

## The “Magnificent Failure” of Hart Crane’s Poetics: Reinventing Crane’s “To Brooklyn Bridge”

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### Abstract:

Howard Moss’ essay, “Disorder as Myth: Hart Crane’s *The Bridge*,” opens with the claim that Hart Crane’s “magnificent failure [in] attempting to create a contemporary American Myth [in *The Bridge*] has become a legend and platitude” (Moss 1943: 32). Crane’s failure, according to Moss, stemmed from wrongfully merging chaos in modern civilization into “some sort of structure,” a structure of heteronormativity and normative canonization. Moss, however, overlooks Crane’s obsession with language and architecture which informed and modulated Crane’s so-called “failure.” These elements, I argue, are closely aligned with Crane’s notions of aesthetic and mysticism. This analysis is an investigation of Crane’s so-called “magnificent failures” in the context his poem “To Brooklyn Bridge.”

**Keywords:** Hart Crane; Modernity; Modernism; Semantics; American Poetry; Spirituality; Aesthetics.

I too walk’d the streets of Manhattan island, and bathed in the waters around it,  
I too felt the curious abrupt questionings stir within me,  
In the day among crowds of people sometimes they came upon me,  
In my walks home late at night or as I lay in my bed they came upon me

Walt Whitman’s “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry”

Many questions regarding Crane’s poetic craft and intention are still left unanswered, particularly regarding the prologue to *The Bridge*, “To Brooklyn Bridge.” Hart Crane’s prologue is about the mystery of “God” and the material properties of the beautiful. It is an ode to divine presence and to the architectural magnificence of the Brooklyn Bridge, a symbol for modernity literally bridging the nineteenth century to the twentieth. With the poem’s dual focus on divinity and materiality, “To Brooklyn Bridge” reinvents modern conceptions of beauty and God, beauty in God, and God in things. The poem’s speaker rejects the conventional, subjective, build-up of beauty and “God” in his admiration and personification of an artifice. The speaker as witness, ultimately, justifies his holy admiration of the bridge via a transcendent ideal for American creativity and national union, which the bridge represents. Furthermore, the speaker’s use of “mystified language,” as Barbara Herman terms it, refutes common American religious and aesthetic beliefs. In her essay, “The Language of Hart Crane,” Herman analyzes Crane’s use of syntax and semantics in relation to abstract art and interpretation. She claims, “for Crane the

need to manipulate words as a fixed value in themselves . . . came from a desire of fixed order where it could be attained” (Herman 1950: 53) In other words, Hart Crane’s dedication to *le mot juste* stemmed from his optimistic vision of a prospective America. Crane’s poems employ words that often generate ambiguity while still promoting optimism. However, the opposite may also be true, that is, Crane’s handling of words is meant to create the basis for an environment receptive to his experience with spirituality and truth: his mysticism. In Crane’s 1925 essay, “General Aims and Theories,” he says, “I feel persuaded that here [in America] are destined to be discovered certain as yet undefined spiritual quantities, perhaps a new hierarchy of faith not to be developed so completely elsewhere.” (Crane 1925: web) Crane was convinced that a “yet undefined” spirituality would surface in America rather than elsewhere. In this process of American spiritualization, he says, “I feel myself as a potential factor; certainly I must speak in its terms and what discoveries I may make are situated in its experience.” (Crane 1925: web) Yet articulating this new spirituality is not the mere process of “referring frequently to skyscrapers, radio antennae, steam whistles, or other surface phenomena.” For Crane, what is most significant is articulating the value of experience deriving from the context of the modern world, i.e., modernity’s impact on people and the writing that comes from it. He says that in order to best articulate the value of modernity, one must fuse the organic effects of language of the old and modern: “the expression of such values may often be as well accomplished with the vocabulary and blank verse of the Elizabethans as with the calligraphic tricks and slang used so brilliantly at times by an impressionist like Cummings. (Crane 1925: web)

Although Crane’s “Lachrymae Christi” and the *Key West* poems dispute traditional religion and aesthetic through word play and semantics, respectively, it is in the prelude to *The Bridge*, “To Brooklyn Bridge” that distills the boundaries of the divinized object. The OED defines “aesthetic” as a “critical reflection on art, culture, and nature,” so it would be trite to simply say that Crane was concerned with the beautiful, when he was largely attempting to redefine the notion of beauty. In the prologue, the Brooklyn Bridge is a religious object and the personification of *aestheticized beauty* that is both venerated and idealized. In the poem, the veneration and idealization of the Brooklyn Bridge holistically validate Crane’s mysticism. In other words, his efforts in “To Brooklyn Bridge” were focused on illustrating the beautiful in terms that reflected the mystification of a modern context, i.e., turn of the century culture, nature, and more importantly architecture. For instance, in the fourth stanza, the speaker admires the “freedom” and magnificence of the Brooklyn Bridge.

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!

The speaker’s venerated, nearly biblical, tone and discourse is deliberately antiquated: words like “thee” and “thy” are archaic terms which are repeated in the stanza. In addressing the Bridge in these terms, the speaker personifies a symbol of modernity and in turn metaphorically connects through language an inanimate structure to a mystified divine entity. In this stanza, the Bridge is addressed directly whereas in the three preceding quatrains the possessive pronoun “his” is used to indirectly refer to the Bridge. Once the speaker has directed his voice to the Bridge, the intonation of the poem changes to a conservative and venerable tone. The Bridge is then addressed with the formal “thee,” and not the informal “you,” further alluding to the reverence the

speaker has for the structure he admires from “across the harbor.” The ambiguity created in the third line by using the words “motion,” “unspent,” and “stride” vivifies the Bridge while simultaneously conceptualizing it as a *type* of immovable beauty. As an inanimate structure, the Bridge is not able to autonomously “motion” or “stride.” However, “stride” (in the noun form) redirects the action and subject of the line. This ambiguity, in turn, allows readers to focus on the Bridge’s freedom as it *skillfully* hangs “unspent.”

“To Brooklyn Bridge” highlights a new *type* of beauty and divinity connected to the modern citizen and her/his ability to create. Crane’s *The Bridge* in turn becomes the antithesis of T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*. Crane read Eliot’s *Waste Land* as soon as it was available. (Tolbin 254) In his study of Crane and the poet’s family, Colm Tolbin claims:

For anyone in those years writing poems that attempted to fuse deliberate and difficult structure with phrases filled with allusion and symbolic meaning, using rhythms that sought to seduce the reader with a mixture of the subtle and the strident, it was obvious that T.S. Eliot was an example to be welcomed and watched. (254)

Unlike Eliot’s jeremiadical song of causal despair and despondency of human error in *The Waste Land*, Crane’s symbol of the bridge represents the age of modernity as a monument for hope and futurity for mankind. For instance, Eliot’s poem, “The Burial of the Dead,” displays the destructive nature of modernity. Eliot’s “unreal” city is an un-modern place in “brown fog.”

Unreal City.

Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,  
A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many  
I had not thought death had undone so many.

For Eliot’s speaker, the “London Bridge” is a place where those undone by death commune. This bridge is an artifice that symbolizes the decay of civilization like the “falling towers of Jerusalem Athens, Alexandria / Vienna London / Unreal. (“What the Thunder Said” 375-377) These are symbols of the world’s doomed centers of power and make sense of contemporary debates over the opposition between spiritual culture and technological civilization. Claiming that Crane’s *The Bridge* decorates an artifice with meaning while Eliot deforms a landscape is insufficient, however. A closer look at Crane’s craft in “To Brooklyn Bridge” will reveal his distinct use of colloquial language, a rejection of Eliot’s erudite poetics and an adaptation of an ambiguous and American lexicon which is equally esoteric. One major distinction between the two poets is Crane’s illustrated optimism about the American landscape. As Herman claims, “Crane’s colloquial verbalisms [are] . . . closely aligned with the rhythm in which they are set.” (59) Even though many readers of Crane are confounded by his choice of words, his poetry is packed with occasional comprehensible American colloquialisms meant to debase his poetry from a strict form of high modernism. Take stanza five, for instance,

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.

The etymological and historical complexity of the words “bedlamite,” “parapet,” and “speechless caravan” are complimented by the sixth stanza’s colloquial opening, “Down wall,” alluding to *down, near Wall Street*. Unrelated to Eliot’s use of erudite language, Crane’s esoteric word choice

stemmed from his concern with rhythm in poetry. In reaction to the grim tone of *The Waste Land*, Crane admits, “The vocabulary of damnations and prostrations has been developed at the expense of these other moods, however, so that it is hard to dance in proper measure.” (Crane to Allen Tate, May 16, 1922)

According to Crane, Eliot’s dismissal of the “other moods” (hopefulness and optimism) was done “at the expense” of rhythm. As a result, the “damnations and prostrations” have stripped *The Waste Land* of its euphony. “Dance,” in the context of Crane’s statement, refers to human connectivity through poetry. If the poem lacks rhythm, it lacks human connectivity similar to a dance without music. While working on his poem, “The Marriage of Faustus and Helen,” Crane writes to Allen Tate, “Let’s us invent an idiom for the proper transposition of jazz into words! Something clean, sparkling, elusive!” (Crane Letter 89) Concerned with the future of American poetry, Crane adopts a Whitmanian tone evident in his command (“Let us”) which invites Tate to consider not only the reinvention of poetic idiom, but asks him to contemplate the importance of jazz, that is, the significance of music in modern poetry.

For Crane’s speaker, the Brooklyn Bridge is beautiful not simply because he sees it as a religious object, but because it is a work of art that brings people closer together through its empathetic nature. In this sense, the Bridge is indicative of Crane’s aesthetics. In addition, the speaker articulates the Bridge’s forgiving benevolence and simultaneously furnishes the image of the Bridge. This intersectionality clearly surfaces in the poem’s seventh stanza.

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.

The Bridge is a forgiving figure that like a God grants pardons. In this sense, the divine artifice creates a path for salvation, which is a literal path between Brooklyn and Manhattan. Comparing the Bridge to the “heaven of the Jews” qualifies the Bridge’s obscurity and evokes thoughts of the afterlife and devout faith. Furthermore, for Crane, it is the Bridge’s beauty that unites commuters, their communal admiration and veneration of modernity’s ultimate symbol.

Consequently, “To Brooklyn Bridge” is concerned with reshaping, reconceptualizing, and reinterpreting the notion of *the beautiful* within aesthetics through a Whitmanian tradition and an Emersonian philosophy. In the “American Scholar,” Emerson defines the scholar as “that man that must take up to himself all the ability of the time, all the contributions of the past, all the hopes of the future.” (1112) Crane came to terms with the reception of beauty and God through Emerson’s notion of Nature, which allowed Emerson and Crane to explore reality by rejecting conventional divinity and accepting the natural world. Emerson’s influence led Crane to experiment with a language for shaping what Crane called the next “American poem.” This was the foundation that justified Crane’s admiration for the Bridge—but more broadly America. Via a universal hope for American creativity and humankind, Crane was able to write of his marginalization in “To Brooklyn Bridge” in hopes for societal transcendence and acceptance.

Such an influence made possible the successful use of archaic and idiomatic language in the first line of the fifth stanza: “Out of some subway scuttle, cell or loft / A bedlamite speeds to thy parapets.” (17-18) The opening language of “subway scuttle” is idiomatically ambiguous: in the verb sense of the word, “scuttle” means “to run hurriedly” (OED). As an adjective for “subway,” the word denotes a filthy place which readers might associate with the New York City subway. For

Crane, the uncanniness of the word “scuttle” articulates the uncanniness of the modern condition which is itself in a transitioning state from old to new. Tate, once said, “Crane was one of those men whom every age seems to select as the spokesman of its spiritual life; they give the age away.” “To Brooklyn Bridge” is indicative of the type of vision Crane had not only for the future of poetry, but for America.

In *Hart Crane and the Homosexual*, Thomas E. Yingling analyzes the national poetic tradition in relation to Emerson and Crane. Yingling claims, “Emerson asserts the possibility of a certain transparency in language, and this metaphor comes down to a precisionist poet.” (153) Without labeling Crane as a “precisionist poet,” “To Brooklyn Bridge” was informed by precisionist concepts: industrialism, American landscapes, modernity, as it avoided Eurocentric influences. Crane’s craft embodies the characteristic of precisionist painters as well. In other words, Crane’s language is clean-edged and ekphrastic as it renders, in the case of “To Brooklyn,” an industrial and urban symbol of modernity. This precisionist trait is prevalent throughout “To Brooklyn Bridge,” but greatly emphasized in the sixth stanza:

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 breathe the North Atlantic still

The holistic image created by this stanza is of a living structure set upon the “sky’s acetylene.” Crane uses precisionist language in this stanza to depict a new outlook of the Bridge. The image is meant to evoke a modern American landscape with American language. As a neologism, “rip-tooth,” similar to the rest of the poem, makes syntactical and logical sense within the context of the poem by introducing a new word. This familiarization, whether it is in the word “rip-tooth” or the complete poem, is the transparency Emerson refers to, the *reality* the poem illustrates. Similar to the way “rip-tooth” creates a more vivid image “of the sky’s acetylene,” “To Brooklyn Bridge” attempts to propose a new reality regarding divinity and aesthetic via rhythm that utilizes the ambiguity within the merger of erudite and colloquial language. In addition, the transparent reality in the poem comes from a post-transcendental tradition, a type of existentialism.

In many ways “To Brooklyn Bridge” is an autobiographical poem; it represents Hart Crane’s struggle with beauty, religion, and sexuality. Thomas E. Yingling’s *Hart Crane and the Homosexual: New Thresholds, New Anatomies* provides a glimpse of these struggles as he explores the ahistorical criticism of gay poets, Hart Crane in particular. In his analysis, Yingling delves into the marginalization of gay poets in traditional American Studies. He refers to gay poets as a “minority issue” that has been myopically studied through an invalidly distorted lens. His analysis begins with Walt Whitman’s often-disregarded poetic homoeroticism in relation to the misinterpretation and underrepresentation of Crane’s body of work. Yingling provides evidence for the omission of queer subjects in traditional American poetry by detailing the fundamental concern within American Studies whose best interest, until very recently, was exclusively in the collective American experience. Hence, the individualized gay poet was rounded to the nearest conventionality; *this*, therefore, became an issue of intentional transparency or “invisibility.” Yingling asserts, “the problem of homosexuality in American Studies is invisibility, its non status in a tradition conceived as addressing more universally cultural and social patterns or issues.” (4) “To Brooklyn Bridge” portrays invisibility both through the poem’s “non status” within tradition and, more directly, in the speaker’s presence as he plays the role of the unseen observer. From

“across the harbor,” the speaker admires and worships the beauty society will not allow him to attain. This is reflected in the imagery of the tenth stanza:

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

Every line uses a word that cancels out the speaker’s existence. In the first line of the tenth stanza, the words “under,” “shadow,” and “waited” are the antitheses of “over,” “light,” and “time,” respectively. All three words are representational of how and where the speaker is. In the line that follows, the speaker talks of the clearness of a “shadow” within “darkness.” Syntactically, the shadow belongs to the Brooklyn Bridge. However, the shadow could also belong to the speaker, or Crane, whose shadow or sexuality, is only clear within other shadows or those who acknowledge his sexuality and invisibility. In the third line, the word “undone” is the antithesis of “done” and further contributes to the tone of “invisibility” and the pattern of “unreal” throughout the poem. The stanza ends by burying part of the Bridge in snow. Again, the submergence of “an iron year” describes the speaker’s own buried, non-existence. Similar to the Bridge’s iron pillar buried throughout the years, the speaker is hidden under the cold snow of cultural customs. Overall, the imagery evoked in this stanza illustrates a lonesome, faceless, and alienated stranger, marginalized both physically and mentally from society. Unfortunately for Crane, what led *The Bridge* to its “magnificent failure” was his failure to convey the speaker’s societal invisibility in the prologue.

Because of the monumental task that Crane hoped to accomplish through *The Bridge*—including the rejection of the conventional, subjective build-up of beauty and God—the language that furnishes his poetry with ambiguity and phonetic charisma could not sublimate queerness in American poetry. In other words, like in Whitman, the language Crane used and depended on failed to normalize queerness in American poetics. Furthermore, Yingling claims, “[t]he sublimation that attempts to restore balance and transcendence [in terms of the heteronormativity and queerness] in Crane is more usually heterosexual” (153). Paradoxically, Crane’s word choice, imagery, as well as the voiced friction *The Bridge* creates when read aloud alludes to a hyper masculine phonetic, which then disrupts rather than restore the potentiality of a gay conical American poem. In *The Bridge*, Crane’s double significance of words reflect the mysticism he struggled to present in his poetry, and the confused, skeptic receptiveness of his poetry in the 1920’s (and even today) reflect his “magnificent failure.” Herman claims, “[Crane] attempted to fulfill his consciousness of being an American poet in *The Bridge*, which was marked by an unsuccessful effort to transport a personal mysticism to the creation of a national myth,” conventionalized aesthetic, and divinity. (55) Crane’s failed discourse and intentions have been closely studied, which inevitably brings one to question the root of Crane’s style. Although his efforts were then fruitless, critics question what galvanized his endeavor to become the next American poet in the first place.

In later parts of *Hart Crane and the Homosexual*, Yingling investigates Whitman’s influence in Crane’s body of work. He argues that, like Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*, Crane’s *The Bridge* intended to capture the American democratic spirit. However, Crane’s failure stemmed from “[the] nationalistic poetic agenda and the erasure of homosexuality” in the American poetic canon. (Yingling 90) In Yingling’s words, the “national displaces the homosexual.” Not until relatively recently have scholars begun reading *Leaves of Grass* in its homoerotic context.

Whitman and Crane had similar poetics, nationalistic agendas concerning America’s religious, democratic, and literary future. In “Democratic Vistas” for instance, Whitman speaks of the idea of national union, “only democracy, religion, and literature would keep America a single and culturally coherent nation.” (345) In this essay, Whitman’s central claim is the United States’ western expansion, yet he links his notion of physical expansion to the intellectual growth within a distinctly American poetry. Whitman’s accomplishment in creating what Emerson advocated in “The Poet” motivated Crane’s poetics.

Until more archival material surfaces, many questions regarding Crane’s poetic craft and intentions will be left unanswered. His notion of beauty and God is complex, especially in *The Bridge* as a whole. Howard Moss was right in saying that Crane’s “magnificent failure [in] attempting to create a contemporary American Myth [in *The Bridge*] has become a legend and platitude.” The foggy legend begins to take shape as readers of modernist poetry reinvent Crane’s *The Bridge*, as well as Crane the individual. This is apparent in James Franco’s New York University MFA Master’s Thesis, *The Broken Tower*, in which Crane’s sexuality is highlighted just as much as his poetry. Despite the mediocre reviews the film received, Franco—who directed the film and played Hart Crane—captured the interrelatedness of Crane’s poetics in ways that did not compromise Crane’s sexuality. Similar to the way Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* is now read within its homoerotic context, prospective analysis of *The Bridge* will benefit from films like *The Broken Tower* to contextualize the poetry within a visual environment. Hart Crane wrote material poetry, about solid objects and structures. Whether the poems describe the Brooklyn Bridge or his childhood attic bedroom (his “The Broken Tower”), Crane fabricated and personified the modern period with a discourse that tugged between the old and modern.

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