

“THE SILKEN SKILLED TRANSMEMBERMENT OF SONG”: HART CRANE’S “VOYAGES”¹

One of the crucial figures of American Modernist poetry, Hart Crane (1899–1932) is notorious for baffling both readers and critics with his nearly impenetrable rhetoric. The paper focuses on “Voyages”, a sextet of poems from the poet’s first collection, *White Buildings* (1926), aiming to prove that his so-called obscurity is often a result of a rather simplistic approach to poetry analysis, where the sound of the verses is dismissed in favour of a purely semantic analysis. Using some of the more recent criticism of Crane’s work, such as Reed’s and Tapper’s studies, the author argues that “Voyages” can be interpreted as a cyclical poetic rumination on the nature of love and poetry, dominated by the motif of the sea. Special attention is paid to the intertextual reading, wherein Crane’s poem is put firmly within the context of traditional love poetry by the authors such as Donne, Wordsworth, Shelley, Whitman and Rimbaud, with the last two poets providing another context, that of queer love poetry.

Key words: American poetry, Hart Crane, homoeroticism, love poetry, “Voyages”

1. INTRODUCING THE POET: HART CRANE THROUGH THE AGES

Rarely has a poet been a solid presence in a literature’s canon, lauded as one of its all-time immortals, and at the same time suffered the necessity of his inclusion needing constant apologetic explanations, as has that most bardic of all American Modernists, the prairies’ dreaming rhapsodist, Hart Crane. Even the most superficial look at the body of criticism surrounding Crane’s work will reveal descriptions of him as “the most gifted of the U. S. poets to come of age reading T. S. Eliot, Marianne Moore, Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, and W. B. Yeats” (Reed, 2006: 2), render laurels describing him as “perhaps more gifted” than any other American poet (Bloom, 2003: 11) or find praises stating that “there is no doubt that Crane was among the most naturally gifted of American poets” (Beach, 2003: 61). The word “gifted” is, as demonstrated, one that is to be encountered in many of these works – and rightly so, given that the “Shelley of my age”, as Robert Lowell called Crane in his *Life Studies* elegy, “Words for Hart

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Crane”, is probably the most natural continuer of such diverse poetic styles as British Romanticism, Victorian mannerism, Elizabethan poetry and American Orphic tradition in the Whitmanesque vein; all that without any formal poetic schooling that helped such greats as Pound and Eliot perfect their expression.

In most of these cases, however, “gifted” quite often comes hand in hand with the words “inchoate” (see Reed, 2006, Bloom, 2003 or Frank’s introduction to Crane’s *Collected Poems* in Crane, 1946) and “failure” (particularly viciously used by Blackmur in 1935, quoted in Bloom, 2003: 79-81; though Blackmur’s triad of great Modernist failures includes, apart from Crane’s *The Bridge*, Eliot’s *The Waste Land* and Pound’s *Cantos*, which begs the question if any poet was good enough for Blackmur). Geoffrey Moore even goes so far as to call the poet “poor Crane” and offer his unfounded (some would say, homophobic and transphobic) imaginings of Crane as “the little-boy-lost of Garrettsville, Ohio, secretly dressing in his mother’s clothes” (in Cunliffe, 1975: 126-127). Thomas Yingling (1990: 8) states that Crane’s “work is almost universally deemed short-sighted, failed, or unreadable, and yet he remains a canonical presence”, and continues to say that, “as is true for almost no other figure in American poetry, Crane’s status within the canon seems to be in spite of himself.” Even though the critical stance towards the poet has been steadily changing since Bloom’s endorsement in 1960s (as Yingling (1990: 21) puts it, Bloom “was among the first, after Northrop Frye, to understand Stevens as more than ironic poseur, and he has always understood Crane as a serious, ‘Orphic’ poet rather than as a mere enthusiast seriously lacking in discipline”) and has become even more positive in the last few decades, the idea of Crane’s strangeness – Reed (2006: 18) calls him “the odd poet out” and mentions his “aberrant writing style” – still remains.

This observation owes a lot to the fact that Crane was, to put it simply, probably the most lyrical of Modernist poets, in the old-fashioned sense of the phrase, at the time when lyricism was not the most valued aspect of poetry – one need only remember Pound’s famous disdain for “emotional slither” to realise just how anomalous Crane’s writing was. In his analysis of what he calls “Lyrical Modernism”, Christopher Beach names Stevens and Crane as the two twentieth-century poets who somehow manage to combine the seemingly opposite styles of “lyricism” and “modernism”, stating that

Both Stevens and Crane were centrally important figures in the development of American poetic modernism; yet at the same time they were poets working within the tradition of post-Romantic lyric poetry in a way that experimental modernists like Pound, Eliot, and William Carlos Williams were not (Beach, 2003: 49).

Unlike Stevens, though, Crane fancied himself a visionary and a mystic, a poet-prophet following in the footsteps of Blake and Shelley rather than a Keatsian aestheticist delving into the relationship between imagination and reality. In the essay entitled “Modern Poetry”, written in 1929, Crane states that “poetry is an

architectural art” (Crane, 1946: 175), and yet he eschews Stevens’ “blessed rage for order” in favour of a chaotically surreal imagery that has its own “logic of metaphor”, a concept which he famously explains in “General Aims and Theories”:

The motivation of the poem must be derived from the implicit emotional dynamics of the materials used, and the terms of expression employed are often selected less for their logical (literal) significance than for their associational meanings. Via this and their metaphorical inter-relationships, the entire construction of the poem is raised on the organic principle of a “logic of metaphor,” which antedates our so-called pure logic, and which is the general basis of all speech, hence consciousness and thought-extension (Crane, 1925: 133).

This dismissal of “so-called pure logic,” as well as the “pure sensibility” (Monroe, 1926: 36) that lies at the heart of Crane’s work is precisely what makes it both deliciously lyrical and extremely difficult to understand, if indeed clear-headed understanding is what one looks for in poetry. Poetry, however, is not science; poetry is art. As Crane elaborates in a letter to *Poetry*’s Harriet Monroe,

It all comes to the recognition that emotional dynamics are not to be confused with any absolute order of rationalized definitions; ergo, in poetry the *rationale* of metaphor belongs to another order of experience than science, and is not to be limited by a scientific and arbitrary code of relationships either in verbal inflections or concepts (Monroe, 1926: 37).

True meaning of poetry, at least according to Crane, thus lies not in the poem divulging all its semantic secrets to a meticulous peruser of dictionaries, but in the sound, music, associations, and emotions it invokes in the open-minded and open-hearted reader. As Philip Pullman put it in his Introduction to Milton’s *Paradise Lost*,

I have come across teachers ... who thought that poetry was only a fancy way of dressing up simple statements to make them look complicated, and that their task was to help their pupils translate the stuff into ordinary English. When they’d translated it, when they’d “understood” it, the job was done. It had the effect of turning the classroom into a torture-chamber, in which everything that made the poem a living thing had been killed and butchered. No one had told such people that poetry is in fact enchantment; that it has the form it does because that very form casts a spell; and that when they thought they were bothered and bewildered, they were in fact being bewitched, and if they let themselves accept the enchantment and enjoy it, they would eventually understand much more about the poem (Milton, 2005: 3).

If one bears this idea in mind, then understanding Crane – his opaque and outrageous rhetoric as well as his lyrically charged sentiment – becomes a much easier task and a voyage (pun intended) to be relished. Take, for example, the syntagm from the title of this paper, the penultimate line of the third section of “Voyages” – “the silken skilled transmemberment of song”. The line sounds bombastic, with its old-fashioned iambic pentameter linking it to earlier poetic traditions and making it appear almost too Romanticist, rather than trying to emulate experimental Modernist verse; while the alliteration of the sibilant /s/ imitates the sound of the sea and takes the reader to the eponymous voyage. Further, the poet chooses to pair the words “silken” and “skilled” not because of their meaning, but because of their sound – the playful combination of /sɪlk/ and /skɪl/ evokes the ebb and flow of the sea and deepens the illusion of being on a shore and listening to the waves rocking the ocean. The neologism ‘transmemberment’, meanwhile, serves as a springboard for a slew of associations – it points to something both transcendent and transgressive, where the most obvious interpretation of the two words put together points to the homoerotic element, especially when combined with another associative meaning, Transcendentalist, which links it to Whitman and his poetic and personal experience. The word also makes the reader think of similar-sounding terms like “remember”, “dismember” or “member”, thus bringing to mind the themes of memory, violence and sex, respectively. Finally, the word “song” connects these ideas – it links the ethereal transcendence of poetry to the sensual music of the actual verse (both the literal diction of the words and the figurative sound of the waves). The line is thus, on the one hand, incredibly dense and difficult to comprehend, but on the other, easy to perceive through sound alone when the focus of the analysis shifts from thinking to feeling, allowing the reader to enjoy the pure synesthetic experience of rhythm and sound, rather than trying to dissect the complicated word cluster.

This, of course, does not mean that Crane’s poetry does not have its flaws – he can be obscure for the sake of obscurity and sometimes, as Harriet Monroe pointed to him, there is a pronounced gap between his theory and his practice, with ideas somehow getting sidetracked on their way from mind to paper and dwindling from initial brilliance to less-than-stellar realisation.² These, however, are the flaws that would have been alleviated with time, had the poet actually been allotted more of it than he had. Perhaps the greatest problem surrounding Crane’s work is that he was an intrinsically lyrical poet trying to write an epic – *The Bridge* strives at mythopoeic grandiosity while following an operatic formula and employs the old Romantic notion of the Aeolian Harp while seriously flirting with futuristic architectural structuring, both literally and metaphorically – but in his shorter

² In her correspondence with Crane, published in the October 1926 issue of *Poetry* magazine, she puts it thus: “My argument comes down, I suppose, rather to your practice than your theory. Or more specifically, your practice strains your theory by carrying it, with relentless logic, to a remote and exaggerated extreme.” (see Monroe, 1926: 40)

pieces, where he wasn’t held back by the epic structure he set himself as a task, his visionary lyricism is formidable. *White Buildings* (1926) boasts several examples of Crane at his best, but the collection’s concluding sextet of poems, the oneiric “Voyages”, which Bloom (2003: 19) calls the “earliest full instance of Crane’s mature Orphism” and Spears (1965: 27) simply pronounces “Crane’s best long poem”, provides the reader with poetry that is, to use Crane’s own words, simply “organically entrenched in pure sensibility” (Monroe, 1926: 36).

2. THE CRITIC’S JOURNEY: A VOYAGE THROUGH “VOYAGES”

A sequence of six cantos in a Caribbean setting, “Voyages” is a poem – or a series of poems – about love and loss, innocence and experience, spirituality and poetry. Inspired partly by Crane’s turbulent love affair with the Danish sailor Emil Opffer and partly by the poet’s ever-so-present fascination with the sea, the work was written in the early 1920s, with the first section finished in 1921, an early version of the sixth in 1923, and all the rest in 1924 and 1925. Christopher Beach (2003: 65) states that the sextet “contains some of Crane’s most lyrically evocative writing”, while Reed (2006: 112) comments that the poem “exhibits an eerie blend of the familiar and the strange.” He also, quite shrewdly, explains that the six sections of “Voyages” do not really follow a linear progression; that is, they do not “work toward the solution of a philosophical, rhetorical, or generic problem” (Reed, 2006: 115). Although their formatting, with Roman numerals in the titles, makes it tempting to analyse them as a straight-forward and straight-progressing tale just waiting to be unravelled, they do not actually lend themselves to an easy organization into a neat sequence of events. They are rather to be understood as a set of poems, each telling more or less the same story, predominantly about love, with the same themes and motifs explored in all of them, and with everything interlocked in a fascinating cyclical structure, not unlike Wordsworth’s “Lucy” poems.

Continuing from this Wordsworthian parallel, the intertextual elements in the “Voyages” sequence are numerous, and certainly owe much to Crane’s formative influences, from Elizabethans and Romantics to Whitman, Melville and Rimbaud. By likening his love to a ship lost at sea, Crane draws upon Sir Thomas Wyatt’s “My Galley”, which in turn points to Petrarch’s original and thus to earlier European tradition of lovers left at the mercy of their beloveds, cruel at worst, whimsical at best. At the same time, this metaphor calls to mind Rimbaud’s “Le Bateau Ivre” and allows for several more associations to run free – apart from the idea of the speaker himself being the boat in question, there is also the indisputable connection between the two poets with regard to their sexuality. In a lot of ways, thus, “Voyages” fits right into the Western reader’s idea of a traditional love poem. As Reed (2006: 112) explains:

Crane’s implicit model for his oddly potent rhetoric is the Elizabethan sonnet sequence. Throughout “Voyages”, Crane’s imagery, like that of Renaissance

love poets, is Petrarchan, featuring storms, tropic heat, arctic cold, ships, pirates, and dreams. So, too, is his rhetoric topos, an enamored poet whose tone veers unpredictably between despair and ecstasy as he uses the occasion of his love to express himself in increasingly convoluted figures.

The Renaissance influence is, in fact, noticeable in the very sound of the verses. Again, Reed (2006: 113) points out that, “like Shakespeare’s *Sonnets* and Spenser’s *Amoretti*, Crane’s ‘Voyages’ delights in aureation, hyperbole, stylization, and syntactical compression.” The language is undoubtedly and unapologetically Crane – words are more often than not chosen for their sound, not for their meaning, metaphors are compressed to such a degree that most, if not all, connection between the signifier and the signified is lost³, and the tight metre that reins the outrageous verses in brings to mind their author’s idea of poetry as an architectural art.

Starting at the beginning, with “Voyages I”, the reader immediately recognises the scene Crane depicts as something straight out of Blake’s oeuvre: the poet paints the image of some children (“bright striped urchins”) playing in the sand on the beach (“above the fresh ruffles of the surf”), unaware of the dangers that await them once they’ve crossed the threshold and entered the world of experience. This could, however, be seen as an oversimplification of Blake’s ideas; after all, he did conceive his famous Innocence and Experience as two complementary states of the human soul. Thus, innocence is not something one should strive to preserve at any cost, seeing as it can be understood not only as gentle, meek and mild, but also as weak, gullible, and easily destroyed, much like its central symbol, The Lamb. Similarly, experience should not be dreaded and avoided, as it is not merely ferocious, merciless and corrupt, but also terrifyingly beautiful, resonant with wisdom and power, and “burning bright” in the proverbial “forests of the night” of ignorance, just like The Tiger these lines famously describe. In fact, Crane’s Romantic predecessor in “Voyages I” is more likely to be Wordsworth, given the poet’s apotheosis of the child in “Immortality Ode” and his lament over the “shades of the prison-house” closing upon that child as time goes by. The final stanza of “Voyages I” (in Crane, 1946: 101) seems to echo this sentiment:

O brilliant kids, frisk with your dog,
Fondle your shells and sticks, bleached
By time and the elements; but there is a line
You must not cross nor ever trust beyond it
Spry cordage of your bodies to caresses
Too lichen-faithful from too wide a breast.
The bottom of the sea is cruel.

³ John T. Irwin explains that “in Crane’s verse the metaphoric relationship ‘A is B’ takes by ellipsis the form of a complex word or phrase ‘AB’, and this complex word or phrase becomes in turn part of the metaphoric relationship ‘C is AB’, and so on, with mounting complexity” (see Bloom, 2003: 45).

The speaker, already standing on the other side of the line that must not be crossed, and inaudible to the children at play ("and could they hear me I would tell them"), wants to warn them about the dangers of adulthood ("the bottom of the sea is cruel"), even though he knows that his words are in vain, both because he would not actually be heard even if he were to speak, and because the line *must* be crossed, if human life is to progress the way it should. The stanza calls to mind the seventh and eighth part of "Immortality Ode", where the speaker addresses the child whose play of being an adult he observes with a desperate plea, "Why with such earnest pains dost thou provoke / The years to bring the inevitable yoke" (Ferguson, Salter & Stallworthy, 2005: 799). Even though both poets bemoan the loss of childhood innocence, their reasons for it are significantly different. Wordsworth, echoing Plato's ideas, describes the gradual loss of "visionary gleam" that happens to us all as we grow older and more removed from the heavenly world whence we come; his warning is therefore more philosophical in nature, and his eventual conclusion much more optimistic. Crane, on the other hand, sees adulthood not as a loss of an ideal (and idealised) world of insightfulness and heaven, but as a dangerous and cruel place whose borders are marked with sexual awakening. He deliberately chooses the words that have sexual connotations ("frisk", "fondle", "caresses"), to indicate that "the children's horseplay has come dangerously close to foreplay" (Reed, s.a, para. 7). Moreover, he indicates that one should trust neither the world (and the stadium of life) that begins after one crosses that fateful line, nor the sea itself – a force of nature in its own right, and the metaphorical chasm that kills and destroys. The cinematic image from the beginning of the poem, of the children playing by the shore ("the sun beats lightning on the waves, / The waves fold thunder on the sand") gets an ominous meaning in retrospect: the children are far too trusting of an entity that is, in actuality, none too gentle ("lightning", "thunder"), and that trust will inevitably lead them to their doom ("the bottom of the sea is cruel").

And yet – the words that open the next poem – the sea is not completely heartless. "Voyages II" (in Crane, 1946: 102–103) makes sure to show the reader that there is a subgroup of humans who might escape the sea's wrath – lovers (which, again, echoes Wordsworth's plan to tell his story "in the Lover's ears alone"), who are, in the tradition of John Donne, canonized by their experience ("the pieties of lovers' hands"):

And yet this great wink of eternity
Of rimless floods, unfettered lewardings,
Samite **s**heeted and processioned where
Her undinal vast belly moonward bends,
Laughing the wrapt inflections of our love;
Take this Sea, whose diapason knells
On scrolls of silver snowy sentences,
The sceptred terror of whose sessions rends
As her demeanors motion well or ill,

All but the pieties of lovers' hands.

The stanzas above lovingly, but carefully, portray the Sea as ephemeral and eternal at the same time (“great wink of eternity”), as a terrible and capricious mother goddess (“her undinal vast belly”, “the sceptred terror”, “her demeanors motion well or ill”), and as a palpable, silken presence (“Samite sheeted”). Furthermore, the alliteration of sounds /f/, /s/, /z/, and /ʃ/ (indicated in the lines above in bold) supplies the actual sound of the waves and allows the readers to – at least metaphorically – immerse themselves into the sea. This is an excellent example of how, in Crane’s verses, the whole is much more than the sum of its parts: he creates an abundance of sound to set the scene, and then populates it with phrases that are a mix of actual words, neologisms, and intertextual borrowings. Regarding the latter, Joseph Warren Beach explains the relationship between “Voyages” and Melville’s *Moby Dick*, from which Crane took the terms “lewardings”, “scrolls of silver” and “diapason of the sea”, stating that “scrolls of silver”, at least, are “a rather extreme example of the showy style in which Melville was all too prone to indulge” (Bloom, 2003: 38). Stylistic similarities aside, the thematic line that stretches through American literature from Melville to Crane, of humans’ dangerous fascination with the one thing that can destroy them, cast to the backdrop of a seascape, cannot be ignored.

Neither can the fact that “Voyages” is, above all, a love poem. In the second poem, the poet introduces the lovers – the speaker, now optimistic about the holiness of his emotion (“the pieties of lovers’ hands”), and the beloved, who has finally returned after a long absence and is to be welcomed home (“O my Prodigal”). Reed (s.a, para. 12) points out that Crane might be casting Opffer in the role of Biblical Prodigal son, seeing that he was a commercial sailor and often went away to South America on business. The poem ends on a celebratory note, invoking the Romantic ode, in a passage especially reminiscent of Shelley⁴:

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

Crane makes a connection between the sea, the ship, and the poet himself – “galleons” thus become “minstrels”, and they in turn become the forces that dictate the lovers’ fate. Echoing “the bottom of the sea” from the previous poem, the poet now mentions “the vortex of our grave”, saying that the lovers will be forced to

⁴ Apart from the fact that both poets often use sea imagery in their poetry (cf. “Adonais”, “Alastor” or “Ode to the West Wind”), their similarities are even more pronounced when one has in mind that they both died by drowning – Shelley in an accident aged 30, Crane by suicide aged 33 – which lends their fascination with the sea an eerie and prophetic note.

wander forever ("bequeath us to no earthly shore") until they have been made holy by the sea ("spindrift gaze toward paradise").

If the first "Voyage" is about a child's anticipation of love, and the second about a lovers' reunion, the third definitely takes place on the other side of the line that must not be crossed, as it describes a passionate consummation. Here Crane most closely resembles Whitman, both in his sheer exuberance and in the seascape dominating the scene. Celeste Shenck (in Bloom, 2003: 50–52) compares "Voyages" with "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking"; however, undeniable thematic similarities between the two works notwithstanding, it seems much more tonally accurate to compare "Voyages" with the famous "Calamus" sequence. Both works extoll the virtues of what Whitman called "manly love of comrades", and both are undoubtedly erotic in nature. As Yingling (1990: 6) rightfully points out, Whitman's poetry is "frankly and directly sexual in a way Crane's more often is not", though it must be said that, in the case of "Voyages III" at least, direct sexuality is not lacking, as can be seen from the following lines (in Crane, 1946: 104):

And so, admitted through black swollen gates
That must arrest all distance otherwise, –
Past whirling pillars and lithe pediments,
Light wrestling there incessantly with light,
Star kissing star through wave on wave unto
Your body rocking!

What Crane describes here is undoubtedly a sexual act, told from the perspective of the lover "admitted through black swollen gates" (probably a euphemism for the anus, which brings to mind Rimbaud and Verlaine's infamous sonnet about that particular body part) into the body of his beloved. The verbs used are mostly in progressive form ("whirling", "wrestling", "kissing", "rocking"), indicating both the immediateness and the duration of the act itself, while their meanings are ripe with erotic association. The doubling of the words "light", "star" and "wave" might be there to denote the two lovers involved, while both the increasingly desperate rhythm (there is no punctuation here) and the words' semantic dimension point, in a rather straightforward way, to the orgasmic completion of the act, the little "death" which "presumes no carnage". Presumably, what Yingling finds lacking here is not the absence of the sexual, but the absence of a clear indication of the two lovers' gender, something that is openly there in Whitman's "Calamus", as this excerpt from "When I Heard at the Close of the Day" (in Whitman, 2004: 283) clearly shows:

When I wander'd alone over the beach, and undressing bathed,
laughing with the cool waters, and saw the sun rise,
And when I thought how my dear friend my lover was on his way, coming,

O then I was happy,

...

For the one I love most lay sleeping by me under the same cover in the cool night,
In the stillness in the autumn moonbeams his face was inclined toward me,
And his arm lay lightly around my breast – and that night I was happy.

Whitman's emphasis here is not so much on the erotic, as it is upon the romantic; a sentiment that is also present in "Voyages III", where the speaker mentions "infinite consanguinity" with "the tendered theme" of his beloved, to whom he promises eternal closeness ("while ribboned water lanes I wind / Are laved and scattered with no stroke / Wide from your side"). In the last lines of the poem, Crane refers to the change that occurs after the experience described as "the silken skilled transmemberment of song", thus, as was already mentioned, evoking numerous auricular and semantic associations. The poet ends this stage of his voyage with a plea to his lover: "Permit me voyage, love, into your hands..."

The hands into which one cannot force his way, but has to be admitted instead, are canonized through love – "Voyages III" mentions the "reliquary hands" of the sea, which echoes "the pieties of lovers' hands" from "Voyages II". Both sections feature the disembodied (or "dismembered", as the word "transmemberment" indicates) parts of both the Sea and the lovers themselves – apart from the hands present in both of them, poem "II" mentions the "vast belly" and the "turning shoulders" of the sea goddess, while poem "III" builds the actual body of the lover. In his innovative analysis of "Voyages", Tapper describes its third section as the most important one, stating that

The pivotal moment of "Voyages" also centers upon the body: the speaker's description of a sexual embrace with his lover's "body rocking," a scene of lovemaking in which the erogenous zones of the body are rendered in architectural terms as "black swollen gates," "whirling pillars and lithe pediments" (Tapper, 2006: 17).

After the sexual tour-de-force that is section "III", "Voyages IV" offers a more subdued sentiment, with the lovers seeking to prolong their time together ("madly meeting logically in this hour... the chancel port and portion of our June"), and reminding us that their love is a key to achieving immortality (in Crane, 1946: 105–106):

No stream of greater love advancing now
Than singing, this mortality alone
Through clay aflow immortally to you.

Once again, after the "transmemberment of song", the speaker reinforces the idea of how combining love and song, i.e. emotion and art, helps transform the

mortal body ("clay") into something eternal and divine ("immortally to you"). Human ephemerality and mortality is always at the back of the speaker's mind ("as I / must first be lost in fatal tides to tell"), but so is poetry, indicated by the increasing mentions of music and verses – after the "adagios of islands"⁵ from section "II", the poet now offers "bright staves of flowers and quills" and "the incarnate word". The flowers may signify the ephemeral nature of both human life and love, especially when compared with the deceptive shortness of the ocean's life ("great wink of eternity"), while the quills might invoke thoughts of birds (symbols of freedom and, to the Romantic poets such as Keats and Shelley, art itself) and written words. The metaphorical meanings interlock with the literal images of flowers and quills, dancing together in our mind's eye on staves – thus turning into notes and allowing us to imagine the music accompanying Crane's dense poetic images, moving at a leisurely – *adagio* – pace.

As the analysis of just this one short line demonstrates, "Voyages IV" is the poem in which Crane lets his style shine the most. Words cluster together in a truly Elizabethan Euphuist style, affixed to one another by the sheer sound they produce. Here Crane offers his readers gems like "all fragrance irrefragably", "mingling mutual", "latitudes and levels", and the fugue-like chasing of the words "portending", "port" and "portion". The meanings of verses, while not insignificant, do not seem to be the truly important thing in this poem; what matters most is, to paraphrase Pullman, the spell they cast when put together in a seeming disarray. "Voyages IV" manages to relay the message of the paradoxical mortality and immortality of love, as well as the necessity of music and poetry – and art in general – in making certain that immortality prevails. The last line of the section – "the secret oar and petals of all love" – serves as a reminder of the greater theme of the entire poem: lovers may feel lost and alone like ships in the ocean ("oar"), love (and life itself) is inscrutable and fragile ("secret", "petals"), but mastering it, if only for a short while, makes all the difference in the world.

Continuing with his exploration of the theme of love, Crane now tries for another angle and, after fear, hope, consummation and promises, he chooses to focus on betrayal. "Voyages V" returns to the metaphors of ships and sea when talking about lovers and love and, in doing so, creates some of the most evocative and memorable images in the poem. This is especially true of the four central stanzas, brimming with urgent pleas and hectic thoughts, indicated by ellipses, commas, and enjambments. The lovers are finally both given voices; unfortunately, those are used to convey an argument, as can be seen from the following lines (in Crane, 1946: 107):

⁵ Crane often felt the need to explain his images and metaphors. In "General Aims and Theories", he famously states, "When, in 'Voyages' (II), I speak of 'adagios of islands,' the reference is to the motion of a boat through islands clustered thickly, the rhythm of the motion, etc. And it seems a much more direct and creative statement than any more logical employment of words such as 'coasting slowly through the islands,' besides ushering in a whole world of music" (Crane, 1925: 133).

... "There's
 Nothing like this in the world," you say,
 Knowing I cannot touch your hand and look
 Too, into that goddess cleft of sky
 Where nothing turns but dead sands flashing.
 "– And never to quite understand!" No,
 In all the argosy of your bright hair I dreamed
 Nothing so flagless as this piracy.

The verses before this confrontation speak of "one frozen trackless smile", "slow tyranny of moonlight, moonlight loved and changed", and the "tidal wedge" that can be stopped by "no cry, no sword". It all sounds rather vague, but it clearly leads to the conclusion that there is a separation between the lovers ("I cannot touch your hand") and that the split has reached the dimensions of a "tidal wedge". Even the sky, silent and governed by no deity, seems to echo the situation below ("that goddess cleft of sky"). The entire area, in fact, reflects the inner turmoil of the scene's human actors – the "infrangible and lonely... bay estuaries fleck the hard sky limits" and it all makes the speaker wonder "What words / Can strangle this deaf moonlight?"

The words that are spoken, though, offer neither resolution nor comfort. In one of the poem's most memorable lines, the speaker calls his relationship a "flagless piracy" – directionless, ruthless and, given its flagless status, also insidious, with no warning signs. He refers to his lover as someone "alone and too tall here", and mentions "all the argosy of [his] bright hair". Reed (s.a, para. 16) finds this phrase "rather silly", stating that the meaning of "argosy" is "an extra-large merchant vessel", and then rephrasing Crane's line as "Oh, Emil, what a cute container ship you have on your head!" While the line may indeed sound ridiculous if taken at face value, we should not forget either the poet's unique use of metaphor or the context of his poem. If their love is a piracy, it makes sense to cast one, if not both of the lovers, as a vessel, and the already mentioned context of Petrarch, Wyatt, Rimbaud and many other poets using ship metaphors when talking about both love and life itself supplies the tradition into which Crane's image neatly fits. Another thing worth mentioning is that the word "argosy" may also mean "a rich supply"; therefore, the syntagm can be rephrased simply as "your thick bright hair". The vessel connotation, however, gives it a better contextual meaning, and this double translation of sorts is probably the exact reason why Crane chose that particular word. In any case, the speaker's beloved, as Rumens (2008, para. 4) notices, really is almost ship-like, "alone and too tall there". He is keeping silent and keeping secrets ("your breath sealed by the ghosts I do not know"), and the only thing that the speaker can do is wish him a safe journey and wait for his return ("draw in your head and sleep the long way home").

The heightened emotion of pain resonating through "Voyages V" is certainly par for the course where love is concerned, and the speaker of Crane's poem is

definitely not alone in feeling the way he does. What makes his experience much more unique, however, is his ability to express that pain through poetry – and to value it precisely because it lends itself to poetic transformation. Thus, “Voyages VI” focuses mainly on love being translated into art. The first indicator of that theme can be found in the very shape of the poem – for this “Voyage”, Crane chooses to employ modified ballad stanza, and in that way he places his work firmly within the context of balladry, with all the associations connected to both the traditional and literary variants of the form, starting with Wordsworth and Coleridge’s *Lyrical Ballads*. In the first stanza the speaker mentions “icy and bright dungeons” and “ocean rivers” with “green borders”, thus perhaps invoking “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner”, and its symbolic use of ice, brightness and the colour green. Reed (2006: 113) also notices that “Voyages VI” “shamelessly includes phrases lifted from *The Tempest*, *Richard II*, and Milton’s *Samson Agonistes*.” Tapper, on the other hand, points out that, when Crane mentions “harbor of the phoenix’ breast”, he is subtextually talking about the erotic, explaining that

Given Crane’s enthusiasm for Elizabethan verse, there is little doubt that he would have been familiar with the way such poems as Shakespeare’s “The Phoenix and the Turtle”, Donne’s “The Canonization,” and Crashaw’s “Epithalamion” all link the phoenix to eroticism (Tapper, 2006: 49).

The direct eroticism, so palpable in section “III”, is not really present in section “VI”. Here, instead of the sensual embrace and exuberant verses, the speaker lets the form of the poem indicate its emotion. The structure of “Voyages VI” is deliberately old-fashioned, and its verses over the top, because the speaker’s heightened emotional state demands equally heightened diction. He is now again addressing the sea, painting himself not only as a voyager on a ship, but as an almost prophetic figure (in Crane, 1946: 109):

O rivers mingling toward the sky
And harbor of the phoenix’ breast –
My eyes pressed black against the prow,
–Thy derelict and blinded guest
Waiting, afire, what name, unspoke,
I cannot claim: let thy waves rear
More savage than the death of kings,
Some splintered garland for the seer.

The “derelict and blinded guest”, a “seer” with “eyes pressed black” is most probably an allusion to Eliot’s Tiresias, a connection that makes sense, given both the reference to April a few lines below the ones quoted (“like a cliff swinging, or a sail / Flung into April’s inmost day”), and the fact that Crane famously chose to set himself against Eliot, explaining in one of his letters that Eliot should be

seen as “a point of departure toward an almost complete reverse of direction” (Weber, 1952: 114). The entire poem could thus be seen as an experience of a Phlebas consumed by love, someone who managed to evade the literal “death by water” in favour of a metaphorical drowning in love and heartbreak-induced sinking.

“Voyages VI” is positively brimming with sea imagery – there are swimmers and “ocean rivers”, shells and waters, sails and prows, capes and cliffs, siroccos and waves. The sea is once again personified as “the lounged goddess” who now rises and speaks silently, with her eyes (“Conceding dialogue with eyes / That smile unsearchable repose”). This links it to the previous parts of “Voyages” and brings the poetic sequence full circle. The sixth poem is actually a revised version of an earlier work, entitled “Belle Isle”; for the most part discarded or drastically reworked, all except the final stanza, which was carried over more or less intact (see Tapper, 2006: 43). The stanza in question (in Crane, 1946: 110) sharply contrasts unwavering poetry and fickle love:

The imaged Word, it is, that holds
Hushed willows anchored in its glow.
It is the unbetrayable reply
Whose accent no farewell can know.

The “imaged Word”, that is, the emotions and landscape intertwined and transformed into poetry, is the only “unbetrayable” thing the speaker can rely on, the only one that will never leave him (“whose accent no farewell can know”). In this way, Crane brings together his two most important themes, love and poetry, using his favourite motif, the sea, to explore their mysterious ways. The speaker of “Voyages I” wants to tell something to the children playing in the sand, but he is resigned to the fact that they cannot hear him, and therefore never speaks. The speaker of “Voyages VI”, by contrast, knows that words are the only things a lover-poet can ultimately possess (as Humbert Humbert eloquently puts it, “I have only words to play with!” – see Nabokov, 1997: 32), and so he decides to end his voyage through love by eulogizing the one certain way of keeping that love alive – the art of poetry, the imaged Word.

3. JOURNEY’S END: SOME CONCLUDING REMARKS ON THE VOYAGE THROUGH LOVE AND POETRY

Even though the postmodern critic should not turn to the “dead author” for help when interpreting his work, it can occasionally be enlightening to see what the poet truly had in mind when he set out to write his verses. A lot of the time, reading Crane’s explanations of his images and metaphors offers no greater assurance than trying to penetrate the dense semantics on one’s own. Sometimes, however, the two interpretations neatly concur, as can be seen from a letter Crane

wrote to his friend Waldo Frank while composing "Voyages", in which he discusses the "indestructible Word made Flesh":

I have seen the Word made Flesh. I mean nothing less, and I know now that there is such a thing as indestructibility. In the deepest sense, where flesh became transformed through intensity of response to counter-response, where sex was beaten out, where a purity of joy was reached that included tears. ... And I have been able to give freedom and life which was acknowledged in the ecstasy of walking hand in hand across the most beautiful bridge of the world, the cables enclosing us and pulling us upward in such a dance as I have never walked and never can walk with another. ... I think the sea has thrown itself upon me and been answered, at least in part, and I believe I am a little changed – not essentially, but changed and transubstantiated as anyone is who has asked the question and been answered (Weber, 1952: 181-182).

Governed by the idea that "the actual province of poetry" is "added consciousness and increased perceptions" (Monroe, 1926: 38), Crane merges sensual imagery, syncopated diction and something akin to shorthand metaphor in order to create a poetic sequence that relies heavily on tradition, and at the same time showcases innovation. Reed (2006: 119-120) concludes that "the strangely centrifugal, disorderly syntax in 'Voyages'" actually has a lot in common with the "synecdochal poetry" of Postmodernist authors, which proves that Crane was prescient in creating the anomalous syntax later favoured by the experimental poets such as Ashbery. Such poets, he explains, "delight in asymmetry, non sequiturs, and shifts in tone" and are interested in "the way certain sounds hit the ear", resulting in poetry whose "forms and verses are broken, dismembered, unravelling, incomplete," and where each poem should be read "as a maimed piece of an absent, ungraspable whole" (Reed, 2006: 122).

Having both this context and the 20-20 hindsight in mind, it becomes much clearer to see why Crane remains part of both literary anthologies and academic syllabi, despite all the "problematic" aspects of his poetry. His actors (the merciless object of affection, the suffering poet-lover, the sea as the topos) are Renaissance. His emotional outbursts and his "divine despair" are Romantic. His Orphic exuberance is Transcendentalist. His irregular syntax is Postmodern. His fascination with language and his particular blend of "tradition and individual talent" are Modern. His ability to combine all of these traits in a unique (even "architectural") way is timeless. And his themes (poetry and love, the latter of the "dare not say its name" variety) are nothing if not universal.

Crane was often perplexed at his readers' and critics' struggles with his linguistic gymnastics, stating that "my 'obscurity' is a mystery to me" (Weber, 1952: 213). The readers who cannot make heads or tails of his poems tend to be those who forget the simple fact that in all poetry, sound is a part of meaning, sometimes maybe even the most important part. When one remembers this, it

becomes much easier to understand Crane – not the entirety of his complex rhetoric, of course, but enough of it to grasp the emotional and sensual side of his poetry, and a large part of its intellectual meaning as well. “Voyages” serves as an excellent example of that particular interpreting wisdom – parts of it are “obscure” due to Crane’s phrasing, parts due to the fact that writing about queer love has historically often been relegated to the subtext, and parts because of the deliberately archaic structure the poet chose in order to make his poem resemble the Renaissance model. Despite all the “transmemberments of songs”, “adagios of islands” and “argosies of bright hair”, Crane still manages to convey his exuberance and desperation, acceptance and betrayal, love and art, which, as he famously states in the opening panegyric to his *The Bridge*, might be poetic enough to “lend a myth to God” (Crane, 1946: 4). And that kind of emotional and intellectual stimulation in his readers is surely something that no poet would ever find inadequate.

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Bojana Vujić

„NEŽNA NUŽNA TRANSEČENOST PESME“: „PLOVIDBE“ HARTA KREJNA

REZIME

Iako spada u ključne figure modernizma u američkoj poeziji, moglo bi se reći da Hart Krejn (1899-1932) ipak predstavlja anomaliju, s obzirom na to da njegovo uključivanje u kanon najčešće prate opravdanja u kojima se najpre navodi njegov pesnički potencijal, a potom objašnjava i u kolikoj je meri taj potencijal ostao neispunjen. Razlog za to leži u Krejnovoj takozvanoj opskurnosti i zamršenoj retorici, koja već decenijama zbunjuje i čitaoce i kritičare. Međutim, ako se tumačenje poezije ne svode samo na prevođenje pesničkih stilskih ukrasa na jednostavan, prozni jezik, već se u interpretaciju podjednako uključe i zvučanje i značenje pesme, dolazi se do zaključka da Krejnovu poeziju i nije toliko teško razumeti. U ovom radu analiziraju se Krejnovi „Plovidbe“, skup od šest ljubavnih pesama objavljen u njegovoj prvoj zbirci, *Bele zgrade* (1926). Koristeći novije kritičke interpretacije Krejnovog dela, kao što su Ridova i Taperova studija, autorka nastoji da dokaže da se „Plovidbe“ mogu tumačiti kao ciklični skup pesama, sličan Vordsvortovim pesmama o Lusi, u kojima se na jezički originalan i idejno zanimljiv način istražuju teme ljubavi i poezije, i u kojima dominira motiv mora. Posebna pažnja se poklanja i intertekstualnim vezama s drugim pesnicima, čime se Krejn jasno smešta u kontekst tradicionalne ljubavne poezije, a njegovo delo upoređuje sa pesnicima renesanse, romantizma, transcendentalizma i francuskog simbolizma. Osim toga, ukazuje se i na vezu između „Plovidbi“ i nekih dela Remboa i Vitmana, i time se pokazuje njegova pripadnost pesnicima koji su u svojoj poeziji obrađivali temu homoseksualne ljubavi. Napokon, u radu se spominje i to da se „Plovidbe“ mogu posmatrati i kao pesma o poeziji, odnosno, o tome kako se tema ljubavi i tema pisanja o ljubavi prepliću i stvaraju jedinstveno, intenzivno pesničko i čitalačko iskustvo.

Ključne reči: američka poezija, Hart Krejn, homoerotski motivi, ljubavna poezija, „Plovidbe“