



It is the preposterous size of the thing that immediately strikes you as meet it, in person, from the ground up, walking from the subway station at City-Hall, Lower Manhattan towards Brooklyn. Here is a rearing prehistoric creature arching its back across the East River, stretching its back across the sky, reducing you to size. But as your eye adjusts you begin to see the sophistication of the thing, the art, its bone-structure. Brooklyn Bridge is made up of two giant suspended granite arches. Granite soars towards the sky in an effort to overcome weightiness. John Augustus Roebling's innovative web truss design – providing two steel trusses on either side of the bridge that carries the weight of its enormous arches – relies upon the geometrical practicality and strength of the triangle shape that disperses weight and impact along three intersecting straight lines. The Brooklyn Bridge is built upon the number three, two granite arches that creating three parts, a number that makes the bridge six times stronger than its original two trusses. Two times 3 is six. A simple mathematics is at the heart of the Bridge's supreme strength, a maths reflective of an imagination that reaches for doubles and triples, exponentially, to the greater power of.

Crossing the bridge one early morning in September you notice how the sun's rays split through the fractured parts of the steel girders, as though the body of the sun is being divided; meted out; re-proportioned. There is something ecstatic about this business of the sun meeting steel lines. You begin to squint and take stock and as you do so you realise that your eye travels from the small details of the bridge on the ground to the vast panorama of the New York harbour and Manhattan skyline. In between there is only your pair of hands holding the steel side, your pair of feet on the granite ground. There is no way of connecting the grandeur of the bridge to the absurd obscurity of yourself, an invisible speck swallowed up by the grander scheme

of much more visible things; and so you surrender to the experience of being dwarfed, halved and halved again and again, as though the universe were cutting and splicing us down to size; as though the stars – in this case the sun – were enjoying a metaphysical reversal. I am reminded of John Donne's cheeky chastisement to the sun, 'Busy old fool, unruly Sun, why dost thou thus,/ Through windows, and through curtains, call on us?'. On Brooklyn Bridge such a line is absurd; any would-be speaker is undone by the collusions of bridge and sun playing out its magnificent panoramic drama. The effect is a chastisement of your ever-diminishing, increasingly insignificant human form. All you can do is allow yourself to be carried to the other side.



In the typescript proofs for the French edition of his 'Proem', the poet Hart Crane notes that the frontispiece page should include a white star suspended above the title. The instructions to the copyeditor are simple and direct: 'A white star here as indicated. The same also after last line of final section or on facing page'. Crane the poet is here Crane the poetic engineer. The printed edition must look right; it is all in the spacing and pacing of language, where and when the reader's sense confronts the effect of his printed words. On the following page we read, 'Quotation from Job maybe switched onto this page if it crowds the title too much'. The quotation left hanging on the title page reads: 'From going to and fro in the earth,/ and from walking up and down in it.' The words of Job arouse the hopeless futility of quotidian life unrelieved by any form of sublimity. Brooklyn Bridge, and Crane's poetic paean to that structure lift us away from the pedestrian pace and repetitious structure of daily life.

Watching and listening to this filmic response to Crane's poem our senses are both doubled and halved, made more but also less. I am mesmerised by the stencilled geometric shapes moving in front of me, the pulsating lines elicited by Crane's strongly shaped, dynamic visual drama -

How many dawns, chill from his rippling rest

The seagull's wings shall dip and pivot him,

Shedding white rings of tumult

Over the chained bay waters Liberty –

and I am aware of how much labour is suggested in the image of the seagull working so hard at moving. Shapes move quickly to the surface of the poem; from behind the dipping and pivoting seagull's wings white circles emerge circles of sea-spray, or arcs of feathery wings, as bird and sea merge. At the end of 'rippling rest' we take an extended pause, a deep breath before the speaker launches us out upon 'the seagull's wings', whose shape turned sideways, suggest the plunging and soaring lines of the bridge's suspended girders. Hanna's imagery profits from such merging; before one image is built, another quickly rises up, as the triangular shapes of the bridge spiral around to form Liberty's helmet. Images speedily tessellate; from the sail-shape of the seagull's pivoting wing, the triangular shapes of the bridge, to the horns on the top of Liberty's helmet. All are malleable and moving, individuated, but open to shared visual connotations and associations, to being spliced open and redistributed.

In one sense the gull stands in for pure dynamic, singular movement; one who struggles to soar above the 'chained bay waters Liberty'. In turn this image of chained Liberty running across the water stands in for the bridge itself, a structure metaphorically and metonymically compressed by words: words producing connotative chains, which in turn connote ideas. And what might these ideas be? Physically speaking the bridge is made up of linked steel and granite parts reaching across the East River; but Crane suggests a relationship between the gull as moving, sentient, cognisant subject and the bridge, whose shared outlook is the statue of Liberty, symbol of American independence and individualism and another example of bold design. Hanna's dipping and pivoting gull not only looks towards the statue for inspiration and direction, but like the bridge, it shares aspects of its parts; it is subsumed within its symbolic force. Metaphorically speaking the gull is taken under the wing of the bridge and the statue, symbols of American history and achievement, the utterly self-convinced march of American progress.

But if we look more closely at Crane's lines we find, beyond the play between external structures and symbols, a more dynamic internal drama. In the oxymoronic 'rippling rest' lies a tug o' war between strong movement and an equally strong urge for stasis. Water cannot both ripple and rest at the same time; but what Crane is getting at is the impact of physical movement, of bodies moving across the bridge, the generated force of physical energy being passed back and forth through steel girders.

On top of all of this soars the recorded voice of Tennessee Williams, performing the poem as a tribute to Crane's poetic legacy. Hagiographic and reverential, Williams's cadences are incantatory and priestly, magus-like. In his voice lies a groundswell of forceful phonetic energy, brilliantly wrought internal rhymes, halved, third and quartered-rhymes, ('chill' and 'rippling'; 'dip and pivot', 'rippling' and 'shedding', 'gulls' and 'wings'). Sound patterns built upon repeated or closely-matching vowel sounds conduct an internal patterns of breaths, long or short intakes: all those 'i's brought to a rest upon the several 'p's; or 'i's trilled upon 'l's. In the final line of the quatrain the 'a' sound, as in 'chained' and 'bay' is pushed through the final 'w' in 'waters', following on from 'wings' and 'white' before reaching the last feminine ending of 'ty' in 'Liberty' – what might be the final opening of the East River running into the Atlantic.

Nonetheless, beneath this lyrical tide is a soundscape that carries its own centre of gravity. Simmons's abrasive composition pulls us back down to the sound effects, the aural connotations of those images heard before they are seen. The soundtrack unsettles the lyrical impact of the words, drawing us down to the baser sounds of water and metal, the sonic underbelly of the film. Another sort of sound, then, something more like noise, undercuts the soaring voice of Williams which, along with the seagull, would carry the lyrical energy of the poem up and away. These noises are the lived-with noises of the physical life of the city, suggested in the lines, 'elevators heave us to our days' ('heave' being the verb selected for the Paris edition; 'drop' the verb for the American); or in the line, 'Out of some subway scuttle/ the bedlamite speeds to thy parapets'. Listening to the soundtrack apart from the voice of Williams is difficult: Williams dominates as presiding priest over his liturgy. Yet the soundscape generates another important sort of tug o' war between the lift of

Williams urgent, resolute and hypnotic cadences and the more cacophonous clang of the train bell and whistle and the sound of a metal lift door scraping open. The life of the city is communal and multitudinous; it is a working machine, made up of several sound-parts.

If we think of translating these sounds into shapes, what might they be? Hanna's film repeats a set of basic geometric shapes: circles, part circles, arcs, triangles, oblongs and squares make up the visual building blocks of the film. Sound breaks through to disturb the regularity of these shapes; the clanging train bell and then its whistle interrupt our visual roaming down the face of the Statue of Liberty. Sound pulls us back to the masses, reminding us of all the other faces, the urban 'multitudes' that bend towards 'some flashing scene'. And so the Statue's profile stands in for all those faces and eyes mesmerised by the 'panoramic sleights' of the cinema screen, the modern form of mass entertainment that draws in the gawping urbanites: those doped up on the sorts of flashy advertisements Crane himself laboured over in order to make his living. Individual liberty and independence of heart and mind, the cornerstone of the American constitution, is forsaken for the allure of mass entertainment. What has happened to that single resolute star hovering over the title page? Where has the star of the hard-won star and stripes gone?



But Crane gives us another narrative, and one that seems to be more personal, or at least metaphysical. Behind this flashing screen emerges a new form of life, a second-person figure: a beloved 'Thee' who strides 'across the harbour, silver-paced', following the progress of the sun. This 'Thee' is the poem's matinee idol, the silvery figure set ablaze upon the screen/stage of Crane's incandescent and ecstatic lines:

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!

In the language of metaphysical love, 'Thee' is the speaker's other self he watches cross the bridge, a self that endeavours to catch up with the progress of the sun, or, in the language of John Donne again, the progress of the soul. In the metaphorical language of the poem it is Crane's 'bedlamite' who speeds towards the bridge's parapet, making a bid for freedom from the deadening monotony of urban life. On screen, Hanna's bedlamite is a dark figure darting for relief from a blaze of white towards the shadow of the bridge. If oblivion were a colour it would be white and blank, and if we follow Crane's lines, then the bedlamite is speeding 'out of some subway scuttle, cell or loft' before 'tilting there momentarily, shrill shirt ballooning'. The white of the shirt balloons open into the white of the gull's wings, the white of the clouds, the white of the sea's foam. 'There' must be the bridge, historically speaking the site of masses of suicides; but here, death or oblivion, is obscured and folded away within the final line of the quatrain: 'A jest falls from the speechless caravan'. What, we wonder, is the jest and where does it or he fall? Where has our figure gone?

Etymologically speaking, 'jest' means story in verse or an idle tale, from the old French, 'gesta' meaning deeds, action, narrative. Its root lies in the past participle form, 'gerere' meaning to bear or to wage. So in this sense 'jest' is an action or deed that might, given the right circumstances, imply something more heroic; in its secondary sense it can also mean an incident that involves a more ludicrous circumstance. Might this be suicide, the ultimate jest? If we combine the two meanings then a jest is also a rather pointless action, something silly or absurd, but an action which may also lead to something tragic: a dead Polonius behind the arras at the hand of a rash Hamlet. A jest may go badly wrong, it may be quite foolish, but it is a sure sign of an individual assertion of will. If we return to the final line of the quatrain above, the ideal of 'Liberty' is turned into 'freedom'; the freedom of the Thy to assert himself in thought, word and deed, even if this leads to death. And yet Crane's line suggests a 'staying' power, a power to carry on, to continue in this life: an

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Comment [1]: Unspent motion, that idea gives me a feeling of seasickness, the stays of the bridge keeping it in place as if it could lift from its moorings otherwise...

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Comment [2]: In the film the flag is inserted instead of the shirt ballooning, and it morphs to the splash and thence to the jagged skyline 'riptide'. The subway is referenced in the soundtrack and vertigo of the bedlamite's location is shown by relationship to the subway train on the bridge passing under his level. In the end the 'caravan' is really referenced later in the lights crossing the bridge. It would have been too literal to show the jump/fall.

unspent motion – an imaginative life - that is stored up for a future tense. This might be the afterlife of the poet himself.

In a note to his mother, Grace Crane, scrawled along the top of the second draft of the 'Ava Maria' section of *The Bridge*, Crane boasts of the already established reputation of his epic poem: 'it has been hailed as a masterpiece by more than one'. His voice is insistent and urgent. His mother must recognise his deed. At the same time he draws his mother's attention to the lyrical lead of this section, the boastful Christopher Columbus who, in the opening stanzas, is found 'at the prow . . . meditating . . . on the return from his first trip' – a trip in which he believed (falsely) that he had found a way to India. The story of Columbus's misdirected journey seems to stand in for Crane's own vaulting epic. It is hard not to read Columbus as a construction of the poet as semi-mythical hero of his own quest. Perhaps it is better to read it as one of Crane's several poetic jests.

In the end the film, like the poem, submits to Crane's private mythology. The presence of the poet saves us from what might otherwise be a purely connotative and lone chain of thought. The poet must appear in some form, and so he does, in the solitary figure smoking beneath the shadows of the bridge awaiting his Thy: 'Under thy shadow by the piers I waited;/ Only in darkness is thy shadow clear.' A shadow cannot be made clear by darkness, only by some interplay with light, but the line is in keeping with Crane's oxymoronic statements, his insistence upon cancelling out one figure with its opposite. But in the end man and bridge, poet and bridge, merge into the darkness and we are left moving up through one final arc towards white stars and then down the other side towards the glittering white of the waves beneath. I am reminded of the line in the poem's opening stanza, 'shedding white rings of tumult'. In this line Crane gives a compressed summary of the poem's entire merging environment, a carousel of cloud, sea, sky, sail, shirt, bird. Reading this line we circle and recircle through Crane's perpetual connotative search for the ultimate figure: the speaker's metaphoric Thee for whom the poem's patient speaker continues to stand and wait ad infinitum.

