Transcendentalists and Cultural Nationalists: Painters & Poets of the Stieglitz Circle

The attempt to match America's newly-won political autonomy with the achievement of its cultural independence goes back to the first half of the nineteenth century: to the literature of the American Renaissance and the paintings of the Hudson River School. During the post-Civil War period it continues with a shift from New England westward to the Rocky Mountains, but then re-emerges in the dynamics of metropolitan New York during the first decades of the twentieth century.[1] On the one hand, this renewed urge for cultural reassertion is part of America's self-awareness as a rapidly modernizing nation; yet on the other it is linked to the radical break with aesthetic conventions that transformed European art – an effort, as William Homer remarked in his book on Alfred Stieglitz and his circle, to recast "the visual language of European modernism in an American mold" (4).

Although the discourse of cultural independence can therefore not be separated from the emergence of the United States as a major industrial power, it may yet be seen as a quasi-postcolonial effort to create a distinctly American literature and art against the cultural dominance of Europe. Absorbing the new techniques of European modernism while at the same time trying to be different from it, American modernists of the 1910s and 20s – especially the painters and writers associated with the Stieglitz circle – discovered their own usable past in Emerson's, Thoreau's and Whitman's search for the presence of God (as well as of the national spirit) in the sublimity of nature – as did the landscape painters of that period when they explored the terror and beauty of its wildness. "The most distinctive and perhaps the most impressive, characteristic of American scenery is its wildness," Thomas Cole had famously argued in 1836, the year Emerson published "Nature." And ten years later, after an excursion to Mt. Ktaadn, Thoreau wrote in awe of nature's grim sublimity: "[W]e have not seen pure Nature unless we have seen her thus vast and drear and inhuman […] Nature was here something savage and awful, though beautiful" (645).

The awareness of early American modernists of the artistic revolutions that were going on in Paris, Berlin, Milan or St. Petersburg went hand in hand with their discovery of American ancestries and continuities – the perception of spirituality in the material world as expressed in the writings of the Transcendentalists as well as in the 'transcendentalist' paintings of

[1] Of the many books that could be mentioned in this context, see Novak, *Nature and Culture* and *Voyages of the Self*; Kelly; A. Miller. For the later period, see esp. Corn.

the mid- and late nineteenth century, in their creation of what Franklin Kelly called a "national landscape." If Durand had warned his fellow-artists that the creation of such a landscape would only be possible if they looked at the natural world and not at pictures, his modernist successors did both. Most of them first looked at nature, then studied the techniques of European experimental painters, before they eventually came back to nature – but now exploring it with different eyes and with new tools of expression or representation.

I shall concentrate on a number of that landscape's iconic objects as they are represented in literature and painting – such as Mount Katahdin, climbed and described by Thoreau, painted by Frederic Church (among others) and then again, little more than a generation later, by Marsden Hartley. Or the New England coast of Maine and Cape Cod which Thoreau explored and wrote about in great detail and which Winslow Homer, John Marin and Marsden Hartley painted obsessively. But there is also a short phase in the 1920s during which the "national landscape" is extended and nature replaced by a man-made yet equally sublime "second nature": the city, Manhattan, its skyscrapers and bridges, most of all Brooklyn Bridge, the symbolic center image of a new urban iconography. In the beauty of "The Bridge," John Marin, Joseph Stella and Hart Crane ecstatically revealed the continuing presence of divinity – thus rephrasing the discourse of the natural sublime in urban terms. Until that discourse collapsed in the 1930s and American art (or the "American" *in* art) was redefined as regional and local – and once again centered in nature or an agrarian pastoral.

In what follows, then, I shall try to construct a narrative that focuses on Mt. Katahdin, Brooklyn Bridge and the sea; as well as on real and imaginary dialogues between poets and painters within and across generations (between Thoreau and Hartley, Stella and Crane, between Hartley, Crane and William Carlos Williams); but also on the tensions in the concept of the creative self and the quality and function of its vision, its seeing *with* and *through* the eye.[2]

Alfred Stieglitz, famous photographer, gallerist and editor of the art journal *Camera Work*, was the charismatic mentor of a small circle of New

[2] Cp. Crane's "General Aims and Theories" (*The Complete Poems*, ed. Weber, 217-223, esp. 220). Both Crane and Hartley referred to William Blake and his belief in the visionary eye. At about the time Crane started working on *The Bridge*, Hartley wrote in an essay: "It is what philosophers crave. The power to 'see' clearly. It is what the artist has with his eye, the power to observe the rhythmic order of the universe […]. It is the age of the eye […]. For the artist, it is the eye that counts. It is the clue to what is called modernism. The new principle implies mental and ocular originality in the artist" ("The Scientific Aesthetic of the Redman" 118).

York artists. He made it the mission of his life to enlighten the American public in matters of art, to introduce it to the path-breaking achievements of European modernism and help develop an art that would be at once modernist and unmistakably American. Between 1908 and 1913, the year of the famous Armory Show, his gallery "291" was not only the first in the U.S. to exhibit paintings and sculptures by Matisse, Cézanne and Picasso; it was also the only place at that time where the artists of an emerging American avant-garde had the chance to present their works. In many cases Stieglitz helped them to survive financially by arranging exhibitions for them, buying their pictures or making his friends buy them.

"291" preceded and also anticipated the Armory Show. Although Stieglitz was not involved in its organization, the show seemed to confirm and move forward his agenda "to enlighten the American public" in matters of art. Yet it also undermined its status as a unique and pioneering place. In the wake of the Armory Show, new galleries and art journals were founded and with them new centers for the avant-garde. The circle that Walter and Louise Arensberg formed in 1915 attracted a younger group of immigrant Dadaists and Futurists, most famous among them Marcel Duchamp, freshly arrived from France, and Francis Picabia, to whom Stieglitz, with his faith in the sacredness of art, appeared venerable if somewhat old-fashioned. Stieglitz, who observed with disgust the increasing commercialization even of modernist painting, responded by retreating to a more exclusive and esoteric position. "291" had to close in 1917, and the dynamics of avant-garde activities shifted toward the Arensbergs. After they left New York in the early 1920s, Stieglitz opened new galleries, first "The Intimate Place" and later "The American Place" – both frequented by his old "291" protegés but also by newcomers and those who had been drifting between "291" and the Arensberg circle: Joseph Stella, Charles Demuth, Marsden Hartley and Charles Sheeler, as well as the poets William Carlos Williams and Hart Crane.[3]

Although the artistic concepts of both groups (the recently arrived Dadaists/Futurists and Stieglitz's home-grown neo-transcendentalists) differed considerably, there were also overlaps that made such drifting plausible: Both aimed at the creation of a distinctly American art – which, in the case of the Arensberg circle, however, included the products of industrial America and its commercial culture – and in their artistic endeavors both evoked the spirit of Whitman, the indigenous patron saint of the modern. I shall concentrate on Marin, Stella, Hartley and their literary counterparts Hart Crane and William Carlos Williams – not least because these three painters were also ambitious writers: Hartley calling himself a painter *and* a poet (cp. Frelik), Marin enacting in his letters a whimsical, huckfinned ver-

[3] On the New York modernist avant-garde, see Homer; Nauman; Cohn.

sion of Thoreau, Stella projecting ecstatic Futurist visions in the voice of Whitman.

Stieglitz had met John Marin in Paris in 1909 and was so taken with him and his work that he invited him to exhibit at "291" a year later. He considered Marin "his closest artist friend" and most dedicated follower. Their personal affinity is echoed in their work: Stieglitz, in photography, and Marin, in his watercolors, oscillate between a commitment to the city *and* to nature, intending to reveal America's latent spirituality (its "true significance") in both. After his return from Europe, Marin responded ecstatically to the explosive energy of New York City: and began to "pile" its "great houses one upon another with paint as they do pile themselves up there so beautiful, so fantastic at times one is afraid to look at them but feels like running away" (*Selected Wrtings* 2-3).

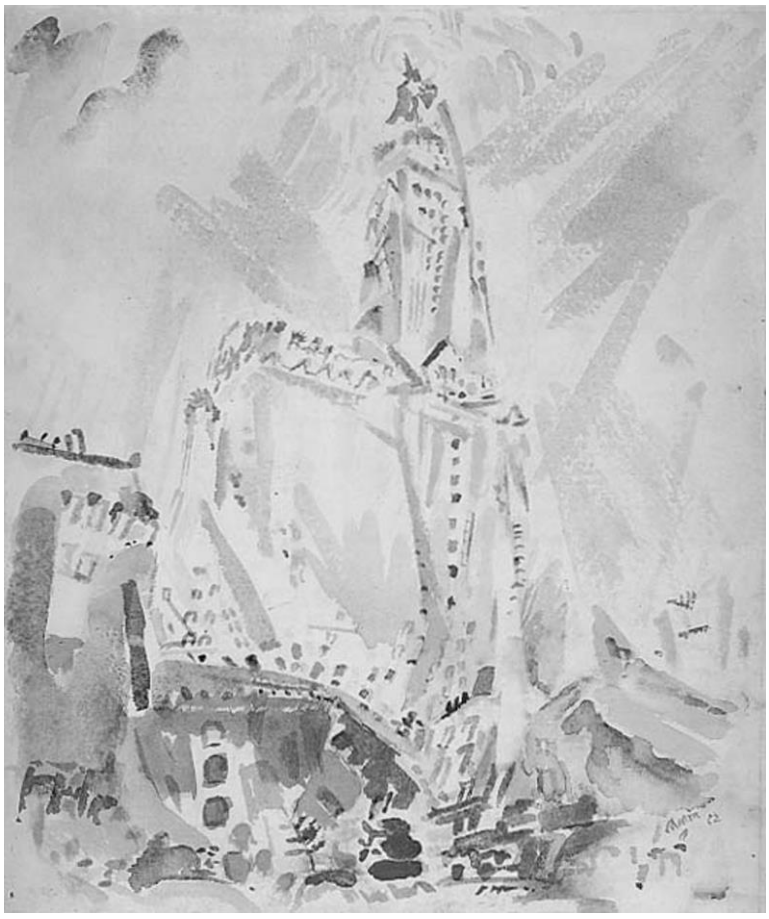


Fig. 1. John Marin, *Woolworth Building, No. 31* (1912)

There is a line-dissolving energy in the thrust upward toward where the building's top seems to touch the sun. Or is it that the chaos of horizontal and diagonal lines in the foreground is gathered and ordered in the upward push of the building? At the same time, the structure of urban phenomena appears to be conflated with the natural architecture of a mountain landscape, its rock-like formations, its arrangement of lateral and vertical lines. Although the painting is clearly representational, anchored in the perception of a well-known object (the Woolworth Building), the perceiving subject is present in the dynamics of the representation. Or, rather, what is being represented *is* the dynamics, the energy inherent in the perceived object as well as in the perceiving subject: the emotional energy of the one echoed in the dancelike movement of the other, in the awareness of the general fluidity of things – for which watercolors seemed to be the perfect medium of expression. "Shall we consider the life of the great city as confined simply to the people and animals on its streets and in its buildings?" Marin wrote in the catalog for his 1913 exhibition.

> Are the buildings themselves dead? […] if these buildings move me they too must have life. Thus the whole city is alive; buildings, people, all are alive; and the more they move me the more I feel them to be alive. […]
>
> While these powers are at work pushing, pulling, sideways, downwards, upwards, I can hear the sound of their strife and there is great music being played. And so I try to express graphically what a great city is doing. Within the frames there must be a balance, a controlling of these warring, pushing, pulling forces. This is what I am trying to realize. (*Selected Writings* 4-5)

The expression he gave to life *in* things as much as to the life *of* things was what Marin called their movement and their inner music: "Go look at the bird's flight," he adviced his fellow-painters, "the man's walk, the sea's movement. They have a way to keep the motion. Nature's laws of motion have to be obeyed and you have to follow along" (184). That "lusty desire to splash about – submerge oneself in a medium" (139) was very much the 'painter's job,' he argued against the intellectualism of Duchamp and others. "Piling New York's great houses one upon another with paint" involved a constructive process of its own that connected, in Emersonian triangulation, the creative work of the artist with that of the city architect and both with the constructive processes of nature. "I refer to Weight balances. As my body exerts a downward pressure on the floor, the floor in turn exerts an upward pressure on my body. Too the pressure of the air against my body, my body against the air, all this I have to recognize when *building* the picture" (126). The underlying principle of construction that also is a form of organic growth, this "wedding of man and material [object]" (193), was, as he argued, the basis of his art. It makes Marin what I would call a 'transcendentalist modernist,' rooted in a world seen with *and* through the eye – spiritual essences revealed in material surfaces or,

inversely, the object perceived gaining true 'reality' by its subjective transformation – via modernist abstraction – into an aesthetic object.

Joseph Stella, who had come to New York shortly after Marin's return from Europe, brought with him from Paris fresh memories of a sensational exhibition of Italian Futurists in 1912 – his ears probably still ringing from Futurist Manifestos proclaiming New York City as the avatar of a new civilization. His "Battle of Lights, Coney Island" (1913) made him famous and established him as the most radical of American avant-gardists. "Equally important for Stella," writes Barbara Haskell, was Picabia's endless proselytizing on the beauty and dynamism of New York:

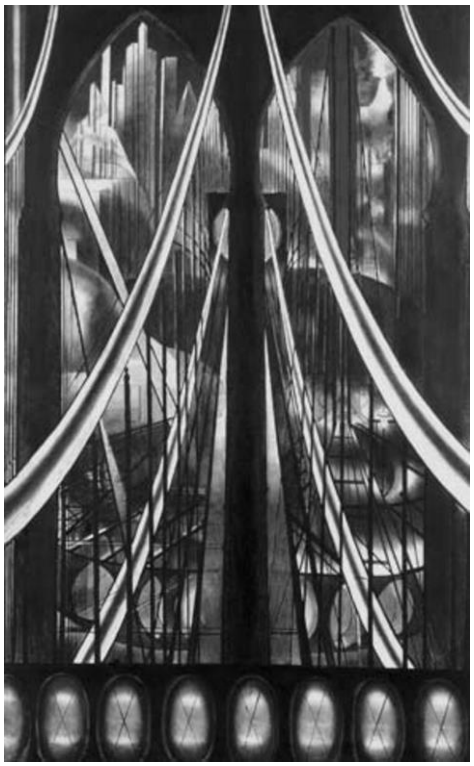
> You of New York should be quick to understand me and my fellow painters. Your New York is the cubist, the futurist city. It expresses its architecture, its life, its spirit, the modern thought. You have passed through all the old schools, and are futurists in word and deed and thought (Picabia, qtd. in Haskell, *Joseph Stella* 41-42).

Stella started painting Brooklyn Bridge in 1918 and then, a year or two later, "The Voice of the City of New York Interpreted," his five-panel vision of New York that celebrated the city as "the shrine containing all the efforts of the new civilization of AMERICA – the eloquent meeting of all forces arising in a superb assertion of their powers, in APOTHEOSIS" (qtd. in Haskell 206-07).

At almost the same time Charles Sheeler and Paul Strand, both members of the Stieglitz circle, created a film that proclaimed New York's mythic status as gigantic machine and "second nature": "Manhatta," booming with vertical energy and the horizontal movement of its human masses, but also embedded in nature and its cycles, its rhythms marked by the movement of the tides and of the sun. Although Stella, like Marin and Sheeler/Strand, invoked Whitman as a visionary guide, he yet seems to have severed his constructivist city from organic ties to nature or to self. It is perhaps for this reason that Marin dispensed with Stella's masterpiece as not having "anything of the *real bridge feeling* in it – any more than if he had put up some street cables and things in his Studio – painted a rather beautiful thing and called it the 'Bridge' which – again (to me at least) is just what he did" (*Selected Writings* 56).

What Marin may have had in mind is the lack in Stella's painting of what Stieglitz called "expression of life": the felt subjective response to the object grasped in the act of perception. In comparison to Marin's "Brooklyn Bridge," Stella's Futurist version appears to be curiously static (despite its vertical thrust), highly theatrical, staged, symphonic, symbolically arranged, a visionary statement of faith – like the glass windows of a cathedral or the alter-piece of a new religion of technology and capital. Both paintings clearly project a symbolic urban landscape. Although some

of the skyscrapers may be identified (the Woolworth, the Flatiron, etc.), their ensemble is not "seen" but constructed. Barbara Haskell perceives in Stella's five-panel celebration of "The Voice of the City of New York Interpreted" a 'literary' quality absent from other pictorial representations of the city. This may be in response to the narrative implied in the arrangement of the panels as well as in their symbolic structure.



Figs. 2 and 3. John Marin's (1912) and Joseph Stella's (1920–22) renderings of Brooklyn Bridge

But Haskell's perception of literariness may also be a response to the extraordinary text Stella wrote some ten years after his painting. "Brooklyn Bridge, A Page of My Life" (1928) is a synaesthetic *poème-en-prose*, a mystic and myth-making piece of writing whose only equivalent in the literature of the period can be found in the exalted rhetoric of "Atlantis," the climactic poem of Hart Crane's own mythopoeic celebration of Brooklyn Bridge. For what Stella's text does (and what his painting does not do) is to introduce and explain a subject position: the position of the observer, or the lyrical I, analogous to that of Crane's in his introductory 'Proem,' a prayer to Brooklyn Bridge ("Under thy shadow by the piers I waited; / Only in darkness is thy shadow clear …").

"BROOKLYN BRIDGE had become an ever growing obsession ever since I had come to America," thus Stella.

> Many nights I stood on the bridge—and in the middle alone—lost—a defenceless prey to the surrounding swarming darkness—crushed by the mountainous black impenetrability of the skyscrapers—here and there lights resembling the suspended falls of astral bodies or fantastic splendors of remote rites—shaken by the underground tumult of the trains in perpetual motion, like the blood in the arteries—at times, ringing as alarm in a tempest, the shrill sulphurous voice of the trolley wires—now and then strange moanings of appeal from tug boats, guessed more than seen, through the infernal recesses below—I felt deeply moved, as if on the threshold of a new religion or in the presence of a new DIVINITY. […]
>
> At the end, brusquely, a new light broke over me, metamorphosing aspects and visions of things. Unexpectedly, from the sudden unfolding of blue distances of my youth in Italy, a great clarity announced PEACE—proclaiming the luminous dawn of A NEW ERA. (qtd. in Haskell 206-207)

Stella's interpretation of his painting reveals the inward 'drama' hidden in, or behind, the vision he projected outward: the lost and isolated self ("a defenceless prey") overcoming its isolation by taking symbolic possession of the powers that "crush" it ("the mountainous black impenetrability of the skyscrapers"); and in doing so becomes ecstatically aware of a new self embodied in Brooklyn Bridge – that is also a bridge of reconciliation between a lost "youth in Italy" and a "luminous" future in America. By interpreting New York, Stella has found his place – and a self that is finally sure *that* it belongs and *where* it belongs.

It is impossible to know whether Crane saw Stella's painting or read his text before he finished his own cyclic poem. He was in any case instrumental in having Stella's prose-poem republished in Eugene Jolas's journal *Transition* in 1929. In a letter to Stella, Crane wrote: "It is a remarkable coincidence that I should, years later, have discovered that another person, by whom I mean you, should have had the same sentiments regarding Brooklyn Bridge which inspired the main theme and pattern of my poem" (*O My Land* 395). It is indeed the recognition of a kindred spirit – and for Crane a sure sign of a "new order of consciousness" (155) whose coming, he felt, had been prophetically announced by Alfred Stieglitz and Waldo Frank and was now confirmed by artists like Stella and himself.

However, when his poem was at last published in 1930, Crane had lost faith in his vision of America's spiritual possibilities as much as in his own creative powers. Whatever spirituality there might have been, in the end, Brooklyn Bridge represented but "an economical approach to shorter hours, quicker lunches" (258-259). What he took to be his failure as a visionary poet can thus not be separated from the general disillusion with the promise of the urban sublime at the beginning of the 1930s – the "mirage" of the City seen as if for the first time. Fitzgerald addressed it in *The Great Gatsby* and then again in "My Lost City" (1932), and another Italian immigrant painter, O. Louis Guglielmi, gave expression to it in his surreal "Mental Geography" of 1934:

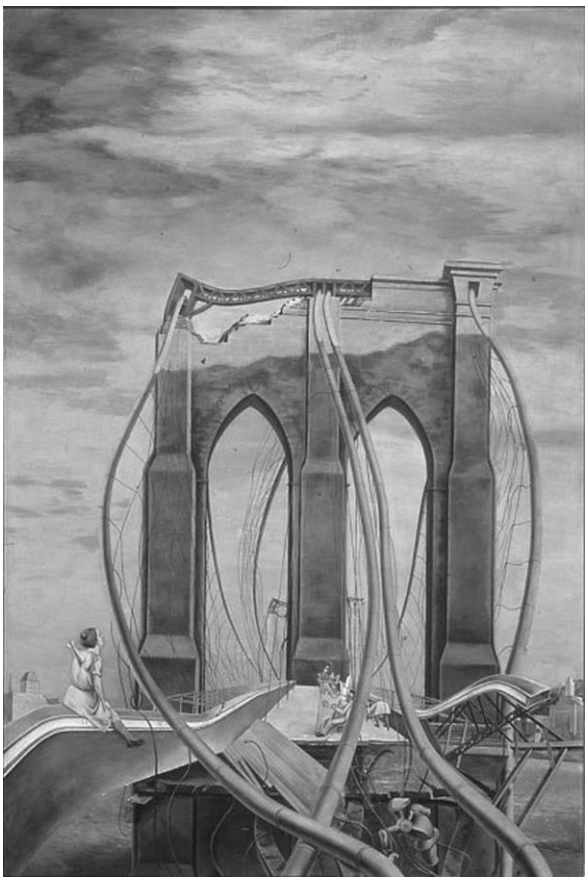


Fig. 4. O. Louis Guglielmi, *Mental Geography* (1938)

Stella himself, however, clung to his utopian vision till the very end of his life – painting, time and again, the bridge that had made his careeer and had become an emblem of his American identity. Yet the time for discovering spiritual wholeness in the city was clearly over.

Marsden Hartley painted his own urban ecstasies away from New York in another metropolitan center of modernism, Berlin, where he spent several years before and during World War I. However, the Berlin paintings he brought back to New York – still considered by some critics his best work – were not well received since they seemed to document Hartley's cultural allegiance to the German enemy. Stieglitz admonished him to find his place and identity in America – which Hartley tried but found difficult to do and therefore continued, for the next fifteen years, to travel between styles, regions and continents, much to Stieglitz's displeasure.

Hartley knew Crane from "291" and as a one-time neighbor in Brooklyn. They met again in Marseille in 1929, when *The Bridge* was still

in print, and then again a few years later in Mexico – Crane spending the last month of a Guggenheim fellowship there, Hartley the first of his own. Both shared a fascination with the visionary and occult (Blake and Whitman being their favorite poets). And they were both homosexuals – Crane occasionally flaunting the fact while Hartley tried to disguise it.

Fig. 5. Marsden Hartley, *Sustained Comedy* (1939)

Note the painter's self-deprecating clown image that nevertheless asserts his visionary power: the arrows that pierce his clairvoyant blue eyes may bring suffering but also generate butterflies, symbols of immortality; the lightning stroke of intuition marks his forehead, birds nest on one of the shoulders of this modern day St. Francis/St. Sebastian, while the other sprouts a bunch of flowers. "The themes of suffering, pain, and mysticism that were […] leitmotifs in Hartley's paintings" (Brennan 160), tempt me to compare Hartley's self-portrait with Crane's self-revelatory poem "Possessions" – although Crane's intensities lack the ironic self-reflexivity that marks Hartley's work.

Tossed on these horns, who bleeding dies,
Lacks all but piteous admissions to be spilt
Upon the page whose blind sum finally burns
Record of rage and partial appetites.
The pure possession, the inclusive cloud
Whose heart is fire shall come, – the white wind rase
All but bright stones wherein our smiling plays.
(Crane, *Complete Poems*, ed. Simon 18)

Hartley was devastated when he heard that Crane had committed suicide by jumping overboard the steamer *Orizaba* on his way back from Mexico on April 27, 1932. Hartley himself had toyed with the idea of suicide – despairing of his isolation as well as of his lack of recognition (and of money). Crane had told him that, after the failure of *The Bridge,* he had nothing more to say – which horrified Hartley ("Hart had not done his work") because he saw in Crane a younger alter-ego and thus an image of his own possible defeat. He wrote three essays on Crane, published a set of five commemorative poems ("Un Recuerdo – Hermano – Hart Crane, R.I.P") and painted "Eight Bells Folly" in memory of him. The essays (all of them unpublished) mainly underline their difference of character, as if Hartley wanted to assure himself that Crane's fate could not, and would never be, his. Nevertheless there is a deep sense of personal loss which has echoes in the poem.

And should it be left like this,
dear Hart, like this,
too much fulfillment, no more promise,
given over petulantly, fevered,
you the severing, we the severed,
to wind-wash,
wave-flow, wave-toss and thrash,
beating forward, backward, to and fro,
in the unremitting high and low
in the never ending torment of today,
yesterday, so redolent of geniality –
never again to know tomorrow […]

A beautiful dive, then floating
on his back, waved a hand,
and was seen, no more. […]

Gone to the end of the bridge and over
worn with roving the bridge, bridge-rover,
done with all the walking and the stalking
and all the cheap talking. (Collected Poems 119 ff.)

These excerpts do not quite represent the uncertainty of Hartley's verse, its wavering between the elevated and the trivial – especially with regard to rhyme and word choice. Yet the poem clearly tries to render rhythmically the sea-swell of Crane's post-mortem existence ("an everlasting being in not being," as Hartley had written in one of the essays). In addition, Hartley wove into the texture of his poem images and motifs of Crane's poetry. While alive, Crane had written several sea poems, most memorably "At Melville's Tomb" and "Voyages" where the sea became a symbol for the dissolution of the self in love, just as, in the end, he made the sea the medium of his own dissolution in death.

Fig. 6. Marsden Hartley, *Eight Bells Folly* (1933)

No wonder, then, that Hartley painted the sea, in "Eight Bells Folly," as a portrait of Crane's "being in not being," as living after having suffered a "sea-change." Accordingly, the painting is highly symbolic and has, as Hartley stated, a "mad look" – the madness, the folly, was Crane's in his dying as well as in the frantic intensity of his living. In the poem, Hartley had integrated elements of what had already become part of the Crane legend: eye witnesses on board the ship had seen Crane come up to the surface for a last time, "then floating / on his back, waved a hand, / and was seen no more" (*Poem*s 119-20). In his painting, Hartley also included the shark that others believed to have seen shortly after Crane jumped. The clipper sailing through the dark sea toward a horizon lit by the moon and

the sun (or is it the golden apple of heavenly perfection?) may symbolize Crane's (and Hartley's) lifelong yearning for a beyond ("still one shore beyond desire," as Crane had written in "Ave Maria," one of the poems of *The Bridge*). The number 33 on its sails marks Crane's (and Christ's) age when he died. The figure eight refers to "8 bells," or noon, the hour of Crane's suicide; yet like the number 9, the 8 may also associate infinity and immortality.

Hartley painted several elegies in his life – the first in commemoration of his German lover Karl von Freyburg who was killed during the first weeks of World War I. His death made Hartley paint "Portrait of a German Officer" which combines an abstract Cubist arrangement of the officer's insignia and uniform with symbols of their friendship. "Eight Bells Folly" is situated between this earlier abstract portrait and a commemoration, five years later (1936–37), of two Nova Scotia fishermen whom Hartley had loved and whom he now intensely mourned. They drowned in 1936, at night, during a fierce storm when they tried to get home from a fishing trip. His "Northern Seascape, Off the Banks" is more representational than both of his previous elegies. It also evokes in its realism and its stylization of waves, rocks and clouds two painters Hartley greatly admired: Winslow Homer, the realist, and Albert Pinkham Ryder, the painter of the dreamlike and mysterious. The symbolism in "Northern Seascape" is thus more discreet than in "Eight Bells Folly."

Fig. 7. Marsden Hartley, *Northern Seascape, Off the Banks* (1936–37)

The two sailing boats scudding toward the horizon may evoke the souls of the two drowned fisherman, but then they may also be just boats on a rough sea. In "Northern Seascape" the rocks, like sharks' teeth, are reminders of the sea's power of death and destruction. There is a Melvillean sense of nature's savage sublimity that informs Homer's sea paintings as well as Thoreau's descriptions of Mt. Katahdin and Cape Cod. Hartley gave expression to it in another elegiac poem and painting, both called "Fishermen's Last Supper."

All of Hartley's elegies – painted or written – deal with a tragic loss in his life but in each case they also mark his overcoming despair by creative self-assertion and a new phase in his development as painter. Throughout his career, he had wavered between expressing emotional intensity through abstract expression, on the one hand, and a vehement rejection of the subjective, the annihilation of the self in the object (something he admired in Cézanne), on the other. "To have an eye with a brain in it," he wished for in 1919 (*Collected Poems* 319); and in an essay of 1928 he went even further in his rejection of the emotionally expressive: "I have joined, once and for all, the ranks of the intellectual experimentalists," possibly thinking of Picabia and Duchamp. And he continued: "I can hardly bear the sound of the words 'expressionism,' 'emotionalism,' 'personality' […] I no longer believe in the imagination" (*On Art* 71).

Yet in response to the deep shock caused by Crane's death, Hartley began to artistically reinvent himself. "Crane's art did not save him," thus Jonathan Weinberg. "Yet in working through an artist's death, Hartley discovered his own subject matter" ("Marsden Hartley" 134). Another critic argues that "Eight Bells Folly" was "Hartley's first overt inclusion of a personal reference in his art since his German days in the 1910s" and a sign that Hartley had begun to reinstate the subjective, the mystic, and imaginative (Robertson 98). "My pictures are bound to the mystical more and more for that is what I myself am more and more," he wrote in 1933. "I belong naturally to the Emerson-Thoreau tradition and I know that too well. It is my native substance." He now proclaims immersion in a "mysticism of nature" that fused subject and object in the act of imaginative seeing. "The power to 'see' clearly. It is what the artist has with his eye, the power to observe the rhythmic order of the universe" (qtd. in Cassidy 108).

That dichotomy in Hartley's aesthetic theory and practice finds an interesting equivalent in Crane's and Williams's diverging concepts of the visionary eye – even though they were both equally committed to the project of creating an original American modernist culture. Crane believed that the dynamic curve of the bridge as much as the dynamics of his own metaphoric densities were both evidence of his visionary "experience of knowledge" (*Letters* 225) were incarnations – the Word-made-Flesh in steel, stone and language – of an invisible but all-pervasive creative energy.

At the time when Hartley began writing his commemorative poem, Williams published a harsh review of Crane's poetry, denouncing its failure of word and vision: "His eyes seem to me often to have been blurred by 'vision' when they should have been held hard, as hard as he could hold them, on the object" ("Hart Crane" 4). Whereas in Crane's eyes, the bridge – like a Stieglitz snapshot – was movement caught and turned into timeless presence, for Williams, timelessness was in the experiential process. In his aesthetics of immanence, presence meant constant attention toward an ever changing Now of experience that, for each new moment, had to be caught and represented anew.

Yet when Hartley met Crane in Mexico, Crane's poetic practice had taken a turn of which neither Williams nor Hartley were aware. In his last poem, "The Broken Tower" – the only poem he had written during his year in Mexico – Crane seems to revoke his earlier visionary poetics when he asks the poet to "lift down the eye" (*Poems* 161). It is the reversal of an earlier metaphor he had used in "At Melville's Tomb" ("Frosted eyes there were that lifted altars" *Poems* 33) where God is made to exist by the very desire for his existence. Crane was not able to test the implications of this new downward vision. But one may well speculate that it would have been close to Williams's insistence on holding the eye "hard on the object." It might also have found an echo in Hartley's paintings of the 1930s and early 1940s which give evidence of his eye "lifted down" in a precise if condensed (essentializing) representation of things seen. What moves Hartley even closer to Williams is the fact that his reorientation of the eye coincides with his homecoming – the cosmopolitan wanderer between continents not only returning to his native land (something Stieglitz had begged him to do for decades), but to his native region: Maine. No wonder that Williams, the champion of an American literature rooted in the local, praised Hartley – in an unpublished review of a 1940 exhibition of his paintings:

> Hartley is painting better today than he ever could have hoped to do formerly and the reason becomes more and more apparent. It is a painter's reason, a basic reason, it has to do with the mind, the body and the spirit drawn gradually together into one life and finally flowering, once. […] the gnarledest of paintings can emit pure light – when they finally come through, when they make good, when they close up broken life such an American as Hartley must have led, to bring into place his native completion. (Hartley Papers, also qtd. in Kornhauser 11)[4]

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[4] I thank the archival section of the Beinecke Library and its curator Nancy Kuhl for allowing me to access its Marsden Hartley and Hart Crane material; also the VG Bild-Kunst for permission to reproduce John Marin's "Brooklyn Bridge" and "Woolworth Building, No. 31." And I thank Ms. Williams Fox for her permission to quote from Williams's essay on Hartley.

Williams's localism (nationalist, yet also universalist) – at a time when regionalists of all kinds claimed to be representative of a truly American art – may seem a far cry from Stieglitz's idea of the artists's involvement in the shaping of an "America still in the making." But it was Hartley himself who believed that his homecoming ("The Return of the Native") was indeed a 'completion' giving him place, identity and not least the recognition he had long craved for.

> […] it is a smiling festival
> when rock, juniper and wind
> are of one mind,
> a seagull signs the bond
> makes what was broken, whole. (*Collected Poems* 251)

Donna Cassidy and others have demonstrated that this return 'home' was also a retreat – a retreat from all those forces of modernity that Crane had hoped to integrate in his own mythic vision of America. It was a retreat from a commercial urban culture to the spirituality of New England, its transcendentalist 'essence' – even though he did not at all mind profiting commercially from his new status as Maine's most prominent painter. It was a retreat also to what he considered the purer and simpler life of farmers and fishermen, and, alas, not least to the racial purity of Anglo-Saxondom.

Going home to come into his own also meant to (re)take possession of what he considered his by right of birth and artistic ancestry: the landscape of New England and the aesthetic tradition of writers and painters that had elevated its sites to national icons. In September he wrote to a friend:

> Next month I go up Mt. Katahdin to paint the "sacred mountain" […] and I must put myself on record as having done it – and as far as I know it has never appeared in art – I have elected myself official portrait painter. […] I must get that Mt. for future reason of fame and success. (qtd. in Cassidy 15)

It is, of course, quite unlikely that Hartley would not have known that Frederic Church had been as much obsessed with Mt. Katahdin as he was now, almost ninety years later, that, in fact, they shared a veritable "mountain madness" (Bohan 152). Hartley's 'pilgrimage' made him paint eighteen "portraits" (as he called them) of Mt. Katahdin since climbing the mountain had been nothing less than a religious experience for him: "I know I have seen God now," he confessed to a friend. "The occult connection that is established when one loves nature was complete – and so I felt transported to a visible fourth dimension – and since heaven is inviolably a state of mind I have been there these past ten days" (qtd. in Ludington 23).

Perhaps it is this sense of finally having found 'home' that allows him – in this last phase of his life – to create (almost Crane-like) a symbolic art of secular religiosity which is nevertheless based on the concretely perceived natural object. One might even argue that Mt. Katahdin is for Hartley what Brooklyn Bridge had been for Hart Crane – except that its sublimity was inviolable since its timelessness went back to that primeval Earth before man which Thoreau had described in terms of beauty, terror and awe. For Hartley painting Mt. Katahdin was "to uncover the principle of conscious unity in all things," and to witness the "living essence present everywhere" – such as the unity inherent in the forms of mountain and of sea, in the "wave rhythms" connecting all natural phenomena (qtd.in McGrath 189).

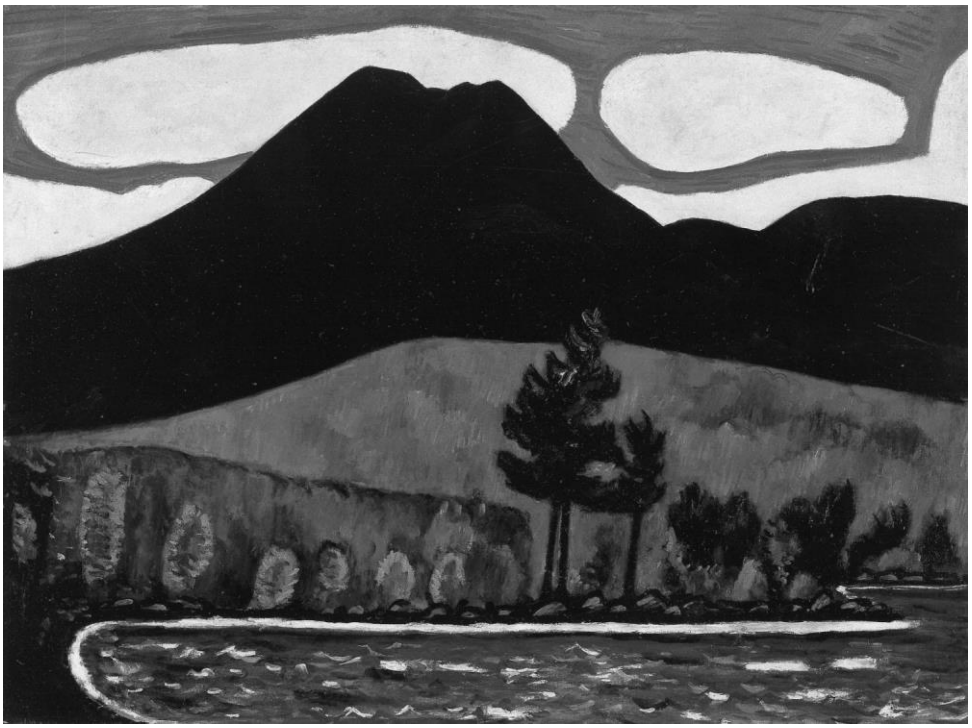

Fig. 8. Marsden Hartley, *Mt. Katahdin, Autumn No. 2* (1939–40)

Reduced to archaic blackness, set against the essentialized colors of sky (blue), cloud (white), lake (blue) and autumn forest (red/orange),[5] Hartley's Mt. Katahdin is primeval and aloof – surviving man's savage materialist assault on that "awful, though beautiful" wilderness that Mt. Katahdin had once embodied in the eyes of poets and landscape painters (Thoreau, "Ktaadn" 465).

For Hartley Mt. Katahdin was an 'icon' of his inmost solitary self as well as an "archetypal symbol of mystic power" (McGrath 189), forever

[5] Which also happen to be the colors of the national flag.

asserting a creative energy that he, like his transcendentalist forebears, had ecstatically experienced throughout his life despite periods of depression and abjection. So that he could write in one of his last poems:

> I want nothing in the way of artificial
> heavens –
> The earth is all I know of wonder.
> I lived and was nurtured in the
> magic of dreams
> bright flames of spirit laughter
> around all my seething frame.
> ("To the Nameless One," *Collected Poems* 250)