

Lecture 13 Hart Crane

The poetry of negation is beautiful---alas, too dangerously so for one of my mind. But I am trying to break away from it. Perhaps this is useless, perhaps it is silly---but one does have joys. The vocabulary of damnations and prostrations has been developed at the expense of these other moods, however, so that it is hard to dance in proper measure. Let us invent an idiom for the proper transposition of jazz into words! Something clean, sparkling, elusive!
---Crane to Allen Tate, May 16, 1922

There is no one writing in English who can command so much respect, to my mind, as Eliot. However, I take Eliot as a point of departure toward an almost complete reverse of direction. His pessimism is amply justified, in his own case. But 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 so in a skeptical age) ecstatic goal. I should not think of this if a kind of rhythm and ecstasy were not (at odd moments, and rare!) a very real thing to me. I feel that Eliot ignores certain spiritual events and possibilities as real and powerful now as, say, in the time of Blake. Certainly the man has dug the ground and buried hope as deep and direfully as it can ever be done. . . .

After this perfection of death--nothing is possible in motion but a resurrection of some kind. Or else, as everyone persists in announcing in the deep and dirgeful Dial, the fruits of civilization are entirely harvested. Everyone, of course, wants to die as soon and as painlessly as possible! . . . All I know through very much suffering and dullness (somehow I seem to twinge more all the time) is that it interests me to still affirm certain things.
---Crane to Gorham Munson, January 5, 1923

In 1925, two years after beginning *The Bridge*, Crane received money from Otto Kahn, financier and patron of the arts, to support him while he completed the poem. Before it appeared in 1930, Crane wrote several letters to Kahn explaining his plans for *The Bridge*. The following quotations, extracted from two of those letters, represent working outlines for the poem. Some of Crane's plans underwent changes---for instance, there are just traces of the section he calls "John Brown" below in the finished section of the poem called "The River," and his outline does not mention several of the shorter poems included in *The Bridge*. But these letters give an overview of the shape of the poem and of Crane's intentions for it.

There are so many interlocking elements and symbols at work throughout The Bridge that it is next to impossible to describe it without resorting to the actual metaphors of the poem. Roughly, however, it is based on the conquest of space and knowledge. The theme of "Cathay" (its riches, etc.) ultimately is transmuted into a symbol of consciousness, knowledge, spiritual unity. A rather religious motivation, albeit not Presbyterian. The following notation is a very rough abbreviation of the subject matter of the several sections:

I Columbus--Conquest of space, chaos

II Pokahantus--The natural body of America-fertility, etc.

III Whitman--The Spiritual body of America (A dialogue between Whitman and a dying soldier in a Washington hospital; the infraction of physical death, disunity, on the concept of immortality)

IV John Brown (Negro porter on Calgary Express making up berths and singing to himself (a jazz form for this) of his sweetheart and the death of John Brown, alternately)

V Subway--The encroachment of machinery on humanity; a kind of purgatory in relation to the open sky of last section

VI The Bridge--A sweeping dithyramb in which the Bridge becomes the symbol of consciousness spanning time and space
---Crane to Otto Kahn, March 18, 1926

At the risk of complicating your appreciation of Part II ("Powhatan's Daughter"), I nevertheless feel impelled to mention a few of my deliberate intentions in this part of the poem, and to give some description of my general method of construction. Powhatan's daughter, or Pocahontas, is the mythological nature-symbol chosen to represent the physical body of the continent, or the soil. . . . The five subsections of Part II are mainly concerned with a gradual exploration of this "body" whose first possessor was the Indian. It seemed altogether ineffective from the poetic standpoint to approach this material from the purely chronological angle---beginning with, say, the landing of "The Mayflower," continuing with a resume of the Revolution through the conquest of the West, etc. What I am after is an assimilation of this experience, a more organic panorama, showing the continuous and living evidence of the past in the most vital substance of the present.

Consequently I jump from the monologue of Columbus in "Ave Maria"---right across the four intervening centuries---into the harbor of 20th-century Manhattan. And from that point in time and place I begin to work backward through the pioneer period, always in terms of the present---finally to the very core of the nature-world of the Indian. What I am really handling, you see, is the Myth of America. Thousands of strands have had to be searched for, sorted, and interwoven. In a sense I have had to do a great deal of pioneering myself. . . . For each section of the entire poem has presented its own unique problem of form, not alone in relation to the materials embodied within its separate

confines, but also in relation to the other parts, in series, of the major design of the entire poem. Each is a separate canvas, as it were, yet none yields its entire significance when seen apart from the others. One might take the Sistine Chapel as an analogy. . . .

---Crane to Otto Kahn, September 12, 1927