

## “Three Songs” by Hart Crane

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What is an American theme? We have known the conflicts of light and shadow, good and evil, wilderness and civilization through Hawthorne, Cooper and Melville, and when we think of ‘blackness’ in them we are led to think of ‘whiteness’ factor they did also indicate, as an opposing epithet to it. Traditional American literary scenes have supplied us with ample examples of these, but *conflict* is a negative, while *unity* should be the positive value to man, because nobody wants destructive disparity or tragedy unless it is inevitable and gives the hope of dramatically creating something dynamic out of it. Although black is merely one side of a famous polarity—and the less popular side—if it reacts against, acts with, or works fusing with, white, it begins to have some positive power related to our very existence since the ancient Adam. ‘The union of opposites, after all, is the basis of the American outlook: the old and new worlds, the past and present, the self and society, the supernatural and nature.’<sup>1)</sup> It is more in American literature, we may say, that with the ‘dark wisdom’ of their ‘deeper minds’ efforts have been made towards connecting and identifying the opposing elements the New World is destined for.

In “Passage to India” Walt Whitman calls 1492 the ‘Year of the marriage of continents, climates and oceans’ (6), when not your deeds only (O voyagers, O scientists and inventors,) shall be justified, but

All these hearts as of fretted children shall be sooth’d,  
All affection shall be fully responded to, the secret shall be told,  
All these separations and gaps shall be taken up and hook’d and  
link’d together. (5)

That is ‘The road between Europe and Asia,’ ‘Tying the Eastern to the Western sea,’ ‘Bridging the three or four thousand miles of land travel’ (3), because it is ‘Passage to more than India’ and the ‘secret of the earth and sky!’ (9)

This was the Romantic conception of the world in the 19th century America, and it was Hart Crane that admired Whitman, ‘a poet of the greatest and oddest delicacy and originality and sensitivity, so

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1) H. Levin, *The Power of Blackness*, pp. xi-xii.

far as words are concerned.'<sup>2)</sup> Crane inherited Whitman's art so faithfully, often more genuinely in a way, that he was faced with difficulties arising from the instrumental, pragmatic, scientific, materialistic and dualistic 20th century. It was the more exacting because Crane was involved in the struggle of not merely writing but living as the man and the poet, which should necessarily be romantic, as John Keats had done by living truly in dying. Mr. Jarrell is right when he says that 'nowadays it is people who are not particularly interested in poetry, people who say that they read a poem for what it says, not for how it says it, who admire Whitman most,'<sup>3)</sup> while Crane, obviously enough, imposed both the tasks on himself, trying to bridge the gaps but sinking into the depth of the Gulf just to symbolize the failure of Romanticism in the modern age.

To Hart, Brooklyn Bridge was the most beautiful consummate construction, a symbol of the Machine Age and the very essence of American myth and ideal. It ought to have been the symbol of Connection myth.

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

("To the Brooklyn Bridge")

But its shadow is clear 'only in darkness,' and 'obscure as that heaven of the Jews.' Like Shelleyan poet legislator, he did not succeed in connecting actual things. *The Bridge* and *White Buildings* are the brilliant monuments of great trial and failure.

By "Three Songs" of *The Bridge* he succeeded in connecting nothing actual, either, except in words and concepts. (Crane quotes from Marlowe at the head of the poem: '*The one Sestos, the other Abydos hight.*'<sup>4)</sup> Lovers must always be separated.)

I wanted you, nameless Woman of the South,  
 No wraith, but utterly — . . .

High, cool,  
                     wide from the slowly smoldering fire  
 Of lower heavens, —

'Whatever call—falls vainly on the wave.' The poet regrets wraith

2) R. Jarrell, *Poetry and the Age*, p. 103.

3) *Ibid.*, p. 101.

4) Crane took this line from Marlowe's "Hero and Leander," but a little differently : the text reads, 'The one Abydos, the other Sestos hight.'



I take my way along the island's edge,  
Venting a heavy heart.

I am too full of woe!  
Haply I may not live another day;  
I cannot rest O God, I cannot eat or drink or sleep,  
Till I put forth myself, my prayer, once more to Thee.  
Breathe, bathe myself once more in Thee, commune with Thee,  
Report myself once more to Thee.

("Prayer of Columbus")

The sailor is another type from the one in "Passage to India," yet his prayer will be heard for the romantic faith in God and history (though I think Crane in "Ave Maria" is more like Whitman's Columbus on Santa Maria).

Hart Crane here is much nearer to Herman Melville, who wrote the poem of the same title: <sup>7)</sup>

Emblazoned bleak in austral skies —  
A heaven remote, whose starry swarm  
Like Science lights but cannot warm —

He asks of a frigid sign, aloft and aloof: 'Estranged, estranged: can friend prove so?' The translated Cross has withdrawn, 'Dim paling too at every dawn, With symbols vain once counted wise, And gods declined to heraldries,' but Melville believes in the symbol deeper, with a more friendly expectancy. The cross or the divine tree's 'tender fruit reached so low.' With 'Love apples of New-Paradise,' the planted nations are yet to be about the wide Australian sea, although the legends must be 'the atheist cycles' and ages hence we shall be 'formenters' as our forefathers who classed the Cross with Orion's sword, Christ with the Giant god.

In spite of his Calvinistic touch, Melville is more stable and integrate than Crane, for Crane fluctuates from verse to verse. While the first song, "Southern Cross" by Crane, is an expression of intense desire and longing for woman, in "National Winter Garden," the second, the poet, strangely enough, 'reacts with revulsion, as though he came from another world:'<sup>8)</sup>

Always you wait for someone else though, always —  
(Then rush the nearest exit through the smoke).

According to Mr. Weber's interpretation, this second song 'is a brilliant portrayal of the overwhelming power of sexual lust. The

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7) O. Williams, ed., *A Little Treasury of American Poetry*, p. 102.

8) Weber, *op. cit.*, p. 368.

woman envisioned is a burlesque dancer twisting in the postures of that animal passion which she hopes to rouse in the audience:<sup>9)</sup>

Outspoken buttocks in pink beads  
Invites the necessary cloudy clinch  
Of bandy eyes. . . . No extra mufflings here :  
The world's one flagrant, sweating cinch.

'And shall we call her whiter than the snow?' The whiteness, however, reminds us of the white beauty of a corrupt leper, which will be the more shining as the corruption advances.

Weber's opinion is that 'Crane is making very important observations. One, that sexual union is a combination of physical and spiritual love, which is perverted by biology into the production of the species. Another, that the child thus created is but another aspect of the impregnating male,' for lust is no means for absolving us from the problems of life, so we must return to life from which we have thought to escape.<sup>10)</sup> Notice how frequently in *The Bridge* Crane uses the form of entreaty instead of assured accomplishment:

Then you, the burlesque of our lust—and faith,  
Lug us back lifeward—bone by infant bone.  
("National Winter Garden")

Out of the way-up nickel-dime tower shine,  
Cathedral Mary,  
shine! —  
("Virginia")

Dance, Maquokeeta! snake that lives before,  
That casts his pelt, and lives beyond! Sprout, horn!  
Spark, tooth! Medicine-man, relent, restore —  
Lie to us, — dance us back the tribal morn!  
("Dance")

No, never to let go  
my hand  
in yours,  
Walt Whitman —  
so —  
("Cape Hatteras")

Again it is remarkable that he is inspired to sing of the lost past of America and himself by the frequent use of 'back' (Lug us back, dance us back); in "Southern Cross" the man who wanted and waited sings.

It is blood to remember; it is fire

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9) *Loc. cit.*

10) *Ibid.*, p. 369.

To stammer back . . . It is  
God—your namelessness. And the wash —

The trio of poems is closed with "Virginia," a light-hearted version of woman as a youthful virgin office-worker 'in the Woolworth Building.'<sup>11)</sup> The blue-eyed Mary with the claret scarf (Saturday Mary, mine!) implies the Virgin Mary, unapproachable and pure. The poet, who has wanted and waited, is overwhelmed and perverted by the power of lust. Still the woman is beyond his reach. In his letter to Waldo Frank, Crane refers to "Virginia" as 'virgin in process of "being built,"'<sup>12)</sup> not accomplished for him. The following lines are also charming, derived from the Grimm Brothers' collection of folk tales.

O Mary, leaning from the high wheat tower,  
Let down your golden hair!

(The Grimms' Rapunzel lives in a high tower, confined there by a witch, who calls to Rapunzel, 'Let down your golden hair,' and a prince, seeing the secret, visits the girl every evening, admitted into the window climbing up her golden hair.) But in reality everything is barren because his intention of creating American myth must face the greatest difficulty as in *The Waste Land* of today.

Crane, in the same letter to Frank, discloses himself as very conscious of T. S. Eliot, saying, '*The Bridge* is already longer than *The Wasteland*,—and it's only about half done.'<sup>13)</sup> This "Virginia" and others too have some semblance to Eliot's modern scenes:

O rain at seven,  
Pay-check at eleven —  
Keep smiling the boss away,

and in the "Proem" to the Bridge,

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 . . .

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.

It is rather hard to say, as I have suggested, that Crane has

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11) *Loc. cit.*

12) Weber, ed., *The Letters of Hart Crane : 1916-1932*, p. 272.

13) *Loc. cit.*

attained Eliot's aim to rebuild *our* land organically, because Crane's vision of completed love and union is fraught with romantic irony in that he is unaware of the irony—that is, he tried to achieve the American myth, without help from the people, without his own power of will; to complete an epic of America with no solid method, not much tradition, but only his philosophy of sensation. In a discussion which was apropos of Crane's poem, "At Melville's Tomb," he told, ' . . . in poetry the *rationale* of metaphor belongs to another order of experience than science, and is not to be limited by a scientific and arbitrary code of relationships either in verbal inflections or concepts.<sup>14)</sup> He was divided, however, between the truth or science and the inability of organizing his experiences into objective system. He was not free from the fatal dualism after all. 'Lie to us,—dance us back the tribal morn!' is a confession that he has no means of realizing his will, that he must return to the primitive past of fiction when the scientific truth was not decisively distracting and there alone he might materialize his imagination. The romantic sea of Keats was exposed to the danger of being readily disturbed by the ruthless history and philosophy but the Indian Maid was ultimately identified with the Moon goddess. And Crane's attempt was even much harder than Henry Adams's to identify the dynamo and the Virgin.

A nameless woman in "Southern Cross," a burlesque dancer in "National Winter Garden," and an office-girl in "Virginia" are all unreal, though real as symbols; as unreal as unreal cities of 'Jerusalem Athens Alexandria/Vienna London' in *The Waste Land*;<sup>15)</sup> despairingly unreal, apart from his homosexuality, because a prostitute and the Virgin must be the one Mary. Whitman may have succeeded, H. Adams discovered violent, dynamic womanhood in Mary the mother, but Crane grasped no real woman. There is no real Man in his poetry. Only his will to die proved real, or his consciousness of the cruel sea—which had meant to him one of the most substantial means of connection, but unhappily connecting him with catastrophic evils of the present world.

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

(“Voyages” I, *White Buildings*)

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14) "A Discussion with Hart Crane," in *Poetry ; A Magazine of Verse*, Vol. XXIX, 1926, p. 36, as quoted in P. Wheelright, *The Burning Fountain*, p. 377.

15) Williams, *op. cit.*, p. 502.

Crane's difficulty came partly from his own moral infirmity, partly from the disrupting age around him, which merely allowed him to dream of connection as a concept, as a symbol. To Keats, it was the reality full of true life; in the modern times it may be sterile attempt, but no doubt the more invaluable.

May I say then that all of what he did achieve was the associating different elements, which is the art of symbolization, the piling-up of images, the multifarious imagery? Hart Crane himself says again, 'As a poet I may very possibly be more interested in the so-called illogical impingement of words on the consciousness (and their combination and interplay in metaphor on this basis) than I am interested in the preservation of their logically rigid significations at the cost of limiting my subject matter and perceptions involved in the poem.'<sup>16)</sup>

The Southern Cross who, as still more alone, 'takes night And lifts her girdles from her, one by one—' is a nameless woman of the South on the same boat who takes her clothes off in the night, reminding us of a holy tree of the Eden, the Cross of Christ and being, of course, a group of stars on the zodiac too. The Southern Cross's 'vaporous scars' are traces of sad tears and at the same time describing the stars rising higher in the sky (emotion plus mathematics).

The Cross is either far or near, sometimes Biblical, sometimes heretical, saintly or beastly, being called to: 'Eve! Magdalene! or Mary, you?' or 'O simian Venus, homeless Eve.' It is both that woman and the divine being above who are

Unwedded, stumbling gardenless to grieve  
Windswept guitars on lonely decks forever;  
Finally to answer all within one grave!

The long wake of 'phospher'—short but life-long nightmare of the insomniac poet—is given by Venus, the star and goddess, and is 'iridescent Furrow of all our travel—trailed derision!'—another example of objective correlatives.

Crane's metaphor is often ambiguous but calls up the more associations, so 'Eyes crumble at its kiss.' The Garden or Paradise 'High, cool, wide from the slowly smoldering fire Of lower heavens' must expect the 'whispering hell.' The 'wash' is the breaking rush in the furrow, the noise of waves, and is to put out the fire, 'The embers of the Cross,' at once to purge and to destroy the woman and therefore the human race including the poet himself. 'Your namelessness' (you will remember Impersonality, Wise Passiveness, Negative

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16). "A Discussion with Hart Crane," Wheelright, *op. cit.*, p. 97.

Capability preached by poets) enables you to be the Holy Mother is one way to reach Christ and the ideal art. But the Southern Cross again must submerge into the cold rattling sea—that is *our* fate.

‘All night the water combed you with black Insolence.’ But you answer all within one grave, ‘docile, alas, from many arms’ of men. Therefore the Cross is ‘a phantom, buckled’ physically and mentally. After the ‘black’ night, when ‘You crept out simmering, accomplished,’ ‘Light drowned the lithic trillions of your spawn,’ stars and human children.

Almost each line and every word has a duplicate meaning. The desire of woman is sublimated into the thought of the archetype of womanhood in all her aspects. She is no specific woman, but Weber writes, ‘Crane is concerned with Eve in this particular poem,’ the mother of mankind, the symbol of innocence tricked by evil and fated to give birth in sorrow.<sup>17)</sup> And the interweaving of constellation, night, woman, and sea is masterfully accomplished.

Now listen to Crane in that “Discussion” about his “At Melville’s Tomb,” —‘ Its paradox, of course, is that its apparent illogic operates so logically in conjunction with its context in the poem as to establish its claim to another logic, quite independent of the logical definition of the word or phrase or image thus employed.<sup>18)</sup> This another logic, symbol,<sup>19)</sup> means combining, joining together, uniting into one, throwing together, etc., and thus can give the unperceptible the tangible form. Symbolization was born as soon as our primitive forefathers felt the necessity of representing any uneasy, inexplicable relation between, say, Man and Nature, life and death, and born from the sense of continuity of the two. Because it has the reality of unchangeable significance, poets have employed the symbol of words and myth. Because we have known the earthly cycle of life of both man and animal, so that we may escape from the slams of logical materialism, we go to the composite-symbol. Since our soul is composed with piled-up layers, we need to imply and accomplish the whole in a flash. To avoid our disorientation—the decline of cooperative spirit, the inability to find a form of festivity and leisure, the lack of imagination for curing diseases of the contemporary civilization—Hart Crane painfully concentrated on discovering our common denominator as spiritual armor for our enigma of solitary existence.

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17) Weber, *Hart Crane*, p. 368.

18) Wheelright, *op. cit.*, p. 477

19) See S. Giedion, “The Roots of Symbolic Expression,” *DAEDALUS*, Winter 1960, pp. 24-33. Tr. by K. Saito in *Americana*, Vol. 7, No. 8, 1961, pp. 103-114.

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