

A Nineteenth-Century Modernist: Walt
Whitman's Influence on American Modernist
Poetry

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Shakespeare and Company, the Paris bookstore that served as a social, cultural, and intellectual center to the English-language literary community of the modernist era, opened an exhibit dedicated to the nineteenth-century American poet Walt Whitman on the night of April 20, 1926. Sylvia Beach, the owner of Shakespeare and Company and organizer of the Walt Whitman exhibit, opened the exhibit that evening to a private reception, and then opened it to the public for the two months following the evening reception. The names of multiple major writers of English-language modernist literature are to be found in the reception's guest book; visitors to the exhibit included James Joyce, Ernest Hemingway, T.S. Eliot, and Ezra Pound. Beach displayed some of Whitman's manuscripts, a first edition of Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, and photographs of Whitman. While the Whitman exhibit was not a particularly successful commercial venture (it was not intended to be), Shakespeare and Company's association with Whitman was undeniable; behind Hemingway and Eliot, Whitman ranked highest in total American sales for the bookstore (Fitch 231-234).

Beach, because of the support she provided to modernist writers and her work in publishing Joyce's *Ulysses*, is often considered to have played an essential role in the world of English-language modernist literature. She, an American herself, revered Walt Whitman. Well before the opening of the exhibit, Beach had made a point of putting Whitman's photograph and work on prominent display in Shakespeare and Company (Fitch 228), and she had encouraged visitors to the shop to read his work (Fitch 225). Moreover, Beach and Adrienne Monnier, owner of the nearby French bookshop *La Maison des Amis des Livres* and Beach's partner, translated an unpublished political speech of Whitman's, titled "The Eighteenth Presidency" and composed in 1856, into French (Fitch 226). Beach, however, found that many of her American literary peers

in Paris did not share her enthusiasm for Walt Whitman. In *Sylvia Beach and the Lost Generation*, Noel Riley Fitch writes of the private opening reception,

“no American present at the reception would have made Morel’s comparison between Whitman and Joyce. Not acknowledging Whitman’s modernism, they knew less about Whitman’s poetry than the French with whom they mingled that night. In fact, American universities were just beginning to consider American literature a subject worthy of university study. During the months of preparation for the exhibit, Sylvia had become aware that the young American writers in Paris (Hart Crane had not yet arrived) did not share her enthusiasm for their great predecessor, that they regarded him only as the cheerleader of American democracy, technology, and nineteenth-century progress. They felt alienated from the culture they saw him championing. Although Sylvia thought that Whitman was the ‘father’ of this rebellious American generation, she knew that they did not share her insight” (Fitch 232).

Fitch goes on to explain that Beach cited Eliot as an American poet particularly hostile to Whitman, and that Ezra Pound felt an “uneasy peace” (Fitch 233) in his relationship with Whitman. Thus, despite Beach’s love for Whitman and Whitman’s popularity among the French writers of this period, American modernist writers had not fully accepted Whitman into their own personal canons.

In spite of the lack of enthusiasm for Whitman that Beach noticed among the American writers in her literary and social sphere, when one examines Whitman and his writings, one can clearly find him to be a predecessor of the American poetry of the early twentieth century. On a basic, formal level, this is apparent in his usage of free verse, a style that was radical for the nineteenth century and made its way into popularity during the twentieth century. Whitman’s role as a predecessor of the modernist literary movement, however, goes beyond his use of poetic

form. Whitman, in his ideas and work, had his eyes fixed towards the future; he likely would have approved of Pound's maxim to "make it new".

Whitman, in 1871, published a lengthy essay titled "Democratic Vistas", an essay which is key to understanding Whitman as a predecessor to modernism. Whitman uses the word "modern" often in this essay; moreover he makes a call for a kind of literary revolution. In his essay, Whitman writes,

"America demands a poetry that is bold, modern, and all-surrounding and kosmical, as she is herself. It must in no respect ignore science or the modern, but inspire itself with science and the modern. It must bend its vision toward the future, more than the past. Like America, it must extricate itself from even the greatest models of the past, and, while courteous to them, must have entire faith in itself, and the products of its own democratic spirit only. Like her, it must place in the van, and hold up at all hazards, the banner of the divine pride of man in himself, (the radical foundation of the new religion.) Long enough have the People been listening to poems in which common humanity; deferential, bends low, humiliated, acknowledging superiors. But America listens to no such poems. Erect, inflated, and fully self-esteeming be the chant; and then America will listen with pleased ears" (Whitman 64-65).

Here, Whitman, whose own work defines itself as profoundly American, makes a call for a new American literature. This American literature, according to Whitman, must be a literature that both grounds itself in the present day and reaches towards the future. His claim that this American literature must abandon "the greatest models of the past" (Whitman 65) is a rejection of European influence on American art and culture; according to Whitman, American poets must abandon the forms, artistic values, and cultural traditions of Europe, and forge new forms, artistic

values, and cultural traditions for the United States. Whitman provides another standard for this new American literary tradition later in the essay when he writes,

“In fact, a new theory of literary composition for imaginative works of the very first class, and especially for highest poems, is the sole course open to these States. Books are to be call’d for, and supplied, on the assumption that the process of reading is not a half sleep, but, in highest sense, an exercise, a gymnast’s struggle; that the reader is to do something for himself, must be on the alert, must himself or herself construct indeed the poem, argument, history, metaphysical essay — the text furnishing the hints, the clue, the start or frame-work. Not the book needs so much to be the complete thing, but the reader of the book does. That were to make a nation of supple and athletic minds, well-train’d, intuitive, used to depend on themselves, and not on a few coteries of writers” (Whitman 81).

In this, Whitman essentially argues for a certain level of difficulty in literature. Literature is not meant to merely be passively consumed by the reader for the purposes of entertainment, but meant to challenge and engage its readers. Readers, in Whitman’s vision of literature, must perform a level of intellectual labor in their experience of a text. If American writers render this type of difficulty in their works, they will, according to Whitman, aid in shaping American minds into intellectual powerhouses, and create a kind of intellectual self-reliance among the American people. Whitman’s vision of American literature, as outlined in “Democratic Vistas”, involves two central goals: to create an American culture that is unique and not derivative from European cultures, and to serve as an empowering, educational, and enlightening force for the nation. Whitman’s vision bends towards the future, and seeks to “make it new”.

One can consider Whitman to be a modernist of the nineteenth century. Yes, he predates the era with which the modernist literary period is normally associated, and he would thus not be

formally considered a modernist by these standards; however, his vision for American literature as outlined in “Democratic Vistas” is interwoven with modernist ideas and practices. His call for a uniquely American literature is not necessarily characteristic of modernism; yet, the demand for new forms which is wrapped up in that call resonates with modernism. Modernist writing, both prose and poetry, is full of new and experimental forms; even if they may not break from associations with European culture, they do break from literary conventions and traditions.

Whitman’s call for writing that, in its difficulty, engages its readers with intellectual labor, also (unknowingly) aligns itself with modernism. Difficulty is characteristic of modernism — one might think of Joyce’s narrative style in *Finnegan’s Wake* or Eliot’s incorporation of cultural and literary references in his work to such a level that warranted his addition of endnotes to “The Waste Land”, two modernist works often associated with difficulty — and this particular type of difficulty is of the type for which Whitman calls, a difficulty that challenges readers intellectually. Whitman’s literary and intellectual sensibilities were modernist in a pre-modernist world.

Whitman’s engagement with his call for a new American literature in his own poetry is an imperfect and complex one; in this way he contradicts himself, just as he claims to do in his own poetry. Of course, the notion of intellectual difficulty is a subjective one; one reader might perceive themselves as undertaking a certain level of intellectual labor while reading a particular work of literature that differs from the level of intellectual labor another reader perceives themselves as undertaking, and thus this makes the objective prescription of “difficulty” to Whitman one that is challenging to make. One can, however, more easily examine his commitment to pure Americanism in his work. His poetry, on its surface level, drips with

Americanism. In terms of content, the subjects of his poetry often involve the American people, the American landscape, or the American political realm. His particular use of free verse has to it a sense of Americanism as well; Whitman characteristically composes long lines that spread and take up as much of the physical page as possible, mirroring the mood of manifest destiny and expansionism that captured the minds of white Americans during the nineteenth century —

Whitman engages in a sort of expansionism of language. However, despite its patent Americanism, Whitman's work does not wholly evade European traditions. Poems such as "To a Foil'd European Revolutionaire" and "Italian Music in Dakota" forge a link between the United States and Europe. Whitman also makes use of the French language; the "Children of Adam" section of *Leaves of Grass* was titled "*Enfans d'Adam*" in the 1860 edition of the book (Miller). Clearly, Whitman, even though he does not make it a centerpiece nor give it a fundamental role, does not entirely shun Europe in his poetry. On a fundamental level, moreover, Whitman's poetry is inherently tied to Europe. The language in which he writes is obviously not uniquely American; English is used in America because of the United States' origins as a colony of England. No matter how distinctly American Whitman's poetry, or any English-speaking American poet's poetry, may be, the use of the English language inherently ties the work to the English tradition, and thus American English-language poetry will always reach back towards Europe. The new American literature for which Whitman called, therefore, does not fully manifest in even Whitman's own work. Rather, the new American literature that actually exists in Whitman's work is far more complex; instead of fully detaching from Europe in search of the American new, the new American literature seeks to make the American new while at the same

time remaining in conversation with European traditions, both intentionally and unintentionally. The American new may be American, but traces of Europe lie within its execution and roots.

Was Whitman's call for a new American literature answered, and if so, in what way? To address this question, one may look towards American modernist poetry. Even if American writers during this period did not clamor for Whitman across the board, Whitman's aforementioned modernist sensibility — his role as a nineteenth century modernist — makes his influence on modernist poetry difficult to ignore. One can find Whitman's influence on American modernist poetry, both in vague traces and obvious homages, in a multitude of forms. When one examines this influence, one can engage with how American literary culture developed between Whitman's day and the modernist period, and if the American writers of the modernist period succeed to, or even tried to, answer Whitman's call for a new American literature. Four American modernist poets — T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Hart Crane, and Langston Hughes — were influenced by and engaged with Whitman, all in different ways and on different levels. When looking at these four poets, one finds that they are in fact engaged in a kind of new American literature; however, it is not necessarily the new American literature for which Whitman called in "Democratic Vistas". Rather, it is the new American literature that Whitman put into practice in his work; these modernist poets present a literature that both seeks to "make it new" through Americanism and engages with the European tradition.

Among the four poets, there exist varying levels of Americanism and European-ness. All four demonstrate a creative relationship between America and Europe; however, each poet leans towards one more than the other. The poetic works of Eliot and Pound are marked heavily by European culture and traditions, even in the newness of their formal characteristics. The poetic

works of Crane and Hughes, however, come across as far more American in their sensibilities. These differing allegiances among the poets tie into how they interact with Whitman and his work.

T.S. Eliot, as made apparent by his experience with Shakespeare and Company's Whitman exhibit, harbored complicated feelings towards Whitman; he certainly did not revere Whitman in the way that Beach did. This does not mean, however, that Eliot's work exists unconnected to and uninfluenced by Whitman's; one need not adore a writer to be linked with them. Major links between the two poets lie in the idea of the city and its relationship to modernity, and the hermit thrush.

One city about which Whitman writes is the one he called home: New York City. New York features prominently in the poem "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry". Even though, based on its title, the poem ostensibly concerns a ferry ride, "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" provides an excellent portrait of how Whitman conceptualizes the city. In the first section of the poem, Whitman writes,

"crowds of men and women attired in the usual costumes,
how curious you are to me! / On the ferry-boats the hundreds
and hundreds that cross, returning home, are more curious to
me than you suppose, / And you that shall cross from shore to
shore years hence are more to me, and more in my meditations,
than you might suppose" (Whitman 129).

The use of the "I" in Whitman's poems is quite common; however, the poet of "Song of Myself" in no way only focuses on himself. Just as how "Song of Myself" encompasses far more people than just the poem's speaker himself, the ferry in "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" holds far more passengers than just the speaker himself, and the speaker is inclusive of them in his vision of the ferry. In these lines, one sees the crowd of the ferry and, by extension, the crowd of the city.

Moreover, this sense of crowd expands as these three lines unfold. Whitman begins with “crowds of men and women” (Whitman 129) who are simply riding the ferry alongside his speaker. Then, he uses “ferry boats” in the plural, reaching out to boats on which he does not currently ride. He speaks of the multitude of passengers “returning home”, extending his vision to homes which his speaker will never visit. Finally, he speaks of ferry passengers who “shall cross from shore to shore years hence” (Whitman 129), which extends his speaker into visions of future passengers beyond his own time; Whitman’s bend towards the future in action. These lines all connect the speaker to all these passengers through the first person singular pronoun, which engages with the experience of existing as an individual in the highly populated space of the city. These lines, as well as other portions of the poem, convey that one of the ways in which Whitman conceptualizes the city is through the people of the city. Whitman’s poetry often concerns itself with vast swaths of people, both city-dwelling and not, and these vast swaths are tied into Whitman’s vision of America, a wide and peopled place. In a sense, one can envision Whitman’s city as a condensation of his America — the multitude quality of Whitman’s America displays itself densely in the city.

Whitman’s conceptualization of the city, however, does not only reside in its people.

Later in the poem, Whitman writes,

“watched the Twelfth-month sea-gulls, saw them high
in the air floating with motionless wings, oscillating their
bodies, / Saw how the glistening yellow lit up parts of their
bodies and left the rest in strong shadow, / Saw the
slow-wheeling circles and the gradual edging toward
the south,” (Whitman 130).

In the first two lines, Whitman focuses on the natural world via his focus on the seagulls.

However, in the third line, he shifts away from the natural world to the human-made world, when

his poetic eye turns towards the boat. In “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry”, the natural world and the human-made world are in contact and conversation with one another. In that same section (the third), Whitman later writes, “the white wake left by the passage, the quick tremulous whirl of the wheels” (Whitman 131). Here, one witnesses the ferry rendering ripples on the surface of the East River. Now, the natural world and the human-made world are not just presented side by side with one another, but they are intertwined; the human-made world (the boat) has a direct, physical impact upon the natural world (the river). Whitman’s conceptualization of the city engages with the relationship between human technology and the natural world, which brings to the city, and by extension Whitman’s poetic vision, a sense of modernity. Whitman’s conceptualization of the city, moreover, is one based on harmonious terms; his speaker experiences a deep connection with all other human beings, and his natural world experiences a deep connection with his human-made world.

Eliot engages with the idea of the city as well in his poem, “The Waste Land”. Eliot’s conceptualization of the city, like Whitman’s, also involves these two major elements of the city defined as a populated place and the city defined as a place in which the natural and human-made worlds intersect; however, Eliot’s conceptualization, in the end, takes on an entirely different tone and outlook.

Many different people appear in Eliot’s city, which in “The Waste Land” is London (notably not an American city); however, these people are not always packed together like the crowds of “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry”. Rather, these people often appear as individuals, such as Madame Sosostris and the woman at the beginning of the “A Game of Chess” section, and in small groups, such as the women in the bar near the end of “A Game of Chess” and the man and

woman who sleep together in “The Fire Sermon”. In one moment, however, within the “The Burial of the Dead” section, the speaker shifts to a focus on the crowd of the city. Eliot writes,

“Unreal City, / Under the brown fog of a winter dawn, /
A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many, / I had
not thought death had undone so many. / Sighs, short
and infrequent, were exhaled, / And each man fixed his
eyes before his feet. / Flowed up the hill and down King
William Street, / To where Saint Mary Woolnoth kept
the hours / With a dead sound on the final stroke of
nine” (Eliot 32-33).

Here, like in Whitman’s poem, one sees a crowd in transit. The speaker’s connection to this crowd, however, is far different than that of Whitman’s. Whitman’s speaker views himself as tied up with the crowd, connected to all human life in a harmonious way. Moreover, Whitman’s speaker appears over and over again in his invocation of the crowd. Eliot’s speaker, however, appears only once, in the line “I had not thought death had undone so many” (Eliot 32). Here, one sense that Eliot’s speaker considers himself to be separate from the crowd; he makes a bleak observation about them. Moreover, the people in Eliot’s crowd are not as connected as the people in Whitman’s crowd. He speaks of what “each man” is doing; even though “each man” is doing the same thing, Eliot separates them into individual beings, rather than saying “the crowd fixed their eyes before their feet”. The crowd is not a harmonious entity, but rather a large set of beings alienated from one another. Eliot’s conception of the city is also partially based around its people; however it is one based on a lack of connections, rather than the deep connections of Whitman’s city.

The human-made world and the natural world also interact in Eliot’s conception of the city. After the scene in “The Fire Sermon” in which a man and a woman sleep together, Eliot

writes after the man has left the woman's apartment, "she smooths her hair with automatic hand / And puts a record on the gramophone" (Eliot 37). The presence of the natural world is less apparent in these lines than it is in Whitman's lines about the seagulls and the river; however, it is there in the presence of a human being, because while a human being may create things that are not part of the natural world, a human being themselves is a product of the natural world. The obvious product of the human-made world in these lines is the gramophone; like the seagull and the boat, the woman and the gramophone exist alongside one another. The collision of the human-made world and the natural world that one finds in Whitman's boat and ripples on the river is found in Eliot's use of the word "automatic". "Automatic" has a denaturalized quality to it; it is a word devoid of an emotional or spiritual sense, and it is a word of machinery. It is, in this case, applied to a woman's body part, and that body part's interaction with another body part. Here, the natural and human-made worlds collide; however, rather than creating the beautiful ripples found on Whitman's river, they serve as an emblem of the tone of despair and bleakness that clouds both the scene and the poem. The woman runs her "automatic hand" through her hair not to move forward, to travel somewhere as Whitman's ferry smooths its East River, but as an unthinking response to the misery that hangs in the air.

Whitman looked towards the city as an establishment of America's modernity, and Eliot carries on that vision through conceptualizing the city through the same avenues as Whitman. Eliot takes the American precedent that Whitman has set, however, and makes it new by pulling out of it despair rather than beauty. Moreover, Eliot adheres to Whitman's actual practice of American poetry in which both America and Europe are present in his conceptualization of the city in "The Waste Land". He takes on Whitman's, an American poet, terms of defining the city,

and then he applies these terms to the city of London. Moreover, the poem is reflective of the city post-World War I, a conflict that involved both Europe and America. Eliot, while the tone of his city is one that may very well have been alien to Whitman's sensibility, carries on the new American literature established by Whitman in his city of "The Waste Land".

Eliot is not merely linked to Whitman by these larger ideas about the city, but also through a small, three-word phrase: the hermit thrush. The hermit thrush is a bird exclusively found in North America; a bird with a natural lack of a European connection. Whitman writes of the bird in his poem, "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd". He writes, "Solitary the thrush, / The hermit withdrawn to himself, avoiding the settlements, / Sings by himself a song" (Whitman 256). The hermit thrush, as a North American bird, fits well into Whitman's context. The hermit thrush is a detail of Whitman's poem that lends itself to Whitman's desire for Americanism in his work.

Eliot, in "The Waste Land", also mentions the bird. In the "What the Thunder Said" section, Eliot writes, "where the hermit-thrush sings in the pine trees" (Eliot 40). From Whitman, to Eliot, the reality of the hermit thrush as an exclusively North American bird has not changed. Another condition that has not changed is the setting of Eliot's poem; "The Waste Land" is still in London. James Longenbach writes in "Mature Poets Steal: Eliot's Allusive Practice" that

"the song of the hermit thrush in the final movement of *The Waste Land* clearly alludes to Whitman's 'When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd,'" but Eliot's notes send us to Chapman's *Handbook of Birds of Eastern North America*" (Longenbach 179-180).

Clearly, Eliot did not mistakenly place the bird in London; he was fully aware of its status as a North American bird. Thus, this placement of a bird that has no business being in London can be read as entirely intentional. Although Eliot has situated himself in London, an element of America persists in this American poet's work. Through this, one sees how an American poet may still retain their Americanism no matter how far outside of America they extend. Moreover, the hermit thrush infused into London is America infused into Europe, a mode that reaches back to Whitman's practice in forming the new American literature.

Ezra Pound, another American poet who, like Eliot, reached as far as he could into Europe and his culture, actively felt and wrote about his relationship with Walt Whitman. His poem, "A Pact", reads,

"I make truce with you, Walt Whitman—, / I have
detested you long enough. / I come to you as a grown
child / Who has had a pig-headed father; / I am old
enough now to make friends. / It was you that broke
the new wood, / Now is a time for carving. / We have
one sap and one root— / Let there be commerce
between us" (Pound).

In this poem alone, one finds traces of Whitman's style. Pound invokes the "I", a common feature of Whitman's work. He crafts a contradiction: "a grown child" (Pound). In his final line, he makes what reads like a Whitmanian request. Unlike Eliot with his subtle inclusion of the hermit thrush, Pound makes his Whitmanian influences obvious and upfront in his poetry.

Pound makes this connection clear outside of his poetry, as well. In his essay, "What I Feel About Walt Whitman, Pound writes,

"mentally I am a Walt Whitman who has learned to wear
a collar and a dress shirt (although at times inimical to both).
Personally I might be very glad to conceal my relationship to
my spiritual father and brag about my more congenial ancestry
—Dante, Shakespeare, Theocritus, Villon, but the descent is a

bit difficult to establish. And, to be frank, Whitman is to my fatherland (*Patriam quam odi et amo* for no uncertain reasons) what Dante is to Italy and I at my best can only be a strife for a renaissance in America of all the lost or temporarily mislaid beauty, truth, valour, glory of Greece, Italy, England and all the rest of it” (Pound).

Here, Pound establishes a few major points. First, he affirms Whitman’s status in the American literary canon; his comparison between Whitman’s relationship to America with Dante’s relationship to Italy asserts that Whitman played a founding role in America’s literary culture, which bestows the authority upon Whitman to be the one to establish a new American literature. Next, he establishes his own relationship with Whitman; he does this in a particularly fundamental way with “mentally I am Walt Whitman” (Pound) — Pound not only connects himself to Whitman, but equates himself with Whitman.

Pound strays from Whitman’s conception of himself, however, when he aligns himself with European traditions. Later on in the essay, Pound writes,

“it seems to me I should like to drive Whitman into the old world. I sledge, he drill—and to scourge America with all the old beauty. (For Beauty is an accusation) and with a thousand thongs from Homer to Yeats, from Theocritus to Marcel Schwob” (Pound).

Pound’s poetic task, as he imagines it in this essay, is to take what Whitman has established — his style, his sensibility, his Americanism — and to infuse it into the European tradition. While this is not the vision that Whitman outlined in “Democratic Vistas”, it is the product of his actual, Europe-inclusive practices in his poetic labor of forming a new American literature.

One place in which Pound’s work fuses Whitman and Europe is in his *Cantos*. *The Cantos* is a work whose composition spans decades, a characteristic shared by Whitman’s *Leaves*

of *Grass*. One finds this fusion all throughout the work. A good example is found in the opening of the very first Canto, in which Pound writes,

“and then went down to the ship, / Set keel to breakers,
forth on the godly sea, and / We set up mast and sail on
that swart ship, / Bore sheep aboard her, and our bodies
also / Heavy with weeping, and winds from sternward /
Bore us out onward with bellying canvas, / Circe’s this
craft, the trim-coifed goddess” (Pound 3).

Here, one thinks back to Whitman’s ferry: a boat and sense of a journey. There is the presence of the “we” as well, which ties into Whitman’s focus on the crowd, on multitudes of people to whom he is connected. There is the physicality of the body, which is present in Whitman’s work; one feels the heaviness of the weeping bodies and the physical labor of getting the ship to sail. However, the final line in this section places the poem in a context that departs from Whitman’s vision; the inclusion of Circe places the poem in the Homeric tradition. Here, Pound has drawn Whitman’s sensibility into the realm of Ancient Greece, an important foundation of European culture. Like Whitman’s use of the English language, this is a connection on a fundamental level between the American and the non-American. Pound situates himself as an American in the tradition of the epic, and thus he must ally himself with its European roots. Pound, like Eliot, demonstrates that the new American literature is one in which America and Europe are intertwined.

Hart Crane, like Pound, openly acknowledges his debt to Whitman; however Crane is far more loving towards Whitman than Pound. One of his poems in *The Bridge*, titled “Cape Hatteras”, intensely engages with his relationship with Whitman, both in style and content. In terms of style, one can essentially choose any passage from the poem and find the mark of Whitman within it. In one section, Crane writes,

“what ciphers risen from prophetic script, / What
marathons new-set between the stars! / The soul, by
naphtha fledged into new reaches, / Already knows
the closer clasp of Mars,— / New latitudes, unknotting,
soon give place / To what fierce schedules, rife of doom
apace!” (Crane 36).

Here, the style appears almost as if Whitman could have written it himself. One finds long lines of free verse, use of exclamation points and em dashes, and use of commas at line ends, which are stylistic choices typical of Whitman’s work. Moreover, this section features the intensity and expansiveness one finds in Whitman. “Marathons”, “the stars”, “the soul”, “new reaches”, and “new latitudes” all bring to the poem a Whitmanian tone. In his work, it is quite apparent that Crane has infused Whitman’s poetic style into his own.

“Cape Hatteras” does not dance around its connection to Whitman. Crane opens the poem with an epigraph from Whitman, and mentions Whitman by name more than once throughout the poem. Crane closes the poem with

“yes, Walt, / Afoot again, and onward without halt,—
/ Not soon, nor suddenly,— No, never to let go / My
hand / in yours, / Walt Whitman— / so—” (Crane 42).

These last lines suggest Crane’s sense of his own close connection with Whitman. If Pound considers his relationship with Whitman to be a kind of truce, Crane considers his to be a close friendship. This implies that he does not struggle with Whitman in the way that Pound, or even Eliot, does, but he rather warmly welcomes Whitman into his poetic life. Crane’s relationship with Whitman is one marked by creative intimacy.

Crane invokes Whitman in another manner in “Cape Hatteras” that leaks outside of this concept of friendship. He writes, “O Walt! — Ascensions of thee hover in me now” (Crane 39). His reference to Whitman here, while still intimate in its use of a first name, reads more like an

invocation to the Muse. The “O” and spiritual implications found on the right half of the em dash suggest that Crane derives a divine, creative inspiration from Whitman. In this, one finds the reflection of the reality of Whitman’s poetic practice. Crane’s poetry is far less enmeshed in European culture than that of Eliot or Pound; however, here is where he strays from his Americanism. The invocation of the Muse is part of the epic tradition, thus making the invocation of the Muse a form that reaches outside of America. However, the Muse whom Crane invokes is an American one: Whitman. This element of “Cape Hatteras” shows how Crane fits into the new American literature that Whitman established. He reaches, like Whitman, for what is outlined in “Democratic Vistas”, but ends up recreating Whitman’s actual poetic practices.

Langston Hughes, a major poet of the Harlem Renaissance, finds a few of his links with Whitman through his use of the “I” and his use of new and radical forms. In both of these cases, he simultaneously displays a connection with and a departure from Whitman. The “I”, a tool of the poetic speaker found across Whitman’s work, particularly comes to light in Hughes’ poem “I, Too”, quoted in full below:

“I, too, sing America. / I am the darker brother. / They
send me to eat in the kitchen / When company comes, /
But I laugh, / And eat well, / And grow strong. // Tomorrow,
/ I’ll be at the table / When company comes. / Nobody’ll
dare / Say to me, / “Eat in the kitchen,” / Then. // Besides,
/ They’ll see how beautiful I am / And be ashamed— / I,
too, am America” (Hughes).

In the opening and closing lines of the poem, Hughes aligns himself via the “I” with America in a Whitmanian fashion; he sings and is America. Moreover, like Whitman, Hughes celebrates himself; he laughs, eats well, grows strong, and considers himself beautiful. However, Hughes is

not as easily absorbed into America as Whitman is. The poem hinges on his separation from America, a separation brought about by the racism of America. In the case of this poem, therefore, the use of the “I” differs between Whitman and Hughes in their experiences of being Americans; Hughes faces a form of systemic oppression that Whitman does not, and this factor plays a role in shaping their respective relationships with America. Hughes’s use of the “I” grounds him in what Whitman established for the new American literature, but at the same time he departs from Whitman and thus contributes another type of American experience — the experience of Black Americans — to Whitman’s new American literature.

Hughes, like Whitman, was a formal innovator; however, his use of new forms is far different than Whitman’s use of new forms. The second section of Hughes’ “The Weary Blues” reads,

“Thump, thump, thump, went his foot on the floor. /
He played a few chords then he sang some more— /
“I got the Weary Blues / And I can’t be satisfied. / Got
the Weary Blues / And can’t be satisfied— / I ain’t happy
no mo’ / And I wish that I had died.” / And far into the
night he crooned that tune. / The stars went out and so
did the moon. / The singer stopped playing and went to
bed / While the Weary Blues echoed through his head.
/ He slept like a rock or a man that’s dead” (Hughes).

This poem, like other poems in Hughes’ book by the same title, incorporates blues in both its content and style. The reader receives the actual lyrics of a blues song, as well as the sounds of the singer’s thumping foot and the chords that are tied into the music of the poem. Hughes’ use of the blues as a form connects him to Whitman in a way that departs from Eliot, Pound, and Crane. Eliot, Pound, and Crane, on varying levels, ultimately reflect Whitman’s actual poetic practice of bending towards America with European roots. Hughes, in this particular use of

form, aligns himself strongly with the call that Whitman makes in “Democratic Vistas” for wholly new American forms. The blues is a form of music that did not originate in Europe at all, but rather originated in America among Black Americans. In this way, Hughes fulfills Whitman’s desire to break from Europe, albeit that he still writes in the English language. Hughes demonstrates that Whitman’s contribution to American modernist poetry is not just carried out in the terms of Whitman’s actual practice, but that Whitman’s dream of new, exclusively American forms expressed in “Democratic Vistas” holds a place in the new American literature as well.

Whitman writes in the final section of “Song of Myself”, “I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love, / If you want me again look for me under your boot-soles” (Whitman 78). Whitman, in a sense, is a writer willingly sunk into the ground of American literature. In its scrupulous attention to America, Whitman’s work certainly retains a place in the formation of the American literary identity. This combined with Whitman’s formal innovation and his gaze towards the new establishes him as a foundational poet from which American poets after him may draw and with which they may struggle. Whitman sought to bring poetry into the modern age, and the poets of the modernist age reflect this goal in their work. When these poets looked under their boot-soles, they found Walt Whitman.

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