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"If You Could Die...": Hart Crane's "Accursed Share" in Mexico

Beatrice Pire

- 1 Born in the Midwest and living in New York City, Hart Crane is less known for his connections with the South, his travels to Florida, Cuba and the Isle of Pines in his family estate. A poet in the Machine Age, he was also familiar with a wilder nature, hurricanes, beaches of white sand or palms metaphorized into the 18 poems of the collection entitled *Key West*. The working title Crane had in mind was "East of Yucatan" and by the end of his life, Mexico rose as this further eastern horizon that he planned to explore—a South of another kind, stranger than the Caribbean, and that eventually proved a place of no return. Many American writers and artists of the Modernist decades settled in Mexico, such as photographers Edward Weston, Tina Modotti and Paul Strand, painter Marsden Hartley, writers Katherine Anne Porter and Waldo Frank. Most of them found inspiration in the culture and landscape of the country and created significant works, though their appreciation of Mexico may have changed and sometimes turned from exultation to dejection. Hart Crane followed a slightly different path. Taken to Mexico City in 1931 by a Guggenheim travel grant, he never wrote a single line of the epic poem he had in mind, a poetic drama composed in blank verse focusing on the moment of contact between the Spanish and the indigenous populations, featuring Cortez and Montezuma. In addition to his painful difficulty to complete the Mexican project on the Conquest, Crane put an end to his life on his way back to New York City in April 1932. He had already attempted to commit suicide a few months before by swallowing a bottle of Mercurochrome. Jumping off a ship in the Gulf of Mexico definitely closed his writing career. Among the foreign lands he visited in the course of his short life, whether France or the Caribbean, Mexico seems to have been "a place of brokenness" instead of being a creative location.¹ He not only "broke ranks with the brotherhood" as he confessed in a letter to Wilbur Underwood, meaning that he slept for the first time in his life with a woman, Peggy Cowley, his friend Malcolm Cowley's ex-wife.² He was also destroyed by a country he initially wanted to absorb and write about, a broken man leaving only one last notable literary achievement during his Mexico year, "The Broken Tower."

- 2 There, he followed in the steps of D.H. Lawrence and, like him, wanted to discover primitive Mexico, the world that had existed before the coming of the white man, and to fathom the descendants of the Aztecs and the older Indian civilization. Under the influence of the New York avant-gardes, Alfred Stieglitz and his circle of Modern Primitives, Crane first took interest in Indian civilization when he was writing *The Bridge*. Although it opens and closes in New York on a vision of the Brooklyn Bridge, the epic poem includes references to Native American culture, specifically in the second section entitled "Powhatan's Daughter." In the poem on Indian dancing "The Dance," Princess Pocahontas appears side by side with a medicine-man called Maquoqueeta, shaped after a New York cabdriver Crane met one night. But except for him, he never came into direct contact with Indians and had to imagine them through an ersatz American history.³ In Mexico however, he became more acquainted with the native people and fully embraced the Aztec theme of the work he wanted to write. With a young Irish American archeologist from Wisconsin by the name of Milton Rourke who was studying at the University of Mexico, he dug in the neighborhood of his house and even found "chips and pieces of true Aztec pottery."

I have had the pleasure to meet a young archeologist... who thinks he has discovered a buried Aztec pyramid right in the vicinity of my house. Yesterday we took pick and shovel and worked our heads off digging into the side of a small hill.... We also ran across some incredibly sharp fragments of obsidian, part of a knife blade used either to carve stone and other materials or human flesh. (Unterecker 689)

- 3 Together they visited the ancient town of Tepotzlan, sixty miles south of Mexico City on the day of the Feast of Tepoztecatl, the ancient Aztec god of pulque, corn liquor, and found several fragments of Aztec idols. In Taxco Crane met the American silversmith and artist Bill Spartling who showed him his collection of Pre-Columbian silver art. His other notions on the Conquest were taken from W.H. Prescott's *The History of the Conquest of Mexico*.⁴

1. "A Bloody Eccentricity"

- 4 Crane only wrote one poem on the Pre-Conquest theme he was planning to compose during his year in Mexico. Entitled "The Circumstance" (1932) the piece is dedicated to Xochipilli, the god of art, beauty, dance, flowers, love, maize and song⁵. His name means "flower prince" and he was one of the gods that presided over the ballgame.

The anointed stone, the coruscated crown—
The drastic throne, the
Desperate sweet eyepit-basins of a bloody foreign clown—
Couched on bloody basins floating bone
Of a dismounted people...

If you could buy the stones,
Display the stumbling bones
Urging your unsuspecting
Shins, sus-
Taining nothing in time but more and more of Time,
Mercurially might add but would
Subtract and concentrate... If you
Could drink the sun as did and does
Xochipilli,—and they who've

Gone have done, as they
Who've done... A god of flowers in statued
Stone... of love—

If you could die, then starve, who live
Thereafter, stronger than death smiles in flowering stone;—
You could stop time, give florescent
Time a longer answer back (shave lightning,
Possess in halo full the winds of time)
A longer answer force, more enduring answer
As they did—and have done... (Crane 203)

- 5 The poem refers to two different fields of responsibility generally attributed to the God: love ("stone of love") and flowers ("god of flowers," "flowering stone," "florescent"). Two other realms are also suggested though not specified: poetry, identical to flower in Aztec mythology, and sacrifice as the images of "bloody basins" and "floating bone" seem to infer. Human sacrifice was often featured in the ritual events of ballgames. The bouncing ball symbolized the movement of the sun and the death of the ballgame player, slave or captive, at the end of the game represented the death of the sun that would then be reborn. Sacrifice ensured fertility, the renewal of nature and pulque ("drink the sun"). Confronting two sets of opponents, the game appeared as a battle between night and day, or as a struggle between life and the underworld. As in the ballgame, the battle between life and death appears in the poem in the opposition of two recurring words, "time" and "Time," as if the temporality of existence fought against the Eternity of death. Other contrasting attitudes or feelings take part in the contest: life and death ("die" and "live"), changeability and steadfastness ("mercurially" and "enduring"), pain and joy ("desperate" and "smile"), plenty and dearth ("drink" and "starve"), emptiness and fullness ("nothing" and "more and more"), past and present ("did" and "does"), loss and gain ("subtract" and "add"). The unnamed personal pronoun "you" can thus be understood as self-reflective, not only as the deity the speaker addresses, but as the poet himself reflecting on his own creative power: his power to stop time, to subtract and concentrate it into Eternity, to write a poem competing with a Pre-Conquest and nonetheless everlasting statue. The verbs carry the tension further in line 13 where past and present are connected ("as did and does Xochipilli") or in the ending line where the preterit-tense verb "did" turns into a present perfect form ("have done"). The *answer* repeated three times in the last stanza metaphorizes the poem itself conceived as a modern reply to primitive art: circumstantial lines growing eternal, "*longer, more enduring.*"
- 6 However, Crane also points out to the chaotic aspect of human sacrifice, as suggested in lines 4 and 7 ("bloody basins floating bone"; "stumbling bone"). Decapitation and bloodletting associated to the ballgame, seem to contaminate the very body of the poem, especially in the second stanza. "Taining" looks deprived or "beheaded" from its prefix "sus," as were the captains of the losing teams (there has even been speculation that heads and skulls were not only cut off but used as balls in the game). Dashes and dots signify missing parts in the dismembered lines. The verbs "add," "subtract," and "concentrate" are not clearly related to one specific subject or agent, and line 21 is interrupted or incomplete.
- 7 Crane is not the only Modernist who took interest in Pre-Columbian art and rituals of sacrifice.⁶ Max Weber published his first poem entitled "To Xochipilli, Lord of Flowers" in the January 1911 issue of Stieglitz's review *Camera Work* that Crane may have been

familiar with, before he wrote his own tribute. But strangely enough, as there is no evidence that he ever read him, Crane offers a vision that shows striking resemblance to Georges Bataille's understanding of Aztec religion. Bataille was involved in the first Pre-Columbian art exhibit in France and wrote an essay entitled "L'Amerique disparue" in *Cahiers de la République des Lettres, des Sciences et des Arts* (1928) where he acknowledges his reading of Prescott's *History of the Conquest of Mexico*, shows his fascination for the religion of the Aztecs and describes their frenzy of human sacrifice:

The life of civilized peoples in Pre-Columbian America is a source of wonder to us, not only in its discovery and instantaneous disappearance, but also because of its bloody eccentricity, surely the most extreme ever conceived by an aberrant mind. Continuous crime committed in broad daylight for the mere satisfaction of deified nightmares, terrifying phantasms, priests' cannibalistic meals, ceremonial corpses, and streams of blood[.]⁷ (3)

- 8 For Bataille, the sacred is a domain of terror, horror, disjunction and disorder that, he admits, exercises a strong power of attraction on him: "No matter; of the various American Indians, the Aztec people... was nonetheless the liveliest, the most seductive, even in its mad violence, its trancelike development" ("Extinct America" 5). It embraces all the emotions that rational humanity rejects as incompatible with its values of survival, reason and order. Likewise, Crane conflates the horrible with the sacred and relates Xochipilli to images of bloodshed, incoherence and chaos ("a dismounted people"). Both thinker and poet see primitive religion as a place of change whereby the horrible or the loathing ("bleeding," "dying," "starving") is transformed into the pure, attractive sacred ("a god of flowers," "live," "smiles"). Bataille reminds that "Mexico City was not only the streaming slaughter-house; it was also a city... with flower gardens of extreme beauty. Flowers... decorated the altars" ("Extinct America" 7). A comparison even comes to Bataille's mind: the French decadent novel *Torture Garden* (1899) designated by its author Octave Mirbeau, on the dedication page, as "pages of Murder and Blood." Lastly, Crane and Bataille also account for the entertaining, even humorous dimension of the ritual. Crane compares the Aztec god to a "clown" and sees "smiles" in death while Bataille finds an expression of black humor in human slaughter: "their religion included a sentiment of horror, of terror, joined to a sort of black humor more frightful still.... They wished to serve as 'spectacle' and 'theater,' to 'serve for amusement,' for their 'distraction'" (7, 9).

2. The Economy of Sacrifice

- 9 The second stanza of Crane's poem even coincides with Bataille's reflection on the nature of sacrifice upon which his overall conception of general economy in *La Part Maudite* (*The Accursed Share*) will later be based.⁸ Bataille indeed conceives sacrifice as an alternative to the rationalistic calculation of capitalistic production and exchange, hence as truly human, passionate and emotional. Aztec civilization with its ritual destruction of war captives is considered as removed from the process of growth and expansion, unsubordinated to the demands of useful production. In the chapter entitled "Sacrifices and Wars of the Aztecs," Bataille analyzes Mexican civilization as a society of warriors but different from "a truly *military* society" implying "a development of power, an orderly progression of empire" and excluding "these squanderings of wealth" (*The Accursed Share* 54, 55).⁹ The annihilation of any surplus energy, "the accursed share" or excess resources frees it from the demands of utility

and usefulness, hence from any orientation towards the future. This society of profitless expenditure is only occupied with the present and is identical to the sun that it venerates, all giving without return. "The sun himself was in their eyes the expression of sacrifice" (46).¹⁰ Likewise, Crane's poem prohibits economic exchange ("if you could buy the stones") and growth ("sustaining nothing") and annihilates any addition by the opposite operation of subtraction. This freedom from the realm of the object allows the subject to seize the moment ("Time") and reach an atemporal or immanent state instead of dissolving in the forward progression of humanity in time. The focus is on the potentiality of the instant or on an eternal return, as the repetition of the sentence—"as they who've / Gone have done, as they/Who've done..." signifies and even makes us visualize.

- 10 Imbued with Aztec religion and its rituals of sacrifice, Crane's poem is also influenced by Pre-Columbian art, thus balancing the evocation of horrible dismemberment and severance with a purer and more formally aestheticized sacred. The description of the god in the opening stanza was probably modeled on a statue unearthed on the side of the volcano Popocatepetl near Tlalmanalco and housed in the National Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City. The statue is a single figure sitting upon an altar. Both the body of the statue and the temple-like base upon which it is seated are decorated with carvings of flowers and psychoactive plants including mushrooms, tobacco, morning glory and one unidentified flower. The figure is seated cross-legged on the base, head lifted up, eyes and mouth open, arms slightly raised to the heavens. The statue is an archetype of lithic (or stone) art displaying contrasting qualities: both refined stylized and ornamental carvings but also a rougher and heavier shape with which the poem resonates. Harmonious at times through the repetitions of sounds such as "stone," "throne," "bone" and the rimes "crown" and "clown," the lines also convey violent sound effects with the echoing plosives /p /, /t/, /k/, /b/, /d/ ("coruscated," "crown," "couched," "basins," "bloody"; "drastic," "desperate," "dismounted") as well as a sense of heaviness. The many adjectives or verbs ("die then starve," "stop," "give," "shave," "possess") with the hammering presence of *answer* ("a longer answer back," "a longer answer force, more enduring answer") overload the poem, thick as the bulky stone statue, and close to Prescott's description of Mexican gods, quoted by Bataille in "Extinct America" (5), a description Crane may himself have read: "one is stuck with the grotesque caricatures it exhibits of the human figure; monstrous, overgrown heads on puny misshapen bodies which are themselves hard and angular in their outlines... a rude attempt to delineate nature" (Prescott 56).
- 11 For Crane and for most Modernist writers and artists, primitive art, whether native American or Pre-Columbian, is attractive in two ways: formally and ideologically. For the city poet living in the Machine Age, the Indian is the quintessential other, closer to Nature, the soil and the primitive sources of energy buried by civilization. When Crane went to Mexico, he tried to recover the living elements of an archaic way of life and became acquainted with Indians who were, as he wrote, "stuck to their ancient rites, despite all the oppression of the Spaniards over nearly 400 years" (Unterecker 692). He found them wiser than "our mad, rushing crowd up north" (Unterecker 686). For Crane, the North is too cerebral, analyzing, sorting things out, searching meaning. The South is after being, unthought, basic, in contact with the earth. Digging into the ancient layers of modern America, he also aimed at recapturing the unconscious sources of his own being, his hidden energies and primal features. But the difference between Crane

and other writers is that he did not only mean to study Mexican culture, but touch it and live its instinctive roots. One day he had an argument with an American historian studying Mexican culture, Lesley Simpson about what he was trying to do in Mexico. And when Simpson explained to Crane that his ideas about the Conquest were too "naïve" and gave him a long reading list, Crane replied that writing poetry was about absorbing the culture, living the life and letting the traditions of a country soak into one's blood, and not about reading books (Unterecker 695)—a choice that ultimately proved sterile (Susanne Hall's interpretation of Crane's inability to write) or dangerous (Simpson would later say: "Mexico killed Hart, I think"; Unterecker 760). Crane did not as Charles Olson would do, two decades later in *The Kingfishers* (1949) "hunt among stones" and work among Mayan ruins to reinstate lost links. "The Circumstance" is a ruin itself, the remnant of what should have been a larger piece but that eventually remained disconnected from anything else. The essence of destruction is "to consume *profitless* whatever might remain in the progression of useful works. Sacrifice destroys that which it consecrates" (Bataille, *Accursed Share* 58). Loss, missing links seemed to have been the aims, as well as instincts. Bataille understands the cruel rites of Aztec religion as a "search of a lost intimacy" (57) and equates intimacy to "immoderation," "madness" and "drunkenness" (58). Identifying himself with the Indians and their ancient rites of human sacrifice, Crane also became acquainted with his own chaotic and sacrificial self who died in the Gulf of Mexico a few months later. Meaning to leave behind a "mad, rushing crowd up north," he unconsciously recovered an even sicker South. "Mexico was a sick country" he would admit to his friend Waldo Frank, who must have been the agent of Crane's interest for Mexico and most feared for him when he left: "He had read my *America Hispana*, and wanted to do something on Montezuma. ... And I was afraid. I knew Mexico very well, and I knew how strong the death wish was in Mexico. I knew there was a dark side to all that had come out of the Aztec civilization" (Unterecker 650, 664).¹¹

3. Aztec Tower

- ¹² In *The Bridge*, Crane chose the Brooklyn Bridge to reach back into the American experience and make contact with the spirit of the Native American Maquokeeta. But the building he selected in Mexico was a ruin, a broken tower that silenced poetic language since, Crane theorizes, "language has [always] built towers and bridges" and vice versa.¹² This broken tower, that reminds of Aztec pyramids at the top of which priests killed their victims, never spanned the two civilizations, Montezuma's Aztecs and Cortez's Spaniards, that Crane meant to confront in his drama on the Conquest.¹³ It is the last poem he wrote in Mexico, a poetic masterpiece equally discussed in several decades of criticism as *The Bridge*, and as I will argue, a proleptic scenario in verse and in the Aztec manner of his real and sacrificial demise a few months later. Crane started writing it in Taxco, the day after a Christmas night he spent listening to the bells of church towers and sleeping with Peggy Cowley—a woman—for the first time in his life. The poem also resonates with the four-day trip to Tepoztlan he took with Milton Rourke, for the yearly feast of the ancient Aztec god, Tepoztecatl. Several letters describe the place, the god's temple "partially destroyed at the top of a surrounding palisade and the fiesta by the town's cathedral," "the ringing of the cathedral bells," "the sextons r[inging] the call of the Cross," the music of an "ancient Aztec drum"

Crane was invited to play: "I beat the exact rhythm with all due accents.... You can't imagine how exciting it was to be actually part of their ritual" (Unterecker 691-693).

The bell-rope that gathers God at dawn
 Dispatches me as though I dropped down the knell
 Of a spent day—to wander the cathedral lawn
 From pit to crucifix, feet chill on steps from hell.

Have you not heard, have you not seen that corps
 Of shadows in the tower, whose shoulders sway
 Antiphonal carillons launched before
 The stars are caught and hived in the sun's ray?

The bells, I say, the bells break down their tower;
 And swing I know not where. Their tongues engrave
 Membrane through marrow, my long-scattered score
 Of broken intervals... And I, their sexton slave!

Oval encyclicals in canyons heaping
 The impasse high with choir. Banked voices slain!
 Pagodas, campaniles with reveilles outleaping—
 O terraced echoes prostrate on the plain!...

And so it was I entered the broken world
 To trace the visionary company of love, its voice
 An instant in the wind (I know not whither hurled)
 But not for long to hold each desperate choice.

My word I poured. But it was cognate, scored
 Of that tribunal monarch of the air
 Whose thigh embronzes earth, strikes crystal Word
 In wounds pledged once to hope—cleft to despair?

The steep encroachments of my blood left me
 No answer (could blood hold such a lofty tower
 As flings the question true?)—or is it she
 Whose sweet mortality stirs latent power?—
 And through whose pulse I hear, counting the strokes
 My veins recall and add, revived and sure
 The angelus of wars my chest evokes: What I hold healed, original now, and pure...

And builds, within, a tower that is not stone
 (Not stone can jacket heaven)—but slip
 Of pebbles,—visible wings of silence sown
 In azure circles, widening as they dip

The matrix of the heart, lift down the eye
 That shrines the quiet lake and swells a tower...
 The commodious, tall decorum of that sky
 Unseals her earth, and lifts love in its shower. (Crane 160)

The poetic "I" stands on a metaphorical place between God and Hell, trying to reshape the strands that resolved in the former vision of *The Bridge*. But here, in stanza 3, the building collapses, broken down by the bell strokes. The image of a demolished tower figures out a poem disrupted by the speaking voice's tongue and turned into a "long-scattered score" of silences and blanks. The lines describe their self-destruction in images of slain voices, exhausted echoes or indirect references to death ("corps" and

"engrave"). The poem is emptying itself out, going through what Harold Bloom would call a kenotic process. Yet, this destructive force is meant to build again campaniles or pagodas when the dead would be rising and awakening from their sleep ("with reveilles outleaping"). Shedding his poetic word like his blood ("my word I poured"), the poet portrays himself as the double of a dead Christ, bleeding and sacrificed. Katherine Anne Porter, who was also a Guggenheim fellow in Mexico the same year as Crane, recalls that he spoke daily of suicide and, when he was drunk, would shout that he was Christ (Unterecker 659)... Christ or a slave slaughtered on the altar of Aztec gods to feed them with his blood, enliven them, revive the setting sun and ensure its ongoing course. The blood imagery is particularly repetitive in the lines: "wounds," "steep encroachments of my blood," "blood hold such a lofty tower," "pulse," "my veins," "my chest" and eventually "Heart" that sounds like the poet's name, Hart. In Aztec sacrifice, blood was offered to the god, but sometimes hearts or eyes could also be torn out. A plate of sacrifice by tearing out of the heart is reproduced in Bataille's "Extinct America" and the torture is again described in *The Accursed Share* as following: "The priests would tear out the still-beating heart and raise it to the sun" (49).

The world of Christianity furnishes Crane with a style for expressing his own death wish and craving for transcendence: "the cathedral," "the choir," "the bell tower," "the sexton and the crucifix," Christ's passion on the Cross before renewal and rebirth. This Christian imagery does not come in contradiction with Aztec religion but rather bears resemblance to it. In "Extinct America," Bataille—like the authors he quotes, Prescott or Spanish missionary Bernadino de Sahagun (1499-1590)—recognizes similarities between Aztec sacrifices and the rituals and doctrine of the Catholic church: "the Christian representation of the devil" compares to the "Mexican representation of the gods" and "the sculptured demons of European churches are to some degree comparable" to Aztec figures (6, 7). In "The Broken Tower," Aztec religion is also viable in the theme of solar movement ("gathers God at dawn," "the sun's ray") and the images of fertility ("matrix," "swell," "shower") as human sacrifice represented the death of the sun which would then rise again: a rite that Crane himself, "too much in the sun" like melancholy Hamlet, seems both to depict and prepare for. In his various writings on the spirit of sacrifice, Bataille does not only relate Aztec religion to Christianity, but also to the figure of the mutilated and suicidal artist. In "Sacrificial Mutilation and the Severed Ear of Van Gogh," Bataille argues that Van Gogh is the "paradigm of the artist as sacrificer" and that "he has found what the Aztec priests had in regard to the sun"¹⁴: "he tore from within himself rather than an ear, nothing less than a SUN" ("Van Gogh as Prometheus" 59)—a sun that he would then paint on his most radiant and flaming sunflower canvases before committing suicide a year and a half later.

- 13 Following these readings, Crane's suicide after one year spent in Mexico may compare to Van Gogh's sacrifice. Though Crane never wrote a single line of his epic on Cortez and Montezuma, "The Broken Tower" however demonstrates and performs the strong link between art and sacrifice that Crane may have better understood and embraced in a country still permeated by Pre-Conquest Aztec religion. Another Guggenheim recipient, painter Marsden Hartley who arrived in Mexico a month before Crane left, and was deeply shaken by his suicide, believed the country to be primarily responsible for it. Gradually exhausted by Mexico, he later believed it to be "the one place I shall always think of as wrong for me... It is a place... [where] the light will wear you down, the air will fatigue, height will oppress.... Perhaps you can learn the secret of all the

dark living but you will change your whole being to do it."¹⁵ But Crane did change. Under the influence of D.H. Lawrence's *The Plumed Serpent*, he came to recover past traces of the mysterious Aztec culture, and finding it, may have let this violent and sacred world of Bataillean "expenditure" come *through* him. When one reads "The Circumstance," "The Broken Tower" and looks at the last photographs of Crane taken in the gardens of Mexico two months before his death on the Easter Sunday of 1932, April 27, one can only be struck by their resemblance to Sahagun's description of a sacrificed young man in Aztec rites, referred by Bataille in the *Accursed Share*:

Around 'Easter Time,' they undertook the sacrificial slaying of a young man of irreproachable beauty. He was chosen from among the captives the previous year, and from that moment he lived like a great lord. 'He went through the whole town, very well dressed, with flowers in his hand... he would play the flute at night or in the daytime.... On the day of the festival when he was to die, ... he mounted the steps by himself and on each of these he broke one of the flutes he had played during the year.... The priest who had the stone knife buried it in the victim's breast and... tore out the heart which he had once offered to the sun.' (49, 50)

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NOTES

1. Biographical accounts of Hart Crane's Mexican year are detailed in Unterecker 685-742. See also Mariani 381-421.

2. *The Letters of Hart Crane 1916-1932*. Ed. Brom Weber (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1965), 138.

3. Susanne Hall argues that Crane's nationalistic and imperialist poetics of the Indian in *The Bridge* were annihilated by his transnational experience in Mexico: "because his visionary poetics hinged on 'the making of Americans by the unmaking of Indians,' his extensive contact with contemporary Mexicans of indigenous descent contributed significantly to an inability to write more than a few lines of his epic poem of the Spanish conquest" (142).

4. William Spratling (1900-1967) graduated in architecture. While teaching in Tulane University in New Orleans and sharing a house with William Faulkner, he wrote a satire on the French Quarter entitled *Sherwood Anderson and Other Famous Creoles* (1921). In 1929 he moved to Mexico and sponsored the work of Diego Riviera in New York City. In Taxco, a site of silver mines, he started designing silver works based on Pre-columbian motifs. American historian (1796-1859), William H. Prescott published in 1843 his *History of the Conquest of Mexico*, a work based on his researches in archives in Spain.

5. The poem is dedicated to Xochipilli, who may also be the poem's addressee (Clive Fisher explicitly calls "The Circumstance" "a poem addressed to Xochipilli"); still, the phrase "as did and does / Xochipilli" renders such a reading debatable.

6. Barbara Braun examines the attraction of ballgame on Modernists. Among them Henry Moore modeled his "Heads" on mysterious axe-shaped sculptures associated to the ballgame and called "hachas" ; 296.

7. "[Cette] sanglante excentricité a été conçue par la démente humaine: crimes continuels commis en plein soleil pour la seule satisfaction de cauchemars déifiés, phantasmes terrifiants! Des repas cannibales des prêtres, des cérémonies à cadavres et à ruisseaux de sang." *Œuvres complètes Tome 1*, 152. Trans. Annette Michelson. "Extinct America," *October* 36 (Spring 1986): 3.

8. *La part maudite*. Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1949. Trans. *The Accursed Share*. New York: Zone Books, 1988.

9. See also Fourny's analysis of Bataille's reflection on Aztec civilization in *La part maudite*: "La civilisation mexicaine est un monde dément bloqué au stade de la société guerrière ('l'ordre militaire'), où le passage à 'l'Empire' n'a pas eu lieu.... La dilapidation des hommes et des biens a interdit le passage à la société marchande, rendu l'accumulation impossible" (132-133).

10. "Dans la croyance primitive des Aztèques, la représentation du Soleil exprime la combustion ou le sacrifice c'est-à-dire la dilapidation irraisonnable et gratuite de soi.... La dépense improductive est le 'geste de qui donne sans recevoir'.... Les adorateurs du soleil sont analogues au 'soleil qui donne sans jamais recevoir" (Hamano 64).

11. William Carlos Williams who published in *Broom* "The Destruction of Tenochtitlan," an essay on Cortez and Montezuma (1923) and proclaimed in 1925 that "the New World is Montezuma" (*In the American Grain* 24) must have been another agent of Crane's interest. On Williams' fascination with Mayan culture, the "Mayan revival" in the 1920s and the Maya-themed issue of *Broom* magazine in which Crane also published "The Springs of Guilty Song," see Park 21-47.

12. "General Aims and Theories," in *The Complete Poems, Selected Letters and Prose of Hart Crane* 223.

13. A pyramid of Aztec human sacrifice is reproduced in "Sacrifice" by Bataille (63) and in Roger Hervé, "Sacrifices humains du Centre-Amérique." *Documents*, no. 4 (1930).

Plate 13. *Codex Magliabechiano*.

14. Hegarty 134.

15. Quoted in May 57.

ABSTRACTS

This article explores the "spirit of sacrifice" and the influence of Aztec religion, as analyzed by Georges Bataille in various writings, on two poems written by Hart Crane in Mexico shortly before his suicide.

INDEX

Keywords: Hart Crane, Georges Bataille, Mexico, Aztec religion, sacrifice

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