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# Hart Crane : an explanation of his poems

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HART CRANE:  
AN EXPLICATION OF HIS POEMS

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A Thesis  
Presented to the Faculty  
of the Department of English  
University of Richmond

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts

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by  
Van C. Wall, Jr.  
August, 1964

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## FOREWORD

The second, third, and fourth chapters of this thesis consist primarily of explication; hence, the reader will understand them better if he has either a general acquaintance with Crane's poems or, preferably, a copy of the Collected Poems at his disposal.

## CHAPTER I

### BIOGRAPHY AND GENERAL CRITICAL APPRAISAL

Like so many writers of the twenties, Hart Crane was born in the Midwest—Garrettsville, Ohio, to be exact, on July 21, 1899; and, again like his fellow artists, he matured in a society which he seemed to have already outgrown by virtue of his sensitive temperament. The amoral world of burgeoning American business was a place where no writers belonged. Main Street crowds disliked them as much as they disliked the crowds. And, in finding his own path through that world, he, like many of them, permanently lost his direction.

The problem of finding a place where he belonged was compounded by the incompatibility of his parents, Clarence Arthur and Grace Hart Crane. Their emotional struggle resulted in two inescapable pressures being cast upon their poet-son: the father's ambition to have his son continue his own dream of success in the candy business, and the scapegoat role he was forced to assume when alone with his mother. His biographers, From Weber and Philip Horton, agree that much of the instability and insecurity in his adult personality was largely caused from the titanic conflicts between mother and father in the poet's early life. Samuel Haze quotes from a letter which Crane wrote to his mother years later. It sums up in his own words the chaotic effect on his early life of this parental conflict.

I don't want to fling accusations, etc. at anybody, but I think it's time you realized that for the last eight years

my youth has been a rather bloody battleground for yours and father's sex life and troubles. With a smoother current around me I would now be well along in some college taking probably some course of study which would enable me upon leaving to light upon, far more readily than otherwise, some decent form of employment.<sup>1</sup>

When Crane's parents made their separation final with divorce in 1916, he moved to New York. From this, his seventeenth year, until 1921, when he was twenty-two, Crane was concerned mainly with two things—getting the education that he sorely lacked and trying to support himself in the business world that he sorely hated. He succeeded at neither. He tried his hand at everything from advertising copy to clerking, at one time even working in his father's then highly successful candy business, only to resign after they repeatedly quarreled. Despite an early interest in his studies, he soon gave them up in favor of his newly found social life and his abiding interest in poetry.

From this period in his early twenties, Crane began to live a life of perversion and dissipation which lasted until his death by suicide in 1932. The dominant characteristics in his life were his sexual deviation and his growing addiction to alcohol.

In 1919 he wrote to his friend and sponsor of his poetry in New York, Graham Munson:

This affair that I have been having has been the most

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<sup>1</sup>Samuel Hazo, Hart Crane: An Introduction and Interpretation (New York: Barnes and Noble, Inc., 1963), p. 5.

intense and satisfactory one of my whole life, and I am all broken up at the thought of leaving him. Yes, the last word will jolt you.<sup>2</sup>

At first Crane openly discussed his homosexuality only with friends, pardoning himself by citing the lives of Whitman, Leonardo, and Plato--one author in whom he was particularly well read. Eventually, however, he abandoned himself to carousing around saloons and propositioning sailors and degenerates. Ivor Winters speaks of Crane's oars and knuckles looking like those of a prize fighter from the beatings which he often received as the result of his solicitations.<sup>3</sup> Malcolm Cowley, another of his patrons and sponsors in New York, writes that Crane came to fear that any single and suspicious man he saw, other than his sailors to whom he was so addicted, was a detective ready to pounce on him and lock him up.<sup>4</sup>

In addition to his problem of homosexuality, his addiction to alcohol grew as his reliance upon it as a stimulus to poetic vision increased. Crane claims that he always had the thoughts of poetry with him; it was the language and emotional vision of poetry that alcohol helped transmit from his brain to paper. As he says in "The Wine Menagerie":

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>3</sup>On Modern Poets (New York: Meridian Press, 1959), p. 29.

<sup>4</sup>Erile's Return (New York: The Viking Press, 1962), p. 231.



Invariably when wine redeems the sight,  
 Narrowing the mustard scansions of the eyes,  
 A leopard ranging always in the brow  
 Asserts a vision in the slumbering gaze.

Cowley gives a typical picture of the alcohol-stimulated Crane composing a piece of verse.

There would be a Sunday afternoon party on Tory Hill, near Patterson, New York, in Slater Brown's unpainted and unremodeled farmhouse. I can't remember any of the jokes that were made, or why we laughed at them so hard; I can only remember the general atmosphere of youth and poverty and high spirits. Hart would be laughing twice as hard as the rest of us; he would be drinking twice as much hard cider and contributing more than his share of the crazy metaphors and overblown epithets. Gradually he would fall silent, and a little later we would find that he had disappeared. In lulls that began to interrupt the laughter now that Hart was gone, we would hear a new hubbub through the walls of the next room--the phonograph playing a Cuban rumba, the typewriter clacking simultaneously; then the phonograph would run down and the typewriter stop while Hart changed the record, perhaps to a torch song, perhaps to Ravel's "Bolero." Sometimes he stamped across the room, declaiming to the four walls and the slow spring rain. An hour later, after the rain had stopped, he would appear in the kitchen or on the croquet court, his face brick red, his eyes burning, his already iron-gray hair bristling straight up from his skull. He would be chewing a five-cent cigar which he had forgotten to light. In his hands would be two or three sheets of typewritten manuscript, with words crossed out and new lines scrawled in. "Read that," he would say. "Isn't that the greatest poem ever written?"<sup>5</sup>

But the need for alcohol to stimulate his philosophy into images of poetry gradually occurred more frequently, and he met the need with greater quantities. Eventually, he had no time to write down the visions even when he had them.

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<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

The stories of Crane's idiosyncrasies are not merely humorous anecdotes, but all too real reflections of an inner turmoil that was rapidly consuming his entire being. The friends, upon whom he so readily imposed for shelter, food, and even handouts, at first complained only vaguely. "The 1920's had their moral principles," Cowley says, and "one of them was not to pass moral judgments on other people, especially if they were creative artists."<sup>6</sup> But in the end, the scenes of obscenity, broken furniture, and typewriters being thrown out of windows came to be too abusive for anyone; and it was Crane, Cowley continues, who "took to avoiding his friends" out of a sense of guilt.<sup>7</sup>

Crane came to New York to write poems and regardless of what his private life was like, he did produce some noteworthy poetry. Consequently, before investigating a possible cause-and-effect relationship between his life and his works, it would be worth while to establish a general appraisal of his work and a general explanation of his method of composition.

The critics who held Crane in greatest esteem were his friends and fellow poets who saw in his life the proper way to revolt against the materialism of the age. Most of this type of criticism, produced either during his lifetime or shortly after his death, is over apologetic to any of Crane's faults. Philip Horton's biography is among these early works. He blames such shortcomings as Crane's homosex-

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<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 232.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 233.

uality and lack of discipline on his unhappy and insecure family life.

Later critics vary in their opinion of Crane because he is often judged by his original and sensitive power of words rather than through the often muddled content of his works. Babette Deutsch, referring to him as "an alchemist of the word," calls him a religious poet unable to create his own belief as Yeats did and unable to accept the established beliefs as Eliot did. He echoes Wordsworth, she says, in thinking that contemporary poetry should include all the "shifting factors" of the modern world.<sup>8</sup> Likewise, he shares with Whitman a pleasure in the native scene. [This similarity will be developed further in the section on The Bridge.<sup>7</sup> It is significant, however, that his treatment of the native scene lies mainly in his chief work, The Bridge, and it is in this work that he fails most colossally.

M. S. Rosenthal, like Deutsch, sees Crane not as a thinker, but as a poet gifted with natural poetic ability, like Rimbaud or Dylan Thomas in his metaphorical association.<sup>9</sup> In the end most critics agree that it is in his short lyrics, sometimes just a stanza of an otherwise mediocre poem, where Crane's efforts shine the brightest.

As would be expected with a poet like Crane, whose inspiration and resources are derived so much from within, particular influences

<sup>8</sup>Poetry in Our Time (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1965), pp. 349-50.

<sup>9</sup>Modern Poets (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960), p. 169.

upon him from other poets are few and slight. This is true because Crane always thoroughly absorbed influences into his own style before he wrote a poem. The only two influences clearly discernible in his poetry are those of the imagists and French symbolists, and they quickly merge into his own maturing idiom. Even then only a few of his early poems record those influences from other poets.

Just what his idiom was is difficult to define. Because of his irrational surrender of the intellect to the will in his habits of writing, some critics have associated him with the madcap French movement of Dadaism—a deliberate attempt to replace sanity with madness in protest against World War I. But as Heinicy replies, "There is a forced and cerebral ingenuity about Crane's poetry that distinguishes it from the true irrationality of Dada or the 'automatic writing' of someone like Gertrude Stein."<sup>10</sup>

Samuel Hazo quotes a comment by R. P. Blackmur which is significant in pinpointing what Crane established as an idiom, regardless of its subjective evaluation of talents:

Crane habitually re-created his words from within, developing meaning to the point of idiom; and that habit is the constant and indubitable sign of talent. The meanings themselves are the idioms and have a twist and life of their own. It is only by ourselves meditating on and using these idioms—it is only by emulation—that we can master them and accede to their life.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>Donald Heinicy, Recent American Literature (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1965), p. 494.

<sup>11</sup>Hazo, p. 18.

William Van O'Connor says the same thing basically: Crane imagines information into a word or "quickens an object into metaphor."<sup>12</sup> Thus, "the complexity of an entire poem raises the relatively simple meaning above mere statement into esthetic experience."<sup>13</sup>

Some of the blame for Crane's obscurity must be placed on the intoxicants that he used to stimulate his creativity. These efforts which he took to stimulate vivid poetic experience would seem to be the very obstacle to prevent his mind from expressing vividly what he had experienced. Somehow, there were holes in his intoxication through which the lights of clear metaphoric expression shone. Perhaps only Crane will ever know exactly how he got the lights to shine.

In one of his own comments on his obscurity, Crane explained that his "illogical" associations of words were intentional. In a reply to Harriet Monroe's inquiries concerning the obscurities in his poem "At Melville's Tomb," he says:

I may very possibly be more interested in the so-called illogical impingements of the connotations of words on the consciousness (and their combinations and interplay in metaphor on this basis) than I am in the preservation of their logically rigid specifications at the cost of limiting my subject matter and perceptions involved in the poem.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>Sense and Sensibility in Modern Poetry (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1963), p. 79.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 75.

<sup>14</sup>From Weber, Hart Crane: A Biographical and Critical Study (New York: The Bradley Press, 1948), p. 417.

Malcolm Cowley's remarks best sum up Crane's method of composition:

Essentially Crane was a poet of ecstasy or frenzy or intoxication; you can choose your word depending on how much you like his work. Essentially he was using rhyme and meter and fantastic images to convey the emotional states that were induced in him by alcohol, jazz, machinery, laughter, intellectual stimulation, the shape and sounds of words and the madness of New York in the late Coolidge era.<sup>15</sup>

The themes in Hart Crane's poetry, with the exception of The Bridge, can all be traced to his inner turmoil. "Objective reality," Waldo Frank says, "exists in these poems only as an oblique moving-inward to the poet's mood."<sup>16</sup> The stories and moods of these lyrics are direct insights into the emotional moments of Crane's days and nights between his nineteenth and twenty-fifth years. Consequently, rather than an integrated philosophy, what emerges is a sort of autobiography of painful experiences. The result of this is that some lines indicate better than an entire poem his degree of poetic ability.

To find any sense of unity in Crane's poems, then, it is necessary to discover what, if any, ordered process was occurring in his mind. In this relationship, Waldo Frank says that Crane was a mystic:

The mystic is a man who knows, by immediate experience, the organic continuity between his self and the cosmos. This experience, which is the normal fruit of sensi-

<sup>15</sup>Cowley, p. 230.

<sup>16</sup>Waldo Frank (ed.), The Collected Poems of Hart Crane (New York: The Liveright Publishing Corporation, 1946), p. xv.

tivity, becomes intense in a man whose native energy is great; and lest it turn into an overwhelming, shattering burden, it must be ruthlessly disciplined and ordered. . . . The true solution is too arduous for most men; by self-discipline and self-knowledge, it is to achieve within one's self a stable nucleus to bear and finally transfigure the world's impinging chaos. . . . Crane did not personally achieve it.<sup>17</sup>

It is possible to see in some of his poems that Crane was a mystic in this sense. Regardless of his specific application, his message can all too often be traced to one integer: the poet-mystic's painful awareness that he is at odds with the remainder of society.

An example of this theme of the alienated poet comes through in "My Grandmother's Love Letters." He wishes that he could tell her what he, the mystic-poet, knows, but she wouldn't understand, likewise, in "Chaplinesque" the poet is pictured as a kitten on the street, scurrying around in order to avoid being trampled by the crowd.

Another, and perhaps more important, way of looking at Crane's poems from a thematic standpoint is to regard them as the record of a quest. The conventional stages of the quest motif are innocence, initiation into evil, and subsequent establishment of a goal which is reached in the end. If Crane's early life is regarded as a state of innocence out of which he was thrust by his warring parents, then the period of initiation into evil is recorded in the poems of White Buildings. The goal which he established was to

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<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p. xiii.

write a magnum opus, a great poem which would create order out of the chaos of his period of initiation. The poem "For the Marriage of Helen and Faustus" indicated that Crane was headed in the direction of this myth-making stage of his quest; and the poems of "Voyages" are his statement to the reader that he knows he is on a quest, that he has now passed through the first two stages, and that The Bridge will complete his quest. That Crane conceived of himself as on a quest is further attested to by the fact that the poem, "Legend," which he placed first in White Buildings, contained lines indicating that he knew he was searching:

It is to be learned  
This cleaving and this burning,  
But only by the one who  
Spends out himself again.

Crane published only three volumes of poetry. White Buildings, published in 1926, contained the poems of his early twenties. In the poems in this volume like "Chaplinesque," "Voyages," and "Praise for an Urn," Crane found his best method of expression--the short lyrical statement. His progress through the influences of imagism and symbolism to his own idiom is rapid and can be traced early in the volume. The next volume, The Bridge, was published in 1930 after several years of struggle to complete the final stages. With the exception of a few lyrical moments, notably the "Proem," "The Tunnel," and "Ave Maria," most critics agree that Crane had over-extended his talents in this sprawling, optimistic reaction to



Eliot's Waste Land. His final volume, Key West: An Island Sheaf, does not contribute significantly to his poetic stature except for "The Broken Tower," in which he approached the same level of lyricism that he did in White Buildings.

## CHAPTER II

### AN EXPLICATION OF THE POEMS IN WHITE BUILDINGS

The poems contained in White Buildings are Crane's best. In the first poems in this volume, he is obviously better in writing certain lines and phrases than in creating entire poems. But by the end of the volume, in "For the Marriage of Helen and Faustus" and "Voyages," he is composing poems which maintain an excellence throughout.

"My Grandmother's Love Letters" represents Crane at his simplest reliance upon imagery. He has found his grandmother's love letters in an attic. With the rain beating a cadence reminding him of the passing time, the poet reads with reverence the "brown and soft" letters of memory.

Over the greatness of such space  
Steps must be gentle.  
It is all hung by an invisible white hair  
It trembles as birch limbs webbing the air.

He would like to see her, but he realizes that his grandmother could not understand many things that he would show her if she were with him now. So the poem ends with the rain hitting the roof, gently laughing its message of time that has passed. This poem of conventional nostalgia for a member of his family was unusual for Crane. Even when his style matured, he seldom wrote about other people at all, much less in a vein of sentimentality.

"Garden Abstract" has one predominant image, but its style shows

Crane becoming more than a simple impressionist. Furthermore, the second stanza contains a simple step towards creating a myth. In stanza one a woman, probably a modern Eve, stands in a garden and is consumed with desire for the apple and the green tree upon which it grows. Then, Hazo says, "the woman in effect submerges her identity in the object of her desire until she has achieved a sense of unity possible only through love."<sup>18</sup> She has become the tree and apple through her desire. This myth is a method which anticipates the message of "Legend"—when someone "spends out himself" by way of painful experiences of sensitivity, he becomes by virtue of his "drop by drop" of blood a universal spirit with objects of beauty and feeling.

This neurotic mirage, if indeed it is a mirage, is not unlike the Christ experience whereby Jesus was united with his father's spirit through his spiritual suffering. Several modern poets have come to experience and write about this unifying effect of sensitive awareness in which people lost the weakness of individuality and become one with the main stream of the universe. Even when Crane was not writing about this experience of the mystic mind, it was not far from the surface of his consciousness and it affected every experience in his life.

Brom Weber, discussing these early poems in White Buildings, says that the best of them are those which contain physical description

<sup>18</sup>Hazo, p. 18.

such as "In Shadow."<sup>19</sup> Crane pictures a woman in a garden. Entirely through description he suggests the woman's feelings of anticipation for her lover. She moves from sunlight into shadows

Gently, yet suddenly, the sheen  
Of stars inwraps her parasol.  
She hears my step behind the green  
Twilight, stiller than shadows, fall.

"North Labrador" is another poem of descriptions:

A land of leaning ice  
Hugged by the plaster-grey arches of sky,

but in the second stanza Crane personifies the land by addressing it as an isolated woman forever barren:

"Has no one come here to win you,  
Or left you with the faintest blush  
Upon your glittering breasts?  
Have you no memories, O Darkly Bright?"

What poetry there is in these poems owes its existence to the images. Weber explains that Crane was as yet under twenty years old and the complexities of his emotion were still too vague for him to communicate them.<sup>20</sup> But the words and images are those of a poet and their brilliance reiterates the words of Rosenthal, quoted before, that Crane was gifted with natural poetic abilities.

"Pastorale," expressing the regret over the passing of summer, anticipates the symbolist influence on Crane. Summer terminates abruptly as a bouquet of violets withers:

<sup>19</sup>Weber, p. 44.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid.

Summer scarcely begun  
 And violets,  
 A few picked, the rest dead?

Another poem leaning toward the fully realized symbol typical of Crane's later stages is "Sunday Morning Apples." Dedicated to an artist-lithographer who sheltered the sensitive Crane during his lonely days in Cleveland, the poem centers on a still-life painting of apples done by his friend William Sommer. Crane depicts the apples as the symbol of all art--art which selects and transfigures until the inner reality of life is reached just as the painter selects and transfigures until the inner quality of the apples is manifested in his painting.

In these early poems Crane appears to be staggering on his shaly, new poetic legs, not so unsure that he is holding a poetic talent as he is unsure where to set it down. Such pieces as "In Shadow" and "North Labrador" seem to be mere exercises in transposing a mood--a breath-taking moment of beauty--into a poem.

Of course, the imagist technique is here, but with Crane imagism seems to be a stage of his own development rather than the result of an influence on him. Imagism as a school was a technique of writing a poem; imagism as a development of Crane's poetic technique was the essence of his poetry. He does not in this particular sense write a poem; he merely writes poetry. When he does come to write what could be termed a poem, it does not rely on imagism for its technique.

Another motif Crane discovered during this early period is the isolation of the artist from society. In "Sunday Morning Apples" Crane

pouted over the transforming power of art. He depicts his painter-friend and himself as being ostracized because of their devotion to art. When Crane spoke of his loneliness during either this stage of his poetry or later stages, he spoke too directly to achieve any real poetic power. The words and poetic techniques were interesting, even dazzling at times, but his theme was shallow. Only when he disguised—objectified—his message (at times merely that he was lonely and sensitive) did he achieve mature expression; and this didn't occur until such poems as "For the Marriage of Helen and Faustus" and "Voyages" appeared.

Besides his social life and grubbing for work to keep alive, Crane somehow found time to make a fairly thorough study of the Elizabethans, particularly Marlowe, Jonson, and Drayton; and the French Symbolists, particularly Mallarmé and Laforgue. As a result poems like "Stark Mad" and "Black Tambourine" show the poet sustaining one symbol throughout rather than building various small images under one title.

"Black Tambourine" concerns the Negro in early twentieth-century America. Crane pictures the Negro in a mid-kingdom:

The black man forlorn in a cellar  
Wanders in some mid-kingdom, dark, that lies  
Between his tambourine, stuck on the wall,  
And, in Africa, a carcass thick with flies.

The entire poem works towards constructing a particular sociological concept of the Negro—a concept that depicts him somewhere between man and beast, somewhere between the tambourine, nin-

strel-like picture of the Negro in the public mind and the carcass in Africa, alive only with flies. Regardless, it and the following poem, "Stark Major," show that Crane had left simple images behind in order to construct a poem whose components were unified into a whole.

"Stark Major" illustrates what Weber referred to as Crane's inability at this time to write about emotion. The poem involves the parting of lovers at dawn in a sense that anticipates a parting which they will later experience because the woman is pregnant. Weber notes that few images approach a direct expression of feeling, exceptions being "broken eyes" and "mound of undelivered life."<sup>21</sup> The poet builds a good central image of departing lover through the third stanza:

It is the time of sundering . . .  
Beneath the green silk counterpane  
Her mound of undelivered life  
Lies cool upon her--not yet pain.

But once the lovers part and the man walks out into the street, Crane's opinion becomes vindictive toward the woman possibly because of his homosexuality. The man leaves, hearing the woman's laughing and happy goodbyes as he walks down the steps. But, Crane says, the man

Will find the street, only to look  
At doors and stone with broken eyes.

Then, he lets us know what the real separation is—that the woman will

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<sup>21</sup>Ibid., p. 118.

have the baby on her own; the man will not know this "memory."

Walk now, and note the lover's death  
Henceforth her memory is more  
Than yours, in cries, in ecstasies  
You cannot ever reach to share.

"Praise for an Urn" and "At Melville's Tomb" reveal Crane at his best. The imagist and symbolist influences have touched his style and left their mark, but he has emerged with an idiom of his own. Incidentally, these two poems, which critics agree to be among his few best poems, are elegies.

"Praise for an Urn" is an elegy to Ernest Nelson, a Norwegian with whom Crane had identified himself because he, like Crane, had been forced to find employment other than poetry. Nelson had gradually been forced to give all his time from painting over to the business of lithography. In the first stanza Crane mentions something of Nelson's characteristics:

The everlasting eyes of Pierrot  
And, of Gargantua, the laughter.

"His thoughts," he says in stanza two, "delicate riders of the storm," were legacies that will outlive the man and possibly life itself in the sense that artistic truth is greater than man. He touches on the importance of physical time in stanza four:

As perched in the crematory lobby  
The insistent clock commented on.

The final stanza is the finest of the poem, almost an epitaph:

Scatter these well-meant idioms  
Into the smoky spring that fills



The suburbs, where they will be lost.  
They are no trophies of the sun.

In a manner reminiscent of Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind," Crane would scatter his words much as Nelson's ashes will be scattered. Words will never be an adequate facsimile of life. This last statement is the central paradox of the poem: an attempt to remember a dead man with the futility of words. Contrasts like this and others that Hazo points out in this poem, are not unique but typical of this third stage of Crane's development.<sup>22</sup>

It was about "At Melville's Tomb" that Crane wrote his reply to Harriet Monroe which stated that he was interested in "the illogical impingements of the connotation of words." A glance at the poem explains why she was puzzled.

Often beneath the wave wide from this ledge,  
The dice of drowned men's bones he saw bequeath  
An embassy. Their numbers as he watched  
Beat on the dusty shore and were obscured.

Crane went on to explain in that letter some of the obscurities: the dice are ground bones of dead men; bearing their undelivered message, they have come with the tide. The second stanza alludes rather obscurely to a sinking vessel which sends its message up to the top of the water in the form of broken timbers; these are sucked up to the top by action of the whirlpool created by its sinking.<sup>23</sup> The third stanza might refer to the dead men under the sea gazing eternally at the sky:

<sup>22</sup>Hazo, p. 31.

<sup>23</sup>Weber, p. 120.

Frosted eyes there were that lifted altars  
And silent answers crept across the stars.

This idea that humanity is out on the sea gazing at the stars for "silent answers" was a favorite image of Crane's; he used it later in "Voyages II." Weber cites Crane's own explanation of "Frosted eyes . . . altars," and it is as obscure as any part of the poem. He "refers simply," he says,

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>24</sup>

The final stanza says that nautical instruments such as "compass and quadrant" can chart "no farther tides" than the eternity spoken of in the preceding stanza. The final line (this fabulous shadow only the sea keeps) established the fact that even though Melville is observing and silently understanding these messages while he is in his tomb, only the sea can keep his spirit; he is forever out there with the "dice of drowned men's bones," the passing wrecks, and the "frosted eyes."

"Praise for an Urn" and "At Melville's Tomb" indicate little or no advance in his thematic development. The "used and tried isolation of the artist" theme is the subject in "Praise for an Urn." It varies from the usual only in the fact that ostensibly his subject is Melville; however, by extension and implication he is still the

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<sup>24</sup>Ibid.

subject of his poem.

One innovation worth noting concerning "At Melville's Tomb" is Crane's use of sea and time, both of which subjects he used later in his highly successful "Voyages." Even as early as this in his career Crane was absorbed by the symbolic potentialities of the sea. In his sexual perversions he preferred sailors, the people of the sea; in his major work he chose a bridge as a symbol because it spanned portions of the sea; and in the sense that it represented time and eternity, he chose the sea as his method of self-destruction.

"Chaplinesque" contains some of Crane's finest poetry. Although it appears at first reading to be easy to understand, the second reading yields more questions than answers.

The title was inspired by Crane's love for the clown Chaplin. In the poem Chaplin is synonymous with today's poets. Their symbol in the poem is the kitten. After establishing in the first stanza the idea that man makes his "mock adjustments" to whatever the "wind" of life chances to put in his "ample pockets" (wonder if he got the image of "ample pockets" from Chaplin's baggy pants pockets which always seemed to house his hands?) Crane states that man's very humanity

Can still love the world, who find  
A famished kitten on the stop, and know  
Recesses for it from the fury of the street,  
Or warm torn elbows coverts.

Hazo quotes Crane in a letter to William Wright explaining

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poems while containing the usual flair of brilliance in some lines.

In "Repose of Rivers" the past is intruding on the present. Crane remembers days when "age had brought me to the sea" by contrasting his present sweltering with cool sea breezes, "a sarabande of the wind mowed on the mead." The city is the villain here:

After the city that I finally passed  
With scalding unguents spread and smoking darts.

The second poem on this theme, "Passage," contains a similar reaction to the city. Hazo says that Crane had been invited to spend a few days at Slater Brown's farm in Patterson, New York.<sup>27</sup> In the poem he exults as the soot and smoke of distant mills pass by the train, which, he fancies, is promising him "an improved infancy."

"Lachrymae Christi" and "Possessions" show the extent to which Crane's personalized idiom caused obscurity. Philip Horton says that even Crane could not explain all the images and transitions of "Possessions." It is no wonder why:

Witness now the trust! the rain  
That steals softly direction  
And the key, ready to hand—sifting,  
One moment in sacrifice (the direct)  
Through a thousand nights the flesh  
Assaults outright for bolts that linger  
Hidden—O undirected as the sky  
That through its black foam has no eyes  
For this fixed stone of lust . . .

Horton quotes Crane's "General Aims and Theories" in explaining "Possessions": "A poem like 'Possessions,'" Crane says, "really

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<sup>27</sup>Hazo, p. 40.

cannot be technically explained. It must rely (even to a large extent with myself) on its organic impact on the imagination to successfully imply its meaning."<sup>28</sup> Hazo claims that "it is essentially a contrast between life and death."<sup>29</sup> The final stanza is representative of its obscurity:

Tossed on these horrors, who bleeding dies  
Lacks all but piteous admissions to be split  
Upon the page whose blind sum finally burns  
Record of rage and partial appetites.  
The pure possession, the inclusive cloud  
Whose heart is fire shall come--the white wind raze  
All but bright stones wherein one smiling plays . . .

In short, it means that the poet records and preserves the "blind sum" of his "rage and partial appetites" until he is finally possessed by death, which is not something undesirable but

The pure possession, the inclusive cloud  
Whose heart is fire . . . .<sup>30</sup>

This poem, aptly titled "Possessions," emphasizes an idea which later became an integral part of Crane's philosophy. The progress goes as follows: Crane would "experience," in his own peculiar way, the events of his life (perhaps as Waldo Frank suggested he "knows" experience in the manner of a mystic) and later would record them in poetry. Making poetry out of experience thus preserved or "possessed" the experiences.

<sup>28</sup>Horton, p. 172.

<sup>29</sup>Hazo, p. 42.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid.

Perhaps if Crane could have reached a more mature stage of this philosophy, it would have saved him; for he came in his later poems to realize and incorporate this conception of "saving" or "possessing" experience into the stages of his great quest. It becomes the only order in his chaos; more completely understood, it could have annihilated his chaos by giving it purpose.

"Lachrymæ Christi" is at least as obscure as "Possessions." Whether Crane thought that this obscurity was justified is not certain, but he wrote only a few poems that were so difficult. Horton says that Crane consciously strove with his difficult poems to make them less obscure. But, as Crane had said, "it was part of a poet's business to risk not only criticism—but folly—in the conquest of consciousness."

"Crane was not at all dismayed," Horton continues, "by the re-  
tory of what seemed to many an impossible paradox. As long as a poem caused an 'impact on the imagination' of the reader he was satisfied that he had not failed of successful creation."<sup>31</sup>

To appreciate "Lachrymæ Christi" one need only appreciate the odd sounds of words:

Whitely, while benzine  
Rinsings from the moon  
Dissolve all but the windows of the mills  
(Inside the sure machinery  
Is still  
And curled; only where a sill  
Sluices its one unyielding smile)

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<sup>31</sup>Horton, p. 173.

"The Wine Menagerie" is an important poem in its significance to both Hart Crane's poetry and his life. The key to understanding his life's "spending out" and the key to understanding his poetic idiom could lie in a comprehension of this poem. It deals with Crane's exhaustive attempts in his own words to touch the clearest veins of eternity flowing through the crowds around us . . . . "I go nearly mad," he said:

with the intense but always misty realization of what can be done if potentialities are fully freed, released. . . . It is really not a projection in any but a loose sense, for I feel more and more that in the absolute sense the artist identifies himself with life.<sup>32</sup>

When he was unable to stimulate his experience into a oneness, a universal, Crane used alcohol to gain an entrance into the gushing slipstream of experiencing everything that was life at one moment. This mystical experience is reminiscent of Gerard Manley Hopkins, who had written in the nineteenth century, much like the thoughts of a medieval scholar Duns Scotus, that everything contained "inscape," a beauty of reality which is at a thing's heart and which identifies it with the universal. In much the same manner Crane, in the twentieth century, tried to live the "inscape" of life. Unfortunately, the magic carpet of alcohol, which allowed him to live this "inscape" of life finally slipped out from beneath his feet.

Horton recalls that William James was an earlier philosopher to discuss alcohol as a "liberator of imminent powers." "Sobriety,"

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<sup>32</sup>Ibid., p. 128.

he wrote:

diminishes, discriminates and says no; drunkenness expands, unites, and says yes. It is in fact the great exciter of the yes function in man. . . . It makes him for the moment one with truth.<sup>33</sup>

Crane reiterates this statement so closely in "The Wine Menagerie" that it sounds like poetic paraphrase:

New thresholds, new anatomies! Wine talons  
Build freedom up about me and distill  
This competence--to travel in a tear  
Sparkling alone, within another's will.  
Until my blood dreams a receptive smile  
Wherein new purities are snared; where chimes  
Before some flame of gaunt repose a bell  
Tolled once, perhaps, by every tongue in hell.

Edgar Allan Poe in criticising the effect of a long poem referred to that poetic excitement in short poems which "elevated the soul."<sup>34</sup> But Crane learned of Poe through a more direct precursor, the French poet Arthur Rimbaud, who in turn was influenced by Baudelaire and consequently Poe. According to Miss Deutsch, Rimbaud thought the poet

an explorer of unknown realms of consciousness. He is a seer, a maker, an inventor, an "alchemist of the word." But above all he is an eidetic, one with unusually vivid mental images. . . . And if the visions do not come to him, he goes out of his way to capture them by means of potent drugs.<sup>35</sup>

The first stanzas of "The Wine Menagerie" depict the poet in his saloon hopping. His vision alters with the mist of inebriation

<sup>33</sup>Ibid.

<sup>34</sup>Deutsch, p. 352.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., p. 353.



and he sees the "imitation onyx" of the bar's "wainscoating" as

Painted emulsion of snow, eggs, yarn, coal, manure.

Later, after his "new thresholds" have been reached, he always returns to earth with the usual hangover:

Ruddy, the tooth implicit of the world  
Has followed you. Though in the end you know  
And count some dim inheritance of sand,  
How much yet meets the snow.

But along with the physical hangover come the mental sands of inheritance which he later turns into poems.

"Wine Menagerie," then, shows the poet writing a poem; or at least it shows him obtaining the raw materials out of which he will build a poem. After this step, all he needs to do is, according to Blackmur, form "his words from within" and develop his "meaning to the point of idiom."

"Legend," which Crane placed first in White Buildings, does not belong to his early group of poems, but to a more mature period of his writing. It was placed first to give a foreword or purpose to the poems which followed it in this volume. Besides "Voyages," which contains a fuller realization of his quest theme, this poem states more of Crane's philosophy than any of the other poems in the volume.

The title "Legend" implies that Crane has come to realize that the direction of his poetry should lie in myth making. "For the Marriage of Faustus and Helen" and "Voyages" both of which dealt with myths, represented his pinnacle of success.

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But more important than his poetical success was Crane's awareness of his life's being a quest. He states in the first stanza:

It is to be learned--  
This cleaving and this burning,  
But only by the one who  
Spends out himself again.

He has already learned, he says in the second stanza, that love is all that can save the artist from his pain--another idea developed more fully in "Voyages."

In the white falling flakes  
Kisses are,--  
The only worth all granting.

In the end, he realizes, there must be some order, "some constant harmony," derived from all his painful awareness.

Then drop by caustic drop, a perfect cry  
Shall string some constant harmony,--  
Relentless caper for those who step  
The legend of their youth into the noon.

It took Crane until "Voyages" to realize what that order, and thus the end of his legend, was--to create poetry from experience. When the awakening came, it was apparently too late.

"For the Marriage of Faustus and Helen" represents Crane at his best. The impression is that for a change he took time to think out what he was going to say before he started writing. In addition to an epigraph from Ben Jonson's The Alchemist, which sets the stage for the poem in its entirety, a unity of theme also holds the parts together. Surprisingly enough, although the theme is unified, there

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were originally three separate poems, which were written and submitted to various magazines at different times.

The key lies in the first three lines of the epigraph:

And so we may arrive by Talmud skill  
And profane Greek to raise the building up  
Of Helen's house against the Ismaelite.

In other words the elements of Hebrew, "Talmud skill," and the elements of Hellenism, "profane Greek," are the two fundamental forces in Western civilization; and together they are capable of defending beauty and knowledge against the Philistine forces, "the Ismaelite."

Crane suggests by his title that there is a possibility of an alliance or marriage between knowledge and beauty in the persons of Faustus and Helen. In the poem Helen is the Helen of history, the Helen of legend, and the girl sitting across the streetcar from Crane; in all cases she is abstract beauty which transcends personification. The character of Faustus is Crane—the symbol of man's thirst for knowledge, "the poetic or imaginative man of all times."<sup>36</sup>

Brom Weber recalls that in Jonson's Alchemist the character who speaks the lines in Crane's epigraph is Sir Epicure Mammon, a sensual character, greedy for gold, jewels, and a whore who he has been misled into believing is a noblewoman. Hence, Weber claims:

It is evident that the quotation was placed at the head of the poem for an ironic purpose. Mammon—misunderstood, ridiculed, sensuous, anxious for beauty and wealth—is none other than the poet who persists in his role despite the abuse and contempt

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<sup>36</sup>Hazo, p. 49.

which are heaped on him.<sup>37</sup>

Weber's concept is apparently supported by a prose statement which Crane stuck into the space between stanzas two and three:

There is the world dimensional for  
those untwisted by the love of things  
irreconcilable . . .

In other words, love of beauty twists the sensitive person until there is no alternative for him except to love "irreconcilable" things. On the other hand, insensitive people have a "world dimensional" which limits their unimaginative world of routine. So it is possible, as Weber suggests, that Crane's seeing his idealization of beauty in the woman on the streetcar is as ironic as Mammon's love for his "noble-woman," who in reality is a whore who feigns hysterical distraction whenever philosophical problems are mentioned in her presence.

The poem opens with a picture of the mind being numbed by trivia such as "baseball scores," "stenographic smiles," and "stock quotations."

The mind has been shown itself at times  
Too much the baked and labeled dough  
Divided by accepted multitudes.

But regardless of these trivia he asserts in the second stanza that the mind can turn into itself even in the midst of slogans flying about. The mind, he says, can return to itself

Until the graduate opacities of evening  
Take them away as suddenly to somewhere  
Virginal perhaps, less fragmentary, cool.

Then, becoming more personal, he spies his beauty--Helen, or

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<sup>37</sup>Weber, p. 180.

beauty--across the streetcar aisle from him, and he thinks that surely there must be some rescue for him in her spirit before his "arteries turn dark" with death. And now that his poetic inspiration has been excited by this girl whose hands

. . . count the nights  
Stippled with pink and green advertisements,

(on the streetcar panels) he addresses a sort of hymn to beauty to her which has feminine imagery on a sexual basis: "limbs and bolly," "throat and sides" and "bluet of your breast"; but which at the same time has the shadows of Plato's "diaphanous" world.

The earth may glide diaphanous to death;  
But if I left my arms it is to bend  
To you who turned away once, Helen, knowing  
The press of troubled hands, too alternate  
With steel and soil to hold you endlessly.  
I meet you, therefore, in that eventual flame  
You found in final chains, no captive then--  
Beyond their million brittle, bloodshot eyes;  
White, through white cities passed on to assume  
That world which comes to each of us alone.

In Part Two Helen and Faustus are at a roofgarden party; and, according to Crane, the Dionysian revels of the ancient Helen's court and her subsequent seduction were transferred in his poem to a Metropolitan roof garden with a jazz orchestra.<sup>38</sup> The sounds of a twenties' jazz group are more than faintly audible in the lines:

Brazen hypnotics glitter hero;  
Glee shifts from foot to foot,  
Hypnotic to their tremolo.

The final two lines of the first stanza when read with Crane's stato-

<sup>38</sup>Horton, p. 323.

ment about "Dionysian revels" in mind becomes a masterstroke:

Know, Olympians, we are breathless  
While nigger cupids scour the stars!

In Crane's second poem, then, Helen's beauty has become the "metallis paradises" of modern man. She has become a "divine grotesque" in man's attempt to create his own beauty under the "gyrating awnings of a penthouse." Consequently, Faustus is confronted by a "siren" rather than the queen he saw across an aisle in Part I.

The siren of the springs of guilty song—  
Let us take her on the incandescent wax  
Striated with nuances, nervousities

In Part I, then, Helen represents the transcending power of abstract beauty—such in the way she has for centuries. But in the second part her beauty has been transformed and crippled by modern man's "metallis paradises." In Part III she represents a way for the poet, and all those true lovers of beauty, to escape the modern sickness and live on a higher plane of love.

In Part III Crane is no longer concerned with saving himself from trivia, but with man's regeneration from the experience of World War I. As Crane said, "The katharsis of the fall of Troy I saw approximated in the recent World War."<sup>39</sup> Thus, death is seen as a "religious gunman" to whom the poet addresses himself. We did not ask for the bombing, he says,

But have survived  
And will persist to speak again before

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<sup>39</sup>Ibid., p. 324.

All stubble streets that have not curved  
To memory . . .

Thus, Faustus-Crane-Poet by uniting with the beautiful escapes death. The only people who can know defeat are those who are unwilling to sacrifice for beauty's sake. The true lovers of beauty can

Laugh out the meager penance of their days  
Who dare not share with us the breath released,  
The substance drilled and spent beyond repair  
For golden, or the shadow of gold hair.

Hazo sums the poem up:

The fury of war made him /the poet/ realize that the tyranny of the finite world could only be overcome by an imagination vitalized by beauty. The progression leads to the conclusion that Faustus must be united with Helen. Only such a marriage will permit man to prevail over war, to compensate for his failure to love, to safeguard him against compromise and deception.<sup>40</sup>

So the poem ends:

Distinctly praise the years, whose volatile  
Bland-bleeding hands extend and thresh the height  
The imagination spans beyond despair,  
Outpacing bargain, vocable and prayer.

This poem represents Crane's first success at maintaining a unified theme for a longer effect than a mere image or symbol. He had realized, apparently, that his brilliant images and symbols, sometimes crowded irrationally into one poem, needed sorting, planning, and building in order to achieve their greatest effect. It is almost as if before "Faustus and Helen" Crane's poems were merely stenographic notes on his experiences out of which he would later build such poems as

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<sup>40</sup>Hazo, p. 55.

"Voyages" and The Bridge. Beyond a doubt he had come into a new stage of his poetic development. Unfortunately, there was time for only three ~~poems to be~~ composed in this stage of his mature poetic powers before the unpaid debt to life for his "experiences" had to be paid.

"Voyages," the longest of Crane's poetic efforts other than The Bridge, was composed in six parts. When it was written, Crane was busy on The Bridge, completing the "Voyages" poems in this interval of four years. Horton discusses two influences on Crane's life during this time which affected the composition of "Voyages." The first was the poet's state of excitement derived from a homosexual affair he was having with a sailor living with him in his Brooklyn flat. The friend, besides providing the state of excitation which Crane always needed to produce poetry, "seems to have had a lively fancy and sensibility" and told Crane many sea stories and legends:

Crane needed only to hear the bare outlines of such legends as that of the sunken city off the island of San Salvador to be completely seized by a "sea change," and to hear the tolling of water-muffled bells in the towers undersea.<sup>41</sup>

The second influence, perhaps less direct, was Crane's discovery of the poems of Samuel Greenberg, a half-literate boy who died in a charity hospital at the age of twenty-three without ever having published his poetry. Babette Deutsch quotes from a Greenberg poem indicating the kindred attitude which Crane would have felt for him:

I live in an age where the age lives alone,  
And lonesome doth it rage  
Where the band dare not come.

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<sup>41</sup>Horton, p. 175.



Another similarity, which Deutsch brings out, between the two poets is their intoxication by words. "Greenberg," she says, "whose mother tongue was Yiddish, got drunk on the dictionary."<sup>42</sup> "It was a poetry," Horton says of Greenberg's poems, "which because of both its subject matter and strangeness of expression could not but fascinate Crane."<sup>43</sup> An example will explain why the poetry struck Crane:

For lustre hath surmised  
 Impouring rainbows of statistics silhouette,  
 Cosmics lotus shadowings and  
 Lewd Satyr's passion sought  
 Refuge . . .<sup>44</sup>

So with stories of the sea swirling in his mind, the necessary mental stimulation provided by the affair, and Greenberg's words and rhythms dancing in his mind, Crane was prepared to write his best poetry yet.

The concept of "Voyages" comes from the poet's being a voyager on the sea of life. The sea is a symbol of time, dissolution, flux, and nature. Hazo describes the overall drama of "Voyages":

It is the destiny of the voyager to seek for love, and the self-knowledge that is the legacy of love, as long as he lives. Love, therefore, is capable of staying the poet even in the midst of the sea of time. The fact that the poet is still a creature of time and that the sea of time will eventually claim him is still unable to deter or absolve him from his quest. Such is the nature and irony of all life.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>42</sup>Deutsch, p. 356.

<sup>43</sup>Horton, p. 175.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., p. 176.

<sup>45</sup>Hazo, p. 56.

Critics are vague in discussing the theme of this poem, and their analyses vary at times. Elizabeth Drew's interpretation is in the spirit of Hazo's, but certainly not in direct line with his. She says:

The theme of the poem is the desire that the union of human lovers should be fulfilled by a mystical union with the sea—a symbol here of the eternal unity and the supreme beloved.<sup>46</sup>

Consequently, all of her explanations of the sexual imagery of the sea such as the sea's "wink" and "wrapt inflections of our love" are analysed as a metaphor for the human love relationship,

Mr. S. Rosenthal is again, in spirit with the others but varies in his idea that the poem bases "itself on the figure of the sea as woman; it accepts and elaborates on the equation of the ecstasy of sexual fulfillment with death."<sup>47</sup>

Basically the theme of "Voyages" develops the idea that love, whatever form it took for Crane at a given moment, was the only way to grasp a moment of life. Since life in time is a process or journey towards death, love was capable of staying the process for a moment. Thus a moment or impulse of love was a more rarefied or intense moment than any other experience in time.

The first section of "Voyages" is, in Crane's own words, "a stop, look, and listen sign." The boys, "bright striped urchins" which he sees playing safely at the ocean's edge, represent the poet

<sup>46</sup>Directions in Modern Poetry (New York: W. W. Norton Company, 1940), p. 213.

<sup>47</sup>Rosenthal, p. 179.

in his more childlike self. The children cannot hear him or he would tell them to play on in their safety but heed the sea's warning:

. . . but there is a line  
 You must not trust nor ever cross beyond it  
 Spry cordage of your bodies to caresses  
 Too lichen--faithful from too wide a breast.  
 The bottom of the sea is cruel.

The poet is in effect warning himself, but there are implications in even this first part of "Voyages" that he will in the future "cross beyond" the line.

Because Crane regards the symbolic sea as the children would a real sea--innocently--he does cross the line in "Voyages II." Thus the quest motif is developed in the sense that the poet is introduced to evil, the stage in the quest which follows innocence. Now the voyager, like Ulysses or any other great "quest" figure in literature, is prompted by life impulse to experience the initiation into life. And, as is so often the case in life, innocence is lost to the wonders of sexual experience. Consequently, in this poem of initiation the sea becomes the woman with whom the voyager of life loses innocence.

Crane, then, in "Voyages II" is using the sea as a double symbol: as the time-place of life and as sex. Notice the sexual imagery in the first stanza:

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

"Wink," "rimless floods," "sheeted," "undinal," "belly," and "bends" all have connotations of sexual imagery. And yet, at the same time,

the images are simply of the sea as the earth's vast eye, timeless save for the ebb and flow of her "vast belly" to the pull of the moon.

In an epiphany the poet realizes in this stage of his quest that the sea as the symbol of time can render terror:

As her demeanors motion ill or well  
All but the pieties of lover's hands.

Thus now that he is caught in the evil that is inevitable in the main stream of life's experiences, he realizes that only lovers escape the wrath of sea-time and even then escape is only momentarily.

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

Here again, he uses the double image of the sea as sex ("her turning shoulders") and as time ("wind the hours"). The only way to escape "sleep, death, desire," is through love—the "one instant in one floating flower."

In the last stanza the same "one floating flower" in time is asked for again:

Bind us in time, O Seasons clear, and ave,  
O minstrel gallions of Carib fire,  
Bequeath us to no earthly shore until  
Is answered in the vortex of our grave  
The scale wide spendthrift gaze toward paradise.

It seems that Crane is merely praying that he won't die until he has tasted the fruits of life. Since the tradition is that he who enters the quest for life must be initiated into evil, "Voyages II," then, represents the "crossing of the line" which he warned his innocence not to cross in "Voyages I."

"Voyages III" and "Voyages IV" represent the pinnacle of the poet's entry into the worldly life. Both are the culmination of the sexual experience. Rosenthal sees in them:

A spirit of wonder like that of . . . the mystical concentration of all reality, all form, all potentiality in that act of union containing the secret oar and petals of all love.<sup>48</sup>

In these poems the poet has been "admitted through his swollen gates" into life's mysteries--to a place:

. . . where death, if shed  
Presumes on carnage, but this single charge.

And at the conclusion of the fourth poem the poet is still enraptured with his love act, his vision of life over death:

In this expectant, still exclaim receive  
The secret oar and petals of all love.

But in the fifth, he understands that the ritual which began with his initiation into evil has not ended, but just begun. The quest will end in death and nothing:

no cry, no sword  
Can fasten or deflect this tidal wedge.

There is no turning back for the poet who crossed the sea's (life's) dreadful line because now he knows:

"There's  
Nothing like this in the world," You say,  
Knowing I cannot touch your hand and look  
Too, into that godless cleft of sky  
Where nothing turns but dead sands flashing.

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 181.

"—And never quite to understand!" No,  
 In all the argosy of your bright hair I dreamed  
 Nothing so flagless as this piracy.

The warning ignored in "Voyages II" has brought the poet to his doom of knowing life to its fullest (represented here in the sexual experiences of "Voyages III" and "Voyages IV") while at the same time knowing both death to its fullest (realized in "Voyages V": "Where nothing turns but dead sands flashing") and that he must live in the pain of realizing life and death simultaneously the remainder of his time (represented in the entire six sections as the sea on which the voyager is traveling). All he can advise himself to do on the remainder of his trip is to

Draw in your head, alone and too tall here,  
 Your eyes already in the slark of drifting foam;  
 Your breath sealed by the ghosts I do not know.  
 Draw in your head and sleep the long way home.

The last of the "Voyages" poems seems to be a philosophical afterthought to the quest completed in the realization, which "Voyages V" deals with, of life's tragic agony, of a life

Where icy and bright dungeons lift  
 Of swimmers their lost morning eyes

The subject of the afterthought is a sort of "what to do now."

My eyes pressed black against the prow,  
 —Thy derelict and blinded quest

Waiting, afire, what name unspoke,  
 I cannot claim.

It seems that he now thinks that all that is left for him to do with this awareness of life's tragedy is to be a poet, the "name" that "unspoke" he "cannot claim." Henceforth, he will tell

Creation's blithe and petalled word  
To the lounged goddess . . .

The only way to preserve the moments of love which he perceived in the love fulfillment experiences of "Voyages III" and "Voyages IV" is to turn them into poetry.

The imaged word, it is, that holds  
Hushed willows anchored in its glow.  
It is the betrayable reply  
Whose accent no farewell can know.

So the voyager comes to the end of his quest with the realization that he must become a poet. Only then can he hold onto the moments of truth and love which the sea as lover sometimes permits to the voyager on the sea of life. In this sense the quest of "Voyages" represents the quest in Crane's own life, in the sense of his search for his proper place, a place which he found to lie in poetry. Hazo discusses this quest urge in the artist's life as follows:

The poet is still drawn to seek what may destroy him. He desires some knowledge of the mystery of creation not only as the goal but as the very reason for his sea quest. He admits that time will undoubtedly triumph over love. But though he holds to the hard fact of inevitable defeat at the hands of time, he can still neither ignore nor abandon the need for the effort he must make to know and to love. The need to seek is inescapable. It is this sense of mission that gives meaning to man's life. He must always be in quest.<sup>49</sup>

It is possible to view "Voyages" as the peak of Crane's poetic achievement and as the poetic account of his own life's quest. It is not hard to see "Voyages I" in relation to the poet's early years in

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<sup>49</sup>Hazo, p. 66.

New York when, as a young, sensitive poet-student, he peered into the sea of life and was tempted to travel over it in the most intense way. The "Voyages II" poem represents the neophyte poet standing amid the wonders of what he sees—warned that he should go no further, but knowing he cannot resist even though it means dissipating himself. "Voyages III" and "Voyages IV" represent the days and nights of Crane's sucking the marrow of life—the poet's absorbing every possible sensation into his very soul. "Voyages V" and the first part of "Voyages VI" depict the poet as realizing the full horror of life, as realizing the price of debauchery and dissipation that he has paid to prepare his soul and mind for poetry. Consequently, the last half of "Voyages VI" represents the mature poet; a man who realizes the effect on his life of how he has lived and that the only way to save any intense moment, make any order out of the chaos he purposely lived, is to convert his experiences into poetry.

This realization came to Crane during the years in which he was intermittently at work on The Bridge, the work that would be for Crane the magnum opus of his life, the end of the quest he talked about in "Voyages VI." The knowledge that his troubles would be for nothing unless he could produce a poem worth all the pain he had put himself through must have been in his mind as he wrote The Bridge.

He thought he had succeeded. Malcolm Cowley describes an incident typical of Crane's last days, when "he had gone so far on the road to self-destruction that none of his friends could touch him



any longer,"<sup>50</sup> and which indicates that he believed The Bridge proved himself to have been successful in his life's quest.

One afternoon I arrived at the Turner house to find Peter Blume sitting on Hart's chest and Bill Brown sitting on his feet; he had been smashing the furniture and throwing his books out the window and there was no other way to stop him. Hart was gasping between his clenched teeth, "You can kill me—but you can't—destroy—The Bridge. It's finished—it's on the Bremen—on its way to Paris." (The Bridge was first published there, and later in America.)<sup>51</sup>

Ironically, "Voyages," the poem in which he discovered the need for a major work which would redeem his sordid life, was a better realized piece of poetry than was The Bridge.

<sup>50</sup>Cowley, p. 234.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid., p. 233.

### CHAPTER III

#### AN EXPLICATION OF THE POEMS IN KEY WEST: AN ISLAND SHEAF

In May of 1926, Crane set sail with his friend Waldo Frank for the Isle of Pines in the West Indies. Because the group of writers who had harbored at Slater Brown's country home in Patterson, New York, had degenerated into a group of misfits and laggards, Crane departed to find a more peaceful surrounding in order to work on The Bridge. The boat on which he traveled was the same boat from which he would later leap to his death. In the West Indies he remained at his grandmother's plantation until it was destroyed the following fall by a hurricane. The poems contained in Key West: An Island Sheaf were written during his few months on the island.

As most of the titles suggest, almost all of the subjects in these poems have to do with some aspect of the island. Crane was enthralled by the natural forces and the unusual things about him.

From the standpoint of poetic achievement, however, the poems in Key West add little to Crane's stature. In technique they resemble the early poems in White Buildings. The best of the lot is "The Broken Tower."

In the first two stanzas of "Key West," the introductory poem, Crane says simply that he has gone to another place, whose skies neither claim nor disown him. He also makes a vague reference to "Legend":

In the moon  
That now has sunk I strike a single march  
To heaven or hades—to an equally frugal noon.

Regardless of the place, he still intends to live his life intensely.

In the last two stanzas he takes another slap at the "millions who reap a dead conclusion." As in so many of his early poems, his theme is the victory of materialism over the human soul.

O, steel and stone! But gold was, scarcity before.  
 And here is water, and a little wind . . . .  
 There is no breath of friends and no more shore  
 Where gold has not been sold and conscience timed.

He can think of no one who has escaped conformity.

The point of emphasis in "O Carib Isle" zigzags as much as the fidler crab mentioned in Stanza One. Out of a group of tropic images and objects--tarantula, white sand, coral beach, eucalyptus, shells--Crane draws a picture of death (the "brittle crypt"). He further realizes that he is caught in this death. He desires ascension of spirit in order to contradict the omnipresence of death on the beach. But he realizes, in turn, that his earth-bound nature holds him down. He likens himself first to the overturned turtles left at daybreak on the beach and, finally, to so much residue left by a hurricane.

Let not the pilgrim see himself again  
 For slow evisceration bound like those huge terrapin  
 Each daybreak on the wharf, their brine-caked eyes;  
 --Spiked overturned; such thunder in their strain

Slagged on the hurricane--I cast within its flow,  
 Congeal by afternoons here, satin and vacant.

The theme is presented with different symbols, but the method and story is the same; poor lonely poet, full of energy to write, can only talk about himself.

Reading these tropically oriented poems one after another gives the reader the impression that Crane was lounging around on the beaches contemplating the unusual things around him until he was moved to write about them. This is especially true of "Royal Palm."

Green rustlings, more than regal charities  
 Drift coolly from that tower of whispered light.  
 Amid the noontides blazed asperities  
 I watched the sun's most gracious anchorite.

Such wordiness to describe a tree seems to be useless effort. It is unusual for Crane to remain on one object throughout a poem as he does in this one. He is simply not capable of writing on a high pitch unless it is about himself and his problems as a lonely poet. Even then he needs to move through several emotional stages in one poem in order to maintain a level of tension.

"The Air Plant" attempts to create a message out of a poem no more significant than "Royal Palm." It begins in description:

This turf that thrives on saline nothingness,  
 Inverted octopus with heavenward arms  
 Thrust parching from a palm-hole hard by the cove  
 A bird almost—of almost bird alarms.

Is pulmonary to the wind that jars  
 Its tannoles, horrific in their lurch.

Then in the last stanza, Crane inserts himself as the hurricane.

— Angelic Dynamol Ventriloquist of the Blue  
 While beachward creeps the shark-swept Spanish Main  
 By w.a.' conjunctions do the winds appoint  
 Its apothecosis, at last—the hurricane.

But where the air plant is able to make something out of "nothingness" Crane is not so fortunate. The tropical air seems to

have put his intensity into lethargy. Consequently, he substitutes intense words and phrases for his lack of emotional intensity. Notice, for example: "horrific in their lurch," "throbbing perch," "blood a milk of earth." Some phrases are pure corn: "Angelic Dynamo," "Ventriloquist of the Blue," "the shark-swept Spanish Main." All of this fanfare is ridiculous when its object is a plant.

Other poems in this volume turn a clever phrase or two but on the whole are no better than might be the result of some high-school poetry contest.

Awake to the cold light  
of wet wind running  
twigs in tremora. Walls  
are naked. Twilights raw—  
and when the sun raps steeples  
their glistenings dwindle  
upward . . .

March  
slips along the ground  
like a mouse under pussy  
willows, a little hungry.

"Moment Fugue" starts out as meaningless as it finished up only a few lines later.

The syphilitic selling violets calmly  
and daisies  
By the subway news-stand . . .

Somewhat better, but still weaker than his good poems are two elegies entitled "To Emily Dickinson" and "To Shakespeare." He captures Dickinson's mood of solitude in some lines:

You who desired so much—in vain to ask—  
Yet fed your hunger like an endless task,

Dared dignify the labor, bless the guest—  
Achieved that stillness ultimately bent.

"To Shakespeare" has lines that alternate almost regularly between good and poor. He asks a question in the second and third lines that is alive with meaning:

Who shall again  
Engrave such hazards as thy might controls—

But the introductory statement is dead, containing little more than clichés:

Conflicting, purposeful yet outcry vain  
Of all our days, being pilot,—tempest too!

The best lines would stand with his best poetry:

Thou wiaidest with such tears that every faction  
Swears high in Hamlet's throat, and devils throng  
Where angels beg for doom in ghaſt distraction  
And fall, both!

Even here, he punctures good lines with wild and meaningless phrases like "in ghaſt distraction." It is hardly a poem to take its place next to tributes by Jonson and Milton.

"The Phantom Bark" is dreamlike and surrealistic. The poet speaks as though he were a drowned sailor. There is no failure to experience in the drowned man's mind; they "dream no land in vain."

Of old there was a promise, and thy sails  
Have kept no faith but wind, the cold stream  
—The hot fickle wind, the breath of males  
Imprisoned never, no not root or rain.

By far the best poem of the volume, and one that would stand with his best efforts, is "The Broken Tower." Often it is taken as a farewell attempt by Crane. Horton says that at the time of the

poem's composition, Crane was in the deepest depression of his life. A momentary elevation of spirit brought on by his love affair with Peggy Baird had failed, and he had returned to his perversion and drinking. But, worst of all, Crane felt that his poetic powers had failed. It had been almost two years since he had written anything of merit, and he felt that perhaps he was no longer able to write. Among a myriad of questions such as where to go, whom to trust, and what his friends would think of him, Crane sent an early draft of "The Broken Tower" to both Malcolm Cowley and Morton Zabel, an editor of Poetry Magazine who had been begging for more of Crane's work. Before either of the men could reply, Crane, taking their supposed hesitancy as an indication of failure, committed suicide. This was a bitter note of irony because not only did the poem show that Crane had not lost all of his creative powers, but also it is possibly one of the best poems he ever wrote. Adding to the irony is the fact that apparently Mr. Zabel never even received the manuscript which Crane said he sent.<sup>52</sup>

The poem shows Crane in his two characteristic moments—despair and elation: despair because he feels that he has sacrificed his life for poetry that is no longer any good; and elation because he experiences moments of redemption through his poetry. Hazo says that "In its agony the poem recalls the beauty of Hopkins' 'Terrible sonnets' and the last poems of Keats; in its hope of redemption, there is an echo of Shelley's

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<sup>52</sup>Horton, pp. 293-295.

## 'The Cloud.' 53

After the Liveright edition of his poems had been published in 1930, Crane was awarded a Guggenheim fellowship. He went to Mexico and settled in the artist colony there, which included Katherine Anne Porter, David Sequeiros, and Peggy Baird. According to a friend of his who was visiting, Crane wrote "The Broken Tower" in Mexico in January of 1932. This contradicted Graham Munson, who had said that the poem belonged to an earlier period of Crane's development, and it obviously indicated that his poetic talents were not dead. The friend, Leslie Simpson, gave this account of the inspiration for "The Broken Tower":

I was with Hart Crane in Taxco, Mexico, the morning of January 27, this year when he first conceived the idea of "The Broken Tower." The night before, being troubled with insomnia, he had risen before daybreak and walked down to the village square. It so happened that one of the innumerable Indian fiestas was to be celebrated that day, and Hart met the old Indian bell-ringer who was on his way down to the church. He and Hart were old friends, and he brought [sic] Hart up into the tower with him to help ring the bells. As Hart was swinging the clapper of the great bell, half drunk with its mighty music, the swift tropical dawn broke over the mountains. The sublimity of the scene and the thunder of the bells worked in Hart one of those gusts of joy of which only he was capable. He came striding up the hill afterwards in a sort of frenzy, refused his breakfast, and paced up and down the porch impatiently waiting for me to finish my coffee. Then he seized my arm and bore me off to the plaza where we sat in the shadow of a church, Hart the while pouring out a magnificent cascade of words. It was a Hart Crane I had never known and



an experience I shall never forget.<sup>54</sup>

The overall symbol of the poem is the tower—a broken tower—representing the poet and his art—not only in the creative but also in its destructive forces. The poet burns brightest in his moment of creation; but the element that burns is no candle wax, but the tallow of his soul.

The first two stanzas is a beautiful description of the mood of the cathedral just before dawn.

The bell-rope that gathers God at dawn  
 Dispatches me as though I dropped down the knell  
 Of a spcnd day—to wander the cathedral lawn  
 From pit to crucifix, feet chill on steps from hell.

Have you not heard, have you not seen that corps  
 Of shadows in the tower, whose shoulders sway  
 Antiphonal carillons launched before  
 The stars are caught and hived in the sun's rays?

The idea of moving from "pit to crucifix" represents the bells gathering Crane from the hell of his spiritual misery and inspiring him toward the God-like creation of poetry. In the next stanza he pictures himself as helpless to resist the poetry which the bells suck out of him.

The bells, I say, the bells break down their tower;  
 And swing I know not where. Their tongues engrave  
 Membrane through marrow, my long-scattered scars  
 Of broken intervals . . . . And I, their sexton slave.

In the fourth stanza Crane completes the introductory information that the bells have called him to write poetry. He implies

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<sup>54</sup>Horton, p. 292.

that the bells are inside him and now have become his poetic voices.

Oval encyclicals in canyons leaping,  
The impasse high with choir. Banked voices slant  
Pagodas, Campaniles with reveilles outleaping—  
O terraced echoes prostrate on the plain.

This is poetry pitched on a high plane to be merely prefatory material. But in the main body of the poem Crane is able to maintain the intensity. In the stanza which is the center of the poem, Crane reveals that the breadth of this poem encompasses his entire life, that he is the tower to which the bells of poetry have rung.

And so I entered the broken world  
To trace the visionary company of love, its voice  
An instant in the wind (I know not whither hurled)  
But not for long to hold each desperate choice.

Undoubtedly, this is Crane's apology for his life. Poetry, the bells, have broken down the tower in which they lived. The innocent poet, unable to resist the pressure of the bells inside him, has sung out his life. Thus, his perversion, his other failures in society, and even—one would suppose—his poetic shortcomings are all to be attributed to the relentless pressure of the poetry within him. The poem is much better than its philosophy. But if Crane can be pardoned for his widesweeping exoneration of himself, the remainder of the poem contains a well-developed argument for the lyric temperament. He begins these remaining five stanzas by asking himself if poetry is the language of some eternal "tribunal monarch" in the heavens by which we mortals grasp the "realities plunging by"; or, he asks, is it the spirit of a mortal world transposed into its own language by the greatest of their numbers, the poets? Leaving that ques-

tion as an academic matter, Crane says that regardless of where poetry comes from, the poet refines, strains, and perfects it in his blood.

My veins recall and add, revived and sure  
The angelus of wars my chest evokes;  
What I hold healed, original now, and pure . . . .

Only by having this "angelus of wars" inside himself, can the poet produce. But these wars take their toll on his life, eventually breaking him down as the bells break down the tower. The last two verses sound a triumphant note: although the poet is broken, his word has been released to humanity.

. . . visible wings of silence sown  
In azure circles, widening as they dip

The matrix of the heart, lift down the eye  
That shines the quiet lake and swells a tower . . .  
The commodious tall decorum of that sky  
Unseals her earth, and lifts love in its shower.

Crane, it seems, never knew what he meant by the word "love." It is always the key point in his most important works, but it never has the same meaning. Often the context is of sexual love stimulated by his perversion, and again it is used in a vague way to represent the poetic soul. He equates love with poetic sensitivity in "The Broken Tower": "the visionary company of love"; and "lifts love in its shower." Since "love" is such a central element in Crane's thought, perhaps he should have defined for himself, as well as for his readers, exactly what he meant by the word.

It is probably untrue that the poems in Key West: An Island Sheaf indicate a total loss of Crane's poetic abilities. True, his

production shows a decline in number and standard, but the excellence of "The Broken Tower" eliminates the probability that very much deterioration of powers had occurred. The poetry in this volume much more likely owes its decadence to the fact that Crane's way of life was finally catching up to him. He unrealistically thought, as he said in "Voyages," that his dissipation was the "raw material" of poetry. If this were true for the poems in White Buildings, the source ran dry for Key West.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE BRIDGE

Hart Crane is truly a modern poet. Refusing to study any previously established order or perception or discipline, he concentrated on learning the modern world. Even when he did turn to the past, it was to that which his contemporaries, particularly Graham Munson and Waldo Frank, approved—the French symbolists and the English metaphysicals. Likewise, the area of his living experiences was limited to contemporary critics, poets, and magazines. It is normal, then, that Crane turned to the modern world for his poetic language. Thus, Hoffman was led to comment, "The true meaning of experiment in modern American literature may be found, after close study, in Hart Crane's fifteen-poem symbolic reading of America, The Bridge."<sup>55</sup>

The Bridge was to be Crane's great work, the poem that would incorporate all his philosophies of the modern scene and transpose that scene into images of poetry. In addition to using modern American objects for his images and metaphors, he was trying to present the "myth of America." He explained this in his letter of September 12, 1927, to Otto Kahn.

What I am really handling, you see, is the Myth of America. Thousands of strands have had to be searched for, sorted and interwoven. In a sense I have had to do a great deal of pioneering myself.

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<sup>55</sup>Hoffman, p. 257.

It has taken a great deal of energy--which has not been so difficult to summon as the necessary patience to wait, simply wait much of the time--until my instincts assured me that I had assembled my materials in proper order for a final wielding into their natural form.<sup>56</sup>

The other problem was one of form. Each of the fifteen sections was different in structure, "not only in relation to the materials embodied within its separate confines, but also in relation to the other parts, in series, of the major design of the entire poem."<sup>57</sup>

The problem of creating a myth of America by writing about modern objects was finally solved by using the Brooklyn Bridge as the central symbol--a symbol that combined the finest artistry of the machine age with the most significant suggestions of symbolic meaning. The bridge symbol linked the individual poem into something capable of at least being termed an epic. But its greatest value was in affording Crane a symbolic structure by which he could return to the American past. His return was not a trip to historic America as pictured in textbooks but to an America transformed in Crane's poetic imagination. Thus, he was afforded an opportunity to create a myth as realized not in men's minds but in one poet's consciousness.

Of course several poets had written about American mythology from available documents and histories, Sandburg among the best, but none had tried to realize America in one all-encompassing poem. Reportedly, while writing The Bridge, Crane wrote Yvor Winters that he

<sup>56</sup>Horton, p. 336.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid.

was rewriting Sandburg the way he ought to be written. Whitman had come closest to what Crane had in mind for his poem, particularly in the spirit of the Preface to Leaves of Grass when he said that the United States "are essentially the greatest poem." Crane showed his indebtedness to Whitman in the same way Dante showed his to Virgil--Whitman becomes Crane's guide through the inferno of the 1920's.<sup>58</sup>

But where Crane follows Whitman most importantly, and where most importantly it is Crane's myth rather than the myth of another poet of the twenties, is in the basic optimism of The Bridge. Crane did not subscribe to the pessimism of his age--the "maladie moderne" as he called it, but like Whitman in his day, had resisted it. Particularly he liked Whitman's will to recognize rather than overlook evidences of evil and then to transcend them. Finally, they shared the similarity of translating material objects into spiritual values.

Crane thought that Eliot, the pessimistic spokesman for the age, had ignored "certain spiritual events and possibilities" in burying hope "as deep and direfully as it can ever be done." He indicated in a letter to Munson, January 5, 1923, that he was hoping to be the "Pindar for the dawn of the machine age," to use modern technique "toward a more positive, or . . . ecstatic goal."<sup>59</sup> In a later letter to Munson, March 2, 1923, he expounded further optimistic tendencies.

<sup>58</sup>Hoffman, p. 260.

<sup>59</sup>Ibid., p. 259.

I have lost the last shreds of philosophical pessimism during the last months. O Yes, the "background of life"--and all that is still there, but that is only three-dimensional. It is to the pulse of a greater dynamism that my work must revolve. Something terribly fierce and yet gentle.<sup>60</sup>

The writing of The Bridge took almost seven years, from early 1923 to late fall of 1929. In April of 1924 he occupied a room at 110 Columbia Heights, Brooklyn, where John J. Roebling, the engineer who had designed and planned the bridge, had once lived. His window looked down on the East River, with its attendant commerce, and the Brooklyn Bridge itself. It was probably during this time that Crane came to choose the bridge as the object capable of representing the numerous symbolic implications and modern technical achievements which his epic would demand. Likewise, it was here that the first version of "Atlantis" was composed. In the final form this poem was placed last because of its emphatic affirmations. Hoffman notes that Crane spent the next six years preparing himself and his public for this poem.<sup>61</sup>

In the winter of 1925, Crane was with the group in Patterson, New York. He continually argued his optimism against the "Eliotic" pessimism propounded by his friends Tate, Cowley, Josephson and Burke; all the while trying to maintain and make firm his own confidence in his version of America. He prepared for The Bridge further by reading Prescott's Ferdinand and Isabella and The First Voyage of Columbus;

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<sup>60</sup>Ibid.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid., p. 261.



Melville's White-Jacket; Whitman's Specimen Days, and Whitehead's Science and the Modern World. Clearly, he had bitten off a large chunk; he was uneducated in anything except the period about which he was writing, and there was no systematic body of knowledge to support his own convictions; he was truly pioneering in writing his "great affirmation."

In the summer of 1926, on the Isle of Pines, Crane made good progress. In this place altogether different from Brooklyn and modern technical achievement, he completed the largest group of poems that he would at one time. He quickly wrote "The Proem," "Ave Maria," and first versions of "Cutty Sark" and "The Tunnel." But even in this, his most fertile period of work on The Bridge, Crane was plagued by the doubts that later would bog him down completely and almost prevent him from finishing the poem. He wrote, "If only America were half as worthy today to be spoken of as Whitman spoke of it fifty years ago, there might be something for me to say . . . ." Even his beloved bridge sank in his estimation. It has, he said, "no more significance beyond an economical approach to shorter hours, quicker lunches, behaviorism, and toothpicks."<sup>62</sup>

Crane left the Isle of Pines when it was destroyed by a hurricane, and returned in 1927 to New York, where he wrote "The River." The years 1928 and 1929 produced little composition. Crane's confu-

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<sup>62</sup> Weber, p. 241.

sion led him to Europe in 1928, where he settled on Majorca, off the coast of Spain, in hopes of finishing The Bridge. But soon he escaped to Paris and completely lost himself in debaucheries for the entire year of 1929.

Only because of the debt he felt to his publisher Harry Crosby, did he finish the last version of the fifteenth poem at his friend's insistence. Weber notes:

It is poignantly and tragically symbolic that, at the very moment when Crane faltered and The Bridge might have passed into limbo unwritten, or at the very least been written as a critical tragic poem, it was revived by a debt of honor to a banker closely identified with the materialism which had destroyed Crane's faith.<sup>63</sup>

But the final product, published in 1930, was unified beyond the expectations of anyone, particularly those who well knew the circumstances of its composition. Although the poet had moved back from some of his initial convictions, he ended up with a mythology of the American tradition as he himself had learned it.

As Crane pictures it, the myth of America is its growth, its nature, and its gigantic size and vitality; the dominant symbol is the Brooklyn Bridge, basically representing material triumph and "bridge" to the spiritual world. A synopsis of the sections runs as follows: The poem establishes the bridge as the central symbol and intricately relates through similar imagery the sections that will follow. The first section, "Ave Maria," centers around the legend of Columbus—sug-

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<sup>63</sup>Ibid.

gesting that his purpose was a divine one—and his emotions upon returning to Spain. "Powhatan's Daughter," the second part, is made up of five short poems: briefly, the poet wakes up from his dream of Columbus, goes through recollections of other American legends in a part called "Rip Van Winkle," muses on a chaotic series of autobiographical memories ranging from hoboes in Ohio to cross-country train trips; and in "The Dance" he returns to the world of the primitive Indian. At last he describes the goal of the entire section—union with Pocahontas, the symbol of maternal fertility of the American earth.

The third section, "Cutty Sark," is impressionistic, containing snatches of conversation from waterfront bars interspersed with visions of an ancient sunken paradise. In the fourth section, "Cape Hatteras," Crane begins with a geological account of the eastern seaboard; then he moves into a memory of Walt Whitman, after which he describes various technical achievements—particularly the airplane—and finally, warning against the dangers of science, he affirms his kinship with Whitman and his loyalty to the American portrayed in Whitman's poetry. The fifth section contains three short erotic poems which reinforce the idea of American fecundity and energy. Section Six is an ironic treatment of the "promised land" myth in America. Section Seven, "The Tunnel," is on the surface an account of a trip by subway from Manhattan to Brooklyn via the East River tunnel. The images and allusions describe urban experience: the banal conversations overheard on a subway lead to the complete helplessness which man feels in the "mechanical jungle." The final section, "Atlantis," returns to the

underwater kingdom of Section Three. Crane intended this section to be the spiritual consummation of the other sections. Most of the themes and images of the preceding sections are mentioned briefly, the dominant image being that of Cathay, which Crane uses as a symbol of the enthusiastic attitude toward America characteristic of Whitman's writing.

From the synopsis it can be seen that Crane pictured himself as on a quest, traveling through America's past and present in order to yield a vision of her future. His quest in the first part, then, is "a spatio-temporal one while his quest in the second part is a spiritual one."<sup>64</sup>

The bridge was essentially the meeting place of quest and transcendence. Crane had written to Waldo Frank saying that he had attempted to induce the feeling of elation—"like being carried forward and upward simultaneously—both in imagery, rhythm, and repetition that one experiences in walking across my beloved Brooklyn Bridge."<sup>65</sup> "It is this sense of forward and upward," Hazo says, "that characterized the various levels of the bridge's symbolism throughout the poem. The forward impetus suggests quest; the upward suggests transcendence."<sup>66</sup>

There are four principal levels of meaning which the bridge conveys. First, of course, it was the structure of cable and steel

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<sup>64</sup>Hazo, p. 68.

<sup>65</sup>Ibid., p. 69.

<sup>66</sup>Ibid., pp. 69-70.

that the Roebings had created—a triumph of human engineering and effort. Margaret Foster Le Clair writes that to understand what the bridge meant to Crane it was necessary to understand what the accomplishment represented in human toil and ingenuity. She mentions that Crane knew of Washington Roebing's paralysis and blindness at the expense of the bridge, of his son John's death at the hands of the bridge, and that he constantly was aware of the setbacks because of explosions and breaks—some of which took many lives—during the thirteen years of construction.<sup>67</sup> The bridge was in Crane's eyes the same thing for the twentieth century as the pyramids were for ancient man and the Gothic cathedrals were for medieval man—the material record of a civilization.

But the positive enthusiasm that Crane felt for mechanization was not so much to sacramentalize it as to acclimatize himself to it. In his famous essay entitled Modern Poetry, he said, "unless poetry can absorb the machine, i.e., acclimatize it as naturally and casually as trees, cattle, galleons, castles and all other human associations of the past, then poetry has failed in its full contemporary function."<sup>68</sup> So, not unlike Wordsworth in his time, Crane was calling for modern poetry to be composed with modern objects. But, he claims, mere "romantic speculation" on the machine is not enough. "It cannot act creatively in our lives until, like the unconscious nervous responses of

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<sup>67</sup>Ibid., pp. 69-70.

<sup>68</sup>The Complete Poems, p. 181.

our bodies, its connotations emanate from within— forming as spontaneous a terminology of poetic reference as the bucolic world of pasturo, plow and barn.<sup>69</sup> Thus, the second level of the bridge's meaning is imagery—use of a modern object to connote further and even spiritual meanings.

The third level lies in the word itself. A bridge by nature unifies and joins. Hence, Crane can join the past to the present and, by implication, the future.

The final meaning of the bridge is spiritual or absolute. Its transcendent aspect for Crane suggests hope and faith—all the positive affirmations in America that the poet struggled to keep during the years of the poem's composition.

All of the levels of the bridge's meaning are explored in the "Proem." It contains all the essential metaphors through which the entire poem is unified. Regardless of what anyone thinks about Crane's poetry, the following table, listed by Hoffman, of "thematic anticipations in the 'Proem,'" should refute the opinion that Crane lacked planning and order in his work.<sup>70</sup>

Line	Phrase	Section	Reference
1	"how many dawns"	II, 1	"The Harbor Dawn"
6	"as apparitional as sails"	III	"Cutty Sark"
9	"I think of cinemas"	II, 3	"The River"
14	"As though the sun took step of thee"	II, 4	"The Dance"

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<sup>69</sup>Ibid., p. 182

<sup>70</sup>Hoffman, p. 264.

15	"Some motion ever unspent in thy stride"	II, 4 VIII	"The Dance" "Atlantis"
17	"Out of some subway scuttle"	II, 2 VII	"Ven Winkle" "The Tunnel"
20	"A jost falls from the speechless caravan"	VI	"Quaker Hill"
22	"Rip tooth of the sky's acetylene"	IV	"Cape Hatteras"
29	"O harp and altar, of the fury fused"	VIII	"Atlantis"
31	"threshold of the prophet's pledge"	IV	"Cape Hatteras"
32	"Prayer of pariah"	I	"Ave Maria"
35	"—condense eternity"	VIII	"Atlantis"
39	"The city's fiery parcels"	VII	"The Tunnel"
41	"O Sleepless as the river"	II, 3	"The River"
42	"the prairies dreaming sod"	II, 5	"Indiana"

In addition to setting the stage thematically by anticipating later imagery the "Proem" presents the bridge in all four levels of its symbolic meaning. He praises the bridge as a technical achievement:

Down Wall from girder into street noon leaks  
A rip-tooth of the sky's acetylene;  
All afternoon the cloud-flown derricks turn . . .  
Thy cables breathe the North Atlantic still.

But more importantly, Crane is using twentieth century technical objects to replace the "bucolic world of pasture, plow, and barn." Instead of snow covering fields or some other traditional description of the end of autumn, he writes:

The city's fiery parcels all undone,  
Already snow submerges an iron year . . .

But to Crane, writing a language of the new technical America was no innovation to dote over and be content with. He extended the meaning of the bridge to symbolize anything that implies:

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 182.

<sup>70</sup> Hoffman, p. 264.

O Sleepless as the river under thee,  
Vaulting the sea, the prairies dreaming sod,  
Unto us lowliest sometime sweep . . .

The sea, the river, the prairie—oven man by implication—are linked by the symbolic structure. Indeed it breached not only the distances between places and things on earth but was an emblem of man's reach from time into eternity.

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

O harp and altar, of the fury fused  
(How could more toil align thy shoring strings!)  
Terrific threshold of the prophet's pledge,  
Prayer of pariah, and the lover's cry

The form of prayer, by which Crane addressed the bridge here, is repeated in almost all the other sections of the poem. It concludes in a request that sets the bridge's most important function for the longer poem: "And of the curviship lend a myth to God." The curve represents the union of spirit and material which is the bridge. Earlier in the poem "curve" is indicated in several images: "the seagull's wings shall dip and pivot him," "white rings of tumult," "inviolable curve," and so on. These curves, which indicate purpose, are pictured against a backdrop of aimless motion.

I think of cinemas, panoramic sleights  
With multitudes bent toward some flashing scene  
Never disclosed, but hastened to again,  
Foretold to other eyes on the screen.

After this point a "bedlamite" rushed out of the crowd, onto the bridge, and, with his "shrill shirt ballooning," he leaps to his death. Then Crane poses his prayer to the bridge deity whose iden-



tity although "as obscure as that heaven of the Jews," will prevent the chaos of meaningless direction such as suicide in its holy curveship; thus it "lends a myth to God."

With the "Proem" Crane has undoubtedly reached a high spot in his career. The work obviously was painstakingly arranged and planned in its imagery without losing its liveliness. He cannot resist his usual ecstatic moments, however, which in the end are meaningless. "Terrific threshold of the prophet's pledge" achieves nothing beyond alliteration; neither does the next line "Prayer of pariah, and the lover's cry . . . ." It seems imperative that "lover" be evident somewhere in a Crane poem and that usually he appear "crying." Another bad taste is left in the reader's mouth by the appearance of words like "terrific." Crane apparently was bent on using such adjectives because he almost always managed to get one in every poem he wrote. However, with the number and excellence of his critic friends, others must have approved because no one seemed to have called the matter to his attention as a fault.

The first poem, "Ave Maria," is Crane's version of Columbus' discovery of America. The figure of Columbus serves a twofold purpose: a symbol of man's quest for the yet undiscovered, and the historic voyager who represents better than anyone else the beginning of the American myth. The title of this first poem could also come from Columbus—his ship Santa Maria—but more likely the title is addressed to Mary because she represents the spiritual bridge between God and man.

The epigraph, which is forced and not very meaningful, is from Seneca's Medea. Roughly, it says that there is a new land ahead, not only in a physical sense but, by implication, a new spiritual land.

At the opening of the poem, Columbus and his men are almost home again. He meditates on the people who had been his supplicants to Ferdinand and Isabella-Luis de San Angel and Juan Perez. He imagines telling them that ("I bring you back Cathay") he has found the coveted sea route to China. Then his thoughts return to America ("It is morning there"), and he remembers the hardships of the journey.

The ocean was terrible:

Invisible valves of the sea,—lacks tendons  
Crested and creeping, troughing corridors  
That fall back yawning to another plunge.

And so is Crane's alliteration, "crested and creeping. . . corridors."

He pictures the ocean as a bridge between two worlds.

For here between two worlds, another, harsh,  
  
This third, of water, tests the word. lo, here  
Bewilderment, and mutiny heap whelming  
Laughter, and shadow cuts deep from the heart  
Almost as though the moor's flung scimitar  
Found more than flesh to fathom in its fall.

These two descriptions of water, only twenty lines apart in the same poem, are perfect examples of Crane's vacillation in The Bridge between good poetry and bad. One set of lines is precise, meaningful, and free-flowing; the other is vague, says nothing, and is stumpy with forced alliteration. The line "Found more than flesh to fathom in its fall" is pregnant with meaning, whereas "crested and creeping . . . corridors" is alliteration at the expense of meaning.

After Crane—Columbus in his mind warns the King of Spain not to use the new land for the sake of plunder, he again turns to meditations on the sea. This time the sea represents quest: the birth and end of life are its shares and Columbus pictures the successful arrival as secondary to the adventure of crossing. From the standpoint of quest, then, "Ave Maria" sets the stage for the tragedy and ultimate redemption that follows in the subsequent poems. Columbus in discovering America brings with him the flaws of the old world. The future can be good or bad depending on man's capacity for good or evil. Likewise, however, it is men like Columbus who accept the quest—in other words poets like Crane—who bring man's redemption.

Part II of The Bridge, "Powhatan's Daughter," contains five sections, each of which examines one area of the American continent or one phase of American history. The poet becomes a twentieth-century Columbus moving through time past and time present in interacting unity. He falls in love with Pocahontas who thus mystically takes him with her into the past.

"Harbor Dawn," the first section, opens with the poet in a reverie. He is at once Columbus, returned four hundred years later, and modern man. Pocahontas, who represents the land in its purest form, is with him. In order to consummate his myth Crane must have her. But she eludes him, and he pursues her through both land and past; thus the stage is set.

"Van Winkle" depicts the poet waking from his dream, and going to a subway, his reveries again taking him into the past.

You walked with Pizarro in a copybook,  
And Cortez rode up, reigning tautly in . . .

With his friend Van Winkle, the two remain on the subway until it becomes the limited that takes them out of the city into the heart of the land.

"The River" describes the countryside as the train takes the travelers to the Mississippi River. Three hoboes, whom Crane sees left in the spotlight of the passing train, represent the nomadic Indians who roamed the continent, knowing the secrets of the land. He interjects snatches of hobo conversation, and calls them the true gypsies.<sup>72</sup>

Hobo trekkers that forever search  
An empire wilderness of freight and rails.  
Each seemed a child, like me, on a loose perch,  
Holding to childhood like some ternless play.

These men are the true lovers of Pocahontas' body. They know her  
"body under the wide rain."

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

These lines set the groundwork for "The Dance," where Pocahontas takes on her full symbolic meaning in the unified image of woman and land. There can be no doubt from the opening stanza that Crane is on his love quest for a woman whose body is the ancient and fertile American land.

The swift red flesh, a winter king--  
Who squired the glacier woman down the sky?

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<sup>72</sup>Hazo, p. 88.

She ran the neighing canyons all the spring;  
She spouted arms; she rose with maize--to die.

Using the first person, Crane narrates his quest for the place of the dance: "I left the village for the dogwood"; "I drifted how many hours I never knew"; "I took the portage climb"; and so forth, until his search becomes the frenzied dance itself. Then, in a vague, spiritual way, the experience of the dance becomes the experience of a growing America. The poet feels the pangs and lives the pleasures as if he were America and America was a body growing up.

We danced, O Brave, we danced beyond their farms,  
In cobalt desert closures made our vows . . .  
Now is the strong prayer folded in thine arms,  
The serpent with the eagle in the boughs.

This experience of becoming one with the universe is similar to other quest accounts such as Ulysses entering hell or even to Christ's archetypal experience when he entered hell before he ascended. The tradition is that the heroes descend before the moment of mystic, universal truth is revealed to them upon their return.

In "Indiana" a pioneer mother replaces the Indian squaw of "The Dance." Her son, Larry, is about to leave the farm forever and pursue a life at sea. Critics have condemned the poem for oversentimentality. But Crane, after most of the work was finished, recognized the need for this poem as a transition from land to sea and from the pioneer West to the commercial East Coast, which would be the setting for Part III, "Cutty Sark."

"Cutty Sark" concerns the period in American history in which the great clipper ships lead American commerce on the sea. The form

of the poem is purposefully erratic in order to represent "the hallucinations incident to rum-drinking in a South Street dive as well as reminiscent lurchings of a boat in heavy seas."<sup>73</sup> Furthermore a sort of fugue, according to Crane, is created by the voice of the sailor and the tune on the pianola in the waterfront dive. The sailor for his part of the fugue relates to Crane, who is with him in the bar, the story of his life at sea. The pianola's tune is the voice of the world breaking into the sailor's story.

Rose of Stamboul O Coral Queen—  
 teased remnants of the skeletons of cities—  
 and galleries, galleries of watergutted lava  
 snarling stone—green—drums—drown—

As the sailor rambles on, the theme of quest is reiterated because the poet thinks he sees desire for further travel in the seafarer's eyes.

I saw the frontiers gleaming of his mind;  
 or are these frontiers—running sands sometimes  
 running sands—somewhere—sands running . . .  
 Or they may start some white machine that rings.

The poet leaves the tavern and on his way home crosses the Brooklyn Bridge. In his imagination, he sees a fleet of clipper ships on the river, and he notes that these ships have completed the dream of Columbus by finding the essential Cathay—the American commerce.

"Cutty Sark" marks the end of that part of The Bridge in which Crane is interested in the physical and historical world. The second half is more concerned with the relation of the world of time to the world of eternity and the spiritual predicament and destiny of man in the modern world. In this sense the voice of the sailor repre-

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<sup>73</sup>Horton, p. 339.

sents time, and the pianola represents eternity. By introducing these two thematic levels of meaning as a fugue in "Cutty Sark," Crane was able to bring the first half of The Bridge to a harmonious close and simultaneously prepare the way for "Cape Hatteras," the poem which follows it.<sup>74</sup>

If the first poems in The Bridge establish a myth from one man's interpretation of American history, the latter poems establish a myth of that poet's proposal for the renewal of the old culture out of today's chaotic and materialistic culture. The hope of this regeneration lies in the poet himself. Only he can reveal in his poetic vision the truth about where the bridge between past and present has been broken.

Crane initiates his theory in "Cape Hatteras" by bringing in Walt Whitman. Whitman's life, similar to Crane's, had inspired him. Whitman had observed war and death and had mourned the loss of life; yet he had come through and his prophetic hope had not diminished.

And it was thou who on the boldest wheel  
 Stood up and flung the span on even wing  
 Of that great Bridge, our Myth, whereof I sing!

Hoffman notes the urgency with which Crane needed Whitman. It is almost as if Crane were saying to Whitman, "You were responsible for this in the first place; I must believe in you and it if I am to be saved."<sup>75</sup>

<sup>74</sup>Hazo, pp. 95-96

<sup>75</sup>Hoffman, p. 269.

But having Whitman as an example did not save Crane's poetry; this is one of his most confused lyrics in The Bridge. It begins ridiculously and uselessly nonsensical.

Imponderable the dinosaur  
                   sinks slow,  
                   the mammoth scurrian  
                   ghoul, the eastern  
                                   Cape . . . .  
 While rises in the west the coastwise range,  
                   slowly the hashed land--  
 Combustion at the astral core--the dorsal change  
 Of energy--convulsive shift of sand . . . .

Presumably, he is simply saying that we are poor, the past was great, and the future will be a return to greatness. But his poetry is as heavy as his "dinosaur." Saying what he says in confusing syntax makes his poem no clearer.

The central message is that although we have been successful inventively, we have not reached Whitman's forecast of American greatness. The symbol of inventiveness is the airplane.

There from Kill Devil Hill at Kitty Hawk  
 Two brothers in their twinship left the dune . . . .

But this invention, just like Columbus' discovery, has been turned to purposes of destruction; consequently, Whitman's dream is yet unfulfilled. The tragedy that the aeronauts experience is dramatized as a plane crash. Like Icarus, man is the victim of his inventiveness. He flies "too high" and crashes. But because there are good poets around like Walt Whitman, whom Crane again invokes after the crash, man can rise from the ashes of his crash like the phoenix. He addresses Whitman as "Panis Angelicus" and dedicates himself and his



poem to Whitman's mysticism—one which includes the machine and yet is also "fundamentally and ultimately intuitive."<sup>76</sup>

Yes, Walt,  
Afoot again, and onward without halt,—  
Not soon, nor suddenly,—No, never to let go  
By hand  
In yours,  
Walt Whitman—  
so—

It is strange that in all the commentary that links Crane with Whitman there is no specific mention of "Passage to India." The ideas in Whitman's poem are so similar to The Bridge that Crane seemed to have borrowed the entire plan for his poem. Because Crane knew Whitman so thoroughly, it seems unlikely that the similarity between the two poems is merely coincidental. But in all of Crane's correspondence about Whitman—how well he knew his poetry and so forth—there is no particular mention of "Passage to India" having any effect on The Bridge. It seems strange that with all the inspiration Crane admittedly gained from Whitman he was so reluctant to mention "Passage to India" as his guide to forming his own poem.

From the beginning the terminology and spirit of Whitman's poem is similar:

Singing the great achievements of the present,  
Singing the strong, light works of engineers,  
Our modern wonders . . .  
In the Old World, the East, the Suez Canal,  
The New by its mighty railroad spanned,

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<sup>76</sup>Hazo, p. 104.

The seas inlaid with eloquent, gentle wires,  
 I sound, to commerce, the cry, with thee, O Soul,  
 The Past! The Past! The Past!

Whitman did not emphasize the myth of American history, as Crane did, but he returned to the past in the same fly-through-the-air manner that Crane did. The following phrases from Section Four of "Passage to India" are reminiscent of "Van Winkle" and "The Dance." "I see the Monument mountain," "I pass the promontory," "I ascend the Nevadas," "I see the forests," "I behold the enchanting mirages," and so forth. At the height of his search for the mythical American past in "The Dance," Crane travels over a series of landscapes reminiscent of these in Whitman's poems.

In the fifth section Whitman mentions "tales of many a sailor dead," an idea which Crane converts into sea imagery in The Bridge. Likewise, Whitman, in his turning to the past, cites 1492 and Columbus ("The world of 1492, with its awaken'd enterprise").

But the most obvious similarity is that both poets recognize the poet as the savior of mankind. Crane pictures him as leading mankind out of the subway depths; Whitman says that

After the noble inventors--after the scientists, the chemist the  
 ethnologist, geologist,  
 Finally shall come the poet, worthy that name;  
 The true Son of God shall come, singing his songs.

Thus, Whitman says, "the gaps shall be taken up," and, Crane adds, "the bridge" will be the link that spans the gap.

"Three Songs" has been criticized as having no thematic justification for appearing in The Bridge. But as Hazo says, these songs

are concerned with women and with love. Hence, they are the modern breakdown of Virgin Mary, Pocahontas, and the pioneer women, who appear in the first part. Pocahontas is no longer the beautiful lover of "Harbor Dawn," nor is she the "glacier woman" pursued in "The Dance." She is a woman who tempts, who is appealing, but who does not satisfy. In the first song, "Southern Cross," she is a prostitute, in "National Winter Garden" a strip-teaser, and in "Virginia" a seemingly demure secretary. The women serve to reiterate what Crane said previously—that modern America looks good on the surface but is decayed underneath. The women are cheap, bawdy imitations of the women of the first poems, just as America is now a cheap suggestion of its glorious history.<sup>77</sup>

"Southern Cross" begins with Eve, or Mary Magdalene, who soon becomes a modern prostitute.

You crept out simmering, accomplished,  
Water rattled that stinging coil, your  
Rehearsed hair—docile, alas, from many arms.  
Yes, Eve—wraith of my unloved seed.

In "National Winter Garden" Crane is at Minsky's in New York: observing a dancer who "wakens salads in the brain."

Her eyes exist in swivellings of her teats,  
Pearl whip her hips, a drench of whirling strands.  
Her silly snake rings begin to mount, surmount  
Each other—turquoise fakes on tinsolled hands.

This strip teaser's dance is a version of the dance of fertility in "The Dance"; however, this dance is degeneration rather than regeneration.

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., p. 105.

The Mary of "Virginia," a secretary, is an ordinary woman who does her work, picks up her check, and keeps "smiling the boss away." "If she is the Virgin Mary," Hazo says, "then the Woolworth Tower is her cathedral; both falsify religious meaning and make it useless."<sup>78</sup>

Hazo notes the following development from the women of the "Three Songs": Crane moves from the prostitutes Eve and Mary Magdalene to the Virgin Mary whose potency is reduced to trivia because of her modern surroundings.<sup>79</sup>

"Quaker Hill" is prefaced by two quotations indicating the theme: the way the world is and the way Crane thinks it should be. The first quotation is from Isadora Duncan: "I see only the ideal. But no ideals have ever been fully successful on this earth." The second is from Emily Dickinson: "The gentian weaves her fringes, the maple's loom is red."

Much like H. L. Mencken, but less bitter, Crane attacks the cultureless culture-seekers of the twenties in this poem. He regards them as

cows that see no other thing  
Than grass and snow, and their own inner being.

This contrasts sharply with poets like himself and those quoted in the proface who know deeper realities.

But I have seen death's stare in slow survey  
From four horizons that no one relates . . .

<sup>78</sup>Hoffman, p. 271

<sup>79</sup>Hazo, p. 108.



the name of a concourse among the ruck of the 'thousand theaters, faces--  
/Mysterious kitchens,'<sup>80</sup>

Undecided about walking home over the Brooklyn Bridge or taking  
the quicker subway, Crane decides to be like the anonymous millions  
who ride the subway.

Be minimum, then, to swim the hiving swarms  
Out of the square, the Circle burning bright--  
Avoid the glass doors gyring at your right,  
Where boxed alone a second, eyes take fright  
--Quite unprepared rush naked back to light;  
And down beside the turnstile press the coin  
Into the slot. The gongs already rattle.

Following this, Crane goes into his customary habit of build-  
ing disassociated images to paint a picture of the world around him.  
This time it is comprised of wisps of talk overheard on the subway  
("Let's have a pencil, Jimmy--living now at Floral Park," and so forth).  
Hazo calls these images "another testament of Crane's architectonic  
or 'virtuosic' ability to give some meaning to the meaningless." He  
cites the fact that all the images concern objects that have been  
frayed by use ("beaten weather vanes"; thus he builds purposefully.<sup>81</sup>  
But it is certainly questionable whether or not Crane had to exult so  
much in his disassociated images. There were other and shorter methods  
open to him. For example, his line that says the voices on the subway  
are like "The phonographs of hades in the brain" conveys meaning with-

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid., p. 110.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., p. 111.

out all the gibberish that Crane forces the reader to wade through. It is undeniable that Crane was having fun in a way that hurt the poem. He wrote in ecstasy to Waldo Frank that all of the conversation in "The Tunnel" was truly overheard conversation which he had copied on the subway. Such realizing is little more than the trivia about which Crane is complaining by inserting the conversations.

In the midst of the jumbled conversation Crane suddenly imagines that he sees the face of Edgar Allan Poe.

And why do I often meet your visage here;  
Your eyes like agate lanterns—on and on  
Below the toothpaste and dandruff ads?

Poe, then, becomes the prophet of the lost world below, while Whitman had been the poet of the paths that lay ahead.

Then the tunnel takes on its full symbolical meaning as a descent into hell.

The car  
wheels off. The train rounds, bending to a scream,  
Taking the final level for the dive  
Under the river—  
And somewhat emptier than before,  
Demented, for a hitching second, humps; then  
Let's go . . . . Toward corners of the floor  
Newspapers wing, revolve and wing.  
Blank windows gargle signals through the roar.

He turns to an Italian scrub woman, significantly recalling Columbus, and asks her if the subway ("the Daemon") takes her home every night to love her children. This leads Crane to his deepest despair. He pictures "the Daemon"—symbolic of the machine—as swallowing everything and everyone in a "demiure and oventful yawn." In

a letter to Otto Kahn, Crane described this moment as "the encroachment of machinery on humanity." People are caught "like pennies beneath soot and stream . . . ."

But finally the depths are reached and the train begins

like Lazarus, to feel the slope,  
The sod and billow breaking—lifting ground,  
—A sound of waters bending astride the sky  
Unceasing with some Word that will not die.

The poetic "Word" has won out and saved humanity. The last is optimism.

Section VIII, "Atlantis," was written at the same time the best poems of the first half were written. Consequently, with its merits Crane was able to prevent the entire second half from falling too far below the level of the first half.

He quotes Plato as a preface: "Music is then the knowledge of that which relates to love in harmony and system." This lends itself to the idea developed in the first of "Atlantis" that the bridge is a harp and that the music of the harp is "god."

Up the index of night, granite and steel—  
Transparent meshed—fleckless the gleaming staves—  
Sibylline voices flicker, waveringly stream  
As though a god were issue of the strings . . . .

The bridge is viewed as an arc over time (threading with its call/ One arc synoptic of all tides below). From this point the poet conceives a quest in his imagination of Atlantis, the symbol of poetic truth and beauty. The spirit of quest is that of Columbus, but the goal has changed. The quest is attained in the following verse, if anywhere; at least this is where Crane reaches a peak of obscurity:



Sheerly the eyes, like seagulls stung with rhyme—  
 Slit and propelled by glistening fine of light—  
 Pick biting way up towering looms that press  
 Sidelong with flight of blade on tendon blade  
 —Tomorrows into yesteryear—and link  
 What cipher—script of time no traveller reads  
 But who, through smoking pyres of love and death,  
 Searches the timeless laugh of mythic spears.

Haze explains this obscurity:

He seems to be wrestling language to his purpose  
 as a mystic would have to rely on the metaphorical  
 character of language to describe an almost indescri-  
 able moment of ecstasy in which he felt himself  
 drawn toward a more intimate union with God.<sup>82</sup>

Crane continues his quest through a succession of ecstatic  
 stanzas, ultimately relating it to consciousness, knowledge, and  
 spiritual unity.

So to thine Everpresence, beyond time,  
 Like spears ensanguined of one tolling star  
 That bleeds infinity—the orphic strings,  
 Sidercal phalanxes, leap and converge:  
 One Song, one Bridge of Fire . . . .

So at last he has returned to his beginnings—the bridge itself, and  
 the full measure of its symbolic meaning. The cables ("harp"), the  
 shape ("curveship") of the surface are all drawn in to describe the  
 myth, which is America.

General critical appraisal of The Bridge falls into two basic  
 categories: that it was generally a failure, and that it was the suc-  
 cessful testament in poetry of modern America. Allen Tate leads the

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<sup>82</sup>Ibid., p. 115.

first group who basically feel that Crane overstepped his talent in attempting something as large as the epic. These critics claim that where merit exists in The Bridge is where merit exists in all of Crane's poetry--the single moment of ecstasy in the stream of consciousness. Many critics in this group feel that Crane did poetry a bad turn when he underestimated the expression of personal emotion as a legitimate art form. Personal emotion does not make for solid casting of a sociological and philosophical myth--particularly when that myth is as large as Twentieth Century America.

Of the critics who favor The Bridge, most claim that Crane should be judged for what he was trying to do rather than what he was supposed to do in terms of literary history. In other words, the poem was successful on its own grounds--an emotional and imaginative concept of the American past and its possibilities in the future. These critics claim that the rigid structure of the traditional epic would not have been suitable to Crane's purposes. Just as Crane does, the most ecstatic critics see the hope for America's redemption to lie in the subway, with the poet as the only one to lead to the sunlight of reality.

As time passes the best opinions appear to be moving in the direction of Allen Tate's negative views. "Modern" America is no longer the America of Crane's day. Subsequent technical developments have muted the effect of writing about the Brooklyn Bridge as representative of American achievement in construction. Furthermore, the day of the

airplane's invention is removed so far from today that younger Americans feel that it happened some vague time in the past. Consequently, when we are left with the poem itself rather than a rhymed and symbolic interpretation of a modern world, its failures loom larger than its successes.

Although the poem deals with the glorious American past in one section and the present American degeneration in another, there is little development in Crane's epic. Even if he did not need the traditional form of the epic, as some critics suggest, Crane did have the need to develop from one point to another to be successful at a long poem. The Bridge has two or three highlights, but they all say the same thing. For example, the development of the Pocahontas myth is a high point in the poem, well done and worth development into a longer poem. But the other supposedly high spots like "The Tunnel" seem to be the same old poet-savior complex which Crane talked about in many of his short poems. Over and over we hear that the poet is ultra-sensitive, and that this pain of sensitivity is a mystic quality capable of saving mankind. Even this theme would have made for a fairly good myth if Crane had stuck to it rather than try to combine it with the myth of American history.

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### VITA

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