

Hart Crane

(1899-1932)

At Melville's Tomb (1926)

Often beneath the wave, wide from this ledge
The dice of drowned men's bones he saw bequeath
An embassy. Their numbers as he watched,
Beat on the dusty shore and were obscured.

And wrecks passed without sound of bells,
The calyx of death's bounty giving back
A scattered chapter, livid hieroglyph,
The portent wound in corridors of shells.

Then in the circuit calm of one vast coil,
Its lashings charmed and malice reconciled,
Frosted eyes there were that lifted altars;
And silent answers crept across the stars.

Compass, quadrant and sextant contrive
No farther tides... High in the azure steeps
Monody shall not wake the mariner.
This fabulous shadow only the sea keeps.

ANALYSIS

This poem is a little elegy upon Herman Melville, the author of *Moby-Dick*, the great American novel of the sea and whaling. The general meaning of the poem is easy enough. The poet says that the spirit of the writer whose imagination was so vividly engaged by the sea, and who saw such grandeur in man's struggle with it, though his body might be buried on land, would find its real abiding place in the sea:

"This fabulous shadow only the sea keeps."

The imagery of the poem, however, provoked the Editor who first published the poem to write the poet to ask several questions concerning the detailed meanings:

Take me for a hard-boiled unimaginative unpoetic reader, and tell me how *dice* can *bequeath an embassy* (or anything else); and how a *calyx* (of *death's bounty* or anything else) can give back a *scattered chapter, livid hieroglyph*; and how, if it does, such a *portent* can be *wound in corridors* of shells or anything else). And so on. I find your image of *frosted eyes lifting altars* difficult to visualize. Nor do compass, quadrant and sextant contrive tides, they merely record them, I believe. All this may seem impertinent, but is not so intended. Your ideas and rhythms interest me, and I am wondering by what process of reasoning you would justify this poem's succession of champion mixed metaphors, of which you must be conscious. The packed line should pack its phrases in orderly relation, it seems to me, in a manner tending to clear confusion instead of making it worse confounded. [Harriet Monroe, Ed., *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*]

The first part of the poet's reply to the editor's letter containing these questions was concerned with the general justification of comparisons which are not scientifically and logically exact...The poet then undertook to analyze the implied points of reference behind his own use of imagery:

...I'll come at once to the explanations you requested on the Melville poem: "The dice of drowned men's bones he saw bequeath / An embassy." Dice bequeath an embassy, in the first place, by being ground (in this connection only, of course) in little cubes from the bones of drowned men by the action of the sea, and are finally thrown up on the sand, having "numbers" but no identification. These being the bones of dead men who never completed their voyage, it seems legitimate to refer to them as the only surviving evidence of certain messages undelivered, mute evidence of certain things, experiences that the dead mariners might have had to deliver. Dice as a symbol of chance and circumstance is also implied.

"The calyx of death's bounty giving back," etc.

This calyx refers in a double ironic sense both to a cornucopia and the vortex made by a sinking vessel. As soon as the water has closed over a ship this whirlpool sends up broken spars, wreckage, etc., which can be alluded to as *livid hieroglyphs*, making a *scattered chapter* so far as any complete record of the recent ship and her crew is concerned. In fact, about as much definite knowledge might come from all this as anyone might gain from the roar of his own veins, which is easily heard (haven't you ever done it?) by holding a shell close to one's ear.

"Frosted eyes lift altars"

refers simply to a conviction that a man, not knowing perhaps a definite god yet being endowed with a reverence for deity--such a man naturally postulates a deity somehow, and the altar of that deity by the very *action* of the eyes *lifted* in searching.

"Compass, quadrant and sextant contrive no farther tides."

Hasn't it often occurred that instruments originally invented for record and computation have inadvertently so extended the concepts of the entity they were invented to measure (concepts of space, etc.) in the mind and imagination that employed them, that they may metaphorically be said to have extended the original boundaries of the entity measured? This little bit of "relativity" ought not to be discredited in poetry now that scientists are proceeding to measure the universe on principles of pure *ratio*, quite as metaphorical, so far as previous standards of scientific methods extended....

This correspondence raises some very interesting questions that frequently appear in connection not only with poems like this one by Hart Crane, but also with all poetry. People sometimes say: "But the poet couldn't have been thinking of all this when he wrote the poem." And in the sense in which they are using the term "thinking" they are right. The poet certainly did not draw up an analysis of his intention, a kind of blueprint, and then write the poem to specification. But it is only a very superficial view of the way the mind works that would cast the question into those terms. Does a finely trained pole-vaulter in the act of making his leap think specifically of each of the different muscles he is employing; or does a boxer in the middle of a round think of the details of his boxing form? Probably not, even though the vaulter or boxer may have acquired his form by conscious practice which involved detail after detail. Furthermore, at least the moment of action, a competent coach would be able to analyze and criticize the performance in detail.

In the same way, one might say that a poet, in his role as craftsman in the process of making a poem, does not work by blueprint specifications, but toward a sort of general objective which is conditioned by his "training"--by his previous methods and effects in the work of other poets, and by his thinking about experience. The process of composing the poem is a process of exploring the full implications of the intended meaning and of finding a suitable structure. The process is probably one of movement by trial and error, governed by self-criticism.

But to return to the matter of Crane's analysis of his own poem: in attempting to answer questions about his poem, Crane is obviously acting in the role of observer or critic, and one is not to confuse this process of analysis with the process that probably occurred in the actual composition. Moreover, one is not to suppose that the reader necessarily must duplicate the process of analysis in experiencing the force of the

poem. But as the preliminary discipline of the poet extends and enriches his capacity for creation, so the process of study extends the reader's capacity for appreciation.

Cleanth Brooks & Robert Penn Warren
Understanding Poetry
(Holt 1938,1950,1960) 320-23