

**HART CRANE AND THE WOMAN WHO TOUCHED JESUS' ROBE: ARCS OF LOVE; MARK 5:25-41; TO BROOKLYN BRIDGE, HART CRANE  
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The way Mark tells it the woman who touched Jesus' cloak was in bad shape. She had undergone many treatments with many doctors; not only did she not get better she got worse; and she used up what little resources she had.

She was at the back of the crowd the day Jesus came by. She couldn't see him but she could hear what people were saying about him. She worked her way toward the front, saying, 'If I touch even his clothes, I shall be cured.' And when she did her hemorrhages dried up instantly. She could feel the healing within her.

When Jesus asked his disciples who touched him they gently deride him—you see the crowd pushing in how can you possibly hope to know who touched you? But the woman trembling with fear fell before him and he proclaimed that her faith had made her well and he blessed her.

That, in my opinion, is one of the most powerful stories of redemption in the New Testament. A human life after years of unrelieved pain is suddenly made whole and well.

It is stories like that that keep me coming back to the Gospels and to this strange, enigmatic healer, preacher Jesus.

Is there any one here today for whom that woman's story does not resonate and also perhaps offer a word of hope and encouragement?

I'd like to look at some striking parallels between this woman and Hart Crane—described by Harold Bloom as America's Shelley and our third poet after Whitman and Dickinson.<sup>i</sup>

That's high praise for a man who died young and left, like Shelley, a relatively modest quantity of work. But his vision and style, like the English bard, are incomparable. Hart Crane embodies as much as any poet we've considered the American quest for wholeness and for a deeper, closer relationship to God.

I am not saying Crane was an official "believer." But he was as religious as any minister or elder of his time. He trusted in and committed his life and poetry to what he called the "divine Answerer" "the Everpresence."

The details of Crane's short life are tragic. Born in Akron, Ohio in 1899 his father owned a candy company and was a demanding, detached figure in his son's life.

His mother, constantly at war with her husband, often used their only child as the martial battleground. She was an addictive personality and oppressed her son's brief life with her own demands for attention and obedience.

Crane was an inveterate opera and music lover. He was a voracious reader and came to New York at the age of 18 after discovering poetry. He went back to Ohio briefly when he ran out of money but returned to New York in his early 20s with a major poem that stunned the critics of his time and elicited comparisons with Whitman. For the next

ten years his life ebbed and flowed between alcoholism, tormented homosexuality and lyrical brilliance until his suicide jump off a cruise ship in the Caribbean.<sup>ii</sup>

In many ways it was his struggle against death that defined him and his poetry. Crane's epic long poem, *The Bridge*, was a calculated "yes" to life in response to T.S. Eliot's famous pessimistic poem of the same period entitled, *The Waste Land*.

Eliot's grip on critics and the academic community for a twenty-five year period was unprecedented—as if he had his fans and followers under a spell. His *Waste Land* poem was an unrelenting condemnation of modern society and the future of civilization if it continued to ignore the conservative values of classic culture.

His poem is filled with putrid rivers, rats, disease, prostitution, and demise. Someone said, "After Eliot's perfection of death nothing is possible but resurrection." Crane announced frustration with Eliot "[He] ignores spiritual possibilities as real and powerful now as in the time of Blake. He has buried hope as deep as can be done." But Crane also felt Eliot lacked a moral integrity, content as he was with "twelve hours of sleep a day and archeology" referring to Eliot's infatuation with the past.<sup>iii</sup>

Yet, rejecting pessimism had to be followed with an alternative—which in Crane's case was his long poem *The Bridge*: widely thought the greatest attempt since Whitman's *Song of Myself* to capture the myth of America, land of hope and opportunity.

Crane's style is dense, fragmented, and non-linear. Critics endlessly try to interpret what his poems mean. He was an idiosyncratic writer having turned away from the early influence of French Symbolism and back to a Romanticism and worldview that believed not in a fragmented but coherent reality.<sup>iv</sup>

Crane's ecstatic style and rhythm reflect the British Victorians Swinburne and Gerard Manly Hopkins. But the content of his writing is absolutely 21<sup>st</sup> century. His sentences 'refuse to add up linearly'; he sutures together images juxtaposing sounds and meters leading to the reader's disorientation and letting go of easy definitions.<sup>v</sup> The religious term for his method is shamanistic, the spiritual word is mystical.

The point Crane seems to be saying is that God is ungraspable. So don't expect to be able to grasp God after reading one of my poems but perhaps one of my poems will usher you into a transcendent experience, an experience of the ineffable.

The music of Crane's poetry anticipated the modern minimalist movement seen in such composers as Phillip Glass—who played if you recall at the UB stadium on the visit of the Dali Lama. Such music evokes a perpetual ecstasy and elevation.

Crane himself compared his epic *The Bridge* to Wagner's *Ring Cycle* on the one hand and to the image-laden Sistine Chapel on the other.<sup>vi</sup>

I wonder if it was the central image of the Sistine Chapel—the hand of God reaching out with index finger touching the index finger and hand of Adam—that inspired Crane.

A holy arc of creation, of love, of touching, of uniting, of making whole—where temporal and eternal meet. Which is what Crane hoped for his epic poem.

He sought in *To Brooklyn Bridge* to unite America's past with its present, as well as its magnificent sprawling diverse geography from city to plain. "Bridge" was the

perfect metaphor. Like the Brooklyn Bridge itself the loft of Crane's vision for it is high and elegant and dramatic.

During the six years it took to create the poem Crane had an apartment that looked directly over the Brooklyn Bridge. Annie Dillard recommends writers not have their desk facing a window but a wall. Had Crane not looked out his window each day to that engineering marvel we might not have this marvel of verse among our national letters.

Crane said El Greco's elongated perspectives in his "Agony in the Garden" influenced his perspective on the bridge.<sup>vii</sup> What comes to my mind is that poster of New York City and the rest of the nation stretched across the horizon: New York landmarks displayed in the foreground; prairies, major cities and Pacific beyond.

That's what this poem does: it envisions all of America from this one vaulted location, this "one arc synoptic of all tides" as Crane says in the closing section of the poem.

One arc synoptic, incorporating, all of our past and present, the ebb and flow of American history: Columbus after coming to North America returning home with the remarkable news of his conquest over space and chaos;

Pokahantus—the natural body of American fertility; Whitman—the spiritual body of America; tall ships and sailors; Cape Hatteras and the invention of flight; a New York subway and tunnel; jazz and skyscrapers.

All of it embodied in this leap-of-faith-of-a-bridge at once and the same the ultimate image of our "yes" to the world and of our freedom to explore and invent and create. Crane depicts less the literal bridge than "America the bridge" to the best of all possible new worlds.<sup>viii</sup>

The closing line from Reed's selection this morning sums up this lofty vision and objective: "and of the curviship lend a myth to God." Crane's vision of the bridge he could see from his apartment stood for a robust and renewed America—bigger than the sum of its parts—like his poem itself.

Crane saw in this structure of granite and steel the incarnation of America's spirit. Not only could the glorious arched span lend God a myth it was the godly myth of the national poet Emerson called for and Whitman in his own *Song of Myself* anticipated, "Will you speak before I am gone? Will you prove already too late?"

Indeed, even Crane sensed himself past due and asked if he would arrive "As a guest who knows himself too late/His news already told."<sup>ix</sup>

That such a vision comes from such a tragic figure is the connection with our biblical story today. Both figures struggling against all odds to survive. Both reaching out to touch the ineffable against all odds. Both summoning from beyond their personal pain and agony the will to say "yes" to life. Both outcasts—a diseased woman in the ancient world, a gay man in turn of century America.

That is what the woman and Hart Crane stand for today: the human impulse to let go of our fear of the darkness and hurl our spirit into the void not just to be received and celebrated but ultimately united with the cosmic life force.

An arc of love is the trajectory of faith found in this woman's story, in Hart Crane's poem and at the table today in these elements of bread and wine. Like the poet's granite and steel they unite us with eternity when we too are compelled to reach out, against all odds, and touch God. Amen.

### **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 breathe 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 I shy 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 curvship lend a myth to God.*

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<sup>i</sup> Harold Bloom and Jesse Zuba editors, *American Religious Poems*, The Library of America, 2006, xiv.

<sup>ii</sup> David Perkins, *A History of Poetry: Modernism and After* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1987) 65ff.

<sup>iii</sup> Margaret Dickie, *On the Modernist Long Poem* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1986) 55.

<sup>iv</sup> Albert Gelpi, *A Coherent Splendor: The American Renaissance, 1910-1950* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987) 394ff.

<sup>v</sup> Brian M. Reed, *Hart Crane: After His Lights* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2006) 128ff.

<sup>vi</sup> Reed, 134.

<sup>vii</sup> Reed, 128.

<sup>viii</sup> James E. Miller, Jr., *The American Quest for a Supreme Fiction: Whitman's Legacy in the Personal Epic* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979) 163ff.

<sup>ix</sup> Mark Simon, editor; Harold Bloom, introduction *The Complete Poems of Hart Crane*, Centennial Edition (New York: Liveright Press, 1986; introduction 2000) xxvi.