

# Whitman's urban kaleidoscope

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Walt Whitman lived in the New York area for more than half his life, so it is perhaps not surprising that he should have declared his intention to chant urban life at the very outset of *Leaves of Grass*. "This is the City and I am one of its Citizens,"<sup>1</sup> he proclaims in the first untitled poem of the 1855 edition, later to become known as "Song of Myself," thus laying the foundation stone of his reputation as the first American poet to celebrate the city.

Most of the Poet's life was spent in urban environments. In addition to the forty-two years he lived in and around New York, a further ten were spent in Washington D.C., where he moved in 1862, before settling in Camden, New Jersey, for the last twenty years of his life. Little wonder then that cityscapes and vignettes of urban scenes feature prominently in Whitman's poetry and prose. In "City of Orgies" (*PP* 279), written in 1860, the Poet, who looked to the city as the future of American democracy, boasts "City whom that I have lived and sung in your midst will one day make you illustrious" and in the eleven lines of the poem "Broadway," penned towards the end of his life (1888), he portrays the heady excitement of the rushed comings and goings of "hurrying human tides" and "endless sliding, mincing, shuffling feet," which he considers to be "like the parti-colored world itself" (*PP* 624).

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What is perhaps less known about Whitman is that behind his posturing as urban guide and celebrant of urban life is an understanding of the more shadowy recesses of the urban environment. Whitman writes on one occasion about New York: “Every kind of wickedness that can be festered into life by the crowding together of a huge mass of people is here to be found.”<sup>2</sup> For all its multi-coloured splendour, the Poet’s description of the metropolis can generate a sense of disquiet for the city is not only like the “parti-colored world itself,” it is also, according to his little known temperance novel *Franklin Evans*, published in 1842, a “mighty labyrinth”<sup>3</sup> with “a thousand things” which “no man is the better for knowing,”<sup>4</sup> and in the words of the later poem, “Broadway,” “like infinite, teeming, *mocking* life,”<sup>5</sup> “visor’d,” “vast” and a somewhat “unspeakable show and lesson” (PP 624).

Even though Whitman states that the city is a place for those who wish “the profound, the generous, encompassing things,” a “natural centre of gravity,”<sup>6</sup> and the poet of *Leaves of Grass* repeatedly associates himself with it, calling the city of New York “Mannahatta my city” (“Starting from Paumanok” PP 176) and himself “of Manhattan the son” (“Song of Myself” PP 210), in a conversation with his friend and confidante Horace Traubel, Whitman complains bitterly that the city is riddled with “devil-take the hindmost business,” adding: “To a New Yorker life is not lived a success if it not be planted in a background of money, goods: curtains, hangings, tapestries, carpets, elegant china” (WWC 47).

In his earliest separately published prose work, Whitman provides little to offset the dark side of the city. *Franklin Evans* tells the tale of a poor young Long Island country boy who sets out for New York in the pursuit of a better life, but instead gets caught up in the corrupting pleasures of music halls, theatres and above all barrooms and taverns, gradually becoming a drunkard on the streets of lower Manhattan, losing his job, wife and freedom in the process. Arriving “on the borders of that great city” in the evening (which is perhaps more of a bad omen than the reader may at first suspect), the young man exclaims:

Yes, here I had come to seek my fortune! A mere boy, friendless, unprotected, innocent of the ways of the world – without wealth, favour or wisdom – here I stood at the entrance of the mighty labyrinth, and with hardly any consciousness of the temptations, doubts and dangers that awaited me there. Thousands had gone on before me and thousands were coming still. Some had attained the envied honors – had reaped distinction – and won princely estate; but how few they were compared with the numbers of failures!<sup>7</sup>

No celebration of city life here, only an ominous sense of what is to come, as reflected in the bleak image of the young innocent standing before a “mighty labyrinth” full of unknown trials and tribulations, although Evans puts on a brave

face and states: "Let us rather think of those who, bravely stemming the tide, and baring up nobly against all opposition, have proudly come off victorious – waving in their hands at last, the symbol of triumph and glory."<sup>8</sup>

Significantly, money, the very symbol of the city the novel calls "the great emporium of our western world"<sup>9</sup> is what an older, wiser and more jaded Evans rues when, years later, he returns to New York and, as indicated by the time of day of his arrival, is able to distinguish more clearly just how much he has lost:

As the light of day dawned in the east [...] I went on shore in the city where, four years previous, I had come an innocent and honest country youth. My unsophisticated country habits had worn away, but at the expense of how much of the pure gold, which was bartered for dross!<sup>10</sup>

As Wynn Kelley points out in *Melville's City: Literary and Urban Form in Nineteenth-Century New York*, the idea of the city as a labyrinth was already well-established in European literature by the time New York writers employed it. As Kelley points out: "Although an actual labyrinth is a highly organized and indeed rational structure, nineteenth-century British authors often used it to represent psychological disequilibrium, the anxiety and fear associated with moving *through* a labyrinth."<sup>11</sup>

Anxiety and fear are certainly feelings one would associate with the "urban experience in mid-nineteenth-century America" as described by Whitman biographer David S. Reynolds in *Walt Whitman's America: A Cultural Biography*.<sup>12</sup> Whitman's New York was growing rapidly. Between 1810 and 1860, according to Reynolds, the proportion of Americans living in cities rose from 6 to 20 percent of the total population, which grew six times faster than the world average during that period.<sup>13</sup> Urban congestion and overcrowding plagued city dwellers, as did poor sanitation. Hogs roamed the streets, feeding on "garbage heaped in the gutters,"<sup>14</sup> and crime was commonplace as street gangs flourished.

The poet of "Song of Myself", a self-confessed "lover of populous pavements" (*PP* 176), plunges right into the labyrinthine streets of urban America, partaking, as one of the many, of all he sees around him, his catalogues listing "snow-sleighs, clinking, shouted jokes, pelts of snow-balls" and "hurrahs for popular favorites" alongside "the fury of rous'd mobs, / The flap of a curtain'd litter, a sick man inside borne to the hospital" and the "meeting of enemies, the sudden oath, the blows and fall / [...] the policeman with his star quickly working his passage to the centre of the crowd" (*PP* 195). Panning in and out of the scene, as fluid as the tides encircling the island city he likes to call Mannahatta,<sup>15</sup> the poet affords us momentary glimpses of the seediness of city life in the nineteenth century – "Arrests of criminals, slights,

adulterous offers made, acceptances, rejections with convex lips” (*PP* 195) – and lays bare its disconcerting polar opposites, reproducing the “groans of over-fed or half-starv’d who fall sunstruck or in fits” (*PP* 195), but upon closer inspection, we realise that he does so from a particular vantage point. “I peeringly view them from the top” (*PP* 195), he states, positioning himself as spectator *above* and *outside* the city. As in the poem “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” (1856), it is this movement which allows the poet-persona to reconcile the two realities he observes. Only then does he launch into the catalogue which brings the city to life on the page, for it is this comprehensive bird’s-eye view of the scene which allows him to portray “the shadowy side of urban life” as “part of a larger panorama in which even apparent evil is good when viewed from a wide enough perspective.”<sup>16</sup>

“Undrape!” exclaims the poet persona of “Song of Myself;” “you are not guilty to me, nor stale nor discarded” (*PP* 195), opting not to pass moral judgement but rather to contain all distinctions or differences. Nothing to him is irreconcilable in the bigger picture. In Whitman’s own words, the aim is to find the “average;” “the average of farmers and mechanics everywhere,” because “the real, though latent and silent bulk of America, city or country, presents a magnificent mass of material, never before equaled on earth” and it is this material “quite unexpress’d by literature or art, that in every respect insures the future of the republic” (“Poetry To-Day in America – Shakspeare – The Future” [1881] *PP* 1029).

Indicative of this is the “barbaric yawp” sounded “over the rooftops of the world” in the last section of “Song of Myself;” in which the poet, tellingly, crosses paths with a “spotted hawk” before bequeathing himself to the dirt underfoot<sup>17</sup> (*PP* 247), spans the full gamut from the “tall spires” of the ideal city on a hill (*Memoranda*, *PP* 1278) to the underground or alternative urban ways of life, subcultures and countercultures struggling for definition in the interstices of the frame of mainstream society and therefore symbolically hidden underfoot.<sup>18</sup>

Perhaps one of the most revealing testaments to Whitman’s understanding of the dichotomy of city life – and one of the best sources of insight into his double vision and the need to reconcile the apparently disparate – can be found in an unfinished poem about Pfaff’s, “The Two Vaults;” penned in a personal notebook in the early 60s (1861-62). Whitman appears to have been a regular at Pfaff’s, a beer cellar-cum-restaurant located on Broadway, between 1859 and 1862, when he departed for Washington to look for his wounded brother and work in the hospitals. The bar, best known for being the watering-hole of choice for a group of Bohemian writers and artists who were “nonconforming, frequently intellectual, engaged in the arts, and in opposition to bourgeois conventions;”<sup>19</sup> appears to have been a favourite haunt of Whitman’s at a time when the literary

mainstream had all but turned its back on him after the initial short-lived flurry of attention surrounding the publication of the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* in 1855. Henry Clapp, the “king of the Pfaffian Bohemians,” however, stood by Whitman, regularly publishing favourable articles about the Poet and his work in his weekly *Saturday Press*.

Furthermore, as Ed Folsom and Kenneth Price have recently revealed in *Re-Scripting Walt Whitman*, it was in the basement restaurant that Whitman met the queen of Bohemia,” Ada Clare, an unmarried mother who was proud of her unconventional status,<sup>20</sup> and joined the “Fred Gray Association,” a “loose confederation of young men who seemed anxious to explore new possibilities of male-male affection,” and it may well also have been at Pfaff’s that Whitman met Fred Vaughn, a young Irish stage driver with whom he had an intense relationship which may have inspired some of the homoerotic poems in the “Calamus” cluster.<sup>21</sup> In short, Pfaff’s was the gathering place for a group of people who experimented with the boundaries of propriety and flaunted their unconventional lifestyle.

Yet, in spite of – or, perhaps, *because of* – Whitman’s connection to Pfaff’s and his debt to the Bohemian subculture that thrived there, the poem about the beer cellar, “The Two Vaults,” begins with a startling image of “drinkers and laughers” meeting “to eat and drink and carouse” while “on the walk immediately overhead pass the myriad feet of Broadway / As the dead in their graves are underfoot hidden / And the living pass over them, recking not of them.”<sup>22</sup>

From the very start, beginning with the first verse of the poem (“the vault at Pfaff’s”), it is clear that the theme, one that would feature prominently in the second edition of *Leaves of Grass* (1860), is “the terrible doubt of appearances.”<sup>23</sup> The play on the word “vault”, an underground burial chamber or an arched brick or stone ceiling, becomes apparent as the “bright eyes of beautiful young men” “beam up” to welcome a new arrival who, “from the upper step [...] looks down” as “[o]verhead rolls Broadway – the myriad rushing Broadway” (*LG* 660). The puzzle about “what is” as opposed to “what seems to be” is further enhanced by the difficulty in understanding if the “dead in their graves” are the “drinkers and laughers” making merry in Pfaff’s or literally the dead buried in the earth beneath them.

In the middle of the nineteenth century, Pfaff’s would have been partly illuminated by the light filtering in from the streets above through glass panels in the sidewalks, but Whitman’s intention is to perplex, so it is not immediately clear who is being referred to when the poet turns his attention to the “crowds” – the people in the beer cellar or those passing by on the street overhead:

The strong lights from above pour down upon them and are shed outside  
 The thick crowds, well-dressed — the continual crowds as if they would never end  
 The curious appearance of the faces — the glimpse just caught of the eyes  
 and expressions, as they flit along (*LG* 661)<sup>24</sup>

However, the first section of the last stanza appears to clarify the matter: the clients in the beer cellar, dependent on artificial light, find it difficult to make out the expressions on the faces of the passers-by who “flit along” (*LG* 660) above them, which would indicate that the “dead in their graves” really are corpses buried in the ground below the restaurant. Yet the final lines of the poem transport the reader right back to the title of the poem, which refers to not one but two vaults, and leave the reader feeling slightly bewildered in the realization that it is the crowds above that are *as good as* dead to the indifferent revellers below:

(You phantoms! oft I pause, yearning, to arrest some one of you!  
 Oft I doubt your reality — whether you are real — I suspect all is but a pageant.)  
 The lights beam in the first vault — but the other is entirely dark  
 In the first (*LG* 661)

The critique of the superficial world of the revellers below, who laugh, drink and “bandy the jest” without a care in the world, unmindful of the many above, is evident in the difficulty in distinguishing who really is in the dark: the careless clients in the vault or the phantom presences flitting along above them. What the poem appears to suggest is that the world “overhead” cannot be seen – or read – clearly by those who inhabit the artificially lit world of appearances below. Note also that Pfaff’s was a meeting place for authors, which points us towards the poem’s underlying message: the need for the poet to ascend to street level in order to “arrest,” or capture, the reality of street life and of the urban masses. Failure to do so might mean never knowing “the real, though latent and silent bulk of America” (*PP* 1029).

Whitman seeks to immortalize the diversity of America in poetic catalogues that capture a wealth of human experiences, chanting the praises of “the common people” (1855 “Preface” *PP* 6) and their diversity, placing everyone on an equal footing. “Of all mankind the poet is the equable man” (*PP* 8), declares the 1855 “Preface,” “He is the arbiter of the diverse [...] the equalizer of his age and land” (*PP* 9). Moreover, *Leaves of Grass* was to be a poem that abandoned the “conventional themes” of the poets of old and to have “none of the stock ornamentation, or choice plots of love or war, or high, exceptional personages of Old World song; nothing for beauty’s sake – no legend, or myth, or romance, or euphemism, nor rhyme”

but concentrate instead on “the broadest average of humanity and its identities” (“A Backward Glance O'er Travel'd Roads” *PP* 658).

In other words, as the 1855 “Preface” indicates, a balance had to be struck between “pride” (individuality) and “sympathy” (average humanity):

The soul has that measureless pride which consists in never acknowledging any lessons but its own. But it has sympathy as measureless as its pride and the one balances the other and neither can stretch too far while it stretches in company with the other. (*PP* 13)

This pattern of the plural and the singular – *e pluribus unum* – is the guiding principle of *Leaves of Grass*. As Whitman scholar Ed Folsom defends, for the Poet, “the confluence of political and artistic representation seemed natural — seemed, in fact, the very essence of a democratic poetics,”<sup>25</sup> making him the first truly American poet to emerge from the shadow of Old World poetics.

In Whitman's verse, humanity descends en-masse onto the pavements of New York City, a symbol of the young democratic American nation in which the Poet deposits his faith and which he sometimes addresses as “Libertad.”<sup>26</sup> Merging with the crowd, he marvels at the “gliding present” and its ever-shifting tableaux of people and events, comparing what he sees to a “kaleidoscope divine” (“A Broadway Pageant” *PP* 385). The analogy is certainly an apt one given that *Leaves of Grass* is the chamber in which Whitman deposits the objects he wishes us, the reader-viewer, to see. Like a kaleidoscope, which typically has rectangular lengthwise mirrors, allowing an arbitrary array of objects to show up as a beautiful symmetric pattern because of the reflections in the mirrors, Whitman's poetry also provides what we might call a two-mirror model which yields a constant flow of ever-shifting pictures, just as he promised in the 1855 “Preface”: “I will have nothing hang in the way, not the richest curtains [...] You shall stand by my side and look in the mirror with me” (*PP* 14).

Prostitutes, squaws, overseers, photographers, reformers, drug addicts, the mentally ill, *connoisseurs* and run-away slaves are corralled together in the lines of Whitman's verse alongside urban roughs, loafers, rowdies and Bowery b'hoys and g'hals.<sup>27</sup> “I will not have a single person slighted or left away,” proclaims the all-inclusive “I”: “The kept-woman, sponger, thief, are hereby invited, / The heavy-lipp'd slave is invited, the venerealee is invited; / There shall be no difference between them and the rest” (*PP* 205). Grand and small, rare and ordinary, beautiful and ugly, male and female, young and old, foolish and wise, learner and teacher – all stand abreast in Whitman's cosmic panorama: “Of every hue and caste am I, of every rank and religion, / A farmer, mechanic, artist, gentleman, sailor, quaker, / Prisoner, fancy-

man, rowdy, lawyer, physician, priest” (*PP* 204). “What is commonest, cheapest, nearest, easiest, is Me” (*PP* 200), boasts the poet, allowing usually silent voices to be heard as we peer with him into his urban kaleidoscope.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> *Complete Poetry and Collected Prose*, 235. Hereinafter all references to *Complete Poetry and Collected Prose* will be indicated in the text as follows: *PP* + page(s). All quotes from *Leaves of Grass* are, unless otherwise indicated, from the last edition of the work (1891-92), known as the "deathbed edition."
- <sup>2</sup> *The Journalism*, 165.
- <sup>3</sup> *Franklin Evans, or The Inebriate: A Tale of the Times*, 22.
- <sup>4</sup> *Franklin Evans, or The Inebriate: A Tale of the Times*, 25.
- <sup>5</sup> My italics.
- <sup>6</sup> *Intimate with Walt: Selections from Whitman's Conversations with Horace Traubel, 1888-1892*, 45. Hereafter abbreviated as *WWC*.
- <sup>7</sup> *Franklin Evans, or The Inebriate: A Tale of the Times*, 22-23.
- <sup>8</sup> *Franklin Evans, or The Inebriate: A Tale of the Times*, 23.
- <sup>9</sup> *Franklin Evans, or The Inebriate: A Tale of the Times*, 5.
- <sup>10</sup> *Franklin Evans, or The Inebriate: A Tale of the Times*, 61.
- <sup>11</sup> 94.
- <sup>12</sup> 107.
- <sup>13</sup> David S. Reynolds, *Walt Whitman's America: A Cultural Biography*, 107.
- <sup>14</sup> David S. Reynolds, *Walt Whitman's America: A Cultural Biography*, 108.
- <sup>15</sup> The Poet liked to call New York "Mannahatta" or "Manhattan," but appears to prefer the first term, "Mannahatta," with its mythical undertones, using it to represent not only the present city, but also to represent his ideal city of the future, whereas when he uses the word "Manhattan" in his poetry and prose, more often than not it refers exclusively to a factual concrete geographical location in the present. Cf., for example, "Walt Whitman, a kosmos, of Manhattan the son" (*PP* 210) and "To-day, doubtless, the infant genius of American poetic expression [...] lies sleeping far away [...] in some slang or local song or allusion of the Manhattan, Boston, Philadelphia or Baltimore mechanic" (*PP* 824).
- <sup>16</sup> William Pannapacker, "The City", 48.
- <sup>17</sup> "The spotted hawk swoops by and accuses me, he complains of my gab and my loitering. / [...] / I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love, / If you want me again look for me under your boot-soles."
- <sup>18</sup> Similar images occur throughout "Song of Myself", as in section 33, where the poet soars from the mountains, skirting sierras, and dips down to weed an onion patch and hose rows of carrots and parsnips (*PP* 299).
- <sup>19</sup> Donald Yannella, "Pfaff's Restaurant", 515. The author goes on to describe the group as follows: "Among the most visible were King Clapp and the queen, Ada Clare, Fitz-James O'brien, George Arnold, William Winter, Elihu Vedder, and, among the more 'genteel,' E.C. Stedman" ("Pfaff's Restaurant", 515). For more details on the Bohemians, cf., also Gay Wilson Allen, *The Solitary Singer*, 228-31.
- <sup>20</sup> 61.
- <sup>21</sup> 62.
- <sup>22</sup> *Leaves of Grass*, 661. Hereinafter, all references to the work will be indicated as follows: *LG* + page(s).

- <sup>23</sup> “The Terrible Doubt of Appearances” is the title of the seventh poem in the “Calamus” cluster of the second edition. Whitman later alludes to the same topic in “The Lesson of a Tree” (*Specimen Days*), where he writes: “One lesson from affiliating a tree – perhaps the greatest moral lesson anyhow from earth, rocks, animals, is that same lesson of inherency, of *what is*, without the least regard to what the looker on (the critic) supposes or says, or whether he likes or dislikes. What worse – what more general malady pervades each and all of us, our literature, education, attitude toward each other, (even toward ourselves,) than a morbid trouble about *seems*” (PP 790).
- <sup>24</sup> My italics.
- <sup>25</sup> Ed Folsom, “What do we Represent? Walt Whitman, Representative Democracy and Democratic Representation”, *The University of Iowa Presidential Lectures*, 25 Sep 2005 <<http://sdr.lib.uiowa.edu/preslectures>>.
- <sup>26</sup> As Matthew Ignoffo points out “‘Libertad’ (Spanish for ‘liberty’) is Whitman’s name for a goddess-like personification of American independence” (“‘Lo, Victress on the Peaks’ (1865-1866)”, J. R. and Donald D. Kummings, eds., *Walt Whitman: An Encyclopedia* 401). Note that at the beginning of the third section of “Starting From Paumanok,” a programmatic poem, Whitman associates “Libertad” with the “masses” (“Americanos! conquerors! marches humanitarian! / Foremost! century marches! Libertad! masses! / For you a programme of chants” [PP 177]) and, in “By Blue Ontario’s Shore”, with Democracy: “A Phantom gigantic superb, with stern visage accosted me, / *Chant me the poem*, it said, *that comes from the soul of America, chant me the carol of victory, / And strike up the marches of Libertad, marches more powerful yet, / And sing me before you go the song of the throes of Democracy*” (PP 469).
- <sup>27</sup> For a more detailed description of these “street types”, cf. David S. Reynolds, *Walt Whitman’s America: A Cultural Biography*, 102-110.

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