CHAPTER – III
OF MANHATTAN THE SON

The splendor, picturesqueness, and oceanic amplitude and rush of these great cities, the unsurpassed situation, rivers, and bay, sparkling sea tides, costly and lofty new buildings, facades of marble and iron, of original grandeur and elegance of design, with the masses of gay color, the preponderance of white and blue, the flags flying, the endless ships, the tumultuous streets Broadway... the assemblages of citizens in their groups, conversations, trades, evening amusements, or along the by-quarters-these I say, and the likes of these completely satisfy my senses of power, fullness, motion etc. and give me, through such senses and appetites and through my aesthetic conscience, a continued exaltation and absolute fulfillment.

Walt Whitman, “Democratic Vistas”.1

Walt Whitman’s life and work have been associated with the city more often than that of any other major Nineteenth Century poet. The Mid-Nineteenth century was a period that saw the rapid growth and transformation of American cities but despite this very obvious change; the subject of the city was of little interest to poets in general. In the intellectual circles the reaction to the city was excessively negative. This refusal to acknowledging the social reality of urban life was a resistive stand and it was an aesthetic choice made by most of Whitman’s contemporaries. Whitman, on the other hand, had mixed feelings towards the city but he was willing to engage the growing reality of urban existence. It was in the city of New York that Whitman went through his incredible transformation from a journalist to a Poet. Whitman was the man of the city, as he wrote in the poem, “Song of Myself” he was “Walt Whitman, a kosmos, of Manhattan the son”. (LG, 497)
Whitman established himself permanently in the city of New York in 1841 and continued to live in the city till 1863. During this period the city of New York multiplied its population by over a million and became the third largest city in the western world. Whitman became an active part of this thriving city by involving himself with the city’s newspapers and magazines as a printer, editor and writer. Till his very last days, Whitman considered the city as an intrinsic part of his life. On his last birthday in 1891, he told his followers that his “preparatory and innovatory life on which everything rests, - New York and Brooklyn, experimentation, ... actual life from New York and Brooklyn.”

The growth of the city of New York paralleled the growth of Whitman as the poet of *Leaves of Grass*. The city played an important role in the maturing of his poetic imagination. In “Specimen Days” he acknowledges the importance of his urban experiences, “Broadway omnibus jaunts and drivers and declamations and escapades undoubtedly entered into the gestation of *Leaves of Grass*” (PW, 1:22-3). The reading of *Leaves of Grass* clearly suggests that the long Island of Whitman’s youth can be regarded as a representative sample of America in its totality. The poems of *Leaves of Grass* were representative of America as a book. The geographical surroundings of the land of his youth with its sea and sea life, harbors, trading, herding and grazing plains, the typical city of New York with its teeming population became the background for the setting of *Leaves of Grass*.

In a newspaper article written in 1856, “Broadway”, Whitman wrote, “The chief street of a great city is a curious epitome of the life of the city, and when that street, like Broadway, is a thoroughfare, a mart, and a promenade all together its representative character is yet more striking.” The thoroughfare, marketplace and promenade of the Broadway are also represented in the poems of *Leaves of Grass*. The city depicted in the poems shares the same features as ‘Broadway’. Whitman absorbed the scenes of the Broadway and inverted them into the model of the city represented in his poetry. This transformation of street into poetry was an idiolectic expression typical only of Whitman. The “endless procession”, as he found the scenes of city life to be, were a mode of serious imaginative perception for Whitman. In the year 1855, after the publication of *Leaves of Grass*, Moncure D. Conway at the suggestion of Emerson visited Whitman. The poet took Conway for

97
a walk through the city and Conway remarked later that, “Nothing could surpass the blending of insouciance with active observation in his (Whitman’s) manner as we strolled along the streets.” The ‘street’ had great importance for Whitman and his engagement with it was indeed engaging. In an article written by Whitman, “New York amuses itself—the fourth of July”, he wrote:

Out into the street again, up and down the city. In Narrow Street, lined with festering green gutters, the tenants, men and women, loaf at the doors in lazy apathy, imbibing the fat aroma, and the children dabble or crawl or bask in the plenteous feverish fifth. In thoroughfares, rowdy boys, with a pistol in each hand, go swinging them along, pointing them at anybody, while they load and make ready, and fire in the air with a boyish indifference to smell, and delight in banging. Firemen are grouped around corners, or in and about the open engine-houses, and the crowds walk hither and thither. (P.83)

The city with its materiality and social relations illustrates itself in the fabric of perception that Whitman uses to create a model for the city poetry. The passage from street to poem -- a ceaseless and complex process -- was one of Whitman’s unique poetic attempts.

To understand Whitman’s unique treatment of the city in his poetry and his mixed feeling towards it, it is imperative to examine his relationship to the literary tradition exemplified by the vast majority of Nineteenth-Century American poetry. As traditionally understood, the sentimentalist pastoral mode of lyric poetry was antithetical to the social setting of the city. Whitman obviously understood this convention but his approach to it was rather unconventional. In his poem, “Give Me the Splendid Silent Sun” (LG, P. 312). Whitman begins by a description of nature apart from the city:

Give me the splendid silent sun with all his beams full dazzling,
Give juicy autumnal fruit ripe and red from the orchard,
Give me an arbor, give me the trellis’d grape,
Give me fresh corn and wheat, give me serene moving animals
teaching content.
Give me nights perfectly quiet as a high plateau west of the
Mississippi, and looking up at the stars,
Give me odorous at sunrise a garden of beautiful flowers where I
can walk undisturbed,
Give me solitude, give me nature, give me again O Nature your
primal Sanities! (LG, 1-11)

Whitman here adheres to the nostalgic pastoral mode of lyric poetry. Nature is
what Whitman desires and the pastoral romantic descriptions remind one of
Wordsworth’s poetry. But as we move forward through the poem Whitman’s
preference shifts towards the city:

These to procure incessantly asking, rising in cries from my heart,
While yet incessantly asking still I adhere to my city,
Day upon day and year upon year O city, walking your streets,
Where you hold me enchained a certain time refusing to give me
up. (LG,13-16)

The poem began with a desire to escape the city, but it ends with the
contradictory gesture of embracing that very city which he hoped to escape from.
His desires are in total contradiction to the traditions laid down by traditional lyric
poetry. Whitman’s desire for “solitude” which he demands by saying, “give me
Nature, give me again O nature your primal sanities!” However, in the next part of
the poem he shifts to his new position on devotion to the city where he incessantly
declares, “still I adhere to my city”. This opposition between the pastoral lyric
poetry and the active real world of the city demonstrated the traditional divide
between the idiolectic mode of the rustic lyric poetry and the sociolectic mode of
the actual events associated with the city. Whitman’s desire for the city is more
like a celebration of its teeming life and events:

Give me faces and streets —give me these phantoms incessant and
endless along the trotters!
Give me interminable eyes-give me women-give me comrades and lovers by the thousand!
Let me see new one’s everyday-let me hold new ones by hand everyday!
Give me such shows –give me to streets of Manhattan!
Give me Broadway, with the soldiers marching!
Give me the sounds of the trumpets and drums! (LG, 24-28)

Whitman revels in the intensity and variety of the crowd. The sites of the tranquil nature with its “serene-moving animals” and “rural domestic life” of the previous passage gives way to a world represented by the city of Manhattan:

O such for me! O an intense life, full of repletion and varied!
The life of the theatre, bar-room, huge hotel, for me!
The saloon of the steamer! The crowded excursion for me’ the torchlight procession! (LG, 32-4)

The urban locales are used by Whitman to represent various facets of the city. For instance, the democratic aspect is highlighted by “the life of the theatre” where people from all walks of life come together for a single event, this democratic aspect of people from various backgrounds amalgamating is also represented by another event, the “torchlight procession”, where people with a common agenda come together to protest against or support a certain issue. The places of meeting and social interchange are represented by the “huge hotel” or the “crowded excursion.” Whitman wants to be “glutted, enriched of soul”, and only the city can give him things he apparently values, the objects of the poet’s love are the faces and eyes of the crowded of strangers passing by:

Manhattan crowds, with their turbulent musical chorus!
Manhattan faces and eyes forever for me. (LG, 39-40)

In another powerful poem of Whitman, “Song of the Open Road” (LG, p. 149) where the ‘road’ and his journey through it is a metaphor for the journey of life, Whitman’s vision does not take part in the pastoral impulse of literary escapism.
Whitman’s road becomes a place that represents a new opposition in poetic discourse since it becomes a topos neither of the city nor of the pastoral world but instead creates its own utopian social space. The road is represented in the poem as a socially democratic space as well as a privately emancipating space. It becomes a place where the poet becomes independent from the petty problems of everyday life:

Afoot and light hearted I take to the open road, healthy free, world before me,
The long brown path before me leading wherever I choose

(LG, 1-3)

Henceforth I ask not good fortune, I myself am good-fortune,
Henceforth I whimper no more, postpone no more, need nothing,
Done with indoor complaints, libraries, querulous criticisms, Strong and content I travel the open road. (LG, 4-7)

The course of the road signifies the passage of time; it is a journey that is embarked upon to search for the signs and symbols of the poet’s era. The journey is an attempt to discover the many sides and composition of the country’s social setup. The road for Whitman is a place where he can absorb all that he perceives without being selective:

You road I enter upon and look around, I believe you are not all that is here,
I believe that much unseen is also here,
Here the profound lesson of reception, nor preference nor denial

(LG, 16-18)

The central aspects of the poems of *Leaves of Grass*, especially in the early editions, were that everything that passed by Whitman was absorbed by him and not only that, it was accepted and made dear. In this poem too, all the people whom Whitman comes across are “not denied”. The compilation of all the social outcasts, “the black”, “the felon”, “the diseased”, “the beggar”, etc, is presented in a
democratic mix along with the “rich person’s carriage” and the “laughing party of
the mechanics”:

The black with his wolly head, the felon, the diseas’d, the
illiterate person, are not denied;
The birth, the hasting after the physician, the beggar’s tramp.
The drunkard’s stagger, the laughing party of the mechanics,
The escaped youth, the rich person’s carriage, the top, the eloping
couple,
The early market-man, the hearse, the moving furniture into the
return back from the town,
They pass, I also pass, anything passes, none can be interdicted.

(LG, 19-23)

The poet embraces every single person he meets on his journey, irrespective
of their moral standing, their social standing or their economic standing.
Whitman’s road is a social representative. It is an attempt – a cry for the reader to
join him in his search for a more satisfying life. Whitman was concerned about the
decaying urban environment of the masses. Therefore, in his vision of the open
road he rejects the capitalist system and instead distributes with abandon all the
 riches:

You shall not heap up what is call’d riches,
You shall scatter with lavish hand all that you earn or achieve.

(LG, 143-44)

Whitman strongly resented the system of the distribution of wealth and power in
Mid-Century America. It was clear to him looking around at the city in which he
lived that there were great discrepancies in the way life was lived by the different
sections of the society. Therefore his open road rejects the various forms of social,
economic and cultural distinctions. All the fine trimmings of culture such as art,
philosophy and religion, as well as decorative language are disregarded. The road
has a new function, to censor the existing economic order of labor and capital:
To see no possession but you may possess it, enjoying all without labor or purchase, abstracting the feast yet not abstracting one particle of it,

To take the best of the farmer's farm and the rich man's elegant villa and the chaste blessings of the well-married couple, and the fruits of orchards and flowers of gardens,

To take to your use out of the compact cities as you pass through,

To carry buildings and streets with you afterward wherever you go,

To gather the minds of men out of their brains as you encounter them, to gather love out of their hearts (LG, 174-78)

The poem eradicates all forms of social distinctions; the traveler is invited to partake the wealth created by the farmer as well as the industrialist. The traveler of this open road must also absorb the thoughts and feelings of all the people whom he will encounter on his way. Thus the poem obliterates the divide between the public and personal. The buildings and streets represent the public aspect and the private is represented by the thoughts and emotions of people.

The road is an idiolectic expression; it expresses the poet's internal disposition. The poem rejects conventionality and avoids association with either the pastoral or the urban mode:

Trusters of men and women, observers of cities, solitary toilers.

Pausers and contemplators of tufts, blossoms, shells on the shore.

Dancers at wedding dances, kissers of brides,

Tender helpers of children, bearers of children, soldiers of revolts,

standers by gaping graves, lowerers down of coffins...

(LG, 154-57)

In the above passage Whitman moves through many discursive registers, from the realistic world of cities to the lyrical life of nature and from the process of creating life to the process of burying the dead. The poem also moves through various settings, from the outdoors with its sky, clouds and trees to the indoors with its libraries houses and schools. In section 13 of the poem the poet moves to the urban...
setting with its hypocritical lifestyle. The city here becomes a place where people are trapped in a materialistic quagmire, and according to Whitman to rid the people of this vice their body has to be “stripped to the bone”.

Whitman collapses many traditional divisions as he moves along in his poetry. He collapses the divide between good and evil, public and social and pastoral and urban. Whitman abandoned the literary tradition of opposition between city and rural life, a central idea for the followers of traditional lyric poetry. His idiolect gave birth to the urban-pastoral mode. As Whitman moved along the streets of the city and absorbed the language of the masses (sociolect) his individual interpretation of the city scenes and life in interaction with the language of the society became his radical idiolect. Whitman absorbed the city in its social, historical as well as linguistic context. It becomes a site for his personal idiolectic literary expression.

To further understand Whitman’s specific relation to the city with its flux of social, personal and physical existence, a comparison with a poet like Wordsworth will be helpful. Whitman was not particularly fond of Wordsworth’s poetry and although he was aware of certain elements of similarity between their work, especially on dealing with issues such as death, immortality and human limitations, he was also aware of the differences in the approach adopted by the two. In a fragment, found among his papers after his death, Whitman expressed his view of these differences:

“July, by the Pond. The same thoughts and themes – unfulfilled aspiration, the enthusiasms of youth, ideal dreams the mysteries and failures and broken hopes of life, and then death the common fate of all, and the impenetrable uncertainty of the Afterwards – Which Wordsworth treats in his intimations of immortality, Bryant in his Thanatopsis and in the flood of years, and Whittier in his pieces. W.W. also treats in Leaves of Grass. But how different the treatment! Instead of the gloom and hopelessness and spirit of waiting and reproach, or bowed down submission as to some grim destiny, which is the basis and background of those fine poems.
Instead of Life and Nature growing state - instead of death coming like a blight and end all.  

As Wordsworth’s poetic elements are the objects of nature, Whitman’s are urban. The poem “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” which Whitman uses to establish an imaginative groundwork for urban poetry, when contrasted with Wordsworth’s “Immortality Ode”, brings out the difference in approach between the two poets. In his poem Wordsworth catalogues all the privileges of nature that he can no longer enjoy:

There was a time when meadow, grove, and steam,  
The earth, and every common sight,  
To me did seem  
Apparelled in celestial light,  
The glory and the freshness of a dream,  
It is now as it hath been of yore,  
Turn wheresoev’er I may,  
By night or day,  
The things which I have been seen I now can see no more.

Here Wordsworth addresses an audience who will read his poems when he is no longer alive and able to enjoy the pleasures of nature, he declares further in the poem that he can hear and see the exchange between his future readers and nature, he can “feel”:

In a thousand valleys far and wide,  
Fresh flowers; while the sun shines warm,  
And the Babe leaps up on his mother’s arm  
I hear, I hear, with joy I hear!  
Ye bless’d creature, I have heard the call  
Ye make to each other make; I see  
The heavens laugh with you in your jubilee;  
My heart is at your festival,  
My head hath its coronal,
The fullness of your bliss, I feel ... I feel it all.

Whitman too in his poem “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” connects with his future audience:

It avails not, time nor place-distance avails not,
I am with you, you men and women of a generation, or ever so many generations hence,
Just as you feel when you look on the river and sky, so I felt,
Just as any of you is one living crowd, I was one of a crowd,
Just as you are refresh’d by the gladness of the river and the bright flow, I was refresh’d,
Just as you stand and lean on the rail, yet hurry with the swift current, I stood yet was hurried
Just as you look on numerous masts of ships and the thick-stemmed pipes of steamboats, I look’d. (LG, 20-26)

By examining their relationship with their future audiences, both the poets seek to compensate the state of fallen relations with things that have had a special place in their lives due to their former experiences with them. These things are commonplace objects that have intrinsic value to both, but it is obvious through the reading of the work of both the poets that for one, nature is the element and for the other the urban environment is the ingredient. According to both poets all humans play a specific part in their lives, but Wordsworth finds the idea of the different parts played by man in the social life as a loss of innocence and originality. According to him customs, conventions and role-playing are an important part of social and particularly urban life that eventually takes away humanity from human beings. Whitman on the other hand disapproves because according to him to be human is to be a part of a social life and accept its variety. Whitman’s concept combines the ancient mystical ocean with the crowds he sees crossing on the Fulton Ferry, and those that he imagines will cross centuries later. Whitman foresees himself surviving in the consciousness of others, who share his humanity, (through social interaction) his city and his river:
Flow on, river! Flow with the flood tide, and ebb with the ebb-tide!
Frolic on, crested and scalloped-edged waves! Gorgeous clouds of
the sunset! Drench with your splendor me, or the men and
women generation after me!
Cross from shore to shore, countless crowds of passengers!
Stand up tall masts of Manhattan! Stand up, beautiful with the
Brooklyn! (LG, 101-105)

Whitman concludes “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” by making urban life essentially
the most spiritual form of life:

Thrive, cities – bring your freight, bring your shows, ample and
sufficient rivers,
Expand, being than which none else is perhaps more spiritual.
Keep your places, objects than which none else is more lasting.
(LG, 123-5)

Here Whitman implores the cities to thrive. He tells the river to bring its
freight and shows, to help the city to expand. This expansion of the city-life is
termed spiritual by Whitman and the objects that make up the city which are
despised by other poets are made “ever lasting” by Whitman. He sees the elements
of urban life as an opportunity to absorb and assimilate rather than create
experiences that bring alienation. In “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry”, Whitman is more
concerned with what the city can be made to represent rather than what it already
represents. The idea for him is to create adhesiveness through social interaction
that is an imperative part of urban existence. In the 1876 preface to the edition of
Leaves of Grass he wrote about the “Calamus” cluster (of which “Crossing
Brooklyn Ferry” is a part):

The special meaning of the Calamus cluster of Leaves of Grass
mainly resides in its political significance. In my opinion it is a
fervent, accepted development of comradeship, the beautiful and
same affection of man for man, latent in all young, north and south,
east and west it is by this, I say, and by what goes directly and
indirectly along with it that the United States of the future, are to be most effectually welded together, intercalated, annealed into a living Union. (PW, 2:471)

Whitman is comfortable with the city and its residents unlike Wordsworth who believes the city is filled with “danger of the crowd” and the people who dwell in the city are only a “weary throng” and “Babel din” to him. Wordsworth simply could not identify with the inhabitants of the city. In book 7 of the “Prelude” he describes his “Residence in London” where he finds himself overcome by the sights, sounds and faces he comes across. He is unable to comprehend the nature of the faces in the crowd and what lies beneath their countenance. Wordsworth feels he has to escape the city in order to write poetry. He feels alone and confused in the urban environment:

All movables of wonder from all parts are here, albinos, painted
Indians, always,
The horse of knowledge, and the learned pig, the stone-eater, the man that swallows fire, Giants, Ventriloquists, the invisible girl,
The bust that speaks and moves is goggling eyes, waxwork, clockwork, all the marvelous craft of modern merlins, wild beasts, puppet-shows,
All out-o-the’-way, far fetched, perverted things,
All freaks of nature, all Promethean thoughts
Of man-his dullness, madness, and their feats,
All jumbled up together to make up this parliament of masters.
Tents and booths meanwhile as if the whole were on vast mill are vomiting, receiving, on all sides, men, women, three years children babes in arms.

The city of Wordsworth, London, represented a complex mix of people – the Blacks, Indians, dwarfs and giants whom he puts in his poem in same category as pigs and horses. The big mixes represented by the racially, physically and
socially marginal people of the city are too chaotic for Wordsworth’s sentiments. For Wordsworth the city is a “Prison”, a hell from which he must escape.

Whitman, on the other hand, accepts the tremendous variety of human types that form the various layers of social life in the city. In the poem “I Sing the Body Electric”, he catalogues the various components of the city and the people who inhabit it -- the men and women, the wives, the laborers the firemen, the wrestler, the slave, all are presented in a completely different light than Wordsworth. Whitman chooses to stay away from the traditional response to the city adopted by Wordsworth. In doing so, Whitman attains a new place in American literature for his urban persona. For Whitman the people of the city do not represent any chaos or confusion. His catalogue is a celebration of the people who live in the city and of city life.

Wordsworth’s response to the city emphasizes the distinctions based on socio-economic status, the educated man of means vs. the member of the lower class. These feelings of Wordsworth are also seen in the works of later writers like Thomas Hardy, for whom the experience of the urban life was not very pleasant, he felt “that in the great city itself, the very place and agency or so it would seem, of collective consciousness, it is an absence of common feeling, an excessive subjectivity that seems to be characteristic”. According to these writers the modern city seems to be atomized more and more due to its growing size and industrialization. Unlike the village the city is a complex place where there is no homogeneity between people, but rather separateness due to an individualistic approach. For these writers the city is an unfriendly place that can only be used as a negative pole in the literary process.

The city of New York with its many layers of physical, social, historical and symbolic associations provided an intensely stimulating environment for a poet like Whitman. The city provided him with an unusually diverse poetic vocabulary due to his interaction with its vast population of different foreign nationals. New York offered a rich density of language and culture for Whitman, although the city lacked literary inheritance to provide him with a model for writing a city poem. Whitman’s exposure to poets like Tennyson from whom he could have meaningfully assimilated the idea of the city only came after he had
written the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* and literates like Emerson who tried to incorporate the city into their poetic vision could only do it metaphorically without much realism. Therefore, for Whitman the literary interest for a literature of the City came from the novel. If America had failed to generate a poet of the city by Mid-Century, it had produced plenty of urban fiction. In the years between 1844 and 1854 a considerable number of popular and sensational novels based on the cities of America, especially New York were being published. Some of the popular writers of the city novel of the time were John S. Adams, Osgood Bradbury, George Foster, Henri Foster, Joseph Ingram, Sylvester Judd, Peter Myers, George Lippard and many more, these novels carried titles like, *Sam Squab the Boston Boy, City Crimes,* and *The Beautiful Cigar-Vender! A Tale of New York,* or *The Life in New York and Boston.* These novels provide a good sense of the socialistic understanding of the city during Whitman’s formative years as a writer. In the year 1842 Whitman wrote a temperance novel *Franklin Evans,* his most commercially successful venture. Since this novel predated most of the city novels mentioned above, it was Dickens who provided an early model for urban literature for Whitman. Whitman wrote in 1842 “how much I love and esteem (Dickens) for what he has taught me through his writings”⁴. When Dickens visited New York in 1842, Whitman wrote in the *Democratic Review*:⁵

> Mr. Dickens never maligns the poor. He puts the searing iron to wickedness whether among poor or rich, and yet when he describes the guilty, poor and oppressed man, we are always in some way reminded how much need there is that certain systems of law and habit which lead to this poverty and consequent crime should be remedied... I cannot lose the opportunity of saying how much I love him and esteem him for what he has taught me through his writings and for the genial influence that these writings spread around them wherever they go. (P.99)

Walt Whitman probably learned from Dickens a general sensitvity to the various dimensions of the city life. Dickens had the ability in his writings to leave behind the avenues and major thoroughfares to shed more light on the habits of the
inhabitants of the lower world that included the slums, the lunatic asylum and the workhouse.

Whitman wrote a temperance novel *Franklin Evans; or The Inebriate, A Tale of the Times*. The novel tells the story of a farmer’s apprentice from Long Island “a mere boy, friendless unprotected, innocent of the ways of the world without wealth, favor or wisdom” who comes to the city of New York, falls, in with bad company, and succumbs to the temptations of the “wicked” and “deceitful” city.

You are taking a dangerous step, young man. The place, in which you are about to fix your abode, is very wicked, and as deceitful as it is wicked. There will be a thousand vicious temptations besetting you on every side, which the simple method of your country life has led you to know nothing of (Intemperance) will assail you on every side, and … if you yield to it, will send you back from the city, a bloated and weak creature, to die among your country friends, and be laid at a drunkard’s grave’ or which will to soon end your days in some miserable in the city itself.

Whitman’s fiction of the early 1840’s displays mixed feelings about the city and city life and although his relationship to New York was one of great ambivalence, it can be stated with certainty that he was acquiring a fascination with the city. On the side, Whitman’s city represented a positive influence, as he wrote in an article in the *New York Aurora*, “our city is the great place of the western continent, the heart, the brain, the focus, the main spring, the pinnacle, the extremity, the no more beyond, of the New World”. On another level the city represented evil, as he writes in “The Tomb Blossoms” (1842), “What is there in all your (city’s) boasted pleasure your fashions, parties balls and theaters, compared to the simplest of the delights we country folk enjoy?”

In the early editions of *Leaves of Grass* Whitman graduated from an innocent country boy to one of the “roughs”. He did not reject the good or the evil and did not acknowledge the division between moral and immoral as dictated by the discourse of social reform. Whitman stood indifferent to the discourse of his
early fictional writings. In the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, in the poem “Song of Myself”, he wrote:

I am not the poet of goodness only, I do not decline to be the poet of wickedness also.
What blurt is this about virtue and about vice?
Evil propels me and reform of evil propels me, I stand indifferent.
My gait is no fault-finder’s or rejecter’s gait,
I moisten the roots of all that has grown. (LG, 63-7).

Here Whitman is not concerned with presenting a parochial moralistic depiction of urban vice or a philosophical opinion on strategies of social reform. He seems to be fostering a more encompassing goal: the universal embrace of all forms of humanity and all forms of human discourse.

In the 1850’s when Whitman wrote his first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, he achieved his most radical objective, he reconciled the urban and the pastoral. In the poem “Song of Myself” he joins visions of the city and the country in single lines of poetry such as “The city sleeps and the country sleeps.”

The experience of the city may be opposed to that of the country but Whitman brings them into the same syntactic space in a manner that dissolves any such conflict. In section 8 of the poem, Whitman presents a kaleidoscopic display of colliding images, visual and aural:

The blab of the pave, tires of carts, stuff of boot-soles talk of the promenades,
The heavy omnibus, the driver with his interrogating thumb, the clank of the shod horses on the granite floor,
The snow-sleighs, clinking, shouted jokes, pelts of snow-balls,
The hurrahs for popular favorites, the fury of rous’d mobs,
The flags of the curtain’d litter, a sick man inside borne to the hospital,
The meeting of enemies, the sudden oath, the blows and fall,
The excited crowd, the policeman with his star quickly working his passage to the center of the crowd,
The impassive stones that receive and return so many echoes,
What groans of over-fed or half-starv’d who fall sunstruck or in fits,
What exclamations of women taken suddenly who hurry home and give birth to babes,
What living and buried speech is always vibrating here, what howls restrained by decorum,
Arrests of criminals, slights adulterous offer made, acceptance, rejections with convex lips,
I mind them or the show or resonance of them – I come and I depart. (LG, 154-66)

The poet is minding and not-minding the scene at the same time. For him there is worth and value in this particular mode of urban perception, a moving mode of spirited panorama. It constructs itself as a recounted movement through city space, a passage that attempts to comprehend a whole in its parts, to create an impression of an entirety out of disparate, disjointed parts. The poem also contains other small urban units that clearly present scenes of life passing by in the city. The various kinds of city dwellers are present in the poem but without any comment made on their moral character. The citizens are staged just as they are observed on the street:

The machinist rolls up his sleeves, .... The policeman travels his beat .... The gate-keeper marks who pass,
The young fellow drivers the express wagon, (I love him though I do not know Him) . (LG, 280-1)
The opium-eater reclines with rigid head and just-open’d lips,
The prostitute draggles her shawl, her bonnet bobs on her tipsy and pimpled neck,
The crowd laughs at her black-guard oaths, the men jeer and wink to each other,
In his preface to *Leaves of Grass*, in 1855, Whitman outlined the poet of America as “the equable man” who “judges not as the judge judges, but as the sun falling around a helpless thing”. Whitman’s observations as he wandered on the streets of his great city became the objects that he celebrated in his poems:

The glories strung like beads on my smallest sights and hearings, on the walk in the street and the passage over the river.

Whitman as America’s first urban poet began as a student of the city’s rhythms and sounds. Even the original name of the city of New York was more appealing to Whitman due to its aboriginal roots. “Mannahatta!” he was to exclaim, “How fit a name for America’s great democratic island city! The word itself, how beautiful! How aboriginal! How it seems to rise with tall spires, glistening in sunshine, with such New Word atmosphere, vista and action!” He preferred the name to New York, because it represented the cities past, its history and its roots, as he writes in the poem “Mannahatta”:

My city’s fit and noble name resumed, choice aboriginal name, with marvelous beauty, meaning,

A rocky founded island-shores where ever gaily dash the coming, going, hurrying sea waves.

In the passages of “Song of Myself” the poet fulfills his duties, which he outlines in the preface. He refuses to judge, he refuses to be the referee but participates in the game of life as it plays itself.

The power to observe was crucial for Whitman, as he stated himself that “simply to absorb one’s mind” in the crowd “should be business sufficient and worthy to fill the days of a serious man”. In one of the lesser-known poems of Whitman “Faces”, an important glimpse can be had of the poet’s attempt to convert into poetic material his personal experiences of passersby on New York streets:
Sauntering the pavement or riding the country by-road, to such faces!
Faces of friendship, precision, caution, suavity, ideality,
The spiritual-prescient face, the always-welcome common benevolent face. (LG 1855, 1-3)

Sauntering the pavement thus, or crossing the ceaseless ferry, faces and faces and faces,
I see them and complain not, and am content with all.

(LG 1855, 14-15)

The poem begins with the catalogue of the various kinds of faces he sees while “sauntering the pavement” of city streets. Whitman is content with what he sees and identifies with the basic human and social existence of the various people that live in the city; faces of all types are referred to:

The face of the singing of music, the grand face of natural lawyers and judges broad at the blacktop,
The faces of hunters and fishers bungled at the braws, the shaved blanh’d faces of orthodox citizens,
The pure, extravagant, yearning, questioning artists face,
The ugly face of some beautiful soul, the handsome detested or despised face,
The sacred faces of infants, the illuminated face of the mother of many children. (LG 1855, 4-8)

Yet, instead of falling into a state of self-satisfaction about the human life around him, Whitman dares the readers with a string of dreadful images:

This now is too lamentable a face for a man,
Some abject louse asking leave to be, cringing for it,
Some milk-nosed maggot blessing what lets it wring to its hole.
The face is a dog’s snout sniffing for garbage;
Snakes nest in that mouth, I hear the sibilant threat. (LG 1855, 17-19)
Whitman shifts his mode from a familiar urban scene to an unusual estimate of suppressed fears about the dark side of the human condition. At this point Whitman seems to be disappointed with his own ambitions for the human race as well as the highly raised assertions of the popular culture. His condition renders him unable to either sympathize or show indifference at this juncture. However, in the next series of images, Whitman moves through a variety of discourses related to various urban locations such as the dispensary, the hospital, the street, and the morgue:

This is a face of bitter herbs .... This an emetic .... They need no label,
And more of the drug-shelf .... Laudanum, caoutchouc, or hog’s lard.
This face is epilepsy, its worldless tongue gives out the unearthly cry,
Its veins down the neck distend.... Its eyes roll till they show nothing but their whites,
It’s teeth grit .... The palms of the hands are cut by the turn’d in nails,
The man falls struggling and foaming to the ground, while he speculates well.
This face is bitten by vermin and worms,
And this is some murder’s knife with half pull’d scabbard.
This face owes to the saxton his dismalest fee, an unceasing death-bell tolls here. (LG1855, 24-31)

Whitman ends this section of the poem with the lines “those are really men!... the bosses and tufts of the great round globe!” He introduces the reader to a less visited side of human existence not to condemn it but to include it in his vast poetic project. He appears to be celebrating the ugliness that is around him. In sections 4 and 5 of the poem the negative images are replaced by positive images of health and life:
This face is flavor'd fruit ready for eating; 
This face of a healthy honest boy is the programme of all good. 

(LG1855, 54-55)

Taken in totality the poem rejects distinctions between real and ideal, evil and good, diseased and healthy, urban and pastoral, secular and sacred. Whitman had learned to see beneath the face probably due to his personal experiences with his mentally challenged brother Eddy, as is clear in a personal subtext that appears in section 3 of the poem “Sleepers”. He blamed his father’s alcoholism for Eddy’s condition (Whitman identified alcoholism as an urban vice) and connects it metaphorically to the rapidly deteriorating conditions of cities like New York:

I knew of the agents that emptied and broke my brother,  
The same wait to clear the rubbish man the fallow tenement,  
And I shall meet the real landlord perfect and unharm’d every inch as good as myself.

Whitman compares his brother to a tenement that is about to collapse and by doing so he is actually pointing to the deeper social problem that is disfiguring the city. The housing facilities in the city of New York in the mid-1850s were in a deplorable condition, almost threatening to destroy the urban environment. The buildings, which were originally intended for private dwelling, were being rented out in little parts causing an overcrowded, unsanitary and badly maintained environment. Whitman’s intentional use of the tenement image is to bring to the reader’s attention the existence of various types of “faces” who lived there, especially those that were commonly ignored or denied. Throughout the poem there is a sense of an urban landscape with its movement of people on the streets or the to and fro from the ferry. Whitman’s city evokes both the positive, “healthy honest boy” who is the “programme of all good” to the negative discourse of poverty, madness and death.

Whitman’s fascination with the various physical “types” of people can also be found in one of his New York Dissected pieces entitled “Street Yarn”. (NYD, p. 127) The article is free from any strict geographic or social demarcation. It is a
single catalogue that includes people from all walks of life presented in a “uniform” parade. Whitman’s observations are those of a traveler as he wanders through the city:

Wild cataract of hair; absurd, bunged up felt hat, with peaked crown, velvet coat, all friggled over with gimp, but worn; eyes rather staring, look upward. Third rate artist.

Dress strictly respectable, hat well down on forehead; face thin, dry close-shaven; mouth with a gripe like vice; eye sharp and quick; brows bent, forehead scowling; step jerky and bustling. Wall-street broker.

Hands crossed behind him; step slow; dress well enough, but careless all over; face bent downward, and full of thought. Leading lawyer.

The traveler observes the occupants of the city as they pass him by, the artist, the Wall Street broker, the lawyer, etc. These snapshots of people from all walks of life do not stop at just the more respected citizens; the harlot and the gambler are also part of Whitman’s “yarns”:

Dirty finery, excessively plentiful; paint, both red and white, draggle tailed dress, ill-fitting, coarse features, unintelligent; bold glance, questioning, shameless, perceptibly, anxious hideous croak or dry, brazen ring in voice, affected but awkward, mincing waggling gait. Harlot. (NYD, p. 129)

It is obvious through the reading of the article that all are equal before the eye of the journalist-poet. Whitman does not travel around the city as an investigator but rather as a roamer, “leaning and loafer” watching as the “crowds go by”. The most interesting aspect about the article however is the way in which Whitman presents his yarns. The stunning, short and witty vignettes resemble notes for poetic descriptions rather than standard newspaper prose. In the vignette that describes the harlot, Whitman captures every detail of her physical and psychological existence. Whitman uses a method that provides details that resist
easy categorization in conventional social or moral terms. The portrait is realistic and does not adhere to any kind of stereotypical sensationalism. Whitman’s yarns are sociolectic in nature but when compared to the poems in *Leaves of Grass* such as “Faces” and “I Sing the Body Electric” it becomes clear that the cataloguing although similar in nature to the poems, lacks a personal touch; the idiolectic personal transformation. However, while reading Whitman’s prose or poetry a reader cannot ignore Whitman’s obsession with people from all walks of life present in the city. The faces of other human beings attract Whitman with a magnetism that he cannot ignore. The city with its people and specific way of life served as a central source of subject matter for his writings. For Whitman the *Leaves of Grass* was a literary embodiment of the city itself. In fact he compares his poems to a “great city”.

Whitman’s catalogues are a proper representation of the radically varied and constantly changing urban environment. When compared to the two city poems of Bryant, “Hymn of the City” (1830) and “The Crowded Street” (1843) it becomes clear how Whitman’s poems in *Leaves of Grass* capture the spirit of the city in a realistic and unembellished manner. The poem “Hymn of the City” despite its title does not really touch the cosmopolitan side of American civilization; it is rather an effort to assert God’s presence in nature and city alike. Despite the surface trimmings of a city poem, the primary style of writing does not break from that of romantic nature poetry. Although the poem is about the city, Bryant uses natural images to convey his message. God is present in the city only through extended similes that compare city life to natural phenomenon:

```
Thy golden sunshine comes
From the round heavens, and on their dwellings lies
And lights their inner homes;
From them thou fill’st with air the unbounded skies,
And givest them the stores of ocean, and the harvests of its shores. 6
The spirit is around,
Quickening the restless mass that sweeps along;
And this eternal sound
Voices and footfalls of the numberless through
```
Like the resounding sea,
Or like the rainy tempest, speaks of thee.

In the poem “The Crowded Street”, Bryant again falls short of Whitman’s realistic social vision. Bryant can only combine the various images of urban life through the inspiration of a higher power; only God’s grace can ultimately neutralize the arbitrary forces at work in the crowded street of the city:

Each, where his tasks or pleasures call,
They pass, and heed each other not.
There is who needs, and holds them all,
In his large love and boundless thought.
These struggling tides of life that seem
In wayward, aimless course to tend,
Are eddies of the mighty stream
That rolls to its appointed end.

According to Bryant the city is struggling to move on its course but this is thwarted by disease, hunger, as well as spiritual and physical deprivation, all of which lead to death or to sinful and corrupt behavior. In the poem Bryant gives a catalogue that includes the various aspects of urban life, from “happy homes” to the “dens of shame” but he falls short of Whitman’s all inclusive, realistic and positive social vision. The poem can only illuminate the commonly held views about the American urban experience, that the material progress in the city is being made at a cost, and the growth and expansion however wonderful is somehow contributing in releasing evil forces within a large metropolis:

And some to happy homes repair,
Where children, pressing cheek to cheek
These struggling tides of life that seem with mute caresses shall declare
The tenderness they cannot speak
Some famine struck, shall think how long
The cold dark hours, how slow the light.
And some who flaunt amid the throng
Shall hide in dens of shame tonight.

The two city poems of Bryant reflect his attitude toward the city that mirrors perfectly the contemporary sociolect. The popular literature of the time mainly concentrated on the negative institutions that dominated the city: the liquor groceries, taverns and fancy saloons with their customers who were largely drunks and disreputable fashionable loungers. These urban evils are linked to the serious social issues of poverty, violence and over crowding, which were the most apparent cause of dislike for the city. However the sociolect of the time was ignoring the positive side like the fact that New York had become the largest and most economically vital city in America. Bryant and his contemporaries however chose to ignore this aspect of the urban reality and used forceful imagery to convey the decaying conditions of life in the city. Unlike Whitman, Bryant cannot detach nature’s images from the city; he constantly brings in the sea, the tide, the tempest, the stream, the rain etc:

Let me move slowly through the street
Filled with an ever shifting train,
Amid the sound of steps that beat
The murmuring walks like autumn rain.

Bryant’s use of the romantic nature mode only takes away from the realistic aspects of city life. His poetry lacks the practical approach used by Whitman, which is more suited for the depiction of city life. The comparison between the two poets helps to highlight how and why Whitman’s approach to the city was a radical one.

However in the year 1840, before the conceptualization of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman seemed to have accepted the discursive stance of Bryant and his contemporaries. He appears to be in tune with the prevalent sociolect of the time. During this early period of his career he wrote a poem, “Young Grimes”, published in the *Long Island Democrat*. In the poem he cautions of the perils of urban life, and recommends a rural environment in which to lead a peaceful life. The poem’s
The title character has rejected the allure of the city, including its fashions, and has mainly stayed away from its evil institutions:

He does not spend more than he earns in dissipation’s round;
But shuns with care those dangerous rooms where sin and vice abound.8

In the poem Whitman asks his reader to “Leave the wide city’s noisy din/the busy haunts of men”. Clearly the urban set up did not sit well with him here, and his admonition to the readers seems sincere. In the poem, Whitman’s use of the prevailing sociolect is very apparent and it is clearly in marked contrast to his invention of a new mode of city poetry in the *Leaves of Grass*. The new mode of poetry that Whitman invented especially for the *Leaves of Grass*.

The radical treatment of the urban poetic in his poems can be most clearly seen in the poem “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry”, written for the 18th edition in which it was called the “Sundown Poem”, Whitman’s greatest urban poem. To further understand how various features of Whitman’s emotional and intellectual life were drawn together to the point where he could begin to produce the kind of urban poetry he ultimately wrote in *Leaves of Grass*, and to observe Whitman’s development of an urban poetic voice, one must reflect upon the relation between “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry”, and an article Whitman wrote nine years earlier about a visit to a gallery of photographs. Whitman’s fascination with photography is well known and well documented. Whitman was a regular visitor of photographic exhibitions and he used photography as a metaphor for his journalism and his poetry. Whitman wrote an article entitled “A Visit to Plumbe’s Gallery”, which appeared in the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* of July 2, 1846. This article is of great importance; it is one of the earliest accounts of the experience of looking at a photograph, documented by a major author. The vocabulary of the article foretells the vocabulary as well as the conceptual foundations of Whitman’s exploration of the poetic dimensions of modernity in his poetry. At the opening of “A Visit to Plumbe’s Gallery” Whitman describes the experience of looking at human faces in the photographs, “human eyes gazing silently but fixedly upon you, and creating the impression of an immense Phantom Concourse speechless and motionless, but
yet realities. You are indeed in a new world a peopled world, though mute as a grave”.

Whitman experiences the photographs that are highly realistic representations of the human face as follows:

We love to dwell long upon them to infer many things, from the text they preach to pursue the current of thoughts running riot about them. It is singular what a peculiar influence is possessed by the eye of a well-painted miniature or portrait. It has a sort of magnetism. We have miniatures in our possession, which we have often held, and gazed upon the eyes in them for the half hour! An electric chain seems to vibrate, as it were, between our brain and him or her preserved there so well by the limner’s cunning. Time, space, both are annihilated, and we identify the semblance with the reality and even more than that. For the strange function of looking at the eyes of a portrait, sometimes goes beyond what comes from the real orbs themselves. ⁹

In “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry, (LG, p.159) Whitman experiences a similar sense of the elimination of time and space. Addressing the crowds that will travel to and fro between Manhattan and Brooklyn in the future, he asks: “What is it then between us? … Time nor place distance avails not.” Whitman feels a deep yet uncertain sense of connection to the crowds of the future as well as the many silent faces that cross with him on the ferry. In the poem Whitman writes:

What is more subtle than this which ties me to the woman or man that looks in my face?
What fuses me into you now, and pours my meaning into you?

(LG, 96-7)

Here Whitman feels a connection with the various faces that he comes across as he travels on the ferry. The delicate connection, the subtle cord that “ties” him to the faces on the ferry has already been experienced by him in “A Visit to Plumbe’s Gallery” where he felt connected to the images of faces by an “Electric Chain”. At
the Gallery, Whitman felt that the silence of the many faces in the photographs, the “Phantom concourse”, provided him with an opportunity for reflection. He feels free to “pursue the current of [his] thoughts running riot” around the gazing images. He has the same sentiment of power in relation to the gazing faces on the ferryboat. At the end of the poem Whitman writes:

You have waited, you always wait, you dumb, beautiful ministers,
We receive you with free sense at last, and are insatiate hence forward. (LG, 126-7)

Here the transformation is clear, the “speechless”, “mute”, yet “beautiful and multifarious” daguerreotypes of “A Visit to Plumble’s Gallery” have clearly taken the shape of the “dumb ministers” who are “plant[ed]... permanently” inside the poet’s “soul”:

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 towards eternity,
Great or small, you furnish your parts toward the soul.

(LG, 129-32)

The similarity of the language used in the article and in the poem, as well as the similar structure, outlined in each, for the mechanism of interacting with silent faces, suggests that, for Whitman, there was a significant analogy between the experience of looking at photographs and the experience of the urban crowd. Like a photographer Whitman’s observations as a flaneur offer a collection of images that, because of the way in which they are selected and captured, appear to be readily available to an interpreting consciousness. Whitman through his observations of the scenes of city life around him that are unmediated images of the actual surface of reality, presenting itself as commonplace and ordinary to be evaluated in terms of its accuracy. These images are more “real”, because they have been encountered, rather than created. Whitman claims that the silence of the faces is an opportunity for him to “infuse” and “pour in” his own meanings.
The nature of Whitman’s attempt at observation is to a certain degree represented by the fact that the word he constantly uses, in the article and the poem is the word “gaze”. In a “Visit to Plumbe’s Gallery” the “human eyes” of the photographs are described as “gazing silently but fixedly upon you”. The word also appears in “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry”, where Whitman writes: “Gaze, loving and thirsting eyes, in the house or street or public assembly!” The word gaze differs from the word observe or look in that it is less definite and more comprehensive. Like taking a photograph, gazing does not necessarily privilege any portion of the field of vision that the eye gazes on, in a photograph or in an urban crowd it does not surrender its mystery or allow itself to be read but captures all, yet this increases its fascination. In the article on Plumbe’s gallery, the “strange fascination” of photographs, a fascination that “goes beyond what comes from the real orbs themselves”, is clearly related to what he finds to be the strange fascination of faces in an urban crowd in “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry”. This fascination, which, as Whitman writes in “A Visit to Plumbe’s Gallery,” is profound because it is obscure. It is an experience for which the flaneur has no discourse, for which Whitman when he wrote the article had no discourse. However, when Whitman wrote “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry”, he had developed the foundation of a discourse that opened up new possibilities for the poetic representation of modern urban objects. The development of this discourse is Whitman’s development as an urban poet.

In “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry”, Whitman takes a mental photograph of New York Harbor, with himself in its midst. He visualizes what it would be like to be part of the future by looking at the mental picture he has created of every object that surrounded him at a specific moment in time. In the poem, Whitman represents himself as both subject and object, both living and dead. He writes in the poem:

Live, old life! Play the part that looks back on the actor or the actress!

Play the old role, the role that is great or small according as one makes it!
Consider, you who pursue me, whether I may not in unknown ways
be looking upon you;
Be firm, rail over the river, to support those who lean idly, yet haste
with the hasting current;
Fly on, sea-birds! Fly sideways, or wheel in the large circles high in
the air;
Receive the summer sky, you water, and faithfully hold it till all
downcast eyes have time to take it from you!
Diverge, fine spokes of light, from the shape of my head, or
anyone’s head in the sunlit water. (LG, 110-116)

In the above account of the ferry passage, Whitman represents himself as the only
dead person in the middle of a crowd of the living. What Whitman experiences on
the Ferry is similar to the understanding of the transitory nature of the crowd that is
part of the eventful effect of viewing a frozen yet extensive image of it.
Whitman’s new discourse impels him to explore new ways to represent cities,
ways that are rooted in the observations of the flaneur, and yet transcend them.
Although “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” is not specifically concerned with
photography, it takes as its starting point “the photographic ecstasy” that Whitman
experiences when he gazes at faces in an urban crowd as if they were photographs
on the walls of Plumbe’s gallery. The poem is a reflective account of a process, an
exploration of the way in which an arrested gaze may lead to an emphatic encounter
with the dead, opening into a vision of the poet himself as dead, and viewed, as in
a photograph, by future generations gazing across time.

By writing “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” Whitman incorporated within
“Leaves of Grass” the idea of a poem that took as its locale the city itself, or rather
the two cities of New York and Brooklyn, between which the Ferry travels. The
poem aspires to capture scenes that are recorded not only for the benefit of the
readers of Whitman’s time but also for those of the future:

Whatever it is, it avails not – distance avails not, and place avails
not,
I too lived, Brooklyn of ample hills was mine,
I too walk’d the streets of Manhattan island, and bathed in the water’s around it,
I too felt the curious abrupt questionings stir within me,
In the day among crowds of people sometimes they came upon me,
I too had been struck from the float forever held in solution,
I too had received identity by my body,  (LG,56-63)

Through the reading of the poem it becomes clear that Whitman breathed imaginative spirit into the crowded and polluted East River.

Whitman creates a new idiolect when he idealizes a common reality so as to embrace the urban experience more fully. The poem presents an urban landscape alive with crowds, and with continuous movement. In the poem Whitman experimented with a new poetic register away from the informal and declarative style of the first edition. Whitman uses a diction that is more elevated and self-conscious:

River and sunset and scallop-edg’d waves of flood – time?
The sea-gulls oscillating their bodies, the hay boat in the twilight, and the belated lighter?
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 and pours my meaning into you?

(LG, 93-97)

In the passage as well as in many other parts of the poem the language used by Whitman is highly affective and lyrical in keeping with the Romantic mode of writing, yet, Whitman’s poetry here is somehow melodious but it still resists complete categorization as lyric poetry. The poem is an important city poem and yet it achieves its status less due to its description of the urban landscape and more through Whitman’s radical idiolect that makes the reader a part of a specific urban
landscape. Although the setting of the poem is suspended between east and west, sky and river, city and country, and day and night and combined with the hazy vaporous, and shimmering quality of a visual picture:

I too many and many a time cross'd the river of old,
Watched the twelfth – month sea-gull, saw them high in the air floating with motionless wings, oscillating their bodies,
Saw how the glistening yellow lit up parts of their bodies and left the rest in strong shadow,
Saw the slow-wheeling circles and the gradual edging toward the south,
Saw the reflection of the summer sky in the water,
Had my eyes dazzled by the shimmering track of beams,
Look'd at the fine centrifugal spokes of light round the shape of my head in the sunlit water,
Look'd on the haze on the hills southward and south-westward,
Look'd at the vapor as it flew in fleeces tinged with violet,

(LG, 27-35)

It is clear from the reading of the poem that Whitman does present a good deal of geographic detail but his interest in the lives or appearance of the moving populace is limited. What he aims for is establishing an “orgasmic union” between poet, reader and city. The aim is to make the poet, the reader and the citizens of Mannahatta members of a harmoniously pastoralized city. The poem is highly personal and Whitman’s idiolect is a specific reflection on place and time. The following passage of the poem illustrates how the poem is not a social or historical commentary but a highly radical idiolect:

The impalpable sustenance of me from all things at all hours of the day,
The simple, compact, well join’d scheme, myself disintegrated, every one disintegrated yet part of the scheme,
The similitude’s of the past and those of the future,
The glories strung like beads on my smallest sights and hearings, on the walk in the street and the passage over the river,
The current rushing so swiftly and swimming with me faraway. The others that are to follow me, the ties between me and them, The certainty of others, the life, the love, sight, hearing of others. (LG, 6-12)

The poem is about the East River Ferry that carried millions of people, serving as an important symbol of American democracy. Since it provided transport for the population as a whole and traveling was no longer a privilege of a few it could be thought of as having significant social force. However, the use of a highly personalized register such as “impalpable sustenance of me”, “similitude’s of the past and those of the future” and “glories strung like beads” suggests Whitman’s disengagement with the sociolect in order to write a radical idiolect. The final section of the poem does describe the various sights of the growing city, but it also brings in abstractions:

Appearances, now or henceforth, indicate what you are,
You necessary film, continue to envelop the soul,
About my body from me, and your body for you, be Hung our divinest aromas,
Thrive, cities- bring your freight, bring your shows, Ample and sufficient rivers,
Expand, being than which none else is perhaps more spiritual,
Keep you places, objects than which none else is more lasting.

(LG, 120-25)

You have waited, you always wait, you dumb, beautiful ministers,
We receive you with free sense at last, and are insatiate henceforward. (LG, 126-7)
The “necessary film” that “envelops the soul”, the “divinest aromas” that encircle the body, and the “dumb, beautiful ministers” bear a relationship to both the city as well as the visionary objects of Whitman’s personalized register.

One of the most obvious attributes in Whitman’s approach to urban life is his assertion that intimacy can be attained without speech and in the space of a moment; he imagines a form of love suited to the conditions of urban life, a form of love that can be enjoyed with strangers. What Whitman was attempting was to convert a kind of freedom and power experienced by a detached spectator in a crowded city into a new form of exalted experience. This new experience achieved through a moment of union with the crowds was according to Whitman a primary visual form of love that could be the basis of a new social bond appropriate to the conditions of urban life. A reading of Whitman’s city poems suggests that the city became a site of the sociolect for Whitman and the city street became the physical representation of a sociolectic crossing. The language of the society entered the poetic text as Whitman encountered the masses and combined different linguistic registers to form his own private idiolect.

The city for Whitman also functions as a space in which all forms of distinctions can be evaded. Whitman as is seen in the following brief scenes from “Song of Myself” engages all types of inhabitants of the city:

Comrade of raftsmen and coalmen, comrade of all
Who shake hands and welcome to drink and meat,
A learner with the simplest, a teacher of the thought fullest
A novice beginning yet experiment of myriads of seasons,
Of every hue and cast am I, of every rank and religion,
A farmer, mechanic, artist, gentleman, sailor, Quaker,
Prisoner, fancy man, rowdy, lawyer, physician, priest.

(LG, 343-49)

Whitman’s poetry absorbs all the people who are a part of the urban scene; he does not reject or ignore the dark side of human existence. In the poem “The City Dead House”, (LG, p. 367) Whitman includes a place almost avoided by all poets in their poems and goes a step further when he acknowledges the dead body of a prostitute
left unclaimed. Whitman addresses the unpleasant and hostile conditions that are a part of the urban existence, but at the same time he refuses to condemn, rather he embraces and refrains from distancing himself:

By the city dead–house by the gate,
As idly sauntering wending my way from the clangor,
I curious pause, for lo, an outcast form, a poor dead prostitute brought,
Her corpse they deposit unclaimed, it lies on the damp brick pavement,
The divine woman, her body, I see the body, I look on it alone,
That house once full of passion and beauty, all else I notice not,
Not stillness so cold, nor running water from faucet, nor odors horrific impress me,
But the house alone – that wondrous house – that delicate fair house – that ruin!
That immortal house more than all the rows of dwellings ever built!

(LG, 1-9)

The “dead-house” is immortal for Whitman and he prefers it to all the other buildings, the body of the dead prostitute is also “divine” for him. Prostitutes symbolize the most downtrodden and ignored strata of society. The institution of prostitution is a product of the urban way of life and represents its ugly side, a side Whitman was willing to engage and explore in his poems. In the poem “To a Common Prostitute”, (LG, p. 387) Whitman wrote:

Be composed – bet at ease with me – I am Walt Whitman, liberal and lusty as Nature,
Not till the sun excludes you do I exclude you,
Not till the waters refuse to glisten and rustle for you, do my words refuse to glisten for you. (LG, 1-3)

Here, Whitman compares himself with Nature and claims to be non-discriminating like Nature. He even goes so far as to make an appointment with the woman and
expects the woman not to forget him till they meet again. It is clear from the reading of the poem that he is not so much interested in embracing or rejecting the woman and her profession, but he is more interested in making all that the city represents as a part of his poem. The city has to enter his poems with everything it represents, good or evil. As an instance of Whitman’s intent attention toward the city and its various features, a passage from an 1868 letter to Peter Doyle written by Whitman can be quoted, where Whitman describes a ride stop a Broadway omnibus with an omnivorous and voracious eye:

You know it is a never-ending amusement and study and recreation for me to ride a couple of hours on a pleasant afternoon on a Broadway stage in this way. You see everything as you pass, a sort of living, endless panorama – shops and splendid buildings and great windows-crowds of women richly dressed continually passing – a perfect stream of people – and then in the streets a thick crowd of carriages, stages, carts, hotel and private coaches ... and so many tall ornamental, noble buildings many of them of white marble, and the gayety and motion on every side: you will not wonder how much attraction all this is on a fine day, to a great loafer like me, who enjoys so much seeing the Busy world move him, and exhibiting itself for his amusement, while he takes it easy and just looks on and observes.

Here, Whitman captures the city’s great promenade and market place, taken in as a panoramic view, a spectacle of visual and auditory procession. The letter to Doyle as well as the city poems of Leaves of Grass shows that for Whitman the mere seeing of things means serious business, generating profits of a different kind from those recognized by the practical and specialized world. As an urban loafer, Whitman differs from literary authorities such as Wordsworth and Emerson. He sees the world in a new non-habitual light, a new approach in which Whitman’s descriptions of the city are marked with flaunted laziness, an incapacitated stare working to an intense appreciation of an unencompassable yet embraced
Whitman’s idiolect responds to everything that is a part of the city, from the human crowds with their passions, sorrows and happiness to the concrete and tangible:

Would but they flagstones, curbs, facades, tell their inimitable tales:
Thy windows rich, and huge hotels – thy side-walks wide; (LG, 7-8)

In his descriptions of the city in the letter to Peter Doyle, Whitman’s senses seem to be over whelmed by the flow of sensations, even as he has the impression of experiencing a heightened awareness of his surroundings. Whitman’s language is saturated with the icons of socio-cultural distinction: the “first-class teams”, the splendor of the “great street”, and the “tall, ornamental, noble buildings” of white marble. The urban experience is stimulating for Whitman, and although there are certain latent fears about the socio-economic situation of Urban America, he asserted on his 1878 visit to New York that “an appreciative and perceptive study of the current humanity of New York gives the directest proof yet of successful Democracy, and of the solution of that paradox, the eligibility of the fully developed individual with the paramount aggregate.” But the very next year in 1879, he is “amazed” at the sight of “three quite good-looking American men, of respectable personal presence... carrying chiffonier-bags on their shoulders, and the usual iron hooks in their hands, plodding along, their eyes cast down, spying for scraps, rags, bones, etc.” Scenes like this prompted fear in Whitman and he began to worry that the “vast crops of poor, desperate, dissatisfied, nomadic, miserably –
waged populations, such as we see looming over us in late years", would consume the United States “like a cancer of lungs or stomach”. And a decade later in an 1889 conversation with Horace Trouble, Whitman referred to Camden as “an ever larger and larger congregation of maggots, human maggots”, and referred to “under flowing currents of life ... so low, so vile, so dirty, so mean” (Walt Whitman in Camden), but despite these intermittent outbursts of rejection his preference for the turbulent and stimulating interaction with urban life always replaces the peaceful enjoyment of nature, “I can no more get along without horses, civilization, aggregations of humanity, meetings, hostels, theatres,” he writes, “than I can get along without food”: “Have I, too, somewhere in my writings been shallow enough to speak of living absolutely alone? Of how good it was to hear nothing but silent Nature of woods, mountains far recesses? To see no tormenting sights, reeking presence of men, women, children?” (PW, 1892)

Whitman’s poetic was unique and although his idiolect was immersed in city life, and he loved it, he could still maintain an objective attitude towards its faults and failures. Among the Nineteenth Century American poets he was, in this respect unique. In the New York Dissected article, “Advice to Strangers”, he elaborates in detail upon the Knaveries and brutalities to be expected of men whose childhood was spent in the gutter or grog shop. A grasp of such realism in him is essential to the understanding of the mind of the poet. If he believed in the Modern man, “immense in passion, pulse and power”, it was not because he had not seen the villainy of many contemporary men in the great cities but because he accepted the reality of human existence that includes both the good and the ugly. When in his poetry, Whitman declared that he would be the poet of evil also, he meant that it was a feature of the urban universe, essential to its growing self-realization but not to be admired as an absolute. It was in articles like “Advice to strangers” that Whitman was developing his evolutionary philosophy. The evil of the city is accepted but not condoned; Whitman’s radical idiolect was realistic, ready to address all aspects of city life good or bad:

Every great city is a sort of countryman-trap. Accordingly there are here in New York various kinds of scamps who do business upon the inexperience of strangers; and accounts are continually
appearing in papers of this or that sojourner robbed, swindled, and perhaps beaten. (NYD, p135)

The above excerpt from the article, “Advice to strangers” shows Whitman’s journalistic writings becoming a foreground to Whitman’s revolutionary poetic discourse.

As Whitman aged and progressed in his literary career, his beloved New York City changed from a small and growing metropolis to an urban magnet with a population of millions. It was obvious that such changes in New York and other cities would have a new impact on American literature and culture. For the first time, American writers had at their disposal the substantial human, social and discursive resources of a large city. With the stimulating new visual and social atmosphere the city provided new responsibilities and new aesthetic choices. In order to be an all-American poet, one had to come face to face with disturbing, even gruesome realities, including the reality that not all of America’s citizens were good. As the century wore on it became harder and harder for Whitman to deal with the new urban environment. Although he wished to remain “one of the roughs”, there were aspects in the city that were hard even for him to accept. In his later years Whitman lost his remarkable openness to the experiences of the city, such as his visit to the dangerous urban ghettos.

In the poem “Song of the Answerer”, (LG, p. 166) Whitman attempts to write about the purpose of the poet. The poet was to sort out social distinctions by “translating” all forms of human experience into a universal poetic language:

Every existence has its idiom; everything has an idiom and tongue,
He resolves all tongues into his own and bestows it upon men,
And any man translates, and any man translates himself also,
One part does not counteract another part, he is the joiner, he sees how they join.
He says indifferently and alike How are you friend? To the President at his levee,
And he says Good-day my brother, to Cudge that hoes in the sugar-field,
And both understand him and know that his speech is right.

(LG, 31-36)

Whitman is distinct about whose idiom he will “translate” and whom he will join to whom: the joining of the “President at his levee” to the “Cudge that hoes in the Sugar-field” is only the most explicit example. Whitman is obviously committed to the democratic act of joining people from all strata of society but he is equally concerned with the poet’s universal acceptance by the people. In his dream of embracing and being embraced by all, he shows that poetic vocation can be translated to any profession, trade, or circumstance. In his role of poet, or “Answerer”, he can “walk with perfect ease in the capitol,” but at the same time he can be taken for a mechanic, sailor or soldier:

He walks with perfect ease in the capitol,
He walks among the Congress, and one representative says to another, here is our equal appearing and new. (LG, 37-8)

Then the mechanics take him for a mechanic,
And the soldiers suppose him to be a soldier, and the sailors that he has follow’d the sea,
And the authors take him for an author, and the artists for an artist,
And the labourers perceive he could labour with them and love them,
No matter what the work is, that he is the one to follow it or has follow’d it,
No matter what the nation, that he might find his brothers and sisters there, (LG, 39-44)

The sailor and traveler underlie the maker of poems, the answerer,
The builder, geometer, chemist, anatomist, phrenologist, artist all these underlie the marker of poems, the answerer. (LG, 73-4)

Whitman’s catalogue of professions and social types includes the “author” and “artist” as if to distance himself as a poet from these two categories. His description of the poet in 1855 Leaves of Grass was that of the direct spokesperson
of the people, the one who could maintain an unmediated relationship to all forms of language, all aspects of the sociolect. But as Whitman’s career progressed he began to see his own work much more in terms of the interdependent between functions of art and authorship.

The public reception to the first (1855) edition of *Leaves of Grass* was disastrous. It made Whitman realize that he needed a distinctive style of writing in order to mark himself as a poet for all ages, as well as to legitimize himself within his own profession as a serious “author” and not merely a literary eccentric. Whitman came to realize that to translate human discourses to poetry he would have to transform them into an acceptable high cultural mode, into an idiolect that mirrored the exigencies of “art” as much as the pressures of “reality”. Whitman’s poetic relationship to the city changed not only in relation to social and historical changes in New York, but in relation to the needs and pressures of his own career that was being defined more and more by the persona of the Good Gray Poet. This produced not simply one language among others, but a distinctive form of language, one suited to the “Higher” aims for which he felt he was ordained as America’s bard.

To be human, Whitman proposes, is to be fluid. It is to be capable of imaginative empathy, and the sort of personal change that involves the appropriation of the personal traits one sees in others. Although Whitman’s concept of unity is mystical and intangible, it nevertheless joins him with the crowds of the future centuries after he is dead. Whitman’s idea of immortality is the survival in the consciousness of the future generations, who will share his humanity, his city, and his river.