

*D. H. Lawrence and Walt Whitman: Transatlantic Divergences*

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D. H. Lawrence was a six-year-old boy when Walt Whitman died in Camden, New Jersey in 1892.<sup>1</sup> The overlap of their lifetimes was slight, but the influence of Whitman on Lawrence was considerable, if complex. He would write, in his preface to his 1918 *New Poems*, that Whitman's work was "the best poetry" of the kind "whose very permanency lies in its wind-like transit."<sup>2</sup> And he would dedicate the final essay in his 1923 *Studies in Classic American Literature* to him—a bivalent salvo that oscillates from mockery to praise, and includes the claim that "Walt's great poems are really huge fat tomb-plants, great rank grave-yard growths."<sup>3</sup>

Here, I take up the question of the nature of Lawrence's relationship with Whitman by comparing two poems, one by each author. I'll consider Lawrence's "New Heaven and Earth," from his 1917<sup>4</sup> collection *Look! We Have Come Through!*, in which the narrator imagines a series of mythological deaths and resurrections. The poem's formal features—anaphora, repetition, apostrophe, and the use of sections and long sentences—are strikingly Whitmanic.<sup>5</sup> Alongside the poem's trope of "crossing," these features invite a comparison to Whitman's 1855 poem "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry."<sup>6</sup> I will focus on how Lawrence's poem articulates an ethos of

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<sup>1</sup> "Chronology," in D. H. Lawrence, *The Poems*, Vol. 1, ed. Christopher Pollnitz (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), xvii.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 647.

<sup>3</sup> D. H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature*, ed. Ezra Greenspan et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 150.

<sup>4</sup> Likely composed in 1915 at Greatham, per Pollnitz in D. H. Lawrence, *The Poems*, Vol. 2, ed. Christopher Pollnitz (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 685.

<sup>5</sup> See, e.g., John Gould Fletcher, "A Modern Evangelist," *Poetry*, Vol. 12, No. 5 (August 1918), 269-274, also cited in Pollnitz, *ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Walt Whitman, *Walt Whitman: Poetry and Prose*, ed. Justin Kaplan (N.P.: Library of America, 1996), 307.

"Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" first appeared, under that title, in the 1891-1892 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, the so-called "deathbed edition." It appeared earlier in, among other places, the 1856 edition of *Leaves of Grass* as "Sun-Down Poem," which invites an alternate reading: of the particularly "natural" (though this notion is problematized by Whitman's praise of the sublimity of the manmade) features in the poem. See Walt Whitman, "Sun-Down Poem," Walt Whitman Archive, University of Iowa, accessed June 13, 2021, <https://whitmanarchive.org/published/LG/1856/poems/11>.

transformative experience that, though loaned from Whitman, is predominantly individualistic, in contrast to the democratic spirit of Whitman's poem.

The narrator of "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," who I'll take to be Whitman, transforms, across nine sections, a commute out of Manhattan into an ecstasy of spiritual communion with past and present others. Although Whitman doesn't overtly frame his journey as a theological one, his discussion of the generations that "shall cross from shore to shore years hence" invites comparisons of crossing the East River with the coming-to-be and passing-away of lives ("Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," l. 5).<sup>7</sup>

If "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" can be read as Whitman's updating the myth of the soul's passage into the underworld for a modernizing, industrializing America,<sup>8</sup> his changes to the fundamental terms of the process are as notable as his redescriptions. Not only does Styx become the East River and Charon a working-class ferryman, but the origin and terminus of the passage are no longer death and the afterlife—terms not capacious enough for Whitman's vision. The passage is instead from Whitman-as-individual to Whitman-transformed<sup>9</sup>-into-the-collective—where Whitman stands in for the modern democratic citizen. His conjecture—the terms of his revised and modern "crossing"—is to construct the individual in terms of shared human experience across time and space, rather than beginning, fundamentally, with the individual.

The formal and thematic similarities of Lawrence's poem with Whitman's helps to isolate their differences. "New Heaven and Earth," unlike "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," happens in a literally otherworldly space and is concerned with just one individual, who I'll take to be Lawrence. Collectivity is absent; the narrator's own wife is objectified into her "flank," itself a

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<sup>7</sup> Whitman, "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," 308.

<sup>8</sup> In "Whitman," Lawrence describes the poet as being "like a strange, modern, American Moses" (155).

<sup>9</sup> I say "transformed into" and not "absorbed into" because the latter suggests one could still remain an individual while being encapsulated in something else, while that's clearly a possibility Whitman intends to exclude.

metonym for *any* human other. Several elements of theological and mythological narrative are present: a death that leads to resurrection<sup>10</sup>, and a framing of this resurrection as deeply morally consequential. Lawrence described *Look! We Have Come Through* as narrating a man's transition into manhood in life's sixth *lustre*—from *lustrum*, a Roman five-year unit—or from the ages 25-30. (Whitman's poem was written when he was 36, not long after the *lustre* that concerned Lawrence.)<sup>11</sup>

Lawrence's poem is individualistic not in the sense that it vindicates the individual over the collective, but in its grounding of the individual as the site of this transformative experience of "crossing," from which it excludes the collective: the narrator's self-transformation occurs in isolation. But this isolation is not necessarily physical. Imagining arrival in the "new world," Lawrence anticipates his inability to speak to its inhabitants:

And whosoever the unknown people of this unknown world may be  
they will never understand my weeping for joy to be adventuring among them  
because it will still be a gesture of the old world I am making... (ll. 9-12)<sup>12</sup>

This marks a radical change from the solipsism of the narrator's pre-death world, where "everything was tainted with myself... it was all myself" (ll. 15-21). The initial sections of "New Heaven and Earth" present Whitman's heaven of communal interpenetration—which appears also, in quasi-canonical form, in "Song of Myself"—as hell; these sections can be understood as an indirect critique of Whitman's philosophy as one that risks idealization and the elimination of difference, or the false belief that oneself is all there is. Despite Lawrence's isolation, there is

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<sup>10</sup> One, curiously enough, where the physical body itself, in the manner of the Christian Day of Judgment in the Book of Revelation, is resurrected.

<sup>11</sup> His Foreword to *Look! We Have Come Through* (arranged as centered and justified text that cannot be reproduced here) states: "These poems should not be considered separately, as so many single pieces. They are intended as an essential story, or history, or confession, unfolding one from the other in organic development, the whole revealing the intrinsic experience of a man during the crisis of manhood, when he marries and comes into himself. The period covered is, roughly, the sixth lustre of a man's life" (Lawrence, *The Poems*, Vol. 2, 941).

<sup>12</sup> Lawrence, *The Poems*, Vol. 1, 210.

never a *rejection* of others, or ideas of mutual obligation, in the poem. But the journey is presented as though, of metaphysical necessity, it must be traveled alone. In his *Studies*, Lawrence repudiates Whitman along these lines. “Sympathy means feeling with, not feeling for,” he writes, correcting the older poet’s error; and democracy itself, insofar as it smelts the individual, is “part of the death-process” that Lawrence felt resulted from this error.<sup>13</sup>

In “New Heaven and Earth,” Lawrence offers a vision not diametrically opposed to Whitman’s, necessarily, but an alternative: some transformations have to be faced alone, and the line between communal ecstasy and solipsism is thinner than the narrator of “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” thinks. A curious fact remains about the end of Lawrence’s poem, however. After one death and resurrection, the narrator dies in the afterlife and is resurrected again, this time “at the core of utter mystery,” the poem’s concluding phrase (l. 45). Nothing more is said—about, for instance, whether this mystery amounts under another description to the very possibilities that so tantalized Whitman.

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<sup>13</sup> Lawrence, *Studies*, 155-158.

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