

## Two Who Wept

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To my certain knowledge, as people used say, during my four years at a men's college, only two of my teachers ever wept openly in class even once. Doubtless they all wept privately on occasion, but these public tears have burned two class meetings into my memory for half a century. Most of the other classes—perhaps all of them—first fused into each other and then collectively disappeared. Emotional students may be a problem for teachers, but there is a serviceableness in emotional teachers, who give students the opportunity to educate themselves. These two educations in my case were different.

The teacher in the first case I'll call Bobo, which would instantly identify him to ninety per cent of my college mates from the last eighty years but almost certainly will not to anyone in this room. He was about seventy when he taught me. He had a trimmed thatch of white hair, wire rimmed glasses, mischievous eyes, and a turned up nose in a boyish face. He was a picturesque, something parents could warm their hands over while they contemplated the tuition bill. He stood out at graduations with his robe, which was a skimpy piece of dull black, relieved over one shoulder by a loop of soiled ermine. This signified an Oxford B.Litt., no more than that, because, perhaps for Kittredge's famous reason, he had never pursued a Ph.D. He kept a Morgan Hunter in a barn behind a large frame house owned by Ulysses Grant's grandson and would canter through campus on it, not just the surrounding woods but the quadrangles, his standard poodle keeping up, his brown woolen cape flowing behind him, looking like one of Morgan's raiders himself, somehow stranded above the fortieth parallel, never having heard of Appomattox. This was evidently a bit much for one of my classmates. Word had it that Bobo marched into a faculty meeting late one afternoon and angrily declared that he had been shot at for the last time. He was insouciant but not really an eternal boy. When girls were up for house party weekends, we took them to Bobo's in those days of Saturday morning classes, as one of the civilized entertainments; there he read seventeenth century English poetry with great expression. He typically began by asking the women to cross their legs. Then he would pause and say that now he could continue, the gates of hell having been closed. Nietzsche might have been imagining that moment when he defined a witticism as an epitaph written over the death of a feeling.

One spring evening we learned that Bobo's wife had died that day, and we went to class next morning confident he would not appear and that the first of his wife's bequests would be what we used to call a free cut. To the contrary, he was there on time and read us, his tears flowing, John Donne's great poem, "A Valediction Forbidding Mourning." Let me read the

beginning of it.

As virtuous men passe mildly'away,  
And whisper to their soules, to goe,  
Whilst some of their sad friends doe say,  
The breath goes now, and some say, no.  
So let us melt, and make no noise ....

When he finished, he left the room, and after a moment we followed in silence.

With his touching performance, he reinforced for everyone in that class a popular misreading of Donne's poem, the occasion for which was not actually a deathbed. As I think every English teacher is at pains to teach, Donne and, as it happened, his wife were not to be separated by an imminent death. The quiet death of people with a good conscience is a metaphor. Donne was to travel as a diplomat to the Continent, risky business, no doubt, but he would go on to give reasons why their love was safe and thus there was no need for anxious fuss. The calm deathbed was only a simile for that. If Bobo had enlisted the death of his wife to make a point about how one poem could be read correctly, that would not have been wholly human—if anything ever is. Rather he subdued the poem to his performance of grief, immolating an innocent metaphor in the process. In that performance of his, triumphant and thus all too human, tears took their necessary place.

Because of the second teacher I will tell you about, but also, perhaps, to open one possible explanation for this performance of grief, I record a quasi-homosexual episode with Bobo—although my recollection of his reputation while I was at college is not that the episode would have been judged especially peculiar. Our fraternity house was just across a gravel lane from Bobo's large yellow frame house, and more than once after his wife's death he had come over and drunk with us. One night it fell to me to see him back home and to bed. Teary, intoxicated, kissing and caressing me, he implored me to join him. I think I learned then if I had not known before how the erotic can rise up in the face of death and stiff arm it—so to speak; how, when the erotic object is a token of life and youth, it may very well not matter which way it is sexed.

The second of my professors who wept, also an English teacher, was half Bobo's age. Where you could Google Bobo by his nickname and find him—although not only him—you could not succeed in Googling Lady Ed (as the second of these men was universally known) because no one ever called him that in print. They might have worried it was actionable. He had come from Minnesota near the South Dakota border, matriculated at Macalester, was with the

Army when it entered Nuremberg, and returned to America and graduate study first at Minnesota and then at Columbia. I believe the only portion of his doctoral thesis he ever published came out more than ten years after his degree. It argued, in academic prose of unusual richness, for the significance of the imagery of pollution in Dickens's Little Dorrit. The pollution is a metaphor especially for mental disease, he proposed. The most extensive reference to this essay in the subsequent professional literature called the proposal itself "perverse."

Ed was tall and wide shouldered. His curly chestnut hair came down in a widow's peak and was brushed into tufts of gray at the sides. His head tapered in a gentle triangle to a modest chin. It would be hard to say where the "Lady" of his sobriquet had come from. His voice was a firm baritone and he wore trim tweedy jackets. Perhaps there was a languor in his graceful hands. He had an easy, natural eloquence: I remember his dropping into a program note the idea that poets are singers manques. He was straightforward and known for his interpretive classroom reading, which made something of a piece with his acting and his direction of plays. He taught Shakespeare and American literature particularly, and when he was reading Hart Crane's The Bridge to us, out of the blue he broke down and sobbed. This was no performance, and the show did not go on. I remember nothing else about that class or virtually about the course, as what I remember from all of college could probably be taught in a single long afternoon.

Hart Crane was dead in his thirty-third year. Dropping out of high school, he went to New York City to be a writer, living sometimes on an allowance from his father, who was mortified that his son was a poet, and sometimes from hack writing. He periodically returned to Cleveland for work in a factory his father owned and once worked in an Akron candy store, his father having invented the peppermint Life Saver. In New York, in his late 'teens and early twenties he was precociously promoting Pound and Eliot to his friends and wrote an appreciative letter to Alien Tate after the latter had published his first poem. Tate considered this his first letter ever from a literary person. Crane's ambition was to write an American epic, a sequel to Leaves of Grass but responsive to the Symbolist tradition of Pound, Eliot, and William Carlos Williams. And like those poets and Hopkins and Bridges before them, he was invested in metrical experiment. His poetic production suffered certainly from the brevity of his formal education but also from his lifestyle——a word the world never uses to name anything it likes. He was well-built, good-looking, and gay. He cruised for sailors in New York, a port city being good for that, and it was a sailor who pummeled him on the night before he killed himself.

While John Donne's "Valediction Forbidding Mourning" is one of the best known poems in English, it would be no good my referring to The Bridge because few people will have got all

the way through it. I have even entertained the unworthy suspicion— impossible, really, with Ed—that he had put it on the class schedule without having read it, based on its reputation as a landmark of modernism, only to be appalled while preparing for class to discover what he had done and to decide upon tears as a fitting makeshift, a way to abort the class and, at the same time, express grief and guilt for doing that.

I can think of three possible springs for Ed's tears. I take up the first only to dismiss it, because doing so will give me as a nonspecialist the chance to give you a few descriptors for the whole poem. I do not think it was the poem's importance as an intervention in the history of poetry that drew Ed's tears. In at least the weak or journalistic sense of "epic," signifying grandeur in space and time, Crane achieved what he intended. The poem leaps like macadam "from Far Rockaway to Golden Gate" and back again, from the Ozarks to the high mesas and then back to Appalachia, from the East River to the Ohio. The poem throws a span over time from Ferdinand and Columbus to the Civil War and Whitman's nursing casualties and to the airplanes of the First World War and the show girls of the Winter Garden. But Crane wanted the style of the poem to make clear that the world of poetry had been decisively if recently changed by what we had come to call modernism. To name a single catalyzing event, T. S. Eliot's The Waste Land had appeared in 1922, the year before Crane began The Bridge. Just as epic has always functioned to give a culture its self-knowledge, so Crane wanted to show America to itself as the city set upon a hill. The problem of writing that he set himself, however, was to do this in the same disjunctive speech registers that Eliot had used to show that a unified culture was no longer possible.

And so, in Eliot's registers, Crane writes of "apparitional... sails that cross

Some pages of figures to be filed away;

—Till elevators drop us from our day....

These lines pull together lines like ". . . each man fixed his eyes before his feet. / Flowed up the hill and down King William Street" and "At the violet hour, when the eyes and back / Turn upward from the desk" from The Waste Land and "Till human voices wake us and we drown" from "Prufrock." Or Crane's "Behind / My father's cannery works I used to see .. ." recalling Eliot's

On a winter evening round behind the gashouse

Musing upon the kin my brother's wreck

And on the king my father's death before him ....

The Bridge earned Crane a Guggenheim Fellowship, which he appears to have

squandered in Mexico with undisciplined living. Honored and ambitious though the poem was, many readers have thought it a failure: like other modernist work, it lacks an easily intelligible narrative line. Moreover, it would be easy to quote many clumsy passages from it, even silly ones. But I am not going to raise a laugh at the expense of a dead boy. Like the bedlamite that Crane himself reports, who speeds to the parapets of Brooklyn Bridge, "Tilting there momentarily, shrill shirt ballooning," Crane will remove his coat, climb a ship's rail, and jump. And besides, Lady Ed wept.

The question is not necessarily why he wept, as if we were always scientists preoccupied with independent and dependent variables. Wilhelm Dilthey and others have defined the humanities—what Dilthey called the Geisteswissenschaften, the human sciences—as focused on context. The meaning of an utterance can be understood as the missing parts of its context. And what could be more an out-terance than a tear? What was the context in which Ed read The Bridge? Was it America itself in some sense, which Ed had brought with him from Minnesota to the European theater, the New World, the New Jerusalem of Roger Williams that for Ed had survived graduate school and academic critique now to be figured as the wires and cables of Brooklyn Bridge? Having rented sleeping space in a house that was owned, unbeknownst to Crane, by John Roebling, Crane happened to see the bridge every day from Roebling's own favorite room for looking at his work. His long poem is bridge to the bridge:

Through the bound cable strands, the arching path  
Upward, veering with light, a flight of strings, —  
Taut miles of shuttling moonlight syncopate  
The whispered rush, telepathy of wires.

.....

And through that cordage, threading with its call One are  
synoptic of all tides below—— Their labyrinthine  
mouths of history Pouring reply as though all ships at sea  
Complighted in one vibrant breath made cry ....

.....

And on, obliquely up bright carrier bars  
New octaves trestle the twin monoliths  
Beyond whose frosted capes the moon bequeaths  
Two worlds of sleep ....

.....

White tempest nets file upward, upward ring,  
With silver terraces the humming spars,  
The loft of vision, palladium helm of stars.

Susanne Langer taught us how form in art and the form of emotions follow each other. Let me suggest one way this is so with Crane. He gives his poem an appositional form. In celebrating the new age of flight, he writes

And now, as launched in abysmal cupolas of space,  
Towards endless terminals, Rasters of speeding light——  
Vast engines outward veering with seraphic grace  
On clarion cylinders pass out of sight....

The nouns with their retinues pile up: cupolas, terminals, Easters, cylinders, engines. We live in expectation for three and a half lines——in this case, for a finite verb. The heart fills up as the head fills up. Such is hope, which much of the world used to associate with America. People call Crane an optimist because his poetry makes them hope.

Finally, the third possible source of Ed's tears: when the lariat sweeps us all into it loop, "[i]n single chrysalis the many twain," that is because love has struck "clear direction for the helm." Love between particular persons does not exist in The Bridge except with difficulty. A sailor is cruised but he departs for distant places. Women become wraithlike. The single person remaining substantial is Walt Whitman himself. "O Saunterer," Crane calls him, "on free ways still ahead!"——Whitman the idealist: "O, upward from the dead

Thou bringest tally, and a pact, new bound,  
Of living brotherhood!

With flight, the skies themselves become the Open Road, where Walt's "vision" is reclaimed. The two hold hands at the end of the poem, "never to let go."

The meaning of The Bridge——which is to say, the missing part of its context; partly, too, the context of Ed's tears——is Terence's ancient claim, "nothing human is foreign to me." If Liberty lifts her torch for that, if Whitman sang that better than anyone, then it is surely a modest consequence of such openness that Whitman adds to the 1860 edition of Leaves of Grass the forty-five so-called Calamus poems, which Justin Kaplan has described as Whitman's "attempt to find a language for 'manly love' and 'the love of comrades,' the ultimate democracy of the heart." Surely a modest consequence that Lady Ed, who became an attractive widower at fifty without remarrying in the remaining decades of his life, added the salt of his tears to the water under

Brooklyn Bridge. Hart took Walt's hand, and Ed evidently took his.

That school year opened for me fifty years ago this past week. Out of it I remember my imperfect compassion for Bobo as I remember Ed's perfect compassion for Hart.