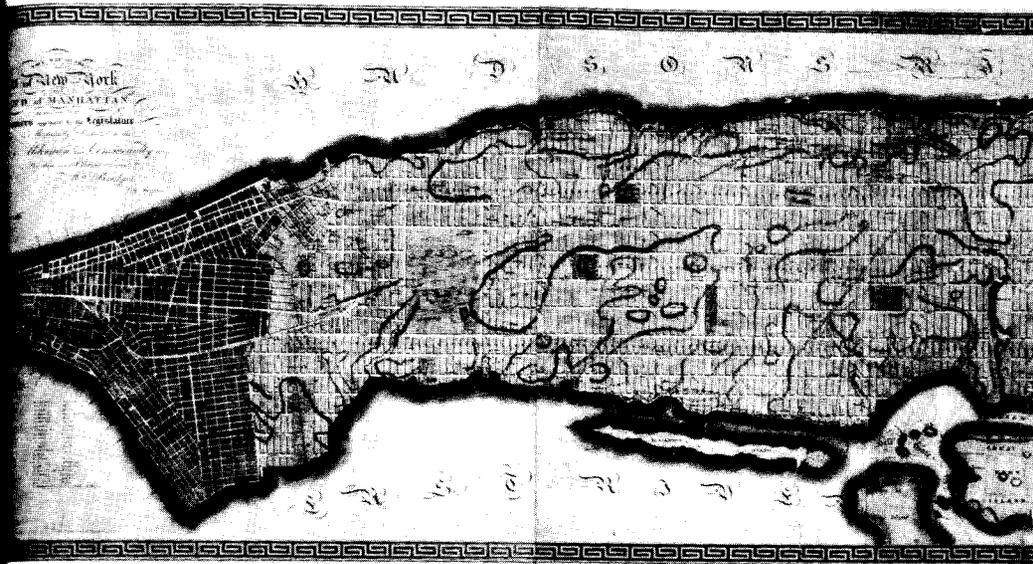


Ceremonies in May 1883, Schuyler imagined a future archaeologist one day surveying the ruins of New York, “the mastless river and a dispeopled land.” Only the towers of the Great Bridge are likely to survive; the cables and roadway would have already disintegrated. “What will his judgement of us be?”⁷

Through this fancy Schuyler made the point that the towers were meaningless forms without the superstructure of cables and roadway. Standing alone, they offer no clue to their function, or of what they are. This was a result of the designer’s failure to incorporate the function of the towers in their design. Gothic arches, cornice, buttress, off-sets — these motifs plainly indicated that the engineer had relied on his conventional sense of beauty; the architectural details were decorations, not integrated aspects of the towers’ function. In effect, the engineer had treated the masonry in a careless and insensitive manner.

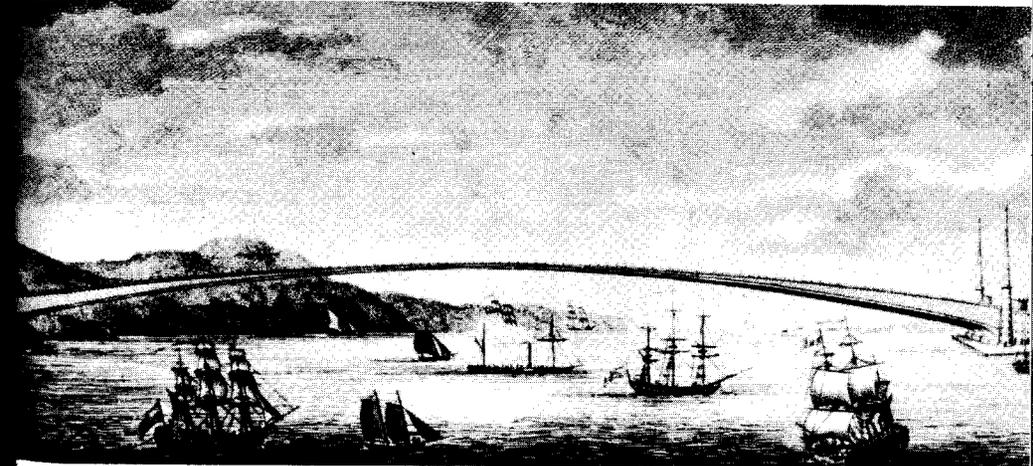
Architecture should “expound, emphasize and refine” the structural elements of a building, not disguise them. In function the towers consisted of three standing piers each; each pier supported a cable (or two, in the case of the central post). The space between the piers was closed to form a solid wall, and the wall pierced with openings for traffic, the openings formed broken arches. So far so good; Schuyler had no objections. But to express this arrangement honestly, the designer should have given the piers more emphasis; they should “assert themselves starkly and unmistakably as the bones of the structure, and the wall above the arches should be subordinated to a mere filling.” Instead, the piers are only shallow projections, hardly distinguishable from the wall. And the arches are “merely tunnelled through the mass,” where they should have been carefully modeled. The entire wall needed more accents, more contrast, “higher lights and sharper shadows.”

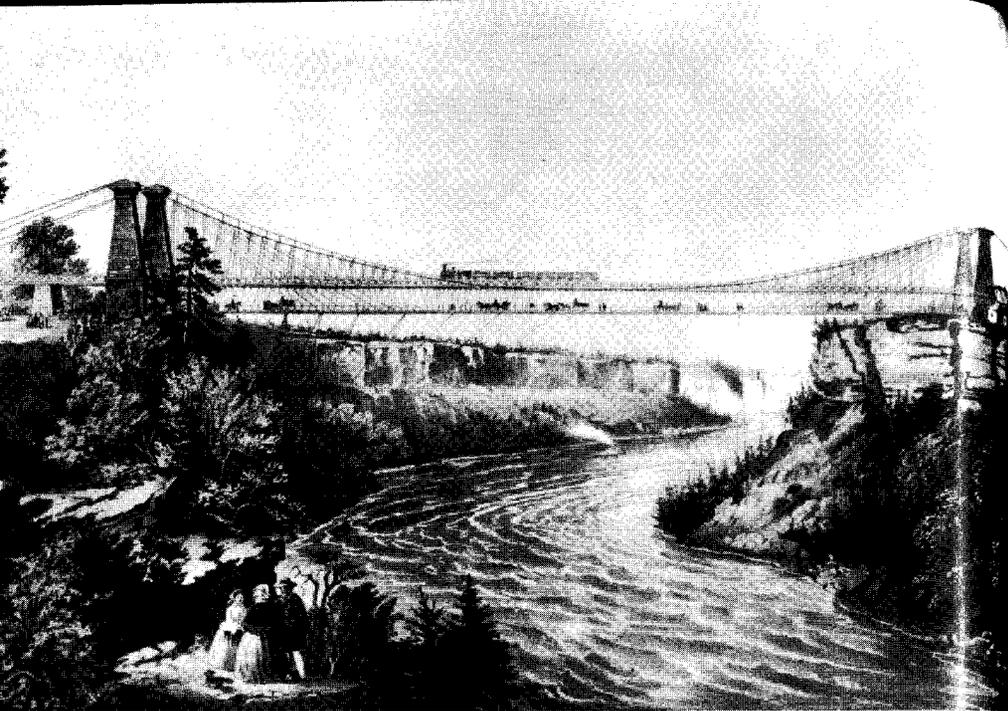
7. “Brooklyn Bridge as a Monument,” *Harper’s Weekly*, Vol. 27 (May 26, 1883), 326; most recently reprinted in Montgomery Schuyler, *American Architecture and Other Writings*, ed. William H. Jordy and Ralph Coe (Cambridge, 1961).



The 1811 Grid (Courtesy of the New-York Historical Society, New York City)

Thomas Pope’s Rainbow Bridge, 1811



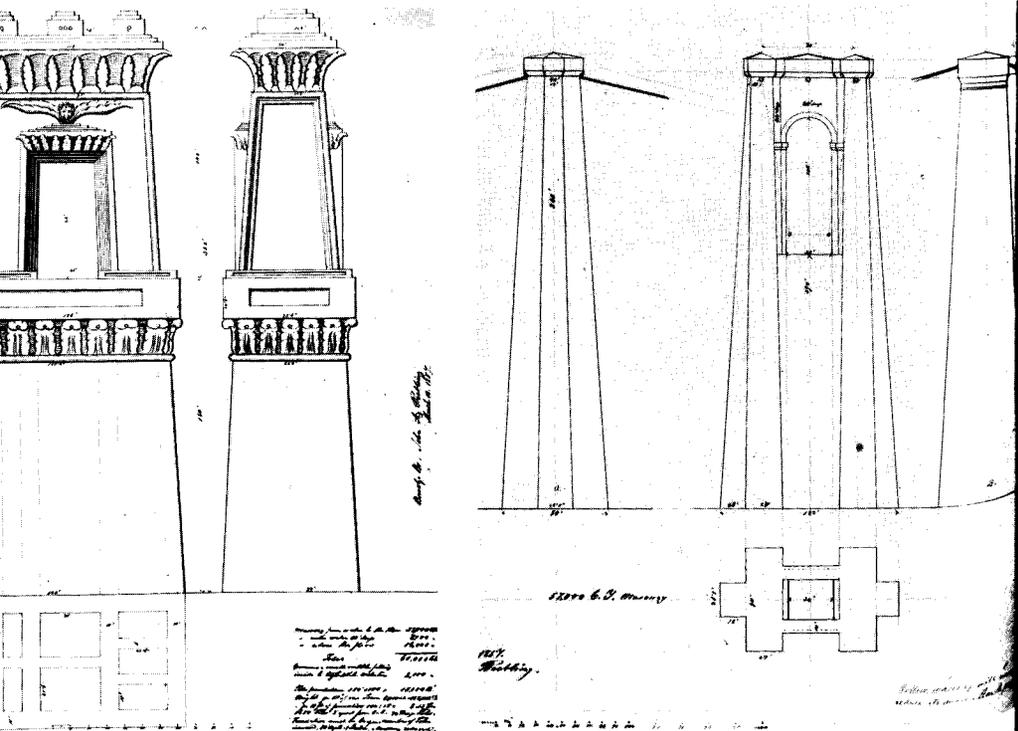


The suspension bridge near Niagara Falls, 1855

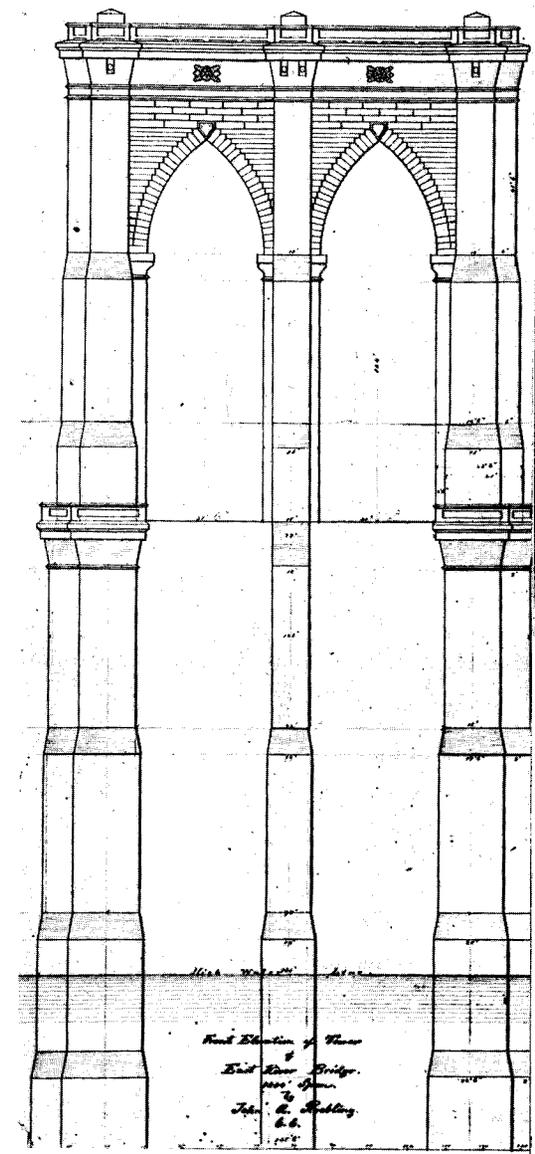
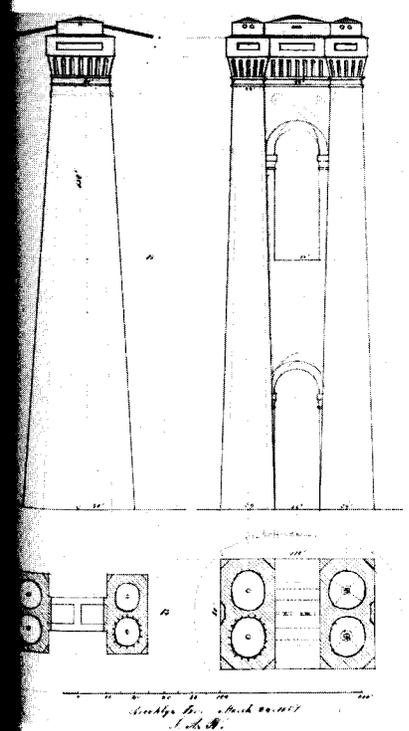


John Augustus Roebling, 1806 - 1869

Drawings for East River Bridge towers, J. A. Roebling, 1857

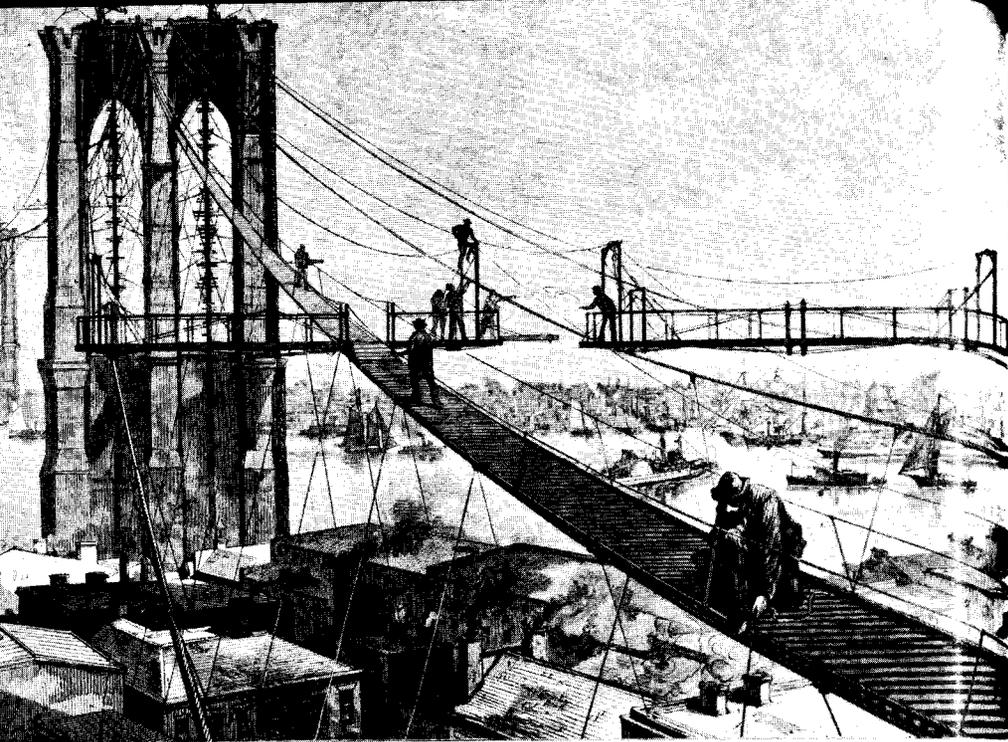


(Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute)



Tower design, Brooklyn Bridge, J. A. Roebling, 1869 (Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute)





Stages of construction (*Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, May 1883;
Bettmann Archive)

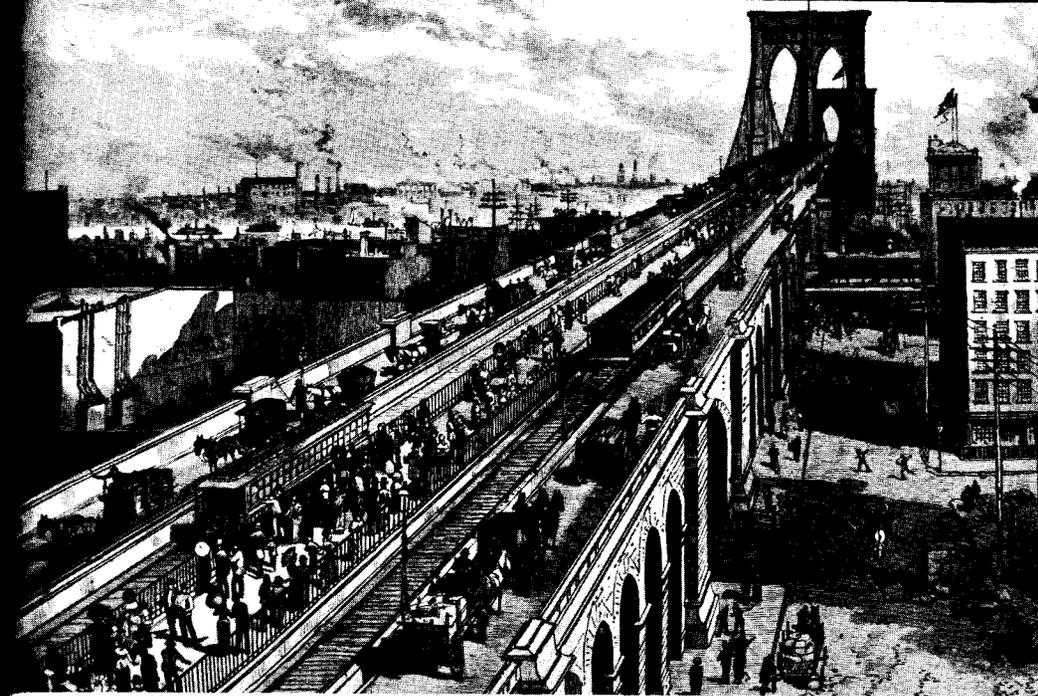
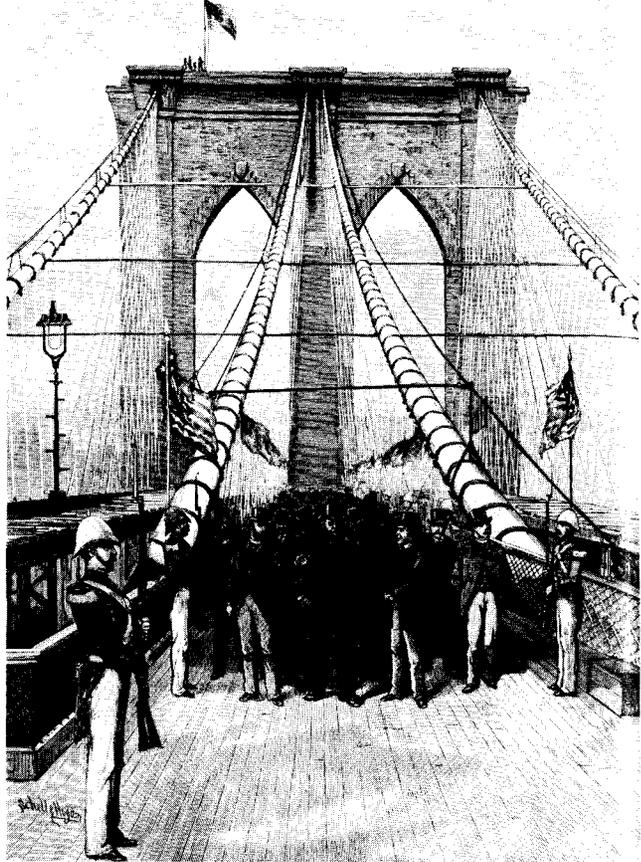


Washington Roebling, 1883
(*Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, May 26, 1883)

Brooklyn Bridge, 1883 (*Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, May 26, 1883)

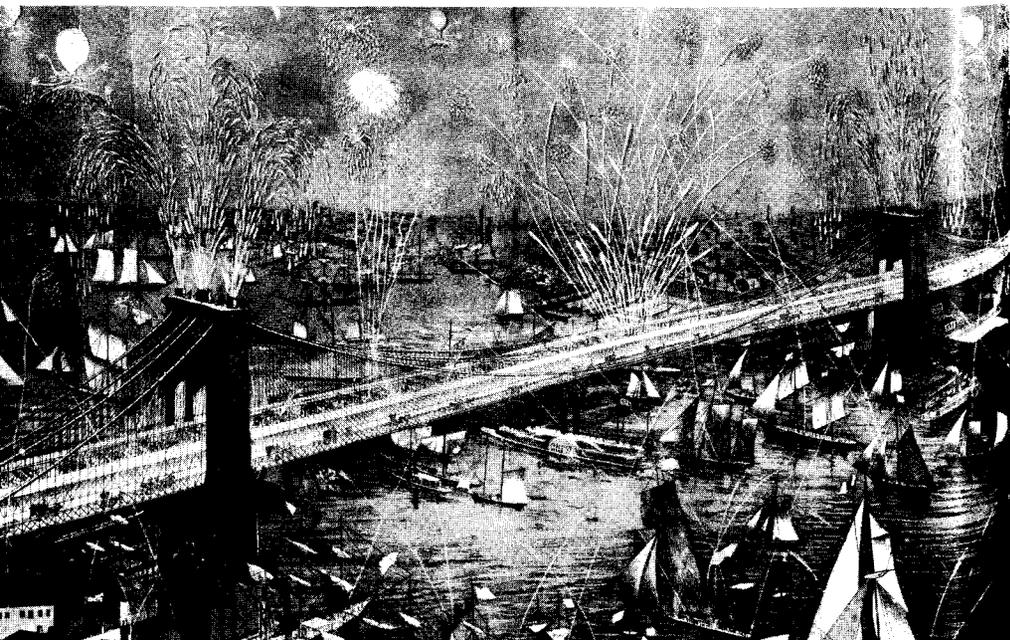


President Chester A. Arthur
at Opening Ceremonies
Harper's Weekly, June 2, 1883)



The New York approach (*Harper's Weekly*, June 2, 1883)

Fireworks and illumination in the evening
(The J. Clarence Davies Collection,
Courtesy of the Museum of the City of New York)



Robert E. Odum in a
dramatic—and fatal—leap.
May 19, 1885
(Bettmann Archive)



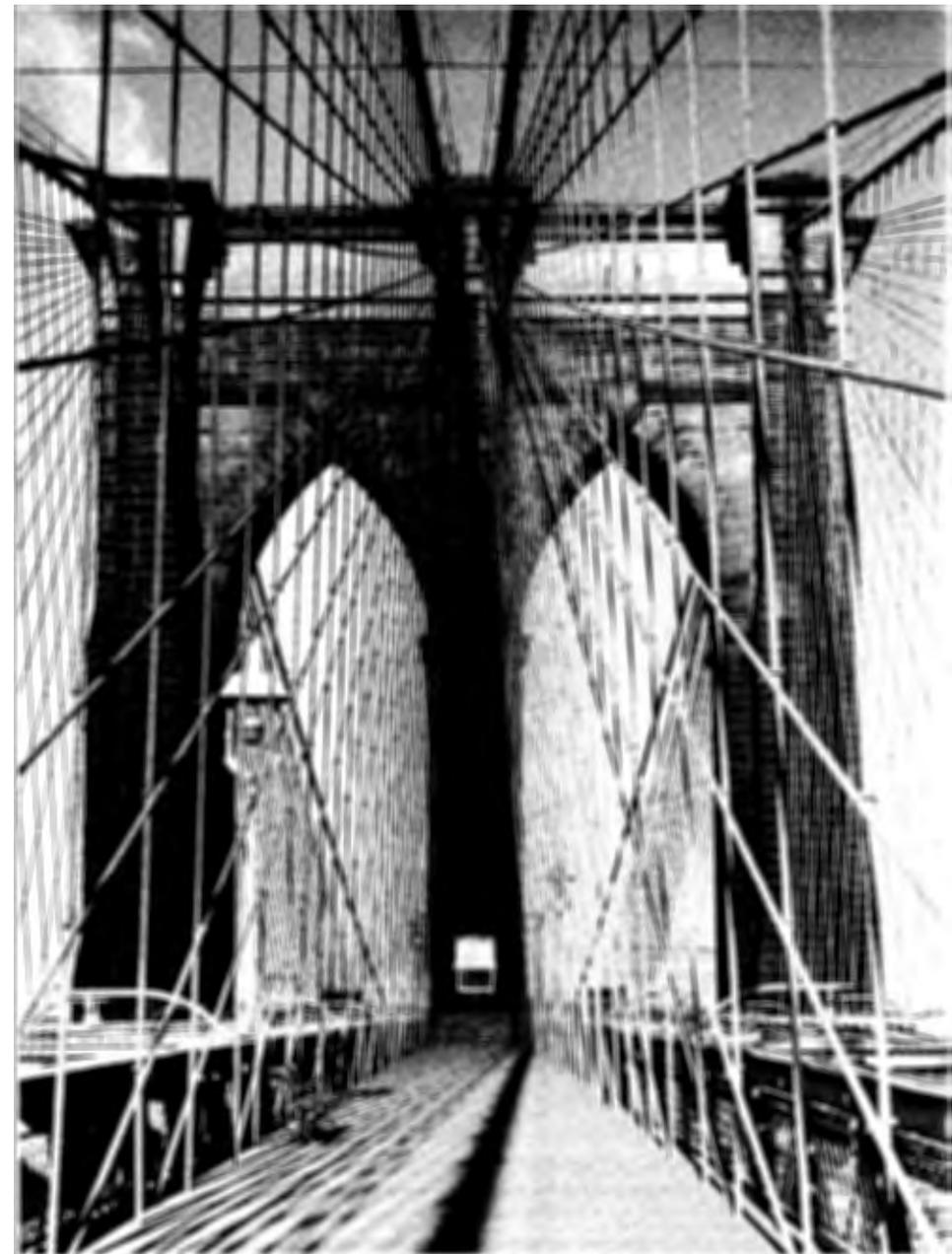
Beauty on the Bridge
(Museum of the City of New York)



The Bridge at night. Above: Engraving by C. Bunnell (*Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, May 26, 1883); below: Aquatint by Joseph Pennell, 1922 (Courtesy of the Brooklyn Museum)

Aftermath of the panic on the bridge, Memorial Day, 1883
(*Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*)

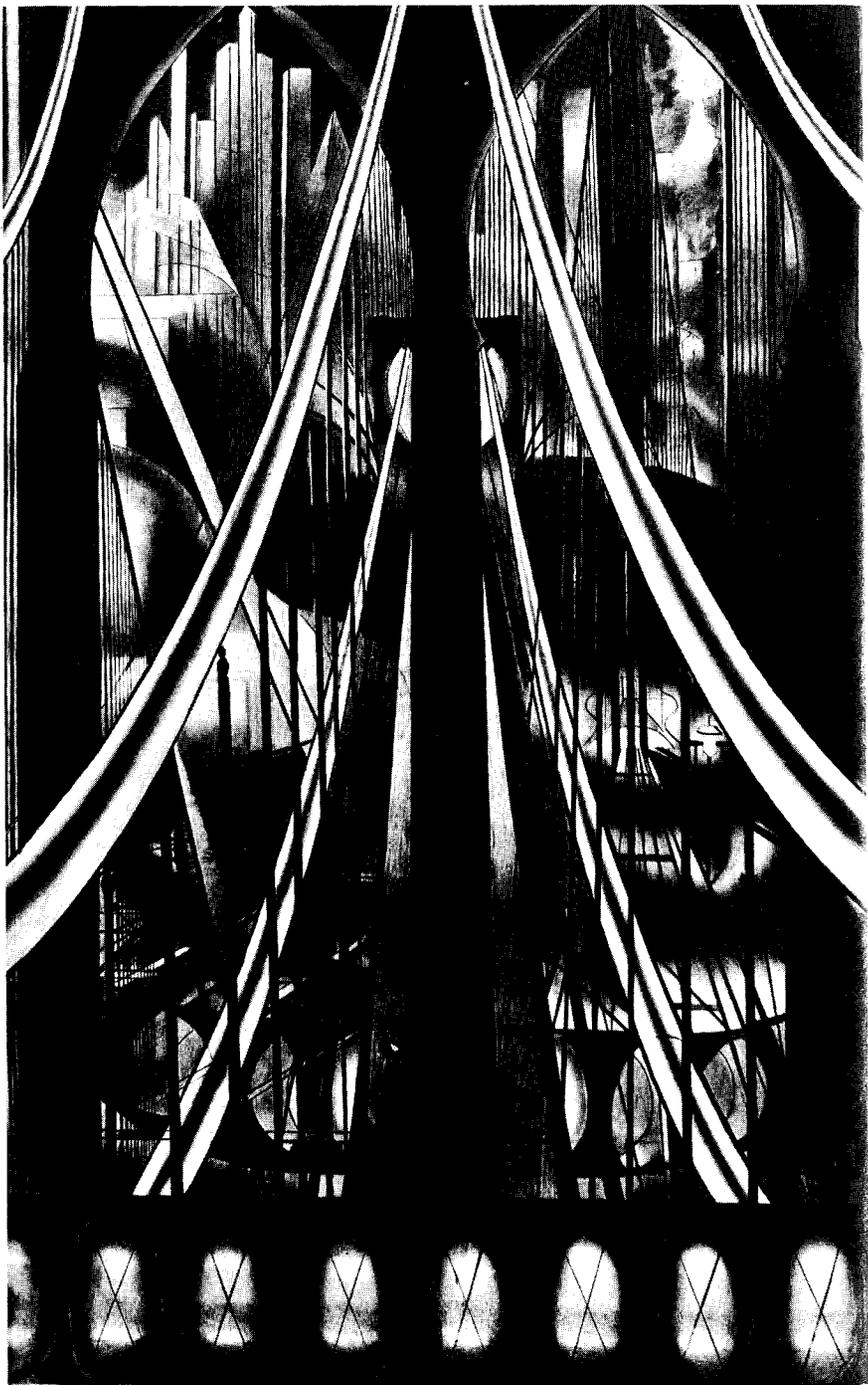




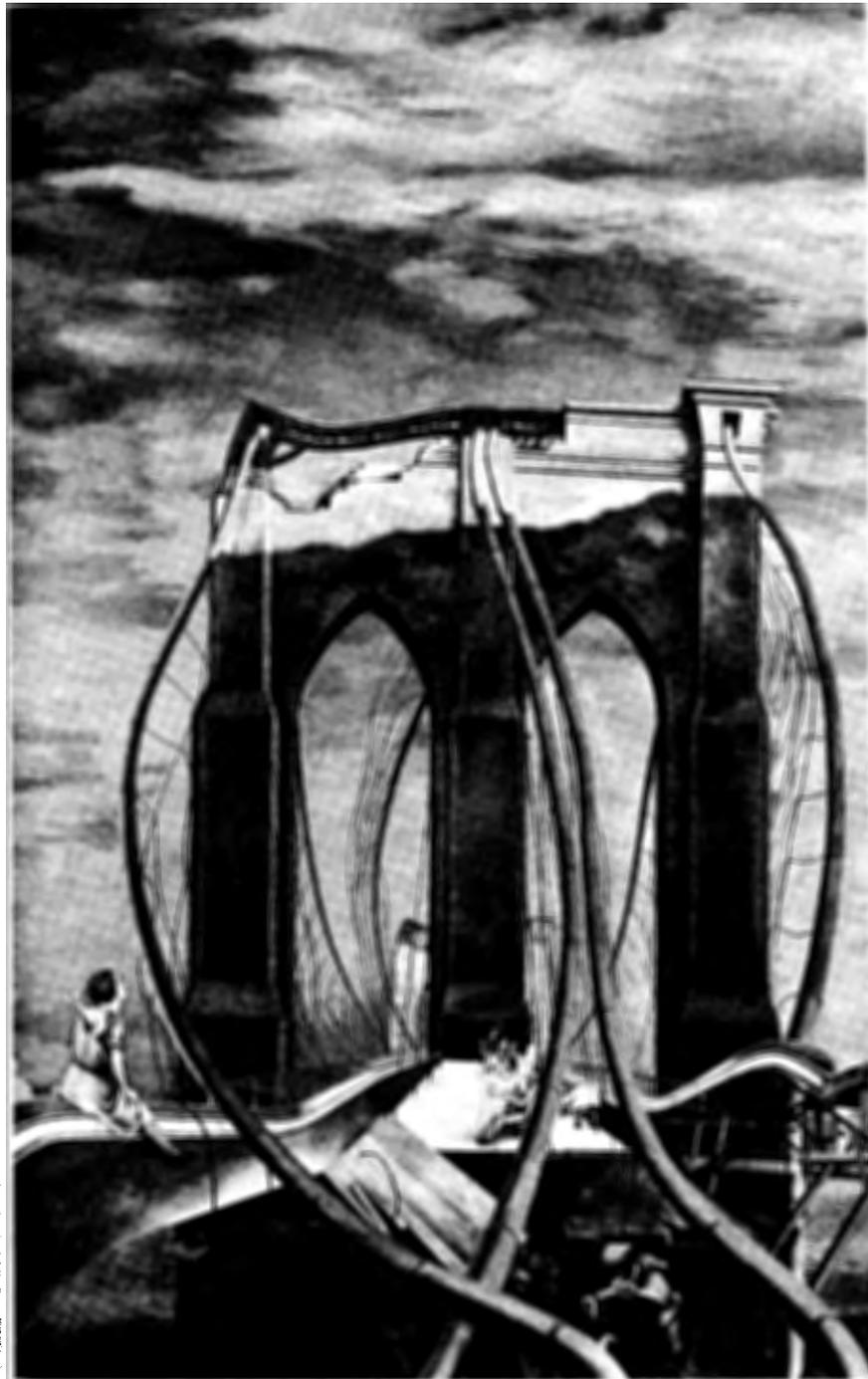
On Brooklyn Bridge (Photograph by Wayne Andrews)



On Brooklyn Bridge. Oil by Albert Gleizes, 1917
(Courtesy of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum)



The Bridge. Oil. One of five panels by Joseph Stella entitled *New York Interpreted*, 1922 (Courtesy of the Newark Museum)



Mental Geography. Oil by O. Louis Guglielmi, 1938 (Collection of Mrs. Edith Gregor Halpert, Courtesy of the Downtown Gallery)



Two views by John Marin. Above: Related to Brooklyn Bridge. Oil, 1928 (Collection of Mrs. Edith Gregor Halpert, Courtesy of the Downtown Gallery); below: Brooklyn Bridge, 1917. Etching (Courtesy of the Brooklyn Museum)



Schuyler admitted that the towers had a force and magnitude commensurate with their function as the heavy parts of the bridge. But to his eye they were dead and spiritless. He wanted more visual evidence that the true work of the structures was to bear a heavy load over their roofs.

Schuyler therefore directed most of his scorn toward the design of the roof. The flatness of the top obscured the autonomy of each pier. Moreover, the flatness concealed the “exquisite refinement” of the arrangement whereby the cables passed over the piers. Each cable rode upon an iron saddle embedded in the masonry at the very peak of each pier, just below the cornice. “Is it not perfectly evident,” he wrote, “that an architectural expression of this mechanical arrangement would require that the line of the summit, instead of this meaningless flat coping, should, to begin with, be a crest of roof, its double slope following the line of the cable which it shelters?”⁸

Roebing had in fact planned to place upon the roof sloped ornamental blocks; lack of funds prevented their appearance. But the flatness of the roof can be justified on its own grounds: the main function of the towers, Roebing had explained, was not to support the cables but the diagonal stays attached to the roadway. Remove the cables, and the bridge would remain standing. Schuyler neglected to consider the towers in their function as sides of many right triangles; he apparently did not understand the function of the inclined stays.

Although Schuyler’s criticisms are occasionally questionable, they do point to something significant about the bridge. Unavoidably it embodies two styles of building: the masonry, good or bad, is

8. Schuyler reports that Eidlitz admired Brooklyn Bridge but deplored the towers. Eidlitz, according to Schuyler, had offered through a mutual friend to design the towers for Roebing; the friend declined to pass on the offer, out of regard for Roebing’s vanity. Schuyler remarks: “It was a great pity. . . . If he had done it, the towers would not now stand as disgraces to the airy fabric that swings between them” (*American Architecture*, 154).

8

The outline of the city became frantic in its effort to explain something that defied meaning.

Power seemed to have outgrown its servitude and to have asserted its freedom. The cylinder had exploded, and thrown great masses of stone and steam against the sky. The city had the air and movement of hysteria, and the citizens were crying, in every accent of anger and alarm, that the new forces must at any cost be brought under control.

HENRY ADAMS, *The Education of Henry Adams* (1907)

Two Kingdoms

In 1883 Brooklyn Bridge had dominated the New York skyline. Its towers rose high above the warehouses and shops of both shores, and ruled the East River. Prints from this period show the supremacy of the bridge. Only the Trinity Church steeple in lower Manhattan approached the height of Roebling's granite towers. Gothic steeple and Gothic arches together kept the peace in the sky above the city.

But the joint rule did not last. By the 1890's more imposing figures had appeared in the commercial streets of Manhattan. Trinity spire at the head of Wall Street was threatened with obscurity; in 1904, when Henry James visited the street, the church was already "cruelly overtopped" and "smothered" by "the mountain-wall" of surrounding skyscrapers. James himself had something of the same sensation on learning that the tall building leaning most threateningly over the church had been erected by the churchwardens themselves. Roebling's towers did not suffer as severely, but the same irony held true for the bridge as for the church: by increasing the volume of traffic into Manhattan and by helping to concentrate wealth in the business section of that city, the bridge indirectly promoted the skyscraper. Like the church, it conspired in its own decline as ruler of the sky.

The new physiognomy of New York expressed modern America with a clarity to be seen nowhere else. Here, in the jagged face of the city, the civilization of the New World displayed its most ex-

uberant forms. And here, interested observers — foreign visitors and native artists — searched for a clue to the meaning of a society which had turned its energies from pruning the wilderness to capturing the sky. Orderly gardens seemed to have given way to a landscape of grotesque shapes: the skyscraper, James wrote, was the new “‘American Beauty,’ the rose of interminable stem.” Writers and artists scanned the face of New York for images such as this, adequate to express the regime which now ruled America.

I

The prominence of Brooklyn Bridge made it an obvious emblem for the new forces that had reshaped the city. Henry James found it to be the perfect physical equivalent of these forces, a naked demonstration of the power which created the skyscraper. He described the bridge in “New York Revisited,” the best-known chapter of *The American Scene*, which is the record of his visit to America in 1904–1905 after twenty-five years of expatriation.¹

James’s responses to his native land were typically complex, but of one thing he was sure: New York City had become a place of “pitiless ferocity.” “Chaos of confusion,” he wrote, was everywhere. And nowhere with more arrogance than in the skyscrapers, those “giants of the mere market” which had “crushed” the familiar monuments of his youth “quite as violent children stomp on snails and caterpillars.” Like Henry Adams, James felt violence in the very air of New York. Both men recognized that the turbulent city represented the dispossession of their class; new economic and political forces had arisen for whom Quincy, Massachusetts, and the New England tradition meant nothing. The most poignant moment in James’s book is his discovery that a “high, square, impersonal structure” had replaced the site of his birth in Washington Square: “the effect for me . . . was of having been amputated of half my history.”

1. *The American Scene* (New York, 1907). All quotations are from this edition.

Nonetheless, James admitted to an attraction for the furor of the city. The emotions produced by the unencumbered energies working upon the sky could be thrilling. In the opening scene of “New York Revisited,” James views the city from the Bay, and writes:

The extent, the ease, the energy, the quantity and number, all notes scattered about as if, in the whole business and in the splendid light, nature and science were joyously romping together, might have been taking on again, for their symbol, some collective presence of great circling and plunging, hovering and perching sea-birds, white-winged images of the spirit, of the restless freedom of the Bay.

Here, at their best advantage, the new forces are displayed in a “splendid light”; their appeal is visual and highly engaging. The sea-birds — “white-winged images” — are their symbol.

Probing the source of pleasure in the scene, James discovers that a sense of accomplishment, of “things lately and currently *done*,” and done “on the basis of inordinate gain,” was responsible for the “restless freedom” in the air. What lay behind the “great circling and plunging” of the sea-birds, he discovered, was vehemence and power, the true notes of the scene.

To describe the “dauntless power” in the harbor, James searched for an equivalent to the “diffused, wasted clamor” of the city. As his eye moved up the East River, the Great Bridge and the trains which cross it supplied the appropriate image:

This appearance of the bold lacing-together, across the waters, of the scattered members of the monstrous organism — lacing as by the ceaseless play of an enormous system of steam-shuttles or electric bobbins (I scarce know what to call them), commensurate in form with their infinite work — does perhaps more than anything else to give the pitch of the vision of energy.

More than anything else, the bridge was a mechanical monster. As his language faltered (“I scarce know what to call them”), James

reached for technological images: a steam engine, a power loom, and in the passage that follows, a clock:

One has the sense that the monster grows and grows, flinging aboard its loose limbs even as some unmannered young giant at his "larks," and that the binding stitches must forever fly further and faster and draw harder; the future complexity of the web, all under sky and over the sea, becoming thus that of some colossal set of clockworks, some steel-souled machine-room of brandished arms and hammering fists and opening and closing jaws.

The bridge was a mechanical spider in a "steel-souled machine-room"; a robot that "grows and grows," a piston, as he puts it in still another sentence, "working at high pressure, day and night." And the result of its work, James gloomily predicted, was "merciless multiplication" of itself.

James used this chilling portrait of the bridge to transport his reader from the joy of the Bay to the horror of the streets. He did not compromise his image: the bridge was monstrous. James did not even concede that the bridge, under certain atmospheric conditions, might have a visual appeal; the skyscraper, on the other hand, sometimes struck him as "justifying" itself, "looming through the weather," with a "cliff-like sublimity." Obsessed with the mechanical parts of the bridge, he seems not to have noticed the towers. This is curious because most other observers found in the towers the same sublimity James found occasionally in the skyscraper: Childe Hassam, John Twachtman, and Joseph Pennell painted the structure precisely this way, as a lofty presence. The popularity of this view of the bridge was such that James's own publisher inscribed a line drawing of the towers on the title page of the 1907 edition of his works!

James might have commented on these interpretations as he did upon his own sense of the skyscraper's sublimity: it came from the "intellectual extravagance of the given observer." He resisted that

extravagance in himself, and his image of the bridge, extravagant in another direction, represents his most powerful feelings toward the modern city.

II

"I feel great forces at work," wrote John Marin in 1913, "great movements; the large buildings and the small buildings; the warring of the great and the small." Recently returned from a study of modern painting in Europe, Marin expressed his reactions in hundreds of water colors, drawings, and oils of lower Manhattan and Brooklyn Bridge.²

Many artists have painted and photographed Brooklyn Bridge, but none with the consistency and the fervor of John Marin, except perhaps Joseph Stella, who like his colleague seized upon the bridge after his return from Europe in 1911, as an expression of "great forces at work." The two painters recognized in the bridge and the skyscrapers fitting embodiments of the new. Stella wrote:

Steel and electricity had created a new world. A new drama had surged from the unmerciful violations of darkness at night, by the violent blaze of electricity and a new polyphony was ringing all around with the scintillating, highly-colored lights. The steel had leaped to hyperbolic altitudes and expanded to vast latitudes with the skyscrapers and with bridges made for the conjunction of worlds.³

Although neither his language nor his paintings are as apocalyptic as Stella's, Marin felt excitement in the new forms of the city, an excitement that appears in his portraits of Brooklyn Bridge.

2. Herbert J. Seligman, ed., *Letters of John Marin* (New York, 1931), n.p. See also Milton W. Brown, *American Painting from the Armory Show to the Depression* (Princeton, 1955), 134.

3. Joseph Stella, "Autobiographical Notes," 1946, Whitney Museum. All quotations from Stella are from this source. See also John I. H. Bauer, *Joseph Stella* (Whitney Museum, 1963). For a catalogue of works depicting the bridge, see *Brooklyn Bridge, 75th Anniversary Exhibition* (Brooklyn Museum, 1958).

Marin's use of the image can be divided roughly into two phases: the sketches and drawings of the years before World War I, and the more elaborate compositions in the 1920's and early 1930's. In the first phase the painter saw mainly the structural parts of the bridge: towers, cables, and promenade. His early drawings and etchings are mainly views of the bridge from the river or the city. In many of these works, the bridge seems about to become an abstract form, a shape expressing energy and movement.

Later paintings reverse the point of view: the bridge provides a platform toward the city. In *Red Sun — Brooklyn Bridge* (1922), *Related to Brooklyn Bridge* (1928), and *Region of Brooklyn Bridge Fantasy* (1932), towers and streets are framed by heavy dark slashes, suggesting the bridge cables. Resembling the dark borders of his marine water colors, these lines intensify the light of the painting, and force the viewer's attention to the energetic movements within. The center regions of these paintings are usually very bright — flashing sun upon steel and glass. Diagonal cables pour across the surface of the paintings, locating the point of view on the promenade. Toward the bottom of some of these paintings, open forms within the overlapping buildings imply tunnels and subway entrances.

The simple visual relationship between bridge and city is Marin's subject in these works. His work as a whole conveys rapid, direct impressions, momentary glimpses cohered into permanent forms. The city is a vision of speed and frenzy — a sharp contrast to his relatively quiet sailboats and water. The bridge too is energy; it partakes of the frenzy. But, more important, it provides a perspective for a rapid succession of impressions. It is both of and apart from the city.

Stella's treatment of the structure is similar; he also uses it to view the city. But Stella's paintings invite fuller literary interpretations: their monumental forms appeal more overtly to the mind than the strictly visual images of Marin.

The first of Stella's many conceptions of Brooklyn Bridge is the famous 1917-18 version. The painting has two planes, distinguished by color as well as line. Below, deep reds and metallic blues predominate, while above, blue lightens into gray. In the middle area greens and yellows play among curving and angular forms. But the canvas is hardly flat in effect; it provides a complex spatial experience. The main features of the painting are the diagonal lines, which, like spotlights, cross, near the top; the twin arches of the towers; and a prism resting on a disc near the bottom. The movement is upward along the diagonal lines to the topmost image of the towers, bathed in light. But to get there, the eye must first encounter the hypnotic prism below and its glaring reds; it is the mouth of a tunnel, surrounded by receding caverns. The direction of the lower half of the painting is downward, under the bridge which rises above. The eye struggles to be released of this maze of underground forms, and finally breaks free. The viewer finds himself on a pathway which leads swiftly to the first tower, then upward to the higher towers, until, encouraged by diagonal and vertical lines, he reaches the topmost pinnacle surmounted by a narrow flat curve, a rainbow shape that runs the entire breadth of the canvas.

The painting conveys the physical sense of walking simultaneously under and over the bridge. Emotionally, however, it leads the viewer into demonic tunnels, and then out of them, into an empyrean of spires. Color and form separate bridge from tunnel. Moreover, the bridge does not emerge from the tunnels, but is imposed upon them. It is in a plane of its own. And except for the powerful diagonals which form a vortex at the top, the organization of the painting does not show the eye, or the emotions, precisely how to escape the tunnels and reach the bridge. There is no orderly procedure; the eye must be wrenched from one plane to another.

Stella's later paintings of Brooklyn Bridge do not possess this exacting tension between bridge and tunnel. The bridge rises firm

and solid, a triumphant form above chaos below. Of *New York Interpreted* (1920-23), Stella wrote:

The bridge arises imperturbably with the dark inexorable frame among the delirious raging all around of the temerarious [sic] heights of the skyscrapers and emerges victorious with the majestic sovereignty sealed on his arches upon the subjugated fluvial abyss roaring below with the moanings of appeal of the tug-boats.

In this painting, the bridge has escaped the treacherous forms of the city, and become a principle of its own. The ambivalence of the first painting is resolved in the transcendence of the later.

III

It is likely that Henry James would have recoiled from the "extravagance" of Stella's apocalyptic visions of Brooklyn Bridge. A mechanical horror for the novelist, the bridge was a spiritual presence for the painter. James had drawn his images from the roadway and its traffic; Stella, from the towers, cables, and promenade. In these two sets of images, the span occupied in the minds of the two artists entirely separate realms — as opposed to each other as the demonic and the divine.

The opposition is all the more interesting in that both artists envisioned the structure as fundamentally technological, yet animated with a spirit above and beyond what the casual eye can perceive. To both it was at once a bridge and something that transcended its concrete "bridge-ness." As such, it functioned for each artist in a realm of the imagination, a vehicle for emotions — rather powerful emotions — concerning the city and modern civilization. And in both cases, although the emphases are entirely different, the emotion is ambivalent: fascination coupled with horror or love. A clear graphic representation of the image would not express the emotion adequately; in each case, "extravagance" is necessary to suggest the wide range of conflicting feelings.

How can we explain this curious fact about Brooklyn Bridge — its ability to arouse such diverse and deep reactions? The answer

must be that for those individuals attuned to the tenor of the times, the bridge embodied physically the forces, emotional as well as mechanical, which were shaping a new civilization. The power of the image arose perhaps from the fact that it represented to certain minds alternate possibilities of those forces — in religious terms, salvation or damnation. Its power arose, in other words, from the fact that the bridge possessed either the capacity of healing, or the disease itself.

This ambiguity of the structure — and the ambivalence of its audience — was also expressed on the level of popular, or unsophisticated, culture. The power to heal and the power to destroy were portrayed in magazine engravings within one week of each other in May 1883: the presence of the symbolic leader of the land at Opening Ceremonies on May 24, and the crushed bodies and terror of May 31. In another mode, similar emotions were represented in the story told by Meyer Berger: A young reporter in the 1870's felt a profound longing for the still unfinished bridge, "unaccountably drawn to it, almost as to a woman warm and pulsing." One night, as though lured to it, he was overcome with the desire to possess the mysterious lady; he climbed one of the cables to the summit of the Manhattan tower. "The siren held him." But then the spell broke, and terrified, he cried for help. None came until morning. Shaken with fear, he was removed. But the fascination continued: "To him she was always a Circe made of steel and granite, but irresistible." ⁴

Conflicting emotions such as these correspond significantly to

4. *Modernized Brooklyn Bridge: Souvenir Presentation: Official Opening, May 2, 1954* (New York, 1954), 21. A similar ambivalence appears in a verse-drama, "The Bridge," by Dorothy Landers Beall, *The Bridge and Other Poems* (New York, 1913). To the heroine, a settlement-house worker, the bridge unites a divided society, linking "two cities, pride/ With anguish — luxury with agony,/ Beauty with squalor." At times, however, she fears the mechanical structure: "the horrible steel thing." Once a popular theme in newspaper verse and "amateur" poetry (e.g. "Brooklyn Bridge in Early Morning"), the span has been praised lavishly ("noble work," "this path among the stars"), and animated with soul and voice ("divine messages from above"). But also, in allusions to its builder's fate and to the multitude of jumpers, it has often been associated with death — especially with the lonely suicides of city-dwellers.

the opposition Henry Adams found at the heart of Western civilization, the opposition between what he called the Virgin and the dynamo. These images — drawn respectively from idolatry of Mary in the Middle Ages and the source of mechanical power in the Machine Age — represented for him two sets of opposing values. The Virgin represented a submissive feeling toward nature: toward its fecundity, its organic order, its mystery. Mary was the Christian version of Ceres and Venus, an earth mother, a goddess of love. Inspired by devotion toward her, medieval civilization had built its aspiring towers — the great cathedrals. These buildings, in all their complexity, their fusion of materials, their containment of “high” and “low” art, represent the unity of mind and heart resulting from love of a divine nature figure.

The dynamo, on the other hand, stood for the refinement of power, for the domination of nature, parallel to the dominance of ruthless, acquisitive, and repressive behavior in modern society. The feminine principle had been suppressed on behalf of the masculine, whereas earlier the masculine had felt itself realized in adoration of the feminine. The effect was a culture of disintegrating faith, of multiplicity. No one prayed to a dynamo. But the New York skyline, Adams observed in 1905, in its appearance of an exploded cylinder, expressed the dynamo’s terrible sovereignty. In America, he wrote, “neither Venus nor Virgin ever had value as force — at most as sentiment. No American had ever been truly afraid of either.”⁵

By designating these “two kingdoms of force,” Henry Adams may have provided the key to unlock the meaning of the bridge. In the minds of many, it occupied both kingdoms — separately, of course, but unconsciously at once. As a highway it served the dynamo, as James recognized, and represented change and progress. But as a form against the sky, or a promenade for lovers, it seemed to serve the Virgin — particularly with its impressive Gothic arches,

5. *The Education of Henry Adams* (1907), Modern Library edition, 1931, 379–91.

like cathedral windows. It seemed to represent something permanent. There was also a mid-kingdom: the deranged discovered the fatal uses of its parapets, and obscure men, driven from the gloom of the streets, threw themselves from its towers to find glory. It is no wonder, then, that taken together in all its aspects, as highway and promenade, as engineering and art, it evoked responses as if it were a cardinal emblem of the age. For if it belonged to both kingdoms, might it not serve an even higher function as a reconciliation, a bridge between the opposite impulses of love and power? Might it not in the imagination heal the most serious breach in the age?

IV

“Beyond any other aspect of New York,” Lewis Mumford wrote in *Sticks and Stones* (1924), “the Brooklyn Bridge has been a source of joy and inspiration to the artist.” Mumford himself initiated a new appreciation of the structure. It is notable that his was a backward look at an already fixed landmark, a vestige of an earlier age. To the public, the first of the East River spans was already touched with nostalgia; to Mumford it was a central monument in a “usable past.” Writing as a young spokesman for a movement to revitalize American culture, he offered Brooklyn Bridge, along with the buildings of H. H. Richardson and Louis Sullivan, the parks of F. L. Olmsted, and the paintings of A. P. Ryder as a tradition to be built upon.⁶

Mumford’s bridge is not a traffic highway; it is not a convenience for transportation. Instead it is a beautiful and prophetic form. The joy and inspiration it excites derives from its mastery over steel, its organic use of mechanical parts. The bridge transcends its materials; it is a “stunning act”: “perhaps the most completely satisfying structure of any kind that had appeared in America.” In a period

6. Lewis Mumford, *Sticks and Stones* (New York, 1924), 114–17, and *The Brown Decades* (1931), 96–106.

when industrialism was deforming the environment, the bridge, with its "strong lines" and "beautiful curve," proved that "the loss of form was an accident, not an inescapable result of the industrial processes." Roebing's work reproached the age, but also redeemed it: "All that the age had just cause for pride in — its advances in science, its skill in handling iron, its personal heroism in the face of dangerous industrial processes, its willingness to attempt the untried and the impossible — came to a head in Brooklyn Bridge."

In his quest for a "usable past," Mumford was guided by a desire to condemn mechanization without condemning the machine. It was possible, he felt, to assimilate modern technology to human ends. If only its true possibilities of service to humanity were acknowledged, the machine might reveal its inherent beauty of form. The bridge represented such beauty: its appeal was in its uniquely mechanical elegance, its undisguised expression of steel. "What was grotesque and barbarous in industrialism was sloughed off," Mumford wrote. "A fulfillment and a prophecy," Brooklyn Bridge embodied in its form and in the devotion of its creators — a devotion in the manner of those lovers of the Virgin who had raised Chartres in her honor — a victory over the aimless energy of the dynamo.

Mumford's treatment of Brooklyn Bridge was a direct response to what Van Wyck Brooks had named in 1912 the "culture of industrialism" — a culture which suffered from a deficiency of the humane, the organic, the aspiring. Along with many others, Mumford found in Brooklyn Bridge an image adequate to express his sense of the promise that lay buried within such a culture — a promise of reconciliation. The bridge seemed to stand between two kingdoms of force as a prophecy of a third.⁷

7. Implicit in Mumford's work of the 1920's was a nationalism based on an integrated culture of mechanical means and organic ends. In *Our America* (New York, 1919), Waldo Frank, a colleague in Mumford's quest for a "usable past," had spelled out the nationalistic implications. "America," wrote Frank, "is a mystic

Word." Without consciousness of itself, however, the land lies "dumb." Industrialism, feeding upon a moribund Puritanism and the exploitive pioneer spirit, had created a "shrieking" environment. The way out lay with a leap of consciousness in which the Machine would take its true place as a servant of man: man, the "parabolic force," the link between earth and heaven — in short, "the Bridge which all true artists seek."

Waldo Frank's mystical nationalism prepared yet another function for Brooklyn Bridge. Mumford had treated the bridge as a monument from the past; Frank, in a novel written several years before *Our America*, portrayed it as an immediate experience. In *The Unwelcome Man* (Boston, 1917), the bridge played an important role in the troubled life of Quincy Burt.

Seeking a "welcome" in American life for his deep but inarticulate yearnings, Quincy found himself one afternoon, "washed along like a splinter of wood on a rising wave," on the promenade of 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." The bridge showed him the ugliness of the cities. But there was also a powerful sense of beauty. With these mixed emotions, Quincy suddenly realized: "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."

But the message was too deep for him. Under the bridge, in its shadows in Brooklyn, it seemed to him "an unattainable pathway." He retraced his footsteps to Manhattan, descended, and saw the bridge again "a giant causeway." Underneath, "one arc-light . . . broke off a circlet of yellow-white from the surrounding gloom. Above shone a ragged strip of sky." In a panic, Quincy wandered through the streets near the bridge: "Under the Bridge itself he went — looming above him like a curse." He tried to "escape the omnipresent Bridge"! "Crowds jostled him; cars clashed; machines were braying, shuttling. The taste of New York was bitter on his lips." Finally he escaped. Unable to reconcile the beauty and the ugliness, to rise to the height of the bridge, Quincy Burt chose to die.

In his creator's mind, the hero of the novel was a victim of the "culture of industrialism." His truest impulses were not welcome precisely because they were "true," and organic; when he resorted to the less trying course of dying spiritually, he became a cog in the machine, a splinter in the "turbid stream" of the city. Van Wyck Brooks reviewed this novel as a substantiation of John Stuart Mill's prediction that industrialism would lead to "an appalling deficiency of human preferences." The bridge represented an alternative to the city streets, a way to absorb the entire urban reality into consciousness; but Quincy preferred to evade the struggle toward liberation. Deficient in courage and faith, he preferred the unthinking life of industrial culture.

Van Wyck Brooks's review is reprinted in Gorham B. Munson, *Waldo Frank: A Study* (New York, 1923), 75-6. See Mr. Munson's more recent study, "Herald of the Twenties: A Tribute to Waldo Frank," *Forum*, Vol. III (Fall 1961), 4-15.

9

Oh, grassy glades! oh, ever vernal endless
landscapes in the soul; in ye, — men yet may roll,
like young horses in new morning clover; and for some
few fleeting moments, feel the cool dew
of the life immortal on them. Would to God
these blessed calms would last.

HERMAN MELVILLE, *Moby-Dick* (1851)

The time is barren, and therefore its poet overrich.

MARTIN HEIDEGGER, "Hölderlin and the Nature of Poetry" (1937)

The Shadow of a Myth

In the winter of 1923, Hart Crane, a twenty-four-year-old poet living in Cleveland, announced plans to write a long poem called *The Bridge*. It was to be an epic, a "mystical synthesis of America."¹ Crane had just completed *For the Marriage of Faustus and Helen*, a poem which sought to infuse modern Faustian culture (the term was Spengler's, designating science and restless searching) with love of beauty and religious devotion. Now, confirmed in his commitment to visionary poetry and feeling "directly connected with Whitman," Crane prepared for an even greater effort: to compose the myth of America. The poem would answer "the complete renunciation symbolized in *The Waste Land*," published the year before. Eliot had used London Bridge as a passageway for the dead, on which "each man fixed his eyes before his feet." Crane replied by projecting his myth of affirmation upon Brooklyn Bridge.

1. *The Bridge* was first published by The Black Sun Press, Paris, 1930; this edition included three photographs by Walker Evans. The lines quoted throughout this chapter are from *The Complete Poems of Hart Crane* (New York, 1933), ed., Waldo Frank; references in the chapter are to *The Letters of Hart Crane* (New York, 1952), ed., Brom Weber. The critical works I have profited from most in my reading of *The Bridge* are, Allen Tate, "Hart Crane," *Reactionary Essays* (New York, 1936); Yvor Winters, "The Significance of *The Bridge*," *In Defense of Reason* (New York, 1947), 575-605; R. P. Blackmur, "New Thresholds, New Anatomies: Notes on a Text of Hart Crane," *Language as Gesture* (New York, 1952); Brom Weber, *Hart Crane: A Biographical and Critical Study* (New York, 1948); L. S. Dembo, *Hart Crane's Sanskrit Charge: A Study of The Bridge* (Ithaca, 1960); Sister M. Bernetta Quinn, *The Metamorphic Tradition in Modern Poetry* (New Brunswick, 1955).

In the spring of 1923, Hart Crane left his father's home in Cleveland, and from then until his suicide in 1932, lived frequently in Brooklyn Heights, close to "the most beautiful Bridge of the world." He crossed the bridge often, alone and with friends, sometimes with lovers: "the cables enclosing us and pulling us upward in such a dance as I have never walked and never can walk with another." Part III of *Faustus and Helen* had been set in the shadow of the bridge, "where," Crane wrote, "the edge of the bridge leaps over the edge of the street." In the poem the bridge is the "Capped arbiter of beauty in this street," "the ominous lifted arm / That lowers down the arc of Helen's brow." Its "curve" of "memory" transcends "all stubble streets."

Crane tried to keep Brooklyn Bridge always before him, in eye as well as in mind. In April 1924 he wrote: "I am now living in the shadow of the bridge." He had moved to 110 Columbia Heights, into the very house, and later, the very room occupied fifty years earlier by Roebling. Like the crippled engineer, the poet was to devote his most creative years to the vision across the harbor. In his imagination the shadow of the bridge deepened into the shadow of a myth.

I

The Bridge, Crane wrote, "carries further the tendencies manifest in 'F and H.'" These tendencies included a neo-Platonic conception of a "reality" beyond the evidence of the senses. The blind chaos of sensation in the modern city apparently denies this transcendent reality, but a glimpse of it is available, through ecstasy, to the properly devout poet. Helen represents the eternal, the unchanging; Faustus, the poet's aspiration; and the "religious gunman" of Part III, spirit of the Dionysian surrender (sexual as well as aes-

130-68; Stanley K. Coffman, "Symbolism in *The Bridge*," *PMLA*, Vol. LXVI (March 1951), 65-77; John Unterecker, "The Architecture of The Bridge," *Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature*, Vol. III (Spring-Summer 1962), 5-20.

thetic) necessary for a vision of the eternal. The threefold image constitutes what Kenneth Burke has called an "aesthetic myth" — a modern substitute for "religious myth."² The poet's impulse toward beauty is a mark of divinity. A part of the myth, and another "tendency" of the poem, is what Crane called its "fusion of our time with the past." The past is represented by the names Faustus and Helen; the present by the data of the poem: the "memoranda," the "baseball scores," and "stock quotations" of Part I; the jazz dance of Part II; the warplanes of Part III. The present fails to live up to the past. But the poet, a "bent axle of devotion," keeps his "lone eye" riveted upon Helen; he offers her "one inconspicuous, glowing orb of praise." At the end, in communion with the "religious gunman," he accepts and affirms past and present, the "years" whose "hands" are bloody; he has attained "the height/ The imagination spans beyond despair."

The idea of a bridge is explicit in the closing image; earlier, as I have indicated, it had appeared in fact, leaping over the street. In the projected poem, it will leap far beyond the street, but its function will be similar: an emblem of the eternal, providing a passage between the Ideal and the transitory sensations of history, a way to unify them.

In the earliest lines written for the new poem, the bridge was the location of an experience like that which ends *Faustus and Helen*: the imagination spanning beyond despair.

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.

* * * *

Expansive center, pure moment and electron
That guards like eyes that must look always down

2. *A Rhetoric of Motives* (New York, 1950), 203.

In reconciliation of our chains and ecstasy
 Crashing manifoldly on us as we hear
 The looms, the wheels, the whistles in concord
 Tethered and welded as the hills of dawn . . .³

Somewhat like Wordsworth on Westminster Bridge, here the poet experiences *harmony*, his troubled self annihilated in a moment of worship. Subsequently Crane developed a narrative to precede this experience. In the narrative, or myth, the poet, like Faustus, was to be the hero, and his task a quest — not for Helen but her modern equivalent: Brooklyn Bridge.

Although the bridge lay at the end of quest, it was not, like the grail in *The Waste Land*, simply a magical object occupying a given location. It does not wait to be found, but to be created. That is, it represents not an external “thing,” but an internal process, an act of consciousness. The bridge is not “found” in “Atlantis,” the final section of the poem, but “made” throughout the poem. In “Atlantis” what has been “made” is at last recognized and named: “O Thou steeled Cognizance.” Its properties are not magical but conceptual: it is a “Paradigm” of love and beauty, the eternal ideas which lie behind and inform human experience.

If we follow the poet’s Platonic idea, to “think” the bridge is to perceive the unity and wholeness of history. In the poem, history is not chronological nor economic nor political. Crane wrote: “History and fact, location, etc., all have to be transfigured into abstract form that would almost function independently of its subject matter.” Crane intended to re-create American history according to a pattern he derived from its facts. His version of American history has nothing in common with the ceremonial parade of Founding Fathers and bearded generals of popular culture. The poet’s idea, and especially his distinction between history and “abstract form,”

3. The first four lines are from “Lines sent to Wilbur Underwood, February, 1923,” and the remainder from “Worksheets, Spring, 1923,” in Brom Weber, *Hart Crane*, 425–6.

is closer to what the anthropologist Mircea Eliade describes as the predominant ontology of archaic man — the myth of “eternal return.” According to Eliade, the mind of archaic man sought to resist history — the line of “irreversible events” — by re-creating, in his rituals, the pre-temporal events of his mythology, such as the creation of the world. Unable to abide a feeling of uniqueness, early men identified, in their rituals, the present with the mythic past, thus abolishing the present as an autonomous moment of time. All events and actions “acquire a value,” writes Eliade, “and in so doing become real, because they participate, after one fashion or another, in a reality that transcends them.” The only “real” events are those recorded in mythology, which in turn become models for imitation, “paradigmatic gestures.” All precious stones are precious because of thunder from heaven; all sacred buildings are sacred because they are built over the divine Center of the world; all sexual acts repeat the primordial act of creation. A non-precious stone, a non-sacred building, a non-sanctified act of sex — these are not real. History, as distinct from myth, consists of such random acts and events, underived from an archetype; therefore history is not real and must be periodically “annulled.” By imitating the “paradigmatic gesture” in ritual, archaic men transported themselves out of the realm of the random, of “irreversible events,” and “re-actualized” the mythic epoch in which the original archetypal act occurred. Hence for the primitive as for the mystic, time has no lasting influence: “events repeat themselves because they imitate an archetype.” Like the mystic, the primitive lives in a “continual present.”⁴

The Bridge is a sophisticated and well-wrought version of the archaic myth of return. The subject matter of the poem is drawn from legends about American history: Columbus, Pocahontas, Cortez, De Soto, Rip Van Winkle, the gold-rush, the whalers; and

4. *Cosmos and History: The Myth of the Eternal Return* (Harper Torchbooks, 1959), 4, 90.

from contemporary reality: railroads, subways, warplanes, office buildings, cinemas, burlesque queens. Woven among these strands are allusions to world literature: the Bible, Plato, Marlowe, Shakespeare, Blake; and most important, to American artists: Whitman, Melville, Poe, Dickinson, Isadora Duncan. The action of the poem comprises through its fifteen sections, one waking day, from dawn in "Harbor Dawn," to midnight in "Atlantis." Through the device of dream, that single day includes vast stretches of time and space: a subway ride in the morning extends to a railroad journey to the Mississippi, then back in time, beyond De Soto, to the primeval world of the Indians,⁵ then forward to the West of the pioneers. In a sense, the entire day is a dream; the poet journeys through his own consciousness toward an awakening. He seeks to learn the meaning of American history which, in so far as that history is inseparable from his own memories, is the meaning of himself: Cathay, which designates the end of the journey, or the discovery of a new world, Crane wrote, is "an attitude of spirit," a self-discovery.

Thus in no sense of the word is *The Bridge* a historical poem. Its mode is myth. Its aim is to overcome history, to abolish time and the autonomy of events, and to show that all meaningful events partake of an archetype: the quest for a new world. In this regard the importance of Walt Whitman requires special notice. For among the many influences that worked upon Crane, few were as persuasive as Whitman's.⁶

5. Crane's conception of the Indian in "The Dance"—in the "Powhatan's Daughter" section of *The Bridge*—seems to owe something to Waldo Frank's *Our America* (1919). In his personal copy, Crane had underlined the following passage: "His [the Indian's] magic is not, as in most religions, the tricky power of men over their gods. It lies in the power of Nature herself to yield corn from irrigation, to yield meat in game. The Indian therefore does not pray to his God for direct favors. He prays for harmony between himself and the mysterious forces that surround him: of which he is one. For he has learned that from this harmony comes health." Hart Crane Collection, Columbia University Library.

6. A word should be said about the powerful influence upon Crane's sensibility—and his plans for *The Bridge*—of the Russian mystic, P. D. Ouspensky, and his

In "Passage to India," we have seen, Whitman identified the quest for wholeness—the "rondure"—as the chief theme and motive of American life. In Whitman's version of history, man was expelled from Eden into time: "Wandering, yearning, curious, with restless explorations,/ With questions, baffled, formless, feverish." Divided into separate and warring nations, at odds with nature, historical man was a sufferer. Now, however, in modern America, the end of suffering was in sight. The connecting works of engineers—the Suez Canal, the Atlantic Cable, the Union Pacific Railroad—had introduced a new stage; the separate geographical parts of the world were now linked into one system. The physical

work, *Tertium Organum: The Third Canon of Thought, A Key to the Enigmas of the World*, tr. Nicholas Bessaraboff and Claude Bragdon (New York, 1922). Crane read this book early in his creative life—possibly in 1920 (an earlier edition had been published that year). It seems very likely that he derived most of his philosophical idealism, and a good deal of his language and imagery, from Ouspensky. A case could be made for the fact that he interpreted Whitman in Ouspenskyan terms—as a mystic who saw through the world to a higher reality. "Higher consciousness" was a typical Ouspenskyan term. So was "vision," in its literal and metaphoric senses. Plato's parable of the cave, in which most men sit in darkness, hidden from the truth, is the unstated assumption of Ouspensky's book. The book attempts to place the mystical experience of light and oneness on accountable grounds; its method is to prove by analogies that the true or noumenal world lies beyond space and time, beyond the capacity of the normal mind to perceive. Limited to a three-dimensional view of the world (a consequence of education and bad science), the mind normally interprets what are really flashes from the true world as things moving in time. In truth, however, the "whole" is motionless and self-contained; time itself is man's illusion: "The idea of time recedes with the expansion of consciousness." The true world being "invisible" to normal sight, it is necessary to cultivate the inner eye. This can be accomplished only by exercising the outer eye to its fullest capacities—to strain vision until familiar things seem unfamiliar, new, and exciting. Then we might penetrate the "hidden meaning in everything." Then we will see the "invisible threads" which bind all things together—"with the entire world, with all the past and all the future." It should be noted that an idea of a bridge is implicit here—a metaphoric bridge which represents the true unity of all things. Moreover, Ouspensky held that art, especially poetry, was a means to attain this metaphoric bridge. To do so, however, poetry must develop a new language: "New parts of speech are necessary, an infinite number of new words." The function of poetry is to reveal the "invisible threads," to translate them into language which will "bind" the reader to the new perceptions. It is quite easy to see how attractive these ideas were to Hart Crane's poetic program. See Weber, 150–63.

labors of engineers, moreover, were spiritual food for the poet; the "true son of God" recognized that by uniting East and West such works completed Columbus's voyage. Now it was clear: The "hidden" purpose of history was the brotherhood of races that would follow the bridges and canals of modern technology.

Crane was not interested principally in Whitman's social vision, but in his conception of poetry as the final step in the restoration of man's wholeness. Not the engineer nor the statesman nor the captain of industry, but the poet was the true civilizer. Translating engineering accomplishments into ideas, the poet completed the work of history, and prepared for the ultimate journey to "more than India," the journey to the Soul: "thou actual Me." Thus the poet recognized that all of history culminated in self-discovery; and he would lead the race out of its bondage in time and space to that moment of consciousness in which all would seem one. That moment of "return" would redeem history by abolishing it. In short, Crane inherited from Whitman the belief in the poet's function to judge history from the point of view of myth.

Whitman himself appears in "Cape Hatteras," which represents a critical phase of the action of *The Bridge*. In the preceding sections, the poet had set out to find Pocahontas, the spirit of the land. With Rip Van Winkle his Muse of Memory, and the Twentieth Century Limited his vehicle, he moved westward out of the city to the Mississippi, the river of time. Borne backward on the stream, he found the goddess, joined her dance of union with nature, and thus entered the archetype. Now he must return to the present, to bridge the personal vision of the goddess and the actuality of modern America. An old sailor (possibly Melville) in a South Street bar and an apparition of old clipper ships from Brooklyn Bridge in "Cutty Sark," are reminders of the quest. But the old has lost its direction; the age requires a renewal.

"Cape Hatteras" is the center of the span that leaps from Columbus to Brooklyn Bridge. The sea voyages are now done, the

rondure accomplished. Now, a complacent age of stocks, traffic, and radios has lost sight of its goal; instead of a bridge, the age has created "a labyrinth submersed/ Where each sees only his dim past reversed." War, not peace and brotherhood, has succeeded the engineers, and flights into space are undertaken, not by poets but by war planes. "Cape Hatteras" poses the key questions of the poem: "What are the grounds for hope that modern history will not destroy itself?" "Where lies redemption?" "Is there an alternative to the chaos of the City?"

The answers are in Whitman's "sea eyes," "bright with myth." He alone has kept sight of the abstract form, the vision of ultimate integration. His perspective is geological; he stands apart, with "something green,/ Beyond all sesames of science." Whitman envisioned the highest human possibilities within the facts of chaos. It was he who "stood up and flung the span on even wing/ Of that great Bridge, our Myth, whereof I sing." He is a presence: "Familiar, thou, as mendicants in public places." He has kept faith, even among the most disastrous circumstances of betrayal. With his help, the flight into space might yet become "that span of consciousness thou'st named/ The Open Road."

"Cape Hatteras" introduces the violence and the promise, the despair and the hope, of modern life. It argues for the effectiveness of ideals, for the power of Utopia over history. The poet places his hand in Whitman's, and proceeds upon his quest. Returning from the sea in "Southern Cross," he searches for love in "National Winter Garden" and "Virginia," for community and friendship in "Quaker Hill," and for art in "The Tunnel." He finds nothing but betrayal: the strip tease dancer burlesques Pocahontas, the office girl is a pallid Mary, the New Avalon Hotel and golf course mock the New England tradition, and the tunnel crucifies Poe. But throughout, the poet's hand is in Whitman's, and at last, having survived the terrors of "The Tunnel," he arrives at the bridge.

II

Brooklyn Bridge lay at the end of the poet's journey, the pledge of a "cognizance" that would explain and redeem history. To reach the bridge, to attain its understanding, the poet suffered the travail of hell. But he emerges unscathed, and ascends the span. In "Atlantis" he reaches Cathay, the symbol of sublime consciousness. The entire action implies a steady optimism that no matter how bad history may be, the bridge will reward the struggle richly. Such is its promise in the opening section of the poem, "Proem: To Brooklyn Bridge."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The setting of "Proem" in the harbor and lower Manhattan area is distinct, though the point of view shifts a good deal within this area, from a long view of the Bay and the Statue of Liberty, to an office in a skyscraper, down an elevator into the street, into a dark movie house, and then to the sun-bathed bridge. The view of the

bridge also changes, from "across the harbor," in which the sun appears to be walking up the diagonal stays, to the promenade and towers as the bedlamite "speeds to thy parapets." Later the point of view is under the bridge, in its shadow. The shifting perspectives secure the object in space; there is no question that it is a bridge across a river between two concretely realized cities.

At the same time, the bridge stands apart from its setting, a world of its own. A series of transformations in the opening stanzas bring us to it. We begin with a seagull at dawn — a specific occurrence, yet eternal ("How many dawns"). The bird's wings leave our eyes as an "inviolable curve" (meaning unprofaned as well as unbroken) to become "apparitional as sails" (apparitional implies "epiphanal" as well as spectral and subjective). Then, in a further transmutation, they become a "page of figures." As the wings leave our eyes, so does the page: "filed away." Then, elevators "drop us" from the bird to the street. In the shift from bird to page to elevator, we have witnessed the transformation of a curve into a perpendicular, of an organism into a mechanism — wings into a list of numbers. "Filed away," the vision of the curve, identified with "sails" and voyages, has been forgotten ("How many" times?), like a page of reckonings. The quest for a vision of bird and sails resumes in the cinema, but, as in Plato's cave, the "flashing scene" is "never disclosed." Then, the eye finds a permanent vision of the curve in the "silver-paced" bridge.

The bridge has emerged from a counterpoint of motions (bird vs. elevator; sails vs. "multitudes bent") as an image of self-containment. Surrounded by a frantic energy ("some flashing scene . . . hastened to again"; "A bedlamite speeds . . .") the bridge is aloof; its motions express the sun. Verbs like drop, tilt, leak, submerge describe the city; the bridge is rendered by verbs like turn, breathe, lift, sweep. Established in its own visual plane, with a motion of its own, the bridge is prepared, by stanza seven, to receive the epithets of divinity addressed to it. Like Mary, it em-

braces, reprieves, and pardons. Its cables and towers are "harp and altar." The lights of traffic along its roadway, its "unfractioned idiom," seem to "condense eternity." Finally, as night has extinguished the cities and thereby clarified the shadow of the bridge, its true meaning becomes clear: its "curveship" represents an epiphany, a myth to manifest the divine. Such at least is what the poet implores the bridge to be.

In "Proem," Brooklyn Bridge achieves its status in direct opposition to the way of life embodied in the cities. Bridge and city are opposing and apparently irreconcilable forms of energy. This opposition, which is equivalent to that between myth and history, continues through the remainder of the poem; it creates the local tensions of each section, and the major tension of the entire work.

This tension is best illustrated in "The Tunnel," the penultimate section of the poem. After a fruitless search for reality in a Times Square theater, the protagonist boards a subway as "the quickest promise home." The short ride to Brooklyn Bridge is a nightmare of banal conversations and advertisements: "To brush some new presentiment of pain." The images are bizarre: "and love/ A burnt match skating in a urinal." Poe appears, his head "swinging from the swollen strap," his eyes "Below the toothpaste and the dandruff ads." The crucified poet, dragged to his death through the streets of Baltimore, "That last night on the ballot rounds," represents how society uses its visionary devotees of beauty.⁷

7. It is wrong to assume that Poe and Whitman oppose each other in this work — one gloomy, the other cheerful. Poe in the tunnel does indeed represent the actuality of art in modern life, but the image is not meant to contradict Whitman's vision — perhaps to countervail it, and by so doing, to reinforce its strength. According to his friends — especially Samuel Loveman — Crane loved both poets, although he derived more substance for his art from Whitman (and Melville). To make this point may also be a good occasion to recall that Whitman himself was powerfully drawn to Poe. There is some evidence they knew each other as newspaper men in New York in the 1840's. Whitman was the only major American writer to attend the dedication of a Poe memorial in Baltimore in 1875, and sat on the platform as Mallarmé's famous poem was being read. In *Specimen Days*, Whitman wrote that Poe's verse

If the "Proem" promised deliverance, "The Tunnel" seems to deliver damnation; its chief character is a Daemon, whose "hideous laughter" is "the muffled slaughter of a day in birth." The Daemon's joke is that he has inverted the highest hopes and brightest prophecies: "O cruelly to inoculate the brinking dawn/ With antennae toward worlds that glow and sink." The presiding spirit in the tunnel, he represents the transvaluation of ideals in modern America.

At the end of "The Tunnel," the protagonist leaves the subway and prepares, at the water's edge, to ascend the bridge. His faith, like Job's, is unimpaired. Job endured the assault of Satan, uttered no complaints, and in the end profited by an enlightened understanding, albeit an irrational one, of the power of his God. It is revealing — although it has been largely unnoticed — that Crane's epigraph to *The Bridge* is taken from Satan's reply to God in Job, 1.7: "From going to and fro in the earth, and from walking up and down in it." The words might be read to indicate the theme of voyage, but their source suggests a richer interpretation: the omnipresence of evil, of the Daemon of "The Tunnel." Job's only defense is unremitting faith in his own righteousness and God's justice. And the same holds for the poet: faith in Whitman, his own powers, and in his bridge.

expressed the "sub-currents" of the age; his poems were "lurid dreams." Thus, Poe presented an "entire contrast and contradiction" to the image of "perfect and noble life" which Whitman himself had tried to realize. But it is significant that Whitman concedes morbidity to be as true of the times as health. He tells of a dream he once had of a "superb little schooner" yacht, with "torn sails and broken spars," tossed in a stormy sea at midnight. "On the deck was a slender, slight, beautiful figure, a dim man, apparently enjoying all the terror, the murk, and the dislocation of which he was the center and the victim. That figure of my lurid dream might stand for Edgar Poe" (*Complete Prose Works*, 150). Whitman's "lurid dream" may very well be a source for Crane's nightmare in "The Tunnel" — where once more Poe is "the center and the victim." Much of the power of both images comes from the fact that, as Jack McManis has said to me, "Whitman's head [or Crane's] also could be swinging from that subway strap."

III

To keep the faith but not close his eyes to reality was Hart Crane's chief struggle in composing *The Bridge*. Reality in the 1920's — the age of jazz, inflated money, and Prohibition — did not seem to support any faith let alone one like Crane's. It was a period of frantic construction, of competition for the title of "Tallest Building in the World," won in 1930 by the Empire State Building. That tower had climbed the sky at the rate of a story a day to the height of a hundred and two floors. Elsewhere, Florida experienced a hysterical real-estate boom. In 1927 the first cross-country highway announced the age of the automobile. The same year, Lindbergh crossed the Atlantic. And in the same decade, the movie palace spread into neighborhoods.

In certain moods, Crane was possessed by the fever of the period: "Time and space is the myth of the modern world," he wrote about Lindbergh, "and it is interesting to see how any victory in the field is heralded by the mass of humanity. In a way my Bridge is a manifestation of the same general subject. Maybe I'm just a little jealous of Lindy!"⁸ But the over-all effect of the direction of American life did not accord with his myth. From 1926 to 1929, years during which his own physical and emotional life deteriorated noticeably,⁹ Crane searched for a way to acknowledge the unhappy reality of America without surrendering his faith. The changes he made in the final poem of the sequence — the poem he had begun in 1923 and altered time and again — disclose the accommodation he reached.

At first, as I have indicated, the finale projected an intense experience of harmony. As his conception of the bridge took shape, he changed the ending accordingly, weaving into it the major images developed earlier, which are mainly nautical and musical. He reor-

8. Hart Crane to his father, June 21, 1927. Yale American Literature Collection.

9. See Philip Horton, *Hart Crane: The Life of an American Poet* (New York, 1937).

ganized the section into a walk across the bridge, and incorporated many structural details of the cables and towers. "I have attempted to induce the same feelings of elation, etc. — like being carried forward and upward simultaneously — both in imagery, rhythm and repetition, that one experiences in walking across my beloved Brooklyn Bridge."

Through the bound cable strands, the arching path
Upward, veering with light, the flight of strings, —
Taut miles of shuttling moonlight syncopate
The whispered rush, telepathy of wires.
Up the index of night, granite and steel —
Transparent meshes — fleckless the gleaming staves —
Sibylline voices flicker, waveringly stream
As though a god were issue of the strings. . . .

* * * *

Sheerly the eyes, like seagulls stung with rime —
Slit and propelled by glistening fins of light —
Pick biting way up towering looms that press
Sidelong with flight of blade on tendon blade
— Tomorrows into yesteryear — and link
What cipher-script of time no traveller reads

Rhythm and imagery convey a real bridge as well as an "arc synoptic": the walk across the span recapitulates the experience of the concluding day.

In stanza six, at the center of the roadway, the poet attains his vision. It is midnight; night is lifted "to cycloramic crest/ Of deepest day." Now, as "Tall Vision-of-the-Voyage," the bridge becomes a "Choir, translating time/ Into what multitudinous Verb": it is "Psalm of Cathay!/ O Love, thy white pervasive Paradigm. . . !" This moment is the climax of the poem. In the six stanzas which follow, Crane interprets the "multitudinous Verb" as the explicit action of reaching Cathay. He achieves this through

predominant images of voyage; the bridge becomes a ship which, in stanza seven, "left the haven hanging in the night." The past tense modulates the tone of the entire section, for we are now "Pacific here at time's end, bearing corn." We have left the physical bridge, and are transported to another realm, a realm which fuses land ("corn") and water ("Pacific") — or Pocahontas and Columbus. The implied image is clearly that of an island, much like the "insular Tahiti" of the soul which Ishmael discovers to his salvation in Melville's *Moby-Dick*. The *Pequod* too had rushed ahead "from all havens astern." In stanza eleven, the poet like the lone survivor of Ahab's madness, finds himself "floating" on the waters, his visionary Belle Isle (Atlantis) sustaining him. In the last stanza, still addressing the bridge, he floats onward toward Cathay. The passage has been made "from time's realm" to "time's end" to "thine Everpresence, beyond time." Like Melville, Crane began his spiritual voyage in the North Atlantic, plunged into older waters, and nearing Cathay, recovered the even older shores of Atlantis. East and West have merged in a single chrysalis.

The language of the closing six stanzas of the section has the resonance of a hymn; it includes some of Crane's most quoted epithets: "Unspeakable Thou Bridge to Thee, O Love." But the oracular tone is bought at an expense. The opening six stanzas were dominated by the physical presence of the bridge and the kinetic sense of moving across it; the last six, having left the "sheened harbor lanterns" behind, remove to a watery element. And as the bridge becomes a symbolic ship, we sense an underlying relaxation. It is true that the language remains rich, even rugged ("Of thy white seizure springs the prophecy"). But the hyperbolic imagery itself seems an effort to substitute verbal energy for genuine tension. The original tension, between the poet-hero and history, seems to be replaced by an unformulated struggle *within* the poet, a struggle to maintain a pitch of language unsupported by a concrete action. For the climactic action of the entire poem had already occurred,

when, at the center of the span, the poet names the bridge as "Paradigm." The rest is an effort, bound to prove inadequate in the nature of the case, to say what it is a paradigm of. Thus the poet, full of ponderous (and, we sense, conflicting) emotions, sails away from the harbor, detaching the myth from its concreteness. And the bridge achieves its final transmutation, into a floating and lonely abstraction.

IV

The dissolution of the bridge as fact — and the subsequent drop in the poem's intensity — was perhaps an inevitable outcome of the poet's conflict between his faith and reality. In the summer of 1926, suffering an attack of skepticism about his "myth of America," Crane stated the problem in his own terms. "Intellectually judged," he wrote to Waldo Frank, "the whole theme and project seems more and more absurd." He felt his materials were not authentic, that "these forms, materials, dynamics are simply non-existent in the world." As for Brooklyn Bridge: "The bridge today has no significance beyond an economical approach to shorter hours, quicker lunches, behaviorism and toothpicks." A month later he had recovered his faith. "I feel an absolute music in the air again," he wrote to Frank, "and some tremendous rondure floating somewhere." He had composed the "Proem," in which the bridge stands firmly opposed to the cities. He had beaten back the nightmarish view of the bridge, and could now proceed with his aim of translating a mechanical structure into a threshold of life.¹⁰

10. In light of Crane's efforts to sustain belief in his cultural symbol, Henry Miller's treatment of the bridge is significant. For Miller, Brooklyn Bridge was an intensely private experience — a means of release from his culture. It served him as it did John Marin, as a perspective upon the city. Only Miller found nothing in modern New York to celebrate. "Way up there," he wrote in *Tropic of Capricorn* (Paris, 1939), he seemed to be "hanging over a void": "up there everything that had ever happened to me seemed unreal . . . unnecessary." (p. 72) The bridge, he felt, disconnected him from the "howling chaos" of the shores. See also "The 14th Ward," *Black Spring* (Paris, 1936). In "The Brooklyn Bridge," the concluding essay in *The Cos-*

But Crane could not dismiss the nightmare. He had to account for it, and he did so in a subtle fashion. Later in 1926 he arrived at the title for his last section: "Atlantis." Until then, it had been "Bridge Finale." The destination of the protagonist's journey, like Columbus's, had been called Cathay, the traditional symbol of the East. Atlantis was the sunken island of the West — older even than the Orient. What does Crane intend by his new title? Does he mean to identify East and West? Or to introduce the idea of the decline of greatness at the very moment his hero's journey is accomplished? What precisely does Atlantis add to our "cognizance" of the bridge?¹¹

The fable of Atlantis had been as important as Cathay to the discovery of the New World. Originally, it was a somewhat mystical legend told by Plato in *Timaeus* and *Critias*, concerning a

mological Eye (New York, 1939), he writes that the bridge had appeared to him with "splendour and illumination" in "violent dreams and visions." He recalled that he took to the bridge "only in moments of extreme anguish," and that he "dreamt very violently" at its center. In these dreams "the whole past would click"; he felt himself annihilated as an ego in space and time, but reborn in a "new realm of consciousness." Thus, he now realizes, the bridge was no longer "a thing of stone and steel" but "incorporated in my consciousness as a symbol." And as a symbol it was a "harp of death," "a means of reinstating myself in the universal stream." Through it he felt "securely situated in my time, yet above it and beyond it." Crane's conception is similar, with this crucial difference: Miller stripped the bridge altogether of its ties with American life, but Crane wished to restore a meaningful relation between bridge and city, and to fuse the personal and the cultural. Moreover, Crane wished to incorporate the stone and steel into the symbol — to join meaning to fact.

Other treatments of the bridge versus the city theme appear in John Dos Passos, *Manhattan Transfer* (New York, 1925); Thomas Wolfe, *The Web and the Rock* (New York, 1938); Vladimir Mayakovsky, "Brooklyn Bridge" (1925), reprinted in *Atlantic* (June 1960); Federico Garcia Lorca, "Unsleeping City (Brooklyn Bridge Nocturne)" (1932), *Poet in New York* (New York, 1955). On May 26, 1923, the Sunday *Brooklyn Eagle* celebrated the fortieth birthday of the bridge with a poem by Martin H. Weyrauch, "The Bridge Speaks," in which the structure argues against modernization of itself in these words: "I think we ought to have/ At least one personality/ In this City of Wild Motion/ That stands for the solid,/ The poised,/ The quiet/ Things of Life." It is likely that Hart Crane, already at work on his poem and living in Brooklyn Heights, read these lines.

11. In May 1926 Crane recorded in a letter that he had been reading *Atlantis in America* by Lewis Spence. Spence, a leading student of mythology (he died in 1955),

land in the western ocean (the Atlantic), founded by Poseidon, god of the sea. Once all-powerful, the nation had grown lustful, and was punished for its pride with earthquakes and floods; in a single day it sunk forever. But the legend remained, and during the fifteenth century, was popular among sailors. The island was believed to be the place where seven Portuguese bishops, fleeing the Moors, had founded seven golden cities. Sailors hoped to rediscover this land, where Christians still lived in piety and wealth. To discover Atlantis, or to reach Cathay — these were the leading motifs among the navigators who sailed westward in the fifteenth century. No one, not even Columbus, dreamed that an entirely new world lay between the sunken world and the legendary riches of the Orient.¹²

Crane thus had historical grounds for identifying Atlantis and Cathay. As it turned out, the discovery of America proved both

devoted much of his time and numerous books to "the Atlantean question." Crane found convincing his argument that there are traces of Atlantean civilization in American Indian culture: "it's easy to believe that a continent existed in mid-Atlantic waters and that the Antilles and West Indies are but salient peaks of its surface" (*Letters*, 255-6). It is, unfortunately, impossible to learn whether Crane knew *Atlantis: The Antediluvian World* (1882) — a remarkable work by Ignatius Donnelly, the fascinating Minnesotan, who tried to found a city in the 1850's, served many years in Congress, was an out-spoken Populist, a Baconian in the controversy over the identity of Shakespeare (he produced a massive argument in 1885, *The Great Cryptogram*), and something of an embittered prophet (*Caesar's Column*, 1890). His book on Atlantis was widely influential among students of the problem; Lewis Spence linked his name with Plato as the most prominent in "Atlantean science." Among the propositions Donnelly tried to prove were that Atlantis was "the true Antediluvian world; the Garden of Eden," and therefore, "the region where man first rose from a state of barbarism to civilization." To establish these — and other — "facts," would, he wrote, "aid us to rehabilitate the fathers of our civilization, our blood, and our fundamental ideas — the men who lived, loved, and labored ages before the Aryans descended upon India, or the Phoenicians had settled in Syria, or the Goths had reached the shores of the Baltic." Atlantis, in other words, provided mankind — and Americans in particular — with a historical tradition far older than any yet imagined. Donnelly's book was reissued, with revisions by Egerton Sykes, in 1949.

12. See Boies Penrose, *Travel and Discovery in the Renaissance, 1420-1620* (Cambridge, 1952), 5, 19, 25; also, J. H. Parry, *The Age of Reconnaissance* (New York, 1964), 165.

legends to be illusions: neither had the geographical position attributed to it by Renaissance navigators. Both, however, remained active myths — Cathay inspiring the revived theme of the Northwest Passage in the nineteenth century, and Atlantis even yet arousing speculation. Crane had indicated early in the composition of his poem that Cathay would stand for "consciousness, knowledge, spiritual unity" — material conquest transmuted into "an attitude of spirit." What does Atlantis stand for?

The answer is complex. When we learn from Plato that the Atlanteans possessed a land with a great central plain, "said to have been the fairest of all plains, and very fertile," the resemblance to America is striking. Further, we learn that they were a race of highly inventive builders, who intersected the island with a vast system of inland canals. They had invented basic tools, farming, and the alphabet. Their proudest creations, however, were bridges — a series of bridges, in fact, which led over the canals toward the exact center of the island. There, a monumental bridge opened upon the gate to a temple, the shrine of Poseidon.

This was Atlantis in its glory. But, Plato revealed, the glory did not last. The "divine portion" faded away, and human nature "got the upper hand." The people grew prideful, avaricious, imperialistic. And most of all, they grew blind to their own failings — blind to the loss of their true powers.

Crane wove references to the sunken island throughout the fabric of the poem. They appear in "Cutty Sark" as the old sailor's memory of "the skeletons of cities." They recur forcefully in "The Tunnel" in two echoes of Poe's "The City in the Sea": "And Death, aloft, — gigantically down," and "worlds that glow and sink." And they emerge explicitly in stanza eleven of the finale:

Now while thy petals spend the suns about us, hold —
 (O Thou whose radiance doth inherit me)
 Atlantis, — hold thy floating singer late!

In the preceding line, the bridge was addressed as a sea creature — "Anemone." Here, the poet invokes the floating form, now

called Atlantis, to sustain his faith. In the following stanza, the last of the poem, the poet passes "to thine Everpresence, beyond time," as the "orphic strings . . . leap and converge." Then:

— One Song, one Bridge of Fire! Is it Cathay,
Now pity steeps the grass and rainbows ring
The serpent with the eagle in the leaves . . . ?
Whispers antiphonal in the azure swing.

The question *may* indicate doubt that the bridge does in fact represent the "mystic consummation" of Cathay; more likely, it indicates wonder. The antiphonal whispers through the cables of the disembodied bridge could hardly be negative. Atlantis, the bridge-anemone, had answered the prayer and held the "floating singer late."

How did the sunken island earn such a high function? Where did it get the "radiance" to bestow upon the poet? The answer lies once more in Plato's account. The people of Atlantis had indeed become blind in their pride and materialism — but not all of them. "To those who had no eye to see the true happiness, they still appeared glorious and blessed at the very time when they were filled with unrighteous avarice and power." Some, however, retained "an eye to see," and these few recognized baseness as baseness. The still radiant ones kept their "precious gift" of the "divine portion."¹³

It is now clear what Crane meant. His *Cathay*, his moment of supreme awareness, was a moment of Atlantean "radiance." With

13. It should be noted that Crane's epigraph to "Atlantis" is from *The Symposium*: "Music is then the knowledge of that which relates to love in harmony and system." This reinforces my view of his reliance upon the Platonic version of Atlantis — and the Platonism of *The Bridge*. Harmony and system were central features of the island civilization — as they are of the Platonic cosmology. Love and music, moreover, had been identified with the poet's quest throughout, and with the bridge in "Proem." The image of Atlantis, then, helps Crane draw these threads together in the finale.

an "eye to see," he perceived the bridge as more than stone and steel, as a "mystic consummation." He perceived the gift embodied in the bridge. The inhabitants of the Daemon's dark tunnels could no longer see — no longer make out the shape of the future within the chaos of the present. These are the people for whom the bridge was nothing but "an economical approach." They represented the loss of radiance, the sinking of Atlantis.

Crane used the Atlantis legend, like the epigraph from Job, to maintain a double insight: the promise of redemption and the actuality of evil. As long as he held the double view, as long as he was able to affirm the myth while condemning the actuality of his culture, he would not sink. To this end he required a bridge to rise above the wreckage of history — to rise above itself — and be a pure curvship. The purity was essential; the bridge could harbor no ambiguities. Hence its symbolic radiance became the only enduring fact of Hart Crane's Brooklyn Bridge.

*Their understanding
Begins to swell; and the approaching tide
Will shortly fill the reasonable shore,
That now lies foul and muddy.*

The Tempest, V, 1

Epilogue

Hart Crane completed the passage of Brooklyn Bridge from fact to symbol. Such a passage was implicit in the earliest ideas of an East River bridge, in Thomas Pope's conception as well as John Roebling's. In the transformation, Crane eliminated the bridge's function as "an economical approach to shorter hours, quicker lunches, behaviorism and toothpicks." He imagined an ideal function: a leap into a new consciousness. He refused to — or could not — acknowledge the social reality of his symbol, its concrete relations to its culture.

The basic motive of Crane's poem was to redeem a bad history for the sake of a good myth: to abolish time and its struggles for a timeless Utopia. An undertaking of this sort is essential for the well-being of any civilization; societies need Utopia to provide directives for action. Crane wanted, in Kenneth Burke's expression, to state his "culture's essence in narrative terms," and thereby provide a myth that might serve as an ideology to guide America in history.¹ He chose materials that were not only authentically American but accurately mythological: Philip Young has shown how well the poet exploited the mythopoeic possibilities of Pocahontas and Rip Van Winkle.² Equally important, Crane understood the idealistic strain in American life, a strain which he accurately identified with

1. "Ideology and Myth," *Accent*, VII (Summer 1947), 195-205.

2. "Fallen from Time: The Mythic Rip Van Winkle," *Kenyon Review*, XXII (Autumn 1960), 547-73, and "The Mother of Us All: Pocahontas Reconsidered," *Kenyon Review*, XXIV (Summer 1962), 391-415.

the imaginative construct of land and nature: Pocahontas embodying the Virgin Land.

For Jefferson, history lay far beyond the sea, in the courts and on the battlefields of Europe. He felt secure in the timeless bosom of the American landscape. But for Crane, history was the condition of daily life. What had begun for Jefferson as a road in the wilderness had become for Crane on one hand, an ideal bridge, but on the other, a mad tunnel under a city. Hence his resentment against history was deeper than Jefferson's, more abrasive than Whitman's. Hence his myth in the end finds no accommodation with history. It was not political, like Jefferson's, or social, like Whitman's. It was aesthetic and private. The very language in which it is realized forbids the access of a large audience. With no common ground between myth and history, he found no common ground between himself and his culture.

And yet, the symbol of his myth, Brooklyn Bridge, is a concrete historical object; it was created in travail amidst corruption; it serves as a highway between two cities; it connects tunnels. This is a paradox no amount of rhetoric can deny: to secure its link with eternity, Crane had to abolish the bridge's link with the opposite shores — to abolish exactly that which made it a bridge! To serve as America's symbol it could no longer serve as Brooklyn's bridge. Crane could not have it both ways.

"Hart Crane saw the structure only as an idea," writes Alfred Kazin; "to the Roeblings the idea was only in the structure."³

3. "Brooklyn Bridge," *Harper's Bazaar* (September 1946). Kazin's treatment of the bridge in his autobiography, *A Walker in the City* (New York, 1951), is closely tied to the pattern which has emerged in this study. "Whenever I humbly retired into the subway for the long ride home," he wrote, "something would automatically pull me out at Brooklyn Bridge for one last good walk across the promenade before I fell into the subway again." All his walks across the bridge, he continued, "were efforts to understand one single half-hour at dusk, on a dark winter day, the year I was fourteen." Alone on the bridge that day, he suddenly "felt lost and happy" as he "passed under the arches of the tower." With a "riot" in his heart, he saw "the cables lead up to the tower, saw those great meshed triangles leap up and up, higher and still

The difference Kazin expresses is significant. By reducing it to "idea," did not Crane strip the bridge of possible social values, values which might have provided an alternative to the blind life of the cities? Might not the bridge have served as a moral as well as mystical symbol — indicating a state of society as well as a state of consciousness?

Crane's predicament represents a conflict within an entire civilization. The paradox of his symbol resembles the paradox of those early proposals to build roads into the wilderness as a way to return to nature, to escape history. America seems to have learned very late, if at all, that roads create history, not abolish it; they inevitably lead to cities, not to the land. And in reaction against the city, Americans have tended to conceive of the land, like Crane's bridge, as an escape rather than as a source of values by which history might be directed, or the growth of cities controlled.

Although his Hegelian confidence, often bordering on naïveté, can no longer be ours, John Augustus Roebling seemed to grasp what eluded many of his countrymen: the idea that history was the realm of the possible. Guided by ideals, Roebling transformed stone and steel into a shape that was both practical and symbolic; he found for his Utopia a tangible form. His materials mediated between the ideas his mind wandered among and the ground he stood on. By and large his countrymen have alternated between the two extremes: a high-flown idealism, scornful of social goals, and an abject historicism, in which a bridge is "nothing but" an "economical approach." Unable to incorporate the "nothing but" into his myth, Hart Crane himself swung from exaltation to jeremiad. His Word could not redeem, and so it lamented. Above the conflicting emotions arose a symbolic bridge, shorn of its history and its actuality: it was a reconciliation detached from space and time.

higher — Lord my Lord, when will they cease to drive me up with them in their flight? — and then, each line singing out alone the higher it came and nearer, fly flaming into the topmost eyelets of the tower." (105-7)

A detached symbol, whatever its roots in the psyche of the poet, is helpless against the facts of tunnels, cinemas, and elevators. If it is to redeem its culture — if it is to project a meaningful Utopia — it must be grounded in actuality. To bring the symbol back to earth requires a simultaneous grasp of the desirable and the possible. John Roebling possessed such a grasp. In his mind the bridge was both fact and ideal: a roadway for traffic below and a structure for poets above. Each required the other; each was incomplete without the other. Thus acknowledged as a fact in all its dimensions, Brooklyn Bridge might still incite dreams of possibility, might yet become a new symbol of what ought to be.

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