“CROSSING BROOKLYN FERRY”: A NOTE ON THE CATALOGUE TECHNIQUE IN WHITMAN’S POETRY

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The rest is but manipulation (yet that is no small matter).

Democratic Vistas

Recent Whitman studies have shown so conclusively the existence of formal patterns in his verse that no one is likely now to insist that he wholly abandoned himself to the vagaries of “inspiration” when he composed. At the same time, the characteristics of his verse and his comments on it are so predominantly antiformalist that they persist in discouraging the kind of formal analysis that good poetry requires and thus also discourage the attempt to clarify certain ambiguities in his statement of the theory of organic form. The purpose of this paper is not to deny the drift of his theory and practice toward the antiformalist position but rather to define more clearly his attitude toward it by studying examples of one of the most distinctive and least carefully analyzed of his patterns or “devices,” the catalogue.

The justification for the “bare lists of words” which mark the Whitman poem is usually found in Emerson’s essay on “The Poet”: “Bare lists of words are found suggestive to an imaginative and excited mind” (Essays [Oxford, 1927], p. 270). According to Emerson, the universe is the externalization of the soul, and its objects symbols, manifestations of the one reality behind them. Words which name objects also carry with them the whole sense of nature and are themselves to be understood as symbols. Thus a list of words (objects) will be effective in giving to the mind, under certain conditions, a heightened sense not only of reality but of the variety and abundance of its manifestations.

It is perfectly possible that a transcendentalist, who sees reality in a special way, might find the catalogue suggestive, though it is worth noting that Emerson qualifies this—an “excited mind.” If one is a transcendentalist, he can accept the words in these lists as metonyms; not exclusively or even primarily interested in the form of the poem, he can substitute the sign for the thing signified, or, for purposes of poetry, he can reverse the process and be satisfied with their effectiveness. But not many readers will be content with this; if the catalogues are to be successful, they must function in such a way that their meaning comes from within the poem and not from reference to something outside it.

Emerson’s discussion of “metamorphosis” suggests that he was aware of the problem and was unwilling to rest with “bare lists”; but he did not develop the idea of the necessary aesthetic transfor-


For a complete discussion of various conclusions about Whitman’s understanding of formal problems in art, see Gay Allen’s summary in Walt Whitman Handbook (Chicago, 1946), pp. 375–441, which also includes a “Selected Bibliography” of the work done in this field.
noration. Whitman turned Emerson’s passing comment into a major technique of his verse, but there may also have been some question in his mind about the adequacy of the purely philosophical argument for the catalogue. Occasionally, and on important occasions, he manipulated his lists so carefully that they are not fairly to be described as “catalogues,” ordered them so that they became aesthetically expressive, conveyed meaning by their form. The catalogues in “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” are excellent examples of what he could do with the device.²

Two sections of this poem, 3 and 9, consist almost wholly of lists, but they are by no means “bare lists.” In section 3 the catalogue begins with the sea gulls:

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.

There is an abundance of concrete detail here, mainly appealing to the sense of sight and the sense of motion. This first image in the long series begins by directing the imaginative vision upward, where it is immediately held by the floating, oscillating motion of the birds, and then is concentrated upon their colors, sharply contrasting light and darkness. Out of these details the whole passage grows. The motion of the gulls continues in their “slow-wheeling circles” and “gradual edging toward the south”; then is repeated in the flying vapor, the “swinging motion of the hulls,” perhaps in the “serpentine” pennants, the white “wake,” the “whirl” of the wheels, the “scallop-edged waves,” “the laded cups,” the frolicsome “crests.” The light imagery, beginning with the “glistening yellow” of the gulls, extends through the “reflection of the summer sky in the water,” the “beams,” the “spokes of light” in the “sunlit water,” the haze and the vapor flying in “fleeces,” the “white” sails, the “pennants,” the “white” wake, the “glistening” crests. “Crests,” in fact, contains overtones of both light and motion, as do “shimmering,” the “white” wake, and the figure of the “centrifugal spokes of light.”³

However, the pattern established by recurring images of a particular motion and a particular color undergoes a change as the catalogue proceeds, a change effected naturally and realistically within the scene at hand, a sunset scene. The exhilaration and buoyancy achieved by the clusters of light and motion images are altered with “The flags of all nations, the falling of them at sunset.” The waves are now seen in “twilight,” and the imaginative vision is no longer so markedly directed upward and toward the horizon; instead, it is necessarily fixed by the falling light upon what is immediately before it, the docks, the ships in the river, a “shadowy group.” An image pattern carefully prepared for in the contrast of light and dark on the gulls’ bodies, in the motion of birds away toward the south and out of the scene, and in the “violet” tinge on the fleecelike vapor, has now become dominant. As the sense of motion becomes a falling one, losing its vigor and soaring quality, so the light, glistening, shimmering, changes to shadows and darkness and then to the “wild red and yellow” of the foundry fires burning into the “night”; the flags fall at sunset, and the firelight, though it burns spasmodically in the night (“flicker” echoes the original, majestic, oscillating light of the gulls), ultimately is

¹ My discussion of the poems is based on the text in Leaves of Grass, ed. Emory Holloway (Inclusive Ed.; New York, 1948).
cast "down," into the "clefts of streets."  

We observe, then, that the images of this catalogue are presented as lists but that the list is not of separate objects, each of which, according to transcendentalist theory, becomes symbolic of the whole. At least, the catalogue does not depend for its expressive value upon any philosophical assumptions about the nature of the word. Instead, the words become effective as they function in the context of other words, which is to say, they become effective aesthetically: they work through a pattern of motion and light, which is first established and then altered. Their status as individual symbols disappears in the sense of a single pattern of motion and light, first evoking exhilaration, which gradually gives way to a feeling of the forbidden and threatening in the fire and darkness. There is no question but that certain of the images are symbolic; the figure of the head, with its halo of divinity, reflected in the water certainly has this meaning; but even this is subordinated to the total effect, which becomes the aim and result of this catalogue.

The changes which take place are more sharply defined when the reader compares this catalogue with the one that concludes the poem. He is struck by the reappearance in section 8 of, first, the "sunset," then the "scallop-edg'd waves," and, finally, the "sea-gulls oscillating their bodies," the "hay-boat" and the "belated lighter." In section 8 these details are only a part of a passage of rhetorical questions, but they (and the rhetorical nature of the questions) prepare for section 9, which is again a listing of details. These, as might now be expected, are basically the same as in section 3. There are the "crested" and frolicsome waves; and once again the "scallop-edg'd" epithet is applied to them, as once again the sea gulls are seen wheeling "in large circles high in the air." There are the summer sky reflected in the water, the spokes of light about the poet's reflection, the ships, the white sails, the flags; and the foundries once again cast their red and yellow light into the darkness.

But there is also a number of differences. The first is a difference in tone, which derives in part from the imperative mode of the verb that is used throughout to begin the lines, giving them conviction and assurance that they did not have before. Though the objects named are the same, though the sunset occurs and with it the falling motion and the disappearance of natural light, the awareness of this is overcome by the force of the imperative—" Flaunt away, flags . . . be duly lower'd at sunset." Though the light changes to the glare of foundry chimneys, Whitman defies this wilderness—"Burn high . . . cast black shadows . . . cast red and yellow light . . . !" And the final motion is not a falling one; the fires are commanded to cast their light "over the tops" of the houses, but not then down into the streets. Other details are reintroduced in such a way as to reinforce the difference; "Stand up, tall masts of Mannahatta! stand up, beautiful hills of Brooklyn," for example, transforms the masts and hills, previously only mentioned, into images that intensify the quality of soaring and exhilaration in a new and final way.

The two catalogues are, however, so basically similar in imagery that a parallelism between them is inescapable, and they are further related by the fact that in
tongue they are the poem's passages of greatest intensity, even though the quality of elation is lost in one (it does not lose its intensity) and maintained in the other. Occurring as they do at the middle and end of the poem, they provide an over-all framework, a structural basis upon which the poem rests. It rises in intensity to section 3, breaks, and rises again to the climax in section 9, an organization emphasized by the flat, prosaic statement of the brief section 4, which serves as a kind of punctuation. And this structure forces the reader to question its meaning. Why is the feeling altered in section 3 and sustained and intensified in section 9? What has happened between sections 3 and 9 that finally enables the poet to keep his assurance in the naming of the catalogue's objects? What significance is there to the inclusion of new images in the final catalogue?

It can be shown that the catalogues not only function as patterns of imagery which have different effects upon the reader as patterns but, by their differing effects, provide the key to the meaning of the poem. In other words, they are expressive aesthetically not only in themselves but within the larger over-all structure of the poem. In section 1 Whitman had introduced the materials of his poem: the flood-tide and the clouds, objects of nature; the crowds of people, which, like the natural world, are seen as external to him, to his self. There is no comment other than this; but he has established the basis for a question that is of recurring importance in his verse: What is the relationship of the "I" of the individual identity to that which is external to it? More specifically in the terms of this poem: What is the status of the physical and objective and what attitude shall we assume toward it?

Then in section 2 he dwells at more length upon both external "things" and the "others," considering the human being in this poem, as is clear from his introductory section, from this point of view. Now, however, he uses the external, both human and nonhuman, to heighten his sense of the oneness of all experience, that is, tending to ignore the status of individualization in his concentration upon the unity of the spiritual reality behind it. Uppermost in his mind is the "simple, compact, well-join'd scheme" into which every object, as individual, is disintegrated; in place of things, he sees the "sustenance" derived from them; in place of past and future, the "similitudes" between them; in place of single images, the "glories strung like beads"; in place of the "others," the "ties between me and them." Specifically, he dwells upon the feeling of oneness with the men and women of the future, who will encounter the same externals, the same images; and, since these will be his readers, he is hoping to reach them through the objects as bridges. As usual in his major poems, he is making some comment on the problems of the poet or his poetry.

The direction in which he is moving becomes clear with the opening lines of section 3, which presents the first catalogue, or extensive listing of objects: "It avails not, time nor place—distance avails not." Dissolving the categories of time and space in his contemplation of that outside him, he loses his awareness of its individuality and of his own and approaches the mystic experience of mergence with a transcendent reality. From a short incantatory stanza, continuing the incantatory style of section 2, with its suggestion of a magical invoking of a spiritual reality in which all identity disappears, he moves into the first climax of the poem, the catalogue where the objects flow in upon him, where he becomes them, where a rapport
“Crossing Brooklyn Ferry”

with life is felt through the inescapably positive tone of the passage.

As we have seen, however, the mood passes, is altered; the exhilaration of the opening lines is transformed, with the sense of the original motion falling and failing, in the presence of the foundries, the darkness of the city’s streets, as if these were the objects which did not suit the visionary unity and therefore broke the sense of it. There is no question but that the last objects in the list are presented as alien and forbidding, and it would appear that Whitman is now further complicating his subject. In addition to considering the human as well as the natural object, he is to cope with the man-made, the object that is typical of his own modern industrial civilization. After the short series of comments in section 4, whose past tense and matter-of-fact tone admit the change of mood, come the questions that open section 5 and indicate further that his first approach to an understanding of the physical and objective has not been wholly successful: What is it then between us? What is the count of the scores or hundreds of years between us?

The questions are only partially rhetorical. To a certain extent they may be seen as such, suggesting that in the mysticism of the catalogue passage he has transcended time and space (and reached the modern reader). But the organization of the poem, and especially the nature of what follows in its second major division, call for further consideration of their meaning. In section 5 he begins again with the assertion that the categories of time and space do not really matter, but he develops his poem now from a totally different point of view, which in one sense denies what he has just said about them. If in the first division of the poem (secs. 1–3) he has been concerned with an attitude of what in the 1855 "Preface" he calls sympathy, he now becomes concerned with its opposite, pride; the emphasis now is upon the "I," the self (note, in this connection, his revisions of the poem which cut the "I" from four of the first five lines of the first catalogue).

In section 6, then, he is attending to the self and, with particular reference to the ugly side of identity, the "wolf, the snake, the hog." That this emphasis is productive is clear from the opening line of section 7: "Closer yet I approach you." He is closer to the "others" of the future (as they are to him) for his recognition of the ugly, the sensual, the elements in his own nature normally thought of as separating him from others. And, as these elements are of the senses, of the physical, they create a basis for sympathy for all objects, all "things," as he says: "I too had been struck from the float forever held in solution." This is, of course, a different kind of sympathy from that of the first division of the poem, where the physical nature of things or of the self was not recognized as having its own separate and unique character. The metaphor of the float held in solution, which contains the answer to the problems studied in the poem, is crude and difficult to handle, but it is central and deserves special comment.6

6 In his very important study, Walt Whitman—Poet of Science (New York, 1953), Joseph Beaver shows the exact scientific meaning Whitman intends for "float" and thus makes certain Whitman’s point here, clarifies the connotations which the metaphor had for the poet. The figure remains rather clumsy, I think, perhaps because it draws upon two sciences, but its intended meaning is now clear enough. Cf. also Professor Beaver’s excellent discussion (pp. 125 ff.) of materialism as a too frequently minimized aspect of Whitman’s thought.
As the problem of the nature of the physical, objective world is stated here, it resembles the problem of evil, as the transcendentalist might define it, but considered more specifically and realistically than was usual for this philosophy. Whitman recognized very clearly the limitations imposed by the senses, by that which gave his physical nature as well as that of the rest of the external world. The identity provided by the physical gives the sense of life, the awareness of life; but, by virtue of its physicality, it presents at the same time the problem of divisiveness and separateness and the potential for the ugly and evil. Thus evil is regarded in somewhat the same way as in the Christian myth of the Fall, though without placing the burden for the Fall upon man. In order to become man, he must assume the physical, with its limitations; and were he not to become man, the existence in which Whitman so positively believed as the end of all Life would not be possible, the spiritual itself being by itself without meaning or significance.

These implications are more fully developed elsewhere, as in “Out of the Cradle.” For the present poem, we find Whitman’s meaning expressed in the closing lines, as he addresses the “dumb, beautiful ministers”:

You have waited, you always wait, you dumb, beautiful ministers,
We receive you with free sense at last, and are insatiate henceforward,
Not you any more shall be able to foil us, or withhold yourselves from us,
We use you, and do not cast you aside—we plant you permanently within us,
We fathom you not—we love you—there is perfection in you also,
You furnish your parts toward eternity,
Great or small, you furnish your parts toward the soul.

The conclusion which he reaches in “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” is that the physical is necessary that we may learn the meaning of spiritual reality but that it must for this reason be allowed to maintain its physical and objective reality; and, though this reality may be seen to have its limitations, these are not only shared by all objects but must be accepted as inevitable accompaniments of the way in which the reality of the spirit can be made manifest. We do not gain in understanding them, or spiritual reality, if we attempt to ignore or dissolve their real existence. They must remain objects, dumb but beautiful in their ministering to us.

This would be true of all manifestations, not only those in the world of nature, but those that are man-made; thus the fires of the foundries are no longer seen as alien, or their status as real ignored, but are accepted with all their apparent limitations, like all the objective world. Thus, too, other humans are encouraged to maintain their objectivity, their individuality, in a more balanced, less extremely idealistic view of life. Paradoxically, Whitman approaches the reader of later generations more closely by insisting upon the individuality and objective reality of himself and the reader than by “transcending” this in an idealist’s unity. The final catalogue, then, includes the young men, the other humans, and the affirmative images of the city objects, with a clearly defined understanding of their status:

Expand, being than which none else is perhaps more spiritual,
Keep your places, objects than which none else is more lasting.

The over-all structure of the poem, on the basis of this interpretation, may be seen to reflect the motion of the ferry, which gives the poem its present title and a background symbol that insures its specific meaning. The poem moves between two extremes, or from one extreme to an-
other, each tested in the presence of the objects of the catalogues. Using Whitman's terminology, the first extreme may be designated as sympathy, i.e., loss of the sense of self, transcendence of it, so that the individual soul may become one with the world-soul and experience the conviction of unity in variety. When, however, the objective world is approached in this way alone, it becomes, at the close of the first catalogue, alien; it excludes the poet, who is now, for the moment, separate from it. In spite of Whitman's description of this as the approach through sympathy, it is, for the theme of this poem, clearly not adequate in itself; if it is not supplemented by its opposite, it provides no key to the significance of the external world.

The other extreme is that of pride, in Whitman's vocabulary a designation for intense, concentrated awareness of self, even though in this case the awareness is primarily of the unpleasant aspects of individuality. In preparation for his second approach to the external, he assumes an attitude directly opposed to the first one; and, as it emphasizes the physical in him, it leads him to regard the physical in other "objects" and thus to respect their identities as he respects his own (though it is also true that he respects his own more after seeing it as a link between the self and the external world). The result is, as has been indicated, the ability to sustain his ecstasy in their presence and, accepting variety in unity, to identify himself more securely with them, to achieve another sympathy now, which has its source in respect for objectivity and individuality.

As the motion of the boat is from one shore to the other, so the movement of consciousness is, characteristically for Whitman, from an extreme of awareness of soul, which is single and universal, to the other extreme of awareness of the physical, which forms the soul into self and which thus constitutes the basis for the identities of the world. Each of these provides a way of knowing the external and thus leads to a catalogue of objects seen in an ecstasy of understanding. This movement is perhaps to be felt also in the rise and fall of the tide and certainly in the oscillating motion of the imagery in the two catalogues; but it is equally important not to ignore the tone of the closing stanza. Like many of his final passages, this reflects a modification of tone, in that it suggests a more subdued level of calm resolution and assurance, which have been achieved out of the play of opposites or extremes. The poet speaks from a point of view that has achieved a proper balance between these opposites, and thus the poem moves from a sense of unity in variety to the opposed (and for the transcendentalist just as valid) sense of variety in unity, and finally to a steady acceptance of the variety on its own terms. Speaking at the close is the self, the third in Whitman's triadic version of consciousness: soul, body, and a self which is emergent from the interplay between the other two and which can mediate between them as it does here, placing the emphasis where it belongs.7

The poem, though, not only derives its general sense of balance and organization from the two long lists but also defines its particular emphasis upon the real status of the objective through what happens within them. And what happens within them has little to do with the words as

7 A recent article by Alfred H. Marks, "Whitman's Triadic Imagery," AL, XXIII (March, 1951), 99-126, shows the triadic nature of Whitman's universe and its reflection in what may be called a "dialectical technique" that is the basis for his thought and his poems. It is possible to read "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" in these terms, with the first division (secs. 1–3) as presenting a thesis (sympathy), the second (secs. 4–9) an antithesis (pride), with the synthesis expressed in the closing lines of sec. 9, which allow for an attitude that recognizes the real status of both physical and spiritual.
transcendentalist symbols, and much to do with their aesthetic unity, which is the basis for what they say. This aesthetic unity, in turn, sharpens their effectiveness as images; though they are expressive as patterns of imagery changing in one way or another, they have an individual clarity and precision seldom found in Whitman, who, except in certain of the "Drum-Taps" poems, does not often reveal a sharpness of presentation so like what we admire in Thoreau and the Imagists. The care that he took with these catalogues, where he was willing to submit to certain formal requirements, paid off in an exactness of expression that the modern reader too frequently misses in Whitman's poetry.

If the catalogues are not understood, if the reader does not respond to them as Whitman intended, the poem seems not much more than aimless, diffuse, and wandering. Its theme is sufficiently complex that this would be inevitable without careful organization and formal expression.

Defining the real and objective status of the external world, and doing so within the framework of transcendental idealism, is a kind of task which requires intellectual effort of a sort that Whitman is too seldom given credit for. But he further takes up the status not only of the object but of those objects which are the products of human society, and of man himself, who for the transcendentalist was a divine but elusive compound of spirit and matter. The close nature of Whitman's thought is not apparent until we recognize this poem as a form of aesthetic rather than philosophic, or simply ecstatic, expression and begin to study it from this point of view. Its form provides the key to its content and, what is more, gives positive evidence that the art-nature analogy, which was the basis for his poetic, was intended to suggest a great deal more than simply the spontaneous and "natural" or even the sense of abundance and variety in poetic composition.

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