HART CRANE BETWEEN THE RIVER AND THE SEA

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Abstract: *The paper points out the irresistible attraction Hart Crane felt to the river and the sea, two life elements which marked his life and eventually became his tomb. The poet decided to offer his life to the god he always worshipped, the Sea, the genuine cradle of poetic truth and beauty.*

Keywords: *sea, river, fate, love, time, death.*

In "At Melville's Tomb", a poem dedicated to a writer who loved the sea, the poet explains, in the letter sent to the publisher, Harriet Monroe, that life is kind of a dice game. When talking about dice, which represent, at the same time, chance, fate, circumstance and death, Crane clearly refers to people who lost their lives drowned in the sea: "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 things . . .". (Reidhead 2003:1810) The presence of dice, as related to an uncompleted task, reflects failure. They exist only as a proof that there was no achievement whatsoever. We can affirm that Crane did not want his body to be recovered, after presenting it as a sacrifice. He did not want his bones to be turned into dice, and, thus, to remain only as a number, with no clear identification. It is something sacred for a mariner to be mourned only by the sea, without involving the "azure steeps", since this right comes to the sea: "This fabulous shadow only the sea keeps."

At the age of 26, when he wrote "At Melville's Tomb", Crane seemed to have planned his death. At 33, Crane, surrounded by evil forces and false friends, decided to offer his life to the god he always worshipped, the Sea. The years that followed Crane's death revealed a lot of admirers, who openly expressed their feelings towards the poet's genius.

Among them, we can mention Tennessee Williams, who dedicated him one of his plays, "Steps Must be Gentle" (1980), Robert Creeley's "Hart Crane" and Robert Lowell's "Words for Hart Crane". Tennessee Williams went further with his total admiration and asked to be buried somewhere near Crane: "in his last will and testament… that his body be deposited as nearly as possible at the same spot where Hart Crane had drowned" (Bowles 1997:vii).

Many of Hart Crane's poems make reference to either the sea or the river, highly praised by the poet. In "The Bridge", with the voices of time (the sailor) and eternity (the pianola) still fresh in his mind, the poet leaves the tavern where he spent some time and crosses the Brooklyn Bridge on his way home. He imagines that he sees below him, in the river, a spectral fleet of clipper ships. He cannot help but note that it was these ships (*Thermopylae*, *Black Prince*, *Flying Cloud*) that actually completed the dream of Columbus to reach the real Cathay. Their captains traded for the "sweet opium" and "tea." They crossed the "green esplanades" of the Pacific and "ran their eastings down." But their achievement as well as the occasional loss of a ship at sea are for the poet only memories, and the beautiful names of the ships echo in the poet's imagination like the callings of never-to-be-united friends across great distances.

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The poet sees the bridge as a single “arc” over the river of time below it (“labyrinthine mouths of history”) as well as over the numberless voyages of “all ships at sea.” The “curveship” thus becomes a variation of the rainbow-symbol in “Voyages,” and the lost continent of Atlantis becomes the goal of the poet as a modern discoverer in the sense in which Belle Isle was the goal of the poet as voyager. Both Atlantis and Belle Isle are Crane’s symbols for poetic truth and beauty. He reached Belle Isle by voyaging on the sea of time and hopes to reach Atlantis via the bridge of the poetic imagination. He is animated by the same spirit that compelled Columbus in “Ave Maria” to discover the secret of Cathay. The spirit is identical; only the goal has changed.

The same way Columbus stood on the deck of his ship and looked out over the ocean in the “Ave Maria,” the poet stands on the shores of Brooklyn after he has left the subway and watches a “tugboat” cross the river and leave in its settling wake an “oily tympanum of waters.” Having passed through “the Gates of Wrath” and emerged into the open air, the poet feels capable of discovering the “Western path” to Atlantis. He resigns himself to the future - “Tomorrow” - and lets his “hands drop memory” into the waters of the river of time.

Hart Crane was definitely influenced, when he composed “Voyages”, by the poetry of an obscure poet named Samuel Greenberg. Philip Horton remembers that “When Crane read Greenberg’s poems, he was completely beside himself with excitement. He stomped up and down . . . muttering the lines to himself and declaiming them aloud; he compared them to the work of Rimbaud and Laforgue ... . It was an important discovery, for the exotic visionary poetry with its curious entwined imagery of rainbow, sea, and flower exerted a distinctly traceable influence on Crane’s *Voyages*” (Horton 1936:151).

The basic theme of “Voyages” grows from the concept of the poet as voyager. The sea upon which he voyages is the symbol of time, dissolution, flux, and nature. The drama of the poem derives from the fact that it is the destiny of the voyager to seek for love, and the self-knowledge that is the legacy of love, as long as he lives. Love, therefore, is capable of placing the poet even in the midst of the sea of time. The fact that the poet is still a creature of time and that the sea of time will eventually claim him is still unable to deter or absolve him from his quest. Such is the nature and the irony of all life.

As the poem begins, Crane describes a group of boys (“bright striped urchins”) as they play on a beach. They are unaware of the dangers of the proximate sea. So long as they keep their distance, the sea will not harm them. Even in this first poem, there is a suggestion of the fatal power of the sea. Crane wants to point out that the sense of death is present. Later Crane will let the sea come to symbolize dissolution of spirit and loss of personality. But in “Voyages I” there is only a mere hint of danger - a poster of what is to come.

The boys on the beach regard the sea from arm’s length, as it were, and they remain oblivious to its power. It is the poet who omnisciently sees the whole picture. The sea is a mother, warm and maternal, which welcomes you to its bosom. But it is also treacherous - it has “too wide a breast” to be satisfied with its love for you; you will be engulfed and destroyed in its embrace. Yet he knows that those who approach the sea innocently, as children do their mothers, will not heed his warning. Thus, the children emerge as prototypes of those who are unaware of the sounds of impending cataclysms until the storms actually break over and around them:

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And in answer to their treble interjections
The sun beats lightning on the waves,
The waves fold thunder on the sand.

The sense of warning becomes more and more explicit as the poem moves toward the climax of the last line. Therefore, the "brilliant kids" are encouraged by the poet to enjoy their "shells and sticks" but, on the other hand, they are advised to keep clear of those depths that could engulf and destroy them. The poet compares the children to a ship's rigging which the sea could crush in an instant.

The sea is then described, for the first time in the poem and in the sequence, as a woman. The sea is loyal only to those organisms that live within it and draw their very life from it ("lichen-faithful"). Who knows the sea can easily understand that it is a deceptive lover; she is cruel to all the intruders and smothers them in her fatal "caresses":

...but there is a line
You must not cross nor ever trust beyond it
Spry cordage of your bodies to caresses
Too lichen-faithful from too wide a breast.
The bottom of the sea is cruel.

In the total development of "Voyages," this introductory poem serves two purposes. First, it equates the sea with death, doom, and dissolution. Second, it succeeds even as an overture piece in suggesting the sea's almost irresistible attractiveness. The subsequent poems in "Voyages" work out the implications of these two motifs, particularly in the continued personification of the sea as a woman. But if "Voyages I" stands as a warning to others, it is a warning that the poet himself does not heed.

"Voyages II" renders Crane's great talent not only with regard to the other poems in the seascape sequence but in relation to all of his other poems as well. "The second of the Voyages," writes Yvor Winters in an essay "in fact, seems to me, as it seemed to others, one of the most powerful and one of the most nearly perfect poems of the past two hundred years." (Winters 1987:597). This is high praise indeed, but the poem justifies it. "Voyages II" resounds with the simultaneous release of all the dominant chords of Crane's versatility, struck almost simultaneously. It is filled with symbolic personification, expert modulations of sound, transmutation and blending of some of the most beautiful imagery ever written of the sea, the ebb and flow of simultaneously sustained and developed themes and a rhythmical progression that never loses its strength.

The impetus of the poem derives principally from an underlying sense of quest - a theme that is also at the core of *The Bridge*. The poet confronts the sea not only as a symbol of time and flux but also as a challenge to the voyager. But these confrontations are not separately introduced, nor are there the conventional transitions to aid us. The presentation is somehow kaleidoscopic.

The sea, which is the poet's symbol of everything that is subject to death or change, is first contrasted with eternity. The sea is broad, but it is still finite. Even though the poet suggests the breadth of the sea by the use of such figures as "rimless floods" and "unfettered leewardings," he still can refer to it only as a "great wink of eternity."

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After this introductory passage, Crane resumes the already mentioned personification of the sea as a woman. However, the personification is no longer anonymous. Crane uses the adjectival form of Undine, evoking the legend of the female water spirit who was promised mortality if she would marry a mortal and bear his child.

Crane uses images which merge with one another and dissolve, only to recur in other forms. Later, in "Voyages VI," Undine will be poetically metamorphosed into Aphrodite, indicating the range of Crane's willingness to lend the sea different identities while keeping the female personification constant. The images are united not only by gender but also by the fact that something of the sea is common to both of them. Undine is a sea nymph, and Aphrodite was created from sea-foam. Exploiting the legend of Undine for his own purposes in the poem, Crane notes that the sea's "undinal vast belly" seems covered with a fabric interwoven with threads of gold. This is described as the "samite sheeted and processioned" surface of the ocean itself, its millions of waves reflecting the light of sun or moon. The transition from sea-surface to gold or silver fabric and from the sea to Undine is swift, and the reader is compelled to make the associations himself if he is to appreciate the relation of line to line, image to image, and word to word.

In the second stanza Crane introduces a musical motif to probe the mystery of the sea of time at yet another level. He imagines the sea as a harmony of melodies sounded in its tides. This harmony suggests not only the fear inspired by the sea but also the sea's power to include all finite things within its sway. It is here that Crane touches on the dominant theme of the entire sequence, which is that only those bound by the sacredness of love will somehow survive and possibly transcend the sea's power.

Take this Sea, whose diapason knells
On scrolls of silver snowy sentences,
The sceptered terror of whose sessions rends
As her demeanors motion well or ill,
All but the pieties of lovers' hands.

The islands in the poem seem to dance to the sea's "diapason" until the lover ("my Prodigal") is able to "complete the dark confessions her veins spell."

The musical theme that is perpetuated from "diapason" to "adagios" is continued in the allusion to the sea's (Undine's) "turning shoulders." This image is particularly significant since it fuses the music of the sea with the image of the sea as a woman. Rhythmically she proceeds to "wind the hours." In an ironic image of empty hands, the poet remarks that the seemingly "rich palms" of the "undinal" sea are really "penniless." She does not give away her riches but keeps them to herself. What is given is only the world of "foam and wave," which is, in effect, the brief and finite legacy ("hasten, while they are true") of "sleep, death, desire." However, there is the possibility that the voyager can find the "floating flower" of beauty and love. It is because love is possible within the "rimless floods" of time that the last stanza of the poem becomes not a surrender but an invocation:

Bind us in time, O Seasons clear, and awe.
O minstrel galleons of Carib fire,
Bequeath us to no earthly shore until
Is answered in the vortex of our grave
The seal's wide spindrift gaze toward paradise.

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The final three lines of the stanza are a further implementation of “Bind us in time, O Seasons clear, and awe.” The poet seems to be saying that we have to look for some permanence in a life that is essentially impermanent. Our lives, like the sea, are subject to violent and continual change. It is love alone that can stabilize and save us.

The instant of the sea-time image in the first stanza (“this great wink of eternity”) is transformed in this last line into a “gaze toward paradise.” This gaze is merely the outward manifestation of man’s eternal search for permanence and peace in a life that seems to promise neither. It is, therefore, a perpetuation of man’s sense of quest through time, where only the prodigal spirit of love can outbrave the “unfettered leewardings” and mocking laughter of the relentless years. Hence we are prepared to accept the poet’s wish that he should come to know the staying power of love before he dies and that the hope of the symbolic “gaze toward paradise” is not frustrated.

“Voyages I” can be regarded as a warning regarding the sea’s treachery; “Voyages II” deals with the sea’s terror, power, and seeming mastery; “Voyages III” presents the fulfillment of the poet’s desire for what he both fears and loves. Despite the fact that the poet-voyager knows that the “bottom of the sea is cruel,” he has, in “Voyages II” chosen to become involved in the sea of time or change since it is the only setting possible for love. In brief, he has come to accept the fact that the experience of love can only happen within time. It is love only that can help the voyager avoid an “earthly shore.”

In “Ave Maria”, Crane introduces Columbus with a double purpose: to revive the promise of the new world and to prove that he highly praises the past, showing that he is proud of his origin. Columbus keeps on meditating upon the sea. He considers the sea as a world of itself between two worlds, a link between the old and the new, a bridge of water joining the hemispheres that are part of a world now proved to be one “turning rondure whole.”

Columbus’ contemplation of the sea gradually becomes a contemplation of God. In fact, God is even identified with the sea to the extent that the sea tends to reflect to Columbus (and possibly to Crane) both God’s power in its fury and God’s peace in its calm. The sea is also a test of man’s faith in the symbolic sense that man is a mariner who must voyage from the shore of birth to the shore of death on the sea of his God-given life. The sea is the bridge between the initial and terminal points of living. Columbus’ attitude is that the true joy and challenge of living comes into existence not so much in the successful arrival as in the adventure of the crossing. It is not the port that satisfies; on the contrary, only “the sail is true.”

There are some conclusions one can quickly draw after reading Crane’s whole poetic work: first, he was ready to challenge reality in order to change it; second, he wanted to prove that T.S. Eliot was wrong when referring to the world as “the waste land”. The solution to all the problems was a strong bond between the love feeling and the sea or the river. Nevertheless, little by little, overwhelmed by despair, disappointment and angst, Crane indulged himself in vices and uncontrollable relationships. He vainly tried to put order in his life, to have a decent communication with his father, to have a normal heterosexual relationship with Peggy Baird. He constructed kind of a theatrical leave, after he noticed that there was no escape. Several events combined and led to life’s ultimate stop: he was not able to write anything any longer, his father died, he had a bitter argument with his mother and both his heterosexual and homosexual relationships were far from what he desired. Since he venerated the sea, there was no better end than being one with it.

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