

ANALYSIS

“Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” (1856)

Walt Whitman

(1819-1892)

“Whitman wrote in *Specimen Days*: ‘Living in Brooklyn or New York City...my life was curiously identified with the Fulton ferry, already becoming the greatest of its sort in the world for general importance, volume, variety, rapidity, and picturesqueness. Almost daily (‘50 to ‘60) I cross’d on the boats, often up in the pilot-houses where I could get a full sweep, absorbing shows, accompaniments, surroundings. What oceanic currents, eddies, underneath--the great tides of humanity also, with ever-shifting movements! Indeed I have always had a passion for ferries; to me they afford inimitable, streaming, never-failing, living poems. The river and bay scenery, all about New York island, any time of a fine day--the hurrying, splashing sea-tides--the changing panorama of steamers, all sizes, often a string of big ones outward bound to distant ports--the myriads of white sail’d schooners, sloops, skiffs, and the marvelously beautiful yachts--the majestic Sound boats as they rounded the Battery and came along towards 5, afternoon, eastward bound--the prospect off toward Staten Island, or down the Narrows, or the other way up the Hudson--what refreshment of spirit such sights and experiences gave me years ago (and many a time since)! My old pilot friends, the Balsirs, Johnny Cole, Ira Smith, William White, and my young ferry friend Tom Gere--how well I remember them all!’”

quoted by James E. Miller, Jr.
The Literature of the United States II, 3rd edition
(Scott, Foresman 1953,1961,1966) 120

“In considering ‘Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,’ one does not have to look for the perfect representation of its underlying metaphor anywhere but in the poem itself; surely it is one of the best Whitman wrote. Thoreau appears to be on solid ground in expressing his preference for this poem and for ‘Song of Myself.’ In ‘Song of the Open Road’ Whitman had been seeking a less witty, more purely lyric expression of the exuberance which was one of his strong points and to expand it into the scope of vision and prophecy. In ‘Crossing Brooklyn Ferry’ he brings a new lyric austerity and control to his capacity for pathos and musing reflection.

Everything conspires to the advantage of the poem. The river, the sea, always called out the best in a poet whose emotions were as languid, powerful, and recurrent as the tides and whose flowing depths were modified by an incorrigible gamesomeness; he was like the profound river, which ‘frolicked on’ with its ‘crested and scallop-edg’d waves.’ The river is the perfect symbol for the ‘float forever held in solution’ from which ‘identities’ are ‘struck,’ just as the objects visualized in ‘mast-hemm’d Manhattan’ and in Brooklyn, as well as the gulls and boats dropping downstream, are perfect symbols of ‘identity.’ Nor is the river less adequate as the mighty, primitive power across whose contrary tides the ferry carries man to eternity--which, the poem asserts, is the focus of everything that brings men into harmony or serves as the principle of the continuity of human feelings in space and through time.

It is usually a good sign when Whitman begins overtly to doubt himself, since his capacity for meditative self-doubt leads him to write some of his best poems, notably ‘Out of the Cradle,’ although, to be sure, self-doubt could also lead him to mere compensatory rhetoric. In ‘Crossing Brooklyn Ferry’ the musing confession of weakness and uncertainty finds its first full voice, and it becomes a saving grace in the poem... The technical superiority of ‘Crossing Brooklyn Ferry’ is in the comparative austerity of the diction and the felicity of the images--the river, the tides, the ferry boat, the sunset, the circling gulls, the ships with their tall masts, the hills on the shore, the flags and pennants. In this poem Whitman has found the ‘objects’ he groped for in ‘Song of the Open Road.’ In alleging that these objects--the ‘dumb beautiful ministers’--mediate between man and eternity, Whitman has made them mediate between the uncompleted particulars of the poem and the fixed perfection of poetic form.

Both 'Song of the Open Road' and 'Crossing Brooklyn Ferry' benefit by Whitman's peculiar affinity for images of motion, his capacity to capture the sensation he himself cherished in his rambles about Long Island, his observation of birds in flight, and of sail boats on the Sound, his inveterate ferry boat and horse-car riding. 'Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,' allowing him to associate images of motion with the sea and the river, called for exactly that kind of supple, indolent, flowing motion which Whitman could supremely render."

Richard Chase
Walt Whitman Reconsidered
(William Sloane 1955) 107-08

"There is general critical agreement that, aside from 'Song of Myself,' Whitman's greatest poems are 'Crossing Brooklyn Ferry' (1856), 'Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking' (1860), 'When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd' (1865), and 'Passage to India' (1871). These four poems not only are Whitman's best but also represent the several individual creative periods of his poetic career....

'Crossing Brooklyn Ferry' dramatizes a simple, ordinary experience in such a way as to symbolize the mystic unity that pervades all mankind and the universe. The crossing on the ferry by its very nature brings together in time many diverse people, holds them together in unity, lifts them for a moment beyond the reach of space and time, then disperses them. The poet sees in this moment of transcendence, when the ferry crowds are held suspended on the water between the shores, a symbol of the human fate and destiny: 'The simple, compact, well-join'd scheme, myself disintegrated, everyone disintegrated yet part of the scheme.' When the poet cries out at the opening of Section 3, 'It avails not, time nor place--distance avails not,' he indicates the dramatic movement of the poem: The poet will fuse himself with the reader in order to persuade him of the universal identity.

All the images of the ferry-scene are invoked in catalog to assist in the approaching identity. And then the poet pauses again in Section 5 and asks: 'What is it then between us? / What is the count of the scores or hundreds of years between us? / Whatever it is, it avails not--distance avails not, and place avails not.' He next turns to the intimate emotional relationships that fuse him with the reader, and he asserts: 'I too had been struck from the float forever held in solution'--a chemical figure of a solid precipitated from a liquid (the individual soul 'precipitated' from the oversoul or universal spirit). The poet (like the reader) had been touched by the 'dark patches,' had known 'what it was to be evil.'

In Section 7 the climax seems near as the poet cries out, 'Closer yet I approach you,' and slyly (and disconcertingly) suggests, 'Who knows, for all the distance, but I am as good as looking at you now, for all you cannot see me?' And the climax is reached in Section 8, as the poet works his way into the very being of the reader: 'Which fuses me into you now, and pours my meaning into you...' Immediately after this direct identification, the poet assumes his task accomplished--'We understand then do we not?' The remainder of the poem is devoted to a kind of ritualistic verbal dance reinvoking all of the images of the poem that assisted the poet in fusing with the reader--the 'dumb, beautiful ministers' which have furnished their 'parts toward the soul.' 'Crossing Brooklyn Ferry' might be called Whitman's public love poem, directed at everybody."

James E. Miller, Jr.
Walt Whitman
(Twayne 1962) 97-98

"In 'Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,' one of his pervasively symbolic works, Whitman establishes a correspondence between the joyously rendered material scene as he knew it in his young manhood and the time-free realm of friendship, release from fatigue through natural variety and beauty, and discovery of the soul's undying reality. So the East River at flood tide becomes 'the float forever held in solution'; the ferryboat crossing it suggests the span from birth to death; the 'fine centrifugal spokes of light' around the poet's--or anyone's--head, in the sunlit water, assume the appearance of a halo; and the poem itself as a 'time-binder' ferries Walt Whitman into the unchanging world of spirit and art. But the poem develops and changes, from separation, 'I,' and the past into absorption. 'We,' and a timeless present; and, because Whitman keeps his images fresh and moving, manages verb tenses and moods climactically, and constantly augments the repeated elements of the poem, he achieves an effect nearly as dramatic as it is lyric or

symbolical. ‘The masterpiece of the first two editions’ as Gay W. Allen calls it, ‘Sun-Down Poem’ (1856) was given its final title in 1860 and its final form in *Leaves of Grass* of 1881.”

William M. Gibson & George Arms, eds.
Twelve American Writers
(Macmillan 1962) 380

“He spoke in ‘Crossing Brooklyn Ferry’ as if from the grave, believing then that the afterlife was simply another part of our existence.... During his days on the *Eagle*, he frequently took a ferry across and back again just ‘to get...the pure air, at the economical price of a penny trip.’ It is ‘Sun-Down Poem’ (‘Crossing Brooklyn Ferry’)...that is Whitman’s greatest celebration of the transcendentalist unity of existence and certainly the crown jewel of the 1856 edition. Here is a poem Whitman had been preparing all his life.... The poet focuses on what it is to be alive in Brooklyn and New York and at the same time part of the greater life of humanity across the ages....Two audiences are addressed here: not merely Whitman’s contemporaries but more emphatically readers ‘scores or hundreds of years later’ (who today note that it is as if the poet is reading the poem over their shoulder).”

Jerome Loving
Walt Whitman: The Song of Himself
(U California 1999) 91, 149, 219

Michael Hollister (2015)