

“Your Hands Within My Hands Are Deeds”: Poems of Love in *The Bridge*

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The Bridge is the great accessible surprise of modern poetry: its lines reach sweepingly outward to overtake and encompass new vistas even as its poet moves out of an awareness of what he has been, of where he has been before. And to some extent, *The Bridge* remains unrivalled by other poems of concerted action, other poems that affirm a precise way for one to move. There have been long poems, such as “Song of the Open Road,” luring us outward toward a dim, lovely golden age of the future. Whitman rocks with us till our bodies melt away, till we go up, immortal, in smoke. And there have been long poems hugging a firm and solid shore of the past, such as *The Waste Land*. Eliot makes our viewing so keen, with all our dissatisfactions intact, that we are weighed down with our own sharpness. But few poems attempt to stand so fully in the present, in the light of the poet’s own intelligence, as *The Bridge*. Few aspire to such a rise of optimism stemming from all that has gone before.

What the poet draws out for readers of *The Bridge* is an act of continuity, and the continuity of the poem is its most remarkable triumph. As a person, as a son, as a citizen, Hart Crane had all the reasons in the world to feel he had no future. He had made no steady home for himself, he had found no single one to love, and in a barbaric age, an age he called “appalling and dull at the same time,”¹ he had taken up the course of complex lyric poetry. But the poet of *The Bridge* will make up for all this—even as he stays close to the dangers of falling apart, close to the difficulties of holding oneself together.

The poet of *The Bridge* is most concerned with the struggle to realize a future for himself in his own poem, to discover a direction that will free him to write more poetry. But the only way such a direction can take shape is through the poet’s encompassing the past of his poem, carrying it with him, transformed, as he moves beyond it. This achievement, perhaps in an individual more assured of his future, could have been all patterned formula, revolving around the projection of some value from the past into the future. This would have conditioned the future, however, as ready-made, fully wrapped up, certain, more gone by than the past. Poetically, the results would have been un-

¹ Quoted in Michael Hamburger: *The Truth of Poetry*, London, 1969, p. 208. From *The Poet’s Vocation* (ed. William Burford and Christopher Middleton), Austin, Texas, 1967, p. 52. The entire quote is: “A period loose at all ends, without apparent direction of any sort. In some ways the most amazing age there ever was. Appalling and dull at the same time.”

bearably nostalgic—the very quality the poet of *The Bridge* insistently acts to overcome.

By spurning the temptation to conceive of a future as though it could be the past made over, the poet writes poems more frustrating, yet more vitally alive, than his critics have so far acknowledged. What *The Bridge* calls for is to take up both the past and the future as the living sequence of the present. The poems emphasize the vitality that can come into the present if one is in the present, yet above it, relating one's past toward a future. This act of connecting past to future involves, most of all, a willingness to listen to oneself while writing. To write is to catch one's impressions, to recall those impressions as full of implications and to realize those implications so that they give bearing to one's future. The poet experiences, discovers the implications of his experience, then acts upon his discovery. And since each action creates a new experience with new implications, the poet's thinking remains compelling, unbroken. The result is the poem as a living present, all the movement of the poem related integrally to the movement within it. The poet is not the celebrant of a golden future or a perfect past: he stands in the present, the maker of a living present in which the past is thought through into the future.

The continuity of *The Bridge* springs from nothing more than the active mind of the poet, holding his poems together line by line and moment by moment through the connections he makes. And while it is a continuity achieved through language—language infused with the connective feeling and thinking of the poet—it is a continuity not without implications for the readers of *The Bridge*. For the American culture of which the poet writes may rest in a void. The American past, as imaged by men like Columbus, was glorious; Columbus, in "Ave Maria," is not only a stirring adventurer but a passionate man of conscience: "—Rush down the plenitude, and you shall see / Isaiah counting famine on this lee!" And at one time, as the poet stresses in "The Dance," the country was virginal, in the care of the Indian whose bounding imagination quickened all that he saw, making the land into a woman, the sun into a man. But today, to the separate individuals brought together in "Quaker Hill," the past simply does not exist:

This was the Promised Land, and still it is
To the persuasive suburban land agent
In bootleg roadhouses where the gin fizz
Bubbles in time to Hollywood's new love-nest pageant.

The land has been raped, sold and sold again; and the famine that has fallen on the country drives people to clutch an immediate present where a Hollywood set of effervescent illusions can become a reflection of the new ideal. The ideals of the past appear to have been forgotten, and with the breakdown of ideals there goes a corresponding collapse of continuity.

The poet's aim is not, however, to return to the ideals of the past but to achieve a continuity—a continuity that commits one to the present. The poet of *The Bridge* has no program for such a commitment; rather, his need for con-

tinuity places him with those who are lost, like the land agent, at the same time as it suggests he must try to break from a sense of the weak, immediate present to write poems that will create a future for himself. Not all the poems in *The Bridge* achieve a breakthrough, though all of them aspire to it. Because the poet, in his very language, is so bent upon making connections through his intelligence rather than through a set scheme or pattern, no poem in *The Bridge* feels out of touch with the poet's desire to create a living present. But at times, his emphasis falls heavily on the distinction between past and present—a distinction paralleled by a lapse in the strength of his language—and in two of the last poems to be written, "Quaker Hill" and "Cape Hatteras," he uses the richness of the past to expose the shallowness of the present. Whitman's "Sea-eyes and tidal, undenying, bright with myth" are set off by the eyes of the aeroplane pilots, eyes up in the air, eyes unfocussed on anything, "bicarbonated white with speed." Other times, as in "Cutty Sark" and "The River," his emphasis hits on the relation between past and present. The past, in those poems, is not truly as remote as might seem apparent. From listening to the broken reveries of a derelict sailor, "O life's a geyser—beautiful—my lungs— / No—I can't live on land!" the poet can put together the days of clipper ships, of races to China-Cathay. And the "20th Century Limited," for all its haste, is still not as evanescent as the aeroplane; the poet can slow down the train, throw open the windows and let in the "River's musk / —As though the waters breathed that you might know / *Memphis Johnny, Steamboat Bill, Missouri Joe.*" Still other times, in the finest poems of *The Bridge*, the poet realizes the shape of his subject primarily through the action of his language; in these poems, the poet brings the past into the present in order to sense a future direction. In these poems the poet realizes that what is absent, what is lacking, does not become a cause for despair but can be made into a sense of what is needed, of what is wanted. The poet understands his own experience and sees the relation between his own experience and the experience of others and can bring into his language a new kind of experience that promises a continuity, a reaching into the future that is based upon an awareness in the present of what the present is in need of. Such writing takes note of the weakness in the immediate present, in the present wrought by contemporary culture, and acts to push beyond it, to create a living present of which past and future are integral parts. These poems become all vital connecting, all continuity, all listening and creating which the reader is pressed to follow. They are truly works suffused with the presence of the poet, each moment in them formed in response to a previous moment and seeded with the possibilities of the next moment. To grasp the push of any one line is to be pulled into the whole poem, for so interconnected is one moment, being the living fusion of the past of the poem bending toward the future of the poem, that the reader seems both inside and outside the moment, both experiencing the moment as well as sensing its origin and what lies beyond it. In these poems, *The Bridge* raises itself to a powerful unity: lines are packed till bursting with implications that foreshadow and recollect, with the presence of the poet's active, shaping mind containing all the energy of the poem. Through such work, the poet sets a standard by which all of *The Bridge* may be judged.

Nothing more firmly establishes the character of the poet of *The Bridge* than the opening stanzas of the poet's invocation to the muse, "Proem: To Brooklyn Bridge." Taken with an objective eye, with an eye detached from the Proem, few artifacts seem more strangely fitted to play the muse than the Brooklyn Bridge. Why not instead a more immediately identifiable inspiration, such as the Statue of Liberty? She holds a torch of light, she offers a welcome to forgotten masses, she towers at the gateway to the country—these qualities all provide her with attractions meaningful to a poet beginning an epic of America.² Yet she would have been, finally, the conventional choice for the poet's muse. That the poet took, instead, Brooklyn Bridge—his own means of "going to and fro" his home and Manhattan—strongly presses on the personal in the poem. The poet will not, here as elsewhere, depend upon what has a fixed and settled meaning for an easy majority of people. He knows he will not have what R. P. Blackmur, in his essay on Crane, said Baudelaire benefitted from: "A well-articulated version of the Catholic Church to control the moral aspect of his meanings."³ The control of the poet will not come from outside his language; the approach of the poet, the way he moves from one thing to the next, is what the reader must learn to follow. Only then can poetry be alive in the act.

Even Brooklyn Bridge does not appear, in "Proem," as distinct from the approach of the poet. It does not appear suddenly; it must, as with a traditional muse, be invoked. But when it is invoked and does proclaim itself in the fourth stanza, it no longer has the status of an object—as it might have had in the title of the Proem. Unlike the goddess traditionally invoked by an epical poet, what has been invoked cannot be separated from the poet's act of invoking it. The bridge appears as the poet's response to certain needs he has realized in the first three stanzas and it is recognizable primarily because it relates to what has come before it. Out of the self-realizations of the first three stanzas, each discovery based on what has gone before, the poet comes to the "Thee," the muse that answers him, catching up all his desires in an image that is both ideal and subjective, as it is suffused with his feelings, with his particular approach to it, as well as tangible and objective, as it is an actual artifact. At the same time, the bridge is always evocative of the beyond—the beyond of the future poem, the beyond the poet is reaching toward, the beyond of a world greater than that which so many accept now:

And Thee, across the harbor, silver-paced
As though the sun took step of thee, yet left

² Crane wrote a brief, bitter, never published poem centering on the Statue of Liberty which includes these lines: "On this strange shore I build/ The Virgin. They laugh to hear/ How I endow her . . ." See "To Liberty" in "More Late Poems," *The Collected Poetry and Prose of Hart Crane* (ed. Brom Weber), New York, 1966, p. 180.

³ "New Thresholds, New Anatomies," *Language as Gesture*, New York, 1954, p. 304. Blackmur says Crane's two masters were Baudelaire, who aimed at control, and Whitman, who aimed at release, but the poet imperfectly assimilated them.

Some motion ever unspent in thy stride,—
Implicitly thy freedom staying thee!

The bridge does not appear till the poet is able to look at it in such a way as to see it. But then it not only looks back at him, reflecting him, casting light on his relation to it, it also points ahead to the unfolding of “new verities, new ink-lings” and redeems the past of the poem, the exploratory strugglings of the first three stanzas. At the same time, what is exciting in “Thee” is that, in one sense, it stands apart from the poet, it is evidently there in the midst of the city, it is felt to be objective. Like a correct idea, the bridge has a life all its own, yet a life others can involve themselves in.

In comparison to this triumphant discovery, the opening of the Proem seems formed from an underlying current of despair. For no matter how gloriously the seagull is at the outset, no matter how closely the poet identifies with him, he still remains all wings and soars up and out of sight:

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 . . .

There is an almost unbearable gap between the winging of the gull and “the chained bay waters.” It is a gap emphasized through the rising and falling, trochee and iamb rhythms of “How many dawns, chill from his rippling rest” as contrasted to the bunched, tight, clenched rhythms of “chained bay waters Liberty.” The poet can identify with the gull—“his rippling rest” and “dip and pivot him” apply to the poet as surely as to the gull: the “his” and “him” underline that—but the wish to be utterly free, apart from all the routine of the city, only leads to an increased awareness of one's bondage to routine.

The lack of conventional syntax in these first two stanzas is, I think, deliberately frustrating; it is meant to convey a lack of any sure direction. But this lack of direction does not mean the poet is simply floundering; indeed, he is already beginning to work out his true freedom by working through his sense of what is wrong with his situation. If “apparitional” in the second line refers to the gull's wings, it also refers to “our eyes” which fade, when forsaken by the brief ecstasy of the gull, toward “Some page of figures.” Most painful of all, however, is the fact that the gull's wings linger in the memory; for in the city, in the office, there is no room for anything like human memory. Memory resides in filing cabinets, memory is “Some page of figures to be filed away,” memory comes down to a matter of commerce. Thus, while the drop of the ele-

vator at the close of day signals a release from routine, an escape from the office, it is also, in this context, truly terrifying; for the persons dropping in that box are, in one respect, treated no differently than the page of figures rolled back in a cabinet.

Out of the poet's sharp awareness of the diffidence of the city—a diffidence fostered by reducing memory to a filing cabinet—the words that open stanza three, "I think . . ." have a special force. The poet, of course, is one of the crowd, the multitude, the lost—all of whom are seeking something better and who recollect the flash of the gull's wings in that "flashing scene/ Never disclosed, but hastened to again."

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.

Yet the implication is that these people are unanswered; they have been overlooked by makers of films who provide only "panoramic sleights"—magic tricks that are but patronizing dismissals. And if the poet sees that they, like him, are frustrated in their longings, living in a kind of abyss with their desires unfulfilled, he also sees them as not at all complacent but unsettled, bending forward in a seeking attitude. The shift, at this point, to a firm syntax, with lines rolling forward in determination, reveals the poet gaining a sense of his direction as he grasps the fact that others share his plight and the audience for a great poem exists all around him. This is a crucial shift in the Proem, the point at which the poet comes to realize the connection between his own troubles and the needs of others. And the very change in syntax becomes a summoning of power which affirms that reaching out to others is in fact the direction for the poet—instead of reaching out to a gull's wings, longing to fly away to some faraway freedom. The lilt of the gull, the sense of freedom, must be won in the city; the yearning to identify with a soaring bird must be transformed into a reaching into oneself and a reaching out to others.

At this point, the entrance of that which is beyond the poet yet to which the poet can address himself becomes a realization most distinctively earned. To address the bridge as "Thee" comports with the poet's grasp of an audience which promises him the opportunity to write a poem that others actually need to hear. And yet the fact is that in this stanza the poet does not speak directly to his discovered audience: he speaks to that which is beyond him, that which is beyond the audience. The very idea, however, of aiming for that which is beyond one is just the possibility the poet has discovered; the poet will speak with an audience of lost multitudes but in his own tongue, taking step of the sun yet not abandoning his own individual stride. He will make his audience aware of the possibilities it shares if only it becomes aware of them—just as the poet has been led, in the lines of the poem, into an awareness of what is possible, of what is beyond him yet within his reach. "Implicitly thy freedom staying thee!"—such a freedom to redeem what is all around one (but which has

gone unrealized, as the multitudes have been overlooked by more fashionable poets) is determined to keep one in touch with himself, with his own deepest needs, even as it is bent on awakening new possibilities for the future.

For many readers, "To Brooklyn Bridge" is a poem of flickering, suggestive imagery.⁴ The poet provides us with tantalizing glimpses of themes that will be taken up at length in *The Bridge*. To be sure, the Proem includes many notions the poet will later explore at length, but to treat the poem only as an overture, full of "some flashing scene" that will be "hastened to again," is to ignore the strength of the poet thinking through the matter of his feelings, rising up out of a sense of what troubles him to discover a meaningful direction for himself in relation to others. Not a rehearsal of the main themes of *The Bridge*, "Proem: To Brooklyn Bridge" is the very discovering of a way of acting which, involving the poet in a complex and living present, opens up a future for the poet in his poem. He must listen to the implications of his own position, realizing that such implications can be the basis for an active response to his own needs and the needs of others. In such a way, he comes into his finest audience.

Such an achievement from Crane, so strenuous and spacious at once, is just not predictable in the light of his earlier poems. *The Bridge* springs most utterly from itself, from the poet's definite and explicit joy as well as his constant apprehension in taking up the continuum of such a poem of concerted action. In comparison, the shorter poems from *White Buildings* seem wrenched with agony and doubt. The only way to achieve release from the intensity piling up in "The Wine Menagerie" is to forge an end for the poem by realizing it is not moving in the direction the poet desires. Only when on the verge of losing what he wishes, only then is the poet able to see what he wishes. To come to the awareness that "To travel in a tear/ Sparkling alone, within another's will" is both what the poet knows he has not attained even as he still upholds it—this moves the poet somewhere even as it pulls him down. A more hope-filled poem is the early "For the Marriage of Faustus and Helen"; but this has little to do with the activity of *The Bridge*. The poet of "Faustus and Helen" seems to wish to be impervious to his doubts. The work is rhetorical and willful, hinged upon the introduction of an imaginary woman into a waste land so that one can feast his eyes on the waste land as though it were womanly. The poem, finally, is small, pinched and egotistical in just those places where the poet wants to let in light and air; it is a magic garden aggressively blooming in a street, and the poet gets there "Without recall,—lost yet poised in traffic." Only, perhaps, in "Voyages," which breaks out of the last pages of *White Buildings*, is *The Bridge* sensed to be possible. There, so great is the love of the poet he must take all the sea as metaphor; and yet he does not drown in the magnitude of his feelings. He can keep in mind the loved one as greater than himself, ever beyond any thought of containment, even as he catches, in the indi-

⁴ For alternate readings of "Proem," see R. W. B. Lewis: *The Poetry of Hart Crane: A Critical Study*, Princeton, New Jersey, 1967; and Herbert Leibowitz: *Hart Crane: An Introduction to the Poetry*, New York, 1968, pp. 143-150.

vidual rhythms and syntax of each voyage, the progress of his feelings toward his love.

Only "Voyages" suggests *The Bridge*. Just as, when one is in love, he retains his loving as long as he continues to arrive at new discoveries through his loving, so the poet of *The Bridge* is always seeking beyond himself, never settling into a firm and fixed position. The poet's peak, like that of the highest lover, has little to do with satiety, with final containment. To be exhausted, fully fulfilled—that is the death of loving. True loving, great poetry: each has climaxes, but no climax. The poems of "Voyages" draw to an end when loving is gone.

2

Yet in "The Harbor Dawn" the poet is denying a conviction about the lover which "Voyages" goes very far to affirm. It is the notion that there is something entirely other-worldly about loving, that it takes place on the ocean, leaving behind completely the kids on the shore. To grasp the poems of "Voyages," we are always on the verge of giving ourselves over entirely to the flow of things. In distinction, the poet of "The Harbor Dawn" is able to catch the movement of one leaving the shore to enter the waves, a movement beyond the scope of the poet of "Voyages," who suddenly shoves off,

The bottom of the sea is cruel.

—And yet this great wink of eternity

leaving the kids on the shore, frisking with their dog, fondling their shells and sticks. The six poems of "Voyages" can be connected to each other primarily through enormous imaginative leaps; movement from one to the other is fraught with risk, full of the unknown. Such extraordinary vaulting is just what a lover cherishes. But in "The Harbor Dawn," the poet is aware of himself writing a personal poem with implications for all who read it. And the poem catches not only the birth of love, the movement from shore to ocean—it also catches the birth of the poet responsive to the needs of others. This is most clear in the quality of the poet's love, for he will make the effort to be in love without withdrawing himself to the special province of the ocean. Indeed, what such a poet must do is bring the ocean to the shores of the city, to the dry sands of metropolitan America. And "The Harbor Dawn," so open in its progress, so alluring to follow, so full of awareness of the implications of its discovery, succeeds in bringing, as the last stanza intimates, the stars into the sunlight.

What matters in "The Harbor Dawn" is not just the lover whom the poet imagines speaking to him:

*your hands within my hands are deeds;
my tongue upon your throat—singing*

arms close; eyes wide, undoubtful
dark
drink the dawn—
a forest shudders in your hair!

What matters as well is the poet discovering the significance and implications of this love. This beautiful, brief poem is more than a lovely lyric of love. It points beyond itself to a love that opens into a bright future, but it does not leave behind the painful, even hateful aspects which shrink men down, which leave them incapable of love. It is tempting, even in the poem, to drop back to sleep, to say that there is where love is true, in the depths of dreams. But the poet wants his love under the sun, in the air—he wants his dreams alive, not shrouded in a foggy haze. This, the loveliest lyric in *The Bridge*, finds the poet turning out of himself, turning away from the lyric poem he might have come to so effortlessly. It reveals the death of the purely lyric poet and the birth of the poet as a man of action, motivated by a lyric poet's love. The private and the public are fused in this personal poem, the poem of a poet aware of himself and others as persons, as individuals who can be loved. What dawns on the poet is that, in loving, the "deeds" of the lover are not simply chivalric, heroic activities; they are contracts, full of promise and obligation. Such a lover, the poet affirms in the course of the poem, is no dream, no image roused from sleepy depths. Instead, such a person is able to include and contain dreaminess within him, because he is in the process of activating his dreams, bringing them to light, making them into contracts, obligations, connections, bridges. And it is the concept of such a love, developed in the poem as what the poet is in need of, what the poet is looking for, that frees the poet to enter a bright new day even as he stays in touch with his dreams of the night.

Without the awareness that what the poet is in need of is a love, the poet might as well be in a haze, half-asleep. The implication is that, without the personal direction that love brings, anyone would be unable to articulate his dreams, his desires. Unarticulated, unfocused, such dreams are indistinguishable from a foggy haze—and this is perhaps the state of the times surrounding the poet. People walk in the fog, aware that they have dreams, unwilling or unable to make them come alive. The poet wants to affirm that one must be roused from this half-sleep, but not in such a way as to lose the dream of love. At the outset of "The Harbor Dawn," the poet is implying this split between the privacy of one's deepest dreams and the publicity of one's everyday routine. And he does so in a personal way, as a man unwilling to awaken, unwilling to be born, because the world he might enter might have nothing to do with his dreams. So he keeps retreating to a hazy state.

This explains, I think, the painfulness at the outset of the poem, for the poet is tossed up on the sands of the oncoming day, a public world, to be tugged back into the waters of the night, a private world. The poet, tossed and tugged, retains his weariness, his reluctance to waken; he seems trapped in a chaos:

Insistently through sleep—a tide of voices—

They meet you listening midway in your dream,
The long, tired sounds, fog-insulated noises:
Gongs in white surplices, beshrouded wails,
Far strum of fog horns . . . signals dispersed in veils.

Counterpoint to this weary, muffled, nightmarish ebbing and flowing is the insistent beat of a daily routine, a regularized throbbing with which the heart is not connected:

And then a truck will lumber past the wharves
As winch engines begin throbbing on some deck;
Or a drunken stevedore's howl and thud below
Come echoing alley-upward through dim snow.

One instinctively shrinks from this onslaught, summoning back the haze of sleep. Though sleep may be painful because of its vagueness, it at least eludes the oafish puns, the animal howls, of the daily grind. But the poet returns to his sleep less to avoid the dull sounds of the everyday than to attempt to make them over, to go under them, to get beneath them, to move to some kind of harmony. The double sense of the poet wanting to escape yet discovering a reciprocity is virtually enacted in: "And if they take your sleep away sometimes/ They give it back again." "Sometimes"—poised so perfectly—pivots toward both "take" and "give"; and yet, when one moves past the line break, there is a sense of relief, as though the poet actually yields his perch to drift off.

With the dreamy visions to which he returns in a half-wakeful, half-wishful state, the poet comes close to understanding his need for a love that is based both on reverent attention (as in the "Soft sleeves of sound" that "Attend the darkling harbor, the pillowed bay") and capacious freedom (as in the steam that "Spills into steam and wanders, washed away/ —Flurried by keen fifings"). Yet to be "washed away" is not truly to be free. And it is only with the presence of the rising sun, sensed as the force behind all, that the poet begins to move out of his hazy retreat:

The sky,

Cool feathery fold, suspends, distills
This wavering slumber. . . . Slowly—
Immemorially the window, the half-covered chair
Ask nothing but this sheath of pallid air.

What is magnificent is not only the perception that the sun is a shepherd restoring order by herding the haze into clouds; it is also the fact that sun brings a sudden sense of light to things that have always been there, making the poet feel the rightness of that which is all about him. In this new relation to light, what had formerly been ignored now has a new look to it, even as what is new is so because it seems immemorial.

Out of the relation of window and chair fulfilled by the sheath of air, and with an echo of the fulfillment of the "Soft sleeves of sound" that "Attend the darkling harbor, the pillowed bay," the poet becomes aware of what he has as fulfillment, the love beside him. Such a love is able to bring into focus all that has been floating associatively, unattached to anyone but the poet. In love, cool arms murmur, close arms sing, eyes drink; your lover's tongue is upon your throat, a forest springs from the hair. All these qualities—multiple yet integrated, so like the impossible happenings of dreams but so focused and unwavering—are brought together in love, in realizing the depths of another person, in sharing your dreams. And this love can help you bring your dreams to light.

For a moment, this is doubtful. The frost is at the window with its clutching hands, day is coming on, the dreams of the night will not survive. Indeed, the words of the lover, set in italics, may be the words of a "waking dream." But must such words be spoken by a definite other to be in the air? Love is a promise, not a fulfillment; the fulfillment of love is in the keeping of a continual sense of promise. And it is difficult to deny that, in the last two stanzas, the lover is with the poet imaginatively. For if the lover has special eyes—

*eyes wide, undoubtful
dark
drink the dawn—*

then the poet surely sees with those eyes. For he sees in such a way as to be able to take nourishment from the sun, not shrink from it (as he had threatened to shrink earlier, when his dreams were attached not to another person but to fog).

It is not accomplished in an obvious way. "Cyclopean towers" all too quickly suggest a one-dimensionality, a lack of depths and perspective, a flatness instead of a richness—all in striking contrast to the multi-dimensionality of "*eyes . . . drink the dawn*":

The window goes blond slowly. Frostily clears.
From Cyclopean towers across Manhattan waters
—Two—three bright window-eyes aglitter, disk
The sun, released—aloft with cold gulls hither.

But it is the sun flickering across the "Two—three bright window-eyes" that is able to recollect the sense of the lover's eyes; the sun is not trapped in the flat sheets of glass, it is free. And out of its stiff, frosty beginning, the very stanza comes alive, fusing the sense of dawning with the sense of the lover. The sun acts as though it were caught, held a moment, then thrust into the air, to become as one of the gulls. The energy of the sun is sprung through the line break: "disk/ The sun, released—aloft with cold gulls hither."

The final stanza bears the poet forward in the shape of the lover who is made active, not incapacitated, by his love. The love chases away the fog,

even as the fog turns friendly in this new light, for now the dreams of the poet are no longer wandering, attached to a haze, but are in the air:

The fog leans one last moment on the sill.
Under the mistletoe of dreams, a star—
As though to join us at some distant hill—
Turns in the waking west and goes to sleep.

The poet is made aware of the presence of a star which can guide him, pulling him ahead into new poems, into an opening future, into a new destiny, even as it remains in touch with that deepest realm of dreams. It lures us ahead, into the “waking west” as it retains a sense of its own origin. It is the star of loving, here brought out into the sun, so that the loving affirmed frees you to walk in the sun, in the bright illumination of day, even as you stay aware of the stars, of the invisible felt presence of evening dreams in the air.

The star of loving, once its invisible presence has been realized, never really fades from *The Bridge*. It is certainly evident throughout “Powhatan’s Daughter,” to which “The Harbor Dawn” is the perfect introduction. Though the poet is occupied with other movements in that sequence (such as turning time into a river, *contra* Eliot, in order to swim in it back to the source of all), the importance of loving, of reaching out to another, is evident in every section. The narrator of “Indiana” tries to reach out to her son by telling of the contact between her eyes and the eyes of a bedraggled Indian squaw. The poet in “Van Winkle” affirms that memory keeps alive, and therefore incomplete and unfinished, the moment when one loses his mother’s smile; and the poet’s future is not to be preoccupied with that past moment: he is to seek out a future that will in its own way complete that which is unfinished from the past. “The Dance” affirms, among other things, that when the poet travels back to that moment when man was just emerging into consciousness, the human was even then in a loving relation; Maquokeeta and Pocahontas represent loving as that which is most primal in humans, that which is impossible to eradicate—bedrock, elemental. And to one who is conscious of *The Bridge* as not only a poem of modernist techniques, not only a poem of affirmations against Eliot’s negations, but also a poem of concerted action, with the poet sharing in the lost quality of the multitudes about him, deeply desiring that the value of living dawn upon one and all, “The River” is one of the finest sections of *The Bridge*—an effort to bridge poetically the gap between the hoboes with their “elemental gist/ Of unwalled winds” and the passengers gazing out of the Limited with their “no more sermons windows flashing roar/ breathtaking”:

And if it’s summer and the sun’s in dusk
Maybe the breeze will lift the River’s musk
—As though the waters breathed that you might know
Memphis Johnny, Steamboat Bill, Missouri Joe.

All is lovingly humanized in the space of these lines, in which the poet would have all breathing in concord, all in touch.

What is most remarkable in "The Harbor Dawn" is that the quality of its loving is realized in the course of the poem. The poet takes up his own sense of wanting to retreat, to shy away, to withdraw at the beginning and, because he incorporates such a reluctance poetically, the poem feels as if it is filled with the poet confronting an obstacle and working through it. He is not going around the problem, not devising a method that makes the problem inconsequential; he takes up the problem, making his work center on the very lack in himself of which he has become aware. Most who have worked closely with *The Bridge* have taken note of Crane's statement to Otto Kahn:

What I am after is an assimilation, . . . a more organic panorama, showing the continuous and living evidence of the past in the inmost vital substance of the present.⁵

What has not usually been considered, however, is the way this achievement comes about poetically; for as the poet considers the past through his present, he is also working through his own dilemmas in an open fashion. In "The Harbor Dawn," the poet is not only considering something as traditional as the power of love, now seen in a new light; he is also working out of the sense of his immediate past, of lying in a fog unwilling to focus on the painful beat of modern life, shrinking from the sun. His poem takes up its own past, confronting it seriously, to afford the poet a future distinct from a simple, immediate present. The future direction the poet is discovering out of comprehending his past truly infuses the present with tremendous richness. And it is not the present of some future in which the poet shall be enriched: it is the present of this moment, of this poem, where the poet has made himself utterly in touch with all that is going on in his work. Thus the whole poem comes alive as an act of loving as the poet realizes the implications of loving. The poem is a fusion of the striving for light, for illumination, while one is struggling to retain the darkness, the dreaminess, of one's own nature—and not just at the close but throughout the whole work, as the poet bridges each feeling by connecting it to what came before and what will come out of it. The whole poem is an effort to bring together the sun of the public world, sprung into the clear air, with the stars of the private life, turning in the "waking west"—an effort realized in the course of a poem neither public nor private but personal, written so that others may follow.

3

"The Harbor Dawn," as befits an introductory work to a long journey, is foremost a poem of dawning. The poet keeps to that first, sudden discovery that what one needs to cultivate, if he wants to invigorate the persons of his arid civilization, is the sense of a person who can live a life of deeds—of actions

⁵ Letter of 12 September 1927, *The Letters of Hart Crane* (ed. Brom Weber), Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1965, p. 305.

that are also contracts, promises leading toward a future. And the poem is everywhere alive with that possibility for acts that are contracts: the very way the poet lets us approach him in his dreams, so that his dreams put us in mind of what is foggy and unformed in ourselves, is an act that includes us in the poem.

"Three Songs" is very different. If the poet is fully involved in the implications of his discovery in "The Harbor Dawn," he is at something of a distance from his subject in "Three Songs." In "The Harbor Dawn," the fusion of sun and stars, of the poet illuminating himself yet within his deepest dreams, is felt to be present from the start. In contrast, while each "song" captures a specific tone of contemporary life—a tone that is dependent on the poet being inside, involved in, his poem—at the same time the poet is able to articulate such a tone because he stands somewhat outside the contemporary, aware of another way of relating to love. Each of the songs is fraught with difficulty; each one pushes us away from it; each has the potential to be utterly ugly, repulsive. And any effort to unite all three—either by lighting on some shared trait or by temporalizing the songs into some kind of dialectical series—is to act too brightly, even too defensively. The songs, I think, are meant to convey a sense of their own apartness, each one being a separate tone of the contemporary, though each one being open to criticism by the poet. The idea is to push us out of the position asserted by each of the songs, to snap us free of the tone in each. We are meant to recognize the songs as capturing aspects of life we can move beyond through the poet of *The Bridge*.

Yet the "Three Songs" are more than simply portraits of various types of the anti-Pocahontas. One way to read them, of course, is to abstract the figures of women sketched out in each and hold each abstraction up to the level of Pocahontas in "The Dance." The modern woman, in such a comparison, seems flat, empty, lacking purpose or grace or love. Yet such an approach gives a wrong slant to the songs, each of them having, for all its ugliness, a fullness of its own life; the poems are not distorted, mean, demonic projections of the debased contemporary version of Pocahontas. Above all, at this point in *The Bridge*, the poet is committed—now that he knows precisely how remote he stands from that wondrous sense of loving that accompanied his rise from bed in the early morning light—to articulating a sense of persons as they are, yet as they need not be: persons involved in relations which are themselves de-personal. In part, the poems work just because of the poet's involvement with these persons; the poet, too, feels distant from dawning. But because of the poet's involvement, the poems can allow another to recognize himself in their lines; and the hope and belief that others will be able to see themselves in the songs seems to be what motivates the poet. At this moment in *The Bridge*, the poet could be most tempted to write as the excoriating prophet. That he does not, that he himself remains aware of his precise distance from the sensuous dawning of lovely new discoveries, that he focuses instead on another, more analytical yet still careful kind of discovering, is what is so impressive in "Three Songs." And in truth, the ability of the poet to enter, here, into the sands of the city at the risk of leaving behind the memory of genuine wholeness in "The Harbor Dawn" makes

the very notion of the poet striving to live out his deepest dreams in the light of the sun that much more genuine.

The poet's subjection to the difficultness of the contemporary is alive even in the apparent light-heartedness of "Virginia"—as becomes most evident if this song is contrasted with Eliot's portrait of the secretary, the "typist home for teatime" in *The Waste Land*. The sing-song rhythms of "Virginia" are not that remote from the kinds of musical rhythm a dreamy person such as Mary is likely to admire; indeed, "Virginia" is based on at least two pop hits well-known in the twenties: "What Do You Do Sunday, Mary," from the Broadway show *Poppy* (1923) and "Sunday" (1926).⁶ The poet adopts such rhythms, hoping to go through them in a spirit both involved and critical, with the notion in mind that Mary, that the secretary, could see herself in them. In contrast, it is no news to say that there is something deliberately stereotypical in Eliot's portrait; the very way the words "typist home for teatime" and "young man caruncular,"

A small house agent's clerk, with one bold stare,
One of the low on whom assurance sits
As a silk hat on a Bradford millionaire

slide under our tongues suggests an ability to sum up individuals, to spear them with a piercing image—an ability against which Crane's songs are most definitely opposed. Eliot is writing, at this point, as Tiresias, as the man who has seen it all, who conceives of nothing new. He is apart from all, uninterested in any discovery, and his approach succinctly catches up all that is most boring, indifferent and mechanized in the seduction of the typist. The moment, in fact, may be the low point, as well as a turning point, in *The Waste Land*. But the import of this passage is clear: to feel around in the dark is horrifying—that is the punishment meted out to the seducer who afterwards "gropes his way, finding the stairs unlit. . . ." Yet the typist horrifies too for she is presented as inoculated against even that fumbling by her slick gestures, her legerdemain: "She smoothes her hair with automatic hand,/ And puts a record on the gramophone." She is able to turn her brain into a gramophone record, her arm into an anaesthetizing needle.

In "Virginia," the relation between Mary and her young man is not so easily pinned down. It is a confusing relation because Mary is so up in the air with her feelings, and her ghostly interlocutor appears so unlikely to bring her out of the clouds. "Mary (what are you going to do?)" is a legitimate question which wants a definite answer throughout the song. Mary seems to want a Prince; but

⁶ Susan Jenkins Brown, a friend of Crane's, recalls the lyrics to "What Do You Do Sunday, Mary" in her *Robber Rocks: Letters and Memories of Hart Crane, 1923-1932*, Wesleyan, Connecticut, 1969, pp. 110-111. She also includes a brief discussion of other poems by Crane that echo popular music of his time. "Sunday" was recorded often in 1926; one of the best versions is by Cliff "Ukelele Ike" Edwards and His Hot Combination, New York, 1926, PERFECT 11633 (mx 107160-3), now available in *The Original Sound of the 20's*, Columbia Archive Series, C3L 35.

she is surrounded by princes who would urge her to let down her hair, not as Rapunzel but as any ordinary flapper. What we keep our eyes on throughout are the many seductive forms that suggest we should be gratified immediately. We see that Mary is right to “keep smiling the boss away,” as she knows he is not her Prince, not her Spring, but what the poet seems to want Mary to see is that her own dream of a Prince, of a Spring, is tinged with that same false smile she gives the boss.

In the background of “Virginia” lies the masculine world of business, but it, too, lacks substantiality. It has the feel of a place where riches are supposed to lie just around the corner, and it has the quality of the suspended, the dreamy, the insulated rather than the active or even the brutal. Mary’s boss, one imagines, is no aggressive suitor; it is a world, after all, of nickels and dimes rather than thousand dollar bills. And the “way-up nickel-dime tower” is juxtaposed to the random energies of a dice game in which all richness rides on the lucky throw, the big break. The counterpart to this conviction is the belief in a Spring with a Prince Charming. The creed of the lucky break keeps coming back into the song, with the suggestion of what is tragic in such a creed: it keeps people waiting for unimaginable riches rather than urging them to discover a richness of their own, imaginable, within their grasp. The creed, in short, is no better than a concoction: it is as satisfying as popcorn. It is bolstered by the corny themes of pop songs that conspire to turn persons into “Pigeons by the millions” lured by the “high carillon/ From the popcorn bells!”

What the poet is incisively aware of throughout is the sense of persons turning away from their own imaginations to imagine the unimaginable. This turning away is implicit in the opening:

O rain at seven,
Paycheck at eleven—
Keep smiling the boss away,
Mary (what are you going to do?)
Gone seven—gone eleven,
And I’m still waiting you—

Mary sidles through the work-week, entering a rainstorm as a “loss” which can be equalled by her Friday pay as a “gain,” and all the while hoping for the lucky break. But “Gone seven—gone eleven,” the week is gone by and the unimaginable voice of popular songs, which we hear through these sing-song rhythms, still hasn’t brought much of a future. The voice claims to be “still waiting,” but there is little sense of expectation or urgency in it. And at the end, the voice leaves Mary more virginal, more untouched, than ever; the walls are building around her, though everything seems merely flippant, simply flowery:

High in the noon of May
On cornices of daffodils
The slender violets stray.

Crap-shooting gangs in Bleecker reign,
Peonies with pony manes—
Forget-me-nots at windowpanes:

Out of the way-up nickel-dime tower shine,
Cathedral Mary,
shine!—

Mary is drunk on her sense of possibilities (she is “High in the noon of May”: the month turns into a verb, the noon suggests a dead center, and her height comes from her self-intoxicating wishes), even as one feels that the flowers are fading and that “Cathedral Mary” is unpromising: her waiting may make her into a nun in a narrow room rather than a June bride under the arch of the church.

“Virginia” utilizes the forms of popular music to probe that pop corn in songs that keep persons lost in their fanciful dreams; the poet wants to burst the bubble Mary, and others, ride in. The approach in “National Winter Garden” is far more analytical: of all the poems in *The Bridge* this song is perhaps the most biting. But the poet has a tough time figuring what it is in the strip-tease dance that disturbs him; in fact, his first temptation is just to ignore it, just to simplify it. The first stanza brings out all that is simple in strip-teasing, and the reductiveness of the dancer’s gestures is paralleled by the quality of speaking that lingers among the men as the routine begins. The dancer and the men are virtually indistinguishable because they hold together a world where one is “Outspoken,” where words are “bandied about,” where the clear ideal is that one should be able to say, “It’s a cinch!” A language stripped of any of its intricacy or complexity is like the garishly but simply draped dancer:

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

Ingenious puns like these dominate the poem. “Before the final ring . . . begins/
A tom-tom scrimmage” brings the world of the prizefight into the Burlesque Hall, reminding us that it is a predominantly masculine world we are involved in. But the puns become horrifying when the poet catches on to the real feelings of the men: the dance *is* a prizefight, and the men are eager to see the woman die. “The lewd trounce of a final muted beat” is the blow that finishes her, and her spasms are not only an acted orgasm but the spasms of a dying person.

The poet becomes gradually aware of this. At first, he seems to think what is disturbing about the dance is the way in which it makes your ideal seem that much more remote. The dancer arouses visions in the brain that have to do with an ideal woman, not the woman before you or any woman you know. And so you rush, at the close of the routine, to keep that visionary ideal alive:

And while legs waken salads in the brain
You pick your blonde out neatly through the smoke.
Always you wait for someone else though, always
(Then rush the nearest exit through the smoke).

This is, to be sure, quite painful, this never-diminishing distance, but it in no way compares to the misery of the close of the song. For there the poet realizes that

We wait that writhing pool, her pearls collapsed,
—All but her belly buried in the floor;
And the lewd trounce of a final muted beat!
We flee her spasm through a fleshless door. . .

The dancer, in dying, is acting out the desire of the men to be free of the flesh, to deny the effect of the pull of gravity, to overleap death by dying out of life's painfulness. The men, who seem at first to be trying to ignore such desperation in the dancer by never granting her any eyes, by making "her eyes exist in swivellings of teats," these men are actually bent upon eliminating themselves, taking themselves out of life. The men truly want to bear all the terrible humiliation of "Pearls whip her hips," of "Her silly snake rings," of "turquoise fakes on tinselled hands," for that is the way in which they die out of living, achieve their own deaths, by sharing in the humiliation of the dancer knocked to the floor in a pool. The utter misery of this position, however, hits the poet fully only in his conclusion:

Yet, to the empty trapeze of your flesh,
O Magdalene, each comes back to die alone.
Then you, the burlesque of our lust—and faith,
Lug us back lifeward—bone by infant bone.

The men do all they can to die, to abandon their flesh, to flee up in smoke: what is awful is that they do not die, fully, but they return. And they must return to life bearing with them the desire to die as something unfulfilled, unrealized, still gnawing. Their efforts to escape pain create more pain for them.

Early readers of *The Bridge* who were convinced of the poem's failure made a common argument that "Three Songs" could easily have been removed from the whole poem without seriously affecting its unity. An offshoot of this argument asserts that the latter half of *The Bridge* simply falls into dispersion.⁷ But such a reading ignores the poet in "Quaker Hill" who, after disparaging a society predominantly aloof from any misery, a society of men in "plaid plusfours . . . with sticks abristle and cigars," a society of lovers from "Hollywood's new

⁷ The position was held by some reviewers in 1930; the first impressive statement of it is by Yvor Winters, "The Significance of *The Bridge*, by Hart Crane; or What Are We to Think of Professor X?" *In Defense of Reason*, Denver, n.d., pp. 575-603.

love-nest pageant," insists upon delving into the painful, the lowly, the overlooked; he no longer becomes the hawk, with its piercing eye, but the whip-poor-will, with its cry that articulates and transfigures pain. Such an exploration, which opens into the stifling air, the murderous atmosphere of "The Tunnel," is foreshadowed in "Three Songs." And each of the songs, in exploring a failure of men to relate to women in a meaningful way, recollects the pilots from "Cape Hatteras," each alone in his "abysmal cupola of space." In "Three Songs," the poet insistently explores, with much sensitivity, the breakdown of the relation between men and women. He takes the dilemma of breakdown, in each case, with much seriousness, as though one could recognize oneself in the songs. And this is especially true, it seems to me, of the best of the "Three Songs," "Southern Cross."

One good reason for the success of "Southern Cross" is that the poem most likely mirrors feelings the poet himself had to work his way out of in order to write *The Bridge*. For the poem is an examination of nostalgia, of the bitterness a nostalgic and backward-looking vision breeds. And one of the blocks Crane had to overcome before seriously beginning his poems was Spengler's *The Decline of the West*. The fact is that, after his reading of Spengler, Crane very nearly did not write *The Bridge*; he expressed his despair in a letter to Waldo Frank:

The form of my poem arises 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 exists any real links between that past and a future destiny worthy of it. . . . The bridge as a symbol today has no significance beyond an economical approach to shorter hours, quicker lunches, behaviorism and toothpicks.⁸

A hatred for the present, based on a reverence for the past, is one of the positions Crane must have moved beyond in order to write *The Bridge*.

"Southern Cross" conveys an experience, then, which Crane has had to work through, an experience he knows full well to be a powerful and attractive lure pulling against the sense of reaching out to others, the sense of moving beyond oneself, that the poet realizes in the course of *The Bridge*. And with the force of other poems borne in mind, it seems to me Crane writes "Southern Cross" in the hope that such an incisive poem will knock free others trapped in the nostalgic position. For it is a terrible position to be in. A nostalgia for what is past and gone, like the desire for anything so remote it cannot be attained, leads to a tremendous bitterness and contempt. For one comes to cherish his ideal, the past, based only on the substantiality of his hatred for the actual, the present. The position is destructive, bound to break again into hatred and contempt, as does the end of "Southern Cross." There, everything is lost: the stars have turned to stone, to "lithic trillions," masses of dead rock. It is so because the narrator, glaring, bitterly affirms that his Southern Cross is a phantom. His ideal, that

⁸ Letter of 20 June 1926, *Letters*, p. 261.

love of his contemporaries most justly by bending to capture some sense of their inner world. And through the eyes and ears of the sensitive poet, their inner world comes to have implications for others—those trapped in fanciful daydreams, those chipped at by lust, those hardened by a nostalgia for the impossible. In “Three Songs,” the poet keeps his own loving alive by the careful way he approaches his subjects at the same time as he remains attentive to just those persons whom other poets have felt fit to overlook. In this sequence, the poet of *The Bridge* most assuredly brings the ocean of love into the sands of the city; the star of love is the invisible, shining presence throughout the poet’s words.