Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* Contrasted with Crane’s *The Bridge*: Epic Lyric Poems and the Tragic Hero of American Poetry

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American poetry has been defined by the figure of Walt Whitman. Many poets have taken inspiration from him. Among these is the early 20th century poet Hart Crane. Both poets have been studied extensively, but one area identified in which research is lacking is a comparison of the two of them, specifically asking how successful was Crane in imitating and innovation Whitman’s form.

First will be the discussion of Whitman’s literary devices: his view of the societal and natural world dichotomy, his American idealism, his method of description, the democratic voice, and the revenant of Whitman. This is to put in context what devices Crane uses and how both authors apply these tools. Following is a discussion of Crane’s literary devices as responses to Whitman’s decisions. Crane was successful in his imitation of Whitman’s devices, however he his chosen techniques were ultimately unsuccessful in creating the new American epic and innovating literature.

One of the most striking elements of *Leaves of Grass* is how it describes an under-the-surface experience of society and nature. In Whitman’s view, there are two distinct ways of viewing the world, the world as defined by society and the world viewed through one’s senses. He acknowledges this society-built world, but moves beyond it. Whitman is interested in a version of reality rooted in the sensations one receives from nature, the base of what each individual person’s experience is. The base experience is the realm of poetry that Whitman listens to, observes, and then translates to the page. Whitman’s work is very much a description of nature, a telling of the way things are, but the value judgement is made on the essence of each object. Whitman is interested in the soul of things, and how each individual’s perspective stems from a shared sensory experience. In the second section of “Song of Myself,” Whitman declares his deep love for the nature of things, he is “in love with [the atmosphere] . . . mad for it to be in contact with [him].” This societal and natural world dichotomy is present in transcendentalist
philosophy, a large influence on Whitman. In the 1855 version of *Leave of Grass* Whitman strives to shape himself in the image of “the great American poet” as painted by the leader of the transcendentalist movement, Emerson, in his essay “The Poet.” Through the course of this work, the speaker describes themself as a translator, an observer, a looker, watcher, and enjoyer of what happens in the world. This is precisely the character that Emerson describes, one who can deeply listen to the pulses of the natural world, and “write down these cadences more faithfully” (Emerson) than it is possible for other poets to do.

In Whitman’s poetry collection *Sea Drift*, the first poem entitled “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking” is an origin story for this translator character. It depicts a young Whitman, “cautiously peering, absorbing, translating” (l. 32) the speak of a mating pair of birds, their words written out in the poem as one bird calls out the other’s graces. In line 144 of the poem, where the speaker cries out “now in a moment I know what I am for, I awake,” Whitman comes to terms with his uncanny ability to comprehend nature’s quiet calls and declares that it is his duty to become the grand documenter of the system.

The next key element of Whitman’s poetry is how he channels his praise of nature into one body, that of America. Whitman’s subject matter, as he describes in the 1855 preface to *Leaves of Grass*, is that of the land of “fullest poetical nature,” the United States, and his mission is to transcribe this hidden, truer nature of the land that is obfuscated by the “intoxicating distillation” (“Song of Myself” l. 24) of the distracting pleasures of society. Whitman’s work is a form of “lyric nationalism: a transcendent and coherent voice of national identity” (MacPhail). This theme is pervasive in *Leaves of Grass*. Section 11 of “Song of Myself” entails a group of young men swimming in a lake, enjoying a celebration of life. Whitman describes a hidden woman among them, and by leaving subtle clues about her, she who “owns the fine house by the rise of the bank,” (l. 202) and was unseen by the men but “she saw them and loved them” (l. 207). This concealed individual is revealed to be a personification of the Earth as a woman. An image that conveys the “procreant urge of the world.” (l. 45) Whitman views himself as the one to fulfill the land’s urges, tenderly telling it “rich apple-blossom’d earth! Smile, for your lover comes” (“Song of Myself” l. 443). In that line, Whitman writes the speaker as one who mates and loves the earth. The carnal link to nature is a powerful driving factor in Whitman’s poetry. For example, in the poem “Facing West from California’s Shores,” Whitman rephrases this energy as an impetus for further exploration:
“Long having wander’d since, round the earth having
Wander’d,
Now I have home again, very pleas’d and joyous,
(But where is what I started for so long ago?
And why is it yet unfound?)”  (l. 8-11)

This passage depicts Whitman’s quest to observe what is yet unfound. The last couplet leads one to conclude that he failed in his search, but paradoxically in the third line it is clear that he is pleased with the outcome. This dichotomy shows that Whitman is always refreshing his search for natural things unperceived as he observes more of the world, and through his poems he brings the hidden wonder to the forefront. Whitman is a trailblazer exposing the ideal beauty of America that all who reside here are connected by a common thread.

In the ode “For you O Democracy” from the collection Calamus, Whitman makes his principles of American idealism more explicit. He describes his mission as “making the continent indissoluble, / I will make the most splendid race the sun ever shone upon” (l. 1-2). He will create this “splendid race” through his depiction of the American people, just by conveying their spirit all will be awed.

Whitman’s method of description is quite unique. As he writes, “to elaborate is to no avail,” (“Song of Myself” l. 37) his alternate methodology of explication is one of Whitman’s innovations that led to his crowning as the Great American Poet. His poetry is famous for his extensive lists, such as in sections 15 and 16 of “Song of Myself” in which Whitman goes through a longform explanation of many professions, events, seasons, and what actions that America’s people are taking at this moment, from the most elite to the most common tasks. Whitman’s goal is to portray the exceptional ambiance and closeness of America’s civilization. This technique of listing is Whitman’s method of explanation. He is truly acting as a transcriber of the American Experience, taking note of every single piece of the environment, and loving them all.

One poem with several great examples of the listing device is “Starting from Paumanok,” a poem with format similar to “Song of Myself.” The final section of the poem contains this passage:
“interlink’d, food-yielding lands!
Land of coal and iron! Land of gold! Lands of cotton, sugar, rice!
Land of wheat, beef, pork! Land of wool and hemp! Land of the apple and grape!
Land of the pastoral plains, the grass-fields of the world! Land of those sweet-air’d interminable plateaus!
Land of the herd, the garden, the healthy house of adobe!
Lands where the northwest Columbia winds, and where the southwest Colorado winds!
Land of the eastern Chesapeake! Land of the Delaware!
Land of Ontario, Erie, Huron, Michigan!
Land of the Old Thirteen! Massachusetts land! Land of Vermont and Connecticut!
Land of the ocean shores! Land of sierras and peaks!
Land of boatmen and sailors! Fishermen’s land!

In this passage Whitman evokes the essence of America’s natural landscapes, linking their majesty together. The list begins with what the different lands produce, “coal and iron / apple and grape.” These features link the lands as “yielding” goods. Whitman is not satisfied with just this level of description however, so he continues to explicate further landscape features. He switches subjects to explore the natural majesty contained within the “pastoral plains.” Whitman then decides to name-drop several locations of special importance to America’s history, calling it the “Land of the old Thirteen.” The list continues in a more generalized manner. From discussion of specific states, it returns to broad features such as the “ocean shore” and “sierras and peaks.”

Whitman justifies the formatting of the epic-lyric poem by using it in order to take advantage of a unique device: “democratization” of the speaker’s voice. The opening of the speaker’s voice is the true experiment of Whitman’s work. Through his descriptive lists that focus on general actions, Whitman lends his own voice to everything, creating the poetry of democracy. In the ode “For you O Democracy” from the collection Calamus, Whitman makes his devotion more explicit by throwing himself at the feet of the manifestation of democracy, crying out “to serve you, ma femme! / For you I am trilling these songs” (l. 15). This makes his intent to further the aims of democracy clear.

In section 16 of “Song of Myself” Whitman gives his own commentary of this idea of sharing his voice. The passage opens with the speaker describing the vast range of voices they represent: “I am of old and young, of the foolish as much as the wise,” (l. 330) first describing all generations of voices being contained in the speaker; “Maternal as well as paternal,” (l. 332) not limiting the speaker to be the same sex as Whitman; “One of the Nation of many nations, the smallest the same, the largest the same,” (l. 335) Whitman riffs off the way Americans are
represented in the Congress; and “a Southerner as much as a Northerner,” (l. 337) a statement very politically relevant to the time directly before the Civil War. Section 16 clearly shows Whitman opening his voice to share a common interpretation of the world with as many other beings as possible.

The purpose of the democratized voice is to characterize the speaker of *Leaves of Grass*, or more specifically to describe the many faces of the speaker. It is a shared voice, that of Walt Whitman, but additionally of every reader of his work, and of every individual experiencing the world he describes. When Whitman invites one to “lean and loafe,” (Line 4 “Song of myself) he is asking his readers to join in his shared experience of the world. Whitman is writing the poem of America, and he cannot do that by focusing on the actions of any single hero among all citizens, documenting their actions. Whitman is obsessed with the natural majesty that is contained within everything and everyone, and in order to document this he uses a universal “I”. In these poems “Everyman is the Hero of the epic,” (Borges p. 4) meaning that Whitman’s work is written with the reader as the celebrated protagonist of the poem.

One of the resulting successes of the democratic voice experiment is the creation of Whitman’s ghost. Through the fracturing of the speaker, Whitman creates two characters, his physical form as well as the spirit of Whitman. The voice that he gives himself in “Song of Myself” comes through with varying strengths. “Song of Myself” section 24 describes this real man “of Manhattan” that he is. Whitman is least concerned with the actual person he is, and is more focused on his spiritual form.

The ghost of Whitman, however, is one of the unique facets of this epic-lyric poem. “Song of Myself” Section 7 describes this revenant that, with some of Whitman’s consciousness along for the ride, can be projected into the future. This spirit form believes his momentary physical form had great “luck to be born,” (l. 131) but is “just as lucky to die” (l. 132). This duration of existence beyond being born and dying is key to understanding that this voice is not the speaker of Whitman’s physical being. The narration is now being led by a figure who “passes death” (l. 135) and is “not contained between [their] hat and boots” (l. 137). Whitman offers his spirit into the world of literature that exists outside of time, and thus immortalizes himself.

Hart Crane is a poet who was born eight years after Whitman’s death, in the year 1900. In 1932, One year after publishing his epic-length lyric poem *The Bridge*, he would jump off a steamship and drown himself somewhere along the Atlantic coast. A tragic life that bears much similarity to the criticisms of his poetry, He is a poet who has had much disagreement as to the value of his work, and is regarded by most as “the great might-have-been of American Verse” (Logan).
the introduction to the 2001 compilation of Crane’s poems, literary critic Harold Bloom discusses how Emerson’s essay “The Poet,” referenced above, which laid out the primary goals and philosophy behind Whitman’s work, “turned out to be Hart Crane” (Bloom). The similarity in mission makes these poets inexorably connected.

Hart Crane began writing *The Bridge* with a clear goal in mind. He wanted to create a “Mystical Synthesis of America” (Unterecker). The work is a deliberate continuation of the Whitmanian vision of America. Crane wants to innovate the techniques that Whitman used to great effect and add his own additional commentary on America. With these goals in mind, Crane discusses several historic landmarks in America’s history.

Before the first chapter of the work, there is a prologue-poem “To Brooklyn Bridge,” an Ode to the primary subject of *The Bridge* to which the majority of other symbols will be compared to. It opens to describe the wondrous view of the landscape the bridge occupies “over the chained bay waters Liberty.” (l. 4) This first poem is critical in beginning to unravel the symbolic argument of Crane’s work. The Brooklyn Bridge is a central symbol to the poem. As a pinnacle of engineering, it has relevance as an example of American Idealism, a time in which Americans achieved something of inventive value. As with all of Crane’s symbols, it can only be fully deciphered by taking into context all possible metaphorical possibilities.

Section one of *The Bridge* is entitled “Ave Maria,” the first poem is entitled the same. It features Christopher Columbus looking a the fading shore of the newly-explored coastline as he sails back toward Spain. This is a well-known event in America’s past that, in a bridge-like manner, links the European continents with the Americas. European colonization is closely linked with this event, and the start of America. The title of this section also builds on the similarity between Whitman and Crane. As this title involves Columbus’s attempted passage to the East, this is an allusion to the section “Passage to India” in *Leaves of Grass*.

With the topic introduced, section two “Powhatan’s Daughter” continues to introduce a more modern American life. The first poem “Harbor Dawn” describes the transition from the night to the day, giving a rudimentary introduction to another primary symbolic motifs of *The Bridge*: time. The second poem of the section “Van Winkle” features Crane adapting the landmark American fiction of *Rip Van Winkle*. The protagonist finds himself awoken not after the civil war, but instead in New York City where he is assaulted by the new modern life and sound, a characteristic “Have you got your *Times*? -and hurry along Van Winkle, It’s getting late” (l. 47-49). The movement between these time periods is another symbolic reference to the Brooklyn Bridge, linking America together through shaded transitions. Now in urban America, Crane
adopts advertising in “The Dance,” a poem that links the major themes of America together. It features three train-hoppers, individuals swept up in the raging spirit of America. With these characters, Crane is indirectly describing Whitman’s “procreant urge of the world.” And just like Whitman, Crane personifies the land of America as a woman:

“Old reprobates
With racetrack jargon, - dotting immensity
They lurk across her, knowing her yonder breast
Snow-silvered, sumac-stained, or smoky blue—” (l. 64-69)

As the three bums take the train, they dart across the landscape. This is metaphorically described as “lurking across her,” her being the the body of the manifested Earth. Crane uses a specific character of Pocahontas (Powhatan’s Daughter) as a link between that of America’s natural landscape and that people swept around in its wild societal currents. Although in different terms, this is very similar to what Whitman did in *Leaves of Grass*, identifying an idealized America with the layers of societal influence peeled back. “The Dance” especially, however the entire poem up to this point is a form of pastorale.

As Whitman uses listing as a method of description, giving detail in length lists, Crane uses a different device of elaboration. By what he describes as the “Logic of Metaphor.” Crane phrases it this way:

“[A]s a poet, I may very possibly be more interested in the so-called illogical impingements of the connotations of words on the consciousness (and their combinations and interplay in metaphor on this basis) than I am interested in the preservation of their logically rigid significations at the cost of limiting my subject matter and the perceptions involved in the poem.” (Hammer and Weber)

When he selects the language for a poem, Crane values the metaphorical implications of the words fitting together more than the sentence making logical sense. This technique pushes beyond the “commonplace incomplete or amorphous syntax” of other poems, with a more basic intent to depict “how our lives choice have been surrendered to chance” (Clark). Crane instead employs the logic of metaphor as a “formal integration of experience” (Waggoner). He seeks to directly connect the unspoken understandings of the phrases with our nerves.

When Whitman formulaically addresses an aspect of nature, such as the “Starting from Paumanok” passage above, he is fulfilling two poetical objectives. The creation of the democratic voice and a detailing of the world around that readers are more connected to through sensory language. The logic of metaphor does the same thing, but it takes one step closer to the reader. Crane’s poems are lenses our own eyes look through. Words were created
as descriptors for communication, and Crane inventively reorders them to create a vivid image more felt than concretely understood.

Just like Whitman, Crane seeks to move beyond the socially constructed barriers to address a reality rooted in sensations. In poems “The River” and “Cutty Sark” a number of songs are referenced as links in the chain of American society and accomplishments. Crane chose to use these in order to highlight the spirit of America as a sensory manifestation. Linking “My Old Kentucky Home” with “Steamboat Bill” makes one imagine a time characterized by an expanding America, flourishing across the continent.

A key piece of the overall work, the poem “Cape Hatteras” discusses the invention of the airplane, another major event in American innovation. The last piece to be written chronologically, it contains a number of Crane’s most important symbolic arguments in his work, while the speaker praises this elevation of American ingenuity,

Crane invokes the revenant of Whitman. With his first invocation Crane creates a relationship between him and Whitman, “We, who round the capes, the promontories” (l. 10). In this line Crane is directly identifying himself with Whitman and his mission. Confirming himself explicitly as his ally. Later in the poem, Crane contemplates Whitman’s ascension as a spirit, “Walt, tell me, Walt Whitman, if infinity / be still the same as when you walked the beach / near Paumanok” (l. 48-50). Crane’s logic of metaphor does not give him the same ability to create a character for himself that he can push through time that Whitman’s democratic voice does. As a result of this, Crane decides that he needs to access Whitman’s revenant for his connotation of being the great American poet. In the rest of “Cape Hatteras” Whitman and the Wright Brother morph together in one spirit as the “windwrestlers veered Capeward,” (l. 85) picking up the speaker along the way, as Whitman’s return to the cape contrasted with the advancement of technology shows how the revenant is being used in this context to “reattach reality, space, and time” (Dembo). This is the main argument that Crane makes in The Bridge and is heavily related to the concluding poem “Atlantis.”

While the Bridge has been referred to as proof that “the quest for a modern epic poem” (Schultz) has so far resulted in failure, Crane was successful at imitating Whitman and unalterably linking their work together. The form of the new pastoral, an ode to America interested solely in the spiritual power of its natural landscapes and those who raise it to higher plateaus. Neither were interested in exploring the confusing social world, but that pure reality that it sits on top of. Not identical, but their work has incredible similarities. Both authors used a confusing explanatory device: For Whitman it is the unending lists, and for Crane it is the
massively stylistic logic of metaphor. These define the syntax both authors employed and gives cohesiveness to their work. Whitman created a ghost of himself to permanently watch over American poetry, and Crane tapped into that energy with vigor yet unseen. Crane, who lived a tragic life and is still relatively obscure, was not successful in revolutionizing the world of American poetry with a new developed form of writing. His admiration for those he was inspired by, and his intentions to innovate that studied literature are meritorious. Crane’s writing however, is simply too abstract, form too subjectively unknowable. Ultimately, Crane is the tragic hero of American Poetry, and The Bridge is the moment of his downfall. A disciple of Whitman who fully embraced his ideology, but in the end was unsuccessful in his translation.
Works Cited


