

Hart Crane's Aberrant English

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The fifth edition of the *Norton Anthology of American Literature* (1998) includes the entirety of Hart Crane's poem cycle *The Bridge*, an epic celebration of U.S. history, culture, and literature. This honor places Crane among an elite group of writers. Only a handful of other long modernist works make it into the *Norton* unscathed: T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, Ezra Pound's *Mauberry*, and William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*. Although the *Norton* is not necessarily a reliable index of a given writer's canonicity, Hart Crane's prominence is nevertheless proof that his poetry's reputation currently stands very high indeed in the country of his birth.

Who could have predicted such an outcome at the time of Crane's suicide in 1932? When *The Bridge* was published in 1930, influential reviewers such as Allen Tate and Yvor Winters accused Crane of immaturity, sentimentality, and lack of focus. They condemned Crane's wayward, fuzzy mysticism as backwards-looking and self-defeating.¹⁾

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1) See Crane, *O My Land* 427-30 for the poet's responses to Winters's 1930 review of *The Bridge* in the little magazine *Poetry*. See 431-33 for his responses to Tate's 1930 review in *Hound and Horn*.

Crane's "failure" as a poet quickly became an academic cliché. As late as 1987, Edward Brunner published a study of *The Bridge* entitled *Splendid Failure*. Even sympathetic critics, such as Harold Bloom, have consistently portrayed Crane's poetry as the pyrotechnic final fizzle of late romanticism.²⁾

These persistent, public reservations, however, have not prevented an impressive proliferation in secondary literature concerning Crane since the late 1960s. There have been more than fifteen books on the poet as well as dozens of articles.³⁾ Recent years have also seen the publication of a new selected letters (1998), a "centennial" edition of his collected poems (2000), and two new biographies, Paul Mariani's *The Broken Tower* (2000) and Clive Fisher's *Hart Crane* (2002). Crane's colorful career in part explains his retrospective fame. His promiscuity, alcoholism, erratic behavior, relative poverty, tragic death, and total commitment to art have earned him the labels of New World Rimbaud and proto-Beat. Nevertheless, living hard and dying young do not guarantee artistic immortality. Why has Crane mattered so much to subsequent generations of U.S. readers? What do they find so compelling in his poetry?

This article argues that the answer lies in Crane's idiosyncratic use of language. Far from striving for transparency, he writes in an inimitably obstructive, artificial manner: "O thou Dirigible, enormous Lounger / Of pendulous auroral beaches" (*Complete* 80). "I heard wind

2) See Bloom's essay "The Central Man: Emerson, Whitman, Wallace Stevens" (*Ringers* 217-34), wherein he concludes that Hart Crane possesses "the last word in this tradition" (232).

3) For recent booklength studies of Crane's poetry that also feature extensive bibliographies, see Edelman, Hammer, Tapper, and Yingling. See also Reed.

flaking sapphire, like this summer" (16). "Mortality-ascending emerald-bright, / A fountain at salute, a crown in view- / Unshackled, casual of its azured height" (122). There is something seductive and absurd in this wild use of words. Here, I would argue, we discover the reason behind both Crane's enduring appeal *and* his supposed inadequacy as a writer. In an early review of *The Bridge*, Odell Shepard writes, "Mr. Crane . . . rejects every natural association of ideas as commonplace; every phrase that might have been written in a normal mood by a normal mind he must torture beyond recognition" (Unterecker 620). Shepard intends to be dismissive, but there is a measure of truth in what he says. Crane does "torture" syntax, semantics, and conventional associations. For Crane, storm clouds become "the sky's pancreas of foaming anthracite." A squadron of airplanes becomes "Tellurian wind-sleuths," "War's fiery kennel," and "moonferrets" (*Complete* 80).

Crane saw his unusual language not as an eccentric mannerism but as a tool in the service of constructing a "Myth of America" and reintegrating the human and divine (*O My Land* 345). Understanding why he considered this to be the case clarifies Crane's achievement and illuminates why his work still seems so relevant today. His central problem, the uncertain relationship between words and the ineffable, remains as vexing today as it was in 1930. This essay will provide an introduction to Crane's poetics by concentrating on a single passage from *The Bridge* and placing it within the larger context of Crane's other works and of modernist experimentation more generally. It will examine one extract from *The Bridge*, lines 63-79 of the poem "Cape Hatteras," in order to elucidate how Crane tries to "condense eternity" (*Complete* 44) into words by using poetic devices to suggest the

simultaneous presence of multiple kinds of ecstasy—mystical, sexual, and psychological. We will observe, in miniature, how Crane stakes his gamble for transcendence on the potentials inherent in the very medium of verse. Only by mastering the concrete details of Crane’s poetics can one arrive at a full appreciation for his continuing, immediate importance as one of the last century’s preeminent U.S. poets.

I

The nasal whine of power whips a new universe . . .
 Where spouting pillars spoor the evening sky,
 Under the looming stacks of the gigantic power house
 Stars prick the eyes with sharp ammoniac proverbs,
 New verities, new inklings in the velvet hummed (5)
 Of dynamos, where hearing’s leash is strummed . . .
 Power’s script,—wound, bobbin—bound, refined—
 Is stopped to the slap of belts on booming spools, spurred
 Into the bulging bouillon, harnessed jelly of the stars.
 Towards what? The forked crash of split thunder parts (10)
 Our hearing momentwise; but fast in whirling armatures,
 As bright as frogs’ eyes, giggling in the girth
 Of steely gizzards—axle—bound, confined
 In coiled precision, bunched in mutual glee
 The bearings glint,—O murmurless and shined (15)
 In oilrinsed circles of blind ecstasy!⁴⁾

These lines from “Cape Hatteras” are something of a viscous verbal

4) These lines are taken from Crane, *Complete Poems* 78–79. For a reader’s convenience, in the text that follows I refer to individual lines by the numbers that I have given them here.

soup, a self-described “bouillon” and “jelly.” Words and sounds and rhythms cycle and recycle. At the simplest level, one can see this in the number of words that are repeated: “power,” “new,” “bound,” “eyes,” “stars,” etc. They appear in different contexts that may or may not be related. For instance, the “New verities, new inklings” of line five do seem to echo and refine the “new universe” of the first line, expanding that “universe” from one of concrete objects to a more abstract, internal one of truth and thought. On the other hand, how would one connect the “eyes” pricked by stars (line 4) with the “armatures” that are “bright as frogs’ eyes” (12)?

Here as elsewhere in Crane’s poetry, repetition seemingly does more to distance words from themselves, to disrupt the coherency of their meaning, than it does to expand their field of reference or to create a continuity of imagery. The word “foam,” for example, appears at least five times in *The Bridge*, as a verb (*Complete* 64, 77), an adjective (80), and a noun (73, 82). It refers to flames, radio static, a cloud, and dew. Other memorable words such as “pallid,” “sleights,” and “levin” likewise recur in startlingly different contexts. The point does indeed seem to be to break down “every natural association of ideas,” as Shepard would have it. In doing so, Crane demonstrates the versatility of words. They can “mean” something in a plenitude of ways. In this particular passage, for instance, the repetition of “Stars” at the beginning of line four and “stars” at the end of line nine functions visually as parentheses, blocking off that section of text, regardless of any semantic connection between the two metaphors that one might make. Thus, the impact of the second “stars” is to provide a sense of closure that anticipates the new departure of line ten: “Towards what?”

Crane’s programmatic playfulness with words often focuses

particularly on their constituent sounds. He tests the ways in which the referential function of words depends on their oral, as well as written, character. This aspect of his poetics explains the prevalence of complex puns in his work. Line two contains an astonishing instance: “spouting pillars spoor the evening sky.” Factory exhaust is like a trail left by an animal, which, one might infer, means that a hunter such as the poet can follow it to discover his prey, the living beast of the machine. Alternatively, if one reads “spore” in place of “spoor,” the factory is like a fungus, spraying seed into the air. What seems waste is actually fertile. Finally, one can reread the phrase as “spouting pillars *pour* the evening sky,” a striking image in which the factory is not only like an animal and a plant and hence part of the natural world but indeed itself *produces* the landscape. Such involuted puns are hardly joking quibbles. Crane inquires not only into a word’s homonyms but also into its potential combinations with words that come before and after. The text becomes many-layered, incorporating any number of thoughts, feelings, or metaphors in a single phrase and allowing for any number of interpretive avenues to explore.

Crane’s careful attention to sound and its possibilities extends down to the level of the phoneme. Lines 63–79 of “Cape Hatteras” are a dense web of alliteration and assonance. Every line but one (15) contains at least a single example of the combination vowel-plus-*r*: “power,” “universe,” “pillars,” “Under,” “Stars,” “verities,” “hearing,” “spurred,” “harnessed,” “forked,” etc. Plosives such as *b*, *p*, *c* and *g* predominate throughout:

As *b*right as frogs’ eyes, *g*iggling in the *g*irth
Of steely *g*izzards-*a*xle-*b*ound, confined

In coiled *precision*, *bunched* in mutual *glee*
 The *bearings* *glint*.

The placement of these sounds is not arbitrary. Crane displays breathtaking ability in manipulating sound in patterned ways.

A	B	C	C B A
<i>power</i>	<i>whips</i> a	<i>new</i>	<i>universe</i>

The rhyme scheme of this stanza is another case in point. The first four lines give no hint that end rhymes will even occur in the passage, yet lines five and six unexpectedly are a perfect couplet. Then “refined” at the end of line seven is again out of place, but subsequently lines eight through twelve have strange, slant, almost-rhymes (“spurred,” “stars,” “parts,” “armatures”), of which “stars” and “armatures” are particularly close. One notices, moreover, that “universe” (1) and “proverbs” (4) in the opening, unrhymed section prefigure through assonance this later ambiguity. Finally, lines thirteen through sixteen present a perfect ABAB quatrain, resolving the suggestiveness of the previous section. In addition, these two, final, perfect rhymes—“glee / ecstasy” and “confined / shined”—both refer back, respectively, to lines 2 (“sky”) and 7 (“refined”). The initial expectations that one develops about the looseness of the stanza prove incorrect as rhymes emerge to tie the whole together. Rather than present a reader with a standard verse form, Crane allows order to appear out of chaos; the similarities of words gradually overwhelm their disparities.

As letters and sounds circulate throughout the passage in these sorts

of uncanny ways, individual words not only repeat but seemingly transform or melt one into another. “Power” becomes “spoor” becomes “spools” and “spurred.” “Hearing” gives way to “bearing.” Altering a consonant and a vowel, “script” becomes “stropped.” In lines 7–9 sound even seems a principle of word formation, as words almost generate themselves spontaneously, without regards to what Shepard might call “commonplace” logic.

wound, bobbin—bound, refined—
Is stropped to the slap of belts on booming spools, spurred
Into the bulging bouillon

One can track any number of verbal currents in this dense patch: rhymes (“wound” to “bound” to “refined”), consonances (“bulging bouillon”), assonances (“booming spools”), a complex interplay of sibilants, liquids, and plosives (“stropped” to “slap” to “spools” to “spurred”), etc. The overall effect is reminiscent of the language games of experimental poets such as the Russian Futurist Velimir Khlebnikov, who in “The Battle of I and E,” “Mog and Bog” and other poems presented letters, not words, as the primary unit of poetry. The particularity of the word gives way to a more liquid, undifferentiated approach to language in which its constituent elements are strands to be woven into various textures.

In this “bouillon” of language, not only words lose integrity but so too does syntax. It becomes difficult to say which modifiers modify what or why. For instance, in the phrase “in whirling armatures, / As bright as frogs’ eyes, giggling in the girth / Of steely gizzards,” does

"giggling" describe "armatures" or "eyes"? Or maybe it is subordinate to "bearing" (15), though the hyphen in 13 makes the syntax of the whole section tricky to parse. In other cases there appears to be no logical way to link the parts of a sentence. For example, line five, "New verities...in the velvet hummed," seems to function as an analogue of a Latin ablative absolute, an adverbial clause with no necessary connection to the subject or object of its main clause (4).

Sometimes the syntax is not merely vague but willfully distorted, with modifiers deliberately displaced: in "The forked crash of split thunder," "forked" seems to have nothing whatsoever in common with "crash," except that "crash" suggests "thunder" which in turn suggests lightning, a word which does not even appear in the poem but for which "forked" would be an appropriate description. Similar moments abound in "Cape Hatteras" and *The Bridge* more generally. Here are a few examples: "tethered" in "tethered foam / Around bared teeth of stallions" more properly modifies "stallions" (*Complete* 82), "nervous" in "nervous shark tooth" more properly describes the man wearing it (71), "pendulous" in "pendulous auroral beaches" refers more to the dirigible in the line than to the sunrise itself (80), etc.

A grammarian might try explain the indistinct welter of nouns and adjectives in this passage as if they were functioning in apposition, that is, as if they all were somehow renaming each other. Something more subtle is going on. The centripetal force of the puns is a counterpart of the centrifugal way that words break down; the different dynamic tendencies in the verse thus criss-cross and so involve words in each other that in some strange sense they become one another. What may seem apposition is in actuality metamorphosis. One should not find surprising, then, the poem's fascination with transformations, whether

the way that “biplane” becomes “twinship” in the next stanza of “Cape Hatteras” (79) or the way that Crane deliberately confuses sea and sky throughout. The linguistic soup of “Cape Hatteras” is an analogue of the primordial sea, endlessly changing, endlessly fertile, spawning “dinosaurs,” “frogs,” “eagles,” “griffons,” and any number of fresh meanings for old words as their husks mate and die.

II

Keeping in mind the tricks and peculiarities of Crane’s language, one can begin to appreciate the consequences that his style might have for his subject matter in this passage, a factory. Described in such overtly sensuous language, in which words and syntax blur, it is surely not accidental that the machinery becomes a collection of strange, half-human, half-animal body parts engaged in something of a disembodied orgy. Like “frogs’ eyes” which “giggle,” the “bearings,” “bunched in mutual glee,” “glint” and shine in “oilrinsed circle of blind ecstasy.” The content mimics the form. True, by eroticizing machines Crane is partly writing in the spirit of Italian Futurism, which celebrates the phallic might of automobiles, engines, and war. He does, after all, praise the “spouting pillars” and “looming” smokestacks of the “power house.” Nevertheless, to understand the dynamics of the passage requires one to grapple more fundamentally with its erotics, which go beyond celebration of the masculine in machinery and which, ultimately, prove to have their foundations in Crane’s urge to push at and through language’s substance.

First, it is important to note that this sexualized factory is alluring because of its dangers and its seductiveness, two aspects not easily

separable. “Dynamos” hum “velvet,” but “belts” also “slap,” and the “whine of power whips.” The whirl, sheen, thunder, boom, in short, the *spectacle* of a factory entices the observer. One is drawn into the titillating exhibition almost physically. One does not merely hear the noise, one’s “hearing” is a “leash” that the roar “strums.” This image in itself further implicates a spectator and by extension the reader in the scene. It likens a visitor in the factory to that which he hears and sees, things being “bobbin-bound,” “coiled,” and “harnessed.” The result of the excitement is visceral, physical captivation.

Whereas the physicality of perception seems paramount in Crane’s vision, the specificity of the perceiver him- or herself matters much less. It is not easy to puzzle out whether the hearing’s being “strummed” belongs to the speaker of the poem, Crane himself, or anyone who might happen to be in the factory. In fact, since this phrase appears in a dependent clause describing the locale, it may be more a characteristic attributed to the site than something which is actually happening. The inclusive “our hearing” in line eleven only complicates the situation. Who are “we”? Poet, speaker, reader, Walt Whitman, the Wright Brothers? Is “our hearing” the same one earlier strummed or is it something different that the “thunder” later “parts”? One can ask the same sorts of vexed questions about the “eyes” pricked by “stars” in line four.

Crane is referring to people by synecdoche, that is, by parts of their anatomy, but without providing context or antecedents. Furthermore, he fails clearly to associate these body parts with concrete bodies, let alone assign them to the poem’s speaker, the poet, or anyone else. This kind of disintegration continually recurs in *The Bridge*. For example, in the lines immediately previous to this passage in “Cape Hatteras,” Walt

Whitman's eyes "range" over Connecticut and "Gleam from the great stones of each prison crypt" (*Complete* 78). Likewise, in "Cutty Sark," what seizes the speaker's attention are the free-floating eyes of a sailor.

His eyes pressed through the green glass
 —green glasses, or bar lights made them
 so—
 shine—
 GREEN—
 eyes— (71)

As he does with words themselves, Crane is experimenting with renouncing the unity of the body in favor of a vision where its separate parts roam unattached. Just as his words slip into one another and the parts of those words in turn seem to live strangely independent lives, people decompose, swirl, and reform, much as they do in such portraits from the analytic phase of Cubism as Pablo Picasso's *Ma Jolie* (1911–12) and Georges Braque's *Le Portugais* (1911–12).

The way in which he describes the machinery in the factory reinforces this kind of an approach to the body. Lines 63–79 of "Cape Hatteras" are dominated by passive verbs, past participles, and prepositional phrases. None of the five grammatically active verbs—"whips," "spoor," "prick," "parts," and "glint"—actually conveys a straightforward notion of agent, action, or thing acted upon. Similarly, "we" in "Cape Hatteras" are like Crane's factory, made up of separate gadgets that act individually without clear causality or purpose. Eyes drift, ears hear, hands touch. In this refracted poetics, it is impossible clearly to differentiate a lyric "I," the audience, or the subject matter.

Everything and everyone is caught up, "bunched," together in a warm, thunderous, living, breeding soup, a "bulging bouillon."

Obviously, then, Crane has a project in mind radically different from the self-enclosed, sharp-edged, artistically coherent lyricism that New Criticism stereotypically propounds. It is helpful to situate his poetry in relation to contemporary artistic trends other than the one that bequeathed to posterity Crane's reputation as a "splendid failure." *The Bridge's* disconcerting indifference to boundaries (self and other, machine and human, body and mind) has many intriguing analogues in the visual arts of Crane's day, ranging from Jean Arp's biomorphic sculptures to works like Francis Picabia's *Voilà Elle!* (1915). Perhaps the most instructive parallel might be Marcel Duchamp's famous *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* (also known as *The Large Glass*) (1915-23), in which coffee grinders, gears, spindles and other bits of industrial detritus engage in a tableau suggestive of voyeurism. Duchamp takes on the academic tradition of the nude portrait and "strips" it of its neo-Platonic wrappings. He reduces human sexuality to nothing more than one function of mutilated, partial, mechanistic beings.

What distinguishes Crane from Duchamp, however, is the poet's celebratory tone. His machines "giggle," express "glee," and experience "ecstasy." Even as his words lose their distinctiveness, the pain of one's own selfhood gives way to a vision of undifferentiated, orgasmic communion with the All. As Crane puts it in "Cutty Sark," "are there frontiers" (72)? Whereas much of the impact of Duchamp's work depends on the eerie grace of the "Bride" spinning in space above a barrier that divides her from the "Bachelors," Crane's verse denies any such gap. It instead more closely resembles what Sigmund Freud in

Civilization and Its Discontents calls the “oceanic feeling,” a blissful return to the psychic state before the infant learns the distinction between self and other (19). People are not reduced to machines, in Crane’s view, but machines are instead like people, caught up in transcendent forces of growth, dynamism, and development, part of the “mystic” totality of the universe.

Insofar as what Crane is seeking for is a dissolution of differences, Freud might argue, it makes sense that he would imagine all objects, whether the soil that becomes Pocahontas in “Powhatan’s Daughter,” or the machines here in “Cape Hatteras,” to be bound up in an exchange of libidinal energy. When everything is connected to everything, then there can be no separation between one who desires and the object of desire. Time itself loses significance as words, things, and the ego cycle, recirculate, and become one another. In this utopia, there could be no loss or separation. “Blind ecstasy” would be an apt description for this profound, total satisfaction.

III

Another way of talking about Crane’s refusal of boundaries is by reference to the long tradition of mystical love poetry. One does not have to invoke Freud to appreciate the metaphor of bridegroom and bride as an expression of the desire to escape the self for union with a higher reality. Such an interpretation recontextualizes eroticism firmly in literary history. John Donne in Holy Sonnet X calls for God to “ravish” him, St John of the Cross imagines Christ taking him to bed, Krishna dances with the maidens. Likewise, at the end of “Cape Hatteras” Crane walks off with Whitman into the sunset. The transport

of *eros* provides Crane with a model for understanding what it might mean to escape the pain of division, of alienation, and attain perfect communion with the true.

If true love is the answer to the pain of modernity, however, it is difficult to say that "Cape Hatteras," more particularly this section, resembles a conventional love poem. Why all the airplanes? How many Petrarchan sonnets include blimps compared to whales? Nevertheless, its dimension as love poetry is vital to understanding Crane's search for transcendence through language. To make this point and to demonstrate its relevance to lines 63–79 in particular requires a digression into history and biography; both are invoked only insofar as they will ultimately shed light on the workings of the poetry itself.

The relevance of Crane's sexual orientation both to his poetry and to the reception of it has occasioned much critical attention since 1990.⁵⁾ One can see why love quickly becomes a thorny subject in *The Bridge*. To acknowledge it means grappling with any number of slippery questions. The aesthetic and the "perversely" sexual become implicated in ways that can disturb the purist. For example, Allen Tate freely confessed to being uncomfortable with what he termed the "homosexual thing" in "Cape Hatteras" (Unterecker 431). Understandably, given his unease, in his review of *The Bridge*, Allen Tate recognizes obliquely but dismisses the role that *eros* plays in the ecstatic vision of mystical poetry. He reinscribes Crane's love as cloying sentiment: philosophically, Tate contends, the book reduces to "a sentimental muddle of Walt Whitman... raised to a vague and transcendent reality"

5) For a booklength investigation of Crane's poetry in relation to his sexual orientation, see Yingling. For other treatments of the topic, see Dean; Gardner; chapter one of Nealon; Smith; and chapters four and six of Vincent.

(622).

One might argue, too, that Crane himself worries over how to integrate his emotional life and his poetry, ultimately deciding to downplay his private life in his search for an all-embracing myth. True, in *The Bridge* he generally does talk about his sexual desires and encounters obliquely. For instance, in “The Tunnel” he hints at cruising in public toilets in the line “love / A burnt match skating in the urinal” (*Complete* 98–99). The scene with the sailor in “Cutty Sark” is full of double entendres such as “the rum was Plato in our heads” or “he shot a finger out the door... / ‘O life’s a geyser” (72). Perhaps most teasing is “Harbor Dawn,” in which Crane includes no gender-specific pronouns referring to the lovers. One has to be sharp to notice that the marginal gloss, “Who is the woman with us in the dawn,” implies that neither of “us” is female (54). Similarly, one could read the factory passage of “Cape Hatteras” as a displaced erotic fantasy about Whitman, full of phallic symbols (“spouting pillars,” “bobbins,” “spools”) and bodily fluids (“bouillon,” “jelly,” “oil”). Crane, after all, has just mentioned Whitman in the lines previous, and similar metaphors will continue later in the poem, as when he talks about flowers “flaked like tethered foam” blooming on the day that he first read *Leaves of Grass* (82).

Thus, one could argue that because of the strictures of his day Crane hides his physical feelings in elliptical, obscure verse in “Cape Hatteras” in order to separate it from his more licit, sentimental adulation of Whitman in the poem’s final pages. This is the opinion of Thomas Yingling, who singles out “Cape Hatteras” as the hallmark of Crane’s “split consciousness” (209). Crane can speak of going off hand in hand with a poet who is a “seer,” a “Meistersinger,” and a “Vedic

Caesar," but he cannot end up in a lover's arms (Crane, *Complete* 83). Machines can have sex, not men. Such a strategy of dissociation is clearly at work in Waldo Frank's introduction. At one point he criticizes Crane for his recourse to the "tangential release" of "sexual indulgence" (xxiii), without specifying his homosexuality, whereas later he mentions that "Crane's tender friendships were with boys who followed the sea" (xxviii). Male-male love can exist but not in the same sentence with sexual activity.

Such an interpretation of "Cape Hatteras" does not do justice to Crane's poem or to *The Bridge* as a whole. He was not overly careful about hiding signs of what he called his "sexual predilections" (*O My Land* 138). The text is full of "tribal" signs from the New York gay subculture of the 1920's. One has to look no further than the epigraphs to the poems, which include quotations from Isadora Duncan, Walt Whitman, Plato, Christopher Marlowe, and Herman Melville, whose parable of homosexual lust, *Billy Budd*, was first published in 1924 to great fanfare. It is difficult to imagine that the kind of literate public likely to read his poetry in 1930 would have completely missed the references to Crane's preferred object choice. Yingling himself goes so far as to call "Cape Hatteras" a "literary coming out" (211). To accuse Crane of deliberate misdirection would be to recapitulate Yvor Winters's charge that a "dissociated sensibility" characterizes homosexuals, an accusation at which Crane took offense (*O My Land* 338). Rather, as Crane cavalierly put it himself, "Such things have such a wholesale way of leaking out" (138).

Indeed, *pace* Yingling, the conclusion to "Cape Hatteras" hardly shies away from the physical. The implicit pun *panis angelicus* / *penis angelicus* is a piece of brilliant blasphemy. Whitman had written in

“So Long!” that *his Leaves of Grass* “is no book. / Who touches this touches a man” (384). Crane sexualizes this sentiment and transforms Whitman’s book-body into a homoerotic sacrament. This sacralization of the body is a recurrent theme throughout *The Bridge*. In “Atlantis,” for instance, Crane imagines a transcendence that encompasses the physical: “Sight, sound, and flesh Thou ledest from time’s realm” (*Complete* 107). He expresses this idea quite clearly in a letter to Waldo Frank.

I have seen the Word made Flesh. I mean nothing less, and I know now that there is such a thing as indestructibility. In the deepest sense, where flesh becomes transformed through intensity of response to counter-response, where sex was beaten out, where a purity of joy was reached that included tears . . . have been able to give freedom and life which was acknowledged in the ecstasy of walking hand in hand across the most beautiful bridge of the world, the cables enclosing us and pulling us upward in such a dance as I have never walked. (*O My* 186-87).

Crane’s faith is more Tantric than Platonic. One must go through the physical, through “response” and “counter-response,” “beating” the “sex” out through indulgence, and refining, “transforming,” love until it becomes “pure,” like the “jelly of stars” collected by the machines in “Cape Hatteras.”

One can see that Crane is doing much more in his ode to machine-sex than tentatively poeticizing his plumbing. He is exploring the Word made Flesh, that is, the way that words, too, are flesh and are to be reveled in. He engages in what might seem “excessive” punning, alliteration, and other forms of wordplay in order to push at and extract their finest essence. The way that the landscape, machinery,

and men become eroticized indiscriminately and powerfully reflects and is of a piece with this linguistic project. If he can "beat" through the barriers between words and men and attain a deeper, "mystical" communion with what they conceal, he advances decisively towards his goal. The sensuous ease with which Crane manipulates, joins and parts words, letters and concepts in his densely textured writing both mirrors and reinforces this vision of ecstatic, almost eschatological, union. Men are machines are words: in loving one, one loves All. If his private life appears marginal or half-suppressed in his poetry, this aspect of it is the result of the way in which the self and its satisfactions are subsumed in the totality toward which they point.

IV

Crane, however, does not rest satisfied with oceanic ecstasy. He aims higher, to a vision of and communion with God Himself. Physical or psychic ecstasy is a route to the religious. Correspondingly, in this passage, the factory promises a "new universe" that will grant "New verities, new inklings." The "stars" deliver us "proverbs," and the message of the factory, "Power's script," is "refined" and we receive the distilled quintessence of the modern, the "jelly of the stars." Though the "thunder" may interrupt us "momentwise," we can find repose in the mechanical vision of an anointed, or "oilrinsed," savior. The rotating wheels are "circles," that is, symbols of eternity, and they "shine" like the stars that later in "Cape Hatteras" deliver "frosty sagas," that is, new revelations from on high. To burst barriers, to immerse oneself in sensual experience, is the essence of his linguistic experimentation, but it is only a precondition for the bliss of

transcending the world altogether.

Lines 63–79 of “Cape Hatteras” not only exemplify *The Bridge*’s drive to dissolve the ego into the All, but they also represent a seemingly countervailing desire, for the individual to confront the Divine one–on–one. The factory offers an almost Biblical theophany. As in Ezekiel 1 and 9, a vision of the divine appears amidst smoke (“spouting pillars spoor the evening sky”), fire (“dynamos”), and “thunder.” Ezekiel’s eye–encircled wheels within wheels become “oilrinsed circles” as “bright as frogs’ eyes.” The final, silent, that is, “murmurless,” epiphany of the stanza recalls the last line of the entire *Bridge*, “Whispers antiphonal in azure swing” (*Complete* 108). Both, in turn, carry resonances of 1 Kings 19:11–12, in which the word of God is a “still small voice” in the wake of the chaos of storm, fire, and earthquake. A moment of quiet and equipoise succeeds violence, whether that of the “torturing” of words, associations, and syntax, or the terrible “Ghoul–mound” of death in “Cape Hatteras” (82).

The Bridge locates these precious glimpses of the divine in a broad, mythic sweep of time for which the teleology of the Bible is the paradigm. For instance, “Cape Hatteras” begins with “saurians” and a “dinosaur” at the beginning of time, moves on to the fall (“Adam and Adam’s answer in the forest” [78]), contains bloody battles like Kings and Chronicles, and finds its Messiah in Walt Whitman. Whitman is both Christ Redeemer and Harrower of Hell (“upward from the dead / Thou bringest tally, and a pact, new bound / Of living brotherhood!”) and Christ the Suffering Servant (“Thou.../ Has kept of wounds, O Mourner, all that sum / That then from Appomattox stretched to the Somme!” [82]). Whitman, transfigured, with his “aureole,” points towards “Easters of speeding light” and becomes himself the Eucharist,

the "Panis Angelicus" (83). Like Milton in the ninth book of *Paradise Lost*, Crane provides an overview of Christian sacred history.

Indeed, *The Bridge* as a whole presents history after sacred history, from the New Exodus of Columbus in "Ave Maria" to the New *Inferno* of "The Tunnel." It is within this mythic timescape that the rare moment of insight gains its import. As TS Eliot puts it in "Little Gidding," "history is a pattern / Of timeless moments" and without knowledge of the history and the pattern, the timelessness of the moments remains elusive (58). The power of the machine, as observed and understood in lines 63–79 of "Cape Hatteras," represents one time among others when Crane asserts that the Divine does indeed "Unto us lowliest sometime sweep" (*Complete* 44). If one is ever to perceive such instances of Incarnation, however, *The Bridge* asserts that one must immerse oneself in time's flow, completely lose oneself in it, and yet come to master it from within.

Likewise, Crane seems to believe, it is only through the inherently temporal dimension of writing—one word always succeeding another—that one can isolate and point to that which eludes time or speech, that which, in short, is outside the humanly knowable world. In looking to forge a mythic language, or as he calls it in "To Brooklyn Bridge," an "Unfractioned idiom" (44), the poet strives against divisions and the forward-propelling momentum of grammar. If Crane's ideal language could ever be actualized, it would be able to collapse time, space, speaker and audience. In itself, it could link All to God and redeem the fallenness of the world. Language would at last extinguish itself by giving way to unmediated communion with eternity.

Conceiving of poetry as a search for a language so perfect that it

negates the need for language leads to a vicious circle. Unless the poet has attained the ideal, even if he sees God, there is no way to assert the content of the truth because it is “Unspeakable” with the words available to him (107). God simply *is*, and in the end the seer can do no more than report the fact of the vision or perhaps mime its meaning through the limited tools and analogies at his disposal. Therefore, caught up in sense of the interconnectedness of things, dissolving the Many in the search for the One, leaving behind even the restrictions of the self, Crane perhaps finds his transcendence but also finds it incommunicable. He reacts by turning again to the language, to press it harder, farther, faster, so as to incorporate and hopefully to overcome more history, metaphor, and emotion, but, trapped like Heidegger in spirals of words, he discovers that Being eludes definitive statement. The resultant fertility of the “bulging bouillon” of his poetry may be prodigious, but framed as his project is, the “transcendence” it searches for is almost by definition going to be “vague,” as Tate accuses. It is in experience, if anywhere, in walking over a bridge hand in hand with a beloved, not in words. Crane chooses to bet the farm in a linguistic game where the rules are such that the house always wins.

This, then, is Crane’s “failure,” but, one must ask, isn’t it a failure emblematic of the later twentieth century? In his article “The Genealogy of Postmodernism,” Albert Gelpi argues that U.S. poetry of the last fifty years has been characterized by a restless oscillation between “neo-romantic” and “postmodern” poles. Neo-romantics, he proposes, believe in transcendence outside of language; postmoderns do not. Gelpi concedes that given writers and given poems rarely represent either extreme consistently or purely. Instead, they wrestle

incessantly with the vexed legacy of modernism: the unstable relationship between language, materiality, reference, and the ineffable. The situation in the academy is no different, one should add. Fredric Jameson's title *The Prison House of Language* has become shorthand for a range of troubling, or perhaps liberating, ideas about language's status as the ultimate horizon within which we exist and make sense of the world. In Crane's poetry we find the dilemma of "the prison house of language" posed in its most immediate, poignant form. Is there a way out? And if there is not, are we satisfied with the lush play of surfaces that seems our chief consolation? His verse poses a problem that contemporary U.S. poetry has yet to overcome fully or satisfactorily.

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[Abstract]

When Hart Crane's poem cycle *The Bridge* was published in 1930, a group of influential reviewers accused Crane of immaturity, sentimentality, and lack of focus. They condemned Crane's wayward, fuzzy mysticism as backwards-looking and self-defeating. Even sympathetic critics, such as Harold Bloom, have consistently portrayed Crane's poetry as the pyrotechnic final fizzle of late romanticism. These persistent, public reservations, however, have not prevented an impressive proliferation in secondary literature concerning Crane since the late 1960s. His promiscuity, alcoholism, erratic behavior, relative poverty, tragic death, and total commitment to art have since earned him the labels of New World Rimbaud and proto-Beat. His colorful career thus explains in part his retrospective fame. Nevertheless, living hard and dying young do not guarantee

artistic immortality. This article poses questions as to why Crane has mattered so much to subsequent generations of U.S. readers and what these readers find so compelling in his poetry. The answer, I would argue, lies in Crane's idiosyncratic use of language. Far from striving for transparency, he writes in an inimitably obstructive, artificial manner. There is something seductive and absurd in his wild use of words here, I would further argue, we discover the reason behind both Crane's enduring appeal *and* his supposed inadequacy as a writer. Crane did "torture" syntax, semantics, and conventional associations, not because he saw his unusual language as an eccentric mannerism but because he saw it as a tool in the service of constructing a "myth of America" and reintegrating the human and divine. Understanding why he considered this to be the case clarifies Crane's achievement and illuminates why his work still seems so relevant today.