridge will carry him. Love is the absolute, and it seems scarcely necessary to argue, as H.H.Waggoner does, that the use of the term here is

sentimental, since the poet has earlier admitted that "It is/ God - your namelessness". The admission is at once the motivation and the limitation of the quest and vision of The Bridge.<sup>70</sup> At any rate, it seems clear that the new voyager hopes that the "marching strands of song" will hold their "floating singer" until the "wide spindrift gaze toward paradise" (CP., p.103) is answered.

But the poet has already realized his personal redemption in "The Dance". One of the functions of the "anonymity" of the poet until the final lines of "Atlantic" is that it permits a virtually impersonal assertion of the vision. I.S.Dembo has argued that, so far as the "epic implications" of The Bridge are concerned (and they are central, of course, whether realized or not), the proposition of the poem is that: "Society will be redeemed when it understands its tragic nature and through its imagination, which speaks through the poet, moves beyond tragedy to a knowledge of divinity".<sup>71</sup> Without the poet's vision, modern society commits itself to the plunge "down gravitation's vortex", to the unalleviated torment of the tunnel; or else to the docility of the creatures who "see no other thing / Then grass and snow", or to the vulgarity

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Cf. Waggoner, op.cit., p.189.

71

Op.cit., p.18.

of the sojourners at the "New Avalon Hotel".

The poet has demonstrated the redeeming rhythm of life in "The Dance" but, though he re-affirms that it is "through smoking pyres of love and death" that "the timeless laugh of mythic spears" (Note that the cables of the Bridge become "spears ensanguined of one tolling star") will be perceived, he has also accepted that the tribal morn is an impossible myth for the twentieth century. The Bridge must take the part of the revivifying and spiritually enriching "Indian" experience of Pocahontas. As she was "the torrent and the singing tree" that, blooming each spring, made time eternity, so the Bridge must be seen:

- translating time  
 Into what multitudinous Verb the suns  
 And synergy of waters ever fuse, recast  
 In myriad syllables.

With the poet, inspired to the re-discovery of America, the "multitudes" must stammer through the page of dust and steel" in the industrial waste land. Thus, they will recognise the "steeled Cognizance" that will articulate all - man, nature, the machine and God - into a single span.

The "One Song" of the Bridge (the poetic vision that in former ages might have sung the re-birth of the destroyed cities of Tyre and Troy) may then announce the regeneration of society:

With white escarpments swinging into light,  
 Sustained in tears the cities are endowed  
 And justified conclamant with ripe fields  
 Revolving through their harvests in sweet torment.

In his acceptance of the "incognizable Word" Columbus too

"The Dance" affirms the spiritual wholeness of the mythic past that has not been achieved in the present age. The final lines of the poem maintain a delicate equilibrium, an equilibrium that suggests that the poet, though discouraged, will continue to survey the "indubitable frieze/ Of heaven's meditation".

had re-affirmed acquaintance with the "gleaming fields and pendant seething wheat/ Of knowledge". The Bridge is to be the twentieth century "pledge" of the Word

Whose canticle fresh chemistry assigns  
To rapt inception and beatitude,-  
Always through blinding cables to our joy,  
Of thy white seizure springs the prophesy.

As, for the realisation of Columbus' vision of Cathay, "a needle in the sight" yielded "by inference and discard, faith/ And true appointment from the hidden shoal", so in the new scientific discoveries ("fresh chemistry") may lie modern man's guide from the "demurring and eventful yawn" of the tunnel to the vision of Atlantis.

In the final two stanzas of the poem, the poet has awakened from the trance of prophesy to review the actual situation. The penultimate stanza of the poem was a late addition which, apart from the rather pallid ramifications to the significance of the Bridge, serves principally to point to the isolation of the poet. They do not indicate despair and loss of faith (as I argued in the introduction Crane had recognised that the poem must represent the struggle for, not the expression of, the myth, the vision of the absolute). The poet retains his belief in the "One Song, one Bridge of Fire" as a redemptive agent, but also understands that Columbus' vision is not fulfilled:

- Is it Cathay,  
Now pity steeps the grass and rainbows ring  
The serpent with the eagle in the leaves . . . ?  
Whispers antiphonal in azure swing.

## CONCLUSION

In a letter to Allen Tate, after the publication of The Bridge, Crane defended his belief that the poet should not submit to any system of ideas which might obfuscate his intuitions. In doing so, he attacked those poets whom, he said, were not "interested in poetry any more":

Poetry as poetry (and I don't mean mere decorative verse) isn't worth a second reading any more. Therefore, away with Kubla Khan, out with Marlowe, and to hell with Keats! It's a pity, I think. So many true things have a way of coming out all the better without the strain to sum up the universe in one impressive little pellet.

(Letters, p.353)

Yet Crane, too, desired a vision of order and harmony that would make sense of his experience; and this is what he had found in the Bridge. As we have seen, it became the symbol not only for the technological advances of the twentieth century, the capacity of man to impose himself on the world, but also for all agencies that could make "this turning rondure whole". Ultimately, it may be understood as man's poetic imagination, and thus became, for Crane, the primary means for organising his perceptions. As a transcendental vision of the absolute reality, the bridge appears to be an adequate symbol; but Crane was not content to rest with that. The Bridge represents his search for the symbol, for the principle of unity, in all

areas of experience.

It was pointed out in the introduction, however, that Crane himself knew that the poem must dramatize the struggle for, rather than celebrate the realization of, the vision; and he seems to admit afterwards that the value of the poem was as much in the undertaking as in the achievement (Letters, p.353). The repose won by the poet in the final lines of the poem suggests that he has not lost faith in his vision, even though he accepts that his audience may be indifferent to it.

Because these millions reap a dead conclusion  
Need I presume the same fruit of my bone  
As draws them towards a doubly mocked confusion  
Of apish nightmares into steel-strung stone?

(CP., p.117)

The lines assume the dignity of the quest and the anxiety of the poet to realise its vision. In The Bridge, Crane had hoped to escape the rejection they also imply.

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