

Crane's Poetic Defiance: American Identity beyond the Good Gray Poet



Ms. Bezzouh Amina ¹, Dr. Saoudi Karima ²

¹Algiers 2 University, Algeria

amina.bezzouh@gmail.com

² Algiers 2 University, Algeria

karimasaoudi3@gmail.com

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Abstract:

This article examines the poetic connection between Walt Whitman and Hart Crane through Harold Bloom's concept of "Anxiety of Influence," illustrating Crane's deliberate "misreading" of Whitman as an act of creative rebellion. Whitman, the poet of American democracy, celebrated an expansive and inclusive America, whereas Crane, writing in the context of disenchanted modernity, presented an ambivalent perspective. Crane's interaction with Whitman's poetry reveals how he simultaneously reveres and undermines Whitman's impact. Specifically, this analysis demonstrates that Crane's reframing of the Whitman-Crane relationship is not one of mere failure but a productive, anxious struggle, through which he establishes a significant new perspective on American identity. The examination illustrates how Crane's "misreading" of Whitman reflects the shifting essence of American identity and the enduring influence of literary tradition. This study fills a critical gap in scholarship by transcending broad evaluations of influence to provide a detailed, Bloomian examination of Crane's particular poetic techniques, uncovering fresh perspectives on the development of American identity and Crane's poetic defiance.

Key words: American Identity; American Modernism; The Anxiety of Influence; Hart Crane; Walt Whitman;

* Bezzouh Amina

Introduction:

The American literary tradition is preoccupied with defining national identity, with poetry playing a key role in this ongoing negotiation. Walt Whitman and Hart Crane are seminal figures in this tradition whose works capture different historical moments. Whitman celebrated a broad view of democracy and human potential, where each person's fate is linked to the whole. Crane, on the other hand, faced the changes of early 20th-century modernity and expressed a more broken and uncertain vision, struggling with spiritual fragmentation and cultural dissonance. Walt Whitman believed that the United States had the greatest potential for poetry. On the eve of the Civil War, Whitman wrote, "Of all nations the United States with veins full of poetical stuff most need poets and will doubtless have the greatest and use them the greatest" (Reynolds, 1996, p. 110). This statement suggests that the country's diverse fabric requires poets to capture and express its evolving identity. Similarly, Hart Crane believed in the authority of poetry and in its importance in the articulation of American identity. At the age of twenty-six, he decided to write a poem (*The Bridge*), aiming to "enunciate a new cultural synthesis of values in terms of our America" as he wrote to his sponsor Otto H. Kahn in 1925 (p. 424). The challenging endeavor was met with conflicting reactions. Crane embodied an exalted view of American identity, yet he was aware of the contradictions within the nation and the notion.

Research on Walt Whitman establishes his position as the seminal poet of American democratic ideals. In *American Renaissance* (1941), F.O. Matthiessen placed Whitman at the top of a uniquely American literary tradition, declaring that his free verse was the only way to channel American democracy. Critics like M. Wynn Thomas (1987) have examined the material foundations of Whitman's worldview, contending that his exaltation of industry was a direct response to nineteenth-century economic and social changes. Thomas asserts that Whitman's "I" appeals to the ordinary worker, striving for spiritual cohesion in an era of industrial capitalism. Betsy Erkkila, in *Whitman, The Political Poet* (1989), examines his poetry in the context of the Civil War, positing that his appeals for unity were a desperate, idealistic reaction to a society on the verge of disintegration. Whitman's American Dream is, thus, a yearning for a united, democratic country.

Critiques of Hart Crane, however, perceive him as a poet of fragmentation. In *The American Adam* (1955), R.W.B. Lewis identified Crane as a prominent figure in the "Party of Irony," writers who had abandoned the naive optimism of their forebears. Lewis perceives Crane's struggle to complete *The Bridge* as indicative of the modern artist's challenge in reconciling the idealized American

story with harsh realities. Sherman Paul, in *Hart's Bridge* (1972), analyzes the epic as a spiritual odyssey, arguing that Crane's inability to create a unifying story illustrates the spiritual emptiness of the machine age.

Despite the extensive existing scholarship on the two poets, a significant research gap persists in the intricate application of Harold Bloom's revisionary ratios to the particular poetic techniques utilized by Hart Crane in his engagement with Walt Whitman. Previous studies have frequently compared these poets, but they typically offer broad evaluations of influence instead of a detailed analysis of Crane's creative "misreadings." This study seeks to address that gap by providing a detailed, Bloomian analysis that reveals the distinctive ways in which Crane redefined American identity and poetic tradition, transcending a simplistic portrayal of Whitman as Crane's unfulfilled predecessor.

Methodology

This study employs Harold Bloom's theory of the Anxiety of Influence as its primary analytical framework, offering a profoundly psychological model of literary history. Specifically, this methodology involves a close textual analysis of selected poems by Whitman and Crane, adopting a comparative approach that foregrounds their specific linguistic and formal choices. Bloom's theory contends that poets fight a colossal, often unconscious battle against their most revered predecessors. Bloom transforms conventional ideas of influence into a dramatic struggle. Strong poets, according to Bloom, must imaginatively "misread" their predecessors to make room for their uniqueness. He contends that this "anxiety of influence" turns literary history into a battleground of conflicting imaginations. Fundamentally, Bloom's theory opposes the Romantic notion of the poet as a solitary genius. He asserts that all poets, particularly "strong poets" or "ephebes", are unavoidably "latecomers" to a tradition rife with greatness. They discover that their poetic "fathers" (figures like Wordsworth, Milton, or Walt Whitman) seem to have claimed the most potent subjects. A deep "anxiety" is induced by this realization: the fear that one has nothing new to say. According to Bloom, the latecomer must fight a "battle for imaginative survival" to overcome this creative paralysis (**Bloom, 1973, p. 5**). This fight is waged using intricate defensive strategies he calls "revisionary ratios."

This study seeks to answer the fundamental question: Through the lens of Bloom's revisionary ratios, what alternative visions of American identity does Crane offer, and how does his poetic project challenge Whitman's fundamental narratives of American progress, democracy, and unity? Previous research juxtaposed Whitman with Crane, typically depicting Crane as Whitman's unfulfilled heir; this study, however, employs Harold Bloom's "revisionary

ratios" from *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973) to move beyond a general understanding of impact to a meticulous analysis of Crane's specific poetic techniques. This study demonstrates that Crane's relationship with Whitman was not merely one of failure but a dynamic endeavour of creative "misreading". The article is composed of three sections. The first is dedicated to Whitman's view of the American identity, American democracy, and his poetic techniques, while the second focuses on Crane's version. The article culminates in the discussion of Crane's poetic defiance in the third section, where his vision and poetic techniques are discussed.

1. Walt Whitman: The Prophetic Voice of Democratic America

Walt Whitman, America's "Good Gray Poet," a revolutionary figure in American literary history, created a poetic style that broke away from the strict rules of meter and rhyme common in his era. This style gave voice to a new democratic nation. His lifelong, ever-changing masterpiece, *Leaves of Grass*, presented a vision that was radically inclusive, unwaveringly believed in the sanctity of the individual, and firmly trusted the promise of progress. Whitman's most significant innovation was his mastery of free verse. This was not a mere stylistic choice; it was a deep philosophical statement. For him, poetic form was the perfect expression of his democratic beliefs. It was a flexible and wide vessel that could hold the country's limitless energy and inherent contradictions while also expressing a shared American identity.

1.1. The Expansive Self: A Universe in a Single Voice

At the heart of Whitman's poetic project lies the construction of the pronoun "I," a persona that is both intimate and universal. In his foundational poem, "Song of Myself," he establishes this radical identification from the very first lines, declaring that his celebration of self is an act in which all can partake, for every atom of his being is equally a part of the reader (Whitman, 1855/1982). This is at once an ego-centric gesture, yet it is a revolutionary claim of democracy and inclusion. By dissolving the traditional boundaries between the self and the other, the individual and the collective, Whitman's poetic "I" becomes an open invitation. It transforms the poem into a shared consciousness, a democratic space that welcomes a multiplicity of voices. It validates the sanctity of everyday life and the common man, elevating the "I" through its capacity for empathy and absorption. Whitman's claim to "contain multitudes" is the central tenet of this vision, suggesting a selfhood that thrives on contradiction and finds its truth in the synthesis of diverse experiences. He becomes the voice of the voiceless, the body that feels the suffering and joy of others, thereby mirroring the ideal of America

itself: *E pluribus unum*, one from many. This poetic strategy is a powerful political act, arguing for a nation built not on exclusion or hierarchy, but on the radical belief that every individual perspective contributes to the richness of the whole.

Whitman's poetry is suffused with optimism toward technological advancement and territorial expansion, capturing the ambitious spirit of nineteenth-century America. Unlike many of his contemporaries who viewed industrialization with suspicion, Whitman saw the engines of progress not as threats to the natural world but as new, powerful expressions of human vitality and divine will. In "To a Locomotive in Winter," he addresses the machine with the reverence of a prayer, composing a "recitative" for its powerful, rhythmic movements and celebrating its physical form—its dark, cylindrical body and the gleam of its brass and steel—as an object of sublime, mythic beauty (Whitman, 1982). The locomotive is thus transfigured from a mere piece of machinery into a symbol of American industrial dynamism, a modern deity worthy of poetic worship.

This romanticized optimism extends to the country's westward expansion. In "Pioneers! O Pioneers!," Whitman makes an impassioned call to action, asking America's "tan-faced children" to take their weapons and axes and march ahead in disciplined, eager order (Whitman, 1982, p.194). The pioneers are represented as heroic agents of destiny, rather than conquerors or settlers in a strictly material sense; their trip across the continent is portrayed as a spiritual undertaking, part of humanity's vast, evolving story. In Whitman's broad perspective, clearing woods and installing railroad tracks were acts of creation, connecting the country's geographical expansion with a profound type of spiritual growth. America, for him, was not merely a country; it was a dynamic, forward-thinking force fated to realize humanity's full potential.

1.2. Poetic Techniques: Form as Democratic Expression

The relationship between Walt Whitman's message and medium makes his poetry revolutionary. His lyrical techniques power his democratic idea, not just decoration. Whitman created an organic form that reflected America's diversity by breaking traditional verse's metrical and structural hierarchies. In his 1855 Preface to *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman famously argued that a nation as dynamic and unprecedented as the United States needed a poet who could break free from old-world restraints and develop a poetic form that matched its expansive, energetic spirit. His use of free verse, the poetic catalog, and unique cadence were meant to express the nation's soul.

Whitman's greatest revolt was free verse. He liberated poetry from aristocratic conventions by discarding rhyme systems and iambic meter. He

replaced it with lengthy, flowing lines based on breath and speech rhythms, creating a voice that was direct, intimate, and intuitive. He equated formal liberation with political liberation. With its changing length and cadence, the Whitmanesque line could cover a landscape or focus on a single grass blade. This flexibility allowed him to write poetry where no subject was too great or mundane; every voice could find its place without being forced into a structure. Form became an assertion of liberation.

His literary catalog mastery was key to this new style. These enormous listings of people, vocations, locations, and experiences are more than inventories. They are key to achieving his democratic inclusion goal. In "I Hear America Singing," Whitman depicts a chorus of laborers—the mechanic, the carpenter, the mason, the mother—each singing their own tune to the nation's symphony. The poem's iterative, parallel structure unites differences by recognizing each worker's dignity and contribution to the whole. The catalog illustrates *E pluribus unum* by showing how a national identity is woven from several strands. Whitman convinces the reader to acknowledge the nation's vast, complex reality by overwhelming them with variety.

Finally, the unique musicality of Whitman's verse, driven by anaphora and syntactic parallelism, provides a uniting, almost incantatory beat. His expansive poetry is united by this cadence, which gives it coherence and forward drive. Whitman may develop his vision line by line, image by image, into a colossal testimonial to the American democratic experiment in this natural and divinely designed structure. Whitman seemed to write about democracy and, in the process, built a democratic poetic form.

2. Hart Crane: An Anxious Modernist of Fragmented America

In sharp contrast to Whitman's expansive optimism, Hart Crane wrote amidst the dislocations of modernity, offering a counterpoint to Whitman's vision. His poetry grapples with fragmentation, alienation, and spiritual uncertainty characteristic of the early 20th century. Influenced by the catastrophic aftermath of World War I and the rapid urban-industrial transformation of America, Crane's vision is marked by an ambivalent engagement with progress and identity.

2.1. Identity: Fragmentation and Mythic Quest

Crane's poetic subject is often fractured, navigating a disjointed modern landscape that resists the seamless integration celebrated by Whitman. His epic poem *The Bridge* (1930) aspires to mythologize America anew and, in the

process, exposes the inherent tensions of identity amid modernity's disintegrated realities. The "Proem: To Brooklyn Bridge" exemplifies this dialectic. While the bridge symbolizes technological achievement and human aspiration, Crane tempers awe with unease in his grand description of the bridge; he also invokes the tired office workers and a man's suicide (Crane, 2006). The expression "chained bay waters" metaphorically constrains the notion of freedom, suggesting that technological progress is inseparable from limitations and latent violence. This ambivalence pervades Crane's urban imagery, contrasting sharply with Whitman's harmonious natural settings. "The Tunnel" section further exposes the psychological ups and downs of modern urban life. The tunnel, a symbol of progress, becomes a site of descent and disorientation. The fragmented imagery and unsettling tone evoke a modernist aesthetic of alienation and existential anxiety (Perloff, 1991).

Notably, no poem exuded more ambivalence towards progress than "Cape Hatteras"; it is where the past and present of American identity collide. Crane invokes the name his predecessor, Walt Whitman, engaging him in a dialogue that is at once an homage and a desperate interrogation. While the poem is framed as an ode, it functions more profoundly as an act of defiance against the foundational tenets of Whitman's optimistic, expansive, and unified vision of America. As literary critic Thomas A. Vogler (1966) notes, Crane's engagement with Whitman is not one of simple imitation but a "struggle for poetic identity" (p. 200). Through the crucible of technological warfare and spiritual disillusionment, Crane's "Cape Hatteras" dismantles Whitman's democratic vista, recasting the American sky not as a symbol of limitless potential but as a fractured space of both transcendent flight and catastrophic failure.

Whitman's vision of America was fundamentally horizontal and inclusive. His open roads, sprawling landscapes, and democratic catalogs created a sense of boundless, terrestrial unity. He saw progress, particularly in the form of the locomotive, as a force that bound the nation together, a "type of the modern—emblem of motion and power — pulse of the continent" (Whitman, 1982, p. 362). Crane, however, deliberately shifts the nation's axis from the horizontal to the vertical. His chosen symbol of modernity is not the earthbound train but the airplane, a machine promising an even greater transcendence by conquering the sky. The section opens by invoking the Wright brothers' historic flight, a moment of pure, Whitmanesque aspiration: "Man hears himself an engine in a cloud." This is the dream of progress, the belief in humanity's power to harness motion.

Crane, nonetheless, immediately complicates this accomplishment. The sky, once a symbol of divine potential, becomes a theater for the horrors of

modern warfare. The airplane, the very engine of Whitman's futuristic dream, is repurposed as a herald of death in World War I. Crane writes of "the nasal whine of power" that "whips a new universe... / Where spouting pillars spoor the evening sky." This is Crane's first and most profound act of defiance: he takes Whitman's faith in technological progress and exposes its terrifying underside. As R.W.B. Lewis (1955) argues, Crane's generation was forced to confront the "actual world" that had betrayed the "ideal world" of their predecessors (p. 28). While Whitman perceived machines as vehicles of creation, Crane, reflecting on the devastation of the twentieth century, describes them as agents of destruction. In the new fragmented reality, the American goal of harmonious advancement is exposed as a lamentably naive illusion. This disillusionment forces Crane into a confrontation with Whitman, whom he addresses with a mixture of reverence and desperate questioning. Arguably, the very act of summoning him is an admission of failure. Crane's plea reveals a deep-seated anxiety that Whitman's vision, for all its grandeur, may no longer be sufficient.

Furthermore, Crane defies Whitman's vision of a unified self, seamlessly integrated with the collective. Whitman's poetic "I" was a confident, all-embracing entity, capable of containing multitudes. Crane's poetic self, in contrast, is fractured, anxious, and overwhelmed. His plea to Whitman is not from a position of strength, but of profound vulnerability: "My hand / in yours, Walt Whitman— / so." This gesture of reaching for Whitman's hand is a poignant admission of his own inability to bear the weight of this new America alone. It is an act of seeking shelter from the very storm that Whitman's optimism helped unleash. The self-reliant American individual of Whitman's poetry has been replaced by Crane's isolated and questioning artist, struggling to find his footing in a world spiraling out of control.

Crane makes a desperate attempt to associate with the Romantic faith that barely has a place in his world: "O Walt! – Ascensions of thee hover in me now/ As thou as junctions elegiac there of speed/ With vast eternity, dost wield the rebound seed!" (p. 58). Crane calls to Whitman yearningly professing that the chance of American identity to be reborn lies within him. Simultaneously, he claims Whitman's shadow to "hover" in him, thus claiming a position within the American literary tradition and, most importantly, a voice of his own. Ultimately, "Cape Hatteras" concludes not with a confident reaffirmation of Whitman's vision, but with a deep longing towards his vision, coupled with a sense of impossibility. As critic Sherman Paul (1965) suggests, Crane's effort is to "force a new synthesis" where the machine can be re-spiritualized, but the effort itself betrays the anxiety behind it (p. 112). He defies Whitman not by rejecting his

spiritual quest, but by insisting on its necessity in a world that seems to have lost all spiritual grounding.

In "Cape Hatteras," Hart Crane builds a bridge to Walt Whitman only to reveal the immense chasm that separates their Americas. He takes up Whitman's core tenets, such as progress, unity, and the expansive self, and holds them up to the harsh light of the twentieth century, revealing their cracks and fissures. By transforming the celebratory symbol of the airplane into an emblem of war and by recasting the confident poet as a vulnerable seeker, Crane stages a profound defiance. He argues, through the very structure and struggle of the poem, that Whitman's vision, while beautiful and foundational, cannot survive the trauma of modernity intact. It must be broken down, questioned, and painstakingly reassembled into something new that can withstand the ever-changing realities of modernity.

2.2. Crane's Modernist Form in: The Syntax of Anxiety

Hart Crane's most radical act of defiance takes place in his formal techniques, even though his thematic dialogue with Walt Whitman reveals a deep spiritual and historical chasm. Crane departs significantly from Whitman's approachable, fluid free verse, creating a poetic language with esoteric references, broken syntax, and dense symbolism that necessitates, as critic Marjorie Perloff (1991) has argued, a very active kind of reader engagement. The fragmented consciousness of contemporary experience is directly reflected in these techniques, which go beyond simple artistic flourishes. In the crucible of "Cape Hatteras," Crane's intricate and frequently confusing style defies the straightforward, cohesive interpretations that Whitman's verse so easily provided, becoming a poetic representation of twentieth-century anxieties.

This modernist vision is primarily expressed through Crane's syntax. Crane's lines are often compressed, elliptical, and syntactically inverted, requiring the reader to navigate layers of ambiguity, in contrast to Whitman's, which frequently unfold with the declarative confidence of a prophet. The intellectual and spiritual challenges of his time are reflected in this structural difficulty. Take, for example, his description of the airplane, the main, conflicting symbol of the section. When he characterizes the sky as a place of both technological wonder and terror, the syntax becomes even more difficult: "The nasal whine of power whips a new universe... / Where spouting pillars spoor the evening sky." A startling image of warplanes tracking their prey across a wounded sky is produced by the violent repurposing of the verb "spoor," which comes from the hunting word meaning to track by scent. This is a language of confusion rather than celebration. By slowing down and unravelling the intricate web of meaning, the

reader is obliged to feel the cognitive dissonance of a world in which progress and destruction have become horrifyingly entwined.

Furthermore, Whitman's more straightforward, emblematic imagery contrasts sharply with Crane's use of complex, multi-layered symbolism. Whitman views the locomotive as a "type of the modern," and the grass as a representation of democratic life. Seldom are Crane's symbols so consistent. One of the best examples is the sky in "Cape Hatteras." It is the scene of aerial dogfights, "Lead-perforated fuselage, escutcheoned wings" preceded by the heroic, Whitman-like ascent of the Wright brothers, "Man hears himself an engine in the clouds". The symbol has contradictions of its own. The conflicting images imply that the act of obtaining this new, contemporary perspective is intrinsically harmful. The promise is viewed through a prism of suffering and destruction. In contrast to Whitman's unambiguous symbols of solidarity, Crane's are tense within and difficult to resolve, representing a society in which every ideal is tainted by its violent, corrupt equivalent.

Lastly, Crane purposefully makes the reader's journey more difficult with his allusions. Although his letter to Whitman is a complex literary work in and of itself, it is interwoven with other, less well-known allusions. He refers to "sibylline voices" and uses place names like Hatteras, Kitty Hawk, and the Dakotas that have both historical significance and a mythical, personal meaning. This intricate network of allusions -historical, Christian, classical, and intensely personal- creates an essentially anti-populist poetic texture that opposes Whitman's democratic project of instantly-accessible poetry. Crane's poetry requires the reader to engage in an intellectual and spiritual struggle, a "work" of interpretation that reflects the poet's own quest for meaning in a fractured world, rather than allowing them to share in a common, easily understood experience. Crane establishes his independence from the very different, more hopeful world that Whitman's poetry had once promised by using this challenging and dense poetic form to create a language appropriate to the anxieties of his time.

3. Crane's "Anxiety of Influence": The Democratic Sublime and the Burden of Prophecy

Harold Bloom's "Anxiety of Influence" theory offers a lens through which one can see the artistic challenges faced by writers who take on their illustrious predecessors. As the imposing "father figure" of American poetry in this context, Walt Whitman's democratic sublime looms large over his successors. Nowhere is this struggle more dramatic than in the "Cape Hatteras" section of *The Bridge*, where Hart Crane's epic ambition demanded a confrontation with this legacy. Crane uses a few calculated "misreadings" to create his own poetic identity in the

poem, which is a frantic, conflicted conversation with Whitman. By analyzing "Cape Hatteras" using Bloom's revisionary ratios—*clinamen*, *tessera*, *kenosis*, and *daemonization*—we can observe how Crane both respects and undermines the vision of his forerunner in order to present a new, more fragmented American prophecy.

The primary and most powerful of these strategies in "Cape Hatteras" is *clinamen*, the corrective "swerve" away from the precursor's foundational beliefs. The locomotive, which unites the country in peaceful, industrial unity, represents Whitman's vision of horizontal, terrestrial progress. By moving the poem's axis to the vertical and promoting the airplane as the new emblem of American ambition, Crane makes a significant reversal. At first glance, this appears to be a straightforward modernization of Whitman's optimism, a celebration of humanity's ability to cross a new frontier: "Man hears himself an engine in the clouds." However, this swerve becomes a tragic correction; Crane pulls the airplane from its heroic invention context and plunges it into the mechanized horror of World War I. Whitman sees the sky as a place of boundless potential, but Crane sees it as a theater of death, where "spouting pillars spoor the evening sky" and "the nasal whine of power whips a new universe." (Crane, 2006, p. 58) This is a profound misreading of Whitman's faith in technology. Crane argues that the same forces Whitman praised have resulted in industrialized slaughter rather than unity, exposing the grotesque nature of industrial powers. The swerve is not only from train to plane, but also from hopeful prophecy to historical trauma.

From this detour, Crane performs *tessera*, an act of "completion" that expands the vision of the precursor into a more intricate and new reality. By including the very elements that threatened Whitman's America, Crane attempts to paint a more comprehensive picture of it, rather than merely rejecting it. He applies Whitman's spirit of "pioneering" to the aviators, the new pioneers of the sky. However, he adds ambiguity and darkness to this image as he finishes it. He addresses Whitman with his first name, asking if his expansive vision can encompass this new, violent world. By including the variable of contemporary warfare, Crane is essentially "completing" the question of America's fate and carrying Whitman's project of spiritual inquiry into a century his predecessor could not have foreseen.

Kenosis, or the "emptying" or humbling of the poetic self in respect to the precursor, results from this intense engagement. Crane's poetic persona contrasts sharply with Whitman's self-assured, all-encompassing "I" throughout "Cape Hatteras." Crane's voice conveys a sense of vulnerability, anxiety, and urgent

need. He is a supplicant, overtaken by the "howling protest" of the contemporary world, rather than a prophet marching boldly across the continent. His direct address to his predecessor, "My hand / in yours, Walt Whitman— / so," is the most moving example of this self-emptying. This is the gesture of a disciple asking his master for strength and direction, not that of an equal. Crane strategically humbles himself by presenting Whitman as the mythic, steady spiritual father and himself as the vulnerable, inquisitive poet. By stripping himself of Whitman's prophetic authority, he creates a new role for the contemporary poet as a sympathetic, suffering observer of a lost world, rather than an all-knowing seer.

Lastly, Crane attempts the boldest of Bloom's ratios: *daemonization*, which is the process of accessing a "counter-sublime" or a power outside the precursor's sphere of influence. Crane seeks a new, stronger force that can restore the fallen sky after demonstrating the failure of Whitman's optimistic humanism in the face of contemporary conflict. The airplane transformed into a saviour of sorts, and his daemon is a techno-spiritual hybrid, invoking a mystical and nearly violent spirituality that is uniquely non-Whitmanian. Crane seeks a power that can transcend the trauma of war by evoking the rebellious, daemonic figure of Byron and by presenting the airplane as a messianic force. This is his counter-sublime: a fierce, ecstatic, and machine-driven ascent rather than the soft, democratic unfolding of the soul. Appealing to a new and more dangerous god to address the challenges of a new and more dangerous age is a desperate and painful attempt to reclaim the prophetic voice.

This complex application of rewriting techniques converts "Cape Hatteras" into a powerful representation of the dread of authority. Crane's poem serves as a bridge to Whitman, illuminating the vast, stormy divide between their two Americas; it embodies both a fierce defiance and a heartfelt respect. Crane establishes a unique voice (appropriate for the fragmented, daunting, and beautiful truths of contemporary existence) by diverging from, completing, subordinating himself to, and ultimately aspiring to surpass his lyrical predecessor.

Conclusion: Legacy and the Dialectic of American Poetic Tradition

The comparative analysis of Walt Whitman and Hart Crane through Bloom's "Anxiety of Influence" uncovers a profound dialectic central to the growth of American poetry. Whitman's democratic sublimity, marked by optimism, inclusion, and formal inventiveness, created a core vision of American identity that endures, whereas Crane's modernist approach, imbued with ambivalence and complexity, mirrors the divided realities of a swiftly evolving society and the obstacles to a unified identity. Crane's intentional

misinterpretations serve as a crucial act of creative self-definition, balancing the dichotomy of homage and defiance. It asserts that Crane's "swerve" into urban despondency, his "completion" of the industrial milieu, his "emptying" of cosmic breadth for intimacy, and his "daemonization" via the myth of Atlantis were intentional artistic choices. His utilization of intricate symbolism and syntactic disjunction contrasts with Whitman's approachable free verse, highlighting the inseparable connection between form and perspective. This approach reconceptualizes Crane not as a tragic poet who fell short of Whitman but as a formidable poet who established a significant perspective on American identity by critically engaging with the legacy of his predecessor.

The rich literary heritage of the United States profoundly influences the discussion about American identity and the concept of progress. A dynamic interplay between rejection of and reverence towards the writings of authors such as Walt Whitman and Hart Crane persists, where poets struggle with the influence of their predecessors, mirroring Bloom's concept of the "anxiety of influence." Crane's complex symbolism and modernist sensibilities question and reinterpret Whitman's legacy of American possibility, which was established by his broad vision of unity and democracy. Together, their poetry creates a dialogue that never stops, illustrating the conflict between tradition and change, tracing the development of American ideals, and exploring new aesthetic horizons. In addition to reflecting individual artistic endeavours, this literary development also shows how poetry both reflects and shapes the nation's continuous quest for progress and self-awareness. These findings not only clarify the original contributions of Crane's poetic project but also offer new insights into the enduring power of literary dialogue in shaping national identity and aesthetic evolution.

End notes

¹ I borrowed this title from William D. O'Connor, who wrote a powerful defence of Whitman's poetry, published in 1866.

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