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*Cosmological Vision(s):  
History, Modernism, and American Renewal in Hart Crane's The Bridge*

*by*

*Lauren Grewe*

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*in*

*English  
University of Richmond  
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### Hart Crane, T. S. Eliot and the Anxiety of Influence

Although Hart Crane's *The Bridge* has made some significant critical advancements over the years, as a solely cultural project it still cannot measure up to the critical as well as canonical success of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. Whereas the publication of *The Waste Land* became a force that directed the course of modernist literature, Crane's poem never achieved the immediate critical success that Crane himself imagined for his poem of America due to *The Bridge*'s near unanimous rejection by the New Critics as well as Hart Crane's own untimely death a mere two years after its publication. Nevertheless, almost eighty years after *The Bridge*'s publication in 1930, new critical discussions of Crane and *The Bridge* continue to appear, suggesting that, despite Crane's early exclusion from the modernist canon, something remains in *The Bridge* to admire and study. It is with this attitude of critical admiration that I approach Crane's epic poem, in an attempt to reveal its potential as a modernist epic poem of a uniquely American desire and conception. At a time when his contemporaries were mired in the despair of the West's cultural wasteland, Crane wrote a poem that moved beyond such a pessimistic view of the modern world as hopelessly fallen and devoid of meaning. *The Bridge* trusts in the principle of renewal—poetic regeneration through expansive vision, courage, and suffering—a foundation that many of Crane's contemporaries viewed as ridiculously naïve. Yet, in many ways, *The Bridge* delivers on its grand promise to rebuild a future for America. Enlisting desire and trusting his own visionary powers as a poet, Crane wrote not only an epic poem for America, but created a new cosmology for the modern world, one which addresses the modernist view of history and despair while nevertheless maintaining the forward-looking principles of mythopoesis. With the help of recent Crane studies, along with my own ear, I intend to prove the worth of Crane's myth of bridging as a way of responding to and eventually reforming the

Elitonian vision of the modern world. *The Bridge* counters Eliot as a way to offer hope to the modern world in place of despair, as a way to offer a system of belief that is neither dogmatic nor futile, that incorporates a vision of the future just as much as a vision of the past.

In *The Anxiety of Influence*, Harold Bloom proposes a view of literary history that highlights the struggle of poets against their poetic predecessors. He argues for a story of poetry as an oedipal battle of sons against fathers, of poetic newcomers against the established literary tradition. All “strong poets,” Bloom maintains, feel the “anxiety of influencing,” the encroaching of more established poets on their own literary work and imaginative powers (Bloom 6). Younger poets must therefore not only prove themselves but prove themselves *against* literary tradition in order to *become* part of that tradition. As a precursor to canonization, poets must rebel against the canon, rebel against the very artists who helped to shape their literary approaches. Strong poets must “wrestle with their strong precursors, even to the death” in Bloom’s vision of literary history (5).

A modernist version of this poetic struggle emerges in the literary relationship between Hart Crane and T. S. Eliot. Half a generation younger than Eliot, with “a little toe-nail in the last century,” Hart Crane found himself in the difficult position of attempting to overthrow a literary monolith that had just emerged as such (Crane, Letters 274). As his letter to Gorham Munson recounts, Crane greatly admired Eliot: “There is no one writing in English who can command so much respect, to my mind as Eliot” (308). Yet, Crane nevertheless felt the urge to critique Eliot, to push forward through Eliot toward his own literary statement. Crane continues his letter with the turn, “However, I take Eliot as a point of departure toward an almost complete reversal of direction....I would apply as much of his erudition and technique as I can absorb and assemble toward a more positive, or (if I must put it in a sceptical age) ecstatic goal” (308). Crane thus

uses Eliot, the established poet, to present himself not only as Eliot's successor but as his improvement. This placement of Eliot as a stepping stone to his own (arguably greater) quest for poetic ecstasy both admits and denies the poet's influence on Crane. Crane at first reveals his own admiration for Eliot, and then criticizes Eliot for not going quite far enough with his poetry since Eliot deflates the modern world rather than celebrates it. In Bloom's terms, this is the classical struggle of poet against poetic antecessor, an instance of a poet "misreading" another poet "so as to clear imaginative space for [himself]" (Bloom 5). As Bloom goes on to note, such a struggle is, in fact, only possible when the younger poet is greatly indebted to the work of his predecessor, as is Crane to Eliot. In such cases, the younger poet, if his vision is strong, strives to reverse the process of poetic influence so that it appears that he, the younger poet, is actually offering his predecessor an escape from his self-created dilemma.

Precisely in aiming to correct Eliot's influence on modernist poetry, however, Crane belies just how large an influence Eliot has had on his own poetic creations, the most notable manifestation of which is his epic poem *The Bridge*. For Crane, Eliot emerges as teacher, antagonist, and enemy, thus explaining why an analysis of *The Bridge* first necessitates a look backward to one of its greatest sources, Eliot's *The Waste Land*. As Crane himself admits, his grand project of writing a modernist epic poem for America takes shape as a rejoinder to Eliot, as an attempt to face *The Waste Land* head on and win the struggle for a "more positive" vision of modernity. Oedipal as this vision is, it comes alive within the pages of Crane's many letters to his friends describing his poetic development. Even before writing *The Bridge*, Crane saw one of his other poems, "The Marriage of Faustus and Helen," as "designed to erect an almost antithetical spiritual attitude to the pessimism of *The Waste Land*, although the poem was well finished before *The Wasteland* [sic] appeared" (Crane, Letters 310). More than anything, such a

retrospective examination of his own poetry supports the argument that Crane used Eliot as a backboard for his own literary ambitions even before conceiving of *The Bridge* but, of course, most remarkably with *The Bridge*. By setting himself against Eliot, Crane creates a sense of his own importance and the potential merit of his own literary projects. Not only is Eliot an influence, in other words, he offers a strategy. Fittingly, therefore, Crane places himself as Eliot's redeemer as well as antagonist. In his letters he explains that he means to correct Eliot's mistakes, how he "ignores certain spiritual events and possibilities as real and powerful now as, say in the time of Blake" (308). Crane rails against "the steady pessimism which pervades the *Dial* since Eliot and others have announced that happiness and beauty dwell only in memory" and hopes that this dire vision of modern life "might sometime lift" (312). What Crane proposes to offer in Eliot's place, is "a positive attitude!" a sense of renewed hope and optimism for the modern world, the proof of which quickly becomes his newest project, *The Bridge* (312). With his epic poem Crane extends to the modern world a testament to the idea "that ecstasy and beauty are as possible to the active imagination now as ever" (310). Eliot's "pessimism," while "amply justified, in his own case," should not dominate the entirety of the Western world view (308). For Crane *The Bridge* becomes the project that will lift him, as well as his readers, out of the quagmire that Eliot and the other thinkers of the "dirgeful *Dial*" have built of the modern world (308). As such, Crane clarifies, "Simply, then, I regard my poem as a kind of bridge that is, to my way of thinking, a more creative and stimulating thing than the settled formula of Mr. Eliot, superior technician that he is!" (310-11). *The Bridge* becomes Crane's means of speaking back against Eliot, a means of reforming Eliot's own poetic vision of the modern world in *The Waste Land* and so creating both a space for himself in the modernist literary canon along with a space for hope in modernist literature.

Faced with the modernist monolith of Eliot's *The Waste Land*, Crane writes *The Bridge* as an attempt to successfully beat Eliot at his own game, the genre, that is, of the modernist epic poem. Crane explains his approach as discovering "a safe tangent to strike which, if I can possibly explain the position,—goes *through* him toward a *different* goal" (279). This "different goal," as it turns out, is the goal of creating a living cosmology with his poetry, the goal of using mythopoesis to inspire and allow modern belief. Cosmology is a term I borrow and expand upon from John Xiros Cooper's use of the word to describe Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" as lacking an inherently "framing cosmology" (Cooper, *The Cambridge Introduction to T. S. Eliot* 55). Cooper seems to understand cosmology as "an external or historical measure or standard for human agency, a criterion embodied in institutions (such as a church, for example) that give individual identities not only metaphysical density but meaning as well" (55). He notes that, in contrast to Eliot's lack of cosmology for the modern world in "Prufrock," John Donne in his dramatic lyric "The Canonization" ultimately reveals "the imperturbability of the Christian cosmos, not just as doctrine, but as a web of living norms, a model of thought, feeling and conduct," a cosmology from which the lovers in the poem cannot never escape, despite their individualistic efforts (55). Cooper suggests that, unlike Donne, modernists can no longer rely on a set cosmology (Christian or otherwise) and thus must collapse into the solipsism and individual despair of which "Prufrock" is a prime modernist example. Similarly, the dictionary defines cosmologies as existing "in so-called primitive societies" to "help explain the relationship of human beings to the rest of the universe" and as "therefore closely tied to religious beliefs and practices" ("cosmology"). Cosmology is thus a living system of belief that allows individuals to account for the problems that emerge in their lives in a systematized way, however, one which is nearly always connected to more "so-called primitive societies." Both in

Cooper's use of "cosmology" and in the dictionary's definition of its mainstream cultural signification, cosmologies belong to the past, signify systems of belief that are somehow more "primitive," and thus more "religious" than those of modern society. Crane, in his hope to create an "ecstatic" goal for modernist poetry, denies this interpretation of cosmology as belief systems dead or near death (which is to say either Christian or non-Western).

As I will later argue, in *The Bridge* Crane creates a working modern cosmology, a cosmology which is, moreover, kinetic or changing in nature, so as to prove adaptable to modern skepticism about history's effect on belief systems. Whereas Eliot argues in "Prufrock" that belief is dead and man's existence is thus incomprehensible, Crane maintains that a working belief system, a new cosmology, is indeed possible within modernist literature, and should, in fact, be the very *goal* of a modernist epic poem. In order to make this cosmology possible within the modern world, however, Crane needed to create a cosmology to fit the modernist view of Western society's place in history as after the fall of many great civilizations. With the modernist view that all civilizations fall and all great belief systems are eventually overthrown, any new cosmology must necessarily be one that is adaptive to the ravages of time. Therefore, by creating a working modern cosmology that is essentially kinetic in nature—that incorporates change and movement within its very structure—Crane avoids the perils of an absolute belief system in favor of something that is both more ethereal and more lasting. By refusing to create an absolute belief system from the outset, Crane creates with *The Bridge* a myth of bridging that is definable more as a process than as a religion. Connection, for Crane—through history and time—is what survives the ravages of time. Yet, connections are ever-changing. Thus by projecting his myth ever into the future, Crane avoids the perils of submitting his new cosmology



to the inevitable decay of history. By embracing change and movement as a way of relating to the past, Crane creates a modern myth designed to endure even the most skeptical of ages.

In both of these strategies, cosmology and myth, Crane differs markedly from Eliot. *The Waste Land* and *The Bridge* both exhibit prolific use of mythology, yet the types of mythology and the way in which the two authors direct those myths create two distinct roles for myth in the two epic poems. Eliot displays what he critically terms the “mythical method” with his placement of mostly classical allusions within his modernist epic poem (Eliot, “*Ulysses, Order and Myth*” 373). Eliot employs myths as one more way of positioning his poem as a cultural work, as a way of making the modern world comprehensible through meticulous allusions to the past. Although Eliot’s many allusions to classical mythology in *The Waste Land* at first seem to expand the poem’s ontological reach, the effect is ultimately not one of creation, of a working, modern cosmology, but rather a sense of deflation, that the modern world somehow always fails to live up to its ancient past, its ancient referents. Thus, in a sense, the way in which Eliot alludes to mythology proves a kind of compositional shortcut, a means of suggesting an ontological expanse without actually providing his readers with that working cosmology. In Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, as readers we must always look back to history, usually in its classical or Renaissance periods, for a sense of the pattern and meaning which are noticeably absent from the modern wasteland.

Crane, on the other hand, engages with myth in order to reform those myths, to appropriate them and recruit them to the cause of *The Bridge*, which contains his own working cosmology of “bridging” for modern life. Crane thus uses myth as part of his strategy of mythopoesis, of creating meaning and a working cosmology for the modern world through poetry. The figure of Brooklyn Bridge in particular comes to embody Crane’s new myth of

bridging for America, his own addition as a poet and creator to the existing myths that he reemploys and reshapes. As an ode to the bridging movement exemplified in the figure of Brooklyn Bridge itself, Crane's *The Bridge* works toward a blend of the mythical and the contemporary, demeaning neither, affirming both in his vision of possibility and harmony. Crane thus extends himself beyond the reach of Eliot, out of the realm of mythical reiteration and into the realm of mythical creation. Eliot, it seems, must always look back, while Crane draws his gaze forward, beyond history, into the realm of possibility.

For Crane, *The Bridge* becomes more than simply an epic poem for America, it becomes a synthesis of America—an act of mythopoesis that works on the land it describes. In *The Bridge*, the poet's role is to imbue the ever-changing world with purpose and a locus of meaning. Crane attests to this purpose in one of his letters to Gorham Munson, arguing, "The modern artist needs gigantic assimilative capacities, emotion,—and the greatest of *all*—*vision*" (Crane, Letters 328). Judging from his letters, Crane began the project of *The Bridge* with a distinctive vision as to its scope and possibilities. He repeatedly calls it, "an epic of America" (Crane, Letters 489), a "Myth of America" (554), making clear that the range of *The Bridge* is that of America. Yet, more than simply an epic of America, Crane imagines *The Bridge* as "a mystical synthesis of America and its spiritual identity now" (127), a "new cultural synthesis of our America" (223). Thus Crane's position as poet of this America "synthesis" is one not only of creator but of assimilator, a sort of mythical historian/poet. Crane's use of the word "synthesis" to describe his poetic ambitions implies a sense of himself as a poet with a Whitmanian ability to distill a new and forward-looking spirit from the many disparate parts of American experience. From the chaos of American history—its people, places, events and spirits—Crane hopes to refashion a common purpose of ecstasy and celebration of the country's future in light of instead of in spite

of the past. Myth and history breathe in *The Bridge*, transform and so gain new life as part of Crane's new song of America.

The Brooklyn Bridge becomes the source of this powerful vision for an optimistic view of American modernity, a vision which Crane lifted from his own observation of the Brooklyn Bridge's architecture. In recognizing the importance of Brooklyn Bridge to Crane's poem, one must note the fact that while writing *The Bridge* Crane found himself fortunate enough to live in a room with a view of the harbor, looking out over Brooklyn Bridge and the Statue of Liberty. As Clive Fisher remarks in his biography of Crane, in 1924 Crane moved to Columbia Heights, "a Victorian settlement set apart from the rest of Brooklyn on a promontory overlooking the East River" (Fisher 221). From his perch at 110 Columbia Heights, Crane gained "a prospect not of history but of myth," as he looked out upon what he described to his mother Grace Hart Crane as "the finest view in all America" (Fisher 221). Crane's room was itself imbued with the history of Brooklyn Bridge, as Crane discovered that Washington Roebling, the son of John Augustus Roebling, the bridge's architect, supervised the construction of the bridge by telescope from Crane's very windows (Fisher 221). As Crane told his friend Waldo Frank, his view of Brooklyn Bridge encompassed "everything from mountains to the walls of Jerusalem and Nineveh, and all related in actual contact with the changelessness of the many waters that surround it" (Fisher 222). In Crane's own personal mythology, Brooklyn Bridge came to stand for the continuity of American history and mythology, the possibility for connection and a positive relation to the past, the present, and, importantly for my argument, the future. The bridge became Crane's emblem for the possibilities of modernity, the blend of functional purpose with aesthetic beauty and the structuring arc of his poem as a whole.

Of course, for Crane the bridge was much more than the physical structure of Brooklyn Bridge itself. As he explains in a letter to Waldo Frank written in 1926,

The very idea of a bridge, of course, is a form peculiarly dependent on such emotional convictions. It is an act of faith besides being a communication. The symbols of reality necessary to articulate the span—may not exist where you expected them, however. By which I mean that however great their subjective significance to me is concerned—these forms, materials, dynamics are simply non-existent in the world, I may amuse and delight and flatter myself as much as I please—but I am only evading a recognition and playing Don Quixote in an immorally conscious way. (Crane, Letters 466-67)

The idea of Crane's bridge and bridging encompasses more than simply a fine view of America's history. The bridge exemplifies the journey of "faith" that Crane expects his readers to take with him, an act of "communication," surely but also an act of "emotional convictions." With *The Bridge*, Crane lays claim not only to the myths of America, but to its emotions, to its latent desire for a means of connection, belief, and communication. As Crane also reveals in his letter, however, such an act of faith in modern times needs must also be an evasion, a "playing Don Quixote in an immorally conscious way." Crane thus suggests that the project of *The Bridge*, while enacting a kind of emotional belief in its pages, is also the act of a fool, a Don Quixote chasing after windmills. Yet it is precisely this category of Crane's work which potentially redeems *The Bridge* as a work of modernist literature, since, with this view in mind, Crane's quest to discover a bridge, a new myth for America, is not the unexamined leap of a romantic (as his least sympathetic critics implied), but the measured risk of a modern, the willing engagement

in an illusion for the purposes of creating, however briefly and emotively, a modern cosmology.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, this description of a poet who willingly engages in a quest for the impossible matches Bloom's description of all strong poets as "the anti-natural or antithetical man [who] from his start as a poet...quests for an impossible object, as his precursor quested before him" (Bloom 10). In this light, it is the questing, the *desire* for the impossible that makes a poet; a certain doom to failure is naturally implied in the definition of "poet." Poetry, thus, is a non-teleological quest, a quest for the sake of desire itself. Crane's willingness to leap, to take on Eliot and assert his own vision of the bridge as a uniting myth for modern America becomes crucially important. As Crane himself spells out, and as I will explore in the culminating section of my thesis and its discussion of "Atlantis," such a leap is not without its doubts. And perhaps it is those doubts, coupled with such persistent optimism, that make *The Bridge* a uniquely modernist epic poem.

Throughout the many sections of *The Bridge* that I treat in the following pages, I aim to explore these motions, both against Eliot and with him, both upward with ecstasy and downward with doubt, as fundamental to the vision of Crane's "Bridge" as a whole. The particular sections

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<sup>1</sup> One such critic who attacks Crane's work on the basis of its supposed "romanticism" is Allen Tate. In his essay, "Hart Crane," published in Tate's collection, *Essays of Four Decades*, Tate introduces Crane as "one of the great masters of the romantic movement," born on July 21, 1899 (115). Tate goes on to assess *The Bridge* as "probably the perfect word of romanticism in this century" (121), accusing Crane as a poet of "fall[ing] back on upon the intensity of consciousness, rather than the clarity, for his center of vision," concluding, "And that is romanticism" (122). Yet, to me at least, Tate's incorporation of Crane into the glorious, but admittedly dead, ranks of the Romantic poets has more to do with Tate's own preoccupation with asserting a certain type of modernism than it does with any inherently romantic quality of Crane's poetry. In the same essay, Tate writes of *The Bridge* that "the style lacks an objective pattern of ideas elaborate enough to carry it through an epic or heroic work" (118). Shortly after, he explains that Crane's method "lapses into sentimentality" (118). It appears that Tate condemns *The Bridge* as romantic simply as a way of displaying his own adherence to Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot's principles of objectivity and masculinity in "A Retrospect." In this essay, Pound argues that twentieth century poetry must be "austere, direct, free from emotional slither" (936) and directs aspiring poets to "Go in fear of abstractions" (930). Eliot similarly maintains that the poet must sublimate emotions, offering, "the bad poet is usually unconscious where he ought to be conscious, and conscious where he ought to be unconscious. Both errors tend to make him 'personal.' Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality" (946-47). Thus, Tate's condemnation of Crane on the basis of his supposed "romanticism" fits within this larger modernist effort to separate poetry from emotion and so make poetry an objective art. The argument that Crane was a romantic therefore constitutes a mostly rhetorical effort to distinguish between "good" kinds of modernist poets and "bad" ones, both, however, being subject to the principles of modernism rather than those of romanticism.

I have chosen best exemplify my own understanding of how the poem is working, both against Eliot and in response to American history. I hope to offer a multidimensional approach to Crane's epic poem, both in terms of movement—*The Bridge* encompasses forward and backward motions across time as well as spatial movements upward and down—and in terms of the potential hopefulness of Crane's vision. If, upon its arrival at "Atlantis," *The Bridge* concludes on a final note of ecstasy, the poem does so in a way that evades absolute belief and instead creates a modern cosmology that is adaptive to the flux of history. Moreover, with "Atlantis," Crane will incorporate not only Eliot's challenges of urban and technological modernity, but the breadth and gravity of America's painful history of colonization and enslavement. In doing so, Crane creates a cosmology that acknowledges the depths of American history so as eventually to overcome those bonds and allow the country what Eliot never could: a future. In his final address to his antagonist and model, it appears that Crane appropriates some of Eliot's skepticism, while nevertheless singing an epic of possibility and hope for a new America.

*The Waste Land: Mythical Method, Restraint, and the Fall of Western Civilization*

*We who were living are now dying*  
*With a little patience*  
*The Waste Land*, ll 329-30

With the publication of *The Waste Land* in 1922, a certain prototype of modernism became "fact" within the modernist scene. Shortly after its publication, T. S. Eliot's modernist epic poem *The Waste Land* stood not simply, as it was likely first viewed, and as Eliot himself once described it, as the testimony of one man's personal and psychological struggle, but rather became one of modernism's first cultural monuments to the "fact" of human psychological and

spiritual isolation and the numbing and machine-like tendencies of modern city life.<sup>2</sup> On a cultural level, *The Waste Land* came to stand for a particular kind of modernism, one which rejected the possibility of human connection and belief in favor of a view that took into account the psychological and historical traumas of the preceding years, including the advent of Freudian psychology as well as the ever-present shroud of World War I. With *The Waste Land*'s "nearly instantaneous canonization," this type of despondent modernism became the norm, encouraging a modernist cultural cosmology that eschewed desire in favor of restraint, condemned the present in favor of the classical past, and used the "mythical method" in an attempt not so much to create new myths as to order the old (North 141). It is precisely against such cultural and mythical despondency that Crane writes *The Bridge* as a counter to Eliot's *The Waste Land*. Unwilling and unable to view modern life as something entirely dead and determined, Crane insisted upon creating a myth that would elevate rather than degrade the contemporary moment. Through its own mythical method, *The Bridge* works against the hegemony of pessimism that Eliot's publication of *The Waste Land* confirmed as the proper model of modernism. In doing so, Crane's epic poem redeems the present moment through its living cosmology, its working system of myths and historical connections for the contemporary world. Where Eliot's mythical method implies that true modern myth is impossible, Crane writes in defiance of such a claim,

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<sup>2</sup>In *Reading 1922*, Michael North mentions that "Perhaps even *The Waste Land* originally appealed to Liveright for similar [psychological] reasons, for, as Ronald Bush has shown, the poem appeared to its earliest readers as 'nothing more or less than a most distressingly moving account of Eliot's own agonized state of mind during the years which preceded his nervous breakdown.' Given the current popularity of psychoanalysis, the new poem might have been a good deal more appealing under this interpretation, as a portrait of psychological extremity, than under the far more intellectual interpretation that would later be offered." (81). According to *The Waste Land: Facsimile and Transcript of the Original Drafts*, edited by Valerie Eliot and published in 1971, Eliot supposedly remarked of *The Waste Land*, "To me it was only the relief of a personal and wholly insignificant grouse against life; it is just a piece of rhythmical grumbling" (Eliot and Pound 1). Of course, as it turns out, *The Waste Land* was neither "insignificant" nor solely "personal" as to critics it came to represent the grumbings of an entire generation against modern life.

with a determination to show his readers not only the degradation of the modern world, but its potential as well.

As the acclaimed start and paragon of modernist literature, *The Waste Land*, in its themes and struggles, promulgates the skeptical ideals of modernism in its many forms. In *The Waste Land*, myth serves to confirm not the continued working of the myth itself, but rather the impoverishment of modern life, as Eliot's "mythical method" is a retooling and reemployment of the old myths of Western civilization. Without trying to cover the entirety of *The Waste Land*, which, given its continued status as a canonical text of modernism is likely unnecessary as well as difficult, a brief journey through the poem's most "modernist" of moments may well serve to set the scene for what exactly the development of Eliot's particular type of modernism meant for the modernist poets who followed in his wake, particularly for the poet Hart Crane.

In his 1923 essay, "*Ulysses*, Order and Myth," Eliot outlines the main principles of what he terms his "mythical method," that is to say, his means and reasons for poetically engaging with ancient myths in his poems, most notably in *The Waste Land*, which was, as I noted earlier, published just the year before. In the essay, he explains, "in manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity....It is simply a way of *controlling*, of *ordering*, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history....It is, I seriously believe, a step toward making the modern world possible in art" [italics mine] (Eliot, "*Ulysses*, Order and Myth" 372-73). Within this argument for his "mythical method," Eliot affirms the use of myth not to regenerate belief or develop a modern cosmology, but rather to "manipulat[e]," to "control," to "order," to "give shape and a significance" to modern history. While the word "significance" perhaps implies meaning, it is, nonetheless, meaning from a critical distance, meaning arrived at not from faith but from a strict



structuring or “parallel[ing]” of ancient myth with images from modern life, comparing them to the latter unfavorably. Following the text of *The Waste Land* itself, it is a sense of methodically shoring fragments of antiquity against modern ruin (“These fragments I have shored against my ruins” ll 431), an attempt at preservation of Western culture through meticulous allusion.

Within this process of cultural and mythical allusions, *The Waste Land* works as much to deny hope as to accumulate the cultural currency to continue onward, in modern life as in modernist literature. A careful fragmentation of subjective voices, myths and places creates a sense that *The Waste Land* operates in a time during which the ability to claim the objectivity necessary for religion is nonexistent, with the result being a chaotic accumulation (carefully ordered as it is) that must serve in the place of a singular, all-encompassing modern myth. The only overarching voice in *The Waste Land*, a strange combination of narrator, poet and God, works within the logic of the inaccessibility of belief and true communion with other individuals. Such a voice lulls the reader into a logic of predestined defeat from the very first lines of the poem, with the words, “April is the cruellest month, breeding / Lilacs of the dead land, mixing / Memory and desire, stirring / Dull roots with spring rain” (ll 1-4). Desire becomes undesirable in the world of *The Waste Land*, as memory and desire tempt the present with unattainable wishes. The use of enjambment leads the reader along this logic of pessimism, forcing the reader to make the leap between the lines, each line a new torment and cruelty in the eyes of the authoritative speaker. Just a stanza later, after the intervention of the more personal voice of the Countess, the authoritative, strangely religious voice reemerges, this time contemplating, “What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow / Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man, / You cannot say, or guess, for you know only / A heap of broken images, where the sun beats, / And the dead tree gives no shelter, the crickets no relief, / And the dry stone no sound of water.” (ll

19-24). The speaker thus uses religious symbols to create an image of the waste land in the reader's mind, addressing the reader from the perspective of God in the Judeo-Christian tradition as "Son of man," and then continuing on to assume the reader's philosophical state as one of modernist unknowing and fragmentation. The world contains only "A heap of broken images," the authoritative voice asserts, and the world contains "no shelter," no means of escaping the psychological isolation of the modern monad.

Desire is similarly devoid of meaning in *The Waste Land*, although sexual desire recurs throughout the poem's pages in various forms. As one of his main motifs, Eliot reiterates the violence of rape throughout the poem, aligning the modern rape of the typist with the classical rape of Philomel "by the barbarous king / So rudely forced" (ll 99-100). The rape of Philomel acts in *The Waste Land* as the original sin of rape, as a barbarous act that produces the nightingale's song of violation expressed through "inviolable voice," as "still she cried, and still the world pursues, / 'Jug Jug' to dirty ears" (ll 101-03). That the nightingale's song repeatedly goes unheeded throughout the unfolding of the poem's narrative is one of *The Waste Land's* more cynical moves, one which takes us next to the violation of the typist at teatime. Tiresias, a classical figure half-man and half-woman himself, narrates this episode in the poem, witnesses, in a sense the otherwise unremarkable violence that occurs between the "typist home at teatime" (ll 222) and the "young man carbuncular" (ll 231). As a preface, Tiresias notes that it is "the violet hour, when the eyes and back / Turn upward from the desk, when the human engine waits Like a taxi throbbing waiting" (ll 215-17). The "violet hour" comes to represent debased desire, sexual desire that arises from the boredom of the office environment more than from any passionate love or emotional attachment. Humans, in this sense, have become "engine[s]" that "wait" like "a taxi throbbing." Eliot envisions sexual desire as nothing more than the mechanical

necessities of a machine, which throbs with energy not spiritual or even truly bodily, but mechanical. Throughout the scene there is also a sense of stalking, that the typist is being pursued as “the world pursues,” not out of love but out of a kind of mechanical instinct. The guest is “expected,” Tiresias “[p]erceived the scene, and foretold the rest,” leading us to remark that such instances are common, that this approaching scene of debased and domineering desire is a known part of life and accepted as such, at least by Tiresias (ll 229-30). Finally, the young man carbuncular arrives and with a “bold,” predatory “stare” (ll 232) guesses that “[t]he time is now propitious,” since the typist is “bored and tired” to “engage” her in mechanical “caresses,” which “still are unreproved, if undesired” (ll 235-38). Then occurs the “assault” which “encounter[s] no defence” and so “makes a welcome of indifference” (ll 239-42). Eliot’s tale of the typist and the young man carbuncular proves not so much a love song, as a song of rape, if a common and indifferent one. Eliot debases sexual desire in this account to purely biological (and mechanical at that) motivations; the young man carbuncular desires the typist not because of his passion for her but rather because office work is dull. The typist receives and fails to reprimand him for the same reason—she feels a kind of modern *ennui* that provokes the inaction of indifference. Although their engagement is potentially procreative, Eliot leads us to believe that there is nothing productive or redeeming about sexual desire, which is almost always synonymous with rape, in *The Waste Land*. Unlike Crane’s portrayal of homosexual union later in “The Dance” section of *The Bridge*, Eliot’s vision, although biologically more procreative, leads to no spiritual union or even sexual ecstasy. Rather, the potential of desire itself is dead in *The Waste Land*, an occurrence that Eliot has hinted at from the opening lines of his poem.

Although desire offers no means of renewal in *The Waste Land*, within the context of philosophical monad-ism, there is, however, a sly reprieve appearing at the poem’s end—albeit

one which occurs too late, perhaps. In *The Waste Land*'s fifth and last section, "What the Thunder Said," Eliot builds toward the Eastern mysticism of the thunder, first engaging the reader in a game of circular logic concerning the absence of water and the presence of rock in the waste land. There is no redemption in this world after the, perhaps sacrificial, death of Phlebas the Phoenician in the preceding section, "Death by Water," as Eliot intones, "He who was living is now dead / We who were living are now dying / With a little patience" (ll 328-30). The persistence of drought, spiritual as well as literal, pervades the text, as Eliot leads the reader in a path of circular logic that repeatedly begins with the hopeful, "If there were water," (ll 346) only to end with the mournful reminder, "But there is no water" (ll 359). Yet, from these images of civilization's decay, of the "Falling towers" (ll 374) of "Jerusalem Athens Alexandria / Vienna London" (375-76), Eliot brings us to *The Waste Land*'s possible salvation through Eastern mysticism and asceticism. There occurs a "flash of lightning" and then "a damp gust / Bringing rain," hopeful words within *The Waste Land*'s theme of cultural drought that lead us to the banks of the Ganga river in place of the Thames (ll 394-95). In this new setting of the East instead of the West, India instead of London, Eliot allows, perhaps, a grain of hope to exist amid the otherwise rampant cultural despair of *The Waste Land*, as he bestows upon readers the ascetic wisdom of the Eastern thunder, which speaks only one word, "DA," (ll 401) interpreted in three different ways. As Eliot's notes explain, these three different interpretations come from the Hindu religious text the *Upanishad*, which prescribes three different paths to gaining peace: "'Datta, dayadhvam, [and] damyata' (Give, sympathise, control)" (note 1, 486). Eliot thus turns to these Hindu texts as a way of prescribing a sort of mystical ascetic medicine for the West. Eliot therefore implies that if Western civilization wants renewal, it must look to the principles

not of its own founding texts, but to those of non-Western cultures, which supposedly contain some mystic wisdom that the West has lost over the years.<sup>3</sup>

In my brief analysis of *The Waste Land*, I will look to only one of those injunctions, the one that begins with the word, “*Dayadhvam*,” which, as Eliot notes, is “DA” as interpreted by the demons, who are “naturally cruel” (note 1, 486). This instruction possibly offers a form of response to the problem of the disconnected individual monad, a problem which recurs throughout *The Waste Land* in various incarnations and human interactions. At the poem’s near end, Eliot summarizes the problem as each individual “think[s] of the key, each in his prison / Thinking of the key, each confirms a prison / Only at nightfall, aethereal rumours / Revive for a moment a broken Coriolanus” (ll 414-17). The promise of connection with other human beings is possible in the vision of *The Waste Land* only “at nightfall,” that is to say, in dreams and other “aethereal rumours” that speak more to delusion and hope for connection than to actual connection. However, as the previous quotation exemplifies, within the heart of *The Waste Land*’s rhetoric there lies a sliver of hope for human connection since the supposedly inescapable logic of disconnection is shown to be just that: a system of logic to which the poem subscribes.

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<sup>3</sup> Yet, in itself this move towards Eastern texts potentially causes theoretical problems since Eliot is doubtless susceptible to Edward Said’s critique of European and American writers’ long abuse of the concept of “Orientalism” to serve their own purposes in his theoretical text *Orientalism*. As such, Eliot’s rhetorical move toward Hindu mysticism, researched as it appears to be, participates in a history of colonialism and subjugation that would negate any otherwise hopeful potential of such a turn toward these texts of the cultural “other.” Indeed, the way in which Eliot uses select concepts from the *Upanishad* supports this claim that he is, at least on some level, participating in colonial practices by subordinating these non-Western texts to his own epic poem of Western civilization. Eliot’s references to Hinduism come at the end of his epic poem, when the path to Western salvation is otherwise blocked. Eastern mysticism thus serves the purposes of the Western text that entraps and manipulates it—Hindu asceticism is a way for Eliot to escape what he views as the problems of Western civilization, the key word being “escape.” Said explains that “The Orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences” (1). The Orient, like Eastern mysticism in *The Waste Land*, exists as a counter to Western civilization, as its mirror, and so necessarily reflects the prejudices and concerns of the civilization that created such a concept. Thus, from a postcolonial perspective at least, Eliot’s Eastern path is not so much a way out of Western cultural dilemmas as a tricky way back into those problems, as engaging with the “East” in this way takes us back into the violence and domineering power dynamic that was so problematic for Western civilization in the first place.

The passage reads: “We think of the key, each in his prison / Thinking of the key, each confirms a prison” (ll 414-15). As Eliot subtly reveals, the theory of the individual monad is, just that, a theory of human existence. By believing in the theory (“Thinking of the key”), each individual “confirms a prison.” This isolationist thought process thus relies upon a circular logic that operates on the individual level: in our prison we think of the key, in thinking of the key (that it exists, that it is necessary to communicate with others), the prison of individuality is confirmed. David Bromwich confirms that this is the kind of knowledge Eliot offers through the image of the key, reasoning, “The comfort this thought brings may be a sort of knowledge, but it is knowledge at the cost of experience, and what it confirms is a negation of freedom” (Bromwich 58). Yet, in moments like this, *The Waste Land*, while maintaining a certain skepticism about modern existence, allows that perhaps there are other alternative philosophies, although, and as the poem revealingly admits, they lie outside the Western systems of thought. Although guarding the system of allusions and fragmented voices, even at the end of the epic poem, Eliot borrows from a limited knowledge of Hindu texts to point towards a possible way out of the skeptical modernist mindset and towards a means of renewing and regenerating human relations, be it through surrender, communication or controlled desire. Through his final turn toward Hindu texts in *The Waste Land*, Eliot perhaps in some sense allows for the possible existence of communication and renewed religion in the future.

However, such renewed belief and connection as Eliot possibly gains through his use of Eastern texts nevertheless remains at the mercy of a skeptical modernity of falling civilizations and decaying empires. Some of the most recurrent images within the poem consist of fallen civilizations and collapsing worlds, as Eliot gives his readers a vision of history that is decidedly traumatic. World War I and the rape of Philomel, the British Empire and Cleopatra coexist in

the pages of *The Waste Land*, lending the modernist history a taste of how its own violence, collapses and failures correlate with those of the past. This comparative process reaffirms a pessimistic vision of history as not progressive (in the sense of a continuation toward perfection), but rather as mythical, as a recurring system of human error and violence. Yet Eliot's vision of history, for all of his "mythical method," evades the ecstasy of myth with which Crane imbues *The Bridge*. In *The Waste Land*, Eliot turns to myth only because history itself is irredeemable and fundamentally chaotic, whereas Crane employs myth, in fact, to redeem history. Eliot depicts history as the eventual fall of all great civilizations, as the "Unreal City" of London in Part I of *The Waste Land* later correlates with the many "Unreal" (ll 377) cities of "Falling towers / Jerusalem Athens Alexandria / Vienna London" (ll 375-76) in Part V. London becomes just one more fallen city in Eliot's vision of history's continued depravities, the circular process by which civilizations rise and fall. Indeed, after proposing the somewhat problematic alternative of the Hindu texts, Eliot returns to the fragmentation of the collapse of Western civilization, asking, "Shall I at least set my lands in order?" (ll 426) before responding with a terrifying babble (Babel) of voices that nearly end the poem. He begins the downward spiral with the nursery rhyme, "London Bridge is falling down falling down falling down" (ll 427), continuing through the "fragments" (ll 431) and the madness of "Hieronymo" (ll 432) to finally conclude with a retreat, individual and measured, into the Sanskrit of Hindu religion, intoning, "Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata. / Shantih shantih shantih" (ll 433-34).

By retreating into Eastern religion, and particularly asceticism, Eliot displays a lack of faith in the ability of Western civilization to regenerate itself, and he leaves behind his Western allusions to experience a retreat into what he likely viewed as Eastern mysticism. Such a retreat, which is not a cultural retreat but rather an individual one, implies a continued skepticism about

the regenerative capacity of his contemporary moment and reinforces the idea that modernism does not allow for the possibilities of human connection and belief for which Eliot searches in *The Waste Land*. As such, *The Waste Land*, as modernism's foremost epic poem, serves to reinforce the type of modernist literature that eschews religion and faith by asserting the impossibility of either in modern, Western society. The problem that Eliot diagnoses is thus a cultural dilemma, a fatal flaw in the progression of Western civilization, past which he cannot move except through an individual retreat to the gathering and controlling powers of Eastern mysticism and ascetic religion. But, where Eliot cannot or will not go, Crane willingly leads us. Where Eliot envisions the only answer to Western civilization's dilemma of despair as a kind of individual ascetic retreat into another culture, Crane takes on the full project of building a bridge to a brighter future for America, embracing desire and history as aids in his quest to affirm rather than degrade the present moment. Whereas Eliot eschews sexual desire and expansiveness in favor of a kind of design and control through restraint,<sup>4</sup> Crane delights in the ecstasy of desire, both visionary and sexual, and shows a marked lack of restraint which ultimately succeeds where Eliot fails in creating a productive vision for a specifically American, rather than Western, future.

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<sup>4</sup> A prime example of this imperative of restraint in *The Waste Land* lies in Ezra Pound's directive to Eliot that he prune his epic poem of contemporary references, which Pound felt debased the cultural project of *The Waste Land*. Instead of the Sibyl epigraph which survives in the final manuscript, Eliot had placed a quotation from a more contemporary author, Joseph Conrad. The replacement of this epigraph with a more "serious" classical reference is perhaps a good demonstration of how allusions work in *The Waste Land* to elevate the text to the status of a modernist cultural epic in line with the classical epics of the past. Pound recommended that Eliot make this modification, as well as other changes, in an effort to elevate the tone of *The Waste Land* with the proper references. In gratification for this advice, Eliot dedicated *The Waste Land* to Pound (in imitation of Dante's dedication in *Purgatorio*) as "IL MIGLIOR FABBRO," that is, the "better craftsman" (Eliot's eighth note, 474). Such a dedication implies that crafting was an essential part of *The Waste Land*'s composition, an aspect of the poem that highlights the importance of critical restraint for Eliot, an aspect of his poetry which dovetails with his distrust (and often disgust) of sexual desire.



“To Brooklyn Bridge”: A Position from which to Strike

*Unto us lowliest sometime sweep, descend  
And of the curvship lend a myth to God.*

“To Brooklyn Bridge,” ll 43-44

In turning away from Eliot’s skepticism about the possibility of modern mythopoesis, we turn, finally, to *The Bridge* itself and to its first lyrical poem entitled, “To Brooklyn Bridge.” As Crane’s “Proem,” as his poetic prelude to the entire song of *The Bridge*, “To Brooklyn Bridge” prepares the reader for many of *The Bridge*’s later developments, introducing many figures, terms and tropes that recur throughout the rest of the epic poem. However, before skipping straight to the “Proem,” the reader must, in fact, enter *The Bridge* through Crane’s epigraph, which itself sets the stage for one of the poem’s major tropes: the connection between movement and belief.

While *The Bridge* as an epic poem contains eight different sections (and nine different epigraphs accompanying those sections), the poem as a whole begins with a solitary epigraph as the reader’s first door into the mythical world of *The Bridge*. Crane places as his first, and arguably dominant, epigraph a biblical excerpt from the Book of Job, which states: “*From going to and fro in the earth, / and from walking up and down in it.*” Thus, in a few lines, Crane’s choice of epigraph highlights what will soon become one of his main motifs, the idea of movement and, even more specifically, a swinging movement, a back and forth, “*to and fro*” motion.<sup>5</sup> The epigraph’s second line reveals another dimension of that movement, the upward and downward aspects of Crane’s poem, “*walking up and down in [the earth].*” Together, these lines of *The Bridge*’s epigraph prepare the reader for the motion of the poem as a whole, its

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<sup>5</sup> With his 1916 poem “Birches,” Robert Frost first coined this concept of modernist “swinging” between polarities, both between reality and imagination as well as between optimism and doubt. He ends the poem famously with the line, “One could do worse than be a swinger of birches” (212).

motion to and fro across the time and space of America, as well as its accompanying periods of upward and downward motion as *The Bridge* spiritually moves from optimism and hope to skepticism and pessimism and back again.

Uniting these spatial and spiritual concepts is the idea of motion itself, of a linguistic bridging through the use of the present participle that implies a sense of continuation, of a future in the process of unfolding still. *The Bridge* is about the “going” and the “walking,” so that here is not a staid form of history or poetics but a living present continuing into the future, a sense of communion between the past, present and future. In relation to Crane’s own mythopoesis, as my later analysis will demonstrate, such a linking of time with space and a spiritual state represents the idea of bridging that Crane pursues as a spiritual (if perhaps ultimately unattainable) goal in *The Bridge* itself. Desire for continuing motion, for a living conception of America as well as of modernist literature, directs Crane’s mythical reimagining of America as a land of continuing opportunities and possibilities (at least) if also as the site of serious historical doubts and atrocities. The epigraph’s reference to the story of Job highlights the dual nature of this desire, surely with its parallel linguistic structure, but also with the Job narrative’s own story of tribulations, doubt and faith. In forcing his reader to enter the text of *The Bridge* through Job, Crane presents a kind of warning to his readers that the vision of *The Bridge* will necessitate suffering as well as extend the promise of renewed faith.

Past the door of *The Bridge*’s epigraph lies the lyrical poem “To Brooklyn Bridge” itself, Crane’s poetic introduction to the task and project of *The Bridge* as a whole. As a proem, that is, as a preface to *The Bridge*, “To Brooklyn Bridge” works to introduce the reader to several figures and tropes which will reappear in various reincarnations throughout the poem’s following pages. From his first lines, Crane establishes that “To Brooklyn Bridge” is a poem that will

concern itself with vision—vision both as sight and as cosmology. In fact, within the poem’s opening lines, these two types of vision work together, as the imagination of a literal sight takes the reader on a visionary quest through the city of New York and, ultimately, back to the signifier<sup>6</sup> of that visionary process, the Brooklyn Bridge itself. The poem opens with the description of a visionary state, as office workers look out the windows of their skyscrapers and behold the beauty of the Brooklyn Bridge, encircled by the motion of seagulls in the dawn light. In this rapturous state, the Bridge becomes a symbol of stasis within motion, of freedom contained, as the seagulls circle the stationary Bridge which itself appears to soar over the bay waters. Crane rhapsodizes, “*How many dawns, chill from his rippling rest / The seagull’s wings shall dip and pivot him, / Shedding white rings of tumult, building high / Over the chained bay waters Liberty—*” (ll 1-4). The first motion of the poem is, in fact, to enact a kind of mental motion, as the reader imagines the seagull’s visual dipping and pivoting around the Brooklyn Bridge which itself soars over the trapped waters of the New York Bay. Crane leads the reader in following the seagull’s motion of “dip[s]” and “pivot[s],” movements which produce “white rings of tumult” which build, in turn, to a vision of the Bridge’s “Liberty,” to a sense of escape from the “chained bay waters.” With the next line, this visual embodiment of liberty through the motion of the seagulls circling the Bridge transforms into a more metaphorical vision, as the next stanza unfolds: “*Then, with inviolate curve, forsake our eyes / As apparitional as sails that cross / Some page of figures to be filed away; / —Till elevators drop us from our day...*” (ll 5-8). The

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<sup>6</sup> I use the concept of Saussurean signifier rather than symbol in reference to Crane’s Brooklyn Bridge in order to emphasize the way in which Crane’s Bridge operates on a linguistic front rather than merely a symbolic one. For Crane’s Brooklyn Bridge is also *The Bridge*, an assembly of words that functions as a linguistic sign which refers to a non-present signified—a signified ever lost in the immaterial. In this way, *The Bridge* takes on a deconstructionist tendency, as it engages in what Derrida explains as the “absence of the transcendental signified” which “extends the domain and play of signification infinitely” (354). Crane’s “Word” of *The Bridge* thus functions in some way as the embodiment of motion, as the denial of set patterns in favor of the movement of language.

Bridge, with its “*inviolable curve*,” disappears from the speaker’s sight, “*forsak[ing] our eyes*” as all spiritual visions must and brings to mind, in its stead, “*sails*,” not of ships from the harbor (Crane will later come back to those kinds of ships in “Ave Maria”), but of the business world, of “*Some page of figures to be filed away.*” Crane published *The Bridge* in 1930 and conceived of the idea for the epic poem in 1926. Thus, the New York City that Crane portrays in “Proem” falls somewhere between these two years, in the New York of the 1920s technological boom that included the first commercial transatlantic telephone call in 1927, as well as the New York Stock Exchange crash on Black Thursday in October of 1929 (Ad\* Access). In Crane’s New York, the sails of discovery have indeed become sales sheets, the accounting reports of businesses have become the next frontier, yet one that requires Americans to staff the deadening office jobs which, for many, had become the diminished reality of contemporary life in the late 1920s. Indeed, as Paul Giles notes, from 1920 to 1930, Americans experienced a 19% increase in the amount of people living in towns and cities rather than in rural areas. For 69% of Americans in 1930, urban life was the reality, and so Crane presents that life as normative, as “*elevators drop us from our day.*” With the last line, Crane once again makes difficult his visionary quest as, just like the disappearance of the Bridge’s “*inviolable curve*,” modern urban dwellers must disappear from the high rises of their office buildings, must drop away from the visionary state of Brooklyn Bridge they enjoyed briefly as well as from their place of work. In Crane’s vision, upward movement necessitates downward movement, and visions are revealed only to finally “*forsake our eyes / As apparitional as sails*” and disappear. Thus, from its beginnings, *The Bridge* sets up these situations of visions unfolded and then rescinded, of an urban world which both presents possibilities in the form of the view from the skyscraper (which, after all, expands the limits of human vision) and retracts them since the “*sails*” of office life are not means of movement but

sales reports. Crane thus creates a need for himself as a mediator who will navigate this ground of modern urban possibility and hopelessness, as a poet who will reveal his vision of bridging only to, in the end, not allow his vision to become determined, to become fully understood. The task of the rest of *The Bridge* will largely concern the unfolding of this vision through the bridging of time, space, and history in Crane's vision of a unified spiritual impulse running through the veins of contemporary America.

As Crane describes the predicament, it is the figure of Brooklyn Bridge that offers some hope of respite from the drudgery and material monotony of contemporary city life. In "To Brooklyn Bridge," Crane does, in fact, apotheosize the Bridge as the potential signifier of a new vision of bridging that could save American urban-dwellers from their current vision of entrapment in materialism and urban office life. In the poem's fourth stanza, Crane eulogizes, "*And Thee, across the harbor, silver-paced / As though the sun took step of thee, yet left / Some motion ever unspent in thy stride,— / Implicitly thy freedom staying thee!*" (ll 13-16). With these lines the Bridge becomes Crane's example of a modern deity, one which encompasses both the "silver" of Wall Street and the cosmology of the "sun." Brooklyn Bridge is a "silver-paced" deity, measurable in terms of economic worth and functional value, as well as ultimately expanding beyond those material measurements towards a span that controls the sun itself which "[takes] step of thee." The stasis of the Bridge, its sense of motion contained is the key to its power, as, despite the Bridge's immovable presence of metal and steel, "Some motion [is] ever unspent in [its] stride." The Brooklyn Bridge's "freedom," its dependence upon its swaying cables insures its stability, and this image provides a model for how a modern American myth should work. As Crane later describes it, the Brooklyn Bridge's "*curveship*" (ll 44) becomes a way of to "*lend a myth to God,*" to reenact a belief which was thought either dead or impossible

(ll 44). However, it is not so much the Brooklyn Bridge itself that enables this new vision of belief for Crane's speaker, but rather what the Brooklyn Bridge, through its stasis in motion, its freedom in "*chained bay waters*" (ll 4), signifies within *The Bridge*. As the later sections of *The Bridge* will go on to demonstrate, what the Bridge represents in Crane's poem is the verb of bridging, of a desire *for* connection and a new mythology rather than, in fact, its accomplishment. Indeed, bridging as a verb implies a kind of desire, a will to connect and understand, despite the potential material and historical limitations of such a desire and vision. And, indeed, as becomes clear in the figures and actions of even the first lyrical poem of *The Bridge*, such a vision of connection, of faith, is greatly needed in Crane's portrait of contemporary New York City, whatever is that vision's final outcome.

The speaker's thoughts of the desperation of office workers brings him to these workers' present means of respite from drudgery: the cinema. As Crane portrays them, the masses look toward films not only as entertainment, vicarious experience, and escapism, but also as a means of renewing faith, of coming to the "church" of the cinema to experience communality and prophecy within the institutions of the modern world. Cinemas bring "*multitudes bent toward some flashing scene / Never disclosed, but hastened to again, / Foretold to other eyes on the same screen*" (ll 9-13). Thus, for Crane, the attraction of the cinema for the multitudes is, first, that it provides a ritual occasion for experiencing the power of common belief, of common willingness to suspend disbelief for long enough to engage vicariously in the movie. Movie theatres have become the new "churches," the new place where the "*multitudes ben[d]*," as if in prayer, and prophecies are "*Foretold*" with a regularity that allows for mass belief. However, what brings the multitudes together for this quasi-religious experience of the cinema is the individual desire to escape through visual pleasure for an hour or two. And Crane portrays this

desire as not so much fulfilled but rather, as always left lacking, as “*Never disclosed.*” If the institution of the cinema lures us in with the promise of a prophecy foretold, it brings us back with its inability ever to meet completely those expectations.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, it is film’s inability ever to disclose completely its vision, its “*panoramic sleights*” (ll 9), which “*hasten*” us back to the movie theatre with the renewed desire to discover some secret left ever undisclosed.<sup>8</sup> With his portrayal of the cinema as a social and religious institution, Crane establishes the precedent for his own version of a prophecy, this secret of the Bridge and bridging which Crane will “*flash*” (ll 10) before us, and yet one that ultimately remains elusive, as Crane is unwilling to establish an absolute system of belief. For in Crane’s vision, it is the process of desire itself, the *wanting* and not the fulfillment of that wanting that is the secret bridge holding American myth together without stultifying it with doctrine and stability.

The figure of the bedlamite fulfills a similar purpose within the structure of “To Brooklyn Bridge,” as he signifies a much more desperate need for justification and meaning in

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<sup>7</sup> Theodor W. Adorno provides an analysis of cinema’s failure to keep its promises to consumers with his essay “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception” in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. He argues: “The culture industry endlessly cheats its consumers out of what it endlessly promises. The promissory note of pleasure issued by plot and packaging is indefinitely prolonged: the promise, which actually comprises the entire show, disdainfully intimates that there is nothing more to come, that the diner must be satisfied with reading the menu” (111). Just as Crane’s cinema lures the multitudes to its screens only to never disclose the secret it promises, Adorno’s culture industry incites desire without ever satiating that desire.

<sup>8</sup> Ever willing to examine the potential of popular culture to suggest hints of grace, Crane aptly describes the important role he envisions contemporary films playing in his poem about Charlie Chaplin, “Chaplinesque.” A short lyrical poem from *White Buildings*, “Chaplinesque” presents a vision of sidestepping, a comical gesture resembling the slapstick for which Chaplin himself became famous in the 1920s and 30s: “We will sidestep, and to the final smirk / Dally the doom of that inevitable thumb / That slowly chafes its puckered index toward us, / Facing the dull squint with what innocence / And what surprise!” (ll 9-13). Sidestepping, similar to his description of “panoramic sleights” in “To Brooklyn Bridge,” implies for Crane a way of cheerily evading the disapproval of cynics and businessmen who “Dally the doom of that inevitable thumb.” Moreover, Crane argues, “And yet these fine collapses are not lies / More than the pirouettes of any pliant cane” (ll 14-15). Rather, sidestepping and “fine collapses” are an astute, optimistic way of dealing with a pessimistic, judgmental world. These sleights are an evasion, but they are not lies, just as film itself is a sort of evasion of real life and yet serves a purpose through its role in harnessing together the desires of the masses. Film brings Americans together as religion no longer can. And if the results of this mass belief in film are often superficial and unconvincing, there are a few surprises in cinema. Charlie Chaplin, for instance, allowed filmgoers a brief respite from the harsh realities of American life, including the onset of the Great Depression, through his on-screen optimism, limited as it was.

contemporary existence. Arising from “*some subway scuttle, cell or loft*” (ll 17), the image of the subway to which Crane will return later in “The Tunnel,” “*A bedlamite speeds to thy parapets,*” that is to say, the parapets of Brooklyn Bridge (ll 18). The suicidal “*bedlamite*” leans over the edge of the Bridge, “*Tilting there momentarily, shrill shirt ballooning*” (ll 19). The masses then return, in the form of the “*speechless caravan*” (ll 20) who mocks the bedlamite, perhaps even presumably urging him to jump while at the same time dreading the result of the bedlamite’s fall. As a figure much more literally “on edge” than the multitudes at the cinema, the figure of the bedlamite becomes a justification for the work of *The Bridge*, as with this figure Crane alludes to the problems caused by his own vision of contemporary America as an urban wasteland, a vision he hopes to reform within the pages of *The Bridge*. As a desperate and lonely man, the bedlamite presents an internal challenge to the poet as well as to the work of *The Bridge* as a whole: can Crane’s vision of bridging save the bedlamite from the perilous position in which Crane himself has placed him? Will the bedlamite experience upward motion, or downward?

Part of that downward motion in “Brooklyn Bridge” comprises a more material aspect of life in late 1920s New York City: Wall Street and the city’s factories. From the bedlamite’s perch, Crane next moves his readers, “*Down Wall,*” as “*from girder into street noon leaks, / A rip-tooth of the sky’s acetylene*” (ll 21-22). An explosive gas used for metal-welding leaks from the sky in this vision of how the skyscrapers of commerce were created in New York City; from the linking, architectural “*girder*” of the Bridge, we turn toward the downtown skyscrapers, “*rip-tooth[s] of the sky’s acetylene.*” In some sense this too is a scene of contemporary creation, since acetylene is also used for welding and so refers to the Bridge’s architectural function of connection. Nevertheless, the image of the buildings ripping open the sky (as indeed, the name



“skyscrapers” literally implies) also brings to mind an ongoing violence, a problem with American urban life because, unlike the Bridge, the skyscrapers of Wall Street are not both functional and aesthetic but rather purely functional. Yet, Crane attempts to redeem this bleak architectural vision of New York commerce both by continually making reference to the Bridge amidst this vision of Wall Street, as well as by elevating the otherwise solely productive movement of commerce itself. Crane celebrates the motion of commerce in New York City by redeeming his own namesake, the city’s cranes, describing how “*All afternoon the cloud-flown derricks turn...*” (ll 23). Although they are connected to the material construction of New York City, in Crane’s vision the cranes are “*cloud-flown,*” and thus he associates them with this uplifting, naturalized vision of the derricks moving among the clouds. In this vision the commercial means of production in New York City take on a poetic valence, as the material moves within the celestial context of clouds, which exalt the otherwise dreary vision of industrialism that “derricks” imply. Crane enhances this effect with his return to the figure of the Bridge itself with his next line, “*Thy cables breathe the North Atlantic still*” (ll 24). With these words, the Bridge becomes a living creature, architecture that breathes as the cables of the Brooklyn Bridge sway with the still sea air. This image further reflects the idea of movement within stasis, as the Bridge’s cables must sway with a force more than material since the air of the North Atlantic is “*still.*” Moreover, Crane’s portrayal of the Bridge as a living organism contains another of Crane’s favorite emblems of motion within stasis: the pun. His description of Brooklyn Bridge’s cables as “breath[ing] the North Atlantic still” could imply either “still” as an adverb, as the idea that the Bridge continues to breathe the North Atlantic air, despite the passing of time, or that the air of the North Atlantic itself is “still,” that is, silent or without motion. According to Paul Giles, Crane’s prolific use of puns in his poetry exemplifies this

notion of swinging since puns work by moving the reader back and forth “between two different meanings” of the same linguistic word (Giles 9). By periodically referring the reader to the model image of the Bridge as the perfect blend of commercial and spiritual energy, Crane, in a sense, allows for a vision that could possibly redeem Wall Street, that could redeem the travail of the trapped office workers through the inclusion of a spiritual aspect within the material vision of New York City commerce. Brooklyn Bridge, along with the willingness of the masses to believe (as portrayed in the cinema scene) together offer the supposition that the right modern cosmology could redeem America from the stagnancy of vision that the skyscrapers and Wall Street represent.

With this idea of the possibilities of commercial America set in place, Crane thus turns our attention more fully toward the figure of the Bridge itself and the possibilities and limits such a vision of contemporary American life might allow. Crane notes that the rewards of such a vision as the Bridge’s bridging offers will necessarily be intangible, describing how, “*And obscure as that heaven of the Jews, / Thy guerdon...Accolade thou dost bestow / Of anonymity time cannot raise: / Vibrant reprieve and pardon thou dost show*” (ll 25-28). Thus Crane warns his readers that the vision he is offering is “*obscure*,” is a means of “*reprieve and pardon*,” and so a religious endeavor, as the comparison to the Jewish faith also implies, but a religious endeavor that is not dogmatic, that provides rewards, “*guerdon*” and “*Accolade*,” and yet remains unknowable, a kind of “*anonymity*.” Yet this anonymity, this unknowable quality of the religious vision Crane presents us with has its own rewards, as the Bridge offers a vision that “*time cannot raise*,” that mere history does not allow, but that is realized through interpreting history, through viewing history within a certain redemptive cosmology. The phrase “*time cannot raise*” also brings to mind a sort of pun, suggesting that time also cannot *raze* the

structure of the Bridge. By showing his readers a spiritual version through the material example of the Bridge and yet leaving that vision open and undetermined, Crane is presenting his readers with a vision that is immaterial enough to resist the ravages of time. “To Brooklyn Bridge” thus prepares readers for the idea that *The Bridge*’s span is both material and immaterial, and that it is by remaining to some extent obscure and unknowable that Crane’s deity can answer the call of history and time and offer in response a pardon, a reprieve from what *The Bridge* will also convey as the atrocities of American history.

After remarking upon the limitations of his vision for America, Crane breaks out into an ecstasy that anticipates the later ecstasy and music of the last section of his poem, “Atlantis.” Within the next two stanzas, Crane offers a vision of synthesis, a word he himself repeatedly uses to describe the project of *The Bridge* in several of his letters. In a letter to Otto Kahn, Crane refers to the project of the poem as “a synthesis of America and its spiritual identity now, called *The Bridge*” (Crane, *Letters* 127). The ending of “To Brooklyn Bridge” reflects these aspirations, as Crane intones, “*O harp and altar of the fury fused, / (How could mere toil align thy choiring strings!)*” (ll 29-30). The Bridge (and the bridging vision to which that signifier refers) becomes both “*harp and altar,*” both musical and aesthetic instrument of the harp and religious and spiritual threshold of the altar. Within his vision of the possibilities of the Bridge as America’s new myth, Crane combines the spiritual, the aesthetic and the material, denying none, requiring all. America’s material vision, exemplified in Wall Street, is not enough; the Bridge as a mere building is not enough, since “*mere toil*” cannot “*align thy choiring strings.*” Rather, the spiritual, aesthetic and material merge in what is indeed a new “synthesis of America” (*Letters* 127), one that creates a place for the artist and the visionary, the prophet and the architect, as well as for the businessmen of the world of 1920s America. For Crane presents

the construction of the Bridge, itself a symbol of the fusion of the aesthetic with the functional, as an endeavor which requires more than material work, needing as well the vision of the architect, of the poet, to complete its cycle of alignment, to make what is otherwise “*mere toil*,” musical. In exalting the Bridge, Crane thus exalts himself as a poet of the Bridge, as a poet of a new vision of America and its mythical possibilities. His next description of the Bridge supports this view, as he enthuses, “*Terrific threshold of the prophet’s pledge, / Prayer of pariah, and the lover’s cry—*” (ll 31-32). Again, the Bridge maintains its slightly immaterial status, as a “*threshold*” rather than as an accomplishment, as a measure of the “*prophet’s pledge*” rather than its fulfillment. Here we come back to the idea of a vision ever in the process of revelation but never fully revealed, yet more marvelous for retaining some of its mystery, more “*Terrific*” for the desire to which it attests than it could be were that desire ever fully attained.

Indeed, the Bridge becomes a testament to desire, the god of figures who long for something: the prophet, the pariah and the lover. Such figures will reemerge in various reincarnations throughout the rest of *The Bridge*, in figures such as Columbus, the pariah/prophet of the New World, Walt Whitman, poet/prophet of his own time in America, the bedlamite in “Proem” as well as the overarching figure of Crane himself as a sort of pariah, prophet, and poet. This emphasis on outsider figures perhaps more than anything reflects the status of Crane himself as a poet while he was writing *The Bridge*, an issue I will touch more upon later. Once embraced by vocal New Critics like Allen Tate, by the end of *The Bridge*’s completion in 1930, Crane had become a pariah of the modernist literary scene, resoundingly shunned by the New Critics as a Romantic and disciple of Walt Whitman (two labels that were also closely connected to the unspoken criticism of Crane as a homosexual poet). Crane’s writing of *The Bridge* at that time had become the writing of a pariah, of a prophet unheeded by his own people, a

circumstance which perhaps accounts for the tinge of desperation and perilous loneliness in such figures as the bedlamite and even in Crane's portrayal of Columbus in "Ave Maria," who himself died scorned and enchained in his own ship after his discovery of the New World. *The Bridge* thus displays this desire for connection, for a means of bridging America within the context of the personal loneliness of the visionary poet, an aspect of Crane's work which will reemerge with his emphasis, Job-like, on suffering as the necessary means of completing his redemptive vision for America.

With the last few stanzas of "To Brooklyn Bridge," Crane establishes the Bridge as his new Godhead, as his means of "*lend[ing] a myth to God*" (ll 44). Through the Bridge's arching span, which encompasses the lights of New York City, Crane visually creates a new way of seeing, of encompassing the contemporary world of stock exchanges and high rises with his new cosmology of bridging. With his description of the Bridge, he unites traffic lights with stars, offering, "*Again the traffic lights that skim thy swift / Unfractioned idiom, immaculate sigh of stars, / Bending thy path—condense eternity: / And we have seen night lifted in thine arms*" (ll 33-36). The figure of the Bridge provides a visual cosmology which unites the view of traffic lights with the night sky since both emerge as lifted in the arms of the Brooklyn Bridge. By uniting both, denying none, the Bridge retains its "*Unfractioned,*" "*immaculate*" nature. The poet places himself within this vision, as he reemerges "*Under thy shadow by the piers I waited; / Only in darkness is thy shadow clear*" (ll 37-38). Crane thus resurfaces in the poem as the figure of the Bridge's lover, waiting for its apparition to make itself visible, which occurs, paradoxically, "*Only in darkness.*" As "The Tunnel" will later more fully show, *The Bridge's* vision requires a kind of descent into the darker aspects of desire for connection, a descent which will require a reckoning with the vision of the modern world which Eliot promulgates in *The*

*Waste Land*. Crane anticipates his later, and fuller, descent into Eliot's world, noting that "*The City's fiery parcels all undone, / Already snow submerges an iron year...*" (ll 39-40). In a reference to the beginning of *The Waste Land*, where desire and memory are dampened by "Winter" which "kept us warm, covering / Earth in forgetful snow, feeding / A little life with dried tubers" (*The Waste Land*, ll 5-7), Crane briefly presents an Elitonian vision of the "City," as desire's "fiery parcels" are "all undone," that is, desire is no longer possible and snow submerges the city in forgetfulness. Yet, the ellipses signals a change in vision, a beginning sign that Crane will not allow Eliot's vision of urban despair and corrupt desire to dominate his own poem, as he finally turns *The Bridge* back upon its own image of hopefulness in order to end his poem.

As "To Brooklyn Bridge" makes its final move back to its deity, Crane unites the image of the Bridge and its bridging motion with his poem's own movement across America and time throughout the rest of *The Bridge*. Denying Eliot's pessimistic view of desire, memory and urban life, Crane returns to his own vision, enthusing, "*O Sleepless as the river under thee, / Vaulting the sea, the praries' dreaming sod, / Unto us lowliest sometime sweep, descend / And of the curveship lend a myth to God*" (ll 41-44). The Bridge reemerges as a caring and watchful God, who "vault[s]" the sea as well as America's heartland, creating connections across America's geography and its history, from Columbus through Manifest Destiny. Thus, with the end of "To Brooklyn Bridge," Crane foreshadows *The Bridge's* own journey across America, uniting space and time with his vision of the connectedness of American mythology through the spiritual desire for motion and unity. Crucially, though, this vision remains, despite its breadth, preliminary, since Crane's "curveship" only "lend[s] a myth to God." Rather than providing America with a new dogma, Crane provides it with a new vision, a vision which, while

encompassing American history and mythology, never aspires to be absolute. In this sense, while providing America with a new “*myth [to lend] to God,*” Crane nevertheless ensures that his own efforts include the swinging motion so vital to him at the beginning of “To Brooklyn Bridge.” The process of bridging, after all, must always remain that, a process, an act of creation rather than the creation accomplished. While Crane sets himself up as the poet of his contemporary America, he nonetheless remains convinced of the desirability of desire, of the idea that his myth of America must be preliminary in order to allow for possibilities for the future as well as for the present. It is with such a premise that Crane enters America’s history and mythology in order to recreate a renewed sense of possibility for the nation.

“Ave Maria”: The Word of Cathay as a New American Origin Story

*The orbic wake of thy once whirling feet,  
Elohim, still I hear thy sounding heel!*  
“Ave Maria,” ll 79-80

In many ways, “Ave Maria,” the first and only poem in the identically named section of Hart Crane’s *The Bridge*, sets the scene for many of Crane’s later questions, and answers, about doubt, hope and faith. As a lyrical poem told from the point of view of Columbus as he invokes the presence of the Virgin Mary, God and his patron saint Luis de San Angel, “Ave Maria,” is a poem, first and foremost, about faith and the role of desire in the origins of America. As Columbus explains to his friend, Luis de San Angel, as well as to the reader, upon his “discovery” of America, he feels compelled to transmit the knowledge he has gained as a result of the attainment of his desire to find “Cathay.” Yet, however much Columbus desires to bring back the word of Cathay—the truth he has discovered with America about the validity of his own cosmology that the world is round and connected—such direct communication of the great truth

he has discovered appears impossible within the poem. Due, perhaps, to Columbus's perceptions of God and the barriers he continues to see between himself and the divine, Columbus grasps at and, indeed, emotionally experiences the word of Cathay without successfully translating that message either to his friend Luis de San Angel or to the country that supported him economically during his spiritual mission, Spain. Columbus, like Crane himself as well as the bedlamite figure in "To Brooklyn Bridge," eventually becomes an exile in his own ship, an ostracized prophet, despite the verity of his vision and his bravery in making that vision a reality. Yet, although Columbus's original intent to bring back the word of Cathay fails, Crane, perhaps, gains some traction in his reimagining of the myth of America through the way in which he transforms one of America's most popular origin stories from a solely colonial story of greed, slavery and ambition (which was, after all Spain's motive as a colonial power) to a more poetic story of desire, faith and vision.

Rather than addressing the less idealistic motives of Columbus's first voyage to the Americas, Crane begins Columbus's prayer with his profession of a desire to share his knowledge of Cathay, the new land he believes he has discovered, with his patron saint Luis de San Angel. The Columbus of Crane's imagination expresses this desire to transmit his knowledge with the invocation, "Be with me, Luis de San Angel, now / Witness before the tides can wrest away / The word I bring, / O you who reined my suit / Into the Queen's great heart that doubtful day / For I have seen now what no perjured breath / Of clown nor sage can riddle or gainsay;— / To you, too, Juan Perez, whose counsel fear / And greed adjourned,—I bring you back Cathay!" (ll 1-8). At the start of the poem, what Columbus thinks to bring back to his friend Juan Perez as well as his patron saint is not the gold or riches of the New World, but rather the "word," which is, as he later conflates the two, "Cathay" as a word, as a verbal truth. Crane



thus portrays Columbus as his own predecessor, as America's first poet, as the first person who attempts to transmit what Crane himself transmits throughout *The Bridge*: a new "word" of America. To these purposes, Crane depicts Columbus as a sort of poet-visionary, as a religious man whose faith was confirmed by the success of his desires, by the final vision of "Cathay" and the subsequent knowledge conferred upon Columbus through that vision. Faced with the ocean, "that dim frontier," (ll 20), Columbus professes to have relied upon his confidence in his own poetic vision of "The Chan's great continent" as existing somewhere across the ocean (ll 21), so that, despite his status as an "exile" in the streets of Genoa (ll 18), a social status that bears parallels with Crane the poet as well as with the bedlamite in "To Brooklyn Bridge," Columbus remains firm, "More absolute than ever," in his cosmology of the world (ll 19). Columbus also relies upon his great "faith, not fear" (ll 21) to provide reassurance throughout the difficult journey to the Americas, and the experience of sighting new land for the first time becomes a religious experience in this portrayal rather than a means of colonial expansion. As Columbus sights land, Crane describes him as "wonder-breathing" (ll 23). By recreating a Columbus who relies on his own personal vision and brings back "the word," Crane creates a parallel for himself as a poet of America in its earliest origin story. Such a reformulation of one of America's founding myths provides a more legitimate and helpful basis for Crane's later insistence upon a new Word of Cathay in *The Bridge*'s overarching paradigm of love, harmony and brotherhood.

Rather than presenting Columbus as motivated by monetary rewards or promises of land or gold, Crane painstakingly paints Columbus as a man motivated only by the twin desires, first to prove his own hypotheses correct and, second, to transcend boundaries of his own experience in order to reach a more profound truth through discovery. Drawn ever forward by his own desire for discovery, Columbus's reward is not material but rather visionary, as he finds, even in

his eyes' adaptation to the endless waves of the sea, a new vision, as "Series on series, infinite,— till eyes / Starved wide on blackened tides, accrete—enclose / This turning rondure whole, this crescent ring / Sun-cusped and zoned with modulated fire / Like pearls that whisper through the Doge's hands / —Yet no delirium of jewels!" (ll 41-46). Columbus's sea madness is, in fact, a kind of truth, as his vision encompasses as a result the entire turning earth, "this crescent ring," which has the value of the finest pearls and yet knowledge of which does not cause the delirium of greed but rather the madness of the poet ("no delirium of [mere] jewels"). Within his new vision, Columbus reevaluates the Judeo-Christian God, finding him wanting as an absent and vengeful God, an "Inquisitor, incognizable Word / Of Eden and the enchained Sepulchre" (ll 61-62). This is a God "who sleepest on Thyself, apart" (ll 57). Compared to the word of Cathay, the word of the Judeo-Christian God is "incognizable," based on the fall, enslavement, and fear of humanity.

Yet, Columbus reincorporates this God within his newly realized (and less harsh) word of Cathay, as he praises Him, "Te Deum laudamus, for thy teeming span!" (ll 72) and later notes that he sees the motion of God in the turning of the earth: "[In] [t]he orbic wake of thy once whirling feet, / Elohim, still I hear thy sounding heel!" (ll 79-80). God, in this new approximation, is the force behind human desire, as Columbus envisions, "White toil of heaven's cordons, mustering / In holy rings all sails charged to the far / Hushed gleaming fields and pendant seething wheat / Of knowledge" (ll 81-84). Again, rather than looking towards America's material rewards (which will, in fact, be in large part the historical story of American colonization), Columbus's newly designed God directs mankind toward the desire for knowledge, for interaction with the "other," who lives in these "far / Hushed gleaming fields." By reinterpreting Columbus's desire for the "new world" as a desire for new knowledge and

discoveries, Crane rescues the American myth of Columbus from its historical realities (of exploitation, enslavement and genocide—the genocide indeed perhaps hinted at with the “holocaust of ships” [ll 66]) and so, by dealing in American history, opens the path for himself as a new poet of America in the line of Columbus as well as Walt Whitman.

In his word of Cathay, Columbus sings praise of a God whose “purpose” is ever “still one shore beyond desire!” (ll 87). Unfulfilled desire, like discovery, becomes the driving force behind the inception of America in Crane’s retelling of the Columbus myth. By shifting the Columbus mythology away from the material (greed) and towards the immaterial (desire), Crane gains a measure of mythological energy for his own epic of America, *The Bridge*. Although even Crane’s Columbus is ultimately delusional (after all, he still thinks of the Americas as “Cathay” and believes he sees “The Chan’s great continent” [ll 21]), in the later sections of his poem, Crane relies on this preliminary, reformed historical figure as a precursor to his own “word” in *The Bridge*. By reincorporating Columbus into his paradigm of love, desire and discovery, as he goes on to do in key moments of *The Bridge*, Crane mitigates the material consequences of Columbus’ journey to America (which included the genocide and enslavement of American Indians) in favor of a vision of America that privileges poetic desire over colonial greed. By making Columbus’s “discovery” a primarily spiritual one, in which Columbus learns a truth from the new world to bring back to the old, Crane allows for the figure of Columbus as an important American myth while reversing the normal process of geographic and cultural influence between Europe and the Americas. In “Ave Maria” Crane subtly asserts that the Americas had, and still possess, some knowledge that Europe does not, knowledge, perhaps, of a desire for spiritual connection rather than material possessions. Crane revisits this site of desire as the originating point for a new American myth in his later section “The Dance” as well as in

the culminating lyrical poem, “Atlantis,” which finally releases Crane’s own contemporary and poetic version of Columbus’s word of Cathay as a source of hope for America. Yet the material repercussions of colonialism in the Americas are never completely forgotten in *The Bridge*, as Crane goes on to address the specters of America’s less hopeful history with his poem about American settlement, Manifest Destiny, and colonial history in “The River.”

### “The River”: America’s Dark History

*The River, spreading, flows—and spends your dream.*  
 “The River,” ll 121

With “The River,” Crane examines the current manifestations of the desire for discovery he first approached with Columbus in “Ave Maria,” but within the historical context of Manifest Destiny rather than Spanish imperialism and discovery of the “New World.” “The River” composes a journey across the body of America, beginning with the train travel of hobos, moving through a kind of erotic communion that these travelers experience with the land and ending with the ancient flow of the River, which stands for the flow of time as well as the burdens of American history. Along the way, the reader encounters the fraternal brotherhood of the hobos, the echoes of American Indian presence and suffering, and the glories and banalities of scientific development in the modern age.

Advertisement and radio waves become the newest imperial development in contemporary American, replacing the earlier land stakes and westward settlement. Crane starts the poem with the image of westward travel, although of a different sort than that of America’s frontiersman. He updates Manifest Destiny as a manifestation of American commercialism and highway advertising, ironically enthusing: “Stick your patent name on a signboard / brother—all

over—going west—young man / Tintex—Japalac—Certain-teed Overalls ads / and land sakes!” (ll 1-4). Just as Manifest Destiny called America’s young men in the 1800s to “Go West, young man!” and settle the American frontier, so Crane bemoans another generation’s westward motion, one motivated by a different type of greed and land stakes—that of commercialism and corporate advertisement—in place of nineteenth century American settlement of the West. Instead of answering the nineteenth century’s call to America’s “destiny” of expanding to its fullest extent westward over the land, young men in the twentieth century answer the call of commercialism, the call to stake a claim with “your patent name on a signboard.” With the start of “The River,” Crane deplores the twentieth century’s movement in America through advertisement and radio waves as an extension of this nineteenth century imperialist movement, as a faster, more overtly commercialized version of the American greed for land and imperial expansion that occurred in the nineteenth century.

Crane’s presentation of this westward, commercialized movement of advertisement and scientific developments clearly becomes a critique, as he ends the first section of “The River” not with an image of successful young businessmen marking their territory in the West, but rather with one of the twentieth century’s more marginalized figures: the hobo. Thomas E. Yingling accounts for Crane’s hobos in this section as “bearers of a marginalized masculinity romanticized by the homosexual from childhood” (Yingling 206). Yingling connects these hobos with other figures in *The Bridge* who represent what he sees as Crane’s figure of the “marginalized” homosexual (206). Yet, before we reach Crane’s marginalized modern-day “Minstrels” (ll 6), Crane takes us first through a demonstration of how scientific and commercial manifestations of “progress” take on religious valences as “the HOLYGHOST RADIO ROARS IN EVERY HOME WE HAVE THE NORTHPOLE / WALLSTREET AND VIRGINBIRTH

WITHOUT STONES OR / WIRES OR EVEN RUNning brooks” (ll 14-17). Scientific development has brought Americans farther than they ever thought possible, farther than the brooks or wires of their ancestors, as radio waves make communication invisible and so become as much a cause for wonder and belief as “the HOLYGHOST” and “VIRGINBIRTH.” Crane’s description of Thomas Edison as “Thomas // a Ediford” (ll 9-10) merges the man responsible for the light bulb with the twelfth century English martyr Thomas a Becket, as well as the twentieth century inventor of the assembly line and mass production Henry Ford. Crane thus implies that the twentieth century’s religion has become science, and men of commerce and technology, like Ford and Edison, are the visionaries of their epochs. However, Crane ends the first section with the implication that such commercialized movement and communication is limiting, that “So the 20th Century—so / whizzed the Limited—roared by and left / three men, still hungry on the tracks, ploddingly / watching the tail lights wizen and converge, slip-/ ping gimleted and neatly out of sight” (ll 19-23). Unsatisfied by the commercialized movement of the twentieth century, these men, these “Hobo-trekkers” (ll 56), as Crane later calls them, remain “hungry,” that is, still searching for something that America’s precipitous movement westward never fully delivered. Crane suggests with this image of figures marginalized by the harried motion of the twentieth century that in its desire to expand, in terms of land and technology, America has forgotten an important element of the quest which Columbus began with his faith-based vision of Cathay.

In the country’s quest for money and expansion, Crane presents American “progress” as a ticking bomb, no longer working for sheer joy of discovery and connection, but working to kill, to exterminate those who stand in its way. Trapped in the commercial need to consume and communicate, America has lost some greater desire for beauty in its westward expansion. Crane writes an elegy for how “The last bear, shot drinking in the Dakotas / Loped under wires that

span the mountain stream” (ll 24-25). Even the most isolated areas of America cannot escape the violent tendencies that seemingly go along with America’s expansion. Crane goes on to show how “Keen instruments, strung to a vast precision / Bind town to town and dream to ticking dream” (ll 26-27). This “ticking” bomb of the American promise of settlement and prosperity, indeed, is the downside of America’s earlier efforts at communication and expansion, the negative, debased version of the bridge’s arching motion of connection and discovery. America’s misdirected efforts of expansion, of connection have caused the destruction of the land and its animals—as well as its indigenous peoples, as we will see later.

In opposition to these destructive tendencies, in opposition to Manifest Destiny as American destiny, Crane presents a different model of movement across America in the figure of the “hobo-trekker.” After describing the “ticking” bomb of America’s precise instruments, he offers: “But some men take their liquor slow—and count / —Though they’ll confess no rosary nor clue— / The river’s minute by the far brook’s year. / Under a world of whistles, wires and steam / Caboose-like they go ruminating through / Ohio, Indiana—blind baggage— / To Cheyenne tagging...Maybe Kalamazoo” (ll 28-34). What separates these men from their nineteenth century settler counterpoints is their lack of imperial designs for their motions, their lack of purpose (and even destination), along with their hesitancy to “confess” the “rosary” or “clue,” their unwillingness to adhere to any form of absolute belief or dogma. Like errant philosophers, they “go ruminating through” the states, passing “Under” the world of technology and mass production, of “whistles, wires and steam.” The “hobo-trekkers” become part of a long line of visionary figures marginalized by American society, joining the ranks of the bedlamite in “Proem,” Columbus in “Ave Maria,” and Crane himself as poet of *The Bridge*. As such, they too possess this desire for connection, in their case an erotic connection with the land of America as

a woman. “Possessed, resigned” (ll 49), these men “forever search / An empire wilderness of freight and rails” (ll 56-57), longing to know, and therefore in Crane’s terms of connection, to “touch” (ll 63) America’s land as heterosexual men long to touch a woman’s body. Being “wifeless or runaway” (ll 55), in lieu of women, they “touch something like a key perhaps” (ll 63) and “know a body under the wide rain” (ll 65). Crane stipulates that the hobos are “Youngsters” and “old reprobates” (ll 66), men excluded from society and possessing heightened erotic desires, and their alternative desire to materialism is to know America in a sexual way, “knowing her yonder breast” (ll 68). Indeed, Crane further legitimizes the erotic desire of the hobos as an advisable alternative to materialistic greed by aligning himself as speaker with these hobo figures. He states: “They lurk across her, knowing her yonder breast / Snow-silvered, sumac-stained or smoky blue— / Is past the valley-sleepers, south or west. / —As I have trod the rumorous midnights, too” (ll 68-71). By aligning himself with the hobos (as opposed to the safe “valley-sleepers”) Crane maintains erotic desire as preferable to America’s contemporary commercialism, signaled earlier in the poem as the domination of advertisement. In “The River,” as in *The Bridge* more generally, Crane privileges marginalized figures, so reinstating America’s outsiders as the best reenactments of her initial founding principles of desire and belief.

Within this process of reincorporation, Crane also works to rewrite history, to subtly tell the tales of the peoples who have suffered as a result of Manifest Destiny and the materialistic subversion of the American promise and desire for discovery. As Crane’s speaker moves with the hobos, he imagines America, “her body bare!” (ll 73) and affirms that he has “dreamed beyond the print that bound her name” (ll 74). Crane dreams himself beyond America’s usual history and ideology, beyond “the print that bound her name,” to reach a vision of America that



includes its colonial wrongs and marginalized figures. In the midst of this process of re-vision, Crane's speaker emerges into new frontiers, "distances I knew were hers" (ll 76). Here, on the edges of American history, the speaker hears, "Papooses crying on the wind's long man / Screamed redskin dynasties that fled the brain, / —Dead echoes!" (ll 77-79). These are the screams, the "Wail" (ll 76) of American history, specifically of a revisionist history that takes into account the genocide of American Indians in America's unrelenting "progress" across Indian lands. The destruction of entire peoples is an American story that most Americans would like to forget, to have "fle[e] the brain" or to account for as "Dead echoes." Yet, Crane forces his readers to stop and note, even if briefly, the systematic destruction of American Indians as part of American history, as he goes on: "But I knew her body there, / Time like a serpent down her shoulder, dark, / And space, an eaglet's wing, laid on her hair" (ll 79-81). American history, Crane seems to say, is indigenous genocide too, an idea of history he will expand more fully in "The Dance," the next section of *The Bridge*. But first, this taste of America's bloody history will wind its way through the rest of "The River," allowing Crane's myth of America to flow not around but rather through America's darkest history of racism, genocide, and imperialistic greed.

In "The River," Crane brings his reader to an imaginative encounter with America's most brutal history of imperialism. His repeated invocations to the reader to reach out and touch the real America encourage the reader to embrace this revisionist history of America. Crane speaks to the reader as if he or she is engaging in this train ride, inviting us to, "Oh, lean from the widow, if the train slows down, / As though you touched hands with some ancient clown, / —A little while gaze absently below / And hum *Deep River* with them while they go" (ll 101-04). By addressing the reader with these commands to experience sensually their progress through "The River," to "touch hands with some ancient clown," Crane incites his readers to view history in a

different way, to account for the atrocities in America's history, to "look see" (ll 105) and remember (Crane also perhaps doubts in the ability of most readers to meet these expectations, as he commands them to "gaze absently" and "hum," their participation in history, therefore suggesting more of a carefree excursion than a serious endeavor.). Yet, through this seemingly carefree process of contact with the land and the people of America, Crane actually brings his readers to a greater knowledge of themselves as Americans and their history, thus thrusting upon them a kind of historical agency and responsibility. Crane urges his readers to immerse themselves in this new conception of American history, asking his readers: "What are you, lost within this tideless spell?" (ll 122). He immediately counters the reader's confusion with, "You are your father's father, and the stream— / A liquid theme that floating niggers swell" (ll 123-24). Within this idea of American history as violent, Americans lose their easy relationship with their history as, in a reversal of responsibility, they become responsible for the crimes of their fathers, becoming their "father's father," the founders of both America and slavery. However, within this process of losing their easy identities, as Crane asserts, his readers actually become more in contact with themselves and their history, as Crane forces upon them a sense of agency and responsibility. Crane admits to pushing his readers towards a more pessimistic view of their own American history, declaring: "The River, spreading, flows—and spends your dream" (ll 121). The dark flow of America's history "spends" America's dream of itself, the American promise of "hope," progress, and Manifest Destiny. In place of these falsely optimistic myths of America, Crane inserts the idea of American history as full of violence, as "the stream" is "A liquid theme that floating niggers swell." American ideals of progress and expansion have been supported by "floating niggers" and American Indian genocide, ensconced in the racism and greed that allowed for frontier settlement. In exposing this dark history of America, Crane takes

away any easy paths to a hopeful American myth since such a myth must take into account the killing and suffering of millions.

Nevertheless, Crane does not give up the journey toward a new American myth entirely with “The River.” Although pessimistic or realistic about United States history, Crane nevertheless leaves his readers with the sense that the river of American history will soon flow toward a more positive destination. To this end, Crane instructs his readers, “Patience! and you shall reach the biding place!” (ll 132). Although it is necessary to view the dark side of American history, to pass “Over De Soto’s bones” (ll 133), through the American Indian holocaust, this process will, Bridge-like, lead to a history that “flows within itself, heaps itself free” (ll 137). Only by acknowledging the full range of America’s history, positive and negative, can a new, freeing myth of America emerge, and, as Crane shows at the end of “The River,” such a myth will be founded in erotic desire and human connection rather than in colonial or imperial greed and violence. Indeed, at the end of “The River,” the speaker watches as “The River lifts itself from its long bed, / Poised wholly on its dream, a mustard glow / Tortured with history, its one will—flow!” (ll 140-42). Crane pollutes American hopefulness and concepts of progress with America’s violent history, tortures it—yet, despite this torture, American history itself desires to flow onward, “its one will” is to “flow.” Whether or not Crane can save this desire for the future, this desire of America to flow forward in full light of its darkest past will be one of *The Bridge’s* major concerns. The key to this flow, as “The Dance” will explore more fully, proves to be a kind of religiously erotic desire, as “The River” ends: “The Passion spreads in wide tongues, choked and slow, / Meeting the Gulf, hosannas silently below” (ll 143-44). Here, the erotic passion of “tongues” melds with religious significations of music and suffering, the Passion of Christ on the cross and the hosannas of church choirs. Thus, for Crane, erotic desire

provides a means of not only physical but spiritual and mythical ecstasy, as religious, national, and bodily images merge together at the end of “The River.”

“The Dance”: Crane’s Subversion of an American Myth

*She is the torrent and the singing tree;*

*And she is virgin to the last of men...*

“The Dance,” ll 91-92

As a crucial moment in Hart Crane’s attempt to remake the American myth in *The Bridge*, “The Dance” stands out as a poem in which Crane reforms popular myths about American Indians in order to reach toward a trans-cultural as well as trans-temporal understanding of his newly imagined America. Occurring in roughly *The Bridge*’s middle section, “The Dance” represents an important shift in the poem from a more observational approach to American mythology to a poetic re-creation and even minority reclamation of one of America’s most engrained myths. As the penultimate poem of the section entitled “Powhatan’s Daughter,” “The Dance” first presents the American myth of virgin land associated with Pocahontas, then subverts that myth through the introduction of the transformative new figure of Maquokeeta who takes Pocahontas’s place in the poem as the sexually violated and, finally, ritually sacrificed subject. However, Crane not only displaces the (apparently necessary) sacrifice of Pocahontas with the figure of Maquokeeta; rather he imaginatively subjects himself (and by association the reader) to a shared participation in the bloody sacrifice and subsequent transformation of Maquokeeta in “The Dance.”<sup>9</sup> In so doing, Crane attempts to bridge a gap in

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<sup>9</sup> In “‘Our Native Clay’: Racial and Sexual Identity in the Making of Americans in *The Bridge*” Jared Gardner extensively addresses the idea that Maquokeeta supplants Pocahontas as the narrator’s sexual partner through a two-fold need to conform to race politics of the 1920s while simultaneously creating a role as model citizen for the American homosexual male. In a less socially-based critique, Peter Lurie argues in “Querying the Modernist Canon: Historical Consciousness and the Sexuality of Suffering in Faulkner and Hart Crane” that this episode in

American mythology between the supposedly pre-historic past of the American Indian and the historical present of the modern American man, two figures that find themselves in conflict and, eventually, erotically entwined in the landscape of the New World. Through his empathetic suffering with Maquokeeta the American Indian “Brave,” Crane reaches, albeit perhaps naively, towards a reformation of America as a newly, and arguably eternally, virginal land, one as connected to mythic time through Maquokeeta’s transformative change into the serpent as it ever was before European contact and settlement of the “New World.” This clever sidestepping, as Jared Gardner has shown to different ends, allows Crane to reconstitute the seminal American myth of Pocahontas on his own terms, to subvert the overtly divisive and colonial undertones of Pocahontas as the sullied female “other” and to place in its stead a myth of America that privileges his own chosen paradigm of homoerotic, brotherly unity. With the same motion, Crane bestows upon the American Indian “other” a kind of agency, albeit through suffering, as Maquokeeta becomes not just a colonial object to whom violence is done by Europeans, but a participant in the (admittedly still violent) process of bodily contact in the Americas. Meanwhile, within the context of *The Bridge* as a whole, “The Dance” subverts American mythology in order to allow for an American land that is still virgin and so, within a Western conception of history, still full of promise and potential for the future. By violating Maquokeeta in a mutual act of homoerotic desire, Crane saves Pocahontas, and by implication the American

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“The Dance” of “white-ethnic sexual union...marks the legacy of an American history of conquest” (150). Within his larger frame of masochistic suffering in *The Bridge*, Lurie notes that Crane’s narrative approximation to Maquokeeta constitutes a “desire to supplant a white, male, heterosexual presence in American history with that of a marginalized subject” (163) though a “mutuality of suffering” (163) and “ecstatic union” between Maquokeeta and the narrator (161). I take from both critics the idea that Crane’s narrator in “The Dance” engages with Maquokeeta in a homoerotic fashion; however, I argue that this engagement serves as much to preserve the sexual purity of Pocahontas (and by association the American land) as it does to liberate the narrator and Maquokeeta from the constraints of normative social bonds. Both ends, no doubt, have a place within *The Bridge* as a whole; however, since my focus is more on the mythmaking elements of *The Bridge*, I choose to focus on the implications of a homosexual bond as they apply to Crane’s larger goals of creating a hopeful, new American myth.

land, from the ravages of colonial contact, preserving America as a hopeful, virgin land rather than a land dominated by its colonial past.

As an introduction to “The Dance,” Crane prefaces the section “Powhatan’s Daughter” with a historical account which describes Pocahontas as a “*well-featured but wanton yong girle*” who “*get the boyes forth with her into the market place, and make them wheele*” (51). This highly sexualized portrayal of Pocahontas forms the background for Crane’s later critique of this mythical image of Pocahontas as a lusty twelve-year old, which goes along with the image of America as a sullied, deflowered land. Crane sets the problem at the beginning of “The Dance” in similar terms, describing as he does a mysterious “glacier woman” who “ran the neighing canyons all the spring” and “sprouted arms” and “rose with maize—to die” (ll 2-4). The figure of Pocahontas here is conflated with the figure of the glacier woman, who, in turn, Crane aligns with the land of America itself, which he represented throughout “The River” as a woman’s body. Crane thus employs a common trope in American literature of identifying women’s bodies with the land, a trope which connects him back to patriarchal colonial history as indigenous bodies, usually female, were violated as a biological and social power play that advanced the European (and later American) colonial endeavor in the Americas. The trope itself is a common critique in both postcolonial and feminist literature, as the representation of bodies becomes a discourse in political, as well as sexual, power. However, as Crane develops “The Dance,” he presents this common trope of American land as a woman’s body as problematic, as somehow unproductive (since the glacier woman dies and autumn comes with drought to the land). Here we catch a glimpse of Eliot’s *The Waste Land* with its vegetative myths and its persistent images of barrenness and desert. Yet, contrary to Eliot, Crane refuses to maintain this image of an American landscape destroyed and instead presses onward towards a homoerotic

reformulation of the America as a virginal land myth, one which relieves the pressure on women as sexual containers for the land and its historical traumas by looking toward a different source for an embodiment of America's historical and environmental traumas. By presenting us with an image of homoerotic union rather than heterosexual violence, Crane changes the power dynamic in the relationship between the indigenous and the white European body. In switching the female indigenous body of Pocahontas for that of the male indigenous body of Maquokeeta, Crane avoids the unequal power dynamics of the heterosexual colonized and colonizer in favor of a more mutual and pleasurable suffering in which no sexual innocence is lost, so preserving America as a virginal land of possibilities, even in light of four hundred years of colonization.

Within "The Dance," the reason for this substitution of Pocahontas with Maquokeeta occurs because of the fundamental "otherness" of Pocahontas who shrouds herself with "a veil" (ll 14) and so conceals herself from full knowledge by the speaker, even in marriage. However, as the speaker leaves his bride Pocahontas and ventures into the river on his canoe, he continues to speak to her, as he discovers "Your hair's keen crescent running" (ll 19). By this personification of the river, the speaker conflates Pocahontas with the land he comes to know, as he "learn[s] to catch the trout's moon whisper" (ll 22). At this point, the relationship between the narrator and the land and the American Indian is still very much a stereotypical, uninventive one. Pocahontas, by being an American Indian, is closely aligned with the idyllic wilderness of the nature surrounding her, and the speaker gains an approximation of her through his engagement with the natural world, a classic Romantic trope since Chateaubriand. Pocahontas is the American land, and the American land is Pocahontas. Yet, after this section of "The Dance," Crane adapts this American myth to his own purposes, working to subvert the classic

relationship of the American Indian woman, the American land and the white settler male by the addition of a third character: Maquokeeta, the American Indian male.

The narrator continues in his quest onward, toward a different type of engagement, almost through a willed, vision-like state, since he observes, “I could not stop” (ll 30). Onward and “eastward,” rather than westward (opposite the path of Manifest Destiny), the narrator continues, seeking to know the American landscape and arriving finally at “Grey tepees” and the rhythm of a thundercloud (ll 39). The speaker’s personal address now shifts to Maquokeeta, as the speaker watches, spellbound, the dance and fall of Maquokeeta, even encouraging, “Know, Maquokeeta, greeting; know death’s best; / —Fall, Sachem, strictly as the tamarack!” (ll 47-48). Whereas Pocahontas was ever an enigma to the speaker, Crane associates engagement with Maquokeeta with knowledge, specifically with knowledge of suffering, of a sort of passing through death towards a regeneration (“death’s best”). The death figured here is the cultural, as well as physical, genocide of American Indians, the violence enacted by Europeans upon the so-called virginal or mythical land of America as upon its peoples. As Maquokeeta takes the place of Pocahontas’s suffering, his hair replaces hers and the suffering takes on a sexual, homoerotic valence, as “every tendon scurries toward the twangs / Of lightning deltaed down your saber hair. / Now snaps the flint in every tooth; red fangs / And splay tongues thinly busy the blue air...” (ll 53-56). The images of “twangs” and “tongues” lend the scene an erotic air, a sense of pleasurable, sexualized suffering that the initiation of “The long moan of the dance” commences (ll 51). Suddenly, dancing has replaced knowing as the speaker’s new command to Maquokeeta, and the speaker increasingly becomes himself embroiled in the act of dancing as a transformative, regenerating event that can “Lie to us,—dance us back the tribal morn!” (ll 60). Losing his sense of objectivity, the speaker addresses Maquokeeta as “snake that lives before /



That casts his pelt, and lives beyond!” as “Medicine-man” who can “relent, restore” (ll 58-59). At this point in the poem, the speaker entwines his fate with that of Maquokeeta, and, as stereotypical as his portrayal of Maquokeeta as an American Indian is, the speaker comes to depend upon these mythical, transformative powers of the “other” not so much to save the American Indian as to preserve through reformulation a mythical element of America. By casting himself as a willing participant in a different kind of engagement than that of colonialism with the American Indian man in “The Dance,” Crane submits himself to the violence of America’s colonial past, imaginatively shares in the suffering and death of Maquokeeta. This shared homoerotic suffering not only unites the two men in a different kind of sexual relation than the one-sided violence and suffering of colonialism, it leaves America, despite European conquest, a virgin country. In reformulating the tale of historical violence against American Indians through a sexualized engagement with Maquokeeta, who, unlike Pocahontas, does not carry the land’s heavy significations, Crane leaves Pocahontas (and so by association American land) as a virgin. Through this poetic substitution of Maquokeeta for Pocahontas, Crane counters the historical view of America as a nation fallen from the innocence of the “tribal mom” after the European conquest. Instead, Crane re-imagines (if somewhat naively) European and American engagement with American Indians as a shared kind of suffering, a mutual sexual endeavor in which both sides willingly engage.

Shared desire—sexual, regenerative and, perhaps above all, sacrificial—unites the two men, as the European-American speaker imaginatively participates in Maquokeeta’s ceremonial burning at the stake. First the speaker notes simply that “I, too, was liege / To rainbows currying each pulsant bone: / Surpassed the circumstance, danced out the siege!” (ll 62-64). The speaker, and the reader through identification with the speaker’s “I,” thus empathizes with Maquokeeta’s

triumph and subsequent sacrifice, following his heights of desire as well as his depths of pain.<sup>10</sup> Just a stanza later, the identification moves a step further, as the speaker forgets his own bodily limits through the depths of his empathy with Maquokeeta, stating, “I could not pick the arrows from my side” and imagining himself “Wrapped in that fire” (ll 66-67). However, unlike Pocahontas and the old myth of destroyed land, from his erotic destruction Maquokeeta emerges reformed, “pure serpent” (ll 75) as the speaker looks on, enthusing, “I saw thy change begun!” (ll 76). This change, this switching of the virgin Pocahontas for the American Indian male Maquokeeta allows for two things: a certain agency for Maquokeeta who becomes “moon / Of his own fate” and a productive, empathetic suffering for Crane’s speaker, who is able to exchange the old myth of America as a once pure, but ultimately soiled land for a more shared, albeit still bloody, experience of American Indian history. Moreover, as Jared Gardner has already noted, through this encounter Pocahontas herself remains untouched, meaning that America, in a rhetorical sense, remains a virgin land since Pocahontas remains “virgin to the last of men” (ll 92) (Gardner 26). The enactment of this maintained virginity of the American landscape is the transformation from the drought at the beginning of “The Dance” to the resumption of the land’s fertility as “winds across the llano grass resume / Her hair’s warm sibilance. Her breasts are fanned / O stream by slope and vineyard—into bloom!” (ll 94-96). Whereas *The Waste Land* leaves its readers in the waste land of drought and debased desire, Crane pushes his poem forward to a kind of regeneration, a renewal of the landscape through an erotic revision of American mythology. Within the parameters of this American myth of virgin land as Pocahontas, Crane transforms the question from one of subversive and colonial

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<sup>10</sup> Peter Lurie further notes in “Querying the Modernist Canon: Historical Consciousness and the Sexuality of Suffering in Faulkner and Hart Crane” how Crane’s depiction of “ecstatic suffering” (156) in “The Dance” works to involve the reader in the poem’s sexual violence.

heterosexual violence to one of mutual (albeit still racially problematic) homosexual violence. The poem ends with the imagined culmination of the speaker's relationship with Maquokeeta, as the speaker enthuses, "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" (ll 101-104). The speaker and Maquokeeta thus enter a kind of subversive, homoerotic space with their dance, a space that functions as one of Mary Louise Pratt's "contact zones," a "social space where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in context of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such a colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many part of the world today" (Pratt 63). Yet this cultural clash of the contact zone between the American Indian and the white American settler takes a sharp turn away from the norms of colonial contact, as Maquokeeta and the speaker dance instead of fight, and this dance brings them to a desert land beyond America's "farms," beyond sheer agricultural and economic interest, and towards a more spiritual union that is interestingly based in an erotic union. "The Dance" thus brings a sense of subversive power to bear on the normative American myth connecting virginity, Pocahontas, and land. It reenacts a tale of colonial contact between American Indians and white settlers in order to reformulate the contact zone, in order to refashion four hundred years of colonial injustices with the promise of a more mutual, fraternal bond for America's future. And while "The Dance" can clearly never make up for the suffering of American Indians, it can offer America a myth that establishes a better model for future contact zones, a myth that hopes to draw the country away from the pursuit of power and wealth and towards a quest for fraternal love based in homoerotic desire.

"The Dance" proves significant within the project of *The Bridge* as a whole since it allows Crane to subvert an already existing American myth and thus avoid the perils of a

pessimistic doctrine which asserts that the mythic time is past. By privileging desire over virginity, and yet nevertheless allowing the American land to maintain its virginity, Crane salvages what possibilities remain in American mythology for creating a contemporary American myth that incorporates a history of colonialism and violence while yet adhering to the principle of brotherly unity and hope. Through “The Dance” and the shared sexual suffering of Maquoqueeta, Crane opens up the possibility of sympathetic communication through the entwined promise of correspondence between time and space, between the eagle and the serpent, despite, or perhaps in light of, America’s historical atrocities. Although the desire between Maquoqueeta and the speaker is not regenerative in a biological sense, in a visionary sense it produces the promise for America’s future of the “serpent with the eagle in the boughs,” a symbol that recurs throughout *The Bridge* as a sign of Crane’s spanning of American time, the serpent, and space, the eagle. Through his speaker’s emotional and sexual engagement with Maquoqueeta, Crane gives the reader his or her first glimpse of a mutual vow, a promise that will eventually bind the many and the different as one through a rejuvenated American myth that at least imaginatively manages to cross space and time through the shared experience of sexual desire. With “The Dance,” Crane gives us a hint of the unity across American time and space that he will develop throughout the rest of the poem, a unity that arises from the productive imaginative desire that drives *The Bridge* in its quest across American history for a renewed modern cosmology.

“Cape Hatteras”: The Possibility of Creation in the Age of the Machine

*The soul, by naphtha fledged into new reaches*  
 “Cape Hatteras,” ll 88

Having moved through Columbus, Manifest Destiny, and an American Indian brave, Crane next brings us to an encounter with his own poet-mentor of the American visionary tradition in “Cape Hatteras.” Situated roughly in the middle of *The Bridge*, “Cape Hatteras,” the epic poem’s fourth section, provides an important turning point for the rest of the poem. Invoking Walt Whitman as a guide, in this section Crane argues for his own importance as an epic poet of America through his process of alignment with Whitman, the quintessential democratic poet of America. However, while Crane uses Whitman as a measure of the potential value of his own contribution to American literature, his insistence in “Cape Hatteras” upon a reformation of modernist vision makes clear, perhaps for the first time, the full aspirations of such an epic poem as *The Bridge*. It is perhaps these aspirations, later realized in “Atlantis,” that make “Cape Hatteras” such a confusing poem to read. On the one hand, Crane seems to praise modern technological and scientific development, creating as he does (and as Walt Whitman did) a correspondence between the natural and the machine in many of his descriptions. Yet, at the same time, Crane nevertheless strongly critiques the modernist age of the machine in many places, enumerating the ways in which its heights of glory have directly led to the depths of war and human suffering. Crane’s ecstasy of language in “Cape Hatteras” leaves the reader in awe as to the possibilities of these silvery, magical machines, and yet the unfolding of the poem works against such aggrandizement, instead offering a world whose machines, coupled with human greed and the desire for empire have plunged the modern world into the atrocities of World War I.

In light of these complications, perhaps it is best to view “Cape Hatteras” as Crane’s miniature version of *The Waste Land*, as his attempt to first diagnose and then repair the psychological and philosophical problems of his contemporary world. For in “Cape Hatteras,”

something has clearly gone horribly wrong with human society. Faced with all the possibilities of science and technology, faced with the brotherhood and faith of the Wright Brothers at Kitty Hawk, humans have corrupted their own creations, turning the airplanes and factories towards war and violence rather than towards connection and creativity. Rather than using machines to expand the mind, humanity has used machines like the airplane to violently expand the territories below them. Within this history, the physical, rather than the spiritual, has been privileged and Crane demonstrates, without a doubt, the final downward trajectory of such imperial greed. However, Crane defines the roots of this problem as far more spiritual than anything as limited (however also tragic) as a wartime bomber's crash. In "Cape Hatteras," Crane presents contemporary imperialism and war as the tragic results of a problem of vision, an inability to view the world as still containing some amount of mystery, wonder and possibility.

Crane turns to another poetic visionary of America, Walt Whitman, as his guiding angel in this poetic fight against what Crane views as modernity's problematic vision. Reading Walt Whitman becomes an exercise in "that deep wonderment, our native clay / Whose depth of red, eternal flesh of Pocahontas— / Those continental folded aeons, surcharged / With sweetness below derricks, chimneys, tunnels— / Is veined by all that time has really pledged us" (ll 18-22). Walt Whitman thus becomes a sort of guide in this process of re-seeing that which is already before us as Americans, a re-viewing of "our native clay" which should fill us with "deep wonderment" and a sense of enmeshment with history. However, this process of viewing afresh is nevertheless, as "veined" already implies, tainted by the sense of history we bring to any re-vision of the landscape. Crane depicts a moment of near revelation as "time clears / Our lenses, lifts a focus, resurrects / A periscope to glimpse what joys or pain / Our eyes can share or answer—then deflects / Us, shunting to a labyrinth submersed / Where each sees only his dim

past reversed..." (ll 26-31). History is liberating and history is enslaving in Crane's approximation of the modern state of mind. The passing of time clears our vision, resurrects our sight and unites us, but only to resume the labyrinth, to enter again a realm where a troubled history controls our vision and negates the ability to see clearly. Crane depicts this state of sight as entrapping, as enslaving almost, as so limiting that the imagination succumbs to mere reiteration. Sight is not visionary in this depiction but rather redundant. Crane continues to enumerate the causes of this logical dilemma, revealing, "Now the eagle dominates our days, is jurist / Of the ambiguous cloud. We know the strident rule / Of wings imperious...Space, instantaneous, / Flickers a moment, consumes us in its smile / A flash over the horizon—shifting gears— / And we have laughter, or more sudden tears" (ll 37-42). The imperious rule of technology, of space and motion, manipulates human emotion, pulls the cord for laughter or tears like a puppeteer. Even emotion is now subject to the rule of the "jurist," the undeniable, "instantaneous" rule of the "eagle." In this context, the eagle itself takes on several possible valences, all of which entail a certain domination of human imagination. The eagle is first the movement of airplanes, which rule our days with their "wings imperious" and their mastery of "Space, instantaneous." Airplanes enable a certain expansion of vision, as they allow us to travel more quickly and with greater ease over a larger span of land. Yet, Crane also points to their destructive tendencies, their ability to dominate not only the air itself (as "jurist / Of the ambiguous cloud") but human life itself, as airplanes can be used for destruction, as "A flash over the horizon" causes either "laughter, or more sudden tears." More symbolically, the eagle also stands for America's imperialistic ambitions. As America's national bird, the eagle displays the negative aspects of the country's psyche, its will to become "imperious" and domineering, as ruthless as a bird of prey. In both instances, the eagle represents an absolute vision, one that

rules through domination of time, space, and even human emotion. The eagle—whether airplane or symbol of American power—implicitly believes in its own rule, trusts in its ability to be “jurist” over the clouds themselves and to impose its “strident rule / Of wings imperious.”

More importantly, modern people believe in the machines that rule them, as Crane notes with his next few lines, “Dream cancels dream in this new realm of fact / From which we wake into the dream of act; / Seeing himself an atom in a shroud— / Man hears himself an engine in a cloud!” (ll 43-46). Humanity not only is subject to the manipulation of technology; people trust in the philosophical and psychological ramifications of this new domination of machinery. Viewing the world of science and technology around him, mankind treats himself as such a machine, as incapable of dreaming and living instead in “this new realm of fact” and “act.” Because science tells humans that they are made of atoms, “Man hears himself” as a machine, as “an engine in a cloud.” Thus, the problem with modern man is not so much technology itself as man’s submission of his own psychology to that technology. Faith, hope and possibility have no place in this factual worldview, and it is this that Crane finds in need of reforming throughout *The Bridge* as a whole, as well as “Cape Hatteras” in particular. Mankind has surely gotten himself into a dilemma, and yet, this dilemma, as Crane presents it, is wholly a matter of viewpoint, of direction rather than of material change.

So Crane turns to Walt Whitman as the exemplary of a vision of American faith and optimism, alluding to one of his lines of poetry, “—Recorders ages hence,” and afterward exhaling, “ah, syllables of faith!” (ll 47). Yet, Whitman’s optimism is not a result of a perfect world, as Crane makes sure to note, but rather a result of his own powers of vision, Whitman’s



ability to “Surviv[e] in a world of stocks” (ll 59), “Confronting the Exchange” (ll 58).<sup>11</sup>

Whitman was living no idyllic paradise, but rather, as Crane paints him, he nonetheless looked upon his world with “Sea eyes and tidal, undenyng, bright with myth!” (ll 62). In Crane’s depiction of him, Whitman’s strength lies not in the perfection of his world, but rather in his poetic ability to transform that world, to re-envision his world and all it encompasses as imbued with meaning, as connected to a living myth.

Energized by this remembrance of his favorite poet’s own struggles, Crane launches into his own mythical vision of science and technology as “The nasal whine of power whips a new universe...” (ll 63). Within this new universe of Crane’s, science and nature merge, as “spouting pillars spoor the evening sky” (ll 64). Industrial pillars regenerate themselves like mold spores, polluting the evening sky with their fumes. Yet, this new world of science and technology is not entirely detrimental since, rather than dismantling Crane’s poetic vision, scientific developments lend him a new language as “New verities, new inklings in the velvet hummed / Of dynamos” (ll 67-68). Crane’s poetics incorporates, rather than discards, scientific vocabulary, as language, science, and a cosmic vision of the universe combine to create “ammoniac proverbs” (ll 66), “Power’s script” (ll 69), and “Stars scribble” (ll 79). Scientific change, rather than hobbling the poetic mind, gives poets new cosmologies (and literally new words) through which to view the world.<sup>12</sup> In “Cape Hatteras,” linguistic, scientific and natural worlds collide, and the result is a

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<sup>11</sup> Walt Whitman indeed wrote at a time when America was undergoing great changes, one of those changes being the growth of the United States into a financial power through the New York Stock Exchange. Herman Melville shows concerns similar to those of Whitman in his short story “Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street,” which mocks the drudgery of New York office life through its depiction of the bizarrely antisocial Bartleby.

<sup>12</sup> As does Crane in “Cape Hatteras,” Walter Benjamin also explores the capacity of human destruction through science to become an aesthetic achievement. In “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” he responds to Marinetti, explaining, “Mankind, which in Homer’s time was an object of contemplation for the Olympian gods, now is one for itself. Its self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order” (122). In “Cape Hatteras,” Crane shows man’s ability to not only use science for destruction but, through the production of his poem, to make of that destruction an aesthetic

sort of verbal ecstasy as the machines whir “In oilrinsed circles of blind ecstasy!” (ll 78).

Science and technology at this point in “Cape Hatteras” encompass new forms of desire and so new means of *jouissance*, of poetic, bodily and spiritual ecstasy. Such forms of ecstasy will go on to find their climax in the last section of Crane’s poem, “Atlantis,” which unites the spiritual with the bodily in the musical celebration of poetic creation and desire.

Nevertheless, Crane’s vision of science and technology is not without its darker moments. As he turns to the accomplishment of brotherhood with “Two brothers in their twinship” (ll 83) at Kitty Hawk, that is, the first flight of the Wright brothers, Crane notes not only “What ciphers risen from prophetic script, / What marathons new-set between the stars!” (ll 86-87), but simultaneously hints that “The soul, by naphtha fledged into new reaches / Already knows the closer clasp of Mars,” (ll 88-89). Here Mars can not only refer to the planet Mars, which, of course, would be slightly closer to the Wright brothers during their flight than before it, but also possibly references Mars the Roman god of war, whose proximity bespeaks the ease with which a society versed in air travel will commence and prolong wars. The next two lines support this position, as Crane continues, “New latitudes, unknotting, soon give place / To what fierce schedules, rife of doom apace!” (ll 90-91). Thus the promise of new technology also contains something closer to a threat, as airplanes will compress the time it takes to make war against other countries. Under these “fierce schedules,” countries become preoccupied again with imperialism and war, as “Iliads glimmer through eyes raised in pride / Hell’s belt springs wider into heaven’s plumed side” (ll 95-96). The new technology of airplanes leads to a “tournament of space” (ll 100), and the language becomes more violent from there, as “the

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achievement, an opportunity for new artistic horizons. Yet Crane, like Benjamin, ultimately points out the negative, as well as the visionary, possibilities of this new aestheticized technology.

threshold and chiseled height / Is baited by marauding circles, bludgeon flail / Of rancorous grenades whose screaming petals carve us / Wounds that we wrap with theorems sharp as hail!" (ll 99-102). Wartime mentalities, perhaps, cause the sense of cynicism noted at the beginning of "Cape Hatteras," as the devastation possible with new technology, such as that occurring during World War I, seems only understandable within a theory of mankind that is equally aggressive. Again, Crane emphasizes that skeptical modernist theorems that are "sharp as hail" are not the definitive theorem for contemporary existence but rather composed the adaptation of man to certain claims of science and technology. While describing the destruction and horrors of which mankind is capable with the new technology of WWI, such as mustard gas, the machine gun, and the fighter plane, Crane nonetheless subtly suggests that such logical approximations of mankind fail to take into account the entire picture. In other words, pessimistic, modernist theories of mankind's isolated and machinelike state arise from a time of unbelievable war and destruction, and so reflect those atrocities rather than commenting on some essential or undeniable part of man's nature. This negative mode of viewing violent history as the basis of a despondent modern philosophy will recur yet again, as well as reach its final containment in "Atlantis."

As a counter figure to the destruction of technology and World War I, Crane introduces the regenerative gaze of the poet, who turns to words to express the historical change that often constitutes progress in the world. Crane berates the pilot figure (soon to die in any case) as shirking his duties of his "Sanskrit charge / To conjugate infinity's dim marge— / Anew..!" (ll 133-35). Rather than, like the poet, using words to "conjugate," to change "infinity," the pilot tries to use the violence of machines to "sowest doom" (ll 130). The pilot relies on the material to enact change rather than the spiritual, and for this he receives "The benediction of the shell's deep, sure reprieve!" (ll 137). In forgetting his command to find, through human creations, new

paths to love and infinity, the pilot commits the sin for which he dies, in the language of “Cape Hatteras.” While the pilot ascends to the “height” of infinity (ll 136), he does not merit his position, and so falls back down into the “Ghoul-mound of man’s perversity at balk / And fraternal massacre” (ll 178-79). The pilot falls into the depths of humanity’s brotherhood “perver[ted],” brotherhood turned into war, a description which evokes America’s famously fraternal Civil War as well as World War I. In opposition to the figure of the pilot, Crane looks to enact a different type of “Ascension” (ll 159), one which will not prove so in-fortuitous as that of the bomber pilot. For this, as well as for poetic guidance, Crane looks to Walt Whitman, as he demands, “But who has held the heights more sure than thou, / O Walt!” (ll 158-59). As the line before this makes clear, “the heights” entail a change in vision, an escape from a familiar cosmology of “The stars [which have] grooved our eyes with old persuasions / Of love and hatred, birth,—surcease of nations...” (ll 156-57). In Whitman, Crane searches for “a pact, new bound / Of living brotherhood” (ll 166-67) which will release “pure impulse” (ll 164) and combat the pessimism of modernist thought which led to the violence of World War I and which continues to spell doom for Western civilization. In poetry Crane hopes to find the key to a new vision of science and technology, as well as a new American cosmology, one which will lead away from the atrocities of history and towards a new paradigm of love and brotherhood.

The fraternal love for which Crane looks toward Whitman as the best example provides the basis for Crane’s own project of *The Bridge* as a song of love and brotherhood. Crane describes Whitman as American society’s “Meistersinger” (ll 204), as the one “who on the boldest heel / Stood up and flung the span on even wing / Of that great Bridge, our Myth, whereof I sing!” (ll 205-07). Whitman thus paved the way for Crane and his song of love and American myth in *The Bridge*. So, appropriately, in the last few stanzas of “Cape Hatteras,”

Crane sets up many of the main questions that he addresses more generally in *The Bridge* as a whole. He despairs, “Years of the Modern! Propulsions toward what capes?” (ll 208). One of the main problems of modernity’s philosophy of humanity is that it lacks direction, that it fails to find a fitting place for desire, which Crane sees as an essential human characteristic, leading not only to wars and violence but also to love and poetic regeneration. Thus, Crane takes up Whitman’s mantle and sets sail for a new direction in American literature, one for which he actually has a precedent in the poetry of Walt Whitman (such as *Leaves of Grass*).<sup>13</sup> The end of “Cape Hatteras” reinforces this stubborn belief in the possibility of regeneration through mythopoesis, as Crane describes the present as “Toward endless terminals, Easters of speeding light— / Vast engines outward veering with seraphic grace” (ll 217-18). While “terminal” implies finality, “endless terminals” is an oxymoron, a finality without finality—an instance of words evading logic, of hope surpassing despair. The same can be said of Crane’s use of the term “Easter,” a reference which anticipates both death and resurrection, both suffering and glory. Keeping these terms in mind as Crane’s description of the present moment, his task as a poet seems to be to reclaim a sense of hopefulness amidst the despair of modernism and technology, to create meaning and myth in a world that proclaims to utterly reject religious faith, as seen earlier in *The Waste Land*.

Such a hopeful move in modernist American poetry, as the rest of *The Bridge* demonstrates, will be a tricky endeavor, and yet Crane nevertheless appears optimistic at the end

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<sup>13</sup> In *Transmemberment of Song* Lee Edelman also reads “Cape Hatteras” as Crane’s positioning of himself as Whitman’s poetic inheritor, but his reading posits a more Oedipal relationship between the two poets. Edelman argues that by positioning himself in relation to Whitman, Crane ultimately “attempts to claim priority” (189) by engaging in his own reading of Whitman, as well as “of American literary history as a figure in which the past is fulfilled by the present and thus by Crane himself” (187). In contrast, I read Crane’s relationship with Whitman as an American literary precedent as a more fraternal bond, one that is certainly much less antagonistic than his engagement with Eliot.

of “Cape Hatteras” as to the achievability of his vision. After ascending and descending, witnessing the marvels of machinery as well as its downfalls, Crane directs the reader, “And see! the rainbow’s arch—how shimmeringly stands / Above the Cape’s ghoul-mound, O joyous seer!” (ll 223-24). Here, at the end of “Cape Hatteras,” Crane has switched places with Whitman, has become the master showing his disciple the possibility of redemption during his own time. By affirming the promise of hope in the rainbow, a sign of divine forgiveness, Crane maintains that creation is as possible in his own time as during the time of Whitman. The only difference is that, to see the hope, modern men must enact within themselves a change of vision, a willingness to see the world of science and technology as as thrilling a myth as ever the songs of Homer.

#### “The Tunnel”: Finding a Path through Eliot

*The subway yawns the quickest promise home.*

“The Tunnel,” ll 23

As the seventh and last section of *The Bridge* before “Atlantis,” “The Tunnel” traditionally holds an important place within the structure of *The Bridge* as the descent into Crane’s urban version of hell before the upward movement of “Atlantis.” Both Paul Giles and Daniel Gabriel account for “The Tunnel” as the required descent before the musical promise of “Atlantis” can be fulfilled. In *Hart Crane: The Contexts of the Bridge*, Giles argues that “the magic island of Atlantis will require such disintegration as a precondition of its citizens’ admission into its mystical mathematics: the injunction at the end of ‘Quaker Hill’ (‘break off, / descend— / descend—’) must be fulfilled” (Giles 95). Similarly, in *Hart Crane and the Modernist Epic*, Gabriel also accounts for “The Tunnel” as the poem’s mandatory underworld

journey before “it is salvaged by the implicit redemption of ‘Atlantis’” (Gabriel 153). I agree with these critics who explain “The Tunnel” as *The Bridge*’s poem of descent into a less optimistic world as a way of finally arriving at the musical ecstasy of “Atlantis.”<sup>14</sup> I would also account for the presence and placement of “The Tunnel” in *The Bridge* as Crane’s final reckoning, not only with the figure of Edgar Allen Poe who appears as the literary muse (or perhaps more fittingly ghost) of “The Tunnel,” but also with the ever-looming figure of T. S. Eliot and his own epic poem, *The Waste Land*.

Due to Crane’s own sense of his poem as a means of “[going] *through* [Eliot] toward a *different goal*” (Crane, *Letters*, 90),

Crane’s epigraph to “The Tunnel” speaks to a sense of working *through* danger in order to arrive at the discovery of a new direction for Western civilization, a goal that replicates Crane’s overall motion in “The Tunnel” of “[going] *through* [Eliot] toward a *different goal*” (Crane, *Letters*, 90). Crane takes the epigraph of “The Tunnel” from the poetry of William Blake, a visionary Romantic: “*To Find the Western path / Right thro’ the Gates of Wrath.*” This “*Western path*” we can first compare to Eliot’s Eastern path at the end of *The Waste Land*, Crane so distinguishing himself from Eliot by stipulating at the start of *The Bridge*’s most pessimistic poem, that unlike Eliot, he will remain rooted within the problems of Western civilization, will not attempt the kind of mystic, individualistic flight that Eliot uses to escape from what he sees as the West’s cultural demise. Instead, like Blake, Crane’s goal in “The Tunnel” is to find a path straight through such suffering, that is to say, through the *ennui* of the type of modernist thought that Eliot embodied at the time, towards, as Crane puts it in his letters, “a *different goal*.”

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<sup>14</sup> In *Hart Crane and the Modernist Epic*, Daniel Gabriel positions “The Tunnel” as “duplicating *The Waste Land*’s despair” (Gabriel 153).

However, Crane's choice of epigraph also prepares his readers for the idea that this path "*Right thro' the Gates of Wrath*" will not be a pleasant one, that it will necessitate a kind of suffering, surely on the part of the poet, and possibly on the part of the readers as well. In a fashion reminiscent of Crane's speaker's suffering with the Indian Brave in "The Dance," Crane once again brings up this notion of poetic *agon*.<sup>15</sup> Thus, as Blake's epigraph warns us, Crane's path in "The Tunnel," towards "Atlantis" and through the poetics of Eliot, will enact a kind of suffering, will descend to an urban hell in order to rise again with the musical ecstasy of "Atlantis."

Therefore it is fitting that Crane begins the actual text of "The Tunnel" with a scene of Elitonian deflation, with the tale of a New York City commuter who goes to the theatre in search of some meaning in life, only to leave early out of boredom and decide to take the subway home. This character, Prufrock-like, finds himself trapped within urban artifice, as he intones, "Performances, assortments, résumés" (ll 1), and he searches Columbus Circle, finding "Refractions of the thousand theatres, faces— / Mysterious kitchens" (ll 4-5), but no comforting vision—neither in the theater nor in the urban masses. Some of Prufrock's social anxiety resurfaces in "The Tunnel," as Crane's figure "search[es] them all" for a trace of communion, yet discovers no human bond or meaning in the faces and performances surrounding him, and finds himself "wish[ing] [himself] in bed / With tabloid crime-sheets perched in easy sight" (ll 9-10) instead of watching a play. Lines from Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" clearly reemerge with Crane's description of his figure's minute and politely socialized habits, even as he leaves the theatre in *ennui*. As he says, "Then let you reach your hat / and go" (ll 11-12), reminding the reader of "In the room the women come and go / Talking of Michelangelo"

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<sup>15</sup> As Daniel Gabriel notes in another instance, Crane's "quest" is one "that presumes the agon of the lyric singer" (179).



(“Love Song” ll 13-14). Upon leaving the theater, the speaker, likewise, is not able to make up his mind whether to ride the subway or to walk (“Or can’t you quite make up your mind to ride” [ll 18]), a detail reminiscent of Prufrock’s similar, albeit more neurotic, indecision over whether or not to declare his love. This similarity of the main figure of “The Tunnel” to Eliot’s Prufrock serves to highlight the ways in which Crane sets up parallels to Eliot’s pessimistic urban vision with the beginning of “The Tunnel” so that he can ultimately go *through* Eliot toward a different goal. By creating a main character who shares many of Prufrock’s problems, Crane descends into the urban world of “Prufrock” and *The Waste Land*, a world where communication is impossible and individuals live condemned to spiritual isolation from each other, in order that he might eventually rise out of that world to a new, more hopeful vision of urban modernity.

Crane prepares his readers for this descent into an Elitonian world view, as he promises that the main character’s descent into the subway “yawns the quickest promise home” (ll 23). Crane thus anticipates an elevation from this subterranean world view, hinting that “home” will be “Atlantis,” beyond “The Tunnel” as a kind of mythopoeticizing of the American home. Crane moreover warns his readers that the quickest way to the redemption of “Atlantis” is through Eliot’s vision itself, through an imitation of his poetry’s fragmentation, both formal and in terms of social class as well as individual psyche. The motion of the subway, and the motion that the reader “overhears” in the subway of “The Tunnel,” is the voices of other individuals, bodiless, broken up as thoroughly as any section of *The Waste Land*: “In the car / the overtone of motion / underground, the monotone / of motion is the sound / of other faces, also underground—” (ll 34-38). This verbal barrage starts: “Let’s have a pencil Jimmy—living now / at Floral Park / Flatbush—on the Fourth of July— / like a pigeon’s muddy dream—potatoes / to dig in the field—travlin the town—too— / night after night—the Culver line—the / girls all shaping up—it

used to be—” (ll 39-45). Both the dashes and the content of this passage itself signify a confusing babble of discourse, offering a dozen conversations as one voice, fractured, broken and yet unified within the listener’s mind by the single set of quotation marks. The next stanza somewhat explains the philosophical process behind this babble, as Crane writes, “Our tongues recant like beaten weather vanes” (ll 46), “[a]nd repetition freezes” (ll 49). Here is a world, Crane seems to say, where belief is denied and repetition “freezes,” refuses possibilities; formally as well this is the world of Eliot, the world Eliot offers with the cultural project of *The Waste Land*.

Another overheard conversation which operates one-way like some exchanges in *The Waste Land* highlights this lost world where the art of communication has been lost, has perhaps never existed in the first place. Voices clash in the street: ““What // ‘what do you want? getting weak on the links? / fandaddle daddy don’t ask for change—IS THIS / FOURTEENTH? it’s half past six she said—if / you don’t like my gate why did you / swing on it, why *didja* / swing on it / anyhow—” (ll 49-56). Several short exchanges merge in this passage, as a passenger asks, “IS THIS FOURTEENTH,” while a prostitute argues with her “fandaddle daddy,” demanding, “if / you don’t like my gate why did you swing on it [?]” Blake’s “Gates of Wrath” have here dissolved into a crude sexual reference to a prostitute’s vagina, as the prostitute argues that her customer appeared satisfied to judge by his “swing[ing].” Paul Giles explains this passage as the disintegration of Crane’s glorification of the pun as an exemplary of a bridging motion between two meanings (as we saw in “To Brooklyn Bridge”) into “a tawdry sexual context, the ‘fandaddle daddy’ ‘swinging’ on the prostitute’s ‘gate’” (Giles 91). The world of “The Tunnel” here disintegrates into something resembling the rape of the typist in *The Waste Land*, as social classes and genders clash in a sexual act that cheapens sexuality. In this section, *The Bridge*

most resembles *The Waste Land* as Crane plunges to the depths of what he sees as modernism's fundamental problem of pessimism in order to emerge victorious and ecstatically celebrating sexual desire's renewal in "Atlantis."

The challenge in this hostile environment becomes one of desire and belief as well, to "somehow anyhow swing—" (ll 57), a line which Giles interprets as referring to the swinging of puns and which I, alternatively, interpret as referring to the potential power of motion throughout *The Bridge*—a motion derived from sexual desire, but also enacted in the visionary movement back and forth between the past, the present, and the future. Crane must find a way to make Eliot's poetics and vision "somehow, anyhow swing," that is, work toward hope rather than against it, to make of his vision a working cosmology for Western civilization rather than entirely a vision of its downfall. The means through which Crane achieves this new vision, this new bridging is through "some new presentiment of pain" (ll 62), through, in a typically Cranian way, bodily suffering. As I discussed earlier about "The Dance," Crane's vision is not one that values virginity and innocence, but rather one that privileges experience, and especially experience which comes at the cost of suffering. And so, in order to traverse "The Tunnel" to arrive at "Atlantis," Crane fashions as his guide to suffering the figure of Edgar Allen Poe and his suffering and near-martyrdom at the hands of politicians' thugs on the streets of Baltimore (ll 80). Giles parses Poe's killing in "The Tunnel" as possibly a social "rite," in line, perhaps, with Eliot's killing of the Phoenician in *The Waste Land* (Giles 94). He cites Crane's presentation of Poe's spectral presence: "And why do I often meet your visage here, / Your eyes like agate lanterns—on and on / Below the toothpaste and the dandruff ads? / —And did their riding eyes right through your side, / And did their eyes like unwashed platters ride?" (ll 72-76). By interpreting this section of "The Tunnel" as strewn with puns and multiple meanings, Giles

derives “rite” from “right,” so reaching an interpretation whereby “the rites and rituals of society, in which *eyes ride* or overlap, serve to undermine the arrogance whereby Poe asserted himself as superior to his society” (Giles 94). Giles opens up the possibility that Poe is not simply “a martyr with oppressive eyes piercing right through his side,” but rather “an arrogant outsider whose side is overthrown by society’s necessary rituals” (94).

In contrast to Giles, I would argue that Crane sympathizes far too much with the suffering figure of Poe for this to be entirely the case. In fact, Poe’s killing brings more to mind Crane’s own “ritual murder” at the hands of Allen Tate and Yvor Winters, two members of the New Critics (Hammer 175).<sup>16</sup> This move would align Poe and Crane also with the figure of the bedlamite in “Proem” and Columbus in “Ave Maria,” all figures who suffer for their positions as outsiders in American society. In my interpretation of *The Bridge*, Crane sympathizes with outsider figures, even as such sympathy proves problematic over the course of his poem as it was over the course of his life. The problem of suffering, of individual, doomed death emerges through the ghostly figure of Poe, as the speaker describes how “Death, aloft,—gigantically down / Probing through you—toward me, O evermore!” (ll 77-78). Death touches the speaker *through* Poe here; thus the poem incorporates its logic of masochistic suffering in order to work against the Elitonian logic of non-communication. Crane’s speaker is able to transcend his own body in order to imagine the experience of death touching him through Poe. Mutual suffering, imagined in this case as in the earlier instance of “The Dance,” becomes a means of transcending those individual boundaries which heretofore proved so worrisome in “The Tunnel.” The mind

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<sup>16</sup> In “Querying the Modernist Canon,” Peter Lurie also describes Crane’s ritual killing at the hands of Allen Tate and Yvor Winters and extends a reason for that rejection by the New Critics: Crane’s sexuality. In a comparison of Crane to Faulkner (whose work the New Critics quickly enshrined in modernism’s canon), Lurie argues that Crane’s homoerotic imagery, which dealt in a different way with masculinity, sexuality, and history than Faulkner, was the underlying reason for Tate and Winters’ dismissal of Crane as partaking in “excessive emotionality” (163).

may be trapped within itself, but empathy with human suffering brings the individual out of Eliot's dilemma of the prison of the mind and renews, through pain, a sort of communal human experience will eventually extend beyond even the fraternal bond of the speaker and Poe to resonate through the subway car.

Crane's portrayal of empathy with marginalized suffering as a way out of the solipsism of *The Waste Land* finds its confirmation in the appearance of another marginalized figure towards the end of "The Tunnel": the "Wop washerwoman" (ll 101). In what otherwise appears to be a digression, Crane addresses the "Wop washerwoman" who, too, rides the subway home, asking, "And does the Daemon take you home, also, / Wop washerwoman, with the bandaged hair? / After the corridors are swept, the cuspidors— / The gaunt sky-barracks cleanly now, and bare, / O Genoese, do you bring mother eyes and hands / Back home to children and to golden hair?" (ll 100-05). Crane refers to this figure both with an ethnic slur and with a poetic elevation, as both the "Wop washerwoman" and "O Genoese." By elevating a character that he first presents through a racial slur, Crane demonstrates his empathy (albeit still limited by the racist discourse of the 1920s) with yet another marginalized figure in American society. Moreover, in addressing the woman as "O Genoese," Crane bestows upon the washerwoman a connection with Columbus (who as I stated before, also becomes a marginalized figure in Crane's poem), so forming further connections between America's past and present, between the mythical and the contemporary reality. Crane's sympathetic portrayal of a working class immigrant woman allows for the argument that, even in "The Tunnel," his aims are larger than simply fraternal brotherhood (although that is an important aim of *The Bridge*). Rather, with *The Bridge*, Crane creates a means of aligning and connecting marginalized figures in his song of America's future as well as its past, a future which Crane will enact through a unity of vision that brings together

the washerwoman with Columbus, the recent immigrant from Genoa with the Genoese man who begins *The Bridge*'s mythic quest.

Returning back to the unfolding of "The Tunnel," Crane moves from his imaginative encounter with Poe to another imaginative, if preemptive, leap forward, as "The Tunnel" briefly escapes the underground terrain of the subway in order to preview the musical ecstasy of "Atlantis" and offer a potential bridge through the pessimism of "The Tunnel" towards a way of reconciling the individual with humanity. After the vision of Poe's martyrdom, Crane brings the subway car "to a dead stop" (ll 84) at "Chambers Street" (ll 83) in order briefly to lift us out of the subway and back to the surface of the world in what is an entirely imaginative gesture in terms of the plot of "The Tunnel." Crane describes how "The intent elevator lifts a serenade / Stilly / Of shoes, umbrellas, each eye attending its shoe, then / Bolting outright somewhere above where streets / Burst suddenly in rain.... The gongs recur: / Elbows and levers, guard and hissing door / Thunder is galvothermic here below...." (ll 85-91). As in Eliot's portrayal of the London Bridge commuters in "Burial of the Dead" as "each man fixed his eyes before his feet" (*The Waste Land* ll 65), in Crane's version of the commuters' exit from the subway, "each eye attend[s] its shoe." Here, as in *The Waste Land*, man is broken down to the state of an individual monad, concerned only with his own progress away from the masses walking with him. Once outside the Hades of the subway, a different picture emerges. The elevator elevates people up out of the underworld (prefiguring the latter upward movement in "Atlantis" and reversing the first drop of elevators in "Proem") and on this level, if the ear is attuned to hear music, "a serenade" of people—of shoes and umbrellas, of mass movement, can be heard. On the surface level of the street, clouds burst into rain and "gongs recur," signifying renewal, while, down below, such sounds reverberate as thunder "galvothermic," as the subway car doors shut again

and the subway resumes its journey towards the longer, more harmonic musical redemption of “Atlantis.”

However, in the path of Crane’s subway commuter as well as the reader on his or her way to “Atlantis,” there remains one obstacle left in his downward plunge: the subway’s final dive “[u]nder the river” (ll 94). In the context of *The Bridge* as a whole, the river represents the flow of American history, troubling with its atrocities and memories, as the earlier section of *The Bridge*, “The River,” shows. As I will demonstrate, the final descent below the river suggests Crane’s final accounting for America’s dark history, a history that has included genocide, racism, and various forced migrations. Thus, with this final journey under the river appears Crane’s final skepticism before “Atlantis” about the ability of America to reach toward a new chapter in its history, towards a Word of love rather than an “eventful yawn” (ll 106). In this final section of “The Tunnel,” Crane faces the historical determinism that views the present-day as “the muffled slaughter of a day in birth,” (ll 108) a perspective which “inoculate[s] the brinking dawn,” (ll 109) which is to say, denies the future any hopeful possibilities due to the historical past. The historical perspective here is Elitonian, “With antennae toward worlds that glow and sink;” (ll 110) that is, towards the fall of civilizations (the fall of Jerusalem and Athens, Alexandria, Vienna, and London) which Eliot describes so readily as “Unreal Cities” in *The Waste Land*’s tale of Western civilization’s fall. This view of history and civilization is one which begins, “Umbilical to call—and straightaway die!” (ll 114). Civilizations rise and fall just as quickly within this view of the country’s contemporary place in history, leaving no hope for American civilization in light of the rise and fall of so many other societies. Left with this perspective of history, the path towards “Atlantis” would indeed be a grim one.

Yet, just when the vision is getting exceedingly grim, Crane reintroduces the godlike figure of the Bridge as a gathering force. Although his earlier presentation of historical necessity would presume men “caught like pennies beneath soot and steam” (ll 115), as indeed are the humans who ride the subway back home in New York City, Crane provides a means out of this path of what Gabriel terms “historical necessity” with his final movement towards the somewhat hopeful outlook of “Atlantis” (Gabriel 177). With his allusion to St. Augustine in the lines “Kiss of our agony thou gatherest” (ll 116), Crane confirms that agony, suffering provides the means of drawing humans back together, that, along with the connecting power of the new Godhead, the Bridge, humans can “like Lazurus...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...!” (ll 119-22).<sup>17</sup> Here at the end of “The Tunnel,” Crane awakens the possibility that his newly created myth can allow for the resurrection of possibility in the world, a possibility that has to do with a “Word,” which will reveal itself more fully in the final section of *The Bridge*. The “Word” to which Crane alludes corresponds to Columbus’ “Word of Cathay,” in “Ave Maria,” as well as to the later “intrinsic Myth” (ll 65) of love, song, and brotherhood which Crane sings in “Atlantis.” This “Word,” becomes the verb of bridging which connects mankind in a vision of hope and renewed fraternal bonds. Like Jesus resurrects Lazarus, Crane prefigures his own attempt to resurrect a kind of American cosmology by moving at the end of “The Tunnel” toward the upward slope of the following poem. Having followed the subway’s journey under the river to its eventual ascent, Crane resumes his visionary position overlooking the

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<sup>17</sup> With the line, “Kiss of our agony thou gatherest,” Crane alludes to the first book of St. Augustine’s *Confessions*, which sings praises of God’s ability to pour himself out into humans without himself being emptied. Augustine exalts: “And when Thou art poured out on us, Thou art not cast down, but Thou upliftest us; Thou art not dissipated, but Thou gatherest us” (Augustine 10). With his allusion to Augustine, Crane thus aligns his mythical bridging myth with the power of God to gather and uplift humanity.



harbor and Brooklyn Bridge for the final section of “The Tunnel.” He watches as “A tugboat, wheezing wreaths of steam / Lunge[s] past” and “up the River,” (ll 123-24) and resumes his visionary quest, “count[ing] the echoes assembling, one after one, / Searching, thumbing the midnight on the piers” (ll 125-26). Looking out to harbor, Crane asks two closing questions, both of which anticipate *The Bridge*’s answers about America’s future as well as its history: “And this thy harbor, O my City, I have driven under, / Tossed from the coil of ticking towers.... Tomorrow, / And to be....Here by the River that is East— / Here at the waters’ edge the hands drop memory; / Shadowless in the abyss they unaccounting lie / How far away the star has pooled the sea— / Or shall the hands be drawn away, to die?” (ll 129-35). Crane leaves the ending of “The Tunnel” unanswered. The hands that have so far been crafting *The Bridge* drop its memories at the waters’ edge, at the foot of the Brooklyn Bridge itself. Yet, what will be done with those memories remains yet to be seen, as of yet “they unaccounting lie” (ll 133). Whether or not death remains on the other side of “The Tunnel” also rests unclear, as the poem ends only with a sort of prayer rather than a declaration, adapted from Saint Augustine, “Kiss of our agony Thou gatherest, / O Hand of Fire / gatherest—” (ll 136-38). The poem thus places much pressure on the functioning of “Atlantis,” *The Bridge*’s ending section as well as what has often been called Crane’s most optimistic section. Partially delivered from the path of Eliot through an empathetic and imaginative suffering, it remains to be seen where Crane’s final destination for that new tangent will lead, but “The Tunnel” makes it obvious that “Atlantis” must bear the weight, must bear, in other words, the “memory” of the entirety of *The Bridge*. It is to this memory—both that of American history as well as that of the poem itself—that I turn in the final movement of my own thesis towards *The Bridge*’s final movement, “Atlantis.”

“Atlantis”: Origin or Ending?

*O Love, thy white, pervasive Paradigm...!*

“Atlantis,” ll 48

*The Bridge* reaches its successful and hopeful culmination through its last section, the lyric poem “Atlantis,” whose insistent upward motion propels the reader toward an ecstatic vision of joy in music, spanning, and connection, as Crane commits his final visionary leap of faith toward a working modern cosmology. With “Atlantis,” Crane found himself in many ways on firmer ground, despite the poem’s own upward flight. Although Crane placed “Atlantis” as *The Bridge*’s last section, it was, in fact, the first poem of *The Bridge* that Crane penned. Being a mainly lyric poet before writing *The Bridge*, for Crane “Atlantis” was a pleasurable return to lyricism. As he shared with many of his friends, Crane proclaimed to have written “Atlantis” in a kind of heightened state of inspiration. Yet, for readers “Atlantis” is an entirely different story. For many readers, “Atlantis” can be hard to place, since it relies on a sort of jouissance, a nearly erotic joy in language that binds the bodily with the musical, mythical, historical, and visionary in the pursuit of Crane’s new myth for America. The poem works through the mythical, God-like figure of Brooklyn Bridge as the basis of its bridging of America, its connection across history, time, and space that binds *The Bridge*’s many parts into one whole that looks finally toward a future for the nation that is both hopeful and uncertain. With “Atlantis,” Crane creates a modern myth of dynamism, of connection and flux, of past and future, of music and body. He bridges the many with his vision of Brooklyn Bridge’s overarching span, and yet leaves a notion of swinging—of change and flux—that allows his myth to remain adaptable, and indeed, amenable, to the never-ending processes of history. All this he accomplishes through a visionary approach to the future, as to the past, that incorporates more positive elements of music as well

as bliss, in its conquest of that final leap toward modern belief, a leap that will itself ultimately remain unfulfilled, but which in its heroic attempt remains a kind of poetic triumph.

Crane begins “Atlantis” as he began his introductory short lyric “To Brooklyn Bridge,” within sight of Brooklyn Bridge itself. Yet, this time, Crane’s vision takes us upward, as one who looks at the Bridge from below at night. Crane orates, “Through the bound cable strands, the arching path / Upward, veering with light, the flight of strings,— / Taut miles of shuttling moonlight syncopate / The whispered rush, telepathy of wires” (ll 1-4). Music quickly establishes itself as an integral part of Crane’s joyful new vision, as moonlight “syncopate[s]” and the Bridge’s connecting wires become “the flight of strings.” Thus, from Crane’s first presentation of the Brooklyn Bridge in “Atlantis,” even in its most material dimension it becomes a kind of song, directing the material toward the vibration of chords, as Crane transforms the Bridge’s “bound cable strands” into the upward “flight of strings.” This musical element continues in Crane’s early vision of the Bridge, as he pushes us “Up the index of night, granite and steel— / Transparent meshes—fleckless the gleaming staves— / Sibylline voices flicker, wavering stream / As though a god were issue of the strings....” (ll 5-8). There, the Bridge takes on its other remarkable characteristics, to which Crane has hinted throughout his epic poem: Brooklyn Bridge becomes a sort of deity, “a god” that is “issue of the strings,” a god that arises from connection, movement, and music, with the ultimate promise of binding America together through those “strings.” Thus Brooklyn Bridge, and much more importantly, the bridging motion it signifies, serves as Crane’s new modern myth, his vision of spanning America’s past in pursuit of a more hopeful, and even ecstatic, present, one which affirms the continuing importance of the poet’s vision rather than denying him a purpose and place in the contemporary moment.

This unifying aspect of Brooklyn Bridge underscores one of Crane's main goals for *The Bridge* as a whole: that he create what he himself describes multiple times in his letters as a "synthesis of America" (Crane, Letters 127). The Bridge, with the cords of its cable strands, as well as perhaps the chords of its song, allows a means of unifying America in one all-encompassing vision. After painting an image of the Bridge as a god arising from "the strings," Crane continues onward to elaborate: "And through that cordage, threading with its call / One arc synoptic of all tides below— / Their labyrinthine mouths of history / Pouring reply as though all ships at sea / Complighted in one vibrant breath made cry,— / 'Make thy love sure—to weave whose song we ply!'" (ll 9-14). The Bridge's "One arc" becomes "synoptic of all tides below," representative of all America's people and history. Indeed, those "labyrinthine mouths of history" reply back to the Bridge, and through love and a longing alluded to with the image of "all ships at sea," Crane brings all within "one vibrant breath" to proclaim the omnipotence of love as the directing power beyond all history and peoples. Yet, if this love is indeed the song and desire of all peoples and history of America, it lacks a certain amount of stability at the beginning of "Atlantis," as Crane stipulates that the "cry" is, "'Make thy love sure—to weave whose song we ply!'" Thus, the cry is not so much a reassurance of love's place in history and people's hearts, but rather a desire *for* a kind of uniting love, a love that has appeared in other sections of *The Bridge*, including "Cape Hatteras," as a kind of fraternal love. Yet, here, Crane transforms the fraternal love of *The Bridge*'s other sections into a more universal love, one which unites across and, indeed, redeems history, not simply through physical desire, but through the more spiritual longing of the poet, that is to say, Crane himself. By making the "thy" lowercase and giving us an image of "weav[ing]" a song, Crane leaves open the possibility that he himself, as poet of *The Bridge* answers the masses' call through the crafting of his own song, or poem, of

love. The Brooklyn Bridge becomes the means of worship and stabilization in this song of love, a way of uniting America's people and history under the banner and song of love, whose force, as Crane shows, should be the true motivator of man. Mankind "ply[s]," works devoutly as part of a reaching toward love—love to which Crane refers with his signifier of the Brooklyn Bridge. In this image of America's tides, the masses cry out for a better future, for a song of love (which Crane implies he answers with the composition of *The Bridge* itself).

Yet, Crane's notion of a myth that bridges by swinging implies a certain amount of doubt, as well as optimism, and so "Atlantis" as the site of Crane's new cosmology incorporates historical suffering as a negative aspect of American empire. Despite the poem's uplifting vision of musical ecstasy and American unity, Crane's "Atlantis" encompasses not only the rebuilding of the American empire, but that same empire's fall. Within its promise of the resurfacing of the most technologically advanced civilization that ever existed, the myth of Atlantis also contains the story of a fall, the story of how Atlantis came to be condemned to the depths of the ocean. Plato's myth of Atlantis holds that after a failed attempt to invade Athens, Atlantis sank to the bottom of the sea as punishment for its civilization's hubris. "Atlantis" can thus also be read, as Daniel Gabriel does read it, as Crane's subtle critique of the American Empire, since the creation of a new national myth necessitates a certain destruction of America's old myths (Gabriel 177-78). To this end, Crane incorporates less optimistic observations within the otherwise exuberant "Atlantis," oftentimes hinting at the dark stain of America's real history in relation to his transcendent paradigm of Love and the work of *The Bridge* as a whole.

Somewhere, *The Bridge* covertly suggests, America has lost its founding principles, its point of origin, amidst the greed and violence that run beneath the surface of *The Bridge*, just as water, history, and time flow under the Brooklyn Bridge and through the river. Crane's critique

of American values takes place not only in “Atlantis,” however, but throughout the course of *The Bridge*. In contrast to Columbus’s faith-driven quest for new horizons in “Ave Maria,” Crane presents his readers with the goals of imperial Spain, the economic force behind Columbus’s quest in the first place, and a country motivated by “fear // And greed” (ll 7-8). “Proem” also addresses the substitution of the American dream of discovery and progress for a different type of quest: that of the businessman and Wall Street. As mentioned earlier, Crane conflates the words “sails” and “sales” with his description of “our eyes // As apparitional as sails that cross // Some page of figures to be filed away” (ll 5-7). In the modern world, “sails” of yore, such as the ones Columbus used in his discovery of Cathay, have become mere “sales” charts, mere pages of figures, of numbers that exist only “to be filed away” (ll 7). This comparison offers an implicit critique of the direction in which America is moving, as eyes no longer look toward horizons but rather look toward business figures and wallets. The spoils, and not the quest of discovery and desire themselves, are valued in *The Bridge*’s fallen America, a position Crane over and over again attempts to reform in his poetic regeneration of American mythology and his reliance on desire rather than material greed to create a new national myth.

The commercialization of America is a recurring concern of Crane’s, one which he believes he shares with Walt Whitman, as the section of *The Bridge* “Cape Hatteras” demonstrates. Within “Cape Hatteras,” the true beginnings of Crane’s concern with American Empire emerge as he beseeches his favorite poet for some friendly advice concerning what to make of American progress. He harks back to the days of Whitman, which were, “Not this our empire yet, but labyrinth” (ll 55) and compares Whitman’s eyes to those of Columbus, continuing: “Wherein your eyes, like the Great Navigator’s without ship, / Gleam from the great stones of each prison crypt / Of canyoned traffic...Confronting the Exchange, / Surviving in a

world of stocks” (ll 56-59). America itself, in this description of the country, has fallen from favor, as Great Navigators no longer exist and poets must confront themselves with the Stock Exchange and traffic rather than the world of nature and discovery. And yet, within his portrait of Whitman, Crane rekindles the faithful Navigator, giving Whitman “Sea eyes and tidal, undenyng, bright with myth!” (ll 62). Although the potential for poetry and the creative outlook has seemingly diminished as a result of increasing technology and commercialization, hope remains for Crane in the ability of Whitman to confront the Stock Market, to incorporate traffic and capitalism within his mythical vision of America. However, it should also perhaps be noted that this America of Whitman’s is “Not this our empire yet” but nevertheless appears like a “labyrinth,” that is to say, as perilous and in need of a visionary. Crane’s critique of Whitman’s America as “labyrinth,” in fact, resurfaces in his presentation of American history in “Atlantis” as “labyrinthine” (“Atlantis” ll 11). Crane’s image of America as “labyrinthine” implies that the country is too dense to penetrate, too convoluted for clear, forward-looking vision. With this single word, Crane thus asserts that since America is a kind of dangerous maze wherein vision is limited, America is in need of a new poetic guide on the scale of Whitman, a visionary like Crane himself, to lead the country out of its own blind peril. Changes, both technological and ideological, have occurred in America since the writing of Whitman’s poetry, and it becomes Crane’s duty as the new American poet aligning himself with Whitman to take on this challenge to see with eyes “bright with myth,” bright with knowledge of the sea-change which will ever confront the imagination with new challenges, but also with new possibilities.

Besides obliquely hinting at the labyrinthine paths of history and its processes, Crane critiques the American Empire in another way: through his persistent references to a necessity for blood, connected to the sufferings of American Indians but also to the *agon* of the poet in

“Atlantis.” Sections of “Atlantis” bring to mind “The Dance” section of *The Bridge*, when the ritual sacrifice of a young American Indian man performs the unification of America as a whole. As mentioned before, “spears ensanguined of one tolling star” (“Atlantis” ll 90) recalls the bleeding star of “The Dance,” while the necessity for a “Bridge of Fire” (“Atlantis” ll 93) and a bleeding that continues unto “infinity” (“Atlantis” ll 91) reminds the reader that American unification does not come without its own price. As discussed earlier in “The Dance,” Crane’s speaker willfully identifies with the American Indian brave in order to vicariously experience the suffering of the marginalized American Indian. This identification constitutes a sort of poetic suffering, as the speaker imaginatively engages in the bodily torture, and finally transformation, of the American Indian brave. Moreover, the poet’s request that “Atlantis,—hold thy floating singer late!” (“Atlantis” ll 88) recalls another floating figure on the Brooklyn Bridge, that of the “bedlamite,” “*Tilting there momentarily, shrill shirt ballooning*” (“Proem” ll 18-19), the figure of the suicide, the blood sacrifice for the “*speechless caravan*” of the masses below him (“Proem” ll 20). As I have explained before, Crane’s own position in modernism was that of a pariah, accounting for why these images of suffering, marginalized figures recur throughout *The Bridge*. Indeed, it could be said that in “Proem” Crane identifies himself in *The Bridge* as a prophet, pariah, and lover, as he praises the Bridge (meaning both the literal Brooklyn Bridge as well as his own poem): “Terrific threshold of the prophet’s pledge, / Prayer of pariah, and the lover’s cry” (“Proem” ll 31-32). These allusions to the other sections of *The Bridge* lend to “Atlantis” a violence of *agon*, of a necessary struggle and sacrifice that relates the poet to the figures of the suicide and the American Indians in his text. However, as Crane does before in his critique of American capitalism and imperialism, Crane lodges these complaints within a system which works to maintain hope by contextualizing suffering and history within the larger processes of a



march towards the ecstasy of universal feeling and connection. In so doing, Crane qualifies much of his basis for critique, but, simultaneously performs the act of drawing his readers toward the promise of a more hopeful, less violent history, a song of love which will meld the joint purposes of “Atlantis” within *The Bridge*: to warn and to create hope anew.

In the process of creating a myth of hope for America, Crane continues upward, upward all the way to the stars, which serve to cement the Bridge’s own position as a modern cosmology. Crane directs his readers, “And on, obliquely up bright carrier bars / New octaves trestle the twin monoliths / Beyond whose frosted capes the moon bequeaths/ Two worlds of sleep (O arching strands of song!)— / Onward and up the crystal-flooded aisle / White tempest nets file upward, upward ring / With silver terraces the humming spars, / The loft of vision, palladium helm of stars” (ll 17-24). Crane’s vision moves “obliquely” through the Bridge’s bars, as he portrays the Bridge as both material and musical, as a kind of architecture that hums and relates with the cosmos it frames—the moon and the stars in the night sky. The Bridge takes on both an ephemeral sense and an architectural weight, as “New octaves trestle the twin monoliths” of the Bridge’s two towers. As a word, “trestle” relates to the architecture of bridges, referring to the support system, the crossbeams of the Bridge. So Crane’s image of “New octaves trestl[ing] the twin monoliths” merges music with architecture, and highlights the dual nature of the Bridge as both material and spiritual. The Bridge itself becomes this much needed “trestle” or support system for America, as Crane refers to “The loft of vision, palladium helm of stars.” The Bridge, through its sheer dimensions, directs the onlookers’ vision upward, toward the stars and night sky it frames with its presence, directing the reader’s gaze as well to Crane’s own vision of the Brooklyn Bridge as the foundation of his new cosmology of bridging. In this vision, the Bridge takes its place as “palladium helm of stars,” as a kind of protector that directs even the stars in its

loving embrace. Looking up through the Bridge's "nets" and cables, the onlooker realizes his or her position in the universe—in relation to the cosmos, literally, the stars and the moon—and so gains a working cosmology, a renewed system of belief.

Yet the Bridge's capacity to renew a visionary state in the reader emerges nonetheless through the process of sight itself, as in the next stanza of "Atlantis" the image of the seagulls in "Proem" reemerges but reverses the relation between eyes and seagulls in this rendition. Whereas in "Proem" the eyes of the officeworkers watched the seagulls, in "Atlantis," the eyes themselves replicate the earlier flight of the seagulls. Crane describes how, "Sheerly the eyes, like seagulls stung with rime— / Slit and propelled by glistening fins 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" (ll 25-30). The motion of eyes across the Bridge is like the flight of "seagulls stung with rime," seagulls impaired by ice, which is to say the vision of the Bridge is not an easy one—the way is "biting" and the vision therefore requires determination. Yet the "looms" of the Bridge "link" "Tomorrows into yesteryear," connect time and create a sort of "cipher script of time." Although this vision is a difficult one, it is also a productive one for Crane, one which helps connect his myth of America across time and history, even if the end result is coded in "cipher script," and so contains an element of ongoing mystery and effort. The point is that the Bridge contains these messages, if we care enough to look for them—the future is linked to the past, if we can undergo the suffering and transformation of vision necessary to reach toward those links. With these lines, Crane maintains that the past, present, and future remain ever connected, that despite modernism's perception of its own separation from history, such separation need not exist. The Bridge provides a way of validating the contemporary moment, since it condenses the future into history

in its performance of bridging and linking. According to Crane's vision, America's future is necessarily a product of its past—the links between history and futurity are unbreakable, even if those links are ultimately encoded in a script that a visionary must interpret.

Yet, Crane comes to this joyful vision not simply through a transcendental, immaterial culmination of his abstract concept of bridging, but also through a more sexual take on desire and its place in contemporary mythopoesis. Crane connects the joys of bridging, of connecting and binding together, with the more overtly sexual bliss of *jouissance*, as "Atlantis" delights in a kind of erotic and linguistic overflowing—a surpassing of boundaries for the sake of creation. Connection in "Atlantis" often takes on a sexual valence as well as a musical one, as Crane reaffirms desire as regenerative of a kind of poetic joy that embraces bodily ecstasy along its path to embracing longing itself rather than its accomplishment, sexual or otherwise. Crane describes the Bridge as "towering looms that press / Sidelong with flight of blade on tendon blade" (ll 27-28) and intimates that the way to eventual hope lies "through smoking pyres of love and death" (ll 31). Crane's vision thus embraces a bodily suffering, a passing *through* physical suffering in order to reach the poem's more abstract climax. Love and death are united in this vision, and the Bridge reemerges as the figure that embodies this suffering that enlists sexual desire as one more way to affirm the value of desire itself and poetic longing *for* an object, rather than its attainment. Indeed, the Bridge will later pass "[t]hrough the bright drench and fabric of our veins" (ll 68). The Bridge passes through the very blood of America—the veins of its history and desires—on its way toward a more ecstatic vision of suffering redeemed, of the capacity to feel longing and desire as more important than any material accomplishment of such desire. "Atlantis" thus does not entirely transcend the body in a kind of romantic flight, but instead passes *through* the body as an integral part of Crane's poetic vision of unity, connection, and

belief for America. Crane's modern myth of bridging America passes through our very human "veins" in ultimate pursuit of a desire that is more ethereal and less tactile, and yet which embraces sexual and musical ecstasy as ways of briefly imagining and validating desire for the modern world.

As a figure, the Brooklyn Bridge becomes more the representation of a certain idea of spanning and bridging than the culmination of those efforts. In the middle of "Atlantis," the Bridge takes on the role of "Tall Vision of the Voyage," standing in for a "Vision" of Crane's voyage across America rather than the voyage itself. In this section, Crane clarifies the function of Brooklyn Bridge in *The Bridge*, bringing together many of the various names and images which alluded to it in the other sections of the poem. Crane envisions, "Bridge, lifting night to cycloramic crest / Of deepest day—O Choir, translating time / Into what multitudinous Verb the suns / And synergy of waters ever fuse, recast / In myriad syllables,—Psalm of Cathay! / O Love, thy white, pervasive Paradigm...!" (ll 41-48). The Bridge thus transforms into a "multitudinous Verb" that with each passing century takes on a new name as "synergy of waters ever fuse, recast / In myriad syllables,—Psalm of Cathay!" "Psalm of Cathay" clearly refers back to the "Ave Maria" section of *The Bridge*, when Columbus brings back to Spain the word of "Cathay" ("Ave Maria" ll 8), a revelation based upon Columbus's religious experience in the New World rather than the material wealth Columbus also brought back from the New to the Old World. Present participles like "lifting night" and "translating time" further reveal the Bridge as more a process than its culmination, since Crane displays the Bridge as the embodiment of an idea that continues over and unites several centuries of American history. Crane's "pervasive Paradigm" of the Bridge is, in fact, this motion of "Love," of what I refer to more often as desire across American history and time. In *The Bridge's* narrative, fraternal love remains an important

alternative to the war and human destruction of which the modern age is more than capable, and the Bridge itself stands for the embodiment of that love that connects and binds America together.

However, before the Bridge can bind America together in its song of love, Crane must leave this haven of the Bridge's presence and enter American history one final time in order to reckon with the suffering that lies therein. Through this process, as readers we come to a fuller understanding of the Bridge's purpose in relation to history, as we must first know the depths of modernity's problem with history before Crane can move us to its solution. Immediately after revealing the Paradigm of Love, Crane observes, "We left the haven hanging in the night— / Sheened harbor lanterns backward fled the keel. / Pacific here at time's end, bearing corn,— / Eyes stammer through the pangs of dust and steel" (ll 49-52). The speaker must then leave the haven of the Bridge, of "Love, thy white, pervasive Paradigm," in order to travel backward through America's more mythical time, through American Indian history to arrive at a time when "Eyes stammer through pangs of dust and steel" (ll 52). The word "pang" is reminiscent of the pangs of birth, of a period of suffering and synesthesia as America constructs itself as a nation "through pangs of dust and steel," through the construction of railroads and bridges, airplanes and highways. Although Americans have reached the Pacific, in the fulfillment of Manifest Destiny, they stand there bewildered, ironically "bearing corn," uncertain as to what direction to take next now that all the purely geographic and material movements are finished. Looking back towards a mythical time of conquest and American Indians bearing corn to save the early settlers, contemporary Americans are unsure of the way forward, and they stammer through the "pangs" of their history. Yet, Crane, in the very same stanza, provides a remedy for this historical perception of the contemporary moment, as he maintains, "And still the circular, indubitable

frieze / Of heaven's meditation, yoking wave / To keeling wave, one song devoutly binds— /  
 The vernal strophe chimes from deathless strings!" (ll 53-56). The Bridge's song of love swoops down into the uncertainties of history in order to defy death and history both with its "vernal strophe [which] chimes from deathless strings." The Bridge thus denies the power of both history and death to negate its positive vision—by incorporating the changes of the ages and remaining adaptable and somewhat undetermined, the Bridge manages to, nevertheless, "devoutly bind" with its "song," all of America's history in its "circular, indubitable frieze." By constantly renewing itself through new incarnations, Crane's myth of love and bridging remains ever undiminished by the usual decay of history and time.

With "Atlantis," Crane gives America a deity for the future, a deity that will evade the decaying powers of time and emerge ever new, ever kinetic and hopeful. By incorporating movement as a fundamental aspect of his new cosmology, Crane creates a myth that regenerates itself, that proves adaptive to modern ideas of history's continual processes of decay and transformation. About his new myth of bridging, Crane enthuses, "Forever Deity's glittering Pledge, O Thou / Whose canticle fresh chemistry assigns / To wrapt inception and beatitude,— / Always through blinding cables, to our joy, / Of thy white seizure springs the prophecy: / Always through spiring cordage, pyramids / Of silver sequel, Deity's young name / Kinetic of white choring wings...ascends" (ll 73-80). Crane emphasizes with his repetition of words like "always" and "forever," the lasting power of his new cosmology, his deity which will forever repledge itself through music, through its "canticle" to "assign" to the world "fresh chemistry" to "wrapt inception and beatitude." The "canticle," the Bridge's song, will forever reinterpret the world in ways that allow for "inception and beatitude," in ways that permit creation and belief. The cosmology of *The Bridge* will stay new and working because it will commit and recommit

itself to precisely the idea of mythopoesis, newness of poetic vision. With this near prayer, Crane confirms that “joy” will always exist in the world, that “inception and beatitude” will forever exist, that the Bridge’s fundamental movement in stasis will allow each age the emergence of its prophecy, will affirm desire and so affirm the essential motion of life. In Crane’s conception of a working modern cosmology, pyramids, works of faith, must always have their “silver sequel,” and “Deity’s young name” must ever remain “Kinetic.” It is this movement itself—this movement toward validating rather than accomplishing the motion of desire itself—that drives history forward, and it is the acceptance and incorporation of desire as the new founding principle of America that ensures Crane of his new deity’s place within the silver sequel of history’s pyramids. For, even as religions change and civilizations collapse, Crane maintains that there will remain desire and “wrapt inception,” a newness and a need for belief, the very elements his own visionary myth of bridging encompasses by remaining a kinetic myth, ever reaching for, rather than seeking to confine and control, new desire and creation in the world.

Crane’s ending of “Atlantis” reinforces this idea of *The Bridge*’s myth for America as one that will remain kinetic, and so resistant to the ravages of time, but also ultimately indeterminate. With his ending for “Atlantis” as well as for *The Bridge* as a whole, Crane offers us hopefulness, but also a kind of swinging, a continued motion that allows his myth to escape the confines of history and live on into the future. Crane ends *The Bridge* with this image of kinetics, concluding: “One Song, one Bridge of Fire! Is it Cathay, / Now pity steps the grass and rainbows ring / The serpent with the eagle in the leaves...? / Whispers antiphonal in azure swing” (ll 89-96). Columbus’s gift of “Cathay,” as the literal land of Cathay (the New World) and of Christopher Columbus’s bridge to it reemerges completely reformed as Crane’s gift to the

Western World at the end of “Atlantis” of “One Song, one Bridge of Fire!” (ll 93). Moreover, and importantly, unlike Columbus Crane appears to question the legitimacy of his own song, of his own vision as gift to the world, continuing to wonder aloud, “Is it Cathay, // Now pity steps the grass and rainbows ring // The serpent with the eagle in the leaves...?” (ll 93-95). Whereas Crane presents Columbus assuredly attempting to transmit the Word of Cathay but only being able to transfer the actual land of Cathay back to his royal benefactors, from the start Crane’s Cathay in “Atlantis” is a “Psalm of Cathay!” (ll 47), or a hopeful song, and so an attempt to avoid the more material problems of Columbus’s vision of discovery. Thus, the “Hand of Fire” (“Ave Maria” ll 93) of Columbus’s God finds its parallel in a transformation in “Atlantis” into “one Bridge of Fire!” (“Atlantis” ll 93). In his repetition of Columbus’s vision of an almighty, fearsome God, Crane transforms this Godhead into an idea about words—a motion towards unification, but without the imperialist European design beyond Columbus’s actual voyage of discovery to America.

Since Crane questions the legitimacy of his own vision at the end of the poem, he leaves the success of his own endeavor as a poet up to his readers. In order for Crane’s myth to reach completion, his readers must connect the images of “Atlantis” back to *The Bridge*’s other sections of America’s history. Crane suggests one way of accomplishing this, hinting, “Now pity steps the grass and rainbows ring / The serpent with the eagle in the leaves...?” alluding to a very similar moment in “The Dance.” Yet, he does not stop there, continuing onward to the near negation of his earlier statements, as he responds to his own ellipses that “Whispers antiphonal in azure swing.” Nothing is determinate in this ending, which ends, in fact, with the word “swing” itself, implying that *The Bridge* could go either way—toward faith or doubt, depending on the “antiphonal” whispers. That is to say that Crane leaves us as readers hanging,



suspended between belief and doubt, wondering if indeed Crane's song was Cathay, and so is constitutive of a new American myth. The word "antiphonal" reinforces this idea of the indeterminacy of the ending of "Atlantis" since "antiphonal" references a verse or song to be chanted or sung in response, as in a psalm during Mass. Thus, any new cosmology on Crane's part requires the proper response from his readers, since all myths—even "secular" or "intrinsic" ones—necessitate the participation of an entire culture ("Atlantis" ll 65). Yet Crane's indeterminate ending of "Atlantis" serves another, and I would argue, much greater purpose: it incorporates change as an essential part of his myth by hinting that a kinetic nature will always remain in the world. By promising a kind of change through swinging at the end of his poem, Crane suggests that it is *desire* itself and not its culmination that is vital to allowing America a more hopeful direction. By leaving possibilities open, Crane effectively allows for creation not only in the contemporary world, but into the future, as his myth encompasses the change that is not only necessary but is an inevitable part of life as well as historical process.

Keeping in mind the dual purposes of "Atlantis" at the end of *The Bridge*, we can read the poem as a whole as an epic poem of origins and ends, of history, myth and transcendence. *The Bridge* distinguishes itself within this category through the distinct roles of direction and movement within its pages, the ways in which the poems build upon each other to create an idea of a working cosmology for America that includes, albeit in a passing note, some of America's most troubling moments. If this is true, then Crane, in opposition to his modern counterparts, offers a new direction with *The Bridge*, a new way of thinking about historical process and change as an inevitable part and parcel of modernity's new cosmology of instability. Therefore, it is not so much that Crane does not see the rapid changes in technology, religion, communication and social structure that occurred with modernity as that he does not interpret

them in the same way as his contemporaries. He refuses to see historical process as a lifeless deterioration of the classical and instead, perhaps obstinately, persists in viewing it as a dynamic, enduring means of extending communication and human ecstasy beyond the immediate present. The dynamic nature of the cosmos becomes his new God in *The Bridge*, and since this God incorporates change and facilitates communication, in Crane's view this leaves the possibility of creation, of poetic newness, open for the world. A changing myth of God and a new myth of America's origins and endings (or non-endings) leave us as readers with a renewed sense of the processes of history as something not quite predetermined, and in that indeterminacy, open to the myriad possibilities of the human imagination.

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