

Post-discussion thoughts on Walt Whitman's "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry"

I was very happy to share one of my favorite poems with the group. The speaker of "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" is direct and surprisingly confident in his address to the reader. This feature challenges the boundaries of the text, and so fits into our ongoing discussion of reader-text relations and the dangers of reading without awareness. The speaker presents himself as a transcendent being with the purpose of winning over the reader. What makes the speaker more persuasive is his (paradoxical) humility, if one accepts it. Like the lulling waves that he often describes, the speaker flows in confidence and ebbs in humility. He draws us with the claim that transcendence is within the reach of every person. This rhythm is effective on some readers, but not on all. Discussing "Brooklyn Ferry" with the group helped me realize that a large part of the poem's power is sensual and emotional. The poem's rational argument, natural transcendence, should be examined objectively: perhaps it is wrong, or perhaps it is only right at a certain time and place. I for one realized that I embraced the content of the poem without full awareness. One conclusion I draw from this is that the boundary between reader and text loses clarity when the reader stops being wary and prudent. It is perhaps desirable to be carefree sometimes, but there should be other moments during which the reader is sharply aware of the nature and limits of texts. If he chooses to, a reader should always be able to check the content of any text for its truth-quality. This will be more difficult in some texts than in others, but should be possible always. One should know how to find the boundaries of any text. The reader's convictions must also be clear.

The discussion made me question my approach as a reader, and made me aware of the importance of distinguishing sensual and emotional effect from truth-content.