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### CHARTER'D STREETS: LYRIC AND THE CITY

I want to consider ways in which three poets—Blake, Baudelaire, and Hart Crane—responded to the great modern cities in which they lived. Questions of scale and form arise as justly in relation to cities as to poems. How can one express the magnitude of the modern metropolis within the constraints of a lyric poem? And what happens to the traditional love lyric in a city experienced by the solitary individual in a crowd of strangers? Does the experience of the city affect rhythm? Blake imagining London, Baudelaire imagining Paris, Hart Crane imagining New York, all have to rethink poetic form in response to the immense shapes and pulses of the city, as they rethink the possibilities of human connection. Each of these poets composed works more expansive in scale—Blake in *The Four Zoas*, Baudelaire in the prose poems of *Le Spleen de Paris*, Crane in *The Bridge*—but I shall concentrate on the internal combustion engine of the short lyric, and see how its powers of compression measure up against urban vastness.

First, London in 1794, as seen, or more precisely, as heard by Blake. (I have reproduced the eccentric punctuation of the original plate.)

#### London

I wander thro' each charter'd street.  
Near where the charter'd Thames does flow  
And mark in every face I meet  
Marks of weakness, marks of woe.

In every cry of every Man.  
In every Infants cry of fear.

In every voice; in every ban.  
The mind-forg'd manacles I hear

How the Chimney-sweepers cry  
Every blackning Church appalls.  
And the hapless Soldiers sigh  
Runs in blood down Palace walls

But most thro' midnight streets I hear  
How the youthful Harlots curse  
Blasts the new-born Infants tear  
And blights with plagues the Marriage hearse

There are many things to notice. One is how four-squarely the poem is built: four quatrains, four sentences, all in tetrameters; four by four by four by four. But against this verse charter, the meter rebels, bucking between iambs and trochees, between rising and falling feet as it opposes itself. The first line is iambic: "I wánd/ er throúgh/ each chár/ ter'd stráet," while the second starts with a hammering trochee: "Néar where." Line three carries on with iambs (and an anapest in the third foot): "And márk/ in év/ery fáce/ I méet," while line four flips again and pounds its argument in trochees: "Márks of/ wéakness,/ máarks of/ wóe."

The internal dissension in meter is reflected semantically. Three key words in this apparently simple poem are crammed with potentially contradictory meanings. "Charter," for instance. The poem plunges us into the geography of streets and river observed by the wandering speaker, but this geography is also legal and conceptual, as suggestive of forms of oppression as of freedoms and powers granted. A charter, from the Latin *cartula*, little paper, is a written page, an instrument by which a sovereign power grants privileges, rights, or franchise. It can be a deed or a contract, or a license to create a corporation or association. While it may confer freedoms, it also binds, and in Blake's poem it bespeaks a constraining power, a crushing state authority and multiplication of guilds and rules that create, not freedom, but "marks of

weakness, marks of woe," and exclude from privilege more than they include. Thomas Paine, in *The Rights of Man* just published in 1791, had accused the city charters of maintaining monopolies and cheating city-dwellers and shopkeepers. Blake's angry repetition, "charter'd street," "charter'd Thames," drives the point home. Like the river, everything else in the poem flows from those charters, including the phoneme AR, picked up and amplified in "mark": "And *mark* in every face I meet/  
*Marks* of weakness, *marks* of woe."

"Ban" is another word at odds with itself. From Middle English and Old French, of Teutonic origin, "ban" has both positive and sinister connotations. It means a public proclamation, an edict, an order, a summons—as in marriage bans. More darkly, it can mean interdict, curse, imprecation, or prohibition—and in ecclesiastical terms, anathema or excommunication. Both of these words, "charter" and "ban," imply institutions that regulate the lives of citizens: government, guilds, corporations, church. And in this poem they have produced neither liberty nor happiness, but weakness, woe, and fear, all of which may be summed up in the dangling indictment, "mind-forg'd manacles."

I spoke of the lyric as an internal combustion engine. It works by combining a fuel (words) with an oxidizer (imagination) in a contained chamber, to create energy. The enclosed form of the lyric is such a chamber, but compression resulting in a combustion of meaning also occurs in Blake's compacting of sense in individual words, as in "mind-forg'd manacles." This punning, alliterative, compound phrase proposes an argument that could be unfolded over many pages, about the mental conditions that trap people, the mind-forg'd limitations we accept. If these conditions are mind-forg'd, then presumably they might be undone by acts of mind: in Blake's terms, by acts of imagination. Which is where art comes in: the faith that the work of art—in this case, the poem—properly executed and properly received, is an exercise in freedom for the maker and the reader. What about those manacles? They contain a dire pun: in the syllable "man," they diag-

nose a condition of enslavement, so that to be a man, to be human, is to have been *manacled*, and "man" is made to rhyme with "ban."

This poem accumulates its evidence largely through the sense of hearing, as the acrostic of the first letters of each line of stanza three commands: HEAR. It deliciously breaks one of those obnoxious rules of "creative writing" by keeping up a drum beat of repetition: "charter'd," "marks," but especially "cry," which occurs three times—the cry of "every Man," of "every Infant," and of the chimney sweeper (who would have been a child small enough to be wedged into 19<sup>th</sup> century chimneys and who usually died young from the injuries and infections received there). It is the challenge of the poem to convert the inchoate cry of suffering into the meaningful measure of verse in a way that does not betray the suffering. Blake has done this, as I've suggested, by staging conflict in the reversing metrical patterns and in semantic contradictions.

The visual sense takes over in stanza three, where the institutions of Church and State are seen as architecture, church and palace, and revealed in color: the black'ning Church, the Palace wall running red with metaphorical blood. The engraved plate with its water-coloring reinforces the visual power of the scene: at the top of the page, a crippled old man in a trailing robe is led by a boy across a bumpily cobbled street; behind them looms the masonry of a forbidding wall, and an equally forbidding closed door. The reddish tinge on the wall may suggest the blood staining the palace. Part way down the page, on the right, a kneeling naked boy warms his hands at a billowing fire that almost invades the text, and perhaps adds some measure of hopefulness to the bleak vision. (In their illustrations as in their verbal ironies, Blake's Songs of Experience are usually complicated by some hint of redemption, as his Songs of Innocence are often subtly compromised.)

"Black'ning" does extraordinary work. We have to read the participle both transitively and intransitively: the church blackens others because it inflicts suffering instead of relieving it. The church also turns

itself black (intransitively) by its own moral turpitude, a spiritual soot no chimney sweeper could remove. Blake accentuates that hypocrisy in the pun on "appalls." From the Old French "*apalir*," "appall" means to make pale, to blanch, to whiten, and by extension, to blanch with terror. But the word is also kin to the Old English "pell," a costly robe or mantle, purple, white, or black, spread over a coffin—hence, to cast a pall. Blake's black'ning church appalls in both senses: it is darkened, and it make others turn pale with horror. A further architectural dimension of the poem extends in its streets, a word Blake repeats and insists on: he has given a resolutely urban picture of life distorted and exploited, in "each charter'd street," and in the "midnight streets" where the young harlot plies her trade.

In the last stanza, hearing predominates once again, and a third institution is introduced, one managed by both church and state: marriage. What happens to the love lyric in the modern city, I asked. Here is Blake's answer:

But most thro' midnight streets I hear  
How the youthful Harlots curse  
Blasts the newborn Infants tear  
And blights with plagues the Marriage hearse

In a context of such institutionalized, systemic injustice, love is perverted to prostitution, and fertility blighted. In Blake's analysis of interlocking realities, no feature of human experience can remain intact when the system itself is so corrupt. Along with the auditory cues "cry," "curse," and "blasts," he has introduced the medical imagery of contamination; "blasts" can also be read medically as it consorts with "blights" and "plagues," to yield the remarkable conflation of sacraments, "Marriage hearse."

Blake's experience in "London" is spatial but primarily auditory, and his method is compression. Baudelaire's "Les Sept vieillards" (The Seven Old Men) acts through vision, and stages its horrors through a nightmare of expansion, though contained within the compression of

the twelve-syllable alexandrine line and tightly controlled quatrains. The secret of Baudelaire's power lies in this interplay between limitation and expansion, the structural dynamism of his psyche reflected in his verse architecture. All art fights to a draw between order and disorder, limitation and expansion. In the French context, Boileau set the terms in his *Art Poétique* in 1674 when he proclaimed, "Qui ne sait se borner ne sut jamais écrire" (Who does not know limits never knew how to write). From the rigid neoclassicism of the 17<sup>th</sup> century into the Romantic revolution of Lamartine and Hugo, French verse accepted a highly regulated, centralized form, more *borné*, more limiting, than anything English poetry ever dreamed. Baudelaire brilliantly exploited this instrument in his verse, constructing symmetries in lines of twelve, ten, and eight syllables and in exquisitely balanced stanzas, while at the same time playing with phonetics and with psychic space to create illusions of infinity. In "Le Poison" (Poison), he declared, "L'opium agrandit ce qui n'a pas de bornes" (Opium enlarges that which has no boundaries—again that word of Boileau's, *bornes*). Baudelaire's ultimately fatal experiments with opium and alcohol may be seen as the sad literalization of his triumphs in expanding the boundaries of consciousness in poetry.

For Baudelaire's dialectical imagination, expansion, *expansion*, can take both ideal and gruesome forms. His most famous poem, the sonnet "Correspondances" which came to be treated as a credo for Symbolism, celebrates the experience of *expansion* of consciousness by pulling the word itself from its normal pronunciation as three syllables (Ex-Pan-Sion) into four syllables by the trick called *diérèse*, diarsis, the taffy-like elongation of syllables allowed by neoclassical versification: Ex-Pan-Si-On. In the sonnet's sestet:

Il est des parfums frais comme des chairs d'enfants,  
Doux comme les hautbois, verts comme des prairies,  
—Et d'autres, corrompus, riches et triomphants,

Ayant l'expansion des choses infinies,  
Comme l'ambre, le musc, le benjoin et l'encens,  
Qui chantent les transports de l'esprit et des sens.

(There are odors sweet as the flesh of children,  
Soft as oboes, green as meadow grass,  
—And others, corrupt, rich, and dominant,

Having the expansiveness of infinite things,  
Like amber, musk, benzoin, and incense,  
That sing the raptures of the senses and the mind.)

The programmatic synaesthesia of this hymn allows the tight chamber of the sonnet—quatrain, quatrain, tercet, tercet—to ignite a burst of *expansion* and transport, an ecstatic fantasy of the infinite. In the city poem I discuss here, “Les Sept vieillards,” that transport is transformed into a very bad trip.

Baudelaire's Paris is a dismal place, a haunt of prostitution, theft, drunkenness, and squalor. T. S. Eliot installed the first lines of “Les Sept vieillards” permanently in the imaginations of readers of English by citing them in the notes to *The Waste Land*, Part I, “The Burial of the Dead.” “Unreal City,” his poem cries out, and the notes point us to Baudelaire's lines: “Fourmillante cité, cité pleine de rêves, / Où le spectre en plein jour accroche le passant!” (Swarming city, city full of dreams, / Where the specter clutches in daylight at the passer-by. . .) Baudelaire has been spoken of as the first poet of the modern city. That seems to me an arbitrary determination—why not Blake? But in any case, first or not, Baudelaire powerfully imagined the city, and right in his first quatrain he thrusts us into it. The first word, *fourmillante*, swarming, as in ants swarming (*fourmis*), insists on scale and on multitude: on demography, we might say, and already it has a sinister aspect in the insect metaphor. The expansion extends into psychic space, “cité pleine de rêves.” City full of dreams: Baudelaire's city immediately translates into dream life, and the second line acts out *expansion* by swelling into its twelve syllables with no central caesura: “Où le spec-

tre en plein jour accroche le passant!” The repetition of the adjective *plein* (full) in its feminine and masculine forms intensifies the sense of fullness, of expansion: *cité pleine de rêves, en plein jour*. His city swells. It joins waking to dreaming, and ghosts to the living. The next two lines introduce the liquid metaphor which will flow throughout the poem, threatening expansion as horror as it moves from sap running through the gutters—“Les mystères partout coulent comme des sèves / Dans les canaux étroits du colosse puissant . . .” (Mysteries everywhere flow like sap / in the narrow canals of the powerful giant), the city seen as one vast organism with its fluids—to the terror of shipwreck in a limitless sea at the end.

The story in “Les Sept vieillards” starts with the second stanza, *Un matin . . .* One morning. The dirty yellow fog of stanza three (which Eliot borrowed for “Prufrock”) participates in the general liquid state; it “drowns the whole space.” And into this space intrudes quite a different nightmare of expansion and of demography. If the strangers peopling Blake's “London” were seen sympathetically, as sufferers, the same cannot be said for Baudelaire's old men. He calls them monsters. One after another, they appear: ragged, bent over, feeling their way with canes, with malicious looks and stiff beards. Whether or not they are Jews, they are imagined as Jews by the horrified speaker: the first old man has the air of “un quadrupède infirme ou d'un juif à trois pattes” (a crippled quadruped or a three-pawed Jew). He has already been compared to Judas. It seems fair to suggest that the anti-Semitism here collaborates with other forms of horror: the degradation of the human, its intermingling with animal nature, the filthy street, and worst of all, the nightmare of expansion, inscribed in the word *multiplait* in stanza nine.

The whole poem multiplies its effects, scaring itself as it lists the frightening features of these apparitions, their succession, and their mysteriousness. (They are walking, the speaker says, to “un but inconnu,” towards an unknown goal, unknown to him. And he imme-

diately fantasizes a horrendous plot of which he is to be the victim: "À quel complot infâme étais-je donc en butte?" (Of what appalling plot would I be the victim?) This operation of self-horrifying fantasy perfectly characterizes the psychology of anti-Semitism, which is a subjective event in the mind of the hater, a projection of fear and anger onto others, with little or nothing to do with their reality and everything to do with the inner reality of the one who fears. I don't mean to over-emphasize the Jewish theme in Baudelaire's poem because I don't think it's dominant, but at the same time it can't and shouldn't be ignored.

Let's look again at this word *multipliait*. It's the key to Baudelaire's experience of the city and to his poetics of the city, if we analyze his poem in its competing strategies of containment (in lines and stanzas) and of spill-over (images of fluids seeping and flowing over borders; the pile-up of description; the multiplication of the old men). In "Les Sept vieillards," the old man who multiplies himself threatens the sanity of the speaker, and threatens to overwhelm, to drown, his individuality, his reason, and any sense of order or harmony. In the poem "Une Charogne" (Carrion), the verb "to multiply" plays a similarly menacing role. The speaker and his lady friend, on their romantic stroll, have come across a putrid disintegrating carcass of an unspecified animal, and the poem looks back on the event, enumerating the signs of stinking decomposition in eleven lascivious quatrains before threatening the lady, in classic fashion (think Horace, think Andrew Marvell) with her own decomposition. The speaker in "Une Charogne," however, maintains his balance and his power, his balance of power. He describes the corpse:

Tout cela descendait, montait comme une vague  
Ou s'élançait en pétillant;  
On eût dit que le corps, enflé d'un souffle vague,  
Vivait en se multipliant.

(All this sank down, and rose like a wave  
Or heaved forward bubbling;  
It seemed the carcass, swollen with vague air,  
Lived by multiplying.)

In "Une Charogne," multiplication—in the strange heaving and buzzing of the carcass through the movement of maggots and flies within it—induces horror, but also a grim, ironic satisfaction; the poet has mastered multiplication in his brilliantly ordered quatrains of alternating alexandrine and octosyllabic lines, in the snapping shut of the padlocks of rhyme, and in the savage irony of the conclusion in which he asserts that though the lady will decompose, his poem will remain immortally composed:

Alors, ô ma beauté, dites à la vermine  
Qui vous mangera de baisers,  
Que j'ai gardé la forme et l'essence divine  
De mes amours décomposés.

(So, my beauty, tell the vermin  
Who will eat you up with kisses,  
That I've kept the form and the divine essence  
Of my decomposing loves.)

The poet of "Les Sept vieillards" has also mastered his form, but the psychic drama of the multiplying old men in the city streets produces in the speaker, not triumphant assertion, but vertigo. The liquid imagery swells from drunkenness to something like a tidal wave:

Exaspéré comme un ivrogne qui voit double,  
Je rentrai, je fermai ma porte, épouvanté,  
Malade et morfondu, l'esprit fiévreux et trouble,  
Blessé par le mystère et par l'absurdité!

Vainement ma raison voulait prendre la barre;  
La tempête en jouant déroutait ses efforts,  
Et mon âme dansait, dansait, vieille gabarre  
Sans mâts, sur une mer monstrueuse et sans bords!

(Infuriated like a drunkard seeing double,  
I went home and closed my door, horrified,  
Sick and shivering, my mind fevered and deranged,  
Wounded by mystery and by absurdity.

In vain my reason tried to seize the helm;  
The storm at play confounded all its strength,  
And my soul danced, danced, an old scow  
Without masts on a monstrous and borderless sea.)

The simile of the drunkard applies multiplication to the poetic privilege of vision, producing the debased doppelgänger of the poet-visionary: not *vates*, prophet, seer, but “un ivrogne qui voit double,” a drunkard seeing double. Françoise Meltzer has expanded this trope of Seeing Double in her remarkable new book of that title, showing in how many ways—temporal, political, esthetic, moral—Baudelaire saw two worlds at once and did *not* resolve them into a single picture. The word “absurdity,” too, implies multiplication. From the Latin *absurdus* with its root sense of deafness, it means the state of being inharmonious, tasteless, contrary to reason or propriety: an excess of elements that cannot be ordered. The last lines of the poem, impeccably *contained* in alexandrines, stage the conflict between the imposition of order, limitation, boundaries, *bornes*—the speaker tries to close the door—and the storm assailing a ship foundering in an infinite sea. The effect of multiplication carries over even into the repetition of words: “Et mon âme dansait, dansait, vieille gabarre. . . .”

In “Les Sept vieillards,” Baudelaire works himself up into a creative state of excitement through horror at the city. Horror is the stimulant he seeks, and he imparts it to the reader. In the “Proem” to *The Bridge*, Crane works himself up, not to horror, but to a pagan ecstasy reflected in some of the most sublime rhetoric in 20<sup>th</sup>-century poetry in English. Like Blake and Baudelaire, Crane gives us an angle of vision on the city from a solitary observer, an “I.” And like the other two poets, he includes people in his vision, though in a manner very much his

own. Except for the bedlamite threatening to leap from the bridge, he doesn’t focus on individuals the way Blake does, and though he considers “multitudes”—the crowds attending the movies—they do not horrify him like Baudelaire’s specters. Though Crane inventories plenty of suffering, he differs elementally from Blake and Baudelaire—both of whom he revered—in seeing in the city a redemptive possibility, a transcendent erotics of space transfigured.

#### To Brooklyn Bridge

How many dawns, chill from his rippling rest  
The seagull’s wings shall dip and pivot him,  
Shedding white rings of tumult, building high  
Over the chained bay waters Liberty—

Then, with inviolate curve, forsake our eyes  
As apparitional as sails that cross  
Some page of figures to be filed away;  
—Till elevators drop us from our day . . .

I think of cinemas, panoramic sleights  
With multitudes bent toward some flashing scene  
Never disclosed, but hastened to again,  
Foretold to other eyes on the same screen;

And Thee, across the harbor, silver-paced  
As though the sun took step of thee, yet left  
Some motion ever unspent in thy stride,—  
implicitly thy freedom staying thee!

Out of some subway scuttle, cell or loft  
A bedlamite speeds to thy parapets,  
Tilting there momentarily, shrill shirt ballooning,  
A jest falls from the speechless caravan.

Down Wall, from girder into street noon leaks,  
A rip-tooth of the sky’s acetylene;  
All afternoon the cloud-flown derricks turn . . .  
Thy cables breathe the North Atlantic still.

And obscure as that heaven of the Jews,  
Thy guerdon . . . Accolade thou dost bestow  
Of anonymity time cannot raise:  
Vibrant reprieve and pardon thou dost show.

O harp and altar, of the fury fused,  
(How could mere toil align thy choring strings!)  
Terrific threshold of the prophet's pledge,  
Prayer of pariah, and the lover's cry,—

Again the traffic lights that skim thy swift  
Unfractioned idiom, immaculate sigh of stars,  
Beading they path—condense eternity:  
And we have seen night lifted in thine arms.

Under thy shadow by the piers I waited;  
Only in darkness is thy shadow clear.  
The City's fiery parcels all undone,  
Already snow submerges an iron year . . .

O Sleepless as the river under thee,  
Vaulting the sea, the prairies' dreaming sod,  
Unto us lowliest sometime sweep, descend  
And of the curvship lend a myth to God.

Crane's rhetoric is so dense, his wordplay so compacted and his imagery so compounded, I cannot presume to give anything like a full account of it. Let me just touch on a few points that guide my reading of this extraordinary poem. The Baudelairean drama of limitation versus the infinite drives this poem too, and provides a model not only for Crane's experience of the city, but for any lyric daring to reach for the sublime. It's a problem encountered in any discussion of poetry and mystical experience, religious or otherwise: how can limited human language represent unlimited experience? In "Les Sept vieillards," Baudelaire dramatized his horror at a multiplying city in neatly trimmed quatrains, using techniques of enjambment and lists to suggest the overflow of his bad dream. Crane maintains a similar control in his bounded quatrains and lucidly logical syntax, and his mastering

meter, like Baudelaire's and Blake's, spells containment, order, control. But his pentameters are even more complex than Blake's tetrameters in their rhythmic variety, and as much as they impose the poet's order, his *cosmos*, upon the city, they also dip and pivot like the seagull's wings, and in engulfing enjambments often marked by a dash or a comma-dash and sometimes by ellipses, they seem to propel a reader into outer space. If the experience of the city is spatial, for Crane, it engenders a lyric form that is paradoxically limited and unlimited in the space of the page, the space of the imagination. The evocation of the Statue of Liberty in the first stanza offers an *ars poetica* for such a thesis: like Wordsworth's nuns who fret not at their convent's narrow room, but more energetically, Crane's stanza celebrates and derives its power from limitation, "building high / Over the chained bay waters Liberty." He accentuates the paradox through hyperbaton, the figure of artificial word order, placing "Liberty," the object of the participle "building," *after* the prepositional phrase "over the chained bay waters," so that the opposing forces, chained water and Liberty, are jammed against one another in an almost Latinate effect.

Let's pause for a moment with this image. Crane's metaphor is convoluted. The first sentence is grammatically ambiguous; it can be resolved neither into a clear interrogative, nor into simple exclamation, since it seems to partake of both: "How many dawns. . . ." When one looks closely, one realizes that the Statue of Liberty isn't literally placed in the scene at all; a seagull's wings, in a flight of fancy, shed metaphysical geometries or optical illusions in the air, "white rings of tumult," and it is that optical agitation which builds high the *notion* of Liberty—capitalized—over the chained bay waters. Chained by the bridge, perhaps; chained by all the human construction that shapes the harbor. Yet the feeling here isn't one of fettered chances, like Blake's charter'd Thames; on the contrary, it's an exaltation leading into one of those dashes into pure white virtual space before the next stanza drives the scene forward. In the fourth stanza, the bridge itself offers another

version of this *ars poetica* in its construction: a magnificent suspension, held aloft by what ties it down, "Implicitly thy freedom staying thee." A perfect description of the art of poetry: a dance of constraint and freedom.

Crane has packed his poem with action, the core of which is the act of seeing. Against the up-down motion, the white rings of tumult pitching down even as they build high, the elevators dropping us from our day, the bedlamite climbing the parapet in order to plummet down—both the seagull's wings and the bridge propose a counter-movement, not vertical, but an arc that might be thought a reconciliation of, even a redemption of, the up-down: the wings "with inviolate curve, forsake our eyes," and by the end of the poem the geometric figure of the curve has been elevated to mythic, idealized, conceptual status: "And of the curviship lend a myth to God."

The eye in Crane's poem is mightily exercised. Stanza three gives the profane vision, that against which the poet-seer must raise his harp and altar. Here is where the multitudes enter:

I think of cinemas, panoramic sleights,  
And multitudes bent toward some flashing scene  
Never disclosed, but hastened to again,  
Foretold to other eyes on the same screen . . .

The solitary speaker "thinks" of cinemas, implying falsity in their vision, "panoramic sleights." The multitude "bent toward some flashing scene" seem engaged in an act of obeisance, humbled and even humiliated, and the vision they are granted is somehow "never disclosed," though it is infinitely reproducible, "Foretold to other eyes on the same screen." The true vision, for Crane, will have to arise from the solitary "I" (or "eye") in his ecstasy, not from a mechanical illusion produced commercially for a mass audience. (Though Crane would not have used their vocabularies, he would have shared Adorno's judgment of mass art, not Benjamin's.)

Crane's city contains suffering and sacrifice—perhaps wrong or wasted sacrifice, like that attempted by the bedlamite—but none of the sense of outraged justice Blake expressed so keenly. Crane gives a sense, though, of human life at the mercy of large forces: the anonymous "us," clerks and managers, dropped from "our" day by the elevators, and the violence of industrial energy driving the city's finances and its physical construction: "Down Wall, from girder into street noon leaks, / A rip-tooth of the sky's acetylene. . . ." Wall, capitalized, indicates both the street itself, Wall Street, a physical place, and a legal, financial conceptual space, the heart of international finance. The harsh spondee following an iamb, "into stréet nóon léaks," stresses the violence. But that ferocious energy is creative, giving rise to technologies that raise the "cloud-flown derricks" and the breathing cables of the bridge.

"Giving rise" characterizes the poem. The seagull's wings built Liberty high in stanza one. In stanza eight, the rhetoric itself rises in its transfiguring invocation, "O harp and altar, of the fury fused. . . ." The pile-up of noun phrases in apposition—"terrific threshold," "prayer of pariah," "lover's cry"—leads to more of Crane's diving board punctuation, the combined comma-dash launching us into mid-air until syntax reasserts itself in the next stanza and delivers a full sentence: The traffic lights—condense—eternity; subject, verb, object. We have moved from dawn to night: now we see car lights moving across the bridge. And because Crane is guiding us, we are led to see the mystical paradox of "unfractioned idiom." An "idiom," from *idios* in Greek, means an expression which is singular, personal, peculiar, isolate, like the individual car lights. But "unfractioned" implies the opposite: all those singularities have fused, combined, into a larger pattern, a unity, leading the poem to soar from earth to heaven, "immaculate sigh of stars." In a further paradox heavily inflected by Blake, time now intersects with eternity: the patterned lights "condense eternity." Both city and poem, for Crane, can fuse singularities into a larger, redemptive *cosmos*.



The true miracle occurs in the penultimate stanza: "Under thy shadow by the piers I waited." I asked, earlier, what happens to the love lyric in the city. In Blake's "London," it is perverted, blasted. In Baudelaire's "Les Sept vieillards," it disappears. Crane's hymn to the Brooklyn Bridge restores a transcendent eros, but grounds it in a private, lonely, we might say "idiomatic" experience. The key transition takes place between the visionary plural of "And we have seen night lifted in thine arms," and the privacy and urban realism of the next line, "Under thy shadow by the piers I waited." The "we" who see night lifted in the embrace of the bridge seem to be some version of the redeemed multitude, a plurality no longer condemned, or bent, to the sleight of cinema, but granted an ecstatic vision of cosmic communion. The solitary figure under the bridge belongs to a different world, a different register. The shadows by the piers notoriously sheltered men cruising for love, and Crane knew those shadows and those piers well. This touch of realism and singularity seems to me to guarantee the poem. Its rock-bottom truthfulness serves as a foundation for its elevations, transformations, and intoxications. After the near-frenzy of the invocation to harp and altar, quietness enters in this penultimate stanza; and after the stream of lights in the traffic light/stars, darkness falls, the condition of the mystic's clearest sight, as in Vaughan's "The Night": "There is in God, some say, / A deep but dazzling darkness . . ." Crane has been juggling mystic paradoxes throughout this poem—the up and down movements, confinement and Liberty—and here he presents the classic chiaroscuro of ecstatic insight: "Only in darkness is thy shadow clear." In "The City's fiery parcels all undone," the movement from light to dark shades into a more general dissolution, "all undone," the loosening of conventional orderings and appetites, perhaps into that state of desolation and receptivity in which the ordinary ego is disarmed and the seeker is vulnerable to vision. The conditions grounding Crane's celestial fantasy remain rough and cold; he is no sentimentalist, who records, "Already snow submerges an iron year."

The last quatrain vaults beyond the urban scene, projecting the bridge as a transcendent principle, an arc capable of spanning the continent in a Whitmanian embrace: "O Sleepless as the river under thee, / Vaulting the sea, the prairies' dreaming sod . . ." Drawing on the high formality of an ode's invocation, "O Sleepless," and on the sacralising pronoun, "thee," Crane directs the final movement in a sweeping descent, a curve, not a vertical plunge, that simultaneously implies a spiritual ascent: "lend a myth to God." In this poem of irregular and very intermittent rhyming, the final rhyme of "sod" and "God" rewrites Genesis. In Crane's heretical faith, which somewhat resembles the supreme secular fiction of his contemporary Wallace Stevens, it is man who makes God, not vice versa. The dust of the earth, or the sod, remains in crucial relation to God, but the creative act has been reversed, and the Genesis power now flows from the human imagination to "lend a myth" to the divine. At the same time, the rhyme of "sod" and "God" configures in yet another way this poem's reconciling of up and down: in the "curveship," the geometrical arcing motion imagined by the engineer John Roebling and his son Washington for the Brooklyn Bridge, and re-imagined by Crane, geometry is promoted to a metaphysical, even a theological power binding the "lowliest" to the highest, and exalting the creative act and human love as sacred.

Eros doesn't explicitly fuel the "Proem," but the poem's exaltations are not only geometrical. The "lover" joined the prophet and the pariah as the main actors in stanza eight. In April 1924, Crane was living at 110 Columbia Heights, Brooklyn, in the very room occupied by Washington Roebling while he oversaw the construction of the bridge he had helped to design. Crane was caught up in a passionate affair with the sailor Emil Opffer, and wrote his friend Waldo Frank:

I have seen the Word made Flesh. I mean nothing less, and I know now that there is such a thing as indestructibility. In the deepest sense, where flesh became transformed by intensity of response to counter-response, where sex was beaten out, where a purity of joy was reached that included tears . . . And I have

been able to give freedom and life which was acknowledged in the ecstasy of walking hand in hand across the most beautiful bridge in the world, the cables enclosing us and pulling us upward in such a dance as I have never walked and can never walk with another.

In these months he wrote the majestic sequence of love poems, "Voyages," and the energy and vision of the love affair with Opffer and the Brooklyn Bridge would flow into the composition of the "Proem" two years later.

In other sections of *The Bridge*, especially "Cutty Sark" and "The Tunnel," Crane experimented with different forms to express the city: jagged free verse, violently mixed voices and juxtaposed scenes. *The Bridge* itself, as an epic, adopts expansion as a principle of composition. But the "Proem" is a self-contained lyric and derives its power from its containment in quatrains, its compact scale, and the regularity of its meter. Against the vastness and violence of the city, Crane generates—to use Stevens's terms—a "violence within" the taut structure of verse, the form his imagination took to press "back against the pressure of reality."

Each of our poets had to devise such a violence within to match the violence without. Blake rewrote the charter to unfasten the "mind-forg'd manacles"; Baudelaire charneled his nightmares by pouring infinite fear into finite quatrains; Crane internalized the arc of the Brooklyn Bridge. At a time when powerful external orders keep reminding us that we are not free—that we are under surveillance from state and from corporations, that our every movement and all our appetites are mapped, chartered, and sold—poetry provides a counter-order and a counter-power. To participate in the making and reading of a poem is to resist those external orders. A good poem re-orders consciousness and is a constantly renewed experiment in freedom. Through the poem, we write our own charter, we authorize our freedom of mind. We have never needed it more.

## Thornton Willis

### A SOHO RETROSPECTIVE