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Hart Crane's Poetry

“Appollinaire lived in Paris, I live in Cleveland, Ohio”

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As always, for Meme, my beloved.
And for the outrageous Harold

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Preface

This is a somewhat old-fashioned kind of book. It is a reading of Hart Crane's poetry that brings to bear on the poetic text information from a variety of sources (e.g., art history, history of ideas, biography, psychoanalysis, classical literature, philosophy, mythology, and so on). What this reading of Crane's work aims to show is that *The Bridge* is the best twentieth-century long poem in English and that it is the best not by a little but by a lot. Among modern long poems it is the richest and most wide-ranging in its mythic and historical resonances, the most inventive in its combination of structures drawn from literature and the visual arts, and the most subtle and compelling in terms of its psychological underpinnings, to name only three areas in which it excels. This book also argues that the best entry to the shorter poems in Crane's first volume, *White Buildings*, and to his last poem, "The Broken Tower," is through his epic—hence, the rationale for this book's organization. Where previous studies of Crane's poetry have characteristically begun with an examination of his shorter poems and then proceeded to *The Bridge*, this study reverses the process by beginning with an examination of the long poem and then taking on the poems in *White Buildings* and "The Broken Tower." Any reader of Crane's poetry knows the difficulty involved in interpreting the poems in *White Buildings*, a difficulty created by the density of their imagery, the brevity of the context any individual poem presents, and the demands made by Crane's "logic of metaphor," a poetic practice that depends on the "so-called illogical impingement of the connotations of words" (Crane 165) on the reader's consciousness. But in *The Bridge*—with its implicit narrative thread, a subject matter ostensibly rooted in American myth and history, and an enlarged context to clarify repeated structural images, and key words (a context that can be invoked to supplement the restricted contexts of his shorter poems)—the reader has the best road map for navigating the rest of Crane's poetry. That is why this study deals first with Crane's epic.

Crane's two sometime friends, Allen Tate and Yvor Winters, largely set the tone of the initial critical response to *The Bridge*—a response that saw the poem as a magnificent failure. And later critics often believed this judgment's accuracy was in some sense confirmed by Crane's suicide two years after the poem's publication. Tate and Winters, both college educated, would go on to distinguished academic careers as poet-critics, while Crane, with only a high school diploma, would educate himself through reading and through conversations with friends (mostly writers and visual artists). But Crane was a major poet, and Tate and Winters were minor poets, and their initial reaction to *The Bridge*—while ostensibly arguing that Crane's poem was too Romantic and Whitmanian, too extravagant (and thus foredoomed) in its optimism, not modern and Eliotic enough—may also have represented a degree of professional *ressentiment* (to use Nietzsche's word). Both Tate and Winters also remembered personal quarrels with Crane, often caused by Hart's boisterous or erratic behavior when drinking: such memories may have made the two academic poet-critics feel that the high-school-educated, "roaring boy" of modern American poetry could not possibly have written an epic. Their reaction may have been further complicated by the fact that though *The Bridge*, in its effort to be a synthesis of American myth and history, was *strategically* an epic, it was *tactically* a lyric, seeking to achieve that strategic epic goal through a disjunctive series of lyric epiphanies in its sections.

This Tate/Winters sense of *The Bridge* as a magnificent failure was accepted critical wisdom when I first read Crane in college in the early 1960s, though by the time I came to write my dissertation on the poem in graduate school a few years later, the situation had begun to change. The change was driven, it seems to me, by two factors: first, a more sophisticated reading of what Romanticism

involved was making readers realize that much of the best twentieth-century English and American poetry was late Romantic; second, a generational change in attitudes in the mid-1960s made that vision of American origins (which Crane had created in *The Bridge* as a prophetic image of America's future) seem less a matter of extravagant optimism than one of practical necessity. Crane's vision of the pre-Columbian Indian world (to which he imaginatively journeyed back in the poem through his surrogate, the poetic quester) was one in which a native people, spiritually wed to the physical nature of their land, cultivated and cared for the environment as if it were a beloved parent or a spouse, rather than exploiting it. The prophetic vision of an eventual return to such an origin (which is to say, to the environmental attitudes it entailed) clearly struck a responsive chord with young people in the 1960s. Since then, it seems, the reputation of *The Bridge* has continued to increase as readers have come to see its vision of an American future (devoted to conserving the natural world) as a prophecy not romantically boisterous and naive but unavoidably realistic. In more recent years, *The Bridge* has been the subject of several helpful works that examine gay poetics or that study the question of poetic influence in the modern period, and the poem has been discussed tangentially in two new biographies of Crane. In 2006, the Library of America series recognized the importance of Crane's work by giving him his own volume (edited by Langdon Hammer). But the question of *The Bridge*'s essential unity, of an interpretation that integrates all the poem's disparate sections into a coherent whole, and of the way such an interpretation becomes the primary heuristic device in interpreting the rest of Crane's poetry has remained open and is the task to which this study addresses itself.

A word about the subtitle of this book. In high school and college I was under the thrall of T. S. Eliot's poetry and prose. For me, he defined what a poet and critic were; yet as a young American interested in becoming both, I came to feel that Eliot, though both poet and critic, never seemed quite American enough. But when I first read Crane and came across lines like those in "The River" describing the freight-train-riding hobos as "Blind fists of nothing, humpty-dumpty clods" or in "The Harbor Dawn," "a truck will lumber past the wharves / As winch engines begin throbbing on some deck; / Or a drunken stevedore's howl and thud below / Come echoing alley-upward through dim snow," I immediately recognized both the vocabulary and sound of American speech. The sentence that serves as my subtitle comes from a May 1922 letter from Crane to his friend Gorham Munson. Discussing Matthew Josephson's championing in the magazine *Secession* of the French poet Guillaume Apollinaire's avant-gardism, Crane reacts against the notion that his own work should "harmonize" with any school or group of modern writers, holding out for the freedom to be himself and American, and not a faux European: "I am interested in possibilities. Apollinaire lived in Paris, live in Cleveland, Ohio" (Crane 276). Whether Crane knew that he had misspelled Apollinaire's name didn't care, or did it on purpose (he had misspelled it differently a few sentences earlier in the letter) his gesture of specifying the state in which Cleveland is located precisely to emphasize that no one need specify Paris's location seems like a turning of the fate of provincialism into a power (to recall Emerson's formula), a defiant gesture worthy of Stevens's "inchling" who "bristles in these pines" and says, "Your world is you. I am my world." It was that aspect of Crane's poetry that first attracted me to it, and the lifelong study of that poetry ultimately made Crane for me a more important poet than Eliot.

While writing my dissertation on *The Bridge* and teaching Crane's poetry once every year for most of the past forty, my admiration for his writing has never diminished; indeed, that admiration kept me working on this book over several decades. Though the manuscript was often put aside during those years in order to complete other writing projects, it was always returned to, and now it is completed. This is the second book in a larger work of triangulation that I projected in the preface to *The Mystery to a Solution* as a three-book suite dealing with four writers—Poe and Borges in the first, Crane in the

second, and Scott Fitzgerald in the third. In that preface I described the extended project as an examination of a structure that the four authors' works shared, one governing these authors' "relationship to their art and thematized in their work" (xv). This structure grew

out of each writer's engagement with Platonic idealism, specifically, their more or less conscious understanding of the allegory of the cave as a womb fantasy that translated the notion of origin (and thus of the self) from a physical to a mental plane and their further understanding that this fantasized return to origin could be assimilated to another structure governing their relationship to their art: that sense of the male artist's ability (personified in the muse) to conceive and give birth to the work, the artist's identification with the muse-as-mother. What animates the art of these four writers in varying ways is a structure whose underpinning is the desire for a total return to the matrix (the space of origin and of original power), but a return *wholly on the son's own terms.*' (xv–xvi)

As I write this introduction, several chapters of the Fitzgerald book have already been completed.

All that remains to do here is to acknowledge, and express my gratitude to, those people who fostered my early interest in Crane, gave help and advice in writing this book, or published parts of it in magazines or anthologies. The first is my friend and mentor, the late Monroe K. Spears, who directed my dissertation on *The Bridge* at Rice University, a dissertation that grew out of a seminar paper I had originally written for another friend and teacher at Rice, David Minter. Of the many people who through conversations or suggestions contributed to my understanding of Crane's work, I would mention Harold Bloom, John Hollander, the late Joe Riddel, J. Hillis Miller, Richard Macksey, Pier-Massimo Forni, Matthew Roller, Francis Mondimore, and Paul Feldman. The magazine editors who published parts of the book were John Dixon Hunt at *Word & Image*, Richard Poirier at *Raritan Review*, and Edgar Dryden at *Arizona Quarterly*. Additionally, Kenneth Johnston and Herbert Marks reprinted in their collection *Romantic Revolutions: Criticism and Theory* the essay on Crane that originally appeared in *Raritan Review*. Needless to say, any excellences in this book are partly due to the aforementioned individuals; any faults in it are all my own. Finally, I wish to acknowledge the generosity of the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation, which awarded me a fellowship to work on this study.

Part One
The Bridge

The Pictorial and the Poetic; *The Bridge* as a Prophetic Vision of Origins

In a 1927 letter to his benefactor Otto Kahn outlining the plan and progress of *The Bridge*, Hart Crane noted that each section of the poem “is a separate canvas, as it were, yet none yields its entire significance when seen apart from the others. One might take the Sistine Chapel as an analogy.”¹ Crane’s remark is characteristic of his comments on the overall construction of *The Bridge* in that it compares the poem’s verbal structure to works of visual art—paintings, architecture, or a combination of the two (paintings of architectural subjects or works of architecture in which paintings are an integral part of the structure’s interior, as in the Sistine Chapel). Indeed, Crane describes the résumé of the poem he sent Kahn as “a commentary on my architectural method” (555).

In those few instances where Crane uses a musical image for poetic structure, he usually applies it to a single section of the poem rather than to the whole work, as when he tells Kahn that the “Cutty Sark” section “is built on the plan of a *fugue*. Two ‘voices’—that of the world of Time, and that of the world of Eternity—are interwoven in the action” (557). Yet even these musical images have a way of metamorphosing into those of painting or architecture, as in his description of the poem’s concluding “Atlantis” section in a 1927 letter to Yvor Winters: “It aspires a little (perhaps far too much!) to the famous Pater-ian ‘frozen music,’ i.e. it may rely too much on a familiarity with the unique architecture of Brooklyn Bridge, to me the most superb and original example of an American architecture yet hinted at” (539)—a curious remark conflating Pater’s dictum from *The Renaissance* that “*All art constantly aspires towards the condition of music*” with Friedrich Schlegel’s description of architecture as “frozen music.” In his comparisons of poetic and visual structures, Crane almost always has a specific visual work in mind, whether it be the frescoes in the Sistine Chapel, El Greco’s *Agony in the Garden*, Joseph Stella’s paintings of Brooklyn Bridge, or the physical structure of the bridge itself. In contrast, Crane’s comparisons of poetic structures to musical forms never mention specific musical works. What we find instead are broad, impressionistic statements, like his remark that the “verbal dynamics ... and the spacious periodicity of the rhythm” in “Ave Maria” and “Atlantis” result “in an unusually symphonic form” (441) or that at the beginning of “The River” the “rhythm is jazz” (556).

Crane’s tendency to describe *The Bridge*’s overall structure in pictorial or architectural terms rather than musical ones stems in part from the fact that, though visual art and music were both important influences on his work, the artistic environment in which his talent first developed was made up almost exclusively of painters and writers, so that his earliest technical models of artistic form other than literary were painterly. Philip Horton suggests, for example, that Crane’s early discussions of painting with the artist William Sommer, as well as the sketches and watercolors that Crane did under Sommer’s tutelage, “served to sharpen and crystallize his awareness of the possibilities in his own medium” of verse (Horton 110). Horton contends that Crane’s “enthusiastic study of modern painting” influenced the structure of the later, more complex poems in *White Buildings*, in that Crane’s “attitude towards them was primarily plastic. He considered them not as vehicles of thought so much as bodies of the impalpable substance of language to be molded into aesthetically self-sufficient and complete units” (177–78). In addition to Sommer’s early influence, there were Crane’s friendships with the artists Carl Schmitt and Richard Rychtarik, the architect William Lescaze, and the photographer and art dealer Alfred Stieglitz, not to mention Crane’s wide range of acquaintances among prominent artists of the day—Gaston Lachaise, Marsden Hartley, Pete Blume, Joseph Stella, Georgia O’Keeffe, and David Siqueiros (who painted Crane’s portrait in

Mexico). In his letters, Crane's references to paintings and visual artists outnumber his references to music and composers five to one.

It seems predictable that Crane would use analogues from the visual arts to describe the structure of a poem whose central symbol is a work of architecture, a poem for whose first edition Crane had wanted to use one of Stella's visionary paintings of Brooklyn Bridge as an emblematic frontispiece (605) (see [fig. 1.1](#)). And this would be a natural enough expectation were it not for the fact that the whole point of Crane's symbolic bridge is that its structure is meant to represent the fusion of time and space, of musical and pictorial form, in a visionary synthesis. Moreover, for all of Crane's comparisons of poetic to pictorial form, he never attempts in the poem any significant pictographic or ideographic representation of its content. *The Bridge* does contain brief passages (like the description of the plane crash in "Cape Hatteras") where the arrangement of lines on the page visually evokes the action described in the text, though in most of these passages the action is always the same—a fall or descent, typographically mimed by an intentionally erratic cascade of words down the page. And it is also true that, in a letter to Winters, Crane described the final part of "Cutty Sark" as "pure calligramme"—by which he meant that the "line-end word divisions and all have an organic purpose" and that he would not "allow it to be printed in any detail other than the mss designates" (Parkinson 14). But Crane did not intend in either instance that the arrangement of the words produce a picture or emblem of the poem's subject, as was the case, for example, with many of the poems in Apollinaire's *Calligrammes*. And certainly none of the instances of evocative lineation or word division in the poem has any significant relationship to the poem's overall structure. Whatever the spatial form of *The Bridge* involves, it is clearly not a matter of those "calligraphic tricks" that, as Crane noted in his essay "General Aims and Theories," are "used so brilliantly at times by an impressionist like Cummings" (162), Crane's friend who was both painter and poet. The surface form of the poem is temporal, sequential, and, in that sense, musical, moving in time from beginning to end.

Yet, having said that by way of counterbalance, I would still emphasize that in his prose descriptions of the poem's overall structure Crane drew his comparisons almost exclusively from the visual arts. This practice was an expression not just of his faithfulness, as a literalist of the imagination, to the visual component of prophetic vision, to the literal modes of sight that inform the notion of prophetic insight, but also of his faithfulness to a specific tradition in the pictorial representation of prophetic vision in Western art and, more specifically still, to that pictorial tradition as interpreted by Oswald Spengler in his discussion of the development of perspective in Western painting in *The Decline of the West* (1918).



Figure 1.1. Joseph Stella, *The Voice of the City of New York Interpreted: The Bridge*, 1920–22. Oil and tempera on canvas, 88½ × 50 in. The Newark Museum, Newark, NJ. Photograph by Newark Museum/Art Resource, NY.

Crane read the first volume of *The Decline of the West* in June and July of 1926 on the Isle of Pines, Cuba, just prior to his most productive period of work on *The Bridge*, during which the various strands of the poem coalesced into an overall design. In a letter to Waldo Frank that August, Crane describes Spengler’s at first disabling and then, by a curious reversal, enabling effect on the writing of the poem, adding that reading him “was perhaps a very good experience for ripening some of *The Bridge*,” since it seemed, along with other “circumstances,” to have “conspired in a strangely symbolical way toward the present speed of my work” (484).

To understand the specific influence *The Decline of the West* had on the pictorially based structure of Crane’s poem, we must first examine certain conventions of the visual representation of prophetic vision in late Gothic and Renaissance art, then discuss Spengler’s interpretation of the development of perspective in Renaissance painting, and then briefly analyze how Spengler’s reading of the culture-symbol of perspective in Western art established the pictorial background upon which the notion of visionary perspective draws in shaping both the form and content of *The Bridge*.

As a preliminary, let me make clear the sense in which I understand *The Bridge* to be a prophetic vision of origins. The central action of the poem is an imaginative quest that begins in “The Harbor Dawn” section with the quester’s dream vision of his union with a mysterious woman whom he will later discover is the Indian maiden Pocahontas, symbol of the virgin continent. The quest then “progresses backwards” (556) through symbolic moments in the history of the American spirit until it reaches the pre-Columbian, Indian world of “The Dance,” where the quester witnesses, in the sacred

marriage of the chieftain Maquokeeta and the virgin Pocahontas, a primal scene of origin in which time and space, American history and environment, mythic lore and physical land are conjoined in a “mystical” union whose emblem is the bird-serpent, the Indian symbol of the conjunction of opposites—the serpent of time and the eagle of space, as Crane describes it.

Having seen the origin of this American higher consciousness, the poetic quester, in his return journey to the present, again passes through a series of symbolic moments in the history of the American spirit, moments that show the gradual loss of that original, visionary world as the white man’s materialism submerged the mythic Amerindian nature-world. Crane’s symbol of that submerged world is the ancient continent of Atlantis, sunk beneath the sea by the gods because of its inhabitants’ materialism. In the process of showing us the gradual loss of that original world, the quester also shows us that symbolic traces of it still remain and that throughout American history visionaries like Whitman, Poe, and Emily Dickinson have used these traces in their work to evoke the image of an ideal America. Finally, in the concluding “Atlantis” section, the quester presents us with his “mystical synthesis of ‘America,’” (321), a radically foreshortened, more abstract vision of our origin and history than that presented in the body of the poem. But that vision of the past is also a prophecy of the future, for in the Platonic, circular time-system that underlies the poem’s view of history, the ultimate destiny of America is a return to its origin. Like the sunken Atlantis, the submerged world of American origins is destined to reemerge when the visions of individual seers such as Poe, Whitman, Dickinson, and Crane dominate the materialist worldview and become the shared mythos of all Americans.

From this synopsis we can see that for Crane prophetic vision involves the ability to look backward into the past as a means of looking forward into the future, the ability to see, as if within a single frame, events so widely separated in time and space that in real life no individual could ever observe them in a single physical glimpse. This ability to see the future by looking into the past implies, of course, that past events foreshadow future ones, and so one of the things we must begin by examining is the way the literary notion of foreshadowing or prefiguration acquires a progressively complex visual syntax in late Gothic and Renaissance art.

The Visual Structure of Prophetic Vision; a Simultaneous Glimpse Before and Behind

Let us start by considering Henri Bellechose's painting *Altarpiece of St. Denis with Scenes from His Life* (fig. 2.1) from the Charterhouse of Champmol, now in the Louvre. Completed at the beginning of the fifteenth century, the picture is a good example of a work of art produced during a transition period between two different traditions of visual representation, in that its Byzantine gold background thwarts the sense of spatial depth that its foreground attempts to convey by means of overlapping contours and a series of visually inconsistent diminutions and foreshortenings—"a curious combination of cult image and historical narrative" in Erwin Panofsky's words (1:83–85). The foreground of the painting is a characteristic moment in the history of Western art's progress from pictorial devices that signify the idea of spatial depth to devices that create the visual illusion of depth. In this painting the atemporal or eternal icon of the Crucifixion intersects the horizontal, left-to-right timeline of the historical narrative in such a way that all three events occupy a continuous, visually integrated foreground. If one did not know in advance the identities and relationships of the people in the painting, one might assume by reading these events left to right (like panels in a comic strip) that the individual shown ministering to the person in prison was subsequently crucified and then the prisoner was beheaded.

Though the event depicted at the panel's center clearly dominates those on either side and thus could be presumed of greater importance, the visual clues do not indicate that the central event was separated in time and place from the last communion and martyrdom of St. Denis, bishop of Paris and patron saint of France. Rather, these clues—such as the overlapping of the contour of the cross by the halo of the severed head and the handle of the headman's axe—place the central event physically in the midst of those on either side. Clearly, the painting's organization of events has been influenced by the narrative structure of a triptych, where the order center-left-right would be a conventional narrative sequence. Yet it is the very fact that the painting is not a triptych—that the three events have not been painted on three separate panels but have been visually integrated within the single picture space—that is of interest; for it is precisely that spatial integration of events widely separated in time that points up the temporal or sequential ambiguity of the painting's visual syntax. On a horizontal timeline the central event is out of sequence.

This is not to say that the fifteenth-century Christians who viewed the painting would have been confused about its symbolic significance. As they would have understood, the painting makes visible the typological relationship between Christ and a figure of Christ. But what makes the painting significant for our purposes is that, standing as it does with one foot in an older, iconic tradition and the other in a newer, naturalistic one, it illustrates the technical problem the artist faced in trying to align the older tradition's symbolic representation of metaphysical relationships with the newer one's visually consistent, perspectival representation of physical relationships. Or, to put it another way, the artist was faced with the problem of whether the temporal, literary notion of prefiguration could be integrated into the new pictorial preoccupation with the illusion of depth, whether the old notion of foreshadowing could be expressed in the new visual syntax of foreshortening, whether a painting could be both theologically exact and visually convincing.

To understand what is at issue here, consider another painting of the same period from the Charterhouse of Champmol—Melchior Broederlam's rendering of the Annunciation, Visitation, Presentation in the Temple, and Flight into Egypt (1394–99) on the exterior of a pair of wooden

shutters for an altarpiece, now in the Musée de Ville at Dijon (figs. 2.2 and 2.3). The four moments from the Gospel story are organized along a horizontal timeline running from left to right, two moments per panel, with a further separation between moments being provided by the alternation of indoor and outdoor settings. One reads the events by moving in the same left-to-right direction that one uses in reading the written story from which they were taken. Though the artist has expended great effort in creating a sense of depth in the landscapes and the architectural interiors, he has made no significant use of that pictorial depth in visually organizing the narrative sequence of the four events: a sequence that proceeds horizontally across the foreground virtually unaffected by the perspectival splendors behind it.

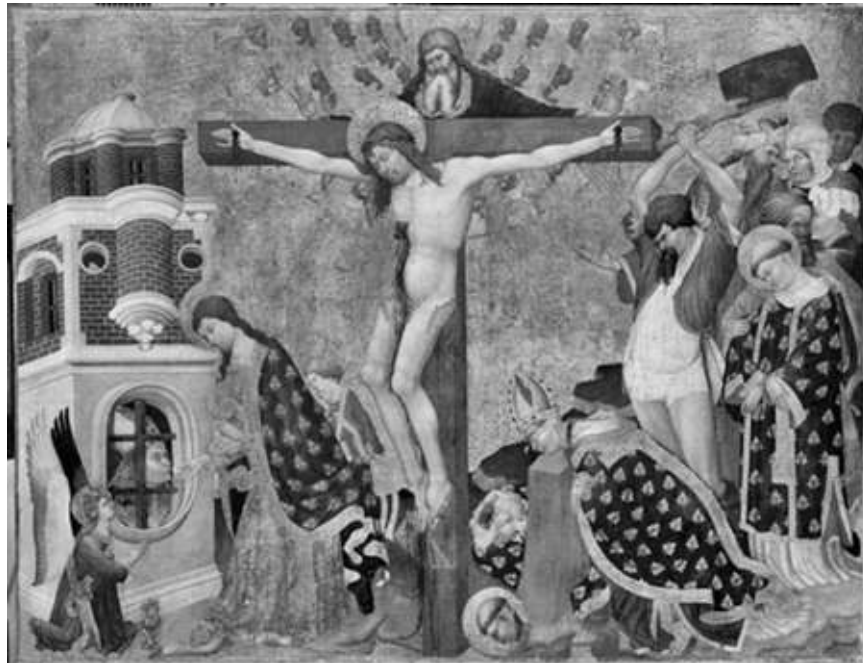


Figure 2.1. Henri Bellechouse, *Altarpiece of Saint Denis with Scenes from His Life*, finished in 1416. Tempera on wood panel, 63½ × 82¾ in. Louvre, Paris, France. Photograph by Réunion des Musées Nationaux/Art Resource, NY.

Now compare Broederlam's rendering of the Annunciation with the Sienese painter Giovanni di Paolo's version of the same subject from around 1445 (fig. 2.4). As with Broederlam's panels, the events in Paolo's painting are organized in a temporal sequence that runs from left to right, but in this case the timeline along which the events are located, instead of running horizontally across the foreground of the painting, begins within its painted depth and intersects the picture plane on a diagonal. From the present of the foreground, we look back along an oblique line into the past. At the farthest point of figuration (upper left), we see the origin of all things, God the Father; then, in the middle ground, the beginning of the human race as Adam and Eve are driven from the garden to begin the work of procreation (iconographically suggested by the hares playing on the tapestry-like lawn). Finally, in the foreground, we see the Virgin, a descendant of that line of human procreation, at the moment when a divine procreation begins the work of redeeming Adam and Eve's descendants and reorienting that line of descent (visually evoked by the timeline descending diagonally from God to the Virgin) back toward its divine origin, a reorientation indicated here by the artist's making St. Joseph, the human stepfather (sequestered in the spatial depth at lower right), face in the direction of that divine origin at upper left.



Figure 2.2. Melchior Broederlam, *Annunciation and Visitation*, 1394. Panel, 64 × 51 in. Musee des Beaux-Arts, Dijon, France. Photograph by Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY.

In the Broederlam panels the narrative's horizontal, left-to-right timeline is parallel to the picture plane, and the viewer's gaze at right angles to it. Broederlam has condensed the Gospel narrative so that four events, separated in time and place, are now combined in a single painting, and this reduction of the narrative to a series of symbolic moments, this purely *literary* foreshortening of the narrative, the only type that affects the timeline in Broederlam's painting. But in Giovanni di Paolo's *Annunciation*, the narrative foreshortening that brings together within a single frame these two events from the Old and New Testaments (the Expulsion from the Garden and the Annunciation) depends upon the perspectival foreshortening that created the illusory depth within which the two are visually linked, linked as a graphic display of their prefigurative connection. In Giovanni's painting the sense of foreshadowing is a function of a combined literary and visual foreshortening.



Figure 2.3. Melchior Broederlam, *Presentation in the Temple; Rest on the Flight into Egypt*, 1394. Panel, 64 × 51 in. Musee des Beaux-Arts, Dijon, France. Photograph by Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY.

A fully elaborated example of this pictorial equation of time and spatial depth can be seen in a painting (in the Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest) of the Crucifixion from around 1480 by an unknown North Netherlandish master. The foreground shows the moment of Christ's death on the cross between two thieves (with the bystanders wearing medieval garb), while the background shows an earlier moment leading up to the Crucifixion—Christ carrying the cross from Jerusalem (depicted as a Gothic town) to Golgotha.¹ Gazing into the visual space of this Crucifixion, we look from the present of the foreground into the past of the background. Any contemporary Christian seeing this painting would have understood the symbolic significance of that way of the cross running from Jerusalem to Golgotha. He would have seen it as a symbol of the arduous pathway through life that awaits anyone who imitates Christ, a pathway that leads not from background to foreground, not from the old Jerusalem to the historic moment of the Crucifixion, but from foreground to background, from that eternal moment of the sacrifice of the cross (available at any moment in the sacrifice of the Mass) onward throughout the individual's life and beyond, along that temporal path whose ultimate goal, as the book of Revelation tells us, is the New Jerusalem that will descend from heaven at the point when time ends. Looking at this painting, a Christian would see an image of the past that—because of the Crucifixion's circularization of time, a redemption of history that reverses the historical timeline's direction, curving it back towards its origin—is also a prophetic vision of the future.



Figure 2.4. Giovanni di Paolo, *The Annunciation and Expulsion from Paradise*, ca. 1435. Tempera on panel, $15\frac{3}{4} \times 18\frac{1}{4}$ in. Samuel H. Kress Collection, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC.

The development of the perspectival depth/time equation for organizing the sequence of events within a single frame did not, of course, abolish the older horizontal narrative sequence. Indeed, the two were frequently combined to produce works of extraordinary narrative complexity, as in Rogier van der Weyden's *St. John Altarpiece* (c. 1452–55) in the Kaiser Friedrich Museum in Berlin. The narrative sequence of the panels in the triptych—the Birth and Naming of St. John, the Baptism of Christ, and the Martyrdom of St. John—runs horizontally from left to right, with the reliefs on the archvaults of the portals presenting moments from the lives of John the Baptist and Christ illustrating the prefigurative relationship between them. Within the painted depth of the left panel (fig. 2.5), the sequential vector runs from background (the birth of John) to foreground (his naming); within the right (fig. 2.7) from foreground (the beheading of John) to background (the presentation of his head on a platter); while in the central panel (fig. 2.6), which contains the point of greatest apparent depth, the artist has not made use of the background to present a sequence of events. The appearance of God the Father in the heavens as John baptizes Jesus is, of course, part of the event depicted in the foreground.

The triptych as a whole, then, shows us three stages of a single human life from birth to death, and it depicts the temporal progression within that life as a movement in opposite directions (toward the viewer in the left panel and away from the viewer in the right) on either side of an unmoving divine center. In this configuration the viewer gazes in the left panel from the present of the foreground into the past and in the right panel from the present of the foreground into the future. This simultaneous glimpse into the past and future represents, in terms of human time, what a visionary glimpse into eternity would be like—as if the heavens had opened and revealed the face of God, as in the central panel. We might note in this connection that when the artist William Lescaze did a sketch of Crane in which he emphasized the right eye as the focus of the composition, Crane interpreted the prominence given to one eye over the other as “in accordance with a dictum of Jacob Boehme, the German Mystic to the effect that the right eye of a man looks forward into eternity while the left eye looks backward in him into time, and that until the eye of time is brought into the eye of eternity a man will not achieve the unity of vision” (Horton 115–16). And this notion would have recalled for Crane a passage

from another of his favorite writers, Ralph Waldo Emerson, who in discussing “the problem of restoring to the world original and ideal beauty” claims, “The ruin or the blank that we see when we look at nature, is in our own eye. The axis of vision is not coincident with the axis of things, and so they appear not transparent but opaque. The reason why the world lacks unity, and lies broken and in heaps, is because man is disunited with himself” (1:73–74). Crane used the Boehme image of the poet as a seer with one eye looking into eternity and the other into time in “For the Marriage of Faustus and Helen,” and the fusion of temporal and eternal vision, the bringing of “the eye of time ... into the eye of eternity,” is, of course, the goal of the poetic quester in *The Bridge*.



Figure 2.5. Rogier van der Weyden, *Birth and Namegiving of Saint John the Baptist*, left panel of the *Saint John Altarpiece*, ca. 1450. Oil on oak, 30¼ × 19 in. Gemaeldegalerie, Staatliche Museen, Berlin, Germany. Photograph by Bildarchiv Preussischer Kulturbesitz/Art Resource, NY.



Figure 2.6. Rogier van der Weyden, *Baptism of Christ*, central panel of the *Saint John Altarpiece*, ca. 1455. Oil on oak, 30¼ × 19 in. Gemaeldegalerie, Staatliche Museen, Berlin, Germany. Photograph by Bildarchiv Preussischer Kulturbesitz/Art Resource, NY.



Figure 2.7. Rogier van der Weyden, *The Beheading of Saint John the Baptist*, right panel of the *Saint John Altarpiece*, ca. 1455. Oil on oak, $30\frac{1}{4} \times 19$ in. Gemaeldegalerie, Staatliche Museen, Berlin, Germany. Photograph by Bildarchiv Preussischer Kulturbesitz/Art Resource, NY.

This sense of simultaneously looking backward and forward in time is evoked again in van der Weyden's *Altarpiece of the Seven Sacraments* (Musée Royal, Antwerp) dating from the same period (fig. 2.8). The altarpiece, designed by van der Weyden and executed by one of his assistants, is noteworthy in that the picture is a nonfolding triptych, yet it depicts a single visual space—the interior of a church, its northern side-aisle shown in the left panel, its nave and the rear of the southern side-aisle in the center, and the front of the southern side-aisle in the right panel.

Though the sacraments are represented as if they are being simultaneously conferred within a single church, their arrangement within that space reflects the temporal order of the stages in life associated with each, in effect illustrating man's progress from birth to death. Beginning with the left panel (fig. 2.9) we move from Baptism in the foreground to Confirmation in the middle ground and on to Penance in the background, then from left to right into the background of the central panel where the Eucharist is being elevated by the priest at Mass, then from left to right again into the background of the right panel and forward to Holy Orders and Matrimony and finally to Extreme Unction in the foreground (fig. 2.10). The side panels give the impression of the human timeline moving in opposite directions (toward the background in the left and toward the foreground in the right), an effect created because we are looking into half of an oval whose center is the gigantic Crucifixion in the central panel's foreground (the eternal moment that curved human history back toward its divine origin) and

whose arch, between the timelines of the side panels, is the Eucharist (the reenactment within time of that eternal moment).

This arrangement of the sacraments in two lines along the side aisles connected by the arch or keystone of the Eucharist reproduces the shape of the building's arches and of the Gothic portals that frame each panel. Indeed, it is as if the portal framing the central panel had been tilted backward ninety degrees onto the floor of the church to provide the perimeter around which the sacraments are arranged, in much the same way that the cruciform shape dominating the central panel's foreground has also been, in a sense, tilted backward ninety degrees, casting its "shadow" on the floor in the church's cruciform plan of nave and transept. And this same sense of shadowing or mirroring is evoked by the relationship of foreground and background moments in the central panel; for as the body of Christ has been raised up on the cross, so the body of Christ in the form of the Eucharist is raised up at the Elevation, the connection of the two moments being made explicit in the words on the pennant the angel unfurls above the altar: "*Hic panis, manu sancti spiritus formatus in virgine, / Igne passionis est decoctus in cruce. / Ambrosius in Sacramentis*" ("This bread, formed by the hand of the Holy Spirit in the Virgin, was cooked by the fire of the Passion on the Cross.—Ambrose in *The Sacraments*"). The central panel's shadowing or mirroring of foreground and background moments evokes a sense of the circularity of human time seen from an eternal viewpoint.



Figure 2.8. Rogier van der Weyden, *Altar of the Seven Sacraments*, before 1450. Center panel: the Eucharist. Left panel: Baptism, Confirmation, and Penance. Right panel: Ordination, Marriage, and Extreme Unction. Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Antwerp, Belgium. Photograph by Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY.

Panofsky contends that the marriage scene in the right panel "reveals the influence of Jan van Eyck's Arnolfini portrait" (1:283) in the detail of the griffon terrier, but I would suggest that the central panel's composition may also show in a particularly subtle way another influence of van Eyck's famous painting (fig. 2.11). One of the most striking details in the Arnolfini portrait is the

sample content of Hart Crane's Poetry: "Appollinaire lived in Paris, I live in Cleveland, Ohio"

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