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The Shared Vision of Waldo Frank and Hart Crane

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Robert L. Perry

The Shared Vision
of
Waldo Frank and Hart Crane

new series no. 33

University of Nebraska Studies

may 1966

THE SHARED VISION
of
WALDO FRANK AND HART CRANE

Robert L. Perry

THE SHARED VISION OF
WALDO FRANK
AND HART CRANE

university of nebraska studies : new series no. 33

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Introduction

THE CENTRAL PURPOSE of this study is to explore the nature of Waldo Frank's influence upon Hart Crane. More exactly, I will attempt to answer these questions: who was Waldo Frank, what body of ideas did he represent, and which of those ideas were important to Crane? Second, what part did Frank and his ideas play in the composition of Crane's most ambitious poem, *The Bridge*? These questions are the kind that demand for their satisfaction not only a knowledge of the ideas that each man represents, but also a knowledge of those ideas as they developed in a causal sequence. As in all biographical criticism, what must be accomplished is the recreation of an historical event. That these questions are worth answering should be evident from the following information.

In the fall of 1922, while one day reading the latest copy of *Secession*, Hart Crane was so struck by the power and honesty of a certain short story that he immediately sat down and dashed off a letter to its author, whom he had never met. The story was entitled "Hope," and the author was Waldo Frank. Frank was not long in returning the compliment. A month later he wrote a lengthy letter to Crane that contained acute critical praise for Crane's latest poem, "For the Marriage of Faustus and Helen," then being published by installment in the same magazine. Crane soon replied that "such major criticism as both you and Gorham have given my 'Faustus and Helen,' is the most sensitizing influence I have ever encountered."¹ Soon after this, in the spring of 1923, Crane traveled to New York City and the two young writers met for lunch in the company of their common friend, Gorham Munson. On the day following, Crane confessed in a letter to Frank that "Yours is the most vital consciousness in America, and . . . potentially I have responses which might prove interesting, even valuable, to us both." This is a laudatory statement, even for Crane, and represents in its magnitude a tribute he paid to no other writer of his time.

The fact that Crane met Frank in 1923 at first seems unim-

portant, but it takes on new significance when we remember that it was during this same time—the early months of 1923—that Crane first conceived the idea for his most important poem, *The Bridge*, a work he once characterized as an “epic of the modern Consciousness.” (308) (“Yours is the most vital consciousness in America,” he had told Frank.) On February 6, 1923, Crane wrote Gorham Munson that “I am ruminating on a new longish poem under the title of *The Bridge*, which carries on further the tendencies manifest in “Faustus and Helen.” (118) On March 2 of the same year he wrote Munson that “the more I think about my Bridge poem the more thrilling its symbolical possibilities become, and since my reading of you and Frank (I recently bought *City Block*) I begin to feel myself directly connected with Whitman.” (128) These statements suggest the general conclusion I hope to draw: that Waldo Frank (and his progenitor, Walt Whitman) was the single most important influence upon the poetry of Hart Crane.

Though several critics have recognized the extent of this influence, there have been too few attempts to probe into its real nature. Brom Weber, Crane’s biographer-critic, has pointed out that “The works of Waldo Frank, as well as his friendship, were among the potent influences acting upon Crane’s life.” However, in describing the nature of this influence, he was content to present only a short synopsis of only one of Frank’s books, *Our America* (1919), which, according to Weber, contained “many of the germs of the attitudes and beliefs which constitute the core of Crane’s ideas.”² These beliefs were Frank’s Americanism, his Whitmanism mysticism, his anti-Puritanism, and his faith in the American poet as a spiritual pioneer or myth-maker. These things Weber let stand in abbreviated form to represent the Frank influence. This conclusion, however, overlooks several important facts: first, that other versions of such beliefs were available to Crane elsewhere, those in the books of Lewis Mumford or Van Wyck Brooks, for instance, and second, that Crane read Frank’s book four years before he met him in 1923, and was at that time summarily unimpressed. “The book is stimulating,” he had conceded, “even though a bit pathetic.” (28) Furthermore, as a firm opponent of the “heresy of the didactic,” Crane had been troubled by “this extreme national consciousness” (26) that he saw in Frank. What happened in the intervening years, we might ask, which caused Crane to develop sympathy for Frank’s ideas by 1923? The answer is not simple, and much of the first three chapters of this study will be devoted to answering it.

But first we must ask an anterior question: what were the causes for the Crane-Frank friendship? To begin with the obvious, we might say that the most immediate cause was a mutual respect for each other's work, the admiration of one literary craftsman for another. Each man did have reason to admire the other: previous to their meeting Crane had been hailed the finest American lyric poet of the decade, and was enjoying his first major triumph, a long poem entitled "For the Marriage of Faustus and Helen"; Frank, already an established novelist and critic at the age of thirty-three, was presently being acclaimed for his latest novel, *City Block*. A second thing serving to bring the men together was the fact that they belonged to the same literary generation, and thus shared general attitudes about life and art. Both were members of the group Louis Untermeyer had called "The New Patricians,"³ that wave of American writers who had succeeded the "Naturalists" and who were much more interested in the formal and technical aspects of art than their predecessors. Thirdly, and probably most correctly, we might suppose that the Crane-Frank friendship was based upon Crane's acceptance of Frank's ideological program (assuming that Crane underwent some basic shift in his attitude during the years from 1919 to 1923). However, there is direct proof that the friendship was encouraged by something more than simply admiration, common literary experience, or ideological sympathy. It was Crane who had sensed that he and Frank might have some potentiality for a rare spiritual affinity. On February 27th, 1923, just a week before the luncheon date, Crane wrote to Frank expressing his appreciation for Frank's perceptive criticism of "Faustus and Helen":

Such major criticism as both you and Gorham have given my "Faustus and Helen" is the most sensitizing influence I have ever encountered . . . And better than all—I am certain that a number of us at last have some kind of community of interest. And with this communion will come something better than a mere clique. It is a consciousness of something more vital than stylistic questions and "taste," it is vision, and a vision alone that not only America needs, but the whole world. We are not sure where this will lead, but after the complete renunciation symbolized in *The Waste Land* and, though less, in *Ulysses* we have sensed some new vitality. (127)

The suggestion here is of something more than ideology working to pull the two men together; Crane's term itself—"vision"—implies that the rapport he felt with Frank was above all a spiritual or mystical alliance, fashioned from some "new vitality" each had sensed independently. And thus the single most important objec-

tive of this paper is to define in detail this "shared vision" of Hart Crane and Waldo Frank.

Because of the difficulties involved in such an investigation, I have considered all information "fair game." For example, I have found it necessary to include ideological profiles of Crane and Frank which trace their developments up to 1923, so that I could then proceed to show the causes that brought the two men together in that year. The method is much like a laboratory experiment, in which the properties of two dissimilar chemicals are analyzed to determine more exactly what forms the basis for their attraction. Certainly it seems reasonable that if, for instance, we can determine precisely what it was that Frank admired in Crane's "Faustus and Helen" (a very obscure poem), we will be provided with a means for determining what common sympathies formed the foundation for their intimacy. This form, then, provides the structure of the first three chapters.

The purpose of these first chapters is, then, to prove that "the shared vision" did exist, that the influence which Frank exerted upon Crane was spiritual and mystical, and not merely intellectual. Accordingly, the objective of the fourth chapter is to define the "shared vision" in detail and to show its various manifestations in *The Bridge*. The working method I have chosen is somewhat complex. Since Crane never defined the exact nature of the "vision" in his letters, and since Frank never openly discussed it in his essays, it has been necessary for me to *reconstruct* the vision from various hints and clues that seem extraordinarily significant. Thus, and this could be considered a warning, I am working for the most part with what might be called circumstantial evidence, evidence taken from indirect sources. These sources are the novels and essays of Waldo Frank. Assuming that the vision is spiritual (that is to say, mystical), I have looked for identical elements in the writings of the two men, elements that we most readily associate with the mystical: forms, symbols, and images. I have done this in the hope that by sorting out these similar elements and relating them to the ideas that they concretize, we might arrive at some new understanding not only of the "shared vision" itself, but of the meaning of the elements as they appear in *The Bridge*.

1 / Waldo Frank: Obstetrician of the Word

WALDO FRANK, the grey-haired, luminous-eyed Jew facing Crane across the table that spring day in 1923, was a writer quite mature in his attitudes and achievements. A graduate of Yale, Frank had served his literary apprenticeship as a drama critic for the *New Haven Courier Journal* in 1912, and then had studied in Europe before returning to America in 1916. In that year he won recognition in the American literary world as a founder and editor of *The Seven Arts*, one of the first of the "little magazines," and as the author of a well-received first novel, *The Unwelcome Man*. By 1923 Frank had four novels to his credit, as well as a critical study of American culture, *Our America*, one of the most widely read and discussed books of its day. A well-respected young intellectual, Frank was during these years a regular contributor to *The New Republic* and other highbrow journals. His position, in a day when positions were painstakingly defined and earnestly defended, was that of a "soil critic": following the general program Whitman had laid down in "Democratic Vistas," he advocated the total rejection of European or Old World values in favor of a truly American literature based on the ideals of democracy, individualism, and human brotherhood.

Frank's literary Americanism was not a naive idealism founded on two readings of *Leaves of Grass*, a visit to Washington memorial, and a good heart, nor was Frank a ruffled-shirt provincial like some of the Chicago writers. The son of a wealthy New York lawyer, he had been given the rare opportunity to develop his ideas carefully through travel and education. As a boy, Frank traveled through Europe extensively, and after his Yale days he spent the succeeding years abroad, chatting with left bank Paris intellectuals and studying philosophy at Lausanne, Switzerland. His acquaintance with the Old World was deep enough that when the first wave of American expatriates hit European shores, he was repelled by their slavish worship of European culture and their sneering rejection of

America. Though he himself had been very much impressed by European refinements, he had balanced his enthusiasm with excellent counterweights. For instance, he had heard Anatole France bewail the "twilight" of European culture—its ultra sophistication and decadence—and had thrilled to the French novelist's idea that in vulgar American society was contained the seeds of a new cultural vitality.⁴ With equal wonder he had listened to other Frenchmen praise Whitman on equal terms with Nietzsche as the prophet of a new spiritual order. Although Frank was perfectly willing to admit that American culture was banal, vulgar, and chaotic, he was able, via France's idea, to see his homeland from a new perspective. Instead of being a wilderness of materialism, America became for Frank a primitive, inarticulate giant, a "Brobdingnagian baby" which had not yet reached a state of self-consciousness. To Frank the means for attaining this self-consciousness existed in America's future writers. This challenge to American artists had been best expressed by the French writer, Romain Rolland:

You have a . . . task—one . . . difficult and remote. It is to establish from all these free-moving personalities within your States a tie that shall be as a blood-bond. Their lives are of many moods and colors. Build them into a great Cathedral. Their voices are unconscious and spontaneous and discordant. Compose them into a symphony.⁵

For these reasons Frank decided in 1916 to leave a comfortable life in Paris for American shores. He had realized that he desired the duties of his birthright—that as a writer he could not exist as a parasite on Old World soil—that he craved the environment where he was truly *needed*, even if it was arid, ugly, and desolate. This well illustrates Frank's most basic attitude: what Crane was later to call "his propagandistic strain": for Frank life was something earnestly in need of improvement, and literature was the means for that improvement, not something which existed for its own sake. Armed with little more than will power and a new respect for Whitman and his native land, Frank determined to answer the elegant weepers of Europe with a "barbaric yawp" of American optimism.

After Frank returned to America, he turned his attention to the formulation of a world view that would guide and direct him for the rest of his life. From Anatole France's notion that European culture was on the decline, Frank developed a comprehensive theory of the cultural deterioration of the Western World. The question of whether this theory was original with Frank will not be answered

here: certainly various versions of it had appeared before, such as in Spengler's *Decline of the West*; and, moreover, such ideas were popular with many intellectuals of Frank's day. But whether or not it is original, this theory is basic to Frank's thinking.

The best exegesis of the theory is contained in an essay Frank wrote in 1924 entitled "For a Declaration of War." According to Frank, a culture represented in its "springtime" or original state a cohesive, unified body; at this apex of its development, it was bound together by shared religious and philosophical ideas, "basal assumptions," that all its members held in common. These assumptions had radiated from a "religious matrix," a spiritual event which had polarized a myriad of diverse attitudes into an embryonic cultural community. Some of the "basal assumptions" that Frank identified with Western culture were: "God is good and is related to man's experience," "Man is lord of the world's creatures," "Man's conception of reality is fundamentally correct," and "Man's reason is autonomous." On a more primary scale, these assumptions had taken the form of *Words*: in Western culture some of these words were "love," "reason," "faith," "time," and "space." These shared words served a culture by forming a skeleton that ordered all the extraneous forms: the political institutions, the social customs, the language. For example, in medieval Christian culture man's trust in reason had produced an elaborate hierarchy of moral values; his trust in the senses had produced a graphic heaven and hell; and his reliance on faith had produced a world long on piety and devotion but short on social welfare and individual freedom. Since the basal assumptions permeated the very fabric of a culture and informed the character of its most insignificant forms, the culture in truth became a *body*. To be a member of such a body had a salutary effect upon the individual: by sharing in the deepest experience of his milieu, he gained a sense of "participation in the Whole"⁶ that gave his life fullness and harmony.

A cultural body was not invulnerable, however. Frank contended that such a body was subject to the same laws that govern the human organism: those of birth, growth, and gradual dissolution. Moreover, Frank argued that Western culture was in just such a state of dissolution—that the "basal assumptions" once shared by all of its members were in the process of breaking up: Copernicus had relegated the world to a minor corner of the universe; Kant had disproved the validity of the senses; Darwin had denied man the title of Lord of Creation; Freud had robbed man of his reason,

and Marx of his free will; and Einstein had unstabilized the concepts of time, energy, and matter. Finally, and this Frank only implies, the Reformation and subsequent splinterings of the Church into warring fragments had signaled the decay of the religious core of the culture—the dogma itself. Thus, the marvelously unified body of medieval Europe had dissolved into isolated parts. The modern world, which was the end product of this cycle of decay, was for Frank a “chaos of sterile facts,”⁷ a “multiverse” populated by “atomic wills,” a world empty of any order or values whatsoever.

In the face of such a disaster, Frank saw no cause for despair, but instead interpreted the chaos itself as a sign not only of decay, but also of gestation. “The old spiritual body is breaking up. Ere we can be whole and hale again, we must create a new spiritual body. And that means birth.”⁸ Frank’s faith resided in the notion of cyclic historical change; he expressed it this way in *Virgin Spain*:

By 1500, European man is a congeries of atomic wills: the unity of Christ had scattered into exploration, industry and science. But in this destructive act, Europe is as creative as when the Fathers builded, out of the Prophets, Plato, and Paul, the puissant organism of medieval Europe. To tear down such a body is as divine an act as to build it. Systole and diastole are equal. Schopenhauer and Kant are brothers with Aquinas before God. The long ages of deliquescence from that peak of Rome rightly seem rich to our encisted eyes since they are as fully of saints and heroes consecrate to our work, as were the anchorites of Thebaïd to theirs.

For this is the mysterious law of history: that the divine is present in death even as in life, in the Nay equally with the Yea. God does not build his revelation upon the earth and then turn away His face while man tears down. He is there too, in the destruction. (p. 188)

This trust in God’s will, for better or worse, was Frank’s most fundamental article of faith.

Believing that out of death came birth, and that out of the ashes of Europe would arise a new culture-body, Frank envisioned that the cradle of this birth would be the soil of the New World, and that the “fumbling giant child,”⁹ American society, contained the materials, as yet inarticulate, which would congeal into a new culture-body. In the formation of the new body, Frank forecast a prophetic and missionary role for the American artist. All art was basically religious, maintained Frank: “The great work of art invests the individual with the ecstasy of participation in the Whole,” and “the great primal artists”—Dante, Blake, Whitman—“were creators, prophets, and sustainers of religion.”¹⁰ Since the roots of a culture were religious, it was the task of the artist to construct new integers of faith and purpose upon which the mass

of men could unite. "In a dying world, creation is revolution,"¹¹ wrote Frank at the end of *Our America*. In other words, the mission of the artist was to create new *Words* whereby the religious experience of the artist could enter the common experience of men. "The noblest function of Art is, then, not to subserve the intellectually accepted forms of life: but to conquer new forms of life and to bring them within the reach of the intellect. Art is the language which expresses vision of being that has not yet been conventionalized into simple words and concepts."

The formation of the new culture-body was for Frank a matter of conscious struggle rather than unconscious evolution. There was an ideological battle to be fought between the "forces of Inertia": those who upheld the remnants of Old World culture (Puritanism, Catholicism, Transcendentalism) and the "moderns": those who followed prophetic and revolutionary writers like Nietzsche, Whitman, and Lawrence. Frank felt that any thought or criticism which was based on the old assumptions was automatically invalid: "Practically all that passes for criticism in book and magazine and journal is based upon *tacit* assumptions of fundamental values which have themselves been challenged and brought into transitory flux." The only valid criticism, to Frank's mind, was *obstetrical* criticism, criticism that would set at "determining potential values," criticism which would act as midwife to the artist in his creation and discovery of the *Word*. He himself hoped to play the role of "obstetrical critic" for the writers of his generation.¹²

When Frank returned to America, he found other writers who had ideas similar to his. One such was Van Wyck Brooks, with whom Frank collaborated to found the magazine, *The Seven Arts*, in 1916. Frank and Brooks intended that the journal would provide encouragement for the growth of an indigenous American literature. "It is our faith," wrote the editors, "and the faith of many, that we are living in the first days of a renascent period, a time which means for America the coming of that national self-consciousness which is the beginning of greatness."¹³ Frank, Brooks, and others in their circle saw as the first step towards this goal the formulation of a truthful view of American cultural history, the achievement of a national self-understanding. In other words, they hoped to compile a "usable past"¹⁴ which the American artist could draw on for inspiration and spiritual sustenance. Accordingly, both men set out to write books of criticism designed to clarify the true nature of the national character, in both its origins and its possi-

bilities. In doing so, both writers painted bleak pictures of American life. Brooks produced *The Ordeal of Mark Twain*,¹⁵ which argued that the talents of the author of *Huckleberry Finn* had been severely constrained in his development as an artist by the inhibitions imposed by Puritanism and commercialism. Frank's *Our America*, working along the same lines, interpreted American mores and literature in the light of Freudian psychology. The dominant factor in American history, Frank claimed, was the Puritan. In his frontier struggle with nature, the Puritan had "sublimated" his natural creative and spiritual impulses, perverting these energies into a passion for wealth:

It was but natural to find from the beginning a greater part of man's capacity for dream and creation turned to materialistic channels—into genius for invention, for political manipulation, for accumulation, and it was natural as well that much of men's capacity for faith and piety should have become the slave of the dominant issue: should have evolved that moral tone at the service of wealth.¹⁶

But this did not mean that American culture was doomed to dissolve in a swirl of dollars. It meant only that the energy of the American people had yet to find its proper expression. The people had "poured all their poetry and most of their religion into the business at hand,"¹⁷ and it only remained for the American artist to elevate and spiritualize that energy by creating from the "usable past," (Brook's term) a "lengendry and mythlogy"¹⁸ which would give purpose and coherence to American life.

The one writer Frank thought had made progress in this direction, the one guiding light in the American cultural chaos, was Walt Whitman. Though Frank believed that writers like Poe, Thoreau, Twain, and Emerson had yielded to the will of the Puritan, he thought that Whitman had been able to slough off the Puritan and give expression to a true American consciousness. Whitman had been a visionary who had rightly insisted that American literature should rid itself of Old World forms and philosophies, who had seen in democracy, personalism, and his own mystic visions the materials for a new culture. Frank considered Whitman to be a great mystic whose visions had national significance, a man who "talked with God, standing upon America as Moses upon Sinai." (And to Frank, who was Jewish, this statement had almost literal meaning.) As a mystic visionary, Whitman had seen "the movements of men upon the flat planes of mundane life in its relation to all mundane life. He saw the unitary flow of

all mundane life in its relation to an Infinite Being of which it was an elementary life." Frank maintained the American artist "cannot be so weak as to doubt that in this juncture of his spirit and our land is revelation."¹⁹ There is no doubt that in the revelation Frank saw in Whitman he also saw a hint toward the *Words*, the religious ligaments necessary for the formation of a new culture-body. The lesson taught by American history, then, was that the real character of America had yet to reveal itself. The Puritan way of life, since it was only a carry-over from the decay of Europe, and since it was unsuited to the American political climate, was dying, and the forms of life that were left were still unconscious and unformulated, the first stirrings of a consciousness not yet articulate. Aside from Whitman, no attempt had been made to realize this consciousness in art. For this reason, the seeds of America's future greatness were contained in its writers, who were "more profoundly pioneers than Daniel Boone, more original adventurers than Columbus."²⁰

Frank's idea of the nature of this literary pioneering was of a definite kind. In simplest terms, he thought the American artist should be a *seer* and religious visionary who would divine from America's past the words and symbols for a new religious system. He thought that the artist's task was to make a metaphysical inquiry, an inquiry that would result in the formulation of a "new order of consciousness" made up of new *Words* which would give spiritual meaning and direction to American life. Certainly Whitman, with his "mystic evolution," his physical mysticism, his prototype for the New World personality and his belief in the "Oversoul," had made a start in this direction. But Frank saw Whitman's achievements as only a beginning. For a more up-to-date statement of mystical theories, Frank turned to the writings of P. D. Ouspensky.

Ouspensky's *Tertium Organum*²¹ was a book that was familiar to many writers in the twenties. Philip Horton reports that the 1923 literary clique—Crane, Gorham Munson, and Jean Toomer—of which Frank served as patriarch, professedly considered Ouspensky's book to be their "bible."²² Passages in Frank's novels and essays before 1923 seem to show that he had read the book much earlier than that, however.

Tertium Organum purports to present a new epistemology and a new ontology in accordance with Einstein's theory of a four-dimensional time continuum. Ouspensky opens his argument by reiterating Kant's proof that ultimate realities cannot be appre-

hended by an empirical perception.²³ (Kant had proved that basic phenomena like time and space were only extensions of the individual consciousness.) Assuming that a noumenal world exists, how can we, asks Ouspensky, perceive these ultimate realities? His solution is to turn to consciousness itself, to the intuitive faculty of the mind, for the means whereby these ultimate truths may be perceived. Such reasoning as this only confirmed what Frank himself had decided earlier—that Scientific truth, because it was relative, was inferior to Religious truth, and that scientific or empirical reasoning, when pursued as an end in itself, became destructive and analytical, breaking down the traditional integers of belief and producing nothing to take their place.²⁴

Although Ouspensky admits that, as the creatures in Plato's cave, mortal man can never hope to fully comprehend the world of ultimate reality—"inexpressibility is the sign of truth"—he does make some tentative deductions about this world by a series of analogies. For one thing, it is a world composed of three dimensions plus the fourth dimension. Just as a dog, when he walks past a three-dimensional object, perceives its third dimension (depth) as something fleeting and transitory, so man perceives the fourth dimension (time) as something fleeting and transitory. The fourth dimension is time itself, but since it is a dimension, it is therefore static. Thus the noumenal world is a world of the *Eternal Now* of Hindu philosophy, a world without past or future. Since there is no duration in such a world, there is no action. And since there is no action, there can be no cause and effect. Likewise, three-dimensional qualities like size and position are nonexistent, and are replaced by subjective feelings of affinity and remoteness. There is no death in this world: everything participates in eternal life. Likewise, there is no individuation, and all share a common self: "Everything is the whole." Contrary to traditional Platonism, the material world is not illusory—it is only the noumenal world represented imperfectly to our senses. As was previously mentioned, Ouspensky believed that the nature of this noumenal world could be known through mysticism. Any type of mysticism would suffice, he thought, from the extreme asceticism of Yoga to the ecstatic trance of the Dionysian, just as long as the conventional perception of phenomena was disrupted and "an expansion of consciousness" took place. And there was no need to worry about the lack of mystics—Nature had provided for them. In the course of evolution, certain men had been chosen who were blessed with the "higher

consciousness." But in order that his experience have value to society, the mystic must communicate his noumenal knowledge. Thus he must be a poet, for only a person in command of the symbolic and analogical powers of poetry could hope to communicate his vision. Art, therefore, was "the language of the future," and its mediator, the poet, was a prophet and myth-maker.²⁵

There is credible evidence that Frank read Ouspensky and ascribed to the main tenets of his metaphysics. In *Our America*, Frank wrote:

The one true hierarchy of values in the world is the hierarchy of consciousness. Most men stir about upon their little plane and know it badly. They are gnats gliding the surface of a pond. Some men's knowing holds three dimensions. They see the flat world they act in: but they know it to be a facet of a greater world, and thereby they know it better. Countries, continents, perhaps the tangled traffic of peoples and of men, come in to them. But there are souls whose consciousness is higher. They partake of this global, three dimensioned world, but know it too for a mere moving surface, moving beyond itself into dimensions that are truer and that cease from motion as they become more true. (p. 202)

Frank's novels and essays reveal debts to Ouspensky, but his primary progenitor is Walt Whitman. The substance of Whitman's credo: his spiritual equalitarianism, his belief in the "Oversoul," his physical mysticism, and his "mystic evolution," all can be found expressed with fervor and clarity in Frank's works. Frank's closest tie with Whitman is his faith in "mystic evolution." James E. Miller, Jr., once defined Whitman's theory in this way: "The universe is not chaotic but schematic . . . a coherent, rhythmical, and purposeful unfolding of time; impelling mystic evolution onward is the mystic life force, primal, elemental, inexplicable, inexorable."²⁶ We have already examined Frank's faith in "cyclic historical change," the faith that God "is there too, in the destruction." Frank's trust is founded on natural processes, the conviction that the natural functions—birth, growth, death, decay, whether relating to the human organism or the social organism, are working towards an ultimate and inevitable good. In Frank's novel *The Death and Birth of David Markand*, the hero, a wandering Whitmanian, involves himself in a labor dispute in a mining town in Kansas. He is disturbed by the injustice he sees on both sides: the mine owners are ruthless in the suppression of the miner's liberties, while the miners themselves are no less ruthless in their use of violence and dishonesty to attain their demands. Unable to find sympathy with either faction, David walks out onto the prairie, where he has

a vision of the unfathomable mystery of God's universal blueprint:

What chaos it is! All whorls of human dust upon the prairie! furiously rising, intermingling, gone. And what to him? . . . How simple the prairie. One day it is all gold beneath sun; one day it is all dour beneath cloud. One season, it is sown, one season harvested. But there is something more to the whorls of human dust upon it, than he has been able to see! Within the passionate, the insane confusion of men against men, each man in himself, there is a cycle also; although less simple than the swing of earth and sky. Not smaller, *vaster* . . . The orbit of human cycle! Markand knows this. That is why the movements of men seem broken and irrelevant and small within the prairie calm: because he finds only fragments, his eye cannot grasp the whole.²⁷

Frank's second novel, *The Dark Mother* (1920), takes as its central symbol that omnipresent "lifeforce" or "Oversoul" that Whitman claimed pervaded the universe: "The world was a Dark Mother. The night of the miracle of worlds was fleshed and was a mother." David Markand, the hero, is himself a kind of American primitive, a sensual young Whitman who intuitively rejects his smalltown Puritan background and wanders down the Open Road for New York City. David is a mystic who feels a peculiar oneness with his surroundings:

A world of infinite color, infinite flesh: himself within the world, himself carried within it, through it. . . . Flesh altogether and altogether about him. He altogether touching all Flesh—and All. David knew through his shut eyes, walking the world, how he was carried within a world of ceaseless substance: how he was substance within it: how his moving and knowing through Flesh was Spirit.²⁸

This is a "physical mysticism": a belief in the paradoxical infusion of the material by the spiritual. Like Whitman, Frank believed that "Objects gross and the unseen soul are one."²⁹ A case in point is an essay Frank wrote, "The Modern Distemper," in which he exploded the fallacies behind what he thought were two equally erroneous kinds of thinking—transcendentalism and materialism. Both had fallen prey to a fatal dualism, Frank argued, in their arbitrary division of the world into two parts: (1) spirit-value-quality-soul, and (2) matter-body-evil. The only difference between the two was that they resolved the duality from opposite ends. The transcendentalist, hoping to resolve this duality into a whole, denied the existence of matter, taking spirit as his reality. "But this All will not bear the buffets of the world, for it is really a fragment. And the transcendentalist begins his endless labor of corrupting reality in order to make it fit his figment." Likewise, the materialist resolves his duality by denying spirit and taking only "measurable matter" as the real. "But the part of the whole

which he has legislated into nullity still 'functions' in him. He wears himself out, denying the domains of emotion and thought which his petty 'whole' has no room for." Frank then concluded with an explicit statement of his own physical mysticism:

But it is plain that we are more sure of the undifferentiate quality of *living* than we are of matter. Living without form does not exist, of course: living-matter cannot be divided.³⁰

This physical mysticism is closely associated with Frank's theory that sexual reproduction is "a merging of the One with the All." Attempting a concise formulation of the sexual aspect of Whitman's mysticism, James E. Miller, Jr., wrote that "in the ritualistic act of reproduction man symbolically *becomes* the eternal, infinite life-force, itself *constituting* time and space," and that "each man's potential contribution to mystic evolution constitutes his supreme, divine individuality, his separateness, while the acts of contribution themselves are acts of merging, acts which unite the individual to the divine One."³¹ The heroine of Frank's *Rahab*,³² Fanny Luve, is a fresh and uninhibited young girl who experiences through the sex act a kind of spiritual replenishment: "She was viced in One: Grass, hair, fingers twigs broken to leaf, lip and earth hot against her . . . One. She was surrounded by One." This of course, is identical to the substance of Whitman's "Children of Adam" poems.

City Block, which Frank wrote in 1922, is in the nature of a Whitmanian catalogue: a series of stories, elaborately interwoven in character and circumstance, delineate the sometimes sordid, sometimes beautiful lives of the occupants of a polyglot city block in East Side Manhattan. One of these stories, "Hope," is especially interesting for the light it throws on Frank's physical mysticism. This is the same story that, as previously mentioned, impressed Crane so deeply. The theme of the story might be said to be "the regenerative power of sex." The story begins with a young man walking down an urban avenue. The parade of sensations that meet his eye are confused and meaningless. A representative modern man, he is lost in a "chaos of sterile facts." Suddenly his glance falls upon a magnificently proportioned Negro prostitute. The narrator notices that "The air that her hands moved wreathed in volumnear curves like the curves of a slender stem of a flower, to her head." Hypnotized, the young man follows the prostitute to a dingy bedroom, where he finds a mystic replenishment in her arms. "The wave of her was measurelessly long as if some tiding force . . . no wind . . .

with infinite stroke had caused it.”³³ It is not coincidental that the woman in Frank’s story was a Negress. In his book, *In The American Jungle*, Frank wrote:

The Negro peasant in the Alabama black belt is illiterate and often drunk. But in his native state, he draws from the soil and sky in whose cycles he is seasoned, a grace which is a refinement even if it be unconscious like the grace of a flower. (p. 109)

Thus we have a primitivism reminiscent of Gauguin or Melville. But we shall postpone a thorough analysis of “Hope” until we can discuss it in the light of its tonic effect upon Crane. Even so, we should at this point notice the extraordinary amount of curve imagery in these quotations, not only the “volumnear curves” of the Negro prostitute, but the flower-like grace of the Negro peasant who is seasoned in “cycles” of “soil and sky.” This curve imagery, and the philosophy behind it, will assume a position of great importance in the concluding chapter of this study.

Thus ends our discussion of the major influences and tendencies in the work of Waldo Frank. Many influences remain unnoticed, for Frank was a wide reader and an eclectic thinker. A whole chapter might easily be devoted to Frank’s debts to Emerson, or to Nietzsche. However, it should by now be clear that Frank was a true Nietzschean, a “modern” in the most uncompromising sense of the word. Not only as a novelist of prophetic and unorthodox mystical themes, but also as a self-styled “obstetrical critic,” Frank conceived of himself as playing at least a subsidiary role in the shaping of the future, which he thought to be nothing less than the creation of a new culture. This is the man that met Hart Crane for lunch that spring day in 1923.

2 / *Hart Crane: The Desperate Dionysian*

IN 1923 Hart Crane's attitudes and loyalties were shifting and contradictory. Though he was perhaps basically nonpolitical, he had flirted with both the liberals and the reactionaries, and his literary interests ran from Melville and Whitman to T. S. Eliot and the French Symbolists. The dichotomy was perhaps best represented by the difference between the two most important "little magazines" Crane subscribed to during the period of his early development: Harriet Monroe's *Poetry* magazine (with its illustrious foreign correspondent, Ezra Pound) which emphasized aestheticism and a high regard for traditional cultural values, and *The Seven Arts*, under the tutelage of Brooks and Frank, which emphasized the "soil values" of America. Before he met Frank in 1923, Crane had not wholly aligned himself with either of the factions these magazines represented.

This disturbing split in Crane's loyalties was an early manifestation of a dualism that was to hound him for the duration of his career. Ultimately, it was responsible for the loss of faith that defaced *The Bridge*. Crane was an ideological-religious manic-depressive. During his manic periods he expressed an optimistic faith in the glorious future of America, in the metaphysical truth of his "vision," in the ultimate efficacy of science and machinery in human life, in humanity, and in the healing power of love. During his depressive periods he expressed pessimistic doubt in the American experiment, a distrust of humanity, denial of his mystical experiences, and a Spenglerian belief that Western culture, and America with it, was heading towards total dissolution. Since Crane was not a true aesthete and could not bear the thought of giving up "vision" poetry to write inconsequential twilight-of-culture verse, he was unable to continue writing poetry after the substance of his vision, as it was revealed in *The Bridge*, was judged to be valueless, both by his critics and by himself. When Crane conceived *The Bridge* in 1923, he was in the midst of one of his optimistic periods. However, its

completion took him into one of deep despair and doubt. As we shall see later, a loss of faith in his material prevented him from doing full justice to his original conception.

Harold Hart Crane was reared in a provincial, middle class culture that affords a sharp contrast to the upper class urban culture that fathered Waldo Frank. Born in 1899 in Garrettsville, Ohio, he was the only son of Clarence Crane, a candy manufacturer.³⁴ The Cranes' marriage was a tempestuous and unhappy one; Mrs. Crane, a sensitive, high-strung woman, was ill matched with the aggressive, money-minded husband, and when Hart was sixteen she was granted a divorce. Their child was a quiet and sensitive boy. A typical embryo Shelley, young Hart dearly loved rich sounds and bright colors; once he was severely punished when he was caught parading before the mirror in his mother's new hats.³⁵ Although his mother did allow him to paint and play the piano, young Hart received little opportunity for the free expression of his artistic impulses. His father, an irascible man interested solely in the accumulation of money, wanted an heir for his business enterprises and was perennially indignant at the fates for having given him such an "effeminate" lad for a son. Because of his parents' failure to understand his poetic nature, Hart formed the habit early of escaping into the solitude of books. Unlike Frank, who took culture for granted, Crane learned to use culture as a shield to ward off the commercialism and vulgarity of his surroundings. His third story bedroom with its cherished writing desk became for him a lonely citadel affording retreat from the endless admonitions of his father, who demanded that he learn "business" and give up such frivolity as the writing of poems.

If Hart's home life offered him little understanding, his experiences at school offered him less. While Frank enjoyed the advantages of private schooling, trips to Europe, and an Ivy League education, Crane received no more instruction than that offered in the Cleveland public schools. Such schooling produced inevitable results: the unusually sensitive boy found little sympathy with his classmates, or they with him. "They are so shallow over there at school I am more moved to disdain than anything else" he wrote to his grandmother. "There are about two out of the twelve hundred I would care to have as friends." (4) The defiant tone not too successfully masks the loneliness of a "queer one" estranged from his conventional-minded classmates. Barred from the normal friendships of adolescence, Hart turned to his studies for solace; but since the

public school curriculum offered little stimulation for one of his interests, he quit school at the end of his junior year. From then on he would do his studying at home in his self-styled "Ivory tower."

Only in the seclusion of his cloistered study did Hart find the opportunity to satisfy his eager cultural appetite. With his inordinate love of colors and sounds, he was early attracted to the sensuous flow of sound and imagery of the late Romantics; one by one he devoured them: Keats, Shelley, Swinburne, and Yeats. One of Crane's early poems displays a gorgeous emotional indulgence and defiant self-pity we might have found in Shelley himself:

Up the chasm-walls of my bleeding heart
Humanity pecks, claws, sobs and climbs;
Up the inside, and over every part
Of the hive of the world that is my heart.

And of all the sowing, and all the tear-tendering,
And reaping, have mercy and love issued forth;
Mercy, white milk, and honey, gold love—
And I watch, and say, "These the anguish are worth."³⁶

Among other things, this poem is a statement of a typically romantic theme, a theme which in various forms was to guide Crane throughout his life: the notion that suffering is somehow ultimately good.

Besides these authors, another of Crane's early favorites was Oscar Wilde. In October of 1916, *The Pagan*, a New York poetry journal, printed a letter written by Crane several months earlier in Cleveland: "Let me praise your September cover; it has some suggestions of the exoticism and richness of Wilde's poems." There is no doubt that Crane was attracted to the purely aesthetic qualities of Wilde's verse; Crane had tried to capture this same "exoticism" himself in his own poem, "Carmen de Boheme." However, there was another reason why Crane liked Wilde: the English dandy's public indiscretions were a token of Crane's own domestic rebellion. Another of Crane's earliest poems, "C 33," the number on Wilde's cell at Reading Gaol, is in the way of a tender consolation for the indignities Wilde suffered at the hands of the Philistines:

From penitance must needs bring pain
And with it song of minor, broken strain.
But you who hear the lamp whisper thru night
Can trace paths tear-wet, and forget all blight.³⁷

Crane's extremely subjective romanticism, induced both by his extreme sensitivity and his isolated, unhappy childhood, might be said to constitute the core of his character. There were other less

purely environmental influences on Crane's early development, however. Though Crane received little contact with "ideas" in his younger years, there are two that deserve special mention: his Platonism and his instruction in the Christian Science religion. Both were to be instrumental in laying the foundation for the metaphysical poetry of Crane's maturity.

Like many another young romantic, Hart was greatly attracted to Plato's theory that there was a noumenal world that contained ideal forms. Philip Horton, Crane's biographer, reports of the adolescent Crane that:

Among his books were Swinburne, the poet par excellence of adolescence, and the early Yeats himself, and the Georgian poets; but more important than all others, the *Dialogues*, where he read of that clear and radiant progression from the beauties of earth upwards to that other beauty and the final revelation of the very essence of beauty. (p. 31)

Crane kept his copy of Plato close by him all his life, and the influence shows clearly in his poetry. Several of Crane's poems, like "The Bathers," deal with "absolute beauty" as a theme. "For the Marriage of Faustus and Helen" concerns the poet's pursuit of ideal beauty, as manifested in a young "Helen" sitting across the aisle from him in a streetcar:

And yet, suppose some evening I forgot
The fare and transfer, yet got by that way
Without recall,—lost yet poised in traffic.
Then I might find your eyes across an aisle,
Still flickering with those prefigurations—
Prodigal, yet uncontested now,
Half-riant before the jerky window frame.

At the conclusion of the first section of the poem, the poet expresses his undying devotion to his eternal lady, much as a Catholic poet might appeal to the Virgin:

Accept a love eye riveted to your plane,
Bent axle of devotion along companion ways
That beat, continuous, to hourless days—
One inconspicuous, glowing orb of praise.

However, though Beauty is the subject for praise, there is no attempt at its evocation except in the lines: "There is a world dimensional for those untwisted by the love of things irreconcilable."³⁸

It was not only Plato's metaphysics that Crane admired, but also the passage in *The Ion* that claimed that madness was prerequisite to the composition of poetry:

For all good poets, epic as well as lyric, compose their beautiful poems not by art, but because they are inspired and possessed. And as the Corybantian revellers when they dance are not in their right mind, so the lyric poets are not in their right mind when they are composing their beautiful strains: but when falling under the power of music and metre they are inspired and possessed; like Bacchic maidens who draw milk and honey from the rivers when they are under the influence of Dionysus but not when they are in their right minds.³⁹

Philip Horton reports that young Crane thought so highly of the truth of this observation that he underscored the passage in his copy with red ink. It is probable, judging from the faithful manner in which he obeyed these precepts in the composition of his own poems, that Crane missed the subtle irony underlying these remarks; for though he was acquainted with the idealistic Plato of *The Symposium*, he was ignorant of the authoritarian Plato of *The Republic*.

Another influence upon Crane's "metaphysical bent" was his formal religious training. Throughout his adult life Hart Crane never belonged to any of the established religious sects. However, his mother, to whom he was deeply devoted, was a practising Christian Scientist, and Hart doubtlessly received instruction in Christian Science as a child. The Christian Science theory of reality undoubtedly served to corroborate the Platonism that infuses most of his later poems.* Mary Baker Eddy, the founder of the sect, had propounded that true reality existed only in the mind of God. Her reasoning was this: since God had created everything, and since everything God created was good, the material world, because it contained sin, death, disease, and other evils, could not logically exist, and was therefore illusory. Correlative to this notion was the idea that human minds partook of the substance of the Divine mind, sharing its divinity and immortality, and that by attaining harmony with it one could banish all evil from his life. This harmony was to be attained by mental discipline—by the continued dwelling on "divine" thoughts. Dostoevsky expresses the idea quite well in the "Father Zossima" chapter of *The Brothers Karamazov*, one of Crane's favorite books:

* The Christian Science theory of reality, degrading as it does the value of quotidian reality, closely parallels Plato's theory, expressed in his famous "cave" metaphor, that material reality is three removes from the truth, and only contains vague hints and clues of noumenal or true reality. While in Plato's metaphysics, this true reality consists of pure ideas that at once embody truth, beauty, and goodness, the true reality of Christian Science is The Divine Mind. Both theories, by discounting material facts, discount empiricism, science, and inductive reason, and rely on intuition or artistic imagination as a means of deciphering the vague outlines of the spiritual world.

Love a man even in his sin, for that is the semblance of Divine Love and is the highest love on earth. Love all God's creation, the whole and every grain of sand in it. Love the animals, love the plants, love everything. If you love everything, you will perceive the divine mystery in things. Once you perceive it, you will begin to comprehend it every day. And you will come at last to love the whole world with an all-embracing love.⁴⁰

"The beautiful young Alyosha, and Father Zossima!" wrote Crane in 1920. "Dostoevsky seems to me to represent the nearest type to the 'return to Christ' that there is record of,—I think the greatest of novelists." (50) This notion that salvation comes through "loving everything" seems to be closely associated in Crane's mind with the idea that suffering is ultimately good:

My mother has had her full share of suffering, and I have had much, also. I have had enough, anyway, to realize that it is all very beautiful in the end if you will pierce through to the center of it and see it in relation to the real emotions and values of Life The true idea of God is the only thing that can give happiness,—and that is the identification of yourself with *all of life*. (140)

The second stage in Crane's development began in the winter of 1916, when the young poet, prompted by youthful ambition and the mounting antagonisms of a troubled home, left Cleveland for New York City to pursue a literary career.

It was inevitable that such a romantic, emotional nature as Crane's would be attracted to the writings of the German philosopher, Frederick Nietzsche. Nietzsche's ideas affected almost all writers of Crane's generation, but because they dramatized his temperament and buoyed up his hope for a high destiny, their impact on Crane was doubly forceful.

As Brom Weber has pointed out, Nietzsche's influence upon the writers and intellectuals of Crane's time was pervasive. Statements made by Crane in his letters testify to his familiarity with Nietzsche. In 1921, Crane designated Nietzsche as one of his favorite authors, coupling him with such important figures as Eliot, Donne, Joyce, and Pound. At the end of the same year, he used the term "Nietzschean" as an accolade to describe a friend of his, Ernest Nelson, "a Nietzschean and thorough appreciator of all the best, who has pursued his lonely way in America since the age of fifteen when he left his family in Norway on account of religious differences." (75) Although there is no proof that Crane read Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*, certainly he could have received the ideas contained in it through conversation and such indirect sources as H. L. Mencken, a youthful idol of Crane, whose pages in *The Smart Set* bristled with Nietzschean quotations.

In a literal sense, Nietzsche's ideas, as perhaps best expressed in *The Birth of Tragedy*, form the backbone of Crane's life. In this book Nietzsche attempted to explain the sudden birth and no less sudden death of tragedy in Greek culture. His thesis, briefly stated, was that it was born of a unity of opposites—that two separate streams in Greek culture, the Apollonian and the Dionysian, had merged for a brief spell before the Dionysian element had been suppressed by the rationality of the Socratic Greeks. Most of the book is given over to a description of the character of these two forces, which between themselves, Nietzsche thought, encompassed all of man's nature.

On one side of Nietzsche's polarity was the Apollonian, best typified among the Greeks by Homer. Here was the rational, objective man, the contemplative man, the fictionalist who drew "the veil of Maya" (or illusion) over reality in order to endure it. His signal asset was his ability to transcend the horror of life and view it objectively in a "symbolical dream-picture." His counterpart, the Dionysian, best exemplified by the lyric poet Archilochus, was the emotional, subjective man, the drunken reveler who ripped away the veil of Maya, and who by frenzied, tortured submersion in the sensations of immediate reality, achieved a sense of oneness with the universe. True tragedy, Nietzsche maintained, required both of these elements for its creation, and for a brief episode in Greek history, in the person of Euripides, they were fused. To the creative act, the Apollonian contributed his ability to view experience objectively—that is, to create art, and the Dionysian his sense of oneness with the universe:

so we may perhaps picture him sinking down in his Dionysian drunkenness and mystical self-abnegation, alone and apart from the singing revelers, and we may imagine how now, through Apollonian dream-inspiration, his own state, i.e., his oneness with the primal nature of the universe, is revealed to him in a *symbolical dream picture*.⁴¹

Whether or not Nietzsche's thesis is valid need not concern us here. What should concern us is the effect it had on Crane. As Brom Weber has pointed out, it is evident from what we know of the facts of his life that Crane found his whole personality in Nietzsche's figure of the Dionysian poet. Like Crane in his letter to Charlotte Rychtarik, the Dionysian "identifies" himself with all of life. That is, he submits to the contradictory flux of existence. He lets excess passions sway him, and joyously suffers the consequences. He desires death, because his soul wishes to return to the

Primal Unity which, because of the individuation of existence, he is separated from. And suffering is redeemed by the Dionysian knowledge. Paradoxically, it is in the height of his agony that the Dionysian is most conscious of this Primal Unity, the indestructible essence of existence. The Dionysian artist, the lyric poet, bears an unmistakable resemblance to the frenzied poet of Plato's *Ion*. Submitting to a "musical mood" similar to Plato's "divine madness," he "produces a copy of this Primal Unity as music." The exclamations of the lyricist do not become a work of art, however, until the lyricist has produced a second copy of his emotions "under Apollonian dream-inspiration."⁴² By such means the personal experience of the poet becomes universal and prophetic.

Nietzsche's Dionysian theory of aesthetics allowed Crane to synthesize all the romantic notions of his adolescence. Crane's conception of Plato's ideal forms (and the "Divine Mind" of Christian Science) became synonymous with the Dionysian knowledge of Primal Unity; Crane's faith in the ultimate efficacy of suffering became the Dionysian agony; his "identification with (or love for) all of life" became the Dionysian excess, and his faith in Plato's "divine madness" became the "musical mood" of the Dionysian poet. That Crane believed in such things is attested by his own manner of poetic composition. As Malcolm Cowley has related,⁴³ Crane often would receive the inspiration for a poem while intoxicated with wine and the clamor of phonograph music, and would immediately dash off a first draft. Later, in his sober (and perhaps Apollonian) moments, he would carefully revise it. "Beauty has most often appeared to me in moments of penitence and even sometimes, distraction and worry," he wrote in 1920. (46)

Not only his manner of poetic composition, but also his manner of life attests to Crane's Dionysianism. A motif that occurs over and over in Crane's letters is his dictum that one should "accept all of life." In one sense, the phrase signifies Crane's willingness "to be a part of his age"—not only to participate in it as a salesman, factory worker, and advertising copy-writer, but to let its discordance ravage his consciousness. The Apollonian recoils from experience, and thereby endures it. The Dionysian yields himself up to it. Crane's poetry is full of sores produced by first-hand experience, from the "curse of Sundered parentage" he suffered as a child, to the "smoked forking spires" of the factories he worked in. In a more personal sense, Crane's phrase signifies the recklessness with which he yielded to physical excess. The Dionysian submits to exper-

ience in the hope of losing himself in the eternal flux and flow of things. Crane's inordinate debauchery and alcoholism, his willingness to torture himself mentally and physically, denotes the true Dionysian agony. Crane was skeptical of those who didn't wholeheartedly "accept" life. "My greatest complaint against G [Gorham Munson]," Crane wrote to Frank, "is (apparently) an incorrigible streak of vulgarity, arising no doubt from some distrust in experience." (273)

Of all Nietzsche's ideas perhaps the most important to Crane was Nietzsche's faith in the poet as myth-maker, his conviction that the "visions" of the poet were salutary and prophetic. Hart Crane had grown up in a world where the writing of poetry was considered idle and effeminate. By prescribing a prophetic role for the poet, Nietzsche charged him with power and significance. This image of himself gave Crane the courage to surmount the indifference of society and to sustain confidence in the worthiness of his calling. Though it is doubtful that Crane read any of Nietzsche's tracts on the "Superman," the Nietzschean ring of assurance in this 1917 letter to his father is unmistakable: "I realize more entirely every day, that I am preparing for a fine life; that I have powers which, if correctly balanced, will enable me to mount to extraordinary latitudes." (5) In the same year he wrote to his mother: "O if you knew how much I am learning! The realization of true freedom is slowly coming to me, and with it a sense of poise which is of inestimable value. My life, however it shall continue, shall have expression and form. Believe me when I tell you that I am determined on a valorous future and something of a realization of life." "I am beginning to see the hope of standing entirely alone and to fathom Ibsen's statement that translated is, 'The strongest man in the world is he who stands entirely alone.'" (9)

It was noted earlier that Crane's artistic loyalties and philosophic convictions were shifting and contradictory. The period in Crane's life beginning in 1916 and ending with his composition of "For the Marriage of Faustus and Helen" manifests just such a swing in Crane's ideological pendulum. The pendulum swung away from Nietzschean and Platonic idealism, towards pessimism and iconoclasm.

By 1918 Crane's Nietzschean image of himself had slowly dissolved, crumbling under repeated barrages by the hard facts of life. He had come to New York resolute and cheerful, determined to carve out a literary career for himself, but by the end of two

years he had learned the hard way that in America poets do not survive by the sale of their verses. In order to support himself, Crane had become a vender of advertising space for *The Little Review*, but, besides failing miserably as a salesman, he found that he was so exhausted by the end of a workday that he couldn't write. "The commercial aspect is the most prominent characteristic of America and we all must bow to it sooner or later," he wrote William Wright. "At present the world takes on the look of a desert,—a devastation to my eyes, and I am finding it rather hard at best. Still, there is something of a satisfaction in the development of one's consciousness even though it is painful." (19) The young Nietzschean was learning to better appreciate the advice of Ezra Pound:

O helpless few in my country,
O remnant enslaved!

Artists broken against her,
A-stray, lost in the villages,
Mistrusted, spoken-against,
...
Take thought:
I have weathered the storm
I have beaten out my exile.⁴⁴

In 1919 Crane would have gladly become an exile, but he lacked the money for passage; he was so destitute that he was forced to give up his poetic aspirations altogether for the duration to accept a job as stockboy in his father's store in Akron, Ohio. This industrial boom-town, with its steel mills, blast furnaces, and dreary masses of laborers, offered Crane further proof that the American atmosphere was hostile to artistic creation. His experiences wrought an inevitable change on his objectives as a poet. Gone were the ecstatic visions of the Dionysian poet, and in their place were the ironic realities of the poetic iconoclast. "More and more am I turning toward Pound and Eliot and the minor Elizabethans for values," (28) he wrote Gorham Munson in December, 1919.

Crane's "Porphyro in Akron," written during his tenure in Akron, well illustrates this new drift in Crane's thinking. The poem begins with an evocation of the monotonous gray dawn in an industrial city, reminiscent of Eliot's "Preludes":

Greeting the dawn
A shift of rubber workers presses down
South main
With the stubbornness of muddy water.

Similarly, all the wistful impotence and spiritual exhaustion of

Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" is contained in the lines:

O City, your axles need not the oil of song.
I will whisper words to myself
And put them in my pockets.
I will go and pitch quoits with old men
In the dust of the road.

Another stanza ironically depicts the vulgarization of love in the modern world by contrasting a cheap chorus girl and her lover with Keat's Madeline, the maiden in "Eve of St. Agnes." Finally, the last stanza makes this bitter comment:

You ought, really, to try to sleep, Porphyro
Even though, in this town, poetry's a
Bedroom occupation.⁴⁶

Early in 1920 Gorham Munson, Crane's closest friend before he met Frank, sent the manuscript of a play to Crane for him to criticize. Crane answered by attacking its sentimentality, and urged that Munson learn to employ irony in order to handle his themes gracefully. "Humor is the artist's only weapon against the proletariat," he maintained. "But I pray for both of us,—let us be keen and humorous scientists anyway, and I would rather act my little tragedy without tears, although I would insist on a tortured countenance and all sleekness pared off the muscles." (31) Thus we have summed up in a neat paragraph Crane's new conception of himself. All that is left of Nietzsche is a kind of aristocratic stoicism, and underneath the facile irony there is evident the deep despair that was soon to find its home in Eliot's *Waste Land*: all that was left of Western culture was "two gross of broken statues," and "a few thousand battered books," as Pound himself once wrote, and in its stead greed and vulgarity swept over a "botched civilization"⁴⁶ like a black plague. This pessimism projected a bleak and futile role for the poet: he could not hope to assume any important or productive role in his society; he was inevitably doomed to exile, a refugee from the vulgarity of the *demos*. He thus became an "aristocrat of the spirit" whose art was a weapon to fend off the horrors of his age rather than to enhance its beauty. "The modern artist has got to harden himself, and the walls of an ivory tower are too delicate and brittle a coat of mail for a substitute," (31) said Crane in the same letter. The dissolution of Western culture as a fact imposed certain limitations on poetry itself. Because there was nothing to praise, nothing to glorify, "humor" was the poet's only

real and valid attitude. Moreover, the poet himself, since he had no utilitarian value, became little more than a pathetic clown. The only attitude to be borne gracefully was the poignant mockery of Prufrock, the delicate, highly intellectual irony of one who recognizes only too well his own impotence.

Crane's swing towards "Waste Land" pessimism reached its farthest extent in 1920. Late in that year his ideological pedulum began a slow swing to the opposite pole, towards liberalism, Americanism, and Platonic idealism, anticipating his sudden burst of enthusiasm for Frank in 1923. A good barometer of this change was the way in which his opinions evolved regarding the poetry of Matthew Josephson and the prose fiction of Sherwood Anderson. In 1920 Josephson symbolized to Crane quite aptly the artist who had "hardened" himself against all eventualities. At the outset Crane admired Josephson's position, and often praised his poetry, a "pointillistic chatter" that seemed to him to be highly desirable. On the other hand, he recognized that writers like Sherwood Anderson, the rustic Ohio storyteller, whom he had once met in the offices of *The Little Review*, had admirable qualities of a completely different sort. "Nature is so strong in all the work of Anderson—and he describes it as one so willingly and happily surrendered to it, that it colors his work with the most surprising grasp of what 'innocence' and 'holiness' ought to mean," he wrote in 1920. (47) He fully realized that Josephson and Anderson were two radically different writers, heading two radically different ways, and that he had yet to make a definite commitment in either direction:

[Anderson] and Josephson are opposite poles. J. Classic, hard and glossy,—Anderson, crowd-bound, with a smell of the sod about him, uncouth. Somewhere between them is Hart Crane with a kind of wistful indetermination, still much puzzled. (27)

A series of things seems to have turned Crane away from the intellectual hardness of Josephson and towards the incipient soil-values of Anderson. For one thing, when the Dada craze spread to the American side of the Atlantic in 1921, Josephson was one of the first to jump on the bandwagon. To Crane, who saw in Dada nothing but "an insane jumble of four winds, the six senses, and plum pudding," (52) and who took his art quite seriously, this represented a dereliction of duty and betrayal of the dillittante. By 1922 Crane was no longer enthusiastic in regard to Josephson's verse, which now was affected by Dadaism. Speaking of a poem

Josephson had published in Gorham Munson's magazine, *Secession*, he resounded:

But what has happened to Marty!?!... All this talk of Marty's is quite stimulating, but it's like coffee-twenty-four hours afterward not much remains to work with. It is metallic and pointillistic—not derogatory terms to my mind at all, but somehow thin,—a little too slender and “smart” after all. (84)

As Crane's taste for Josephson slackened, his taste for Anderson grew. Though he clearly recognized Anderson's deficiencies as a technician, Crane was profoundly impressed by his honesty and his balanced, essentially spiritual view of life. In 1921, after a year spent reading such Anderson classics as *Poor White*, *Triumph of the Egg*, and *Winesburg, Ohio*, Crane's enthusiasm grew to such bounds that he voluntarily contributed a critical study of the writer for the New Orleans magazine, *The Double Dealer*. The content of the article demonstrates that Crane was quite eager to accept at face value the lyric beauty of the humble country life that Anderson depicted. Unlike Sinclair Lewis, whom Crane felt had only “reported the facts” in his iconoclastic novel, *Main Street*, Crane thought Anderson had “told the truth” about small-town America, and had subsequently made contact with an “animal and earthly life” which in its lusty vitality belied the taunts of the cynics and the Spenglerian doomsayers.⁴⁷ On the other hand, Anderson remained uncompromisingly hostile to the Machine and the industrialism it represented, a fact that allowed Crane to swallow him whole. The young poet was beginning to feel that the ironical approach to life that Josephson advocated must be controlled by positive spiritual values to be truly effective:

It is his love for rows of corn on flat lands, fields bending over rolling Ohio hills, and the smell of barns under the warm hours of noon, that has given Anderson's description of modern city life with its mechanical distortions of humanity such thrust and bite.

Another important factor in Crane's conversion to the soil was his own irrepressible vitality. Though Crane the city-dweller had, like Eliot, experienced all the soot and meaninglessness of the Machine Age, Crane the Dionysian was far from being an impotent, despairing intellectual. On the contrary, he was extremely robust, and possessed a boundless appreciation of experience for its own sake. Even his period of despondence in Akron had been spent for the most part drinking and carousing with the immigrant workers rather than moping alone in his bedroom study. Having neither time, money, or the inclination for an ivory tower malaise, he

instead had spent his life clerking in stores, writing advertising copy, and riveting steel in a shipyard. With such a positive, exuberant attitude towards existence, Crane soon began to grow dissatisfied over the prospect of writing the Josephson-type "poetry of wit" for the rest of his life. "There's only a lime or a lemon to squeeze or a peppercorn left to shake," (44) he complained to Gorham Munson in 1920.

This Nietzschean yea-saying inclination towards life included something more, however. Crane's early instruction in Christian Science, his reading of Plato's *Ion* and *The Symposium*, and his familiarity with Nietzsche's theory of the Dionysian ecstasy all had prepared Crane for an unusual experience which he had in 1922. In the next year he wrote Gorham Munson:

Did I tell you of that thrilling experience this last winter in the dentist's chair when under the influence of aether [sic] and amnesia my mind spiraled to a kind of seventh heaven of consciousness and egoistic dance among the seven spheres—and something like an objective voice kept saying to me—"You have the higher consciousness. This is something that very few have. This is what is called genius."...O Gorham, I have known moments in eternity. (91-92)

Hoping to capture the beauty of such experiences in poetry, Crane started work in the early part of 1922 on a long poem, "For the Marriage of Faustus and Helen." For his major symbols he chose Helen of Troy to represent this eternal felicity, and he himself played the role of Faustus, the poet who pursues her favors. Perhaps remembering Nietzsche's theory that the Dionysian artist "produces a copy of this Primal Unity as music," he wrote Gorham Munson that he was "attempting to evolve a conscious pseudo-symphonic construction toward an abstract beauty that has not been done before in English." (92) Just as Crane's own ecstasy came upon him in the banal setting of a dentist's chair, the poet in "Faustus and Helen" finds eternal beauty across the aisle from him in a streetcar. Like Plato's ideal forms, she is wraith-like, and fleeting. The affirmation of beauty in the midst of the distractions and strident vulgarity of an American city was a theme that appealed to Crane with a particular intensity. Notwithstanding his experience in the dentist's chair, it might be said that Crane's attempt to communicate his ecstasy was unsuccessful. Because of the inadequacy of the archaic symbolism, his "Helen" remains incomprehensible in modern terms.* Unlike Crane's later symbol, *The*

*"It is in the title of the Poem that these symbols exist with any validity in their own right."—Brom Weber in *Hart Crane*, pp. 185-186.

Bridge, it stands for nothing except beauty itself. Despite this, Crane's fundamental Platonism is quite evident. "There is a world dimensional," the poem states, "for those untwisted by the love of things irreconcilable."

There was also another motive at work in Crane's determination to affirm experience. During the very period when Crane was composing "Faustus and Helen," the *Criterion* was heralding the publication of T. S. Eliot's first major poem, *The Waste Land*. Crane, who once confessed to having read Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" at least twenty-five times, regarded Eliot as an influence he must by all means break away from if his poetry was to keep its originality. In June of 1922 he wrote to Allen Tate that: "The poetry of negation is beautiful—alas, too dangerously so for one of my mind. But I am trying to break away from it. Perhaps this is silly—but one *does* have joys." (87) When "Faustus and Helen" was published in 1923, Crane's optimism was at its peak. Because his poem had followed so closely on the heels of Eliot's, Crane began to think of F & H as being in the nature of an antidote to the spiritual despair in *The Waste Land*. When Eliot's poem was published in October of 1922, Crane wrote to Munson that "it was good, of course, but so damn dead." (105) In 1923 he wrote to Charmion Wiegand:

I find that I have derived considerable stimulation from *Secession*. Without it there would be only the vague hope that the steady pessimism which pervades *The Dial* since Eliot and others have announced that happiness and beauty dwell only in memory—might sometimes lift. I cry for a positive attitude! When you see the first two parts of my "Faustus and Helen" that comes out in *Broom* in February or March, you will see better what I mean. (117)

Such was the state of mind of Hart Crane when he met Waldo Frank in the spring of 1923.

3/ *The Vision Is Sensed*

THE chapters previous to this could be likened to steps in a laboratory experiment. The experiment, which is only half-completed, is like this: two dissimilar compounds are brought forth, and the properties peculiar to each are analyzed. Thus we have analyzed the ideological chemistry of Waldo Frank and Hart Crane. We are now prepared for the second stage of our experiment: the mixing of the chemicals and the ensuing reaction. In other words, we must now answer the question: what brought Frank and Crane together?

Such a question does not seem so enigmatical as it did upon first inquiry. It is possible now, for instance, to formulate a series of reasons why Crane could have been expected to be sympathetic to Frank's ideas, and especially so in 1923. In many ways Crane's ideas were anticipatory of Frank's. For Crane's idea of the poet as Nietzschean myth-maker, there was Frank's of the American poet as spiritual pioneer. For Crane the Platonist, there was Frank the Ouspenskian. For Crane the admirer of an "animal and earthy" life in the novels of Sherwood Anderson, there was Frank the "soil critic," the Whitmanian who admired the culture of the American Negro. At this point in our discussion, however, such a formulation of "reasons" could only be the purest speculation. The fact that two men hold sympathetic attitudes does not guarantee that they will become friends. A place to begin, however, is with a discussion of the immediate causes of the Crane-Frank friendship.

Gorham Munson was chiefly responsible for the series of events that led to Crane's personal acquaintance with Frank in 1923. Munson had been a close friend of Crane as early as 1918, when they had served as co-editors of the Greenwich Village magazine, *The Pagan*. When Frank came out with his *Our America* in 1919, Munson, who was himself something of a "soil critic," urged Crane to read it. Crane, who was at that time passing through the previously described "Akron" period, a period of emotional depression,

could at that time see only the negative aspect of Frank's book: his exposure of the ravages of commercialism and Puritanism upon American society:

Waldo Frank's book *Is* a pessimistic analysis! The worst of it is, he has hit on the truth so many times. I am glad to see justice done to Sherwood Anderson, but this extreme national consciousness troubles me. (26)

This last remark is in tune with Crane's attitudes in 1919. Haunted by a lack of faith in American society, he had been drawn away from "social" literature or criticism towards narrow aestheticism, and thus could see no good in a criticism that strived to foster a literature based on national values. Thus the positive aspects of Frank's book, and especially his advice that the young American artist take the "revelation" of Whitman as a starting-point, could not have helped but fall on deaf ears.

Although Crane from the start had some respect for the negative aspects of Frank's social criticism, it was several years before his prejudice against Frank the novelist-mystic was overcome. In December of 1920 Gorham Munson read Frank's latest novel, *Rahab*. He became extremely enthusiastic over the book, and there-with tried to communicate his zeal to Crane. The latter, knowing only too well his friend's weaknesses (Munson's tastes were somewhat erratic—in the course of several years he moved from Dadaism to Gurdjieffian mysticism), replied coldly that he couldn't stomach Frank's style because it was "too exclamatory and Semitic." It was "too much in the style of David Pinski, whose stuff I am somehow terribly bored with." (47)

A series of things changed Crane's attitude towards Frank. During the summer of 1922 Munson took the opportunity to write a book about Frank's virtues as a novelist; *Waldo Frank, A Study*. Since Munson and Crane were sharing an apartment at this time, they undoubtedly spent many hours together discussing the project. And because Munson's book contained extended analyses of all of Frank's novels, it undoubtedly gave Crane a close critical acquaintance with Frank's ideas that he previously had lacked, a familiarity which probably helped to conquer his aversion to Frank's "semitic" style.

But more than this, it was Crane's rising spirits—his growing feeling that life itself had to be affirmed, his growing realization that the pessimism in Eliot's poetry had to be surmounted at all costs—which contributed to a more sympathetic attitude towards Frank's works. "*Rahab* is a beautiful book," he wrote Munson in

1922. "It has a synthetic beauty that is more evident than the lyric note behind *Ulysses* My only doubt about *Rahab* comes in with the question, as yet undecided, as to whether or not there isn't a slight touch of sentimentality in Frank's 'mysticism.'" (98)

The convincing proof of the authenticity of Frank's mysticism seems to have come to Crane in November of 1922. In that month Crane read the previously mentioned short story, "Hope," in *Secession* Number 3. Deeply impressed, he immediately dashed off a note of appreciation to Frank. It was the first interchange of any kind that had occurred between the two men. "I have heard through Munson that you care for some of my poems," he wrote. "Let me take the occasion of *Secession* Number 3 to tell you how powerfully I think you can write in such a story or episode as 'Hope.' This is so fine I cannot keep [from] writing you. I never read prose before that flowed with such lyricism and intensity.—I suppose there are to be shocked cries, but the beautiful manipulation of symbolism in the thing has made your daring (if it took any) infinitely worth while." (106–107)

It is worth speculating why Crane, at this particular period in his life, was so profoundly impressed by such a story as "Hope." We know for a fact that during this time he was engaged in the composition of "For the Marriage of Faustus and Helen." It is possible that Crane saw qualities in Frank's story that were similar to those in his own poem. If we look closely enough, similarities do become evident: in Frank's story a young man walks down a metropolitan thoroughfare buffeted by "little balls of tremulous commotion,"⁴⁸—the meaninglessness of the modern world, that world Frank had described as "a chaos of sterile facts." In Crane's poem a young man in similar circumstances experiences similar sensations:

The mind has shown itself at times
Too much the baked and labeled dough
Divided by accepted multitudes.
Across the stacked partitions of the day
Across the memoranda, baseball scores,
The stenographic smiles and stock quotations
Smutty wings flash out equivocations.⁴⁹

There are other identities: Frank's narrator finds meaning and beauty in only two aspects of his world: the elevated train and the "volumnear curves" of the Negro prostitute. Crane's narrator finds a similar meaning in his "Helen of Troy," a symbol of abstract

beauty, who is framed in "rainbows spread/Impinging on the throat and sides . . ." Moreover, the denouements of both stories come with sexual union. Frank's narrator finds fulfillment in a sordid embrace in a tenement room, while Crane's narrator rapes his Helen during a Dionysian orgy in a Manhattan roofgarden. The difference should be noted, however, between the symbols: Crane's archaic abstraction, Helen, is empty of almost all relevance to the modern world, while Frank's flesh-and-blood Negress is very real and very probable. It is probable that Frank's symbol convinced Crane the classicist that there were valid and positive symbolic materials right in his midst.

There is even a remote possibility that Crane received the inspiration for his major symbol, the Bridge, from a particular passage in Frank's story describing the elevated train:

Above his hat, the Elevated Road . . . a balance in the sonorous black where all that was over it and under it was contained. The structure so immediate above him, so infinite beyond him. He stood, white upright wisp, and listened to the word of the murmuring, pounding, falling trains, to the refrain before and after of long black beams parting the dwellings of men, swung between mists.⁵⁰

Immediately after Crane wrote to Frank praising "Hope," Frank replied with a letter of his own containing a very detailed and complimentary discussion of Crane's "For the Marriage of Faustus and Helen," Part Two. Crane replied immediately, "I have not been so stimulated for a long time as I was with your letter and its exact appreciation of the very things I wanted to put into the second part [of the poem]." (120)

Such were the events that precipitated the friendship of Waldo Frank and Hart Crane. Evidently one of those rare events had transpired—two isolated artists working independently had glimpsed in each other's work similar materials and objectives. A rapport had been established; a *shared vision* had arisen spontaneously between the two men. Several weeks later Crane took the opportunity to tell Allen Tate of his new spiritual liaison:

You may be indisposed to Waldo Frank, but I must recommend to you *City Block* as the richest in content of any "fiction" that has appeared in the American 20th century. Frank has the real mystic's vision. His apprehensions astonish one. I have also enjoyed reading Ouspensky's *Tertium Organum* lately. Its corroboration of several experiences in consciousness that I have had gave it particular interest. (124)

This letter is interesting in two ways. Suitably enough, Crane's affirmation of the veracity of Frank's mysticism is followed by a

reference to *Tertium Organum*. The “experiences in consciousness” Crane is referring to obviously included that previously related experience in the dentist chair in which his mind had “spiraled to a kind of seventh heaven of consciousness.” (92) Ouspensky’s book contained quotations from William James’ *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, and there is no doubt that its firsthand accounts of mystical experiences did serve to corroborate Crane’s own experiences. Also, Ouspensky’s metaphysics undoubtedly had an effect upon Crane—from Plato’s world of ideal forms to Ouspensky’s fourth dimension was a short step. Secondly, Ouspensky’s approval of the Dionysian ecstasy as a means for the attainment of noumenal knowledge must have impressed Crane. Moreover, Ouspensky’s belief that “art is the language of the Future” and that only “the sensitive soul” of the poet and his instrument, the analogical method of poetry, could divine the shape and outline of the noumenal world,⁵¹ must have appealed to Crane with particular intensity.

Besides his reading of “Hope” and *Tertium Organum*, another factor contributing to Crane’s eventual acceptance of Frank’s ideas was his conversion to the belief that the machine was a fit subject for poetic treatment. Munson’s *Waldo Frank, A Study*, contained not only a lengthy paen to Frank, but also a dissertation on the machine and its value to poetry, and it was in this that Munson made his own particular contribution to Crane’s changing attitudes. It was only in their attitudes toward the machine that Munson and Frank took issue. Frank had taken a stand against the machine, and had seen it, in Munson’s words, as “a mere appendage of the human body” which had secured a crushing control of the individual, a monster that blotted out “love, aspiration, faith, dream and poetry.” Furthermore, industrialism, by utilizing machinery, had “adopted the pioneer-puritan life—denying attitudes and had stratified them into a permanent extraversion.” By this Frank saw mirrored in the merciless impersonality of the machine the ruthless practicality of the Puritan. Therefore, he felt that the artist had no choice but to exclude the machine from his work or to treat it negatively. Munson thought this was not so, however. Arguing that the role of art is to adjust man to his environment, and that any art that excludes part of the environment surrenders this function, he claimed that it was absolutely necessary that the artist “bring the machine into the scope of the human spirit.” As a preliminary hint towards how this should be done, Munson pointed towards the Dadaists and the Futurists, who had proved (as in the example of

the sculptor, Marinetti) that machine-art was “capable of carrying intellect, courage, humor,” and other “minor esthetic thrills.”

Up to now, it [machine art] has refused to channel emotional profundities, to take up love and desire and religion into its form. But while thus so patently limited, it should still be encouraged. For if my tentatives should prove to be sound, then we are in the childhood of a new age. We are, by the accident of our birth, chosen to create the simple forms, the folk-tales and folk-music, the preliminary art that our descendants may utilize in the vast struggle to put glowing spiritual content into machinery.⁵²

Actually, Munson's arguments did not demonstrate *how* this “spiritual” content could be put into machines, but only demonstrated that it was imperative that the artist do so if he wished to create a lasting harmony with his world.

When Frank read Munson's argument, he did not disagree with the conclusions, but instead decided to incorporate them into his own thinking. As a consequence, Frank himself developed some ideas as to how the machine might be adapted to the human spirit. In simplest terms, Frank proposed that what was necessary was a *psychic* expansion of man's consciousness. This expansion had been paralleled by primitive man's slow adjustment to what were now the simple tools. “The primitive man, wielding an artifact, paddling a dugout or making an instrument of a horse, had to undergo a profound psychological revolution ere this element in his hands, stone or wood or flesh, could become an extension of his personal will. He had to grow.” If the simple tool expressed the single will of its manipulator, argued Frank, the problem was greatly complexified in the machine, which represented a collective will.

In the machine are adumbrated the will of the inventor, the will of the owner, the will of many workers, the will, indeed, of an age and of a world. Only when the individual worker experiences that these wills are not alien to him, that these elements of life contained in the machine fuse, in a higher synthesis, together with his own, into a unitary art—only then will his spirit in participation be able to go out through the machine, so that it and the whole mechanized world may, once again, in his joy, in his beauty, in his human pride, express him.

Thus Frank thought the worker had to become conscious that he and the machine he operated were both instruments working towards a great and distant future good, that the goals posited by industrialism (cheaper goods, for instance) were subsidiary to a greater spiritual goal. But such a mechanic would have to possess “the consciousness of a Spinoza.” “No less is needed,” Frank maintained, in order that the human world may not go down before this new Nature—the free-spawning mechanical invention.”⁵³

Munson's and Frank's arguments for the acceptance of the machine struck a most responsive chord in Crane's temperament. His great desire to affirm experience made it imperative that he find some way of reconciling the most adverse and anomalous facts in his environment to his religious faith. The Dionysian could accept the trammeling uproar of the Machine Age (as in the second part of *Faustus and Helen*), but the Apollonian demanded that a symbolic order be found in its chaos. To endure his age, Crane needed to bring it under the control of his art. In his essay *Modern Poetry*, Crane wrote:

For unless poetry can absorb the machine, i.e., *acclimatize* it naturally and casually as trees, cattle, galleons, castles and all other human associations of the past, then poetry has failed of its full contemporary function. This process does not infer any program of lyrical pandering to the taste of those obsessed by the importance of machinery; nor does it essentially involve even the specific mention of a single mechanical contrivance. It demands, however, along with the traditional qualifications of the poet, in extraordinary capacity for surrender, at least temporarily, to the sensations of urban life. This presupposes, of course, that the poet possesses sufficient spontaneity and gusto to convert this experience into positive terms. Machinery will tend to lose its sensational glamour and appear in its true subsidiary order in human life as use and continual poetic allusion subdue its novelty.⁶⁴

Further clarification of what Crane meant by his contention that the machine must be *acclimatized* to poetry might be welcome. In simplest terms, Crane meant that machinery must be associated with spiritual ideas. The candle might serve as an example: because of the Christian ideas (for instance, the idea that Christ is the Light of the World) that attach themselves symbolically to the candle, it has become an integrated part of our experience. The machine, because it lacks such associations, remains unintegrated. Crane wished to attach spiritual ideas to airplane motors and electric dynamos.

There is no doubt that Munson's and Frank's argument for acceptance of the machine had a direct bearing on Crane's decision to start work on his "epic of the modern consciousness." In February of 1923, he wrote Munson:

And I am even more grateful for your very rich suggestions best stated in your *Frank Study* on the treatment of mechanical manifestations of today as subject for lyrical, dramatic, and even epic poetry. You must already notice that influence in "Faustus and Helen." It is to figure even larger in *The Bridge*. (125)

Clearly the most immediate cause that worked to bring Crane and Frank together was Frank's own appreciation of Crane's

poetry. After receiving Crane's "Hope" letter, Frank replied with a perceptive appraisal of a poem of Crane's he had seen in manuscript. The poem was "The Springs of Guilty Song," later to become the second part of "For the Marriage of Faustus and Helen," a poem which Crane worked on from early in the fall of 1922 to late in the spring of 1923. Since Crane had previously been accused of obscurity, Frank's appraisal was quite a rare thing for him. Due to its subjective and highly-concentrated nature, most critics, even respectable ones, often found Crane's verse entirely unintelligible. In fact, Crane sometimes had to explain the meaning of his poems to even his best friends, including such acute minds as Allen Tate. Because of this, Frank's understanding of his poem, since it was spontaneous and entirely independent, functioned to reaffirm Crane's faith in the communicative power of his style. On February 6th, he wrote Tate that "In regard to this latter ['The Springs of Guilty Song'] I had a very fine appreciation from Waldo Frank who was quite astonished at it." (119) Later he wrote Frank that "I have not been so stimulated for a long time as I was with your letter and its exact appreciation of the very things I wanted to put into the second part of 'For the Marriage of Faustus and Helen.' The fact that its intention was completely evident to you without any explanation or notes from me has renewed confidence and made me quite happy." (120)

Fairly probable conclusions can be reached in the matter of why Frank was "astonished" at this poem. As previously noted, the poem describes a Dionysian orgy in a Manhattan roof garden. In contrast to the first part of "Faustus and Helen," which is "The Evocation of Beauty" and which describes Helen in spiritual and Platonic (albeit Apollonian) terms, it is the Dionysian "sensual culmination" of the poem. In other words, Helen becomes a flapper in a jazz ballroom and Faustus becomes her seducer. Much like Whitman's Muse, who is "install'd amid the Kitchenware,"⁵⁵ Helen, the symbol of eternal beauty, is seen in the midst of "grotesque" American surroundings:

Let us take her on the incandescent wax
Striated with nuances, nervosities
That we are heir to: she is still young,
We cannot frown upon her as she smiles,
Dipping here in this cultivated storm
Among slim skaters of the gardened skies.⁵⁶

For Frank, the Whitmanian, the significant thing about Crane's

poem was that its attitude towards life, and especially American life, was positive. Since he was familiar with the morbid pessimism of most of the "Waste Land" poetry of his time, Frank was doubtlessly impressed by the optimism (though somewhat demonic optimism) of such lines as:

Above the deft catastrophes of drums
While titters hailed the groans of death
Beneath gyrating awnings I have seen
The incunabula of the divine grotesque.
This music has a reassuring way.

This is a poem which "accepts" the most raucous, discordant, and vulgar elements of American life, including the machine, and which voices the faith that the American chaos itself is vital and pregnant with possibilities for good. Though the young jazz music is "grotesque," it is also "divine," and has "a reassuring way." (Also woven into the pattern is a suggestion of physical mysticism which must have pleased Frank: the narrator's union with Beauty is seen at its lowest level—a rape. But like its real life counterpart, even this lustful assault can bear fruit. Helen is not too far removed, after all, from Crane's Earth-mother, Pocahontas.) This readily explains why Frank was amazed at the poem—for it expressed poetically the same theory, the theory that America was a vulgar yet vital primitive, that he himself had advanced in his essays. It is quite possible that Frank saw in this acceptance of machine age American vulgarity and the affirmation of beauty in the midst of it, the very "folk tales and folk music" that Munson had said it was the role of the age to create.

Certainly, Crane's choice to accept the machine had been precipitated by Munson's arguments of the previous summer. And now, the renewed confidence stemming from Frank's appreciation of "Faustus and Helen" acted upon Crane so favorably that he began to think of such an acceptance as a basis for a complete poetic *rationale*. Right after he had received Frank's letter of appreciation, Crane conceived the idea for his most ambitious poem. On February 6th he wrote Gorham Munson that he was "ruminating on a new longish poem under the title of *The Bridge*, which carries on further the tendencies manifest in 'Faustus and Helen!'" (118) Other factors played probable parts in the genesis of *The Bridge*, such as Frank's story, "Hope," certain of Frank's early novels, and perhaps some ideas Frank passed on to Crane via letters. However,

since Crane never defined these influences in his own letters, we can only speculate as to their nature.

At any rate, Frank's appreciation of Crane's poem removed the last barrier between the two men. After the discovery of the rapport, Crane lost no time in sending Frank the other two sections of "Faustus and Helen," and Frank replied with another letter equally perceptive and just as stimulating to Crane's spirit and imagination. Answering him, Crane wrote:

Such major criticism as both you and Gorham have given my "Faustus and Helen" is the most sensitizing influence I have ever encountered. It is a new feeling, and a glorious one, to have one's inmost delicate intentions so fully recognized as your last letter to me attested. I can feel a calmness on the sidewalk—where before I felt a defiance only. And then all—I am certain that a number of us at last have some kind of community of interest. And with this communion will come something better than a mere clique. It is a consciousness of something more vital than stylistic questions and "taste," it is vision, and vision alone that not only America needs, but the whole world. We are not sure where this will lead, but after the complete renunciation symbolized in *The Wasteland* and, though less, in *Ulysses*, we have sensed some new vitality. (127)

It is now possible to ascertain just what this "community of interests" was. As we have seen, Crane was by 1923 very favorably disposed to accept exactly what Frank had to offer. His Nietzschean aspirations to be a poet-prophet, his Dionysian mystical powers, his growing desire to affirm experience, and his dissatisfaction with Eliot's pessimism, had primed him for Frank's Whitmanian mysticism. To Crane the aspiring Nietzschean prophet-poet, Frank offered the role of "spiritual pioneer" and "discoverer of the Word," and a convincing argument as to the great importance of such a role. To Crane the pessimist haunted by the meaningless fragmentation of his age, Frank offered a comprehensive theory of the decline of the Western World and the long-range vision to see it as only one stage in a greater historical process. To Crane the affirmer of life, the Dionysian, the searcher for beauty and meaning in the midst of the American chaos, the poet who wished to transcend Spenglerian pessimism, Frank offered his own Whitmanian mysticism and a faith in "cyclic historical change," Crane's "Faustus and Helen" had been little more than a desperate yea in the nihilistic vacuum of the early Eliot, a poem in which the imagination spanned "beyond despair," borne up by little except the poet's own will power. It had been a poem constructed of the most part with archaic, inadequate symbols. Frank offered Crane vital symbols and the affirmative philosophy of the Whitman tradition. Thus

spiritual rapport had been established between two of the most promising artists and intellectuals twentieth century America had yet produced. And more than this, the vague outlines of a "vision" had been sensed, a vision that contained perhaps a new system of values and a new religious myth, a vision "that not only America needs, but the whole world."

Especially significant in the preceding passage is Crane's mention of a vision "that not only America needs, but the whole world." That there was just such a vision is further attested by another letter of Crane's, written several years later, describing an experience the two men shared on the occasion of one of their meetings in 1923:

I'm glad to know that *The Bridge* is fulfilling your utmost intuitions; for an intuition it undoubtedly was. You didn't need to tell me that you had "seen" something that memorable evening, although I was never so sure just what it was you saw, until now. But I have always carried that peculiar look that was in your eyes for a moment there in your room, it has often recurred in my thoughts. What I should have done without your love and most distinguished understanding is hard to say, but there is no earthly benefit for which I would exchange it. (273)

Just what it was that Crane and Frank "saw" that night is of primary importance if we are to assess the degree and kind of influence Waldo Frank exercised on Hart Crane. It is possible to make some tentative guesses as to the nature of this *shared vision*: for one thing, knowing that Crane and Frank both had predilections for mysticism, it was probably mystical in nature, or at least symbolical; and too, Crane's and Frank's intimacy grew out of mutual appreciation for the symbols contained in "Hope" and "Faustus and Helen," so it is probable these symbols are contained in it. Moreover, there is a possibility that the vision was associated with the metaphysics of Ouspensky's *Tertium Organum*, which both Crane and Frank had read. Finally, it is also possible that it concerned the problem of "putting glowing spiritual content into machinery," since Crane's stimulus to write *The Bridge* seems to have grown out of Munson's consideration of the problem. The remainder of this study will attempt to determine exactly what this *shared vision* was.

4 / *Mystical Geometry: The Shared Vision*

In spiral routes by long detours . . .
The real to the ideal tends.

—Whitman, "Song of the Universal"

And of the curveship lend a myth to God.

—Crane, *The Bridge*.

IN the January 1924 issue of Mencken's *American Mercury* there appeared an article entitled "Aesthete: Model 1924." Written by Ernest Boyd, a spokesman of the Sandburg-Dreiser literary generation, the article was a violent attack upon the "New Patriarchs" of which Crane, Frank, and Munson were the principal members. Speaking of the writing ability of "the new man" these writers represented, Boyd spared no venom: "His further contributions (if any) to the art of prose narrative have consisted of a breathless phallic symbolism—a sex obsession which sees the curves of a woman's body in every object not actually flat, including, I need hardly say, the Earth, our great Mother." Elsewhere in his essay Mr. Boyd charged that "the almost Swedenborgian mysticism of the aesthete is implied in all his comments, for he is usually inarticulate and incomprehensible."⁵⁷ Superficial though these statements are, they do contain an inadvertent element of truth. If the rancorous Mr. Boyd had taken the time to connect the "sex obsession which sees the curves of a woman's body," etc., of his first remark to the "almost Swedenborgian mysticism" of his second, he would have made a first step towards understanding what I hope in this chapter to define in detail: the "mystical geometry" of Waldo Frank and Hart Crane.

Boyd was close to being accurate when he said that the artist in Frank and Crane's literary clique saw curves "in every object not actually flat." Even the casual reader of Frank's novels and Crane's poems cannot help but notice the great preponderance of images, metaphors, and symbols associated with the curve or its kindred, the arc, parabola, and circle. Stanley Coffman, in his article, "Sym-

bolism in *The Bridge*," has brought to our attention the countless array of curve metaphors and images which he thinks "add persuasiveness to the symbolic meaning"⁵⁸ of Crane's poem (that meaning being "an exhilaration that is part of Crane's mysticism."). Furthermore, Bernice Slote has maintained that *The Bridge* relies for its form upon "structural curves" existing in "space, time, and psychological action,"⁵⁹ with *The Bridge* itself being the major curve in Crane's poem. Studies of Frank's works are hard to come by, but Gorham Munson once described the form of *Rahab* as "a volume composed of a double series of superimposed strips running at graduated speeds and growing in complexity, and falling upwards across all this a simple poignant curve."⁶⁰

My own examination of Frank's novels has uncovered many hitherto unnoticed examples of curve imagery and metaphor. It is extremely doubtful that such excessive employment of curve imagery in the works of both writers constitutes nothing more than the favorite eccentricity of a literary clique, or, as Boyd says, a "sex obsession." Though critics like Coffman and Slote have been quick to recognize curve imagery and its role as a unifying agent in *The Bridge*, there have been too few efforts to perceive that the curve itself, as an abstract entity, might have an independent meaning that was rooted in Crane's (and Frank's) most basic philosophic beliefs. It is my hope in this chapter to assemble evidence that will show that their employment of the image stemmed ultimately from a *shared vision*, that is, a kind of religious and ethical *mystique*.

Before we turn to the evidence, it might be useful for us to ask a simple question—how can a simple geometric abstraction like a curve carry associational meanings that lend themselves to religion or philosophy? To obtain an answer, we must first remember that Crane and Frank were individualist mystics who believed it was possible to receive knowledge through extra-rational channels—channels that transcended both the mechanisms of empirical logic and the revelation of established religious dogma. The apparatus for receiving this "higher" knowledge was the individual consciousness itself, the intuitive faculty of the mind.

It is commonly believed that the intuitive knowledge of the mystic is uncommunicable, being composed of some ineffable beauty or flash of pure power, some wisdom that traditionally "passeth all understanding." There is reason for believing, however, that Frank and Crane considered the mystic intuition capable of receiving not only uncommunicable knowledge, but also another kind of knowl-

edge which, though certainly extra-logical, was still concrete enough to contain some communicative value. This knowledge was a symbolical knowledge, that which was based on the formal, rather than the causal, relations of things. This is the kind of knowledge Emerson speaks of when he states in his essay "Nature," that "Particular natural facts are symbols of particular spiritual facts." The curve, then, is this kind of knowledge.

As a simple, geometric abstraction, the curve has many qualities which suit it well as a sign of noumenal knowledge. Because of its abstractness, it assumes the nature of a reflection or shadow; because of its ideal form it somehow transcends the imperfections of this world and seems to partake of the next. We would do well to recall, of course, that Plato himself was first of all a geometrician, and his central proof for the existence of ideal forms was the proof of the independent existence of geometric figures.⁶¹ It is probable that Frank conceived the curve to be a faint glimmering of the shape or outline of the noumenal world; only a sign, perhaps, but a very important sign, one which in its ever-repeating appearances would serve as primary evidence for what Crane once called the "logic of metaphor." (418)

The best exegesis of Frank's "mystical geometry" occurs in an essay, "Straight Streets," written in 1937. The piece, although primarily social criticism, is criticism of a new and different kind. After asking the mysterious questions, "What is the meaning of our cities of rectangular streets? What is their effect on our souls?" Frank goes on to establish an ingenious natural justification for the curve:

It is plain that Nature likes curves. You may find rough angles in rocky mountain wastes, or in the sort of creature that a microscope makes vaguely visible. But the Nature of man and near to man is a sinuous, rounded being. Think of our bodies and the bodies of animals—not a Euclidian angle in the lot Think of the shapes of flowers, plants, trees; of the configuration of the hills and fields; of the sweep of waters; of the globe. Now think of our interior worlds, our physical dynamo has not a straight line in it.

This universal sanction of the curve may be found not only in the material world, but in the world of the mind as well, the world of thoughts and actions. Frank continues:

Logic may proceed theoretically like a plummet; but there's nothing natural in such logic. Draconian justice might be called rectilinear but it, too, does not exist in Nature. Uprightness when it is now tempered by the curves of mercy is repellant. Man's mind moves in curves. His thoughts arch, vault, melt into reverie. Dreams and sense swerve into each other. His heart, too, is full of arcuations. And the heart's desires are parabolas.

As a final proof, Frank reminds his reader that modern physicists have theorized that the universe itself is curved: "Space, we have learned from Riemann, has a crimp and a curve."

Thus "there is naught angular within us . . . Nor above us." If the curve enjoys universal dominance, what about its opposite in form, the angle? Frank includes these interesting observations:

Indeed, the European links angles with humanity only in his thought of death. Christ was killed on a cross. St. Laurentius was roasted on a grid. When the fanatical Felipe of Spain built a monastery to express his contempt for life and his withdrawal to the grave, he patterned it after a gridiron.

With his new-found knowledge of the curve, Frank then proceeds to a geometric analysis of hometown Puritan America. American communities, designed to incorporate Yankee thrift instead of beauty, are laid out on severe gridirons. On top of the gridirons are monotonous rows of houses angular "as if they were made of the building blocks of Brobdingnagian babes." With a genial eloquence Frank roves at will over the American countryside, settling at last on the harsh demeanor of the then incumbent president:

Our laws, like our houses, become more rectangular and upright. Our morals are strait like the gates of Ellis Island. Even our faces . . . If there be in all the world a human countenance made of angles instead of the immemorial curves, it must be that of Calvin Coolidge. So perhaps biology will give way after all to the rectangular will of our American World. Perhaps the flapper of tomorrow will have pyramidal breasts . . .

Bifurcations had afflicted the American character, Frank explained, because the Puritan, acting under the stress of a severe climate, had elected to resist his world rather than to accept it, had decided to meet harsh winds with equally harsh discipline and dress. The culture of the American Indian had followed a similar pattern, but had later transcended it:

The Amerind was profoundly, beautifully adjusted to the land. If you will study him in his demeanor, his dance, his music, his pyramiding pueblos or his simple tepees, in his flinted arrows, in his decorations, you will find that the general symbol of his expression is a curve so severe that it barely escapes being an angle. *The curve is the way of acceptance; the angle is the way of resistance.* America is a feverish world. Its geological tempo is not like that of Europe. It is far more terribly intense. I am certain that when the ancestors of the Indian crossed to America from Mongolia (or Atlantis) they resisted this atmospheric fury, as have we, with an angular restraint. That reaction was not a culture, any more than our present reactions from Europe or from mechanical civilization constitute a culture. The Indian culture began when his innate spiritual and intellectual values formed a solution with the world about him: his culture was achieved when the responses between his soul and the world had rounded into a unified *life* which expressed both fully.⁶² (Italics mine.)

A multitude of meanings implicit in the curve and its counterpart, the angle, are released by the foregoing evidence. These meanings may be enumerated. First, it seems clear that Frank considered the curve to be a kind of intuitional rule-of-the-thumb for judging whether objects and actions were natural or unnatural—a universal geometric judgement applicable to all phases of existence, whether it be architecture, morality, or posture. Since “the nature of man and near to man,” (to say nothing of trees, rivers, flowers, clouds, etc.) “is a sinuous, rounded being,” it becomes certain that “Nature likes curves.” With its justification grounded in a “natural law” similar to those of the Scholastic philosophers, the figure gains a kind of divine credence: it becomes God’s favorite architectural design, his pet motif. The curve is also God’s intended pattern for the movements of man’s consciousness: It is natural for man’s thoughts to “arch, vault, melt into reverie,” and it is also true that “the heart’s desires are parabolas.” Thus, angular thoughts, and actions predicated from them are unnatural: morally, man must not be rigid and unyielding. “Uprightness when it is not tempered by the curves of mercy is repellent.” It is natural and divine, Frank might have said, for man to pattern his actions and thoughts after the ever-yielding, ever-resilient rise and fall of the curve. Such a man might resemble Whitman’s “friendly and flowing savage,” who moves among people like “the flow of beauty.”⁶³ Such a doctrine is similar to that of Taoism—when a man follows the path configured by the universe, he “fits in” because his impulses are congruent with the larger design.

Thus the curve as “the way of acceptance” becomes a gauge for moral behavior. As a metaphor, the curve suggests mercy, generosity, freedom, and sensuality—that is, both sexual and spiritual love. Perhaps it might be helpful to relate an incident from one of Frank’s novels in order to more fully understand what Frank meant by the phrase, “way of acceptance.” Fanny, the heroine of *Rahab*, marries Harry Luve, a Southern aristocrat. Harry is an alcoholic, and when Fanny becomes pregnant with their first child, he leaves her for a life of drunkenness and destitution on the Bowery. Thrown into a fit of despair by her husband’s act, Fanny finds the courage to continue living when a strange spiritual event transpires. Leon Dannenberg, a Washington lawyer, calls on Fanny; and with him Fanny has a brief “sacramental” love affair which in its beauty serves to renew Fanny’s flagging spirit. In a word, what Fanny has done is to choose “the way of acceptance.” The lovers, both of whom are

fully aware of the regenerative effect the interlude has had on Fanny's life (Fanny sees the stranger as a "holy man" sent by Providence.), part never to see each other again. Several weeks later Harry, who has been converted to Christianity and temperance at a Bowery Mission, returns home. Fully reconciled to life, his wife receives him with open arms. In her great desire to communicate her spiritual experience, Fanny tells Harry of her affair with the lawyer. However, Harry, with his newly acquired Christian precepts, finds it difficult to see things Fanny's way. Using Christian biblical quotations, he denounces her as a filthy adulteress and expels her from his premises forever. Harry has chosen "the way of resistance."

This phrase reminds us of the other side of Frank's equation: the angle. From the evidence we have examined, the main implication seems to be that angles are not only "unnatural," but are "death-directed" (Christ was killed on a cross. St. Laurentius was roasted on a grid.), and as such are diametrically opposed to curves, which must then be "life-directed." An important clue to Frank's anti-Christian bias is contained herein. Frank associates the angle with Christianity mainly because its major symbol, the cross, is bifurcated, and also because it is a religion that traditionally emphasizes the value of the "next" world at the expense of this one. It is death-directed. The death-directed quality is not only implicit in its major symbol, but also is characteristic of its attitudes concerning society and morality. "Our morals are strait like the gates of Ellis Island;" it is obvious that Frank is talking of the traditional Puritan denial of the pleasures of the world—dancing, singing, and drinking, and the sex act itself—in a word, all those things Frank probably would characterize as "life-giving." It is no accident that Frank calls the angle "the way of resistance."

An example from one of Frank's novels illustrates excellently this curve-angle, life-death polarity. In *Island in the Atlantic* the hero, a lad possessed of a quite stern Puritan conscience, pays a visit on a young girl who once worked as a maid in his father's household. Frieda is an ignorant German immigrant girl with an irrepressible zest for life. Because Jonathan is her economic benefactor, and because she has always harbored a secret affection for him, she subtly induces the boy to sleep with her. Though she is a Catholic, she follows the "way of acceptance." Frank underlines this irony by contrasting the curves of her breasts with the angularity of the crucifix between them:

She got up and kissed his mouth. In the close room, enclosing their bodies, nothing was changed. She kissed him again; her mouth smelled of milk and berries, her chemise strained with her breasts He saw, between them, the little ebony cross with its silver Christ, so small, so unavailing. His will was against this summer swelling of her flesh and his, but it was like the crucifix, powerless and outside.⁶⁴

So far in our discussion of the meanings implicit in the curve, we have for the most part treated only the moral and ethical meanings behind the curve. But there is good evidence that Frank regarded the curve as not only an ethic, but as a symbol of the religious act. Conversely, he regards the straight line as a symbol of the worldly, acquisitive, act. In *Virgin Spain*, he wrote:

The unreligious is the incomplete. And its symbol is the unreal straight line which moves away from its beginning. As mathematics becomes non-Euclidean, it tends toward the religious. In place of the pagan straight line, we have the geodesic-line which meets its source and completes a body for gravitational and inertial forces.⁶⁵

What Frank means here is that since the geodesic line—and by extension, the circle, is infinite (having no beginning or end) it is a mystical prefiguration of eternity, whereas a straight line (which must have a beginning and an end, if space is curved) is finite and worldly. The circle thus becomes a primary religious symbol. Of course, this is not the first time in history that religious connotations have been associated with the figure. In Christian iconography, for instance, it has long been used to represent the perfection of God.

Perhaps we should submit more proof. In *Virgin Spain* Frank wrote a chapter about Islam characterizing it as a “straight line” movement that was basically unreligious. Its founder, Mohammed, was “a great statesman, a great captain, a great lawmaker, a great poet.” But he did not found a religion. What he did, says Frank, was only to channel the native religiosity of the Arabs towards material goals by inventing a ready-made religion that promoted military conquest. In doing so, “he elected that the ideas, the forms, the rituals, the experience, and truth which he created should suffice for all time for his people. All their powers might hence be transformed into the stupendous business of outward conquest.” Since Mohammed left no means for the development and perpetuation of a religion, Islam became all Body and no Soul, an archaic culture forbidden by its own “Holy Writ” from a natural growth. Then Frank continues:

But if this death from inanition is patent in modern Islam, it is implicit in the source. The fruit, only, of the religious impulse lives, for it alone holds

the rounding of life's circle. The religious act—be it art or be it ethics—cannot exhaust itself, because each forward step is an approach to the beginning. The man possessed of religion is possessed of a universal principle; and what he does cannot die. The forms and words of his activity may grow archaic—like the sculpture of Egypt, like the gods of the Rig-Veda. But the activity itself is forever an approach to the Source. The farther the religious man goes afield, the closer he will come to the Primordial Fountain, *since all his life is plotted to a circle*, and if he lose his life, then will he win it. But with the unreligious will, each act is a severance from source. The unreligious is the incomplete. *And its symbol is the unreal straight line which moves away from its beginning.*⁶⁶ (Italics mine.)

This interesting passage shows clearly that Frank conceived the circle to be a symbol of personal resurrection, of the continuous renewal of faith characteristic of the religious life. But we have seen previously that Frank was by no means an orthodox Christian. Certainly he is not speaking here only of Christian resurrection but of resurrection in some wider sense.

Thus far we have discussed the curve as an ethos and as a symbol of the religious act. But there is proof also, as we have previously hinted, that Frank regarded the curve as a kind of metaphysic, as a symbol of the shape of history and the structure of the cosmos. We have already, for instance, learned from Riemann that space itself is curved. P. D. Ouspensky, one of Frank's favorite metaphysicians, has elaborated upon Riemann's theory in his book, *Tertium Organum*. Attempting to explain the life-line of a man in terms of a fourth-dimensional, noumenal world, Ouspensky wrote:

The life of a man or of any other living being suggests a complicated circle. It begins always at one point (birth) and ends always at one point (death). We have complete justification for supposing that it is *one and the same point*. The circles are large and small, but they begin and end similarly, and they end at the same point where they began, i.e., at the point of non-existence, from the physico-biological standpoint, or of some existence other than the psychological one.⁶⁷

This passage defies comment. It could be said to "prove" in a literal sense Frank's assertion that man's life is "plotted to a circle." To the reader who says "humbug" to this, we can only reply that our purpose is to elucidate, not to justify. Ouspensky may or may not be a reliable metaphysician.

Frank's favorite of all metaphysicians was Walt Whitman. Previous parts of this study have already explored Frank's "cyclic historical change" and its close identity to Whitman's "mystic evolution." But so far we have failed to notice that it was characteristic of Whitman to express his metaphysical notions in terms of curve imagery. In "Song of the Universal" he writes that "In spiral

routes . . . by long detours, the real to the ideal tends." Also, in the "Children of Adam" section he says "Curious here behold my resurrection after slumber, the revolving cycles in their broad sweep having brought me again." Elsewhere he claims that "I know I am deathless, I know this orbit of mine cannot be swept by a carpenter's compass, I know I shall not pass like a child's carlecue cut with a burnt stick at night."⁶⁸

Frank's own works are filled with similar curve imagery. In *Rahab* Frank's heroine, Fanny, makes a remark during one of her soliloquies that "I am a broken curve, asplintered part of a circle I can't see."⁶⁹ Similarly, in *The Death and Birth of David Markand*, the writer observes: "What chaos it is! All whorls of human dust upon the prairie! But there is something more to the whorls . . . than he has been able to see: Within the passionate, the insane confusion of men against men, . . . there is a cycle also; although less simple than the swing of earth and sky."⁷⁰ Thus the curve is not only used to describe journey of the individual soul through life and infinity, but also to describe the larger actions of history. Birth, growth, decay, and death, whether applied to individuals or cultures, all become part of a cyclic historical pattern, and thus what appears to be evil is only decay, the mulching action of the old needed to provide life for the new.

This concludes our discussion of the associational meanings behind the curve as they are elucidated in the novels and essays of Waldo Frank. Perhaps one more quotation would be appropriate to relate more closely the material we have covered to the purpose of this study. Frank's first novel, *The Unwelcome Man*, was written in 1917, six years before he met Crane, and five years before Crane conceived the theme for *The Bridge*. The hero of this novel is a young man named Quincy. One evening Quincy watches the lights of Manhattan from the rail of the Brooklyn Bridge:

Manhattan of the day, with its sharp, cruel outlines and its clumsy angles, hostile to subtlety and suggestion, was fading utterly before this faëry Manhattan with its swarms of color and its deep store of fancy.

One arc-light underneath broke off a circlet of yellow-white from the surrounding gloom. Above shone a ragged strip of sky. The air was rank. The solitary light tumbled and flashed in the vapors. . . . Before him swept the bridge. He felt that every cable of the web-like maze was vibrant with stress and strain. With these things he was alone. Yet he felt no insecurity, such as the crowds inspired. . . . Suddenly the fancy flashed upon him that from his perch of shivering steel the power should indeed come to poise and judge the swarm above which he rocked. The bridge that reeled beyond him seemed an arbiter. It bound the city. It must know the city's soul since it was so close to the city's

breath. In its throbbing cables there must be a message. In its lacings and filigrees of steel, there must be subtle words!⁷¹

In this passage the life-death, curve-angle symbolism is applied to the Manhattan skyline. On one hand we have the harsh, ugly skyscrapers, with their angles "hostile to subtlety and suggestion," and on the other hand we have the sweeping curves of the Brooklyn Bridge. Furthermore, the bridge is seen as "an arbiter," and "in its throbbing cables there must be a message." Certainly this passage prefigures the essential symbolism of Crane's poem.

Now that we are familiar with the meanings behind the curve, we are prepared to utilize these meanings by applying them to Crane's poem, *The Bridge*. By doing this we will not only be able to determine the nature of Frank's influence upon Crane, but also will be better able to decipher the poetry itself. For simplicity, it has seemed wise to limit further discussion to seven areas: first, several preliminary paragraphs about the nature and intent of Crane's poem; second, a discussion of the curve imagery and symbolism in the poem to see how it binds the poem together; third, an examination of curve imagery as it is used in descriptions of machinery; fourth, a discussion of curve symbolism and its relation to the poem's theme, Whitman's mystic evolution and Frank's "cyclic historical change;" fifth, an examination of Pocahontas, a major symbol in the poem, and her relation to the curve symbolism; sixth, a look at the angle imagery in the poem; and seventh, a consideration of the poem as Word or religious revelation.

The Bridge is an eight-part lyric poem celebrating the glories of America, past and present, including the discoveries and inventions of science. The theme of Crane's poem is most clearly borne out by the sweeping panorama of the Brooklyn Bridge itself, the poem's major symbol, and it is exactly the same as the theme of Whitman's "Passage to India," which is modern man's conquest of space and knowledge. Both poets understood that the signal facts in American history—the discovery of the continent, the settlement of the colonies, the opening of the West, the migrations to Oregon and California—had been motivated by not only a desire for material gain, but also for spiritual well-being. "The theme of 'Cathay,'" wrote Crane, "ultimately is transmuted into a symbol of consciousness, knowledge, spiritual unity." (241) Thus Crane's theme embraces something more than "scientific progress" or "the future greatness of America"—it is a foreshortened version of the spiritual progress

of Whitman's mystic evolution. But there is more proof of this to come.

Crane's success in finding evidence for this spiritual evolution led him to make some extravagant claims for his poem. We have previously noted that he once described it as "the epic of the modern consciousness." (308) "What I am really handling, he wrote Otto Kahn in 1927, "is the Myth of America." (305) Both of these generalizations seem infected with Crane's characteristic bombast. However, there are reasons to believe that Crane did in fact mean what he said—that the poem would function as an American myth.

Perhaps we should go deeper. Malinowski wrote in his *Myth in Primitive Psychology* that "the function of myth... is to strengthen tradition and endow it with a greater value and prestige by tracing it back to a higher, better, more supernatural reality of ancient events."⁷² Likewise, what Crane wished to do was to strengthen the spiritual foundations of America by relating certain little-understood phenomena of the American present, such as airplanes, railroads, jazz music, and burlesque, to similar but more easily understood phenomena of the American past, such as Columbus' voyages and the Dionysian customs of the Indians. However, and this is important, Crane was not primarily interested in relating past ideas to present ideas—he had no intention of tracing the historical development of a concept like "freedom," for instance. Rather, what he wanted to do was to trace the history of those "nuances, nervosities that we are heir to"⁷³—to find a recurring pattern in the physical or *sensate* facts of American history, and to derive from them a symbolic scheme that could be related to Whitman's mystic evolution. By doing this he hoped to endow aspects of the American present with historical and spiritual meaning.

Accordingly, he was not interested in the chronological progression of events, or its ideological counterpart, "the history of ideas." He did not, in other words, wish to write a "traditional" epic, even though he unfortunately attached the word to his poem. He had no intention of tracing the course of an American Aeneas through the allurements presented by foreign customs and ideas, towards a final realization of ideal American citizenship. Crane had no talent for systematic political or religious thinking. He was a lyric poet, pure and simple, and his materials were symbols and metaphors, and above all, physical facts. But the facts of *The Bridge* would not be straight "history"—they would be facts selected for their symbolic and poetic value: "It seemed altogether ineffective," he wrote

Otto Kahn in 1927, "from the poetic standpoint, to approach this material from the purely chronological historic angle—beginning with, say the landing of *The Mayflower*, continuing with a resumé of the Revolution through the conquest of the West, etc. One can get that viewpoint in any history primer. What I am after is an assimilation of this experience, a more organic panorama, showing the continuous and living evidence of the past in the inmost vital substance of the present." (305) This much has suggested, I hope, the intentions projected by Crane for his poem. Now we must consider the nature of the poem itself.

The Bridge is a narrative lyric poem, consisting of a dedication and eight sections—"Proem," "Ave Maria," "Powhatan's Daughter," "Cutty Sark," "Cape Hatteras," "Three Songs," "Quaker Hill," "The Tunnel," and "Atlantis." The poem is a narrative inasmuch as it utilizes the "stream of consciousness" technique popularized by James Joyce in his *Ulysses*—that is, it is a narrative of the associative and imaginative meanderings of the poetic mind. It is lyric poem because its unity depends on symbols rather than action or character. "The form will be symphonic," Crane wrote Munson in 1923, "something like 'Faustus and Helen' with its treatment of varied content." (118) Crane completed the last section of his poem first. The section he completed was "Atlantis," an ecstatic hymn to the Bridge itself. "[Atlantis] is symphonic," he wrote Frank, "in including the convergence of all the strands separately detailed in antecedent sections of the poem—Columbus, conquests of water, land, etc., Pocahontas, subways, officers, etc." (232)

The following is a summary of the action and movement of *The Bridge*. The poem begins with a heroic dedication to the Brooklyn Bridge, and a pledge that the structure shall "lend a myth to God." The first three sections—"Ave Maria," "Powhatan's Daughter," and "Cutty Sark"—take us back through the American past. In the first section the narrator becomes Columbus on his return voyage to Isabella. In the second, a much longer section, the narrator (now transformed into a Twentieth Century man) takes an imaginary time-journey via railroad and river in a search for his lost love, the "swift red flesh" of Pocahontas (or the "mythic soil" of the American continent). He climbs an Appalachian hillock and finds her, and then celebrates the union of her Flesh with his Spirit in the mystic consummation of "The Dance." In "Indiana," the last part of this section, Crane introduces a new symbol—the sea—and gives us a nostalgic roll call of famous whaling ships of

yore. Here also the poet meets an old sailor (an old man of the sea, like Eliot's Tiresias) who prophesies a glorious future for America.

"Cape Hatteras" is the first extension of Crane's theme into the present. In it the narrator visits the sands at Kitty Hawk where the Wright brothers once put together the first flying machine. Then he imaginatively becomes a fighter pilot in the First World War. Although his plane crashes, he is able, via Whitman's mystic evolution, to arise phoenix-like and reaffirm the lasting value of scientific progress and life in the modern world. "Three Songs," gives us three modern incarnations of Pocahontas—the first, "Southern Cross," presents us with Eve, or European Christian woman, the second, "National Winter Garden," with Magdalene, modern American woman reduced to her meanest version, and the third, "Virginia," with Mary, a fresh young Manhattan sweetheart. The sixth section, "Quaker Hill," deals with the arid austerity of Puritan America as well as the ravages wrought by American middle-class nouveau-riche values upon the Puritan tradition. "The Tunnel," section seven, describes the poet's journey through the subway under the Bridge and expresses his revulsion at the ugliness and meaninglessness of the present world. The poem closes with "Atlantis," a vibrant hymn sung by the poet to the Bridge itself.

It is in the very texture of Crane's poem—in its diction, imagery, and metaphor—that the influence of Frank's curve-mystique can be most readily noticed. The first two stanzas of "Proem: To Brooklyn Bridge" illustrate this perfectly:

How many dawns, chill from his rippling rest,
The seagulls' 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.

We should notice not only the curve imagery here—the "white rings," and "inviolate curve" of the seagull—but also notice that subtly opposed to such curves are the bifurcations of the Manhattan business world—the rank and file of the "page of figures," the vertical plummet of the elevator, and the skyscraper itself. Thus there is a sharp contrast drawn between the angular Puritan world of duty and commerce (a world that Crane knew well) and the

arcuate world of freedom and adventure, symbolized by the seagull. At the very beginning of his poem, Crane has established a polarity which will lend meaning and unity to the whole.

There are many other examples of curve imagery in Crane's poem. Besides the curving flight of the seagull, there are, for instance, in "Ave Maria" the "holy rings" of Columbus' sails and the "turning rondure whole" of the earth. In "Powhatan's Daughter" we come across the "keen crescent" of Pocahontas' hair and the "wiry vine" of the morning glory, as well as fish which "curvet" in pools under the Ozarks. In "Cutty Sark" the poet speaks of "pen-nants, parabolas," and in "Cape Hatteras" there is "the circle, blind crucible of endless space," to say nothing of the "marauding circles" of the dog-fighting airplanes, and "dayspring's spreading arc." In "Three Songs" we have the "swivellings" of a strip-teaser whose pearl-chains whip in "whirling strands" about her hips. Finally, in "Atlantis," we feel "the arching path" and "the arc synoptic" of the Bridge itself, whose "lariat sweep" encloses "The circular, indubitable frieze / Of heaven's meditation."⁷⁴ Also, in a tentative outline Crane made for the poem in 1926, he projected a section entitled "John Brown" (never completed) which was to bear this epigraph:

Well, don't you know it's mournin' time
Wheel in middle of wheel;
He'll hear yo' prayers an' sanctify,
Wheel in de middle of wheel.⁷⁵

But more important than Crane's use of curve imagery and metaphor is his use of symbols associated with the curve. The Bridge itself, of course, is the major curve symbol of the poem. The Brooklyn Bridge, the real-life structure Crane celebrated, is constructed in the form of a long, sweeping curve of steel upheld by curving cables suspended from four monoliths. Besides this, there are the geodesic curves described by the voyage of the Santa Maria in "Ave Maria," and by the course of the Twentieth Century Limited, and the Mississippi River in "Powhatan's Daughter." Similar arcs are described by the clipper ships filing in review in "Cutty Sark," the flight of the airplane in "Cape Hatteras," and the subterranean course of the subway (under the Bridge) in "The Tunnel." Another important curve-symbol is the whirling dance of the poet and Pocahontas ("The oak grove circles in a crash of leaves; / The long moan of a dance is in the sky.") in "The Dance." Moreover, it is Pocahontas herself, with hair like a "keen crescent,"⁷⁶ who is blessed with a multitude of curves.

Bernice Slote has gone even further than this to point out other curves in Crane's poem, "structural" curves that consist of "space, time, and psychological action."⁷⁷ Some of the spatial curves, for instance, are Columbus' voyage in "Ave Maria," the poet's journey from Manhattan to the mouth of the Mississippi in "Powhattan's Daughter," and the poet's ride in the subway in "The Tunnel." Typical of the time curves in the poem are the movement in "Powhattan's Daughter" from the modern era through frontier days to the mythic era of "The Dance." An exemplary psychological curve is that prefigured by "The Tunnel," in which the poet moves from boredom to dejection to extreme horror, and then to depression and on to hope. Such curves as these help Crane to yoke together his central symbols, thereby giving his work cohesion and power.

It is worth mentioning here that such chronological, spatial, and psychological curves were by no means unpremeditated. The literary clique that Crane belonged to—Frank, Munson, and Toomer—was fond of using the curve as a "literary form." We have already mentioned that Munson described the form of *Rahab* as a "poignant curve." He applied a similar terminology to other works of Frank, as for instance *City Block*, which he claimed had a "spherical form."⁷⁸

Many other examples of curve symbolism could be found, of course. But probably the most convincing proof that Crane requisitioned Frank's curve-mystique is shown by Crane's poetic treatment of the machine. Few poets in this century have attempted to find spiritual or poetic elements within the machine itself—or, putting it another way, few have attempted to reconcile poetry to the realities of modern life. Most poets have followed the example of T. S. Eliot, and have used the machine in a negative and ironic way to depict the dehumanization of man—of the human spirit drummed to insensibility by the whine of industrialism:

At the violet hour, when the eyes and back
Turn upward from the desk, when the human engine waits
Like a taxi, throbbing, waiting,
.
She smooths her hair with automatic hand
And puts a record on the gramophone.⁷⁹

Other poets, as Robert Frost, have solved the problem by simply barring the machine from their poetic world altogether. For Crane, however, who was driven by an overpowering need to accept and bring under control all phases of modern life, neither of these solutions was tenable.

Crane darkly hinted of an acceptance of the machine in "Faustus and Helen." The third section of that poem presents a poetic description of the airplane as it was used as an instrument of death in World War I. In this poem Crane affirms Frank's basic tenet—that God "is there too, in the destruction." In other words, Crane accepts the airplane as an instrument of destruction; however, he fails to understand it symbolically. In this passage the "eternal gunman" must be understood to represent God:

We even,
 Who drove speediest destruction
 In corymbulous formations of mechanics,—
 Who hurried the hill breezes, spouting malice
 Plangent over meadows, and looked down
 On rifts of torn and empty houses.

 We know, eternal gunman, our flesh remembers
 The tensile boughs, the nimble blue plateaus,
 The mounted, yielding cities of the air!⁸⁰

The airplane exists here merely as a neutral fact, a "corymbulous formation of mechanics," though the adjective "corymbulous" likens the airplane's motors to clusters of flowers. Since flowers are curved, we thus have a slight suggestion of curve imagery.

In relation to this, it is interesting to compare two early fragments of the "Atlantis" section of *The Bridge*, evidently some of the first lines of his poem that Crane composed. The first fragment is dated February, 1923, and contains a central symbol that seems to be a Prometheus-figure—a symbol that undoubtedly appealed to Crane the poet-prophet. There is curve-imagery here, although not affixed to machinery, but instead to "that radiant field that rings the universe"—perhaps a description of mystic evolution. It is a timeless vision the poet has stolen from heaven:

And midway on that structure I would stand
 One moment, not as diver, but with arms
 That open to project a disk's resilience
 Winding the sun and planets in its face.
 Water should not stem that disk, nor weigh
 What holds its speed in vantage of all things
 That tarnish, creep, or wane; and in like laughter,
 Mobile, yet posited beyond even that time
 The Pyramids shall falter, slough into sand,—
 And smooth and fierce above the claim of wings,
 And figured in that radiant field that rings
 The Universe:—I'd have us hold one consonance
 Kinetic to its poised and deathless dance.⁸¹

The second fragment is dated simply "Lines Sent to Alfred Stieg-

litz, July 4, 1923." In it we have the first clear suggestion of curve imagery applied to machinery.

And, steady as the gaze incorporate
Of flesh affords, we turn, surmounting all
With keenest transience to that sear arch-head,—
Expansive center, purest moment and electron
That guards like eyes that must look always down
In reconciliation of our chains and ecstasy
That crashes manifoldly on us as we hear
The looms, the wheels, the whistles in concord
Tethered and welded as the hills of dawn
Whose feet are shuttles, silvery with speed
To tread and weave our answering world,—
Recreate and resonantly risen in this dome.⁸²

Thus we can see clearly what has been done—via the universal common denominator of curve and circle imagery, religious overtones have been attached to the wheels and gears of machinery. The spinning of every wheel in a machine imitates the “radiant field that rings / the universe.” The circles inscribed by the machine also allow it to be related to the structure of the atom with its whirling electrons, as well as the solar system with its orbiting planets. Such correspondences serve to take the strangeness and novelty away from machinery and to integrate it and poetize it—in a word, to *acclimatize* it to the natural landscape. In “Cape Hatteras” Crane describes an airplane engine in these terms:

As bright as frog’s eyes, giggling in the girth
Of steely gizzards—axle-bound, confined
In coiled precision, bunched in mutual glee
The bearings glint,—O murmurless and shined
In oilrinsed circles of blind ecstasy!⁸³

If we thought the ecstasy posited by these lines was caused by the pragmatic or aesthetic value of the machine itself, we might consider them pure, unadulterated bombast, the kind of thing a starry-eyed teenager might conceivably chant to his shiny hot-rod. But if we keep in mind that Crane saw religious overtones in machinery—prefigurations of eternity—the emotion becomes more convincing. The same is true in relation to that other piece of machinery, the Brooklyn Bridge itself.

It seems clear that as it was originally conceived, the central meaning behind Crane’s major symbol, the Bridge—that is, the theme of the work itself—is the spiralling coil of Whitman’s mystic evolution. The Bridge structure is only a segment of that “spiral route” whereby “by long detours . . . the real to the ideal tends.”

We have already seen that the first lines of the "Atlantis" section which Crane struck off in 1923 contained such lines as "that radiant field that rings / the universe"—vaguely alluding to Whitman's idea. In an essay he wrote in his *Destinations*, Gorham Munson claimed that Crane's ultimate spiritual faith resided in a "circuit calm of one vast coil."⁸⁴ And of course it cannot be an accident that "Proem," Crane's dedicatory poem, containing as it does the initial statements of all the themes woven into his work, claims that the Bridge will offer "vibrant reprieve" for suffering, and concludes with the lines "And of the curvship lend a myth to God."

But to find more conclusive proof of Crane's indebtedness to Whitman, we must return again to "Faustus and Helen," a poem that was a harbinger of *The Bridge* in theme and content. In other parts of this thesis we have devoted space to an interpretation of Parts One and Two of "Faustus and Helen." It is the third part of Crane's poem that contains the most distinct intimations of mystic evolution. Here is the opening stanza, describing a gangland killer:

Capped arbiter of beauty in this street
That narrows darkly into motor dawn,—
You, here beside me, delicate ambassador
Of intricate slain numbers that arise
In whispers, naked of steel; religious gunman!

In his notes, Crane entitled this section "Tragedy, War (the eternal soldier), Resumé, Final Declaration." (116) Factually, the section deals with the problem of death as it represented itself to Crane in his day. The spectres of "intricate slain numbers" arise—the victims not only of the domestic violence of Capone's mobsters, but of the airplane attacks of World War I:

Who hurried the hill breezes, spouting malice
Plangent over meadows, and looked down
On rifts of torn and empty houses.

The kind of poet Crane aspired to be made it imperative that he accept these macabre facts—that he find some transcendent, religious way of reconciling the facts of death to his basically affirmative attitude. Although there is no overt solution to the problem of death in the poem, a tone of absolution is clearly evident at the end of it: "We did not ask for that, but have survived, / And will persist to speak again . . ." The key to Crane's attitude—and the "theology" behind the attitude—is contained in his "religious gunman" figure. In the stanza above quoted, the figure clearly refers to a gangster who "faithfully [him]self will fall too soon." When in

the second and third stanzas the poet takes an imaginary bombing-run over the cities of Europe, the figure at his side has been metamorphosized, and is now a deity:

We know, eternal gunman our flesh remembers.
The tensile boughs, the nimble blue plateaus,
The mounted, yielding cities of the air!⁸⁵

At first it is difficult to see how Crane could find religious overtones in the figure of a gangland killer. A reference to the writings of Waldo Frank will help to explain this. In *The American Jungle*, Frank, in an essay, "Murder as Bad Art," put forth the thesis that the American gangland killer is really a kind of frustrated artist—that his impulse for spiritual self-expression, having been denied the normal outlets by a sterile cultural environment, had been channeled into a primitive folk art whose ritualistic form was crude and direct, like the human sacrifices of primitive tribes. "Murder is an American expression, a folk art. It contains some virtue so close to our desire that we have protected it jealously from the class distinctions which begin to encroach upon our once so purely democratic life."⁸⁶ Murder, said Frank in effect, was a primitive, perverted expression of spirituality.

Thus, the murderer, with his stifled religious impulse, became a first step in the slow evolution of a true American artistic expression. He became a "detour" in the mysterious workings of mystic evolution, a manifestation of the primal energy of the life force. "Not the right only justified, what we call evil also justified,"⁸⁷ Whitman had claimed. This thinking allowed Crane to use the "religious gunman" figure not only as a symbol of the American gangster, but also of God himself. The divine became an "eternal gunman" that murdered friend and foe alike, but who had some transcendent purpose for such massacres. Such a deity is similar to the four-sided spirit of Whitman's "Chanting the Square Deific,"⁸⁸ a god who contains both good and evil qualities in himself. "This last part begins with *catharsis*," said Crane, "the acceptance of tragedy through destruction." In it "the creator and the eternal destroyer dance arm in arm." (121)

The conclusive proof that Crane used mystic evolution as his theme in *The Bridge* is contained in a tentative synopsis he made for the poem in 1926. Describing a section entitled "Whitman—The Spiritual body of America," a section that was later replaced by the crucial "Cape Hatteras" section in the final version of the poem, Crane wrote:

Whitman approaches the bed of a dying (*southern*) soldier—scene is in a Washington hospital. Allusion is made to this during the dialogue. The soldier, conscious of his dying conditions, at the end of the dialogue asks Whitman to call a priest, for absolution. Whitman leaves the scene—deliriously the soldier calls him back. The part ends here before Whitman's return, of course. The irony is, of course, in the complete absolution which Whitman's words have already given the dying man, before the priest is called for. This alternated with the eloquence of the dying man, is the substance of the dialogue—the emphasis being on the symbolism of the soldier's body having been used as a *forge* toward a state of Unity. His hands are purified of the death they have previously dealt by the principles Whitman hints at or enunciates (without talking up-stage, I hope) and here the "religious gunman" motive returns much more explicitly than in *F & H*. The agency of death is exercised in obscure ways as the agency of life. Whitman knew this and accepted it. The appeal of the scene must be made as much as possible independent of the historical "character" of Walt.⁸⁹ (*Italics mine.*)

"Cape Hatteras" is the crucial section of *The Bridge* for the reason that it marks the first extension of Crane's theme—the conquest of space and knowledge—into the present day. It represents a test of materials—Crane is required to show that the spirit of Columbus is still operative in the modern world. Strangely enough, Crane does not choose to portray the workings of mystic evolution in this section. The doctrine is submerged and only barely suggested. The question is the same as that posed in the third part of "Faustus and Helen"—who shall answer for the death and destruction of World War I, as dealt by machines? Mystic evolution is not the answer. Instead, Crane calls on Whitman himself—literally resurrecting him from the grave—to grant the "vibrant reprieve" that the Bridge itself had earlier promised. In the action of the poem the narrator becomes a fighter pilot in World War I who takes part in the "tournament of space," and who deals out "theorems sharp as hail." But because of a "shell's deep, sure reprieve," his plane plummets to the earth in flames—"By Hatteras bunched the beached heap of high bravery." But all is not lost, for then comes old Walt sauntering down the Open Road, wielding "the rebound seed" and bringing "a pact, new bound, / Of living brotherhood."⁹⁰

At this point in our exegesis, a critical digression is necessary. The criticism is this: such a theatrical and totally unprepared use of Whitman himself tends to defeat the structure of the poem. The trouble is that the whole appeal of the poem *is not* independent of the character of Whitman. Crane exploits Whitman by making cheap capital of his personality "surviving in a world of stock," and his "sea eyes and tidal, . . . bright with myth."⁹¹ Evidently Crane at this point lost faith in mystic evolution, and thus, in lieu of basing

his argument on Whitman's philosophy, based it on Whitman's personality. This is analogous to electing a president for his winning smile instead of his political philosophy. It is hard to believe that Crane didn't purposely, almost perversely, sabotage this section of the poem. Had he stayed by his original scheme and presented a dramatic portrayal of mystic evolution, such as the drama of the dying southern soldier, his poem would have been much more successful.

Crane's Pocahontas or earth-mother symbol is one which most clearly reveals his indebtedness to Frank and Whitman. By means of a remarkable historical anecdote Crane is able to relate her directly to the curves of mystic evolution. The section that is devoted to her is prefaced with this quotation from Strachey's *Historie*:

—Pocahuntus, a well-featured but wanton young girl...of the age of eleven or twelve years, get the boyes forth with her into the market place, and make then wheele, falling on their hands, turning their heels upwards, whom she would followe, and wheele, so herself, naked as she was, all the fort over.⁹²

By such curves—as well as her hair's "keen crescent"—Pocahontas* is also identified with Frank's "way of acceptance" and thus with both sexual and spiritual love. Thus, when the poet dances with Pocahontas in "The Dance" section of *The Bridge*, he is enacting one of the rituals of mystic evolution—the mystical intermingling of flesh with spirit. The more prosaic meaning of the episode is this—that a genuine American spirit exists in those men (Daniel Boone, Whitman) who have yielded themselves up to the land and its forces, and who have made some attempt at synthesizing their own culture with Indian culture. Boone and his kind, for example, wore buckskin, spoke the Indian languages, and took Indian wives. Such men have obeyed the precepts of mystic evolution and Frank's "way of acceptance."

Pocahontas symbolizes the life-force—the fertile quality in nature that impels mystic evolution along in its upward spiral. Besides "The Dance" itself, another celebration of this cosmic energy is

* We should remember that the Negress in "Hope," with her hands that "wreathed in volumnear curves" is another version of the same thing. Even Crane's Helen possesses curve qualities:

Reflective conversion of all things
At your deep blush, when ecstasies thread
The limbs and belly, when rainbows spread
Impinging on the throat and sides.
"Faustus and Helen," *Poems*, p. 98.

“National Winter Garden.” Although the woman in the poem is only a burlesque queen, and although she mocks the sex act itself, reducing it to its lowest integer of lust, she is not barren like the “Nameless Woman of the South,” her Christian counterpart: instead, she “lugs us back lifeward:”

Yet, to the empty trapeze of your flesh,
O Magdalene, each comes back to die alone.
Then you, the burlesque of our lust—and faith,
Lug us back lifeward—bone by infant bone.⁹³

Thus by a miraculous transformation Crane is able to endow the most ugly and sordid facts of his world with religious meaning. Like the “religious gunman” the “burlycue queen” is art reduced to its lowest component—a bare, brutal energy. From a conventional or Christian point of view it is evil, and decadent, but looked at in terms of Whitman’s mystical evolution, it takes on positive values. It is possible that Crane and Frank saw in the American strip-tease artist the crude, primitive incunabula of a religious ritual (something like the belly-dancers of Islam), that would someday be a wholesome and genuine expression of American culture.

It is not accidental that the poem that immediately precedes this one, “Southern Cross,” is a portrayal of the barrenness of Eve, the traditional prototype of European Christian woman. The title of the poem is derived from the cross-shaped constellation that once guided mariners on the high seas. The Marlowian epigraph, “The one Sestos, the other Abydos hight,” reminds us of the cities located on opposite sides of the Hellespont between which Hero and Leander carried on their tragic love affair. Just as the lighthouse in the myth was extinguished leaving Leander floundering in the channel, so has the Light of Christianity been extinguished, leaving the poet with an unsatisfied longing for ideal Christian love:

I wanted you, nameless Woman of the South,
No wraith, but utterly—⁹⁴

The poet claims he wants her in flesh as well as spirit, but he knows that she is only a “wraith” “stumbling gardenless to grieve / Wind-swept guitars on lonely decks forever.” The last lines contain a reference to the dissolution of Christianity:

The Cross, a phantom, buckled—dropped below the dawn.
Light drowned the lithic trillions of your spawn.⁹⁵

This reference to the Cross suggests another consideration that might prove worth looking into—the occasional angle imagery in

Crane's poem. The bifurcations of the Cross appear not only in "Southern Cross," but also in "Quaker Hill," a section that attempts poetically to sum up the qualities of Puritan New England. The first stanza deals with the asceticism of the New England Brahmins:

Perspective never withers from their eyes;
They keep that docile edict of the Spring
That blends March with August Antarctic skies:
These are but cows that see no other thing
Than grass and snow, and their own inner being
Through the rich halo that they do not trouble
Even to cast upon the seasons fleeting
Though they should thin and die on last year's stubble.⁹⁶

In the third stanza, Crane describes an ancient New England Hotel, which by its rigid angularity, its tier upon tier of angular windows, is an apotheosis of the Puritan spirit. A "mizzentop" is a mast of a ship with a shape much like a cross:

Above them old Mizzentop, palatial white
Hostelry—floor by floor to cinquefoil dormer
Portholes the ceilings stock their stoic height.
Long tiers of windows staring out toward former
Faces—loose panes crown the hill and gleam
At sunset with a silent, cob-webbed patience . . .
See them, like eyes that still uphold some dream
Through mapled vistas, cancelled reservations!

The next stanza continues the theme, with an obvious reference to the "death-directed" character of Christianity:

High from the central cupola, they say
One's glance could cross the borders of three states;
But I have seen death's stare in slow survey
From four horizons that no one relates . . .⁹⁷

Such evidence suggests that Crane not only accepted Frank's curve-mystique but also accepted his theory that angles, and especially the Christian Cross, were death-directed, and that the angular austerity of Puritan America aptly symbolized the final death-throes of Christianity. Thus, the Bridge-curve itself becomes a kind of antithesis to the Cross, and mystic evolution a modern day replacement of Christianity.

In the course of these last pages I have presented many arguments explaining why I think Crane's *The Bridge* stands ultimately for Whitman's mystic evolution and Frank's "cyclic historical change." In his essay, *Modern Poetry*, Crane wrote that "[Whitman] better than any other was able to coordinate those forces in America that seem most intractable, fusing them into a universal vision which takes on additional significance as times goes on."⁹⁸ When Crane

said he was creating a myth, he was telling the truth, in so far as he was giving a new form and structure to a religious myth that had already been propounded in Whitman's "Passage to India" and "Song of the Universal." There is no doubt that Crane himself believed that he was helping to perpetuate a new religion. To him the Bridge was something like a new Cross, and the meanings behind it a kind of new theology. We know that Frank had called for new *Words* to serve as building-blocks in the creation of a new cultural whole, and we also know that Frank believed that these *Words* must be founded on a new revelation of the relation of man to the cosmos. There is no doubt that Crane himself thought he had created one of these *Words* by creating *The Bridge*, and that the "curveship" of the structure, along with all of the ethical and philosophic ideas that accrue to it, constituted just such a revelation.

This then, is the shared vision of Hart Crane and Waldo Frank. The Bridge is the "arc synoptic,"⁹⁹ including within itself the arcuations of machine and plant, the curves of the fourth dimension, the ellipse of sexual and spiritual love, the parabola of the religious act, and the cycles of "mystic evolution." That Crane considered the structure to be such a *Word* is suggested by the last stanza of "The Tunnel":

O caught like pennies beneath soot and steam,
 Kiss of our agony Thou gatherest;
 Condensed, Thou takest all-shrill ganglia
 Impassioned with some song we fail to keep.
 And yet, like Lazarus, to feel the slope,
 The sod and billow breaking,—lifting ground,
 —A sound of waters bending astride the sky
 Unceasing with some Word that will not die . . .¹⁰⁰

It is possible now to obtain a fair answer to the question of how great an influence Waldo Frank exercised on Hart Crane. It should be clear that that influence was considerable. There is no doubt that Frank played the "obstetrical critic" to Crane by suggesting directions he should take—either through his books or by direct personal contact. There is no doubt that when Crane answered the call to write a religious myth, he was answering Frank's call. There is no doubt that the theme of *The Bridge*, mystic evolution, was transferred to Crane from Whitman via Frank. There is no doubt that the supplementary ideas behind the curve symbol that the Bridge embodies, such as Frank's "way of acceptance," were also shared by Crane. There is no doubt that Frank and Munson played a central part in Crane's positive treatment of machinery in *The Bridge*.

Also, there is good reason to believe that Crane's central symbol, the Bridge itself, was suggested to him by certain passages in Frank's novels.

For the most part of this study I have talked about the healthy, affirmative side of Crane's life and work. It has been difficult to avoid telling the other side of the story—the spiritual doubts he suffered, the periodic attacks of deep pessimism, the consequent alcoholism and debauchery, ending with Crane's tragic death in 1932. The exact causes of these things will probably never be determined. Certainly the atmosphere of reckless nihilism that permeated the age played a large part—as well as the personal difficulties Crane suffered as a child and as a struggling poet. But there is no need to identify the man so closely with the poetry that we fail to fathom the real meaning of his major works. Seeing chaos in his life, many critics (and especially those who continually carp on “obscurity”) have been all too ready to read chaos into his poetry. But we should remember that man's imagination is fully capable of “spanning beyond despair,” of operating beyond the exigencies of time and place. With Lawrence Dembo we should remember that “if Crane the man went to pieces towards the end of his life, Crane the poet did not.”¹⁰¹

The problems that faced Crane in his day—problems centering in the question of how to reconcile poetry and religion to the Scientific Age—are problems that have yet to be solved. For the few poets who still dare to live in the modern era, the search for the American character, for a “usable past,” for a religious synthesis of values, still goes on, though the obstacles loom larger than ever before. In his day Whitman roundly celebrated the glories of science, and saw it as a “mounting sun” which would evaporate misty superstitions like Christianity.¹⁰² Nowadays the only “mounting sun” one associates with is the fiery orb of a hydrogen bomb blast.

Regardless of its ultimate value, the shared vision of Frank and Crane represents one of the few attempts of modern man to come to grips with these problems. It was an heroic attempt, an attempt that many of the finest scientists and theologians of our time have scarcely equalled. The shared vision has yet to be shared among us, of course, and perhaps it never will be. But it seems to the writer that this myth is so closely bound up with the very fabric of America and the modern age, that any final denial of its worth would constitute a denial of modern life itself.

Notes

Notes to Introduction

1. *The Letters of Hart Crane* ed. Brom Weber (New York: Hermitage, 1952), p. 127. All quotations from letters are from this edition.
2. Brom Weber, *Hart Crane* (New York: Budley Press, 1948), p. 163.
3. Louis Untermeyer, "The New Patricians," *The New Republic* (Dec. 6, 1922), p. 41-42.

Notes to Chapter 1

4. Waldo Frank, *In the American Jungle* (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1937), p. 15.
5. "America and the Arts," *The Seven Arts*, I (1916), p. 49.
6. All quotations in this paragraph are taken from Waldo Frank, *Salvos* (New York: Boni & Liveright, 1924), pp. 17-19.
7. Waldo Frank, *Virgin Spain* (New York: Boni & Liveright, 1926), p. 287.
8. *Salvos*, p. 21.
9. *American Jungle*, p. 12.
10. *Salvos*, p. 17.
11. Waldo Frank, *Our America* (New York: Boni & Liveright, 1919), p. 232.
12. All quotations in this paragraph are from *Salvos*, pp. 20, 15, and 14.
13. *The Seven Arts*, I (1916), p. 52.
14. *Our America*, p. 195.
15. *The Ordeal of Mark Twain* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1920).
16. *Our America*, p. 16.
17. *American Jungle*, p. 12.
18. *The Seven Arts*, p. 53.
19. All the foregoing quotations are from *Our America*, pp. 203, 204, 202, 204.
20. *American Jungle*, p. 20.
21. P. D. Ouspensky, *Tertium Organum* (Rochester, Manas Press, 1920).
22. Brom Weber, *Hart Crane* (New York: Budley Press, 1937), p. 154.
23. *Organum*, p. 7.
24. Waldo Frank, *The Re-Discovery of America* (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1929), p. 37.
25. All quotations in this paragraph are from *Tertium Organum*, pp. 113, 92, 93, 33, 110, 277, 267, and 74.
26. "Four Cosmic Poets," *University of Kansas City Review*, XXIII (1957), p. 312.
27. Waldo Frank, *The Death and Birth of David Markand* (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1934), pp. 259-260.
28. Waldo Frank, *The Dark Mother* (New York: Boni & Liveright, 1920), pp. 13-14.
29. "A Song for Occupations," *Walt Whitman, Complete Poetry and Selected Prose*, ed. James E. Miller, Jr. (Boston: Houghton, Riverside Edition, 1959), p. 158.

30. All quotations in this paragraph are from *American Jungle*, pp. 201, 215, and 216.
 31. "Four Cosmic Poets," p. 312.
 32. Waldo Frank, *Rahab* (New York: Boni & Liveright, 1922).
 33. Waldo Frank, *City Block* (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1932), pp. 171 and 173.

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34. Brom Weber, *Hart Crane* (New York: Budley Press, 1948), p. 4.
 35. Philip Horton, *Hart Crane, The Life of an American Poet* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1937), p. 14.
 36. *The Complete Poems of Hart Crane*, ed. Waldo Frank (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1958), p. 167.
 37. Weber, *Hart Crane*, p. 381.
 38. The foregoing quotations are from *Complete Poems*, pp. 98–99.
 39. *The Dialogues of Plato*, Vol. I, trans. B. Jowett (New York: Random House, 1937), p. 289.
 40. Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov* (New York: Penguin, 1958), p. 294.
 41. Quotations in this paragraph are from *The Philosophy of Nietzsche* (New York: Modern Library, 1927, 1954), pp. 951–971.
 42. All the foregoing quotations are from Nietzsche, pp. 951–971.
 43. "The Roaring Boy," *The New Republic*, LXXXI (June 9, 1937), p. 134.
 44. "The Rest," *Selected Poems of Ezra Pound* (New York: New Directions, 1957), p. 29.
 45. Weber, *Hart Crane*, p. 386–87.
 46. *Ezra Pound*, "Hugh Selwyn Mauberly," p. 64.
 47. Weber, *Hart Crane*, pp. 408–11.

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48. Waldo Frank, *City Block* (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1932), p. 170.
 49. *The Complete Poems of Hart Crane*, ed. Waldo Frank (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1958), p. 97.
 50. *City Block*, pp. 170–71.
 51. P. D. Ouspensky, *Tertium Organum* (Rochester: Manas Press, 1920), p. 74.
 52. All the foregoing quotations are from Gorham Munson, *Waldo Frank: A Study* (New York: Boni & Liveright, 1923), pp. 18–25.
 53. All the foregoing quotations are from Waldo Frank, *In the American Jungle* (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1937), pp. 155–157.
 54. *Poems*, p. 181.
 55. "Song of the Exposition," *Walt Whitman, Complete Poetry and Selected Prose*, ed. James E. Miller, Jr. (Boston: Houghton, Riverside Edition, 1959), p. 144.
 56. *Poems*, p. 101.

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57. Ernest Boyd, "Aesthete: Model 1924," *The American Mercury*, I (1924), p. 34.
 58. Stanley Coffman, Jr., "Symbolism in *The Bridge*," *PMLA*, LXVI (1951), p. 67.
 59. Bernice Slote, "The Structure of Hart Crane's *The Bridge*," *University of Kansas City Review*, XXIV (1958), p. 226.

60. Gorham Munson, *Waldo Frank: A Study* (New York: Boni & Liveright, 1923), p. 48.
61. *The Republic of Plato*, trans. F. M. Cornford (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1941), pp. 225-34.
62. All the foregoing quotations are from Waldo Frank, *In the American Jungle* (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1937), pp. 123-26.
63. Walt Whitman, *Complete Poetry and Selected Prose*, ed. James E. Miller, Jr. (Boston: Houghton, Riverside Edition, 1959), "Song of Myself," p. 56; "Song of the Answerer," p. 122.
64. Waldo Frank, *Island in the Atlantic* (Toronto: Duell, Collins, 1946), p. 81.
65. Waldo Frank, *Virgin Spain* (New York: Boni & Liveright, 1926), p. 42.
66. All of the foregoing quotations are from *Virgin Spain*, pp. 36-42.
67. P. D. Ouspensky, *Tertium Organum* (Rochester, Manas Press, 1920), p. 107.
68. *Walt Whitman*, "Song of Myself," p. 28; "To the Garden of the World," p. 69; "Song of Myself," p. 38.
69. Waldo Frank, *Rahab* (New York: Boni & Liveright, 1922), p. 33.
70. Waldo Frank, *The Death and Birth of David Markand* (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1934), pp. 259-60.
71. Waldo Frank, *The Unwelcome Man* (Boston: Little Brown & Co., 1917), pp. 173, 168.
72. Bronislaw Malinowski, *Myth in Primitive Psychology* (London: W. W. Norton & Co., 1926), p. 125.
73. *The Complete Poems of Hart Crane*, ed. Waldo Frank (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1958), p. 101.
74. *Poems*, pp. 7, 8, 18, 22, 26, 32, 34, 37, 40, 45, 59, 61.
75. *Brom Weber*, Hart Crane (New York: Budley Press, 1948), p. 261.
76. *Poems*, pp. 23, 22.
77. Bernice Slote, "The Structure of Hart Crane's *The Bridge*," *University of Kansas City Review*, XXIV (1958), p. 226.
78. Gorham Munson, *Waldo Frank: A Study*, p. 50. Intellectual honesty seems to demand that some sober reservations be made concerning this matter of a geometric literary form. For example, though it may be illuminating to speak of a novel or poem following an emotional trajectory identical to an arc or parabola, it seems hardly possible that the artist could consciously create such a perfect progression. (With difficulty, one can imagine the artist selecting a series of incidents, each with a minute increase in *quantitative* emotion, charting a series of locus points, as an economist would chart the rise and fall of the earning power of the dollar.) Moreover, it is hard to believe that even if the effect could be brought off, that this would constitute a true form. Literary form is a matter of point-of-view, character, time, and perhaps even space, but not geometry, be it emotional, psychological, or anything else.
79. T. S. Eliot, *Poems* (New York: Harcourt Brace) pp. 96, 98.
80. *Poems*, p. 102.
81. *Weber*, p. 425.
82. *Weber*, p. 427.
83. *Poems*, p. 36.
84. Gorham Munson, *Destinations* (New York: J. H. Sears & Co., 1928), p. 175.
85. All foregoing quotations from *Poems*, pp. 102-3.
86. Waldo Frank, *In the American Jungle* (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1937), p. 25.
87. *Whitman*, p. 166.
88. *Whitman*, p. 309.
89. *Weber*, p. 261.
90. *Poems*, pp. 37-39.

91. *Poems*, p. 35.
92. *Poems*, p. 10.
93. *Poems*, p. 46.
94. *Poems*, p. 43.
95. *Poems*, p. 44.
96. *Poems*, p. 49.
97. *Poems*, p. 50.
98. *Poems*, p. 183.
99. *Poems*, p. 59.
100. *Poems*, pp. 57-58.
101. "The Unfractioned Idiom of Hart Crane's *Bridge*," *American Literature*, XXVII (1955), p. 203.
102. *Whitman*, "Democratic Vistas," p. 489.

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