

City/Body/Text : Walt Whitman's Urban Incarnation

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CITY/BODY/TEXT : WALT WHITMAN'S URBAN INCARNATION

«I see the cities of the earth and make myself at random a part of them», Walt Whitman wrote in «Salut au Monde !» (1856) (1). Arguing that the observer and the objects he sees engender each other, Whitman creates a poetry of the city that seeks to become a city in itself, to transcend the limits of the text by fashioning its own physical world. The poet imagines a reciprocal relation between himself and his surroundings, whether passing strangers, inanimate objects, urban landscapes, or even his readers : «the scene and all its belongings, how they seize and affect me» (*CP*, p. 410). He wishes to be as much «incarnated» by the urban environment as it by him. As I will show, what characterizes Whitman's city poetry is this ever-present tension between urban reality, the body which experiences it, and the text which records it. Though he recognizes the impossibility of ever fully merging city, body, and text in a poem, his poetic strategy is to extend the boundaries of writing as a form of representation by emphasizing the indivisibility of seer and seen in the moment of perception.

Other writers and artists of the later nineteenth century, such as George Eliot or Claude Monet, registered the breakdown of the once-firm distinction between subject and object, treating the two as different aspects of the same experience. But Whitman's city poetry is perhaps unique in describing this new relation almost entirely in sexual terms, whether metaphorical or literal. Examining his New York poems we realize that the city's attraction for the poet is unfailingly physical. A cancelled section from the significantly titled «Poem of Joys» (1860) demonstrates how closely Whitman associates the urban with the sexual :

O for the girl, my mate ! O for happiness with my mate !

O the young man as I pass ! O I am sick after the friendship of him
who, I fear, is indifferent to me.

O the streets of cities !

The flitting faces — the expressions, eyes, feet, costumes ! O I cannot
tell how welcome they are to me ;

O of men — of women toward me as I pass — The memory of only one
look — the boy lingering and waiting. (*CP*, p. 808)

This immediate intimacy with the crowd through «only one look» is for Whitman the quintessential city experience, and here the erotic impulse behind it is unusually explicit. His pleasure in the pervasive sexuality of the city contrasts sharply with the dread felt by his Victorian contemporaries. When A.H. Clough, for example, braves the crowd, he fears violation by it ; Whitman, on the other hand, worries that his just-spotted lover will be «indifferent» to him. In *Maud* Tennyson «loathe[s] the squares and streets, / And the faces that one meets» ; but Whitman yearns for «the young man as I pass !»

In regarding the city as a vast concentration of sexual desire and promise, Whitman has much more in common with Baudelaire (2). Both poets single out the eye contact one makes with strangers on a busy street as a metaphor for the stimulating yet disjunctive nature of modern city life. Mythicizing the vocation of the *flâneur*, they delight in what Baudelaire called «bathing in the crowd». But if for Baudelaire each bizarre or beautiful stranger he spies brings the

consciousness of his own estrangement and of the city's propensity to rupture all human connections, Whitman seizes his satisfaction from the initial contact, ephemeral as it is. He finds the first instant of encounter more rewarding than all the «shifting tableaux» of the city :

Not those, but as I pass O Manhattan, your frequent and swift flash of
eyes offering me love,

Offering response to my own – these repay me,

Lovers, continual lovers, only repay me. (CP, p. 158)

Many of Whitman's poems celebrate these «curious questioning glances – glints of love !» (CP, p. 530) (3). Yet in all of them the finely poised ambiguities of Baudelaire's «A Une Passante» (1860) – where the poet glimpses a woman on the street whom he instantly loves, knowing he will never see her again – give way to Whitman's «latent conviction» that the «swift flash of eyes» will deliver the love it seems to offer. Though he could not have known Baudelaire's poem, Whitman's «To a Stranger», written the same year, provides an uncannily direct reply to Baudelaire's sense of loss :

Passing stranger ! you do not know how longingly I look upon you,
You must be he I was seeking, or she I was seeking, (it comes to me as
of a dream,)

I have somewhere surely lived a life of joy with you,

All is recall'd as we flit by each other, fluid, affectionate, chaste,
matured.

You grew up with me, were a boy with me or a girl with me,

I ate with you and slept with you, your body has become not yours
only nor left my body mine only,

You give me the pleasure of your eyes, face, flesh, as we pass, you take
of my beard, breast, hands, in return,

I am not to speak to you, I am to think of you when I sit alone or wake
at night alone,

I am to wait, I do not doubt I am to meet you again,

I am to see to it that I do not lose you. (CP, pp. 159–160)

In striking contrast to Baudelaire's cry, «Fugitive beauté... ne te verrai-je que dans l'éternité ?» Whitman tells *his* passante, «I do not doubt I am to meet you again». He codifies the sudden glimpse into an aesthetic of countless urban consummations. *His* city will fulfill all its myriad promises : «I announce adhesiveness, I say it shall be limitless, unloosen'd, / I say you shall yet find the friend you were looking for» (CP, p. 512).

Ultimately Whitman's city emerges as a kind of prelapsarian Eden where hearty, unselfconscious citizens can love without inhibition. Innocent of Adam's fall into sexual guilt and of Babel's fall into urban alienation, the men and women in his poems build their cities and communicate openly, free of repression. At the same time that his contemporaries see only a rising Babylon, Whitman envisions the modern city as a recaptured Paradise without division between men and women, city and country :

A newer garden of creation, no primal solitude,

Dense, joyous, modern, populous millions, cities and farms,

With iron interlaced, composite, tied, many in one

.....

The crown and teeming paradise, so far, of time's accumulations,

To justify the past.

(CP, p. 421)

Whitman's modern Eden is «iron interlaced» ; it consists of steel and stone as well

as «populous millions». «Latent with unseen existences», the city's inanimate objects, too, seem to offer him their surfaces and souls :

You flagg'd walks of the cities ! you strong curbs at the edges !
You ferries ! you planks and posts of wharves ! you timber-lined sides !
 you distant ships !
You rows of houses ! you window-pierc'd facades ! you roofs !
You porches and entrances ! you copings and iron guards !
You windows whose transparent shells might expose so much !
You doors and ascending steps ! you arches !
You gray stones of interminable pavements ! you trodden crossings !
From all that has touch'd you, I believe you have imparted to yourselves, and now would impart the same secretly to me,
From the living and the dead you have peopled your impassive surface,
 and the spirits thereof would be evident and amicable with me.

(CP, p. 180)

Impregnated with secret meanings by constant use, the apparently opaque materials of the city are actually «transparent shells» which «might expose so much» if someone only looked or listened. Whitman claims a special receptivity to the inanimate world which is no less a part of man's life in the city.

Nowhere is this more evident than in «Crossing Brooklyn Ferry» (1856) (4), where the two central motifs of the passing glance and the poet's immersion in the crowd come together to produce a powerful fusion of poet, city, and reader. Identifying completely with the moment and place, the poet dissolves his being into the city's : «The simple, compact, well-join'd scheme, myself disintegrated, every one disintegrated yet part of the scheme» (CP, p. 190). The scheme comprises the poem as well as the city, and through it Whitman hopes to bring future readers into union with the landscape he describes. This process transforms poet and reader into participants in a composite city consciousness, not just outsiders responding to a picturesque scene. The first two lines of the poem enlarge the notion of rapport with a passing stranger to include the landscape itself :

Flood-tide below me ! I see you face to face !
Clouds of the west – sun there half an hour high – I see you also face
 to face.

Just as the poet eliminates the difference between himself and others through a single glance, he now sees eye to eye with all of the external world, above and below.

The mirroring relationship that being «face to face» with the water implies also prepares for the subsequent effort to bring poet and reader to a similar understanding. For through an increasingly heated appeal to shared experiences and desires, Whitman thrusts himself upon his audience, even those «ever so many generations hence» :

I too walk'd the streets of Manhattan Island...
I too felt the curious abrupt questionings stir within me,
In the day among crowds of people sometimes they came upon me
.....
Closer yet I approach you,
What thought you have of me now, I had as much of you – I laid my
 stores in advance,
I consider'd long and seriously of you before you were born.

(11.58–60, 86–88)

Toward the end of the poem the writer's attention shifts momentarily back to his surroundings : «Ah, what can ever be more stately and admirable to me than most hemm'd Manhattan ?» (1.92). But finally he does not attempt to privilege the landscape over the people of the city, his readers. Rather, all contribute to a collective personality that remains invitingly intimate :

What gods can exceed these that clasp me by the hand, and with voices
I love call me promptly and loudly by my highest name as I
approach ?

What is more subtle than this which ties me to the woman or man that
looks in my face ?

Which fuses me into you now, and pours my meaning into you ?

(11.95—97)

By returning to the archetypal «face to face» communion of poet and city with which he began, Whitman «fuses» sexually as well as spiritually with «the man or woman that now looks in my face» — the reader. The amorous relationship with the city and its inhabitants that they now have in common makes them both contemporaries and lovers ; the look they exchange collapses their distance in time and space. The rest of the section displays satisfaction after consummation : «We understand then do we not ? / What I promis'd without mentioning it, have you not accepted ?» (11.98—99). The lines emphasize the mystical nature of the union effected ; we can note the steps leading to it, but cannot really point to how it happens. Because Whitman courts the reader by indirection and glances, they meet only by a kind of peripheral vision, when each regards the city rather than the other.

Yet the final section leaves no doubt of the outcome. Poet and reader return to the panorama of harbor, town, and sky, now in full rapport with it. The Victorians or Baudelaire may engage the reader by imaging certain moments with enough symbolic resonance to make him feel that he too shares their urban sensibility. But Whitman makes himself and the reader co-eternal with the city, joined with it in a permanently orgasmic union :

Flow on, river ! flow with the flood-tide, and ebb with the ebb-tide !

Frolic on, crested and scallop-edg'd waves !

Gorgeous clouds of the sunset ! drench with your splendor me, or the
men and women generations after me !

Cross from shore to shore, countless crowds of passengers !

Stand up, tall masts of Mannahatta ! stand up, beautiful hills of Brook-
lyn !

Throb, baffled and curious brain ! throw out questions and answers !

Suspend here and everywhere, eternal float of solution !

Gaze, loving and thirsty eyes, in the house or street or public assembly !

(11.101—108)

The admonition to the «loving and thirsty eyes» points to the source of this giant procreation : flooding tides, drenching clouds, erect masts and hills, and ejaculating mind all leap almost visibly from the poet's animating glance. For Whitman, city life does not exist apart from his perception of it (5), just as his own life would be void without the city to stimulate poetry and even thought itself. Mingling with the material of his creation, the poet becomes a god, the mirroring environment of the opening lines now spontaneously providing his halo : «Diverge, fine spokes of light, from the shape of my head, or any one's head, in the sunlit water !» (1.116). Whitman's expansive being fills the gap between city and object, poet and reader, uniting urban man with the «minute

particulars» as well as the potent geography of the harbor scene.

This conjunction brings a new awareness of all objects, wherein the inanimate manifests as much of the heavenly as the poet's silhouette in the water. The assimilation of matter by mind is complete :

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. (11.126–132)

Creating a self commensurate with the city, and a city inseparable from the self, Whitman nevertheless does not claim to have mastered or subsumed the phenomena he addresses : «We fathom you not». Subject and object, though interchangeable, remain independent «parts toward eternity». Thus at its fullest pitch Whitman's poetry radiates a triumphant conviction of its own solidity, of its ability to give the reader the physical world — not merely words about it. As he announces in «So Long» (1860) :

Camerado, this is no book,

Who touches this touches a man.

(CP, p. 513)

Yet Whitman's vast erotic energy and his urgent quest for integration with the objects around him strongly suggest an origin in alienation and division. His entire *oeuvre* conveys an intense longing for a consummation that poetry alone can deliver. The most dramatic proof of Whitman's tortured «procreant urge» is to be found in the sexually explicit «Children of Adam» and «Calamus» (1860), poems which celebrate human love. But in his city poems the search for fulfillment is projected as the desire to merge with *urban* surroundings, city and seer each engendering the other. Thus Whitman's yearning to make his poem/city as real as he is, a physical fact — and thus the secret fear, the unexpressed doubt that both of them, poet and city, may turn out to be «unreal».

One of Whitman's earliest poems, «There Was a Child Went Forth» (1855), furnishes a clue to the poet's insecurity. The poem treats the familiar theme that seeing involves becoming, maintaining that each self develops through a kind of visual absorption from its initial moments of consciousness :

There was a child went forth every day,

And the first object he look'd upon, that object he became,

And that object became part of him for the day or a certain part of the
day,

Or for many years or stretching cycles of years.

(CP, p. 386)

Differing from almost all writers and psychologists, Whitman imagines the child-object union as continuing into adulthood and into poetry. But in the poem's last stanza several disturbing questions intrude, which are never directly answered :

... the sense of what is real, the thoughts if after all it should prove
unreal.

The doubts of day-time and the doubts of night-time, the curious
whether and how,

Whether that which appears so is so, or is it all flashes and specks ?

Men and women crowding fast in the streets, if they are not flashes and specks what are they ? (CP, p. 387)

One is reminded of the ghost-like processions in Baudelaire, or of Eliot's hallucinatory, «unreal» cities. The uncertainties voiced in these lines anticipate a passage in *Democratic Vistas* (1871) where, after customary praise of «the splendor, picturesqueness, and oceanic amplitude and rush of... great cities», Whitman suddenly demands : «Confess that to severe eyes, using the moral microscope upon humanity, a sort of dry and flat Sahara appears, these cities, crowded with petty grotesques, malformations, phantoms, playing meaningless antics» (6). These doubts imply a loss of perceptual faith, strangely at odds with Whitman's insistence on actuality and solidity : «The streets themselves and the facades of houses, and goods in the windows, / Vehicles, teams, the heavy plank'd wharves...» (CP, p. 387). The very qualities that make his poems so concrete seem to open up a phantom world dissolving his apparently substantial cities, a kind of Cartesian enchantment making even our most acute sensations suspect.

Certain lines in Whitman's early work assert that reality as it is presented in poetry is insufficient. The poet longs, we read in «Spontaneous Me» (1856), for «the real poems (what we call poems being merely pictures)». The reader soon learns that such poems are meant to be as tactile and provocative as the naked body :

This poem drooping shy and unseen that I always carry, and that all men carry

.....

Arms and hands of love, lips of love, phallic thumb of love...

(CP, p. 138)

This desire to break out of the illusory poem and into the world – or to capture reality and return it to the poem – emerges as crucial even at the start of Whitman's career. In the 1855 version of «Song of Myself» he writes :

My words are words of a questioning, and to indicate reality ;

This printed and bound book....but the printer and the printing-office boy ?

.....

The well-taken photographs....but your wife or friend close and solid in your arms ?

(CP, p. 726)

How to transform the «well-taken photographs» of each of his objects into something «solid» in order to resolve «questioning» into «reality» becomes Whitman's most pressing task. We must possess the printer – appropriately, in the case of the poem's first edition, Whitman himself – as well as the book. The poet must combine the moments of seeing, writing, and reading into a palpable eternity, always available to the grasp.

The sexual-textual tension fully reveals itself in «Now Precedent Songs, Farewell» (1888) :

From fibre heart of mine – from throat and tongue – (My life's hot pulsing blood.

The personal urge and form for me – not merely paper, automatic type, and ink.)

(CP, p. 544)

In this context the stated purpose of *Leaves of Grass*, «to put a Person... freely, fully and truly on record» (CP, p. 583), takes on a literal dimension, as the desperate self-referentiality of Whitman's writing becomes evident. Fighting the limitations of language, the poet insists that he wants his work to be more than just print, and yet, paradoxically, that his printed lines do indeed recreate the physical world : «See, steamers steaming through my poems» (CP, p. 62). In

both cases his need to enjoy and possess things bodily prompts Whitman's emphasis on the concrete, the specific, the corporeal as his major poetic strategy. For as he explains in «Crossing Brooklyn Ferry», it is only via the body that the poet can know who he is or make his poems matter :

I too had receiv'd identity by my body,
That I was I knew was of my body, and what I should be I knew I
should be of my body. (11.63-64)

Suspicious, therefore, of the abstractness and impalpability of poetry, he seeks to make it actual, most notably by rendering it as part of his sexual self («This poem drooping shy and unseen that I always carry»). Distrusting mere words, he posits a stronger, fuller bond with the material world which has given him his own being and identity : «Objects gross and the unseen soul are one» (CP, p. 245). Like Montaigne, he discovers that «composing a self» involves the individual *and* the world. Only through a network of interrelations with everything around him is it possible for the poet to see, to learn, to have or to assign meaning. Indeed, one is tempted to call Whitman a «structuralist» poet because of his continuing recognition that the self is not a privileged center of consciousness, apart from the material world. In Saussurean linguistic terms, the poet or any detail he concentrates on acts as *parole* to the rest of the world's *langue* ; or, as late nineteenth century psychologists of perception would argue, the interplay of exterior stimuli and the senses of the onlooker comprise a single reality of which subject and object are simply mutually enabling elements. From the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, this union remains constant in Whitman's city :

All architecture is what you do to it when you look upon it,
(Did you think it was in the white or gray stone ? or the lines of the
arches and cornices ?) (CP, p. 244)

With its merging of noumenal and phenomenal worlds, Whitman's poetry operates on what could be called a principle of reciprocal absorption ; as his original preface concludes : «The proof of a poet is that his country absorbs him as affectionately as he as absorbed it» (CP, p. 762). The interplay between object and observer, city and self, «every one disintegrated yet part of the scheme», gives the poet his particular identity as a composite and creator of all he experiences. His status as a genuine product of the city is perhaps most clearly proclaimed in «City of Ships» (1865) :

... submit to no models but your own O city !

Behold me — incarnate me as I have incarnated you ! (CP, p. 320)

City and poet bring each other to life, a quasi-divine act of creation repeated daily in the streets and poems of New York.

It is sometimes assumed that Whitman's identification with the city expresses an immense will to power which subsumes a multiplicity of urban lives and entities within the poet's own consciousness. And certainly Whitman maintains that the coherence of the world depends upon the mental attitude of its beholder :

I swear the earth shall surely be complete to him or her who shall be
complete,

The earth remains jagged and broken only to him or her who remains
jagged and broken. (CP, p. 252)

Thinking of the many modern poets, including Baudelaire, Eliot, and Williams, who see the world as «jagged and broken», we may ascribe to Whitman a sort of primeval wholeness. But behind his self-assertiveness lie vital questions about the nature and capabilities of writing itself. In «O me ! O life !» (1865) Whitman

openly confronts the antagonism between the city and the text. Asking himself what good are «the cities fill'd with the foolish», or «the plodding and sordid crowds I see around me», the poet responds :

Answer

That you are here — that life exists and

That the powerful play goes on, and you may contribute a verse.

(CP, p. 299)

This oracle restates a central tenet of Whitman's poetry, that life, sheer physical presence («you are here») presumes identity — which we know from «Crossing Brooklyn Ferry» means the body («I too had receiv'd identity by my body»). But Whitman does not make the leap which his most confident poems would lead us to expect : that identity can be achieved through writing, by «contributing a verse». Rather, he interposes a middle layer of drama and illusion. Conscious of the artificiality of «the powerful play» of life the poet can only add his lines to its all-encompassing script. For there is an irrecoverable distance between city and text, body and writing, which Whitman's cosmic scenario labors heroically to conceal, transcend, or even obliterate. The entire force of his city poetry, the whole of its masculine sexual thrust («Beautiful dripping fragments.... The oath of procreation I have sworn» [CP, pp. 138, 140]) strives to overcome the body/text division, to embody the text :

See, in my poems, cities, solid, vast, inland, with paved streets, with iron
and stone edifices, ceaseless vehicles, and commerce

.....
See, lounging through the shops and fields of the States, me well-
belov'd, close-held by day and night. (CP, p. 62)

The solidity of body and city in his poems, Whitman recognizes, depends on the reader's receptivity and willingness to share the insights which the poem records. More than any other poet, Whitman deliberately invites the participation of the audience in his work (one reason for the inordinate number of imperatives and apostrophes he uses). He exhorts and coaches the reader, hoping to transmit successfully the odily sensations encoded in the text. For it is only by the reader's involvement, only by his feeling the effect of Whitman's lines upon his own body, fusing «me into you now», that words and body meet again. And when he triumphs, as in «Starting from Paumonok», there is a sense of wonder at the world his words have brought into being :

This then is life,

Here is what has come to the surface after so many throes and convulsions.

How curious ! how real !

(CP, p. 50)

Whitman himself was at times sceptical of this «reality», as we have seen. But through the combination of his «resistless» apprehension of the stones, streets, and people of New York, and his reciprocal absorption of them with «free sense», rejecting «nothing you offer'd me» (CP, p. 320), he builds in his poetry the greatest metropolis in American literature. Situating his poems squarely *between* (a favorite Whitman word) the body and the city, Whitman's program for self-incarnation appears both less assured and more daring than previously imagined. If his unalienated and frank sexuality as a «lover of populous pavements» (CP, p. 50) makes him more thoroughly sympathetic to modern city life than either Baudelaire or the Victorians, his exuberant stress on the doubleness of each act of vision foreshadows the relativistic cityscapes of *The Waste*

Land and *Paterson*. Inscribing the text of the self on the body of the city, Whitman's unsurpassed poetic conquest of the urban world remains an intensely personal, ecstatically sexual achievement :

What cities the light or warmth penetrates, I penetrate those cities
myself. (CP, p. 178)

NOTES

- (1) *Walt Whitman : The Complete Poems*, ed. Francis Murphy, Penguin, New York, 1975, p. 174. Subsequent citations noted parenthetically. Unless specified the text is that of the final «death-bed» edition of Whitman's poems, *Leaves of Grass*, David McKay, Philadelphia, 1891–92. Dates given indicate when the poem first appeared in print, regardless of later revision.
- (2) Whitman did not read Baudelaire until well after he had formed his own style and subject matter : «His sole mention of Baudelaire was to quote one of the few beliefs they shared, 'The immoderate taste for beauty and art leads men to monstrous excesses'» (F.O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance*, Oxford Univ. Press, New York, 1941, p. 518).
- (3) See, for example, «I Dream'd in a Dream» (1860), «A Noiseless Patient Spider» (1862), «Poem of Joys» (1860), «Mannahatta» (1860), and «Faces» (1855).
- (4) See *CP*, pp. 189–196. Because of the length of the poem, quotations will be cited by line number.
- (5) Of Whitman's refusal to distinguish between city and self, Quentin Anderson writes, «Bodies and images are simply correlative with 'soul'. They exist only in that they are apprehended ; we exist only in the measure that we apprehend them....It is an assertion that what is seen is correlative with a seer or seers....In sum, there is no evidence that in the Whitman of 1856 there is a separate realm in which 'soul' enjoys an existence independent of a presented scene» (*The Imperial Self*, Vintage, New York, 1971, p. 127). I am indebted to Professor Anderson's reading of Whitman throughout this article.
- (6) *The Portable Walt Whitman*, ed. Mark Van Doren, rev. Malcolm Cowley, Viking, New York, 1974, p. 328.