

Constructing the American Image through Urban Writing in Walt Whitman's Poetry

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Abstract: This article examines how urban writing contributes to the construction of the American image in Walt Whitman's poetry. Rather than treating the city as a background for modern life, Whitman turns urban crowds, labor, transportation, infrastructure, and transnational circulation into materials for imagining America. The article identifies two connected dimensions of this image. Internally, urban spaces bring differentiated individuals into recurring structures of work, movement, and public experience, enabling Whitman to represent democratic community without erasing individual distinction. Externally, the city's machines, bridges, ports, and global connections allow him to present the United States as modern, culturally self-confident, and engaged with the wider world. Close readings of *Song of Myself*, *Crossing Brooklyn Ferry*, *Song of the Exposition*, and *A Broadway Pageant* show that the city functions not simply as a subject but as a poetic mechanism through which a plural, democratic, modern, and outward-looking image of America is constructed.

Key words: Walt Whitman; urban writing; American image construction; urban modernity

Introduction

Walt Whitman (1819–1892) occupies a central place in American literary history. The formal and thematic innovations of *Leaves of Grass* helped move American poetry beyond inherited European models and toward subjects, rhythms, and voices drawn from contemporary life. Harold Bloom's description of Whitman as the "center of the American canon" captures the extent to which his literary position is bound to his representation of the United States (264–89). By the mid-nineteenth century, political independence had not resolved the problem of cultural definition. As Philip Fisher notes, the United States did not possess the common racial origin, inherited history, or linguistic tradition presupposed by many older theories of nationhood (60–61). Literature therefore became one arena in which a heterogeneous and rapidly changing society could be represented as "America." This article argues that Whitman's urban writing plays a central role in that process by constructing a distinctive American image through modern social experience.

Scholarship has approached this problem from several directions. Yang Yanqing argues that Whitman sought to build a distinct American culture by writing contemporary life and ordinary people (75–77). Paulo Miller Loonin shows that *Song of Myself* negotiates individuality and collectivity through forms that preserve distinct persons while creating democratic relation (118–19). Studies of Whitman's city writing have likewise connected urban experience to poetic form and national imagination. Simon Parker links Whitman's newspaper career to the language and forms through which he represented modern New York (161–62), while Edward Whitley shows that *A Broadway Pageant* uses New York to mediate among local, national, and global affiliations (451–52). Taken together, these studies suggest that the city is where democratic community, literary modernity, and America's relation to the world become mutually visible. This article therefore asks how urban writing enables Whitman to construct an American image rather than merely

describe American cities. Here the “American image” refers to the composite representation of the United States produced in his poetry. It has two connected dimensions. Inwardly, Whitman represents America as a democratic community formed through shared urban spaces and repeated public experience. Outwardly, he uses industrial and transnational urban modernity to present America as culturally distinctive yet connected to a wider world. The discussion first explains the literary significance of Whitman’s positive valuation of the city; it then examines the democratic community produced through urban experience; finally, it considers how urban modernity shapes America’s literary and global image.

1. From an Anti-Urban Tradition to an Urban Poetics

The nineteenth-century American city occupied a paradoxical position. Materially, cities were increasingly central to common social experience and cultural production. Migrants from different countries and speakers of different languages met within shared systems of labor, consumption, transportation, and public life. Printing houses, publishers, newspapers, literary societies, and lecture venues also clustered in Philadelphia, Boston, and New York, making cities major centers of literary production and circulation. Yet their cultural importance did not automatically give them equivalent poetic value.

Poetry had long drawn much of its imagery from nature, agriculture, and rural life. Huang Canran observes that the history of poetry in both East and West was largely shaped by “agricultural imagery,” even after the modern city had become the everyday environment of large populations (87). Romanticism strengthened this tendency by associating nature with spiritual value and the metropolis with commerce, crowding, and alienation. Whitman’s urban writing is significant because it converts a space often treated with suspicion into a positive literary resource. Qin Liyan contrasts Wordsworth’s alienated metropolitan vision with Whitman’s attachment to New York, noting his willingness to embrace machinery and modern life (132–33). M. Jimmie Killingsworth similarly emphasizes Whitman’s “celebration of the city” and calls him “America’s first urban poet” (19).

Whitman’s urban poetics does not simply replace nature with the city. Killingsworth argues that his more original move is to understand nature as “integral and inescapable,” present within urban and bodily life as well as outside it (19–20). What changes is the range of experience admitted into poetry. Workers, ferries, streets, wharves, newspapers, machines, bridges, and crowds become as poetically available as rivers and grass. The city thus gives Whitman a form adequate to a society transformed by migration, industrialization, mass culture, and expanding public life. By making these developments visible and valuable, he turns urban modernity into a major component of the American image.

2. Shared Urban Experience and the Image of Democratic America

The first dimension of Whitman’s American image is democratic community. A society divided by occupation, ethnicity, class, and region could not be represented through a single inherited social type. Urban life, however, placed different people in recurring contact through work, movement, and everyday routines. Whitman translates that heterogeneous proximity into poetic form.

Section 15 of *Song of Myself* offers a large catalogue of ordinary lives: “The pure contralto sings in the organ loft,” “The carpenter dresses his plank,” and “The pilot seizes the king-pin” (Whitman 39). The catalogue continues through farmers, printers, machinists, laborers, migrants, and many others before the speaker declares, “And these tend inward to me, and I tend outward to them,” and “of these one and all I weave the song of myself” (42). The figures remain socially specific, but their juxtaposition creates a larger collective pattern. Loonin calls this technique “democratic portraiture,” a “portrait-series” in which distinct persons supply the concrete content of collective life (121–22). Whitman’s catalogue therefore does not construct democracy by making everyone identical. It constructs a social whole from visible difference.

The formal force of the catalogue lies in its syntax as much as its social range. Each figure enters through a brief independent action—singing, dressing a plank, steering, printing, laboring—so no single occupation is allowed to

become the normative American type. The sequence accumulates without subordinating one figure to another. Its parataxis gives different lives the same grammatical visibility even as their activities remain distinct. The speaker's closing verb, "weave," is therefore crucial: the poem does not discover a pre-existing unity beneath difference; it composes unity by placing unlike persons in relation. The song of myself can become national in scope only because the self is presented as porous enough to receive these particular lives and to turn outward toward them. The American image formed here is democratic not because social conflict disappears, but because representation grants heterogeneous figures co-presence within the same poetic field.

Fisher's account of "democratic social space" helps clarify the material logic behind this poetic form. He argues that a mixed American population developed common identity partly through repeatable structures of economic and everyday life rather than through common ancestry (62). His own example is the later American suburb, where repeated institutions, housing types, commodities, and routines create a recognizable social environment "from point to point" (65). The nineteenth-century city operates differently, but a comparable principle is at work: labor, transportation, commerce, and public space create practices that can be shared by people with different origins. Whitman uses this repeatability not to erase difference but to make relation possible.

Crossing Brooklyn Ferry concentrates the process in an urban practice of movement. The speaker stands among the "hundreds and hundreds" returning home and describes the city as a "simple, compact, well-join'd scheme," in which each person is "disintegrated yet part of the scheme" (Whitman 129). Difference and membership are presented simultaneously. The repeated phrase "Others will" then projects the crossing beyond the present: "Others will enter the gates of the ferry and cross from shore to shore," "Others will watch the run of the flood-tide," and "Others will see the shipping of Manhattan" (129–30). The repetition makes ferry travel a public experience that strangers can perform again and again.

Whitman extends this shared practice across time. "Fifty years hence" and "A hundred years hence," future passengers will encounter the same river and urban relation (Whitman 130). The speaker then turns from "I" to "you": "It avails not, time nor place—distance avails not, / I am with you," followed by "Just as any of you is one of a living crowd, I was one of a crowd" (130). Community emerges through the repeatability of urban movement and perception. People separated by generations do not share ancestry or personal knowledge, but they cross the same space, look toward related scenes, and occupy the recurring position of "one of a crowd." Pronoun shifts, anaphora, and temporal extension give this relation poetic form.

The poem develops this relation through a sequence of spatial and grammatical crossings. The ferry itself is neither origin nor destination but an interval between shores, and Whitman makes that transitional space the site of collective perception. The phrase "every one disintegrated yet part of the scheme" holds separation and belonging in the same sentence: membership does not require absorption into an undifferentiated crowd. The anaphora of "Others will" then reproduces formally what the ferry does materially. Each repetition introduces another future subject into the same route and visual field, so the poem keeps reopening the scene to persons who are absent from the speaker's present. When "I" becomes "you," the reader is not simply told that experience is universal; he or she is placed in the position of a later passenger. The river, ships, islands, and facing shores serve as recurring objects of attention through which temporal distance can be imagined as relation. Thus the democratic community of *Crossing Brooklyn Ferry* is not founded on sameness but on repeatable participation in an urban practice.

Across *Song of Myself* and *Crossing Brooklyn Ferry*, Whitman thus constructs the image of a democratic America from differentiated persons linked through common social structures. The city does not abolish individuality; it makes individuals mutually perceptible through proximity, circulation, and repeated use of public space. The national image that emerges is consequently plural rather than homogeneous: America appears as a collectivity created through shared life.

3. Urban Modernity and America's Image in the World

Whitman's city writing also shapes an outward-facing American image. If American literature was to establish cultural

distinctiveness, it needed subjects and forms capable of representing contemporary experience rather than merely reproducing inherited European themes. The labor, machinery, transportation, and infrastructure concentrated in modern cities gave Whitman such material.

Song of the Exposition makes this literary ambition explicit. The poem asks the Muse to leave Greece and Ionia, marks the old classical accounts “Removed” and “To Let,” and announces that “a better, fresher, busier sphere, a wide, untried domain / awaits, demands you” (Whitman 158). Brady Earnhart notes that the poem turns Whitman’s literary competition with Europe into an explicit theme (191–92). Yet Whitman does not simply reject the “elder World”; he writes, “We do not blame thee elder World, nor really separate ourselves from thee” (160). The shift is instead toward present experience. Occupations, domestic work, steam power, express lines, gas, petroleum, and other signs of modern life become legitimate poetic subjects. American literary distinctiveness is constructed through what the poem chooses to see and celebrate.

Whitman’s treatment of the Muse is especially revealing because the poem turns literary inheritance into a spatial problem. Parnassus and the Mediterranean sites of classical poetry are not denied their historical value; instead, the Muse is asked to move. Commercial notices such as “Removed” and “To Let” humorously recode the old literary geography in the language of the modern city. This rhetoric does more than announce a break with Europe. It transfers poetic authority toward a “busier” present in which labor, domestic activity, machinery, fuels, and transportation can bear cultural meaning. The poem therefore constructs American distinctiveness by changing the scale and location of the poetic: what counts as elevated material is no longer secured by distance from ordinary life. The modern city, with its mixture of work, technology, commerce, and movement, becomes the environment in which a new literary image of America can be assembled.

The poem’s catalogue of infrastructure expands this modern image beyond the nation itself: “the Atlantic’s delicate cable,” “The Pacific railroad,” “the Suez canal,” tunnels, “the Brooklyn bridge,” and “lines of steamships threading every sea” (Whitman 163). Several projects named here are not American. Their importance lies in connection: cable, railroad, canal, tunnel, bridge, and steamship reduce distance and join regions into widening networks. Whitman thus represents American modernity not as isolation but as participation in an increasingly connected world. The city becomes the point where national modernization and transnational circulation meet.

The form of the catalogue reinforces this argument. Cable, railroad, canal, tunnel, bridge, and steamship appear in rapid succession without being arranged into a narrowly national inventory. Instead, they create a geography of linkage. The Atlantic cable and transcontinental railroad stretch communication across oceanic and continental distance; the Suez Canal and European tunnels extend the same logic beyond the United States; the Brooklyn Bridge inserts the American city into this larger field of engineered connection. By gathering them in one sentence, Whitman imagines modernity as simultaneity: projects separated by nation and region become parts of one present. The American image produced by this catalogue therefore depends on participation in a world system of movement rather than on cultural isolation. Technological confidence and international connectedness are made mutually reinforcing.

A Broadway Pageant makes this relation still more explicit. Written for the Japanese embassy’s visit to New York in 1860 and first published in the *New York Times*, the poem joins urban public space, national ceremony, and international contact. Whitley argues that New York allows Whitman to negotiate local, national, and global allegiances within the same public event (451–52). Whitman begins from a dense Broadway crowd and expands the procession until “Geography, the world, is in it” (194). The local street becomes a stage on which the wider world enters the American city.

This global image is grounded in material circulation. New York’s port brings foreign envoys, ships, commodities, and information into the city; Broadway converts international contact into public spectacle; print carries the event beyond the street. Whitley accordingly describes Whitman’s New York as “surrounded by the world” and shaped by international trade (473). In Whitman’s poetry, America’s position in the world is therefore not imagined from a sealed national center. It is produced through movement, exchange, and urban encounter.

A Broadway Pageant translates that infrastructural world into a human scene. Its movement is outward in scale

but inward in location: the poem never leaves Broadway even as its vision expands from a particular procession to “Geography, the world.” That expansion matters because the global is not introduced as an abstract map. It arrives through bodies in the street, the watching crowd, visiting envoys, commerce, and the printed circulation of the event. The pageant thus turns public space into a medium of representation. New York can stand for America not because the city contains the nation in miniature, but because it concentrates the encounters through which local, national, and international scales become visible together. The crowd is equally important. Unlike a ceremonial scene organized solely around political leaders, Whitman’s urban spectacle depends on ordinary spectators whose collective attention constitutes the event as public. The American image becomes outward-looking through participation: the world enters the city, while the city makes that encounter available to a wider reading public.

From *Song of the Exposition* to *A Broadway Pageant*, urban modernity allows Whitman to present America as both distinctive and connected. Industrial infrastructure provides a contemporary vocabulary through which American poetry differentiates itself from older literary conventions, while ports, transport, and public gatherings place the nation inside global networks. The outward-facing American image is thus modern, mobile, and international rather than culturally isolated.

Conclusion

Whitman’s urban writing does more than record the growth of nineteenth-century American cities. It turns the city into a poetic mechanism for constructing an American image. Internally, *Song of Myself* and *Crossing Brooklyn Ferry* represent democratic community through catalogues, crowds, mobility, and shared acts of seeing. Differentiated individuals remain distinct while becoming part of recurring structures of common life. Externally, *Song of the Exposition* and *A Broadway Pageant* transform machinery, infrastructure, ports, and transnational movement into poetic materials through which America appears modern, culturally distinctive, and connected to the world.

The city is therefore important not simply because it is recognizably American or modern. Its density and circulation allow Whitman to bring social plurality, collective experience, technological change, and global contact into a single poetic field. Through that field, he constructs an image of America as a plural democratic community and an outward-looking modern nation. Urban writing becomes one of the principal means by which his poetry gives literary form to the transformations of nineteenth-century American life.

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