

15 CRITICS DISCUSS

The Bridge (1930)

Hart Crane

(1899-1932)

“The late Hart Crane was not a learned man; he was not trained in or given to nice distinctions.... Now life was too prodigally real for him to concede the impossibility of giving it meaning. He might be said to be the only modern poet sufficiently *blind* to give his concepts the force of convictions *felt*, not cerebrally, and perhaps, timorously, posited. That (*The Bridge*) is the product of desire rather than of fulfillment must mitigate, in the eliminating process of time, its claims as a successful epic. Its convictions are frenziedly positive; one’s reactions are mixedly negative.”

Howard Blake
Sewanee Review
(Spring 1935) 193-94

“The fifteen parts of *The Bridge* taken as one poem suffer from the lack of a coherent structure, whether symbolic or narrative: the coherence of the work consists in the personal quality of the writing—in mood, feeling, and tone. In the best passages Crane has a perfect mastery over the qualities of his style; but it lacks an objective pattern of ideas elaborate enough to carry it through an epic or heroic work. The single symbolic image, in which the whole poem centers, is at one moment the actual Brooklyn Bridge; at another, it is any bridge or ‘connection’; at still another, it is a philosophical pun, and becomes the basis of a series of analogies.... Alternately he asserts the symbol of the bridge and abandons it, because fundamentally he does not understand it. The idea of bridgship is an elaborate blur leaving the inner structure of the poem confused.

Yet some of the best poetry of our times is in *The Bridge*. Its inner confusion is a phase of the inner cross-purposes of the time. Crane was one of those men whom every age seems to select as the spokesmen of its spiritual life; they give the age away.... The River [section] has some blemishes towards the end, but by and large it is a masterpiece of order and style; it alone is enough to place Crane in the first rank of American poets, living or dead.”

Alan Tate
Reactionary Essays
(Scribner, 1936) 32-38

“The element of obscurantism in the details of Crane’s writing, some of it probably intentional, makes it difficult to paraphrase him as fully and precisely as one might paraphrase George Herbert or Ben Jonson. Nevertheless, the general drift of *The Bridge* is clear... *The Bridge* endeavors to deal in some measure with the relationship of the individual American to his country and to God and with the religious significance of America itself. It reaches its first climax in the poem called ‘The Dance,’ which deals with the apotheosis of the individual, and its second in ‘Atlantis,’ which deals with the apotheosis of the nation. *The Bridge* is a loosely joined sequence of lyrics, and some of the individual pieces have only a tenuous connection with the principal themes.

The first poem is the dedicatory piece to the Brooklyn Bridge. Crane regarded the Brooklyn Bridge as the most beautiful artifact in North America, and largely for this reason he chose it as a symbol. The dedicatory poem is mainly descriptive of the literal bridge, but contains hints of the religious symbolism to follow; so far as the total symbolism is concerned, it has something of the nature of an unrestrained pun: Crane’s poem is a bridge; it joins the past to the present, the present to the future, life to death, non-being to birth, the old world to the new; the United States is a bridge which joins the two oceans. The next poem, ‘Ave Maria,’ is a monologue spoken by Columbus as he is returning from America and considering his discovery. Columbus appears to be secondarily the unborn soul approaching birth and the man of the past approaching modernity.

The next five poems are grouped under the heading, 'Powhatan's Daughter.' Pocahontas, in these poems, is the symbol of the American soil, and the five poems deal more or less clearly with the awakening love of the young protagonist for his country and for the deity with which his country is identified. We have here a characteristically Whitmanian variation on Emerson's pantheism: for Emerson God and the universe were one, but for Whitman the American soil was part of the universe to be especially worshipped, so that the pantheistic mysticism tends to become a national mysticism; Sandburg carries this delimitation further by insisting on the Mississippi Valley as the region of chief emphasis and creates a kind of regional mysticism and we get precisely this Sandburgian mysticism in the third poem in the group which I am now discussing, the poem called 'The River': when Crane was writing this poem, he informed me that he was rewriting Sandburg in the way in which he ought to be written.... I do not object to these poets' feeling a love for their country or for their region; but I believe that nothing save confusion can result from our mistaking the Mississippi Valley for God.

The first poem in this group of five is 'The Harbor Dawn'; it deals with the awakening of the protagonist in a room in New York, a room overlooking the harbor; this protagonist had been previously the unborn soul of the 'Ave Maria'; the modern man is now born and the woman with him is vaguely identified as Pocahontas. The second poem in the group, 'Van Winkle,' is a flashback to the childhood of the protagonist: we see the schoolboy becoming acquainted with the figures of North American mythology, with Cortez and with Captain Smith and with others. The boy is loosely equated with Rip Van Winkle, as one who has awakened after a long time ('400 years and more'), and so is connected with the Columbus of 'Ave Maria.'

The third poem in the group is 'The River.' This poem opens with a vision of the countryside as seen fragmentarily from the window of the Twentieth Century Limited, a symbolic railway train; then the train suddenly moves ahead and leaves the protagonist walking down the tracks in the company of various hoboes. The hoboes are the intercessors: they introduce the adolescent boy to the soil, to Pocahontas, since they are among the few people left who will take the time really to know the land and its old gods. We then see the train again, and the travelers within are separated from the soil and the folk by their wealth, luxury, and speed; they are advised to 'lean from the window if the train slows down,' and make the acquaintance of the folk; and we then have a vision of the folk flowing in a kind of symbolic river toward the gulf of eternity. The symbolic river is described in the last five stanzas simply as if it were the real Mississippi. Until we get to the last portion of the poem, the section beginning, 'And Pullman breakfasters glide glistening steel,' the writing is predominantly very powerful and becomes steadily more powerful, with only a few slight lapses, to the end. That is the one deeply impressive passage of any length in *The Bridge*, and along with a few earlier poems is probably the best writing in Crane. The pantheism is subdued here; the emphasis is on the country and the folk and on the poet's love for them; and the rhetoric is magnificent.

The following poem is called 'The Dance.' In this piece the protagonist takes a canoe trip down Hudson River, finally leaves his canoe and climbs into the mountains, and at the same time appears to proceed into the remote past. He finally comes to an Indian dance, where a captured warrior is being burned at the stake; the warrior in death is married to Pocahontas, or in other words is united with the American soil. The tone of the poem is nervous and violent; the poem contains some of the most brilliant lines in Crane and some of the most grotesque; and at the end it illustrates very dramatically the difficulty of the pantheistic doctrine. The warrior is united with the soil, which is God; his identity is presumably lost in this union; yet the language in which the union is described is in part the language of the traditional poetry of devotion, but it is mainly the language of love poetry: that is, personal extinction is described for the most part as if it were the consummation of a marriage and in some part as if it were a form of personal immortality. There is a violent dislocation here between the motivating theme and the emotion resulting from it; the poem is not merely confused, but it is confused in a manner which is suicidal. As I have said elsewhere, one does not deal adequately with the subject of death and immortality by calling the soil Pocahontas, and by then writing a love poem to an imaginary maiden who bears the name of Pocahontas. The misuse of metaphor here, the excursion by way of metaphor into pure irrelevance, is irresponsible almost to madness. Yet this poem is one of the two major crises in the sequence: in this poem the relationship of the protagonist to the soil, to God, and to eternity, is presumably established.

The last poem in the group is called 'Indiana'; in this poem a frontier mother bids farewell to her son and begs him to return home eventually. The mother may have been related loosely in Crane's mind to Pocahontas conceived as a mother; it is hard to be sure about this, but if she is not so related, there is no very evident reason for her being here. The poem is weak and sentimental.

The poems thus far have dealt primarily with what one might call the private spiritual experience, or the fate of the individual; those to follow deal primarily with the public spiritual experience, or the fate of the nation. There are qualifications to that statement, of course: 'The River,' for example, as we have seen, deals with a vision of the folk, but it deals primarily with the individual's awakening to the folk and his share in their life; there is an element of private experience in a later poem, 'Cape Hatteras,' but it is a secondary element; the 'Three Songs,' which follow 'Cape Hatteras,' deal with private experience, but have no real place in the sequence.

It is worth noting that the poems thus far described, with the exception perhaps of 'Indiana,' have a certain structural relationship to each other; whereas those which follow, and which deal with the public experience, are thrown together very loosely, and the aspects of the public experience with which they deal are few and appear to be selected almost at haphazard. Although Crane had curious ideas about the individual, he yet had ideas; but he was simply at a loss in dealing with society either in the present or in the historical past, for his ideas of the individual really preclude the possibility of a society.

The first of the later poems is a piece called 'Cutty Sark,' a very slight but perversely amusing meditation on the great days of the American clipper ships. The main reason for the inclusion of such a piece is Crane's enthusiasm for everything pertaining to the sea, but the ships represent a heroic portion of the American past and can be made a symbol of the type of adventurousness treated more explicitly in 'Cape Hatteras.' Next comes 'Cape Hatteras,' which is primarily an invocation to Walt Whitman and an explicit acceptance of his doctrines. The Whitmanian doctrine which Crane emphasizes in this poem is the doctrine of an endless procession of higher and higher states of perfection, or what I have called the doctrine of change for its own sake. Crane restates Whitman's symbol of the open road in terms of a vision of airplanes traveling farther and farther into remotest space, airplanes which are more or less successors of the clipper ships of 'Cutty Sark'...

'Cape Hatteras' is followed by 'Three Songs' which are only loosely, if at all, connected with the central theme. When Crane was putting the sequence into final order, he wrote me that he wanted to include the songs because he liked them, but that he was not sure the inclusion would be justified. The first song is called 'Southern Cross': it is a kind of love poem addressed to the constellation of that name as if the constellation were a woman or a female divinity; the constellation is equated with Eve, Magdalen, Mary, and 'simian Venus,' as if all conceivable types of love, like all types of woman, were one and were in some way identified with the mystical experience. The next song, 'National Winter Garden,' is a vision of love as lust; and the third, 'Virginia,' is a very slight and casual vision of sentimental love in the city. The poems obviously have no place in this latter half of the sequence, and they would probably fit but little better into the first half. And the significance of the trilogy, simply in itself, and as a related group, is not clear, nor, I think, is the significance of any one of the three songs except the second, with its forthright and ugly portrayal of lust. The recognition of ugliness which we get here, in 'Quaker Hill,' and in 'The Tunnel,' is strictly speaking out of place in an optimistic system...

Next comes 'Quaker Hill,' a poem which compares the past with the present: Crane borrows his procedure from Eliot, and compares a sentimentalized past with a vulgar present; neither past nor present is understood, nor is there any apparent effort to understand either; both are presented impressionistically. The poem contributes nothing which is not better accomplished by 'The Tunnel.'

Next come the two concluding poems, which may be regarded as companion pieces. Superficially regarded, 'The Tunnel' is a fragmentary description of a ride in the subway, but it is offered as an account of a kind of inferno through which one must proceed to the final vision; into it Crane has crammed as many as possible of the ugliest details of modern urban life. No reason for the necessity of such an inferno, or purgatory, is offered; the account is given because the literal subway exists and perhaps because Crane had

his periods of depression; there is obviously no intellectual grasp of the subject: 'The Tunnel' is not well written, but this sudden outburst of ugliness has a curious pathos, nevertheless. It is as if the facts of Crane's life had suddenly and for the moment rebelled against his faith. We see the same Crane who in 'The Dance' identifies himself with the warrior at the stake and cries out in one of the purest and most moving lines of our time, but with no understanding of his agony: 'I could not pick the arrows from my side.' But 'The Tunnel' offers a kind of ugliness which is not justified by the Whitmanian theme and so cannot be treated in terms of the theme. It was an ugliness which Crane experienced, in part as a result of his acceptance of the theme and the fallacies of the theme, but to treat it in these terms he would have had to understand the fallacies and what had happened to him as a result of them. He did not understand, and the poem is an assortment of impressions without meaning. He abandons these particular impressions in the final poem, 'Atlantis,' but a few years later they or others like them destroyed him.

In the last poem, 'Atlantis,' the bridge is seen in apotheosis. The bridge is the United States of the future, reaching from ocean to ocean, from time to eternity; on it are spread cities and farmlands; from it skyscrapers rise to remoter and remoter distances, as the Whitmanian airplanes had risen earlier.... The poem is unfortunately the most obscurely written in the sequence. If one examines it closely and from line to line; and I confess that I find it next to impossible to decipher except in what seem to me its most general intentions. As nearly as I can understand it, it offers a vision of physical splendor as a symbol for some kind of spiritual splendor; but the spiritual state in question remains undefined, and the final vision is without meaning: what we see ultimately is higher and higher skyscrapers, more and more marvelous in appearance, but ascending into heights of which the nature is uncertain. At the end Crane returns to the pantheism of the central poems: 'O Answerer of all,--Anemone,--' A passage which is, I imagine, Crane's equivalent for Whitman's 'Look for me under your bootsoles.'...

The work as a whole is a failure. It builds up to two climaxes, one in 'The Dance,' and one in 'Atlantis,' both of which are incomprehensible. As a whole it is loosely constructed. The incomprehensibility and the looseness of construction are the natural result of the theme, which is inherited from Whitman and Emerson. The style is at worst careless and pretentious, at second best skillfully obscure; and in these respects it is religiously of its school; and although it is both sound and powerful at its best, it is seldom at its best. Yet the last fifty-five lines of 'The River,' and numerous short passages in 'The Dance' and in 'Atlantis' and a few short passages elsewhere, take rank, I am certain, among the most magnificent passages of Romantic poetry in our language; and at least two earlier poems, 'Repose of Rivers' and the second of the 'Voyages,' are quite as fine. The second of the 'Voyages,' in fact, seems to me, as it has seemed to others, one of the most powerful and one of the most nearly perfect poems of the past two hundred years.

The difficulties inherent in the Whitmanian theme come out more clearly in Crane than in Whitman or in Emerson because of the more intense religious passion of the man. He is not content to write in a muddling manner about the Way; he is concerned primarily with the End. And in 'The Dance' and in 'Atlantis' respectively, he goes to the End. But his end is not an end in either case: it is a void. He does not discover this fact himself, but the passion and the linguistic precision with which he endeavors to render his delusion make it impossible, I think, that we should fail to recognize the delusion for what it is. And the same passion, functioning in his life, made him realize both the Way and the End completely, as Emerson and Whitman were incapable of doing. We have, it would seem, a poet of great genius, who ruined his life and his talent by living and writing as the two greatest religious teachers of our nation recommended."

Yvor Winters
In Defense of Reason
(Alan Swallow, 1937-47) 590-98

"Opening with a proem, 'To Brooklyn Bridge,' in which the structure, both 'harp and altar,' is conceived as lending 'a myth to God,' the eight succeeding sections begin with 'Ave Maria,' in which Columbus dedicates himself to the new world, and 'Powhatan's Daughter,' envisioning Pocahontas as an earth goddess but also drawing upon the legend of Rip Van Winkle, the author's own boyhood experiences, the movement of Americans flowing like a river, a dance of life and death associated with an Indian chief, and the farewell of a pioneer mother to her son who is leaving Indiana to go to sea.

‘Cutty Sark,’ the third section, presents a kaleidoscopic view of life at sea, at the Panama Canal, and in the Bowery. It is followed by ‘Cape Hatteras,’ hovered over by the spirit of Whitman and guided by him as elements of America, such as the achievements of the Wright brothers, are evoked. ‘Three Songs,’ treating the power of woman as Venus and Virgin, precede ‘Quaker Hill,’ which summons up the sense of degradation in American culture, a theme intensified in ‘The Tunnel,’ in which Poe is the author’s Virgil in a Hell conceived as a modern subway. The work concludes...its eighth section, ‘Atlantis,’ with an affirmative vision that returns to the symbolism of the opening view of Brooklyn Bridge ‘iridescently upborne / Through the bright drench and fabric of our veins....’”

James D. Hart
The Oxford Companion to American Literature, 5th edition
 (Oxford, 1941-83)

“*The Bridge* is a noble and basically impersonal poem of epic vision fulfilling its author’s boldest claims as a monument to America. In fits of drunkenness Crane declared that he was a reincarnation of Christopher Marlowe. In one sense there is sober justice in the vaunt. The youthful and ecstatic Crane is at least as successful a poetic spokesman for modern America as the youthful and ecstatic Marlowe for Elizabethan England. The American public has as yet scarcely appreciated the contribution of *The Bridge* to a distinctively national literature.”

Henry W. Wells
The American Way of Poetry
 (Twayne, 1943) 204

“*The Bridge*, upon which he worked intermittently for half a dozen years, was designed to be his most important refutation of ‘The Waste Land.’ Convinced of the necessity for poets to repossess the amplitude of myth, his was to be ‘the myth of America’ from our earliest history. The content of his poem was to be an ‘organic panorama, showing the continuous and living evidence of the past in the inmost vital substance of the present,’ and its title was meant to suggest an equally vital span into the future. His declared master was Whitman, since Crane wanted an expansive identification with our life in order to be able to make his ‘mystical synthesis.’

But his immense difficulty in finishing this poem, and the stylistic inequality between its parts, betray how much of it was a mere act of will and not a product of his deeper consciousness. His awareness of American history was hardly more than of a romantic spectacle. He had taken the leap from the time of ‘Powhatan’s daughter’ into modern New York with nothing to sustain him. What affirmation could he make when he knew only the breakdown of his family, and no community except a shifting metropolis?...

The Bridge, when finally published, was far less of a whole than ‘The Waste Land.’ It veered from passages of the purest poetic energy, as in the poem to Brooklyn Bridge, ‘The Harbor Dawn’ and ‘The River,’ to other passages of sentimental tawdriness. In one of the most perceptive essays by one of our poets about another, Tate, while recognizing Crane’s immense gifts, pointed out his utter failure to rise, in his conclusion, ‘Atlantis,’ to the passage from the *Paradiso* which is his source. Crane’s failure was that of the romantic ego to find any sanctions outside itself. His ‘vision’ had disintegrated into sensationalism.”

F.O. Matthiessen
The Literary History of the United States, 3rd edition
 (MacMillan, 1946-63) 1344-45

“We may ask whether the bridge, the metaphorical strength of which, obviously, is its power to unite one part with another, is as powerful a symbol as Crane thought. The bridge, over and above its metaphor value, does have ready associations for an industrialized world. But a more basic consideration is this: Can any amount of arbitrary spanning or bridging on the part of the poet—Crane bridges the agrarian and industrial worlds; the Tunnel and the final vision of hopefulness—create a unity in the minds of a society that normally sees the parts in isolation or in opposition? It would seem that the bridge symbol, which would have been remarkably appropriate to the medieval world, is an ironic one for ours.”

William Van O'Connor
Sense and Sensibility in Modern Poetry
 (Chicago, 1948) 23

“...it is poignantly and tragically symbolic that, at the very moment when Crane faltered and *The Bridge* might have passed into limbo unwritten, or at the very least have been written as a critical tragic poem, it was revived by a debt of honor to a banker closely identified with the materialism which had destroyed Crane’s faith.... It is as a description of an urban experience that the poem attains its greatest distinction, and it is unquestionably one of Crane’s most successfully integrated pieces. The horrors of subway transportation [in ‘The Tunnel’ section]—the noise, the broken conversations, the staring eyes, the lights, the spasmodic stops and starts at stations, the rounding of curves—are masterfully presented.”

Brom Weber
Hart Crane: A Biographical and Critical Study
 (New York, 1948)

“The true meaning of experiment in modern American literature may be found, after close study, in Hart Crane’s fifteen-poem symbolic reading of America, *The Bridge* (1930). Crane was exposed to all the movements in modern literature that were of any consequence. Lacking a formal education, he improvised in his search for background; he read widely but on impulse, and along lines he set for himself.... That he possessed an extraordinary native lyrical power was indicated from the very beginning of his career. When his first volume of poems, *White Buildings*, appeared in 1926, that power was widely acknowledged, though no critic was unreserved in his admiration.

Waldo Frank said that Crane ‘belongs to a group of poets who create their world, rather than arrange it’ (*New Republic*, March 14, 1927). Yvor Winters hailed the volume as the work of ‘a poet who accepts his age in its entirety, accepts it with passion, and...has the equipment to explore it’ (*Poetry*, April 1927). Allen Tate considered *White Buildings* ‘probably the most distinguished first book ever issued in the country’ and added that ‘Crane’s blank verse is one of the few important contributions made by a contemporary to poetic style’ (*Bookman*, January 1929). The fault was not in the gift itself, but in its abundance. There was ‘too much,’ and it lacked control, discipline, ‘a system of disciplined values’ (Tate); Crane tried ‘to crowd more images into each poem—more symbols, perceptions, and implications—than any few stanzas could hold or convey’ (Cowley, *New Republic*, April 23, 1930). Much was said about the crowding, the rich natural abundance, the romantic sensibility. This was a common complaint in the criticism of all his poetry....

Crane’s mind was shaped by modern influences. Even his use of the past was an extreme case of modernism...his effort to train his genius brought him to read and occasionally to translate French poets (Laforgue, Rimbaud, and Vildrac) and to Jacobean and metaphysical verse.... His life (in Manhattan, Brooklyn, Ohio, Europe) was a modern poet’s progress, from one group of critics and creators to another, from one little magazine to another. The special contribution made by contemporary letters was his experience, his training, his education. From it he formulated his own theories of organic metaphor, revisions of poetic language, explanation of the contemporary world. As he was from the start a poet in the modern world, so he became in his life a living symbol of the ‘forms of dislocation’ an extreme sensitivity to that world might produce. Unlike many of his contemporaries, however, Crane did not want to give in to what he thought was the pessimism of his age...

He wanted to use the techniques of the moderns, but ‘toward a more positive, or (if [I] must put it so in a skeptical age) ecstatic goal.’... He was motivated first of all by an oversimplified view of what Eliot and his followers were actually doing; it was based on a simple emotional division of the motives for writing about the contemporary world (as either blandly optimistic or frankly pessimistic). Crane was not acquainted with any orderly or systematic body of knowledge through which he could translate his convictions into art; most of all, such a body of knowledge was not available to him as he prepared to write his ‘great affirmation.’...

The writing of *The Bridge* took almost seven years, from early 1923 to late fall of 1929.... At this time he also felt a great spiritual association with Whitman, who became the monitory spirit of *The Bridge*. No

one thought so highly of Whitman in the 1920s; no one needed him so desperately. Through Crane's work, Whitman was placed in the very center of the experimental literature of the decade. From Crane's reading of *Democratic Vistas*, he knew that Whitman had not been a superficial optimist concerning America; he liked Whitman's desire and his will to transcend the evidences of evil he had seen, and especially his attempts to translate material things into spiritual values. In short, Whitman was Crane's guide through the inferno of the 1920s, and, more than that, became a divine and mythical spirit to lead him safely to 'Atlantis'; Whitman took over from Columbus in the journey to Cathay....

At times he lost confidence in the vision of America he had proposed to formulate. He was held grudgingly to the reading of Spengler's *Decline of the West*; at Patterson, New York, in 1925, he argued through the night with the Allen Bates over the persuasions of Spengler and Eliot.... Throughout...he was plagued by doubt that his original vision could be sustained: 'If only America were half as worthy today to be spoken of as Whitman spoke of it fifty years ago there might be something for one to say—not that Whitman received or required any tangible proof of his intimations, but that time has shown how increasingly lonely and ineffectual his confidence stands.' At times he lost his belief in the Bridge itself, which today, he said, 'has no more significance beyond an economical approach to shorter hours, quicker lunches, behaviorism and toothpicks.'...

The 'Proem,' 'To Brooklyn Bridge,' is more than a prefatory tribute; it contains all the essential metaphors through which the entire poem is unified. It is necessary to begin here, in the present, in the big city, with the bridge dominating the scene and giving it a symbolic fixation. The 'curveship' of the bridge is repeated in images of curve throughout, it is the most clearly *functional* imagery of the poem: the 'seagull's wings shall dip and pivot him,' 'while rings of tumult,' 'inviolable curve,' and so on. Posed against these indices of a fixed and repeated curve are the insights into aimless motion, not apparently governed by a design.... Once the specific location and meaning of the Bridge have been established, Crane moves for the first time into the past, in 'Ave Maria.' Here too the symbolic value of Columbus's journey to the New World is explored (as it was in Williams' *In the American Grain*). The prospect of a New World is both a romantic challenge to man and a prophecy of a new history....

This vision of Columbus, as he estimates the consequences of his voyage, is a primary historical insight into the realization of America. It is given in terms of the 'curveship' of the earth, which is linked with God's universe in the image of 'one sapphire wheel: / The orbic wake of thy once whirling feet.' The curve, here of the Bridge itself, [is] celebrated in all of its symbolic intensities in 'Atlantis.'... In Part II 'Powhatan's Daughter,' Crane moves in time both to the present and to the historical American past. In all the devices used in this, the most fully developed of all the book's divisions, time past and time present are given in an interacting unity; the shifts of time and space are both necessary to represent the 'myth of America,' and geographical space—in the description of the Mississippi River—is identified with time. This unity is also essential to the symbol of the bridge's 'curveship,' since it bestows as 'accolade' of 'anonymity time cannot raise'...

Part II begins with 'The Harbor Dawn,' with the poet himself in his room near the bridge and harbor; he is both modern man and Columbus returned some four hundred years after his original voyage. The noises of commerce and shipping crowd through his brain until they take his sleep away altogether. With him is Pocahontas, who represents the land in its purest form. Mastery of the American myth requires that the love of the two be consummated; but she eludes him, and he pursues her through the land and through the historical past. When the full light of the present has come, leaving only vagrant memories of the past, she has fled.

In 'Van Winkle' the poet is faced with present reality.... As he prepares to make his way to the subway, the sound of a hurdy-gurdy reminds him of his childhood, and thus of America's beginnings.... These references to past dream visions and memories are indispensable to Crane's symbol of time and history: his own childhood, the childhood of the nation, the history of the white man's exploitation of Indian lands, all suggest an appraisal of the past in terms of the Bridge and will eventually qualify its mystic value. So that, when he and his companion, Van Winkle, descend into the subway, the reader is prepared for the symbolic journey that occurs in 'The River.' The subway, raucous and noisy reminder of modern life in confusing motion, is transformed into the 20th Century Limited, and the protagonist is moved from a setting

of jumbled advertisements and commercial promises to a lonely spot in the heart of America. There follows a contrast between present and past in terms of the American hobo, who have not been taken in by American progress, who have in turn been ignored by it, tolerated as 'blind baggage'....

Like Van Winkle, they are his clue to the search for Pocahontas, in which the vast continent itself is both the setting and the goal. Pocahontas is both the feminine spirit of fertility and the actual American land; the land is therefore identified with the history of her race. This is not a narrow view of history in terms of what the white man did by way of abusing the Indian; rather, the Indian, as a precivilized race, symbolizes the land for Crane, and the history of both involves an appraisal of the entire American past. The train (which had emerged from the commercial bedlam of Manhattan) is now symbolic of the ruin of the land's past... It is most useful that the railroad should run parallel with the river: the 'glistening steel' covering the American space, 'a dance of wheel on wheel.' The past appeals to and warns the 'Pullman breakfasters' who ride to remember the past and their own mortality.... For they too 'feed the River' endlessly; they will also become the victims of time... The sea is eternity for both Whitman and Crane: the river, which obliterates individual lives, flows finally into it; the Bridge points both westward to the land and eastward to the sea; and on the sea (as 'Ave Maria' demonstrates) the 'Hand of God' is our only security.

From the geographical symbol of time and eternity Crane turns to the configuration of 'The Dance.' Once again he attempts to pose the moral question of America's history in terms of the Indian and of the unified image of Pocahontas as woman and land. The dance is given in a setting of storm; it is a dance of death, the death of the Indian warrior, and the dance becomes a ritual of restoration, an appeal for survival of the land through the sacrificial death of individuals. In the death that arrives in these ritual circumstances, the warrior is made immortal through his union with Pocahontas...through a secular-inspired religious mysticism... In a sense the 'bedlamite' of the 'Proem,' in hastening to his death 'out of some subway cell or loft,' is trying for the same unification of himself with the eternity promised by the Bridge. This is not a rational endorsement of faith, but a participation in ritual for an objective defined by symbolism created within the myth.

Part II concludes with an inferior, sentimental poem, 'Indiana,' which serves as a transition from the land to the sea, from the pioneer West to the East and the commercial life of the coast. 'Cutty Sark' (Part III) celebrates the era of clipper ships, the vast American commerce on the sea, but with full ironic recognition of the defections of which that commerce was guilty. Again the form of the poem is purposely erratic; as Crane said, 'meant to represent the hallucinations incident to rum-drinking in a South Street dive as well as reminiscent lurchings of a boat in heavy seas, etc.' The primary imagery is the green of the sea itself (and of death) and the rose (religious color) that is part of a song played in the 'nickel-in-the-slot piano.' The 'Rose of Stamboul' becomes, as the refrain grows in explicitness, the Queen of a lost city, Atlantis, until she is called 'Atlantis Rose.' The image is a terrifying one, as is the use of Poe's 'The City in the Sea' in 'The Tunnel'...

'Cape Hatteras' (Part IV), one of the last, and least successful, poems Crane wrote, is a specific tribute to Whitman and an appeal to him to guide him in his journey.... It is crucial to the sequence, and it is full of frantic images and rhythms. It fails because Crane could not control its mass of perceptions. Whitman becomes a divine spirit...a projection into infinity of the Bridge symbol itself, in the language of the machine and industry. The 'Open Road' has become the air....

At first glance the 'Three Songs' of Part V seem the least suitable of all the parts to the structure of the whole, but they possess an important number of unifying signs. They are all concerned with women and with love. 'Southern Cross' celebrates the 'nameless Woman of the South,' as Eliot was to appoint the 'Lady' the guardian of his protagonist's struggle for conversion ('Ash Wednesday,' 1930). The woman... is a symbol of immortality and, through her association with the sea and the heavens, a universal refuge....

Crane never came closer to imitating the superficialities of Eliot's manner than in 'Quaker Hill'; the ironies of Eliot's early poems and the deeper ironies of 'The Waste Land' are here more or less crudely transcribed. Quaker Hill itself is a primary irony: formerly a meeting house, it is now a resort hotel... The 'Promised Land' has become a place of 'bootleg roadhouses where the gin fizz / Bubbles in time to

Hollywood's new love-nest pageant.' This is tired writing; it was finished shortly before deadline. Yet even here the major conflict is maintained, though it is certainly forced: these vulgar successors to our past are pathetic reminders of the nation's 'sundered parentage.' The cheap amusements and preoccupations of the resort hotel are contrasted with the genuine artistry of Emily Dickinson and Isadora Duncan, to whom the poet finally appeals that they may shield 'Love from despair.'

The final passage to 'Atlantis' needs still to await Crane's journey through the Inferno; and in 'The Tunnel' he presents us with a remarkable evocation of the 'terrestrial Hell.' The self is finally and totally isolated, in full and dreadful consciousness of its isolation. The subway becomes in every detail a place of death, despair, and woe. The sound is a monotone punctuated by fragments of speech, disconnected and vagrant... To this terror Crane brings a vision of Poe, for whom sufferings as artist Crane felt an affinity. The head and body of Poe are victimized by the subterranean hell. The effect of industry is signified by the subway as demon... In this description Crane employs the full resources of the poem as it has thus far been presented: the kiss of agony of 'Ave Maria,' the hope of immortality of 'The Dance,' the reminders of death and eternity of 'The River.' He finally rescues himself from the agony by a return to the Bridge itself and to 'the River that is East.'

He has at last returned to his beginnings—the Bridge itself, and the full measure of its symbolic and mystical figuration. The cables radiating from the towers (the 'harp'), the shape of the surface (the 'altar'), and the curve of the span are all drawn in, to describe the 'myth' which is America. They are also symbolic, in their unity and their geometric design, of the pattern of the turning world, as previous sections of the poem have led us to anticipate. The Bridge is 'synoptic' of 'all tides below'; it incorporates all pasts, not only America's but those of Tyre and Troy; it is the Logos, the 'multitudinous Verb... It is the ultimate knowledge, 'steemed Cognizance,' whose 'curveship' unites all patterns of curve, mundane and celestial... It presents the one absolute 'intrinsic Myth,' in its 'Swift peal of secular light.' It is therefore the culmination of Crane's search for a secular myth, not dependent upon past dogmas but 'intrinsic,' containing its certainties and its symbology within itself. As a product of the 'fury fused' of science, it is constantly renewed and strengthened as science adds 'fresh chemistry' to its song. To it Crane addresses his final prayer—the Bridge now stands where the 'Hand of God' once was....

The Bridge thus concludes on the note of unease and uncertainty with which it began. The elements of experiment and improvisation in modern letters induced and forced Crane to consider the possibility of a positive myth that might avail itself of the techniques of modern poetry and at the same time to make through them an assertion that would differ from other applications. The poem itself testifies to the great difficulty Crane had in sustaining his vision, how often he was in danger of committing himself not only to the methods but to the points of view of his contemporaries. In the tension set up between an oversimplified vision and a tortured awareness of realistic circumstances, the poem demonstrates the very mood of experiment in the literature of the 1920s: its complexities, its untraditional modes of approach to the uses of poetry, its attempts to force a new idiom and to utilize a new range of subject matter, and above all, its moral concern over the special value and function of poetry itself. The poet of *The Bridge* is a man alienated from his community because of (and in the very act of) his search for an acceptable, believable synthesis of that community."

Frederick J. Hoffman
The Twenties: American Writing in the Postwar Decade
(Viking/Crowell-Collier, 1949-62) 257-74

"*The Bridge* consists of fifteen parts. These parts, however, are rather loosely held together, and can be read separately as well as in conjunction. Crane, in fact, succeeds better in the individual poems which compose *The Bridge* than he does in their amalgamation into an integrated whole.... 'Proem: To Brooklyn Bridge,' 'The River,' and 'The Tunnel'—are representative of Crane's best poetry and show the kind of 'mystical synthesis' which he was attempting in *The Bridge*. Here indeed we see, as Crane put it, 'the continuous and living evidence of the past in the inmost vital substance of the present. The 'Proem' is a beautiful and moving apostrophe to Brooklyn Bridge as 'harp and altar.'... In an early synopsis, Crane spoke of this section ['The Tunnel'] as 'a kind of purgatory,' its subject being 'the encroachment of machinery on humanity.' Although the effect of the subway picture is undoubtedly depressing, the poem

ends with buoyant, essentially religious, references: to Lazarus, who rose from the dead, to the 'Word that will not die,' to the purifying, sacramental 'Hand of Fire'."

Walter Blair
The Literature of the United States 2
(Scott, Foresman, 1953-66) 1086

"The mystique of language which is at the heart of Crane's genius is evident from the outset. The Bridge is not only personified but is addressed as at least a demi-god. Both the machine-made and the natural worlds are granted life and purpose.... Each of the speakers in the poem has his own deep need to seek the meaning of the new world; and to each of them the poet grants the sensibility to satisfy his need. In 'Ave Maria' (I), Columbus speaks, dedicating himself to the new world. In the beginning was his word. In 'Powhatan's Daughter' (II), the poet himself speaks in various moods—waking in the city, then recalling at once his boyhood and the story of Rip Van Winkle, then thinking about some tramps and the land over which they travel, and so moving to a meditation upon pioneer times, and finally envisioning Pocahontas as an earth-goddess and Chief Maquoqueeta in his dance of life and death. Because in each of these reveries the poet identifies with the person upon whom he muses, he yet must see them all as one, united....

...the integrating force of the river is contrasted with the divisive force of the railroad—the second a sterile, mechanical parody of the first.... The poet's task here is, through the use of such language as will genuinely manifest both the search and what is sought for, to show how they, like him, are one with Columbus, one with their land, one with their incognizable Word. The transition from the many to the one, from all personae to the poet, occurs in the last section of Part II, 'Indiana,' in which the protagonist is a pioneer woman, bidding her son farewell as he goes off to sea—to a new world to conquer. It is her deep-felt sorrow which marks the turning point in the poem—when the American, sated with his conquests of the place which is the ground of his being, turns elsewhere....

The whole poem, which, taken as a simple narrative sequence, would begin here when the Prodigal's meditations are initiated, is an account of his efforts to recover the authentic use of his language—through metaphors recover its dynamism—and to be truly at home... Here Crane, against what he took to be a 'whimpering' Eliot, is defining the true quest upon which modern man must embark—a quest not for a myth which would make for discipline and ritual, but rather a myth... which would make for 'spontaneity,' for sheer creativity.... Crane's protagonists, taken all in all, reduce to the American as Prodigal: having wasted his patrimony; now trying somehow to restore it; unable to restore it until he returns to the home, the land, the myth, the language, which he has left behind. The patrimony is simply this: his spontaneous, fully-felt, all-powerful sense of his language as it reveals him as a person...

...there is in 'Cutty Sark' (III), an almost surrealist nightmare (in which the poet is a kind of enraged voyeur) of life at sea; in 'Cape Hatteras' (IV), an account of American history (the poet's guide is Whitman) as that of an ancient place whose natural resources modern men thoughtlessly use to make machines—all the while unaware of the 'mythic' significance of their acts; in 'Three Songs' (V), brief appeals to woman as 'homeless Eve'—in a burlesque show as 'Magdalene' and in a towering office building as 'Cathedral Mary'; in 'Quaker Hill' (VI), a glance at the degradation of the American heritage in fashionable society, Hollywood, and the like; in 'The Tunnel' (VII), a vision of the subway (the poet's guide is Poe) as the American's constant reminder of the hell in which he lives, and in 'Atlantis' (VIII), a return to the theme of the Proem—the bridge having become a lost continent.... The Prodigal knows himself for what he is. After being identified thus in the 'Indiana' section, he speaks ever after in his own person, having absorbed the persons of those who had spoken before. His means to that absorption are his increasing sense of his direct connection (to recall Crane's phrase) with Whitman, who figures toward the end of 'Cape Hatteras' as at once father-figure, the poet's self, and God....

So Crane admired Brooklyn Bridge as a machine whereby a man might ascend to complete self-knowledge and complete self-realization, thence to a complete community made up of men like himself who had ascended as he had. *The Bridge*, as poem, is meant to be such a machine: one which, if the Prodigal sets it going right, will surely take him home. Only, home is where he has always been, but without knowing it. How is the machine to work? Not, surely, through the collocation of events and images which it is when considered as a structure. Rather, through the synergy—to use a term of which

Crane was fond—of word with word. Crane's obsessive use of the word 'myth' is, I think, unjustified, since for him there is no essential 'story' behind reality which, as it is revealed to him, will let him design rituals whereby he might celebrate the revelation. (Crane therefore is what I shall later have occasion to call an Adamic, as against a mythic, poet.) Crane's 'myth' is simply his word for that fecundative power of language...in which he would find its primary mode of being....

Perhaps *The Bridge* is to be taken as an abortive attempt to create a creation myth. Thus the closing words of the Proem: '...of the curveship lend a myth to God.' The Bridge is a human creation; the impulse to make it is super (or supra-) human; making it is a sign that human making is subsumed by super-human making. Making it is thus a way of making possible 'making' itself. The 'myth' is, then, solipsistic—that of man the myth-maker who must feed upon the myth he makes. Our gaze is fixed hypnotically on the Prodigal-protagonist, willing himself to do his will....

...he will have history only on his own terms—those dictated by his understanding of the nature of language, wherein lies his true power. There is in the world of Crane's poem no genuine variety, no feeling for the qualitative differences among the plenitude of places and things which he can mark in it. He cannot conceive of history as something that really—and therefore uniquely—happened. History is for him now, here, and of a piece. (And better education and more careful 'research' are hardly likely to have helped.) For marking them, he conceives of them as all having value only in so far as they can be put into language, his language. That he thought that his language (or rather his hypervitalist theory of language) was all men's—this is a sign of the cost he had to pay to be what he was bound to be....

Like Whitman, he sought a passage, or a bridge, to another world—thus the quite justified transmutation of Brooklyn Bridge to Atlantis in the last part of the poem. America was to be a means to an end, not the end in itself. Like Barlow, Whitman, and Pound, Crane hoped to show the American how, through an understanding of the meaning of his country in its history, he might prefigure a new man, cosmic man. The end of Crane's epic (or 'symphony with an epic theme') was to be a vision, 'in terms of America,' or a World Renewed. But getting down to his task, Crane in all his furor could envision it only in his own terms.... Striving to put America into a poem, he rendered into homogeneity all of its particulars and brought forth a 'multitudinous Verb.' In spite of all he could do, it was his Verb and his only."

Roy Harvey Pearce
The Continuity of American Poetry
(Princeton, 1961) 104-07,108,109-11

"Hart Crane has his monument in Brooklyn Bridge, the structure that inspired his greatest poem and a poem which, after all its faults have been enumerated, is still one of the best of modern times.... This work is an endeavor to see America and American history mystically and symbolically. The chief symbol is "The Bridge," here Brooklyn Bridge. Crane did not intend a nationalistic panegyric or a glorification of 20th century development; on the contrary, he valued the ideals that industrialism was suppressing. Difficulties in writing included economic ones, partially solved by financial aid from Otto H. Kahn, a leading industrialist. Crane allowed himself to be constantly distracted, and suffered agonizing mental turmoil and depression over the poem and his own existence as a poet. Yet he continued writing, published some portions in magazines, and *The Bridge* was published in the fall of 1930.

In the poem appear Columbus, Pizarro, Priscilla, Walt Whitman, and other figures, all regarded as 'bridges.' Columbus, for example, is a bridge between the Old World and the New. Crane felt that he was 'really building a bridge between the so-called classic experience and many divergent realities of our seething confused chaos of today.' Often he shows his love of America and the American soil, even when displaying American degeneration, as in the section called 'Quaker Hill.' Henry W. Wells feels that 'the American public has as yet scarcely appreciated the contribution of *The Bridge* to a distinctively national literature.' Brom Weber calls the poem 'altogether superb in its music, imagery, and most of its structure.'... Of all the poems by moderns that have the analogy of musical composition for their design, *The Bridge* is the most satisfactory. Crane has carried nearest to perfection the idea that teased Whitman, Lanier, Mallarme, Pound, Eliot, and Wallace Stevens...."

Max J. Herzberg & staff

The Reader's Encyclopedia of American Literature
(Crowell, 1962)

“*The Bridge* grew out of Crane’s personal situation and his devotion to Whitman, particularly to the mystical aspect of Whitman’s work; out of his desire to provide an ‘answer’ to Eliot’s description of modern life as empty of spiritual meaning (‘I feel that Eliot ignores certain spiritual events and possibilities as real and powerful now as, say, in the time of Blake. Certainly the man has dug the ground and buried hope as deep and direfully as it ever can be done.’); and out of his belief that P.D. Ouspensky’s *Tertium Organum*, describing in twentieth-century language what Bucke had earlier called ‘cosmic consciousness,’ had provided him with a way of defending mystical experience in an age of science. Whitman, Eliot, and Ouspensky are thus the formative influences behind the poem; and of the three, Whitman is the real source and fountainhead, the indispensable influence....

Precisely at the center of *The Bridge*, if we count the ‘Proem’ as an introduction and ‘Atlantis’ as a coda, is ‘Cape Hatteras,’ which Crane once described in a letter as ‘a kind of ode to Whitman.’ This section more than any other is the key to the poem’s intent. Crane opens the poem with an epigraph from ‘Passage to India,’ section eight, the prayer for a vision of God in Whitman’s poem.... Both poems are ‘about’ union with God, achieved through sensing the immanence of deity in present experience.... Between the beginning and the end of ‘Cape Hatteras,’ everything is Whitmanic by intention, though whether the poem actually achieves a re-creation of Whitman’s vision or merely urges and asserts it, sometimes frenetically, is likely to remain an open question.... We should have to chart the rhythmic, contrapuntal thematic structure of one of the most dense and complex poems ever written by an American. We should have to say whatever could be said about the parts—like ‘Three Songs’—that seem unrelated to the main theme, or at least not clear in their function within the whole poem...

The Proem, ‘To Brooklyn Bridge,’ is the full repayment of Crane’s debt to Whitman. Only a Whitmanic poet, living in the new conditions of the 1920’s, could have done it. Moving by affirmation and denial, soaring dream and sinking fact, it captures both Whitman’s vision and the ideas of the 1920’s which seemed to render that vision invalid. It invokes ‘harp and altar, of the fury fused,’ but attends just as carefully to the feeling that comes when ‘elevators drop us from our day.’ The parabolic curve of the actual bridge becomes at once the ‘inviolable curve’ that suggests the perfect circle of infinity and the ever-ongoing movement of a spiritual open road; for a parabola never closes in on itself, yet always seems to be moving toward the circle’s closure. The poem’s final line is the climax of the prayer of invocation: ‘And of the curviship lend a myth to God.’...

‘Atlantis’ begins with an epigraph from Plato: ‘Music is then the knowledge of that which relates to love in harmony and system.’ Substitute ‘poetry’ for ‘music’ and we get both Crane’s idea of what he hoped he had accomplished and a justification for his naming of the Word which, though it is ‘unspeakable,’ he still speaks, as the meaning of his major symbol, and of the poem he has built upon it: ‘Unspeakable Thou Bridge to Thee, O Love.’ ‘God is love,’ John said in his First Epistle.... The final lines of ‘Atlantis’ proclaim the God that Crane’s contemplation of the bridge’s curve had led him to. Crane’s God is very like that of the Christian Gospel, but he has been arrived at, or met, or discovered, by a different route from that taken by Eliot, who struggled to conform his thoughts to ‘the faith once delivered to the saints.’ (Whether God has in fact, in very truth, ‘disclosed’ himself to Crane, in the experiences described in *The Bridge*, is a religious, and not a literary-critical, problem.) Crane has been attentive to what has been called ‘continuous creation,’ considered as revelation...the light is ‘secular’ because it has come from ‘nature,’ not from ‘Scripture,’ the Cathedral being no longer able to hold the bells that peal out the light. And the myth is ‘intrinsic’ both because it is the product of native conditions (Pocahontas, the Indiana mother, the bridge) and also because it has been ‘essentialized from experience directly, and not from previous precepts or preconceptions.’ Crane’s God has been intuited—perhaps it would be better to say ‘perceived,’ since that is what the poem in effect says...

‘Cape Hatteras,’ we may conclude, does yield the sufficient clue to the intended meaning of the whole poem. But Eliot and Ouspensky also helped to make the poem possible, and to give it the form it finally assumed. Crane’s real literary education had begun with his discovery of Pound...but had later continued under the tutelage of Eliot, while his admiration for Pound gradually waned. Early in 1922, before he had

read 'The Waste Land,' he wrote his friend Tate, 'The poetry of negation is beautiful—alas, too dangerously so for one of my mind. But I am trying to break away from it...' When he read Eliot's poem in the fall of that year, he at first found it 'dead.' His work was cut out for him, he thought. He would devote himself to refuting the poem, to showing that 'spiritual illuminations' could come even in the waste land. He would answer Eliot in his own idiom, in the older poet's own symbolic techniques. But *his* myth would be 'intrinsic' and 'secular.'

About the same time, probably in 1922, Crane was profoundly affected by his reading of P. D. Ouspensky's *Tertium Organum*. A Russian mystic with mathematical and scientific training, Ouspensky tried to explain the nature of the 'higher consciousness'...as a way of 'perceiving' that transcended the dimensions of space-time. 'That which can be expressed,' he argued, 'cannot be true,' because ordinary logic is founded on space-time categories. Truth is never Aristotelian, but always and only the discovery of 'the logic of infinity, the logic of ecstasy,' which is necessarily intuitive. Real knowledge is 'direct' knowledge; it comes only by 'illumination.'

Ouspensky devoted a chapter in his book to Bucke's *Cosmic Consciousness*, which had used Whitman as its chief modern example of a man possessing the mystic awareness. Crane already knew and liked Whitman's work, but now he had another reason to go back to it: Ouspensky had told him why it was that Whitman had been able to articulate, as Crane would later say, a myth 'beyond all sesames of science' and thus to become 'the most typical and valid expression' of the American psyche, writing visionary poetry that reconciled and fused 'those forces in America which seem most intractable.'... No wonder that when Crane came to write *The Bridge* he showed the influence of Ouspensky's language and concepts and offered his hand to Walt as he attempted to do for his age what he thought Whitman had done for his, that is, to bridge the gap between time and eternity, the one and the many, the wholly transcendent and the inertly factual.

The line between Emerson and Whitman, and Whitman and Bucke, and Bucke and Ouspensky, and Ouspensky and Crane, is unbroken, a kind of Apostolic Succession accomplished by the laying on of hands. Crane was hesitant, and became more so with the years, about claiming to be a 'mystic,' but all his later work, after the earlier poems in *White Buildings*, shows that that is how he thought of himself—or at least how he thought of the 'true poet,' which he sometimes despaired of being. He had read in Ouspensky that 'the founders of the religions of the world have all been bridgebuilders...between the *Finite* and the *Infinite*,' and in Whitman, 'I inaugurate a new religion.' He felt himself suited for an attempt at Whitman's task by his own experience.... His view of poetry, whenever he was not driven to making concessions to the naturalistic conceptions of his friends, was thoroughly Emersonian, though he most often cited Blake when attempting to explain it: 'Poetry, in so far as the metaphysics of absolute knowledge extends, is simply the concrete evidence of the experience of knowledge'....

The best part of Crane's work may be understood as the attempt of a poet who interpreted his rare mystical experiences in Ouspenskyan terms, and his proper role and function as a poet in Blakean-Whitmanic terms, to create, in his poetry, an alternative to Modernism's 'inadequate system of rationality.' This, in effect, is what he meant by such statements in letters to friends as 'I find nothing in Blake that seems outdated, and for him the present was always eternity'... But the 1920's were not a good time for such a poet.... Temperamentally, perhaps, especially in the final years of his short life, Crane had more in common with St. John of the Cross than with Whitman. If he had lived earlier and elsewhere, he might have trusted his mystic experiences... 'The way down,' into the depths of consciousness, was very possibly the only mystic way Crane ever personally and strongly experienced. His life was too anguished, his experience too scarifying, to encourage frequent perceptions of 'immanent divinity.' But Whitman's 'way up,' his nature mysticism, was the only *example* Crane knew. He was forced to interpret his experiences of illumination in terms fundamentally alien to his temperament.

The failure of *The Bridge*, if it did fail, or to the extent that it fails, may have more to do with Crane's being forced into a mystical tradition alien to him—forced by his lack of knowledge of any other, and by his desire to answer Eliot—than with any of the excesses of his personal life on which it has so often been blamed. The excesses, I suspect, were as much effect as cause.... The experiences of hell in *The Bridge* all seem to come when *other people* are around. 'Love' to Crane came to mean being beaten up by sailors, or

a burnt match in a urinal... Crane came, in the end, before he committed suicide, to feel much more like St. John than like Whitman.... To the extent that *The Bridge* is an 'imperfect' and uneven poem, perhaps the chief reason is that Crane was trying to re-express Whitman's themes without having Whitman's temperament...."

Hyatt H. Waggoner
American Poets: From the Puritans to the Present
(Houghton, 1968) 502-11

"In *The Bridge*, Crane connects the bridge, the technological symbol of the machine age, to the dance of Pocahontas, to Whitman's mapping of the American continent, to the hoboes riding the freight trains, and to New Yorkers in the subway. Each portion of the sequence has its own form, ranging from first-person monologue to third-person description to second-person colloquy; the sequence employs both rhyme and free verse. In recognizing the Indian dance as the primal American aesthetic and religious form, and, later, in wanting to write an epic called *The Conquistadors*, Crane demonstrated his conviction that the present is constructed upon the past. America, he thought, must retain historical memory, not the memory of Europe so much as the memory of what has occurred on American soil. And unlike Pound and Frost, he turned not only to the New England past but to Spanish sources. *The Bridge* included not only political events (Columbus's voyage) but also aesthetic ones, from 'Rip Van Winkle' to the works of Poe."

Helen Vendler
The Harper American Literature 2
(Harper & Row, 1987) 1690

"...Crane never revived the inspiration that inaugurated the long work, and the last poems that he wrote for it lacked the power and vitality of the beginning. However, because he published the poems not in the sequence in which they were written but in the sequence outlined very early in the composition (he wrote, for example, the last section first), *The Bridge* is a difficult poem to read as a whole. It moves through changes of mood, as it struggles to maintain the positive vision of America that Crane first imagined. The poem starts and ends with a paean to the Brooklyn Bridge, symbolized as 'O harp and altar, of the fury fused.' In the middle sections of the long poem, Crane moves back and forth in American history: back to trace the modern subway traveler, back to the Indians, forward to the airplane age, in an effort to unite past and present, nature and technology, America and the spiritual possibilities of the new age. Some parts, written late in the process of composition, express Crane's flagging spirits even when, in the sequence of the long work, they are designed to move positively toward the affirmation of the ending. As a result, *The Bridge* has presented problems in interpretation. Assured of its power, readers have been less certain about its purpose. Long before he completed *The Bridge*, Crane lost faith in his vision of America and in his own ability as a poet."

Margaret Dickie
The Heath Anthology of American Literature 2
(D.C. Heath, 1990) 1433-34

Michael Hollister (2015)