

A Short Comment on Hart Crane's Poem *To Brooklyn Bridge*

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Abstract—This article presents Crane's representative works "To Brooklyn Bridge" which is the proem of masterpiece "Bridge," and poet's creative thoughts. Through depicting the splendid spectator of the bridge, inserted spontaneous flow of the feelings of the poet, Crane expounds the theme of the poem: The bridge is the emblem of the creativity and spirit faith.

Index Terms—Crane, Bridge, proem, mythology, industrialization

I. LIFE INTRODUCTION

The miserable life of Hart Crane, an American lyrical poet in the tradition of romantic modernist, can be appropriately expressed by the French phrase 'poet maudit' that concepts the optimism and despair in his life. Hart's childhood spanned the tension between the parents and his adulthood frequently bouts of alcohol abuse, and finally his life ended by suicide at the age of 33. His tortured life has a root in the contradiction between his ambition to create the Great American Poem and the lack of popularity or patronage, and in his unwilling to live in any other way but as poet (MacGowan, 2004). The small body of work he left behind, mostly written within a single decade, testifies to both artist talent and tragic experiences.

Hart Crane was born and raised in Garrettsville, Ohio in 1899. His boyhood suffered agonies of the bitter quarrels and strife between the parents. He remained close to his mother, though burdened by her demands and expectations; he continually wished for the approval of his father, a successful candy manufacturer, but could not purchase it by acceding to his father's wish that he become a businessman. He went to New York City in 1917, ostensibly to prepare for college but in fact to investigate the possibility of a literary career. In 1919, Hart Crane returned to Cleveland and stayed there for four years until 1923, during which he tried to business as a means of financing an after-hours literary life, but he could not organize and discipline himself sufficiently to succeed in two lines at once. The years in Cleveland were useful to him, however, because he read widely and was in contact with almost all of key writers of the early 1920s (Bloom, 2003). He also produced some of the poems and published them in leading literary magazines which made his early reputation. His first major poem *For the Marriage of Faustus and Helen* was completed in the spring of 1923. Soon afterwards, he moved back to New York City and found another job at an advertising agency.

After Crane went back to New York City, in the winter of 1923, he announced to his plan to work on a long poem *The Bridge*. In the following years, he produced the best works of his poetry. His romantic relationship with a Danish sailor inspired *Voyages* which is a poetic apprehension of love and was finished it in 1924. In the year, Crane already commenced his first draft of *The Bridge*, which he intended to refute the pessimism in T. S. Eliot's masterpiece *The Waste Land*. In 1926, his first collection of lyrical poems *White Buildings* was published, which earned him substantial respect. Also, Crane composed ten of the fifteen poems that were to comprise *The Bridge* and published much of them in the collection *Key West: An Island Sheaf*. In contrast to the success in his poetry, mostly, his life in New York was a struggle due to unemployment and alcohol abuses. With the support from New York banker and artist's patron, Otto Kahn, he continued his work on *The Bridge*.

Crane believed that "poets had access to a higher state of consciousness than others" (MacGowan, 2004). Although Crane had little formal education, he read widely books by English poets William Shakespeare, Marlowe in 17th century, French poets, Bodlare, Laforg in 19th century and American poets Walt Whitman, Pound and Eliot. He became learned and versatile. After that it laid a solid foundation for poetry creation, which made him receive the strong points from other numerous poets. His commitment to visionary poetry was directly connected with the father of American poetry Walt Whitman (Bloom, 2005). His aim was nothing less than to entirely express the American experience. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, which imaged London Bridge as a passageway of the dead and expresses impotent disillusionment, was both threat and model for Crane who made Brooklyn Bridge positive, celebratory; and deeply meshed with modern American life. This was the vision he attempted in *the Bridge*.

The Bridge is a lyrical epic portraying the American experience—a new positive myth. Focusing on dynamism in Whitman's tradition, *The Bridge*, as a bridge connecting the American past and the present, dwelled on historical or legendary figures, from Columbus to Rip Van Winkle and on the modern urban reality from railroads to Brooklyn Bridge. Bloom (2005) said that "woven among these strands are allusions to literature: the Bible, Plato, Marlowe, Shakespeare, Blake, and most important, to American artists: Whitman, Melville, Poe, Dickinson, Isadora Duncan" (p.

74). The action of the poem comprises through its fifteen sections, one waking day, from dawn in "Harbor Dawn," to midnight in "Atlantis." (Bloom, 2005, p. 74). The poem is a personal journey of time and space: the American historical and legendary figures all at once showing up on Crane's journey to the city in temporal and literary cubism, all the way to California and down to Virginia and North Carolina, and back to Brooklyn. The journey moves back to past and forward to present, through which Crane "seeks to learn the meaning of American history which, in so far as that history is inseparable from his own memories, is the meaning of himself" (Bloom, 2005, p. 75).

The ambitiousness of the undertaking, along with Crane's very real doubts about both the future of poetry and his own career, made writing extremely difficult. To some degree the product represent not so much Crane's faith, but his will to believe; the traces of doubt provide a truly modern ironic undercurrent to the surface of the work. The poem, when published in 1930, was not well received an award from *Poetry* magazine. In this year, Crane received a Guggenheim fellowship and went to Mexico to ponder the next stage of his life. He completed work for a third book, *Key West*, but squandered his already depleted energies in drinking bouts and in pursuing sailors and waiters. Returning by ship to New York City in 1932, he jumped to his death.

II. INTERPRETATION ON "TO BROOKLYN BRIDGE"

A. *Background of the Poem*

Crane moved back to New York City In 1924 and resided in an apartment where just Roberlin, the man who devised the Brooklyn Bridge. One day, when he gazed the distance, the graceful shape of Brooklyn Bridge jumped into his eyes. So that inspired to eulogize the bridge. Although there exists sharp contrast on the theme between *Bridge* and *Waste Land*, on the structure, Crane made use of the composition of Eliot's. At the beginning of the poem, the hero waked up in the dawn and strolled on the bridge. Then he toured the whole city and returned to the original place at night. During a short day, his minds transcended from east to west, from remote antiquity by Whitman to modern society. Meantime, the poet converged diverse historical affairs, mythology and legend. The poem expresses the ebullient imagination of the poet as fully as possible and the advanced controlling ability of language.

B. *Paraphrase of the Poem*

The setting of "Proem" in the harbor and lower Manhattan area is clearly outlined, though the point of view shifts a good deal within this area, from a long view of the Bay and the Stature of Liberty, to an office in a skyscraper, down an elevator into the street, into a dark movie house, and then to the sun-bathed bridge. The view of the bridge also changes, from "across the harbor," in which the sun appears to be walking up the diagonal stays, to the promenade and towers as the bedlamite "speeds to thy parapets." Later the point of view is under the bridge, in its shadow. The shifting perspectives secure the object in space; there is no question that it is a bridge across a river between two concretely realized cities.

The first stanza depicts the splendid panorama of Brooklyn Bridge which spanned East River and is the earliest used steel cable bridge. It developed an inestimable function in the congested America. Then the poet presents the chill climate, the joyous seagull and the calm surface of the bay, all provides a tranquil atmosphere in the dawn. On a cold winter dawn from the water, the seagull soars upward, an emblem of freedom and unhampered motion. Like the bridge, the bird builds high, but unlike the bay waters below, it is not shackled. The seagull's wings shed "white rings of tumult," that is first, the excited cries of the seagull wheeling, and second, a Platonic circle of perfection, which anticipates the "inviolable curve" of stanza two. "White is found everywhere—in the gull, the sail, some pages of figures," the silvery paint of the bridge—suggesting the purity of this vision. This kaleidoscopic technique, "panoramic sleights," the rapid appearance and disappearance of images, describes fairly accurately Crane's formal imagistic procedure.

The 5th line draws the graceful curve of the bridge, which suddenly disappears from others' eyesight, till the elevators drop the people from their day (in 8th line). It implies the speeding pace of American life. Although the bridge has become the part of our routine life, the tall building is deep rooted in the minds of American's. The sails that cross some page of figures to be filed away are visionary, a dream of escape from the world of mundane face and dull business routine to which the masses of men are enslaved.

The 3rd stanza is a set of analogy. The poem provides some common scenes where people look over the flashing pictures. The underline meaning is the comparison between the movie or the magic and the noisy life. Numerous one could be or would be swirled into the painstaking life. The next two lines reveal the meaningless of the cosmopolitan life of America, which gives no originality, only makes different people come across the same scene in the daily life. The people hurry to seek refuge in the fantastic fictions of the cinema, seeking some revelation that will invest their life with meaning, but the motion is too quick, the magic is unreal and transitory. Man is irresistibly drowned to appealing temporary substitute that recur periodically, but nothing of value is revealed to him. The bridge is addressed directly in the next stanza.

The 4th stanza the potent is the sense of the bridge's organic vitality that usual contrasts get reversed, and nature seems for the moment to adapt itself to art: that natural measure of time, the sun, synchronizes its movement with the pace of the bridge. The poet conveys that the freedom spirit of the bridge condenses its steps. The bridge stretches across the harbor, paradoxically both freely moving and unmoving. The sun's motion seems to be measured by that of

the bridge. The vaulting stride of the bridge, from Brooklyn's shore to Manhattan's, is linked to some stoppage. Like the elevator, it is a typical product of the iron or technological age; but like the seagull, it has its own inviolate curve of motion, and it manifests a miraculous beauty of mobile repose and disciplined freedom.

"Out of some subway scuttle, cell or loft" (in line 21st) implies the narrow space and high tempo of American life. In the last line of the 5th stanza, if the bridge stands for unity and liberty, it is also the stage on which death is enacted, a death it is impotent to prevent. Some unstrained lunatic dashes out of some hole or other, sways momentarily on the bridge's parapet, a scream implicit in his wildly billowing shirt, and then plunges to his death, the horror accompanied by the silent mockery of others.

In stanza six, time has moved from dawn to the slow leakage of noon, and the scene has shifted to the city that shelters underneath the bridge. A rip tooth of the sky's acetylene in its juxtaposition of nature and machine images, vividly pictures the jagged bolt of light that harshly cuts and sears the New York skyline. The derricks, like the bridge, hum with activity and penetrate space, reaching toward the realm of the spirit though the derricks may be a parody of the bridge and the seagull. "Thy cables breath the North Atlantic still" means some timeless quiet. The poet provides the exciting spectator of industrialization of America. "acetylene" dotted here is aiming at drawing a layer color of modern industry civilization.

From the 25th to 27th line, the poet sings high praise of the bestow spirit of the bridge. Although the bridge is man-made, it has become something more than man; it is not exactly transcendently, but it is not temporal either. It represents an indefinite eternal principle which is without the metaphysical furniture of traditional religions. It processes the power to bestow peace, honor, pardon, and, ambiguously, the reward of anonymity that is not subject to the erosions of time.

Based on the meaning, the last line of this stanza should be regulated into the next part which explains that the bridge reprieve and pardon the fury fused, such as terrific threshold of the prophet's pledge, prayer of pariah and lover's cry. The bridge is filled with apostrophes such as this. The bridge has been built out of prophecy, pioneering, engineering, and an exceptional poetic frenzy, involving praise and sacrifice (the harp and altar). The bridge is "terrific threshold of the prophet's pledge," an epithet which characterizes the bridge's potent religious status. The poet expresses that the bridge indeed brings cosmopolitan people some console and release under the burden of life.

The 3rd stanza from the bottom composes the picturesque sparkling night scenery. Nothing would change the graceful bearing of the bridge. The lights and voices of the bridge are seldom separable, and they appear together. The lights of the bridge are like strings of pearls, pearls that might "whisper through the Doge's hands." Brooklyn bridge is a superbly articulated structure, an "infractioned idiom," which by transference of epithets means both spiritual wholeness and the poet's poem which mediates that wholeness to man. The time scheme has shifted to evening, and the lights are compared to an "immaculate sigh of stars," an inviolate exhalation of some divine reality—note once again the synaesthetic images—which literally and figuratively "condense eternity." The last line presents a fine visualization of night coming to the city. Crane personifies the bridge as a parent who lifts and hugs night in its arms, a gesture of love that drives away despair. Lift almost always implies some kind of aspiration; but here it also suggests that revelation waited for in vain is confirmed by the next stanza. If the bridge "condenses eternity," it also testifies the unyielding grip in which time holds man; and if the bridge is a shimmering light of salvation, it paradoxically can be glimpsed only in darkness, and then only its shadow. After that, the poet expresses his emotion on the bridge. The "shadow" used here is the shadow of the bridge; "darkness" is the darkness of the American life. Thus we can induce the underline meaning from the poet. Only if you understand the gloomy side of the American life, you can comprehend the truth of the bridge. "The city's fiery parcels all undone" suggests the extinguishing of the building's light, or fragmented urban lives, while "Already snow submerges an iron year" recalls the heavy load of custom that weighs down the spirit. Meantime, the word "iron" modifies the "year" technically and protrudes the overwhelming place of American industry.

The pessimistic interpretation seems correct, however, because it would logically account for the invocation to the bridge which ends the poem; thus the poem clearly announces the intention of the entire poem. Man's craving for an idealistic faith and the power if the bridge to aid in its achievement is acknowledged. The bridge is honored as a span between time and the timeless. So perfectly does the Brooklyn Bridge symbolize this function and so alluring are its inspirations that the poet is motivated to search within its glow for further support of his belief. From its towers he sees earlier spans across the American past, anticipants of this climax expression. He trusts that his cumulative strength of the bridge will constitute a sure "myth to God." The last sentence of the last stanza "And of the curveship lend a myth to God" vividly expresses that the poet takes the pride of the human's strength and he thinks that it is not god but men build the myth of the bridge. God, himself, cannot create the miracle. In the end, the poet points out the theme: The human create the civilization and mythology.

C. *The Thought of the Poem*

Bridge is consisted of eight parts and a prelude, which represents the creative climax of Crane's. It is one of the few poems to direct at eulogizing modern American society. The theme of the poem presents the cosmopolitan spectator of New York City, which induces some associations. The poet adopts the creative skill—symphony. By the description of the bridge to display the American mythology and the epic subject same as. The bridge is a symbol of evolution of civilization and spirit faith. For access to American, it connects the past, the present and the future. With exultant

emotion, the author draws a historical and spiritual sense of America and chants the poem with some way like Walt Whitman's who is associated with the upward and the westward. The poem expresses not only the rural scene, but the urban style, not the legendary figure, Rip Wan Winkle, but the masters, Walt Whitman. At the same time, the same as T.S.Eliot, the author creates a new kind of symbolic literature; however, the different idea is that Crane finds the hopeful life and vital future. Eliot's poem is full of pessimism. That's to say, the content of this poem strikes a powerful counterblow on the sense of "Waste Land".

The author can acquire the inspiration from the industry civilization of modern cities and insert the industrious content to the poem. Meantime, the poet can gather the subjects not only from the natural scene, but also from the modern industry. This expresses the positive idea of the poet. He warmly sings highly of the coming of the machine times and genuinely hopes that modern industry can bring about the civilization and progress, and that the traditional civilization can get extension and development.

The bridge presents a heroic quest, at once personal and epic, which is carried out in several directions. As in *Song of Myself* it moves westward in imagination from Brooklyn from California; it also goes backward into the depths of the psyche. Different historical figures appear to guide the poet-quester: Pocahontas, Columbus, Rip Wan Winkle. Two poets represent American opposites: Walt Whitman, who is associated with the upward and westward, and Edgar Allan Poe, poet of darkness, who is met in the depths of *The Tunnel*. The bridge, in various metaphorical meanings, is the object of all these quests and hence unifies the poem. The separate lyrics that comprise *The Bridge* are arranged like music, with recurring and modulated themes rather than a narrative or expository sequence. As in most modernist poems, the verse is open and varied the syntax complicated and often ambiguous, and the jumps in reference abrupt and often dependent on a personal, hence obscure, logic. All this makes the poems to apprehend; yet for some of its readers it accomplishes just what Crane intended—that is, it restates an American tradition in modernist terms.

The creation of *Bridge* is of a grand scale. It took Crane seven years to devote his energies of a lifetime to complete this piece of works. When the poetry came out, it got both the praise and blame from the echoing of the critic circles. Even the prestigious critiques hold the negative attitudes. After his death, the critic circles reconsidered to examine his works closely and confirmed out of the ordinary attainment of *Bridge*. They considered that Crane extremely developed modern functions of poetic creative patterns. Finally, he got a high reputation.

D. Summarization of Some Rhetorical Devices

Accordingly, this poem is a lyrical free verse, also known as "open form verse, and without regular meter, line length, rhyme scheme, or stanza form." In this poem, the poet provides some kinds of rhetorical devices as follows:

Metaphor: The core of Crane's poetic practice was the use of metaphor, the building of connections between metaphors, and the slow peeling of the associations that clustered around them. The center of *The Bridge*, for example, is the image of the Brooklyn Bridge: a tangible object studied for its implications as metaphor and transformed in the process. Crane believed that the essential difference between poetry and expository, logical discourse is the image; he believed that metaphor preceded logic in the history of human thought and it remains the primary mode in which human knowledge is acquired and expanded. Thus the Brooklyn Bridge becomes a metaphor for division and connection, for access to America, for a thrust into the past and future. It reminds one of American technology, and of Walt Whitman's great poem *Crossing Brooklyn Ferry*. The image is supported by other unique image, which is the total poem. "Over the chained by waters Liberty" (in the 4th line), the poet regards the graceful shape of the bridge as Liberty's. "The flashing scene" (in stanza 3) is the metaphorical meaning of cosmopolitan noisy life. "Shrill shirt ballooning" (in stanza 5): the poet regards the shrill shirt as the balloon.

Personification: "Some motion ever unspent in thy stride" (in stanza 4); "A rip tooth of the sky's acetylene" (in stanza 6); "Vibrant reprieve and pardon, thou dost show"; "immaculate sigh of stars" (in stanza 9); "Thy cables breath the North Atlantic still"; "And we have seen night lifted in thine arms"; "lend a myth to God."

Transferred epithet: "How many dawns, chill from his ripping rest" (in stanza 1): the word "rippling" modifies the surface water, not the "rest"; "Vibrant reprieve and pardon thou dost show": the word "vibrant" modifies the bridge not "reprieve pardon" (in stanza 7); "immacular sigh of stars" (in stanza 9): the word "immacular" modifies the stars, not "sigh."

Simile: "As apparitional as sails" (in stanza 2): the bridge is regarded as sails; "obscure as that heaven of the Jews" (in stanza 7); "O sleepless as the river under thee" (in stanza 11): the bridge is taken as the sleepless river.

Symbolism: "Beading the path---condense eternity" (in stanza 9): The sigh of stars spreads out a road for you which condenses eternity. The poet suggests that the bridge connects past, present and future. In a nutshell, the bridge symbolizes the eternity. "Only in darkness is thy shadow clear" (in stanza 10): It means that "Darkness" is the gloomy side of cosmopolitan life and "the shadow" is the shadow of the bridge. The poet wants to tell us that only if you understand the dark side of the American life, you can comprehend the truth of the bridge.

III. CONCLUSION

Crane is not interested principally in Whitman's social vision but in his conception of poetry as the final step in the restoration of man wholeness. Not the engineer nor the statesman or the captain or industry, but the poet was the true civilizer. In short, Crane inherited from Whitman the belief in the poet function to judge history from the point of view

of myth.

Bridge composes eight parts and every part is a deliberate concise and made himself as a whole, meantime, they are full fused together. Many critiques think that *To Brooklyn Bridge*, *The Tunnel* and *The River* are the essences of the poem. In the proem, the poet with intense emotion represents the absorbing shape of the bridge, which is referred as “harp” and “altar”. These vividly depict the “mythical composition” made by modern and mythology of American, which summarize the highest attainment of the poet.

To Brooklyn Bridge

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...

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;

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

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

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

And obscure as that heaven of the Jews,
Thy guerdon ...Accolade thou dost bestow
Of anonymity time cannot raise:
Vibrant reprieve and pardon thou dost show.

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

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

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

O sleepless as the river under thee,
Vaulting the sea, the prairies’ dreaming sod,
Unto us lowliest sometime sweep, descend

And of the curveship lend a myth to God.

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