

Suspended like an absalom: brokenness and (dis)connections in Hart Crane's proem: to Broklyn Bridge¹

Maria João Pires

Although the approach of this paper is not biographical, certain aspects of biography seem, in the first place, specifically useful, concerning, as they do, with Hart Crane. Accounts like Northrop Frye's *The Archetypes of Literature* or Roland Barthes's *The Death of the Author* or *S/Z* conspire to dismiss the author from critical discussion. The former states that, if the poem is alive, it is equally anxious to get rid of the author, screaming to be let loose from private memories or associations; more radical, the latter maintains that, if we are the product and not the agent of language, then it is not the writer who speaks the language, but the language who 'speaks' the writer. In this view, "I" is not an innocent subject, anterior to the text, one which will approach and deal with it, but a plurality of other texts and infinite codes.

By this we mean to state and justify the importance of the knowledge of the author: although a work may achieve a degree of independence from its creator, an account of its origins may throw useful light on our understanding of it. A literary work is not simply a linguistic object, it is produced by the mind and represents human experience in all its richness and complexity. It is not concerned with abstraction, but with the wonder of life and its concrete variety. In this and in its proper sense it comes close to religion. In this paper we will then try to make a close understanding of the 'Proem: To Brooklyn Bridge' without losing sight of the poet's human dimension.

Hart Crane was born in Garrettsville, Ohio, and committed himself to a poetic career after having had one of his poems accepted by a New York magazine when he was 16. He was encouraged in his ambition by the widow of William Vaughn Moody, and when his parents separated in 1916 he moved to New York, abandoned his intentions of preparing for college and plunged into the Greenwich Village world of poetry, painting, avant-gardisme and moral and

1 Estudo desenvolvido no âmbito do projecto de investigação 'The City in American Literature' – unidade 'Instituto de Estudos Norte-Americanos' da FLUP Programa de Financiamento Plurianual de Unidades de I&D.

ideological unorthodoxy. After making many literary contacts, Crane returned to Ohio in late 1919 to try to support himself by working in his father's chocolate business while reading and writing in the little spare time that was left to him. In 1922 he obtained work as an advertising copy-writer which he believed would be much more congenial to his poetic abilities. In 1923 he went back to New York and from this time onwards he made a precarious living and came to feel increasingly isolated from the values of 1920s America both because of his life-style and deepening alcoholism and also because of his socially non-respectable vocation as a poet. His first collection of lyrics, *White Buildings* was published in 1926. While a personal grant from the banker Otto Kahn allowed him to work on *The Bridge*, the disorder of his personal life continued to intensify making his private faith in the meaning and value of his optimistic poem steadily decline.²

Mainly through association with Waldo Frank's circle of literary nationalists in Manhattan, Crane started this epic with the Brooklyn Bridge as its central symbol. While he was working on the poem, he lived in the same room that the engineer Roebling had occupied, a room having a fine view of Brooklyn Bridge. This was something that joined opposing shores and, metaphorically, psychological and moral contradictions and manifested a technological sublime to match the sublimity of the wilderness. Being the single symbolic image in which the whole poem centers, it is at the same time the actual Brooklyn Bridge and any bridge or connection, making a series of analogies available. Other emblems which serve to integrate the poem on a symbolic level include Columbus, Pocahontas, Rip Van Winkle, the clipper ship Cutty Sark, the Mississippi river and the New York subway.

From the start, the success of such an enterprise seemed doubtful, even to Crane himself, but the large-scale and loose framework of the long poem nevertheless allowed him room to explore many different poetic styles and materials. Throughout the weeks of creativity that ultimately gave rise to more than three-fourths of the poems in *The Bridge*, Crane displays no real certainty as to where his insights will lead him. In the summer of 1926, one poem simply leads to another. In the ten poems of that summer, Crane brought together the experience of the last several years and composed a single long sequence which could well be read as a personal epic. In this respect, one could take into account Lee Edelman's words:

² In March of 1926, Crane drafted the outline of *The Bridge* in the form of a progress report to Otto Kahn in a letter of March 18, 1926. This initial plan for *The Bridge* emphasizes history and made this epic seem a panoramic overview of the course of America. It was to take place in six sections: I – Columbus; II – Pocahontas; III – Whitman; IV – John Brown; V – Subway; VI – The Bridge. See, Brunner, *Splendid Failure*.

Though he declares in the proem that *The Bridge* extends an 'unfractioned Idiom', that bridge is so intimately bound up with the materials and idioms Of previous poetry that Crane must ask, near the end of "Atlantis", a "pardon For this history".

In fact, the difficulty that so many critics experience in trying to read *The Bridge Comes*, in part, from the fact that no responsible thematic reading can fail to Engage, at some point, explicitly metapoetic concerns. Bringing into play the Parallel levels of social, political, and biographical history, the poem directs Them all toward its reading of American culture as a trope for Crane's reading Of his own poetic identity: that means, primarily, a reading of American Literary history as a figure in which the past is fulfilled by the present and thus By Crane himself. (187)

That figure, which itself is figured by the bridge, is a reading of history, an image that calls to mind the joy of Crane's discovery that a bridge is constructed from both ends at once. Thematically as well as rhetorically, then, *The Bridge* conducts a meditation on the very activity of bridging. For Crane, however, the relationship between the two sides of the bridge – between past and present, early and late – must always be governed by his interpretation of anteriority as a figure fulfilled by his own poetic modernity.

Crane's act of bridging, then, takes the form of a complex process of binding: throughout *The Bridge* Crane joins a host of choring voices that sound through the poems. In "The Tunnel" he invokes Edgar Allan Poe as the tragic victim and image of violation; in "Cutty Sark" he alludes to Melville's transcendental claims; in "Cape Hatteras" he invokes Blake's epics. Nevertheless, it is T.S. Eliot that remains the pervasive voice – a voice that informs much of the language and format of *The Bridge*. Crane responds to *The Waste Land* on many levels as though he answered the citation at the end of Eliot's poem - "London Bridge is falling down falling down falling down" - with the assertion that his own *Bridge* could still triumphantly ascend. Instead of Eliot's sense of alienation and loss, Crane develops his temporal bridging or binding that links him to the father of American poetry, to Walt Whitman. Whitman's prophecy is thus projected into an industrialized urban America which synthesizes a myth that Crane hoped would be strong enough to defeat *The Waste Land's* impotent disillusionment. Crane's reaction against the poetic pessimism of Eliot's *The Waste Land* was then partly responsible for his

determination to make an affirmative and visionary poem about America which he eventually wanted *The Bridge* to become.

Before he left New York in the spring of 1926, Crane wrote "Repose of Rivers" and submitted it to the approval of Marianne Moore. A month later he wrote:

Yes, Marianne took the little speciality I wrote for her and even proof has been corrected and sent back. This time she didn't even suggest running the last line backwards. (255)³

Just like *The Bridge*, this poem is, on the one hand, a firm statement and a sign of a strong commitment. As the poet turns to the sea and the sun he makes us feel a sense of new discovery. On the other hand, in the three middle stanzas, the poem shows a detached and distant view of the confusions of the past. Predictably, then, only a few weeks later, Crane is full of doubts and uncertainties and the first version of "O Carib Isle!" reveals the atmosphere of sterility and diffidence, the lack of participation and the indifference with which he feels surrounded. In this way, the isolated poet lacks the energy or enthusiasm to revitalize that sterility that surrounds him. The discovery of an optimistic sign becomes in the first version of "O Carib Isle!" a ritual the significance of which has been forgotten.

It is this same spirit that makes him lose sight of *The Bridge* as an epic about the history of America. In a letter of June 20, 1926 he renounces his calling as an epic poet, explaining that he lacks an audience worthy of his efforts. He maintained that the fault could not be ascribed to any audience in particular – it was, he said, the fault of the age in which he was condemned to live, an age that lacked a common faith and had no interest in a "poetry of destiny", being essentially speed, efficiency and triviality:

The form of my poem rises out of a past that so overwhelms the present with its worth and vision that I'm at a loss to explain my delusion that there exist any real links between that past and a future destiny worthy of it. The "destiny" is long since completed, perhaps the little last section of my poem is a hangover echo of it – ***but it hangs suspended somewhere in ether like an Absalom by his hair.*** The bridge as a symbol today has no significance beyond an economical approach to shorter hours, quicker hunches, behaviorism and toothpicks. And inasmuch as

³ Hart Crane to Susan Jenkins Brown, May 22 1926, *Letters*, 255.

the bridge is a symbol of all such poetry as I am interested in writing it is my present fancy that a year from now I'll be more contented working in an office than before. Rimbaud was the last great poet that our civilization will see.⁴

In order to resolve his crisis, Crane needed to overcome his doubt that he lacked a worthy audience. However, his analysis of the audience's indifference starts to change. In a letter to Waldo Frank, June 20, 1926, he reveals a different concept of multitudes. If they had been lifeless and unenergetic in his previous poetry, in "Faustus and Helen", for instance, they all run home, carrying the routine of their lives, leaving the city empty. The multitudes are now viewed as frenetic, racing over the bridge, showing a rapid growing America.

This new vision of multitudes brings us close to the main point of *The Bridge*: the expression of a modern culture where people are not viewed as mere corpses lying in their torpid routines, but are anxiously driven by an undirected energy. They try to escape from the difficulties that constrict them and, with their dynamic activity, they postpone all conflict. The modern city is composed of people on the move, engaged in a headlong flight, of multitudes that abuse the new mobility that is theirs and stream ahead in endless movement. In the poems of 1926, Crane is involved with his self as he turns to address the multitudes – he views himself in the present in order to link his past and his future. Thus, the feeling that contemporary culture lacks a center and an orderly matrix of values is an essential perception of the poem and one of the main reasons why Crane struggles to act in the present.

'Proem: To Brooklyn Bridge' should not be faced only as a prelude to the poem, as a way of providing fragmentary glimpses of themes to be taken up later in *The Bridge*. A closer look at the proem reveals that, on one hand, the poem serves as a bridge, recalling images from Crane's earlier poems and anticipating those that will emerge. On the other hand however, Crane is demonstrating, in each of his examples, the necessity of his actions – the proem embodies what Crane takes to be an essential way of acting.

In fact, in the first four stanzas, Crane gives the bridge an identity, it becomes an action, a way of moving. Perhaps this is the reason why Crane does not open his poem's first lines with the bridge – until he has reached a certain stage, the bridge is only present as one more object in the cityscape: the poem begins at dawn and leads through the day,

⁴ Cited in Brunner, *Splendid Failure*, 117/8.

concluding beneath the bridge in wintry darkness. It suggests that we should be following the graceful curve of the "seagull's wings" - except that they vanish abruptly and leave us suspended:

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

Then, with inviolate curve, forsake our eyes
As apparitional as sails that cross
Some page of figures to be filed away;
Till elevators drop us from our day.

Crane juxtaposes the "inviolate" world of ideals, represented by the seagull "shedding ...rings of tumult", against the realm of economic power, depicted in terms of oppressive inscriptions. He images that entire milieu as "some page of figures to be filed away", expressing at the end of the first stanza his intention to free himself from the limitations of those "figures" in order to perform an act of poetic construction like that of the seagull "building high/ Over the chained bay waters Liberty -".

No matter how gloriously the wings flash, they ultimately vanish, moving out of sight, leading us into the long, downward spiral of the second stanza as we are confined to the office routine. What began in line 1 as a vision of freedom, only defined by the play of the wings, becomes in lines 7 and 8 a glimpse enjoyed for a moment from an office window, breaking up the routine. We then have two different fields of meaning: the liberty of the gull and the bondage of the office, the expansive and free *versus* the confined, the orderly, the rigid. The drop of the elevator at the close of day may express a release from routine but, on the other hand, this release is compromised: the persons dropped in that elevator are not treated differently than the "figures" which stay in the file drawer.

In the modern city it is difficult to dream of freedom. This dream is certain to fade, dropping one back to the routine but with an even greater sense of bondage than before. However, despite this longing for freedom, everyone is allowed to search for it:

I think of cinemas, panoramic sleights

With multitudes bent toward some flashing scene,
Never disclosed, but hastened to again
Foretold to other eyes on the same screen.

The third stanza brings the movement of the first two back. The "flashing scene" of the cinema makes the white wings reappear and the multitudes bend only to find that the scene longed for is "Never disclosed". Just like the poet in the opening stanzas, the crowds are left in frustration. The poet shifts his attention to the others and, if in the second stanza he makes part of that multitude ("our eyes"), in the third he puts himself at a distance ("other eyes"). So, instead of remaining egotistically fixed in his own dilemma he moves his perception in order to check if others have similar needs to his own. In spite of the ephemeral white wings, the poet reaches the tangible presence of others. In this way, he is strikingly connected to the crowds who are in a cinema, are provided with "panoramic sleights", but share his own frustrations. The poet's actions are reflected in theirs and the two share a common desire.

After the crowds and multitudes, unknown figures and dark cinemas, the fourth stanza brings the bridge to the poem, bathed in silver moonlight. The bridge appears suddenly as the muse does – the poet is now well prepared for it and understands the significance of all that remains behind. This moment occurs when he turns outward to the longing crowds ("our eyes" / "I think" / "other eyes"):

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

On the one hand, instead of simply keeping his vision, the poet turns toward other persons and finds himself reflected in them. It is as if this motion makes him identify with the white wings and see the bridge in a new light, as though for the first time. As it shows its particular beauty and reflects back on its surroundings, Crane also sees the importance of his own actions. Within the city, it is as if the bridge goes up in the air – the same happens with the poet who, by turning in the city toward others, recognises himself in them.

On the other hand, this stanza offers an insight into the nature of the rhetorical activity of the bridge – between the sun and the latter it establishes a covenant, a promise or a binding agreement. The sun

takes "step" of the bridge and this is designated as "silver-paced". Among many other possible interpretations, we could say that the sun, the universal source of energy, seems in this figure to draw its own energy from the "silver-paced" bridge, while leaving some portion of that "motion ever unspent" by the bridge itself. Thus the image reverses the natural order of power. This reversal, however, by which Crane puts the bridge as the source from which the sun gets the energy for its "motion", does not seem to constitute an exchange. This is to say that, although the sun here takes its force from the bridge, this one receives nothing in return. Crane identifies the bridge as "silver-paced/ As though the sun took step of thee", the phrase "as though" suggests a figurative status of the figure. Here Crane implies that the representation of the bridge as "silver-paced" results from the sun's taking "step" of it – an image that draws an intersection of different axes as the it becomes a figurative ladder or stairway for the sun. And because of this the sun designates the bridge as a "silver-paced" "stride": it is imaged as the pathway paced by its own steel and, as it catches the light of the sun, it seems brilliantly transformed into silver. In this way, it is itself a movement or "stride" and implicitly these are the designations by which a bridge is said to "go" or "lead" to somewhere.

Describing the details of an upside-down city in Rilke, Paul de Man says:

In an apparent personification, which is in fact a prosopopoeia based on the language-embedded idiom according to which, in German as in English, streets are said to go from here to there, the auxiliary condition for an action (the streets, auxiliary device for the action of going) becomes the agent of this same action. (41)

To speak of a bridge that "goes" somewhere, one must first personify the unmoving bridge and that personification takes place by means of a metonymy: the activity of the person walking upon the bridge is assimilated, by contiguity, to the bridge itself.

In the fifth stanza the bridge vanishes. The bedlamite falls as though the bridge had disappeared, exactly because a "jest" escapes from the lips of the "speechless caravan". On the one hand, the jest that falls "from the speechless caravan" may be a jeer from the disdainful crowd ("speechless"); on the other hand, it may be the bedlamite as a victim of that jeer ("shrill shirt ballooning"). Crane

urges others to recognise the power each has within himself, a potential to bring life or death, to connect or to dismiss, to see the bridge as an ideal or as a mere piece of mechanics:

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

The sixth stanza brings the narrow and dark city back. The financial center at Wall Street ("Down Wall") is referred in terms of depth and the sun, the source of life, is squeezed into a "rip-tooth of the sky's acetylene". With its high walls that serve to isolate persons, the city is left to itself. What is required is a capacity that reaches beyond the encircling narrowness: "Thy cables breathe the North Atlantic still". The strength of the cables, which calms the stormy North Atlantic sea, brings into the city a breath of the wind. The cables respond both to the North Atlantic and to the city, producing Crane's direct praise of the bridge as a "terrific threshold of the prophet's pledge,/ Prayer of pariah, and the lover's cry".

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

Here, the 'Proem' suggests some later uses in Crane's work of the bridge as a Christ-symbol. If the line "Thy cables breathe the North Atlantic still" personifies it, the following two lines compare it to a heavenly reward ("and obscure as that heaven of the Jews,/ Thy guerdon ..."), extending the figure easily to Christ ("Accolade thou dost bestow/ Of anonymity time cannot raise:"). This stanza concludes with the bridge pardoning and relieving ("Vibrant reprieve and pardon thou dost show") which is certainly a divine prerogative. Besides, the first line of the eighth stanza expresses a fervent invocation ("O harp and altar, of the fury fused,/ (How could mere toil align thy choiring strings!)") uniting the harp and altar references in the adjective describing the strings ("choiring").⁵

Crane puts the bridge as occupying a crucially intermediate position between the material reality and the transcendent realm

⁵ Sister M Bernetta Quinn makes an analysis of this stanza comparing it to the Dialogues of Saint Catherine of Siena – See, *The Metamorphic Tradition in Modern Poetry: Essays on the work of E. Pound, W. Stevens, William Carlos Williams, T. S. Eliot, Hart Crane, Randall Jarrell and W. B Yeats.*

above it. Reproducing the "inviolable curve" of the seagull, Crane's bridge also connects the sublime to the mundane, figuratively presenting a division of height and depth like that between the gull and "the chained bay waters". It thereby connects distances that are horizontal, vertical, and temporal at once and, in doing so, it occupies a liminal position:

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

The intermediate status of the bridge is reinforced when it is defined as the "terrific threshold" on which the prophet, pariah and lover are joined. To recognize that one is a pariah, a misfit whose wants have gone unmet, is to articulate those wishes with the passion of a lover and thereby become a prophet who pledges to fulfill those needs. Crane sees the prophet, the pariah and the lover as linked in projecting various speech acts onto the bridge. They make of this a poetic construction, interpreting it as a form of enunciation, a figure. "Pledge", "prayer" and "cry" are all articulated and embodied in this utterance. And as the lights in the next stanza move beyond the crest of the bridge and, instead of vanishing, appear to break into the stars in the sky, - as though the glittering stars were a living expression of a true "flashing scene" - there is the sensation that the prayer and the cry will be fused in the pledge that can bring about a new future:

Again the traffic lights that skim thy swift
 Unfractioned idiom, immaculate sigh of stars,
 Beading thy path – condense eternity:
 And we have seen night lifted in thine arms.

If we can say that Crane, in the course of the poem, adopts each of the personae (prophet, pariah, lover) and assimilates their distinctive rhetorical gestures, "the prophet's pledge" becomes his most significant activity, since that pledge or promise stands between and bridges the desire of the pariah's prayer and the fulfilment of the "lover's cry". Both a reader and maker of figures, the prophet looks forward and backward at once, revealing his divinatory power in the context of an acute historical consciousness. So, he figures the poet's own efforts to foretell his literary prospects by assuring the

relationship of the present to the past. Thus, Crane's "prophetic pledge" is a rigorous act, having to bring together the bridge's "choiring strings", that is, the voices of the American poetic past. Like the prophet's, Crane's speech act takes the form of a pledge, an utterance that binds. Appropriately, Crane's "pledge" in *The Bridge* is quite literally his word. Thus, the presence of such a "pledge" in the proem follows from Crane's awareness that the bridge must be figured simultaneously as "harp" and "altar". In order to claim the vocative power of the bridge (fourth stanza) he must voice his own prophetic "pledge".

Crane clearly identifies himself with the bridge, a covenant or synthesis which means to stress that the conflicts of the city are essentially individual. On the one hand, designated as a "jest", the bedlamite "falls" from the bridge's "parapets" after a momentary "tilting". In its context, that "tilting" suggests not only a precarious balance, but also the aggressive engagement in a tournament, a "tilt". On the other hand, the "jest" falls because a jeer escaped from someone's lips. So, the two final stanzas show the contrast between what is ephemeral and what is genuine, between true aspirations or turning movements that reach within oneself and out to others creating new directions and false aspirations or evasions, jests that twist one away from others encouraging isolation and flight. Figuring the sun as taking "step" of the bridge and rendering that structure "silverpaced" in return, Crane establishes a relationship wherein the energy of the sun derives from the bridge, which retains in its "stride" a reservoir of "motion ever unspent". The final stanza of the proem echoes exactly this reversal that reads the sun as dependent upon the bridge:

Under thy shadows by the piers I waited;
Only in darkness is thy shadow clear.
The City's fiery parcels all undone,
Already snow submerges an iron year.

O Sleepless as the river under thee,
Vaulting the sea, the prairies' dreaming sod,
Unto us lowliest sometime sweep, descend
And of the curveship lend a myth to God.

In the reversal of the order of power, Crane makes the sun, and

ultimately the deity as well, dependent upon the bridge. Asking the bridge to "lend a myth to God", Crane expresses the divine poverty, for which only the "ever unspent" energy of the bridge can offer compensation. The "myth" that Crane would have the "curveship" of the bridge "lend to God" is an "intrinsic myth", as he announces in "Atlantis", that interprets godhead by articulating "Deity's young name". That name will emerge from the structure that serves as the main image of the poem: the bridge as "multitudinous Verb", as "unfractioned idiom", as the axe of the flow of language. Echoing the "inviolable curve" of the seagull and anticipating the "ship" in which Columbus will carry the "word" of the new world back to Spain, the "curveship" of the bridge embodies the energy of rhetorical extension that lives in Crane's text.

When the "fiery parcels" of the skyscraper lights disappear, the city seems undone, plunged in darkness, but the bridge possesses a shadow even in the dark and does not depend upon ephemeral illuminations. Though a purifying snow "submerges an iron year", softening the outlines of the city, Crane persists in following the shadow of the bridge upon the unfrozen waters of the river. Unlike the darkness that accompanies the submerging snow, the shadow of the bridge touches its surface and transforms it, unfolding differences. As generated in the course of 'Proem', the bridge can lend a myth to God giving the secular city a common faith, an energy and a new direction. Between the bridge and Crane there stands a testimony to the grandeur that exists latently in one and all, an affirmation of the power individuals have to shape their own lives by participating in the lives of others. The curve of the bridge is man-made ("curveship"), a revelation of the truest longing in people, the desire to reach out to others. But the power of the bridge is genuine only if individuals act to sustain it. The "myth" is always dependent on the willingness of people to manifest their own potential – in a secular world this is the most important myth.

Only glimpses of the bridge will be caught through the poem until it emerges once more in "Atlantis"; but even when the bridge cannot be seen, its structural principles organise the poem, providing a model for the bridging or binding that figures so prominently in the text. Thus, even when Crane appears to abandon any direct reference to the bridge as a central image, cross-references seem carefully knitted, making us believe that the bridge assumes some disguises in Crane's poem. For example, the most obvious mutation of the bridge

in "the River" is the Mississippi river, which connects north and south and even east and west through its tributaries. Another image of continuity and binding is the telegraph:

The last bear, shot drinking in the Dakotas
Loped under wires that span the mountain stream.
Keen instruments, strung to a vast precision
Bind town to town and dream to ticking dream.

A third important image is the railroad itself - "From pole to pole across the hills, the states/ - They know a body under the wide rain;". The actual Brooklyn Bridge is mentioned again in section III, "Cutty Sark", as the poet crosses it at dawn after his talk with a sailor in a South Street bar:

I started walking home across the Bridge ...

The lines in italics present in this section foreshadow the bridge of the final section, conceived of as the sunken continent of the platonic myth, Atlantis. The two bridges – the material one and the transcendental one – alternate, as in a dialogue of voices out of time. Just like in another Crane's poem "Wine Menagerie", this loosening of the strict bonds of place and time, this sublimation of the ordinary, is facilitated by the rum of the tavern. Another major transformation of the bridge is its reconversion to the subway in the section "The Tunnel". The poet journeys from Manhattan to Brooklyn via the East River tunnel, while within his mind is reproduced a miniature subway, a terrifying interior labyrinth to which Crane had alluded earlier in "Cape Hatteras":

Us, shunting to a labyrinth submersed
Where each sees only his dim past reversed ...

As Crane brings out in his prefacing quotation from Blake, the subway is "the Western path/ Right through the Gates of Wrath". The setting is clearly a terrestrial Hell and the subway itself is a monstrous Daemon whose Hand of Fire, no longer the hand of a benign Providence as in "Ave Maria", gathers the kiss of man's agony. Yet, at the end of "The Tunnel", after a shift of tone to exultation and hope, the Hand of Fire becomes again the Hand of God Himself:

Kiss of our agony Thou gatherest,
 O Hand of Fire
 Gatherest —

In the conclusion, "Atlantis", Crane returns to the bridge as harp of 'Proem' and to the bridge as telegraph of "The River":

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

In *Hart Crane's Harp of Evil*, Jack C. Wolf suggests that Crane's main impetus for writing *The Bridge* was to write his myth for America: Considering America as a promised land which had betrayed its promise and failed to fulfil the expectations of those who came to it, *The Bridge* is, in Wolf's opinion, Crane's presentation of an alternative mythology or belief which would cure the ills of American society and redeem America (i). Announcing the poem to Wilbur Underwood, Crane wrote:

I'm on a synthesis of America and its structural identity now⁶

In fact, in almost all the descriptions of this project, Crane employs the vocabulary of synthesis and structure; to Yvor Winters, for example, he wrote of his desire to "reach some kind of positive synthesis"⁷ and, seeking the patronage of Otto Kahn, Crane explained that he saw his poem as "aiming to enunciate a new cultural synthesis of America"⁸. Thus, in all these definitions, the author uses the architectural metaphor that plays a large role in his poetry and critical prose alike. Indeed, in letters written during the period of the poem's composition, Crane refers to himself not merely as one who is writing *The Bridge* but as one who is building it and, in our opinion, this process of writing as rhetorical construction supplants "America" as the subject of his poem itself. As we have seen, while the architecture of *The Bridge* can function almost independently of its subject matter, Crane defines his aesthetic goals through a rhetoric of connection and harmony. In an early statement about the poem he wrote:

⁶ Cited in John Unterecker, *Voyager: A Life of Hart Crane*, p.19

⁷ Thomas Parkinson, (ed) *Hart Crane and Yvor Winters: Their Literary Correspondence*, p.126

⁸ *Letters*, 223.

The form will be symphonic, with its treatment of varied content,

And it will probably approximate the same length in lines⁹

Three years later, referring to "Atlantis" he said:

It is symphonic in including the convergence of all the strands separately detailed in antecedent sections of the poem – Columbus, conquests of water. Land, etc., Pokahantus, subways, offices, etc. etc. I dare congratulate myself a little, I think, in having found some liberation for my condensed metaphorical habit in a form as symphonic as this.¹⁰

At this point we should remember that, not only *The Bridge* but also *White Buildings*, take their titles significantly from the realms of architecture and engineering. Although his posthumous collection, *Key West: An Island Sheaf*, invokes a spirit of place, Crane's final poem, 'The Broken Tower', takes us again to the realm of architectural allusions. Thus, Crane identifies his poetry with the world of white buildings, bridges and towers which reflects his desire to demonstrate and express his urbanity. Although he spent his life in restless movement, travelling first between New York and Ohio, then wandering to California, Cuba, to London, Paris and finally to Mexico, Crane's aesthetic consciousness was rooted in the density, confusion and freedom of urban life.

In Crane's imagetics, music is linked to architecture as a token of synthesis. In "Legend", for example, these two items combine to form a bridge of "constant harmony": "Relentless caper for all those who step/ The legend of their youth into the noon". In its verbal peculiarity, this "stepping" identifies Crane's most common trope of connection, advance and extension – the desire for continuity, the desire to establish connections between past and future, between morning and noon.

Exploring this synthetic capacity would surely help us understand Crane's Brooklyn Bridge, not only in the way it is presented in 'Proem', but also in the whole poem. We would probably also consider the art of dance as another form of synthesis and connection visible in *The Bridge*: 'The Dance' and 'Three Songs'. Instead, we take only the final stanza of "Atlantis", which culminates as the poet addresses one last apostrophe to the bridge:

⁹ Letters, 125

¹⁰ Letters, 232.

So to thine Everpresence, beyond time,
 Like spears ensanguined of one tolling star
 That bleeds infinity – the orphic strings,
 Sidereal phalanxes, leap and converge:
 One Song, one Bridge of Fire! Is it Cathay,
 Now pity steeps the grass and rainbows ring
 The serpent with the eagle in the leaves . . . ?
 Whispers antiphonal in azure swing.

On the one hand, the stanza offers images of transcendence: the bridge leads "beyond time", while its cables "leap and converge"; but on the other hand, it introduces the concept of "infinity" through the image of those cables viewed as "spears ensanguined of one tolling star/ that bleeds infinity". This wound expresses a kind of triumph rather than defeat, especially when the strings that "leap and converge" are characterised as "orphic". Thus, convergence mingles with a celebratory cry, a hymn of synthetic unity - "One Song, one Bridge of Fire" -and with "rainbows", symbols of promise and reconciliation. So, even if the word "synthesis" doesn't appear in the poem, *The Bridge* abounds in figures of reconciliation, employing numerous terms of integration and reconstructive renewal. These concepts present themselves in the eighth stanza of 'Proem: To Brooklyn Bridge' and recur at significant moments in *The Bridge* where, like the convenantal symbol of the rainbow, they figure a poetic covenant, a rhetorical pact or pledge:

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

Crane's bindings in *The Bridge* assume a diachronic dimension and this is the reason why, in 'Atlantis' Crane explicitly describes the bridge, his major figure for metaphoric binding, as

Threading with its call
 One arc synoptic of all tides below –
 Their labyrinthine mouths of history
 Pouring reply

These images of "threading" can be identified with the temporal and historical aspects of the bridge and, though he declares in the proem that *The Bridge* extends an "unfractioned idiom" he asks, near the end of "Atlantis", a "pardon for this history". In a letter from 1923 Crane writes:

The city is a place of 'brokenness', of drama; but when a certain Development in this intensity is reached a new stage is created, Or must be, arbitrarily, or there is a foreshortening, a loss and Premature desintegration of experience."

On the one hand Crane significantly acknowledges the possibility of reaching "a new stage", of radically recreating the context for experience. On the other hand, the situation to which that new stage must respond is that of fragmentation, a "brokenness". Thus, Crane's perception of the city is also informed by a sense of disconnection, alienation or even exile from external objects – a "void", just like he says in "Possessions". Though Robert Lowell had observed that Crane's poetry "got New York City", the poetic affiliation of Crane's titles proclaim a city not localized by geographic borders but perhaps charted in the cityscapes of Baudelaire and Rimbaud or celebrated by Whitman and by himself as a place of "brokenness" visible, as we have seen, in his syntax of experience. This note of discontinuity is well expressed in the epigraph to *White Buildings*:

Ce ne peut être que la fin du monde, en avançant.

When Crane discusses the art of poetry he suggests that the poem exists as a linguistic edifice, a structure fabricated by the poet's architectural deployment of language. His conclusion of "General Aims and Theories" help us define what is, above everything, his most important sense of the city:

Language had built towers and bridges. (219)

WORKS CITED

BRUNNER, Edward J. (1985). *Failure: Hart Crane and the Making of the Bridge*. Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois Press.

II Letters, 138.

- CRANE, Hart (1952). *The Letters of Hart Crane, 1916-1932*. Ed. Brom Weber. Berkeley; University of California Press.
- _____. (1966). "Hart Crane's General Aims & Theories". *Complete Poems & Selected Letters and Prose of Hart Crane*. Ed. Brom Weber. New York: Doubleday.
- _____. (1993). *Complete Poems of Hart Crane*. Ed. Marc Simon. New York & London: Liveright.
- EDELMAN, Lee (1987). *Transmemberment of Song: Hart Crane's Anatomies of Rhetoric and Desire*. California: Stanford University Press.
- MAN, Paul De (1979). *Allegories of Reading : Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke and Proust*. New Haven & London: Yale University Press.
- MARIANI, Paul (2000). *The Broken Tower: The Life of Hart Crane*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.
- PARKINSON, Thomas, ed.(1978). *Hart Crane and Yvor Winters: The Literary Correspondence*. California: University of California Press.
- QUINN, Sister M. Bernetta (1972). *The Metamorphic Tradition in Modern Poetry. Essays on the Work of Ezra Pound, Wallace Steven, William Carlos Williams, T. S. Eliot, Hart Crane, Randall Jarrell and William Butler Yeats*. New York: Gordian Press.
- UNTERECKER, John (1969). *Voyager: A Life of Hart Crane*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux.
- VOGLER, Thomas A. (1971). *Preludes to Vision: The Epic Venture in Blake, Wordsworth, Keats & Hart Crane*. California: University of California Press.
- WOLF, Jack C. (1986). *Hart Crane's Harp of Evil: A Study of Orphism in The Bridge*. New York: The Whiston Publishing Company