HART CRANE AND T. S.
ELIOT ON THE MODERN CITY

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It is a commonplace in literary criticism that the twentieth century North American writer views the city as destructive of human values. Not since William Dean Howells and Henry James have important American authors been able to reconcile successfully a positive philosophy with the conditions of urban life. Some of the apparent thematic contradictions in Hart Crane’s *The Bridge* (1930) arise from his attempt to accomplish just this. With T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* (1922) and its denunciation of the “Unreal City” prominently in his mind during the composition of *The Bridge*, Crane still felt that he could reconcile the city with a basically optimistic view of American life. Differences between his conception of the city as expressed in “Atlantis”, the section of *The Bridge* completed first, and in “The Tunnel” and “Cape Hatteras”, written much later, suggest that while working on the poem Crane was approaching the disillusionment he mentioned in a February 19, 1931 letter to Waldo Frank: “Present day America seems a long way off from the destiny I fancied when I wrote *The Bridge*” (1).

At the time of his first conception of *The Bridge*, Crane had almost a romantic’s optimism, and the dreams mentioned in the poem recall those described by Keats in *Endymion* in their prophetic veracity. Crane’s fifteen uses here of the word *dream* in various forms are evidence of the importance of dreams in his concept of poetic vision. In view of Crane’s stated liking for Keats, it is not surprising that he should balk at some of Eliot’s work, and in fact *The Bridge* grew partially out of a reaction to *The Waste Land*, of which he said, “I was rather disappointed. It was good, of course, but so damned dead.” (20 Nov. 1922 letter to Gorham Munson) It is interesting to note that all three poems are prophetic in nature, though with far different messages. Shortly after beginning “a synthesis of America and its structural identity... called *The Bridge*”, (20 Feb. 1923 letter to unidentified recipient) Crane was to write to Waldo Frank:

Such major criticism as both you and Gorham have given my “Faustus and Helen” is the most sensitizing influence I have ever encountered.... And with this communion will come something better than a mere clique. It is a consciousness of something more vital than stylistic questions and “taste”, it is vision, and a vision alone that not only American needs, but the whole world. We are not sure where this will lead, but after the complete renunciation symbolized in *The Waste Land* [sic]... we have sensed some new

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vitality. Whether I am in that current remains to be seen.

(27 Feb. 1923 letter)

Whereas Keats at the time of writing *Endymion* could say of the imaginative prophetic vision, "The Imagination may be compared to Adam's dream—he awoke and found it truth", (2) Crane by the time of finishing *The Bridge* had come to doubt the truth of his vision. Nonetheless, he still clung to the hope that poetry of romantic vision would continue:

The fact that you posit *The Bridge* at the end of a tradition of romanticism may prove to have been an accurate prophecy, but I don't yet feel that such a statement can be taken as a foregone conclusion. A great deal of romanticism may persist—of the sort to deserve serious consideration, I mean.

(13 Jul. 1930 letter to Allen Tate)

In terms of the author's stated intention, *The Bridge* must be viewed as an attempt to answer the pessimism of *The Waste Land* and its disparagement of modern civilization, a reaction to "the fashionable pessimism of the hour so well established by T. S. Eliot". (22 May 1930 letter to Selden Rodman) Crane explained this reaction in some detail to Rodman:

I tried to break loose from that particular strait jacket, without however committing myself to any oppositional form of didacticism. Your diffidence in ascribing any absolute conclusions in the poem is therefore correct, at least according to my intentions. The poem, as a whole, is, I think, an affirmation of experience, and to that extent is "positive" rather than "negative" in the sense that *The Waste Land* is negative.

(22 May 1930 letter to Selden Rodman)

Crane even defended the complexity of this poem by reference to Eliot's, and claimed that he had read *The Waste Land* "innumerable" times while writing *The Bridge*:

It is pertinent to suggest, I think, that with more time and familiarity with *The Bridge* you will come to envisage it more as one poem with a clearer and more integrated unity and development than was at first evident. At least if my own experience in reading and rereading Eliot's *Wasteland* has any relation to the circumstances this may be found to be the case. It took me nearly five years, with innumerable readings, to convince myself of the essential unity of that poem. And *The Bridge* is at least as complicated in its structure and references as *The Wasteland*—perhaps more so.

(22 Apr. 1930 letter to Herbert Weinstock)

During composition Crane measured his poem by Eliot's, writing to Waldo Frank that *The Bridge* is already longer than *The Wasteland." (12 Aug. 1926 letter) He decided to include the marginalia because "a reaction to Eliot's *Waste Land* notes put them in my head". (3 Aug. 1926 letter Waldo Frank) To accomplish the task he set for himself, the refutation of the negative vision of *The Waste Land*, Crane had to establish the city as a positive and integral part of the vital being of the country. He hoped to make the Brooklyn Bridge function as a symbol of the "constructive future" of the country, as a link between the urban life represented by Manhattan, and the rural mainstream of American life represented by the mainland.

The fact that the bridge, although built by man, has a more than mechanical
perfection—"(How could mere toil align thy choir strings? )"(3)—implies the possibility of a higher purpose behind man's other works. The city with its "multitudes bent toward some flashing scene", "traffic lights that skim"—traffic from the city crossing the bridge—and "fiery parcels" (pp. 45£) is an "affirmation of experience", (22 May 1930 letter to Selden Rodman) fitting the description which Crane applied to the poem as a whole. As such the city is, like the bridge, "Sleepless as the river under thee", and in direct contrast to "the prairie's dreaming sod", (p.46) the quiescent countryside. The city is here viewed as embodying more vigorous life than rural America, but it is even here not without negative aspects. The mechanical grip the city has on its occupants is indicated in the line, "Till elevators drop us from our day", (p. 45) which echoes the human despair of "Till human voices wake us and we drown", (4) the last line of Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock". In Eliot's poem, the "drowning" means a return to harsh reality.

Crane is not blind to the nature of this reality: the city has its Inferno, its subway, and is capable of driving a "bedlamite" to suicide; "noon leaks" between the buildings to Wall Street, "A rip—tooth of the sky's acetylene", (p.45) which suggests the fires of hell beating down on the pavement. Most important, however, the city embodies action, and as such answers affirmatively Prufrock's question, "Do I dare?" Nowhere is Crane's city like Eliot's "Unreal City" with its "Falling towers" (5) —destruction—and human inaction: "What shall we ever do?" (Waste Land, I.134)

Hart Crane's romantic affinities doubtless made it hard for him to accept the modern city. Although at home in the dives and by-ways of New York, Crane once wrote, "There's really nothing like getting out in the wilds occasionally to clear one's head", (23 Nov. 1931 letter "To his Stepmother") called Brooklyn a "Babylon", (11 Feb. 1930 letter to Charlotte Rychtarik) and deplored the effect of the city on his friends:"Most of my friends are worn out with the struggle here in New York". (23 Sep.1923 letter to Charlotte Rychtarik) In The Bridge he tends to idealize both the pastoral and the past, and salvation is to come through union with the Indian maiden Pocahontas, a figure tied up with the concept of the noble savage, the distant past, and unsullied nature. In "Ave Maria" Crane's narrator, Columbus, foretells the prosperity of the country in pastoral terms: "Hushed gleaming fields and pendant seething wheat" predict fruitfulness, and Crane in subsequent sections shows this fruitfulness perverted by commercial exploitation on the part of the city.

In "The Harbor Dawn" the noises of the modern city imply the fading of Columbus's dream: "The long, tired sounds", "Far strum of fog horns... signals dispersed in veils", "winch engines throbbing", "beshrouded wails", and "a drunken stevedore's howl" all suggest a deterioration from Columbus's "hushed gleaming fields". There is still, however, a strong positive note in the echoes of Keats and Omar Khayyam. The "darkling harbor" suggests the phrase "Darkling I listen" from the "Ode to a Nightingale", where the poet attends not to city noises but to the song of the "Immortal bird". Also, the "waking dream" (p.55) of Crane's marginalia again recalls Keats's ode and sets the scene for the poet's ideal union with the Pocahontas figure. The lines,

And you beside me, blessèd now while sirens
Sing to us... , (p. 54)

suggest the famous quattrain from The Rubáiyát:

A Book of Verses underneath the Bough,
A Jug of Wine, a Loaf of Bread —and Thou
Beside me singing in the Wilderness—
Oh, Wilderness were Paradise enow! (6)

These passages imply that even in the city the kind of inspiration sought by the
Romantics is possible.

Crane continues his attack on Eliot in “Harbor Dawn”, touching on several passages from “Prufrock” and The Waste Land, and answering them with affirmations where Eliot is ambiguous or negative. The sirens sing to the poet and his lover in The Bridge whereas they ignore Prufrock:

I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each.
I do not think that they will sing to me.

(“Prufrock”)

Also, the fog which in “Prufrock” curls “once about the house” and stays there, “leans one last moment on the sill” in “Harbor Dawn” and then gives way to a star, an image of hope. Here too is the first of Crane’s eight mentions of hair, which may be interpreted as a symbol of fertility, following Sir James George Frazer and T. S. Eliot:

...eyes wide, undoubtful
dark
drink the dawn—
a forest shudders in your hair! (p. 56)

After the embrace, the vision of the forest in the woman’s hair suggests fruition, as does the mistletoe mentioned six lines later. It is important that in The Bridge these images suggesting fertility are undenigrated, while in The Waste Land Eliot undercuts the positive implications of living hair with pessimistic general tone of the poem, and at least in one instance with the linking of hair and modern prostitution:

‘What shall I do now? What shall I do? ’
‘I shall rush out as I am, and walk the street
‘With my hair down, so’.

(Waste Land, ll. 131–3)

What Crane is apparently trying to do in this section of The Bridge is to replace Eliot’s negative urban vision with the positive pastoral vision of Keats and Khayyām applied to the city scene.

In “Van Winkle”, the city is shown closing in on the individual, especially the one who cannot move with the times. Rip Van Winkle “forgot the office hours” and has been reduced to sweeping a tenement. He tries to see the city as a pastoral scene:

...He woke and swore he’d seen Broadway
a Catskill daisy chain in May, (p. 60)

but is caught up in the commercial life and hurry of the city:

Keep hold of that nickel for car—change, Rip,—
Have you got your “Times”? ?
And hurry along, Van Winkle—it’s getting late! (p. 61)

In these themes Crane echoes Eliot faithfully. Stetson and “Mr. Eugenides, the Smyrnes merchant”, represent the unfeeling commercial scene in The Waste Land, and the rush of urban life is reflected in the publican’s cry, “HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME”. (Waste Land, l. 141)

In “The River” commerce degenerates into the cant of the advertising agency. This
represents a negative aspect of the city spreading out “all over—going west”, not to
develop the land but to sell products in billboard campaigns. Through the three tramps
the poet provides a “key” to the understanding of the country which he could not find in
a consideration of the city alone:

Yet they touch something like a key perhaps.
From pole to pole across the hills, the states
—They know a body under the wide rain. (p.66)

This is one of many indications that the city is limited and cannot contain the essence of
the whole country, though it does share history with the land itself.

Crane rather subtly attacks the economic tyranny of the city in “Cutty Sark”. An
old sailor has been emotionally crippled in serving the wants of the city, in keeping its
lamps lit:

... “A whaler once—
..............................
... I know what time it is ——No
I don’t want to know what time it is— that
damned white Arctic killed my time....” (p. 82)

“Murmurs of Leviathan” and “spiracle” suggest Melville, but the sailor has not come out
of the whaling experience with the strength of vision that Ishmael achieved. Having
shattered the old sailor’s nervous system, the city then tries to finish him off: “Outside a
wharf truck nearly ran him down”. (p.84) The economic strangehold of the city includes
such ordinary things as transportation, the “nickel for car—change”, and even music—and
by implication all the arts—here degenerated to the “nickel-in-the-slot piano”. (p.82)
Economics, however, also occasioned one of the most inspiring competitions of maritime
history, the races for the eastern tea trade, and the building of beautiful clipper ships such
as the Cutty Sark. The name of one of the ships Crane mentions seems especially
significant. Thermopylae recalls the heroic battle fought by the outnumbered Spartans
under Leonidas to protect their homeland, and it compares favorably with the one
ancient battle mentioned in The Waste Land, Mylae, which Rome fought mainly to secure
economic supremacy over Cathage.

In “Virginia” love in the midst of the economic life of the city is enthusiastically
proclaimed:

O Mary, leaning from the high wheat tower,
Let down your golden hair! (p.102)

Reference is made here to the long hair, symbol of fertility and fulfillment, “let down”
by Rapunzel in the romantic legend, and the “wheat tower” recalls the “seething wheat”
promised by Columbus in the “Ave Maria” section. That such an idealized lover can lean
“Out of the way—up nickel—dime tower” — the Woolworth Building— takes something
of the sting out of all the nickels spent for carfare and recorded music. By way of
contrast, love and the economic life of the city are linked in a disparaging way in The
Waste Land, notably in the callous sexual assault of the “small house agent’s clerk” (Waste
Land, 1.232) on the bored and indifferent typist. Unlike Eliot, Crane does see in the
commercial life of the city some cause for celebration. He also shows nature’s continuing
power over civilization. The sea can still claim “a tragedy”, and the dawn can still “put...
the Statue of Liberty out” in an assertion of the natural night/day cycle. The triumph of
the city is only superficial, and by implication its grip on man’s nature need only
be superficial as well.
In “Cape Hatteras” Crane enlarges on some of the defects of the city touched lightly in “Cutty Sark”. There is a strong warning to a civilization which is misusing scientific invention and smothering the natural virtues of the continent,

... 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...
And from above, thin squeaks of radio static,
The captured fume of space foams in our ears. (p.88)

Although the city dweller is hemmed in by “derricks, chimneys, tunnels” and “each prison crypt/ Of canyoned traffic”, his ears pierced by “thin squeaks of radio static” and the “nasal whine of power”, and his eyes smart with “sharp ammoniac proverbs”, he should be consoled since Pocahontas is still with him, “surcharged/ With sweetness”, reminding him of a “dim past” not wholly extinguished. Also, man’s dreams may become “act”, may come true:

Dream cancels dream in this new realm of fact
From which we wake into a dream of act;
Seeing himself an atom in a shroud—
Man hears himself an engine in a cloud! (p.89)

Here, in a new twisting of Keats’s pronouncement on the veracity of the poetic imagination, man’s dreams have led to the attainment of flight, a human desire going at least as far back as leucus. Crane’s striving man, even when blundering, is on the path to salvation. Important for the effect Crane evidently intended for the “Hatteras” section is the narrator’s concluding wish to place “My hand/ in yours,/ Walt Whitman”, to join in hopefulness with the American poet who loved both city and countryside.

After the love-vision of “Three Songs”, Crane returns in “Quaker Hill” to the attack on the city as a perversion of the dreams on which country was settled:

This was the Promised Land, and still it is
To the persuasive suburban land agent
In bootleg roadhouses . . . . (p.105)

The “was/is” opposition reflects one of the basic themes of both The Bridge and The Waste Land: the contrast between a glorious past and a sordid present. In Eliot’s poem the river romances of Elizabeth and Leicester and of Cleopatra and Anthony are contrasted with the coarse seductions of the Thames maidens. Where Eliot sees little hope for the future, Crane, although admitting the shortcomings of his civilization, holds out hope for salvation through pain and suffering, along the traditional Christian lines; the “angelus” of the whip-poor-will, as American as Whitman’s mockingbird, rings out consolation,

Breaks us and saves, yes, breaks the heart, yet yields
That patience that is armour and that shields
Love from despair —when love foresees the end—
Leaf after autumnal leaf
break off,
    descend—
descend. (p.106)
The descent is into the “Tunnel”, the Hades which the Christ/ Dante/ Poet—figure must experience before he can achieve the vision of Atlantis, the Annunciation celebrated by the whip—poor—will.

“The Tunnel”, written at about the same time as the “Proem”, “The Dance”, and “Cutty Sark”, shows, like these sections, Eliot’s influence, and continues the particular attack on the city initiated in “Quaker Hill”. In “The Tunnel” Crane ironically includes Columbus Circle among the sights far removed from Columbus’s original prophetic vision of the continent, and passes judgment on the near—hell the city has become:

... You shall search them all.
Someday by heart you’ll learn each famous sight
And watch the curtain life in hell’s despite. (p.108)

The first line of this passage is reminiscent of Prufrock’s “For I have known them all already, known them all”, all the “decisions and revisions”, and all of the futile “evenings, mornings, afternoons” of his wasted life. Crane implies that there is a similarly pointless side to the city scene he describes. As in The Waste Land where “The river sweats/ Oil and tar”, (ll. 266–7) the city has made Crane’s river an “oily tympanum of waters”, polluting the river, linked with time, as it distorts time itself with its waste of human effort. Crane also found original images to objectify his condemnation of the city. He described it as claustrophobic, a place “Where boxed alone a second, eyes take fright”;

ugly, “like a pigeon’s muddy dream”; banal and repetitious:

Our tongues recant like beaten weather vanes.
This answer lives like verdigris, like hair
Beyond extinction, surcease of the bone;
And repetition freezes; (p. 109)

and destructive of the most important human values: “...love/ A burnt match skating in a urinal”. The hair symbolic of the fulfilling nature of the poet’s ideal union with Pocahontas has here become “like hair/ Beyond extinction”, like the hair which continues to grow for a short period after the death of the body, and is hence a false indication of life, as is the “bandaged” —inhibited, restricted— hair of the “Wop washerwoman”. The poet can only appeal to Columbus to somehow bring about the fulfillment of the prophecy voiced in “Ave Maria”:

O Genoese, do you bring mother eyes and hands
Back home to children and to golden hair? (p. 111)

In his description of the abuse of Poe which led to his death, Crane echoes William Blake’s lines about Christ:

And did that Countenance Divine
Shine forth upon our clouded hills,

with “And did their eyes like unwashed platters ride”, (p.110) showing the city’s present hostility to the poet, which is from his viewpoint its worst crime.

In one basic way, however, the city in its tunnel/hades aspect promotes the vital and unnamed quest of the human being. Like the bridge, the most positive symbol in the poem, the tunnel can be a means to a voyage, a quest, since it too can take the questor across the river:
... The train rounds, bending to a scream,
Taking the final level for the dive
Under the river. (p.111)

Even when most evil, the city, like Goethe’s Mephistopheles, can still work for good
Through purging agony, and by means of a cleansing fire like that described in Buddha’s I
Sermon, referred to in The Waste Land, Crane foresees a salvation, a gathering in of
valuable:

Kiss of our agony Thou gatherest,
O Hand of Fire
gatherest. (p. 112)

Even without “Atlantis”, the ultimate intention of the poem and Crane’s view of the city should be clear. Man may be virtually helpless in a mechanical hell, yet his unquenchable will to live and the Word promising that he will live guarantee his ultimate endurance, ability to arise like Lazarus in answer to a call which will in fact come:

And yet, like Lazarus, to feel the slope,
The sod and billow breaking, —lifting ground,
—A sound of waters bending astride the sky
Unceasing with some Word that will not die...! (p.112)

“Atlantis” was intended to answer and refute the pessimism of “The Tunnel”; the negativism of The Waste Land as well. Although Crane leaves unanswered his final question,

... Is it Cathay,
Now pity steeps the grass and rainbows ring
The serpent with the eagle in the leaves...? (p. 117)

he implies that the Brooklyn Bridge of the spirit is indeed the bridge to Cathay/Atlan
topia—not, to be sure, the modern city, but an ideal city of the psyche. The city redeemed through human suffering from the indictments of the preceding sections:

Sustained in tears the cities are endowed
And justified conclamant with ripe fields
Revolving through their harvests in sweet torment. (p.116)

The fulfilling harvest of crops in the fields is paralleled by the harvest of tears and human endeavor in the cities.

Crane does more than merely redeem the city. By analogy to the parts of the body, New York City becomes the head of the country, the seat of both the poetic imagination and the kind of half-knowledge that makes man abuse nature and himself. Opposed the head is the clay—red body represented by Pocahontas, the quiescent “body under wide rain”, (p.66) the life—giving rain. The river, tunnel, and bridge are the common connections among the parts. The river is water, the life—blood which the Waste Land lacked; the tunnel could well stand for the esophagus, passage of appetites and lusts; “The phonographs of hades in the brain/Are tunnels...”; (p.110) the bridge as a harp with “choiring strings” (p.46) and a voice “like an organ”, (p.116) “One song, one Bridge Fire”! (p.117) is the larynx, the voice of the country. Just as the human being must h
all his parts to function properly, the nation must have fields and cities and a poetic, prophetic voice to be fruitful and complete. Eliot, a classicist unable to impose a classical order on the disorder of the modern city, pronounced it "Unreal" in despair, and caused his London Bridge to fall, symbolizing his despondency. Crane was willing to tolerate the real city in the faith that it was by devious means approaching the ideal, and that even in its imperfections it was serving in man's quest for individual salvation; his Brooklyn Bridge held for him the promise of man's ultimate triumph. This, at least, was the substance of Crane's intention during the time when he conceived the major part of The Bridge; his subsequent doubts and the despair which eventually caused him, like Eliot's Phlebas the Phoenician, to "enter the whirlpool", to commit suicide by drowning, were not enough to make him excise the optimism from the poem before he mailed the final drafts to Caresse Crosby for publication.
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FOOTNOTES


