American Limbo

The Decline of Spirituality in the Early Twentieth Century

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IT IS THE IMAGE of the flapper on the dance floor swaying to the beat of a jazz piece, or perhaps cruising through the streets in a brand new automobile, that usually accompanies mention of the 1920's in America. That the decade was labeled "The Roaring Twenties" indicated the kind of radical development the country was undergoing at the time. Not only was the invisible mechanical force of Henry Adams' dynamo in full swing with the incorporation of the telephone, the refrigerator, and the automobile into everyday life; but the fields of communication and entertainment had developed as well. Motion pictures had become a favorite preoccupation of the public and the so-called "Golden Age of rat broadcasting" had begun. Charles Lindbergh had flown solo across the Atlantic. Suffrage had been extended to women (Handlin 11 8e).

It was a time of change and of possibility, but was paradoxically one of disillusionment, disconnection, and disappointment as well.

The sense of promise and opportunity during the 1920's was offset by the fact that mankind had just opened its eyes to the horrors of mechanized trench warfare during the First World War. People had begun to question the ideologies they had formerly believed in without hesitation. Community life, the sanctity of the family unit, and morality in general began to disintegrate in the face of the sweeping momentum of progress. This was a golden age for technology and human achievement, but it was one for

bootlegging, gang wars, and juvenile misconduct as well (Handlin 11 8e). Despite the advantages of economic and technological progress, some negative aspects of life during the turn-of-the-century had lingered and been compounded by industrialization and urbanization: the loss of confidence in formerly unshakable institutions like the government, the decline of faith in a higher, all-powerful entity, and the brutalization of man.

Walt Whitman, in his *Democratic Vistas* (published around fifty years prior to the beginning of the Roaring Twenties), had already expressed some concern for a society he felt was heading towards ruin:

> ...the highly artificial and materialistic bases of modern civilisation, with the corresponding arrangements and methods of living, the force-infusion of intellect alone, the depraving influence of riches just as much as poverty, the absence of all high ideals in character - with the 1 g series of tendencies, shapings, which few are strong enough to resist, and which now seem, with steam-engine speed, to be everywhere turning out the generations of humanity like uniform iron casting... must either be confronted and met by at least an equally subtle and tremendous force- infusion for purposes of spiritualisation...or else our modern civilisation, with all its improvements, is in vain, and we are on the road to a destiny, a status, equivalent, in its real world, to that of the fabled damned. (qtd. in Lee 8)

He had already foreseen the American limbo his compatriots would experience when mechanization and expansion were in full force and had taken their toll on society. This artificial, immoral "cast-iron existence" greatly resembles the setting of "The Hollow Men," "Chaplinesque," and "Black Tambourine."

The following poems reflect the American reaction to the massive, rapid changes it was undergoing in the early twentieth century. Robert Frost, in "Once by the Pacific," depicts the nature of this change, emphasizing its violence and rapacity, while T.S. Eliot, in "The Hollow Men," and Hart Crane, in "Chaplinesque" and "Black Tambourine," depict the American response to the upheavals going on in politics, economics, and culture. Eliot and Crane present their personas as dealing with life in a gritty urban limbo in which man's reality threatens to become a meaningless living death. Eliot's personas

succumb to this limbo and sleepwalk through life, while Crane's personas cling to the possibility of a world beyond the limbo, a transcendental concept that recalls several key figures in Western literature. Plato, for instance, believed in the divine origin of the soul, and that a man immersed in the realm of imperfect forms could only see glimpses of that divine origin, the realm of perfect ideals. He claimed that we all came from this latter world, and that we were born into an inferior imitation in which everything we perceived was only a reflection of a more perfect form that existed elsewhere. The Romantic poet William Wordsworth reiterated these beliefs in his *Ode: Intimations of Immortality*. In it, the persona laments that fact that he is no longer able to see anything in the "celestial light" which, in childhood, used to characterize his daily life. He regrets that he got bogged down in life's "weddings, festivals, mournings and funerals," that the world has, besides having lost its beauty, become smaller and is closing in on him like the walls of a prison. Without the aforementioned "celestial light," he finds himself in a dull limbo-like existence. However, he finds hope in his intimations of immortality: the "obstinate questionings of sense and outward things, failings from us, vanishings." What keeps him hopeful is his recollection, however vague, of something more beautiful that exists elsewhere (Wordsworth 287-92).

Although the characters of both T.S. Eliot and Hart Crane are suspended in limbo, the belief in the existence of a "better world" of absolute beauty - what the term "spirituality" will refer to for the scope of this paper - is what separates the latter from the former.

The atmosphere of chaotic cultural upheaval was the facet of modern life that Robert Frost chose to portray when he wrote "Once by the Pacific" in 1926. The poem's first image is one of violence - the water "shattering" against the shore. This, along with the phrase "ocean- water broken" speaks of the impact of the sea's attack. However, the unending battery of waves is not only relentless; it is also rapacious, hungering after the land: the water thinks "of doing something to the shore the water never did to land before." Frost also employs personification to portray the water as alive and deliberate. That the waves are allowed to "look" and "think" highlights the sea's intent. Here, it is not just a force of nature; it is a sinister presence out to victimize innocent prey. This is further emphasized in lines ten to twelve — "It looked as if a night of dark intent was coming, and not only a night, an age. Someone

had better be prepared for rage" — which imply that the imminent force is evil and means to do harm or to unleash its "rage" onto a weaker entity. The final two lines reveal, ominously, the grave consequences of the ocean's intrusion into the land.

The tone of the poem is dark, raucous, and violent. Such was the American condition. Wave after wave of development - new media, a boom in the economy, and advances in technology - bombarded the American landscape as relentlessly and as forcefully as the sea does the shore in Frost's poem. Too many sacrifices had been made for the sake of progress. Not only had the gap between the rich and the poor widened, even bigger and more catastrophic change was on the horizon (the Great Depression would occur at the end of the decade). Man had gotten absorbed into the industrialized, technologically-advanced, jazz-age jungle and had consequently lost his morality, his humanity, and his sense of purpose. Change (or progress, more specifically), if seen as the equivalent of Frost's menacing ocean, was wreaking havoc on society.

"Misty din" is a synaesthetic image that serves to enhance the sense of havoc by obscuring both the visual and the aural perception of the persona. The commotion caused by the violent crashing of the waves makes it easy for one to get lost and disoriented. The shore itself would conceivably be overcome if it weren't "lucky in being backed by cliff, the cliff in being backed by continent." The sheer volume of the land's defenses is another testament to the power of the sea; only the continent can contend with the ocean. The presence of a certain solid foundation is crucial if one is to avoid getting swept up in the momentum of the waves.

This foundation is what the subjects of T.S. Eliot's poem lack. In "The Hollow Men," the poetic personas (the "we") float around, dead in life, devoid of any spiritual anchor (in Frost's poem, the continent backing the shoreline). Eliot describes lost beings that are so immersed in the innovations and novelties of the modern age that they have lost their own souls. The poem addresses the theme of meaninglessness. That the word "we" is used suggests Eliot's inclusion of all humanity - including the reader and the poet himself - in the scope of the poem. His collective persona comprises a set of zombie-like drifters moving within a kind of limbo rendered in images of barrenness and death, a montage of spent places in which their actions mean nothing:

"...quiet and meaningless as wind in dry grass or rats' feet over broken glass in our dry cellar." There is nothing remotely human about these straw men; there is certainly no instance of "obstinate questioning," of itching for an escape from their arid world. Even their physicality is inconsequential (they are simply "shape without form, shade without color"). Since their lives are pointless (they are, because of their moral paralysis in the twelfth line, literally unable to act), so are their deaths.

In Part II, Eliot illustrates the disgrace with which they regard heaven, or "death's dream kingdom." They see the difference between their hollow selves and eyes that are full of sunlight. They are ashamed to face the beings in heaven (probably because they know that in life, they never had enough faith to make the simplest moral decision), and not only believe they will never attain it, but also refuse to approach it: "No nearer - not that final meeting in the twilight kingdom."

So, they will remain drifters forever, unanchored by any sense of morality. They are neither good nor evil; they simply exist, but barely do so. They are not likely to be remembered by anyone from either realm, especially given the way in which they leave the world: "Not with a bang but a whimper." They fizzle, unnoticed, out of the living world and into the afterlife, their deaths only extensions of the limbo in which they used to live. They remain confined to purgatory, in between worlds, gathered together rather pathetically ("...we grope together and avoid speech") under the shadow of "this broken jaw of our lost kingdoms," a picture of absolute desolation. They await a hope — the "multifoliate rose" — the will, in all likelihood, never come. Even in the afterlife, their existence is characterized by useless action: "Lips that would kiss form prayers to broken stone." Here, the worship of obsolete gods has replaced what might have been the worthwhile experience of romance.

Nothingness, in other words, is their eternal fate, and the fate in store for those who in the context of modern America had succumbed to the power of the dynamo, as the hollow men have. Man has already lost his soul to the dynamo and is trapped in yet another monotonous, meaningless existence — this time in Purgatory — repeating all that is left of his spirituality in fragments that mimic the motion of the dynamo's gyrating blades: "For Thine is/ Life is/ For Thine is the/ *This is the way the world ends/ This the way the world ends....*"

Eliot saw that Walt Whitman's cast-iron existence was being realized in his contemporary society: in the "misty din" of the swiftly developing world, with all the innovations that had suddenly come about, it was becoming increasingly easy for the American to lose himself in the hustle of his modern lifestyle, looming fixated on trivial urban concerns rather than anything remotely spiritual, and for society to begin to consist of nothing more than these shells of men. Without a solid spiritual foundation — an aspect of soul that takes one's concerns beyond the demands of everyday life — it was likely that the unsupported "shore" would be swallowed up by the "great waves." Eliot tried to articulate this very real possibility. The loss of faith illustrated above corresponds to the sudden decline of morals in American society that made many of its members feel alienated. In fact, his previous work *The Wasteland* had, similarly, "dramatized the weakened will to live in the modern world" and articulated "the wounded modern spirit" (Perkins 14). He was concerned with mass dehumanization; the poem, like *The Wasteland*, presents "a collective death in life" (Perkins 19).

While Eliot's persona has been completely absorbed by an extremely progressive urban society, the personas in Hart Crane's poems react somewhat differently. Crane's characters find themselves in situations similar to those in Eliot's poem — worlds full of meaningless objects and places, of oppressive conditions — but Crane ends his poems on a more hopeful note. His personas have not completely given themselves over to the limbo wrought by rapid (or rabid) progress. They manage to hang on to something spiritual that enables them to continue to see beauty, even in the metallic, immoral urban jungle.

In "Chaplinesque," we see the same meaningless existence threatening to overcome the persona, here, another collective "we" on the verge of assuming the moral paralysis of Eliot's hollow men. No major decisions, spiritual or otherwise, are necessary in a life completely driven by arbitrary forces, "random consolations as the wind deposits…" The idea here recalls the doctrine of determinism. Human will proves obsolete in the face of a more powerful force: chance. The "meek adjustments" man has made to his life have and will continue to suffice, since he already has everything he needs in his too ample pockets." That he has ceased to strive makes him less human. As in Eliot, Crane's use of a collective persona implicates all humanity — the readers and the poet included — in this brutalizing complacency (Hazo 37).

At this point, however, Crane introduces the source of the persona's redemption; the equivalent of Eliot's "the multifoliate rose" is not out of his reach, but is instead sitting right on his doorstep. Suddenly, in a wave of compassion that contrasts sharply with the nonchalance of the first stanza, the persona feels the need to risk his own life to secure a kitten from the brutal hustle of the street: "Poetry, the human feelings, 'the kitten,' is so crowded out of the humdrum, rushing, mechanical scramble of today that the man who would preserve them must duck and camouflage for dear life to keep them or keep himself from annihilation" (Crane, qtd. in Hazo 37). This need, according to Hazo, is all that keeps the persona from being eaten up by the monotonous "humdrum" of progress. The kitten becomes a manifestation of beauty in the midst of ruin, a symbol of the "things which beguile our affection and thus implicate us in their plight by an appeal to our sympathy and love. It stands for everything which forces us to be 'human'"(37).

This encounter with beauty now enables the persona to fight off the "inevitable thumb that slowly chafes its puckered index toward us." Hazo identifies the adversities with which the persona grapples in this stanza as the forces of fate and authority: "He thus attempts continually to 'sidestep' or squirm from beneath the accusation of the 'thumb' of fate and to avoid the scorn of authority's 'dull squint'"(37).

The persona here is the opposite of the hollow men: he is unable to escape the notion or "intimation" of beauty, the demands of his heart: "We can evade you and all else but the heart." While the limbo-like existence of the hollow men extends to their existence in the afterlife, the persona here is able to escape the world of limbo (the world of "random consolations" and "too ample pockets"), to transcend it into one in which his glimpses of beauty and love permeate his every experience: "What blame to us if the heart live on." Even in the "misty din," the "wilderness" of the city, he is able to make out the cries of the kitten, to turn, with the help of the moon, the desolate "ash can" into a more hopeful "grail of laughter."

Several such transformations occur in Crane's poetry. In fact, he nurtured other such Romantic sensibilities in many ways. He was a herald of beauty and love, believing that art could perfect reality: "Hart Crane's poetry is evidence of the miraculous power of art. Its expression of longing and grief

saddens the reader; yet its artistry is awesome and arouses joy. His work is an outcry of unsatisfied yearning for absolute beauty and love that by its eloquence gives rise to hopefulness" (Quinn 19). He not only believed in the elevated status of the poet, the special role the poet played as someone with a heightened sense of perception — ". . . a poet is a seer, an inspired creature who is permitted a more profound glimpse into reality than men ordinarily experience" (Quinn 21) — but he was also a part of that tradition in which poets were believed to have produced their best work in fits of divine inspiration — "...the creative experience of the poet is regarded as a gratuitous visitation far beyond his conscious power and control" (Quinn 22).

He was, however, thoroughly modern in that he believed certain ideas could not be framed in precise, well-defined terms. The kind of pleasure he wanted his readers to derive from his poetry was intuitive, an objective experience perceived subjectively. To be effective, and to evoke the sense of beauty properly, poetry had to involve "finding unusual relationships between objects; making evocative statements as opposed to explicit statements; exploring the connotative meanings of words rather than relying on denotative meanings... and moving from meaning to meaning within the poem by relying on association rather than strict logic" (Hazo 36-37). His poetry afforded readers the same glimpses of beauty that kittens and moonlit ash cans afforded his poetic persona.

In a sense, Crane successfully reconciled modernist and romantic sensibilities. Like his fellow modernists, he believed it was not possible to depict the world in terms that were not at least slightly fragmentary or obscure. Too much of human experience was "indefinable." However, Crane, the Romantic that he was, relied heavily on the reader's ability to grasp his poetry intuitively, to appreciate it by feeling "intimations" of his own subjective experience.

The ideas Crane presents regarding beauty and love (what is signified by the kitten) echo the ideas broached by Plato about divine origin, and those broached by Wordsworth about "intimations of immortality."

It is precisely this ability to find beauty in the ugly, "iron-cast" world that Crane says is man's salvation. This is the solid foundation one needs to be able to withstand the battery of the waves of progress. It is perhaps

what Eliot's hollow men see in the "eyes of death's dream kingdom," and what they see themselves as lacking: spirituality, or faith in the existence of a world in which beauty can exist. Unlike the persona in "Chaplinesque," they have ceased to believe that there is anything better, brighter, and more beautiful beyond the desert in which they dwell. The bleak modern reality becomes all they have; that they have no "intimations of beauty" to fall back upon allows them to be swallowed up by Frost's "great waves," and they ultimately descend into despair. By contrast, Crane's Chaplinesque persona, though trapped in a random, meaningless limbo as well (although in the latter poem a certain harshness of surroundings is implied by the use of words like "fury" and "wilderness") escapes by seeing — and more importantly, by rescuing — beauty from it.

This heightened ability to "see" (or in the poem, to "feel love") was the role of the poet, or the artist, in America. The country had spiraled into immorality and corruption, but the artist was still capable of finding beauty or intimation s of beauty at the very least, within it. In fact, Crane associated the figure of the poet with that of Charlie Chaplin himself, an appropriate source of inspiration, because Chaplin's characters had a knack for finding something to smile about in the most grotesque situations: Chaplin was particularly known for his comic depiction of poverty (Griffith 289) . Crane was enamored of Chaplin's performances and was fascinated by the mixed emotions it evoked: "...In Chaplin's clown he saw not only a burlesque Pagliacci but also something of the poet. Chaplin's antics personified the 'buffooneries of the tragedian'" (Hazo 35).

In "Black Tambourine," Hart Crane gives us another picture of the American limbo. Here, the persona is trapped in a dreary "mid-kingdom," represented by the room in which he dwells. The poem's frequent use of images of death, decay, and infestation — the physical setting of the poem is a dark cellar overrun by insects, a grave littered with animal remains is mentioned in the second stanza, and the final image of the poem is that of a "carcass quick with flies" — highlights the oppressive conditions the persona must endure. The many images of animal remains and insect scavengers are suggestive of the persona's brutalization, the fact that he has been reduced to an animal himself, "bearing on the Negro's place somewhere between man and beast" (Lewis 28). Not only has he been

dehumanized; he is also forcibly alienated from the world, separated from it by a "closed door" (Lewis 26-29).

There is, however, still hope for the persona; he still has the power — or at least the prospect of power, should he choose to accept it — of creation, of myth or music-making. He is compared to Aesop who, despite his slave status, told stories that outlived him and became immortal. More importantly, a tambourine hangs, waiting, on the wall.

There are, of course, inextricable racial dimensions to this poem — the brutalization and dehumanization of the Negro and the prejudice he encounters from the rest of the world are issues Crane took very seriously in this poem — but he extends its meaning to include the plight of the American poet.

Whereas "Chaplinesque" gives us an idea of the poet's power, "Black Tambourine" reveals the conditions he must rise above in order to exploit that power. For Crane, the American poet, like the Negro, is trapped in limbo, alienated from a harsh,"implicitly deaf" world: "Crane associated himself, and by extension the modern poet, with the Negro, as victims of a comparable persecution and exclusion; the world closed its door equally on both" (Lewis 27).

Aesthetically, "Black Tambourine" paints the most unpleasant picture among any of the poems mentioned so far. Spirituality here is challenged more forcefully; the limbo is physically more confining and crueler. It becomes even harder to see beauty in such an oppressive environment. The opportunity, however, is still present. The persona here has not yet made his choice; he has not surrendered to the dark of his surroundings, nor has he taken up the tambourine to play.

Consequently, he finds himself in a narrow and filthy mid-kingdom ("forlorn in the cellar") that is in some ways reminiscent of W.E.B du Bois' dilemma of twoness. If the Negro is trapped in between his primitive African self and his new American self, the metaphor of the American poet in "Black Tambourine" shows how he is experiencing his own dilemma of "double-consciousness." He is trapped between two possibilities: one of creation, of seeing beauty in a dark world, perhaps being able to create music even in the damp of his cellar, of outliving any prejudice or rejection by

immortalizing himself in works of art; and another of monotony, a reality which brutalizes him, turns him into one of Eliot's living dead, a walking "carcass, quick with flies."

The end of the war, along with the developments made in science and communication, had taken the American economy to new heights, but although big businesses reaped the benefits of this financial golden age, the working class descended further and further into poverty; a more violent assertion of white supremacy was wrought upon minority groups by the revived Ku Klux Klan; the corruption of government administrations like that of Warren G. Harding was exposed, eliciting no great reaction from an already cynical people (Handlin 118g) . Morality, community, and spirituality had declined significantly. America was beginning to see the price that had been paid for progress, a double-edged sword and the paradox of the early twentieth century outlined by Henry Luce in "The American Century."

What made the sense of disappointment even more potent was the fact that America was supposed to be a New World, a New Jerusalem. However, with the disillusionment and the decline of morals outlined above, it was ironically a nation in limbo, one that, for all its development, had not quite reached the status that had been envisioned for it in the past.

One can see why Robert Frost's image of a violent ocean assailing the helpless shore is an appropriate metaphor for the times. America could not hold back the impending cultural upheaval and the result was a roaring chaos. The dynamic, industrialized, gas-lit urban centers began to resemble an immoral, meaningless limbo that was for some simply the monotonous setting for a "humdrum" existence and for others a frightening, inhuman wilderness or prison. Without a sense of spirituality, a means of enriching the soul rather than the pocket, it became impossible to transcend the mundane cast-iron atmosphere Walt Whitman was dreading, and one ended up like one of Eliot's hollow men.

If, however, one held fast to the presence of love in the world, had faith enough to see in the wilderness traces of splendor, as Crane did, and as he allowed his poetic personas to do, then life ceased to be meaningless. What animated man, what made him "still love the world," what kept him alive, made him a sentient, searching being, and not just a stuffed straw statue,

was the spiritual belief in the existence elsewhere of divine, absolute beauty, whether this came in the form of Plato's world of ideals, Wordsworth's immortal sea, the Christian notion of heaven ("death's dream kingdom") or the dream of a fully realized American New World.

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