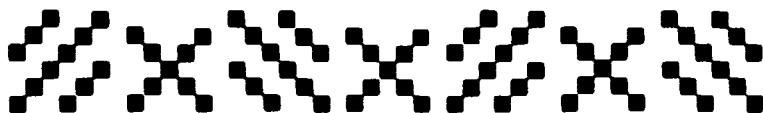




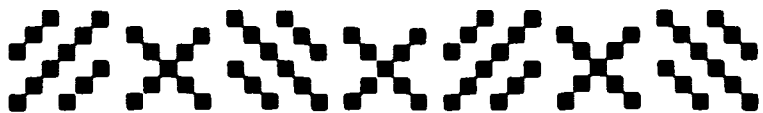
EUGENE V. DEBS, CANTON, OHIO, JUNE 16, 1918

Courtesy Eugene V. Debs Papers Project, Indiana State University, Terre Haute.



A Note on the Origins of Eugene V. Debs' "Bending Cross" Speech

*Richard Oestreicher**



On September 14, 1918, Judge David C. Westenhaver sentenced Eugene V. Debs to ten years in prison for violation of the Espionage Act of 1917 in an antiwar speech made at Canton, Ohio, June 16, 1918. Prior to the sentencing the court clerk asked Debs if he would like to make a final statement.¹ The resulting speech to the court was a masterpiece of American oratory. Most well known is the concluding section in which Debs employed the metaphor of a storm-tossed sailor to describe the people's struggle.

I can see the dawn of the better day for humanity. The people are awakening. In due time they will come to their own.

When the mariner, sailing over tropic seas, looks for relief from his weary watch, he turns his eyes toward the southern cross, burning luridly above the tempest-vexed ocean. As the midnight approaches, the southern cross begins to bend, and the whirling worlds change their places, and with starry finger-points, the Almighty marks the passage of time on the dial of the universe, and though no bell may beat the glad tidings, the look-out knows that the midnight is passing—that relief and rest are close at hand.

Let the people take heart and hope everywhere, for the cross is bending, the midnight is passing, and joy cometh with the morning.

"He's true to God who's true to man; wherever wrong is
done,
To the humblest and the weakest, 'neath the all-
beholding sun.
That wrong is also done to us, and they are slaves most
base,
Whose love of right is for themselves and not for all the
race."

• • •
I am now prepared to receive your sentence.²

*Richard Oestreicher is assistant professor, James Madison College, Michigan State University, East Lansing.

¹ Still the best account of Eugene V. Debs' career is Ray Ginger, *The Bending Cross: A Biography of Eugene Victor Debs* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1949). This work was reissued in paperback as *Eugene V. Debs: The Making of an American Radical* (New York, 1970). The trial is described in chapter 18.

² *Debs' Address to the Jury and Statement to the Court* (Chicago, n.d.), 19-20

Although the judge was not impressed, many of Debs' contemporaries were. Heywood Broun described the speech as "one of the most beautiful and moving passages in the English language. He [Debs] was for that one afternoon touched with inspiration. If anybody told me that tongues of fire danced upon his shoulders as he spoke, I would believe it."³ Ray Ginger also recognized the speech as a high point of Debs' career when he used a key phrase, the bending cross, as the title of his biography of Debs.

Debs' power as an orator and essayist was based on his capacity to translate socialist ideology into American idioms. Native audiences responded to him emotionally, reacting as they might to a preacher at a tent meeting. "Lover of Mankind," John Dos Passos called him in *The 42nd Parallel*, a man who wanted "a world brothers might own, where everybody split even."⁴ Yet many of the images in Debs' speeches were not original. The orator's talent lay, at least in part, in his capacity to recognize the emotional potential of symbolism and allegory and history and religion as used by his contemporaries. The sailor and his bending cross in the 1918 speech is an excellent example. The metaphor was not Debs' creation. Early in his career Debs had been secretary treasurer of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen and editor of their journal. It was at this organization's 1890 convention that he possibly got the inspiration for his 1918 speech from the concluding passage of a lengthy keynote address by the Honorable Tom Fitch.

And shall not the toilers come to their own? Shall not crowns and castes be abased before them, and oppression and injustice and greed lost their power. Who shall doubt it? When amid the howling storm the mariner, sailing over tropic seas, waits for relief from his weary watch he turns his eyes toward the Southern Cross burning luridly above the tempest-vexed ocean, and as the midnight approaches the Southern Cross begins to bend, the whirling worlds change their places, with starry finger-points the Almighty marks the passage of time upon the dial of the universe, and though no bell may beat the glad tidings, the lookout knows that the midnight is well nigh past, and relief and rest are close at hand.

Let labor everywhere take heart of hope, for the cross is bending, the midnight is passing and "joy cometh with the morning."⁵

³ Ginger, *Bending Cross*, 396.

⁴ John Dos Passos, *The 42nd Parallel* (New York, 1961), 28-29.

⁵ *Journal of the Proceedings of the Second Biennial Convention of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen* (Terre Haute, Ind., 1890), 17.