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The Real Thing

Imitation and Authenticity in American Culture, 1880-1940

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In trying to understand the relationship between the American artist and the new technological civilization of the nineteenth century, we can do no better than begin with the poet who attempted to reinvent poetry in America and who would thereby provide a model for so many artists coming after him, who were likewise seeking to establish an art appropriate to the conditions of the country. More than any other artist of his time, Whitman had tried to reproduce in his work the entirety of American civilization—its industrial and urban character as well as its spiritual, aesthetic, and demotic wealth. The lifelong creation of *Leaves of Grass* was to be a kind of counterpart to the United States, an epic embodiment of the national character and landscape, a poetic equivalent of the new reality of America, and also, of course, the picture of an ideal self—"Walt Whitman, a kosmos"—that the poet created out of his historical identity to serve as a model for his readers.

Whitman is our first modern poet because he was first to invent a new form appropriate to the modern age, a form that would reflect the new relationship between part and whole that a mass civilization would establish, a form that could contain within the bounds of the artwork the rich particularity and clashing contradictions of American life. That form is, of course, the free-verse catalogue—a series of unrhymed lines of varying length, sometimes numbering over a hundred at a stretch, each of which names some single, concrete, complete image of a person or thing or place; it is a form that stands classical epic poetry on its head, making what used to be an extended pause in the action into the main substance and structure of the poem.

There can be no single explanation for Whitman's great invention, but we can, to begin with, offer certain literary precedents for Whit-
man's verse. Milton, and much later Carlyle, for example, had argued that rhyme was not essential to poetry; and the popular Englishman Martin Farquhar Tupper gave supporting evidence of a sort in his thousands of lines of sententious wisdom, composed in a verse that was indeed unrhymed, but otherwise wholly congenial to the sentiments and imagery of the parlor. Moreover, Emerson's advice in "The Poet" about meter-making arguments undoubtedly gave Whitman strength in his experiment, along with Emerson's notion that "bare lists of words are found suggestive to an imaginative and excited mind." A reviewer for the London Examiner tried to give a lineage to the anomalous Whitman and came up with the following description, which Whitman had the good humor to include among the reviews at the back of the 1856 Leaves of Grass:

Suppose that Mr. Tupper had been brought up to the business of an auctioneer, then banished to the backwoods, compelled to live for a long time as a backwoodsman, and thus contracting a passion for the reading of Emerson and Carlyle? Suppose him maddened by this course of reading, and fancying himself not only an Emerson but a Carlyle and an American Shakespeare to boot when the fits come on, and putting for his notion of that combination in his own self-satisfied way, and in his own wonderful cadences? In that state he would write a book exactly like Walt Whitman's "Leaves of Grass."

The reviewer was probably not far from the mark; what he left out, however, was at least as important—namely, those "influences" that came not from the printed page but from the contemporary urban world that Whitman experienced so deeply and fully. Whitman was certainly right when he said that "my 'Leaves' could not possibly have emerged or been fashioned or completed, from any other era than the latter half of the Nineteenth Century, nor any other land than democratic America." An enormous cultural sponge, Whitman had spent the fifteen years before the first edition of Leaves in and out of journalism and had absorbed as much as anyone the transformations in American life in the mid-century—the growth of cities and manufactures and technology, the new scientific theories and discoveries, the currents of Orientalism and German philosophy, and not least the flourishing popular culture of his time—newspapers, opera, phrenology, photography, and exhibition halls. The poet must "flood him-

self with the immediate age as with vast oceanic tides," Whitman wrote in the 1855 Preface, and that is exactly what Whitman had done, until he contained enough to "let it out," as he put it in Song of Myself.

Modern criticism of Whitman has indeed taken notice of the influence of popular culture on the development of the poet (Paul Zweig's recent biography most effectively), but in a somewhat piecemeal fashion. The popular urban culture of the mid-nineteenth century was crucial to the poet, providing Whitman with an angle of vision and a coherent matrix for his vision. In particular, I shall argue that the camera provided the foundation for Whitman's way of looking at the world, and that the exhibition hall, in all of its various forms, provided a model for the structure of the long poem Whitman never stopped writing.

Whitman's project was nothing less than a "readjustment of the whole theory and nature of Poetry," as he put it in "A Backward Glance," "for democratic America's sake." And what that came down to, first of all, was looking at the world with new eyes. Remy G. Saisselin has recently argued that the city in the nineteenth century transformed the eye of the observer, as novel kinds of urban spaces and entertainments, like the arcade, the panorama, and the department store, were created to satisfy a growing population of consumers. Saisselin affirms, moreover, that an unprecedented variety of aesthetic observer evolved along with these changes in urban experience: no longer was the observer a person "of taste in contemplation before a picture or a landscape ... [but] a flaneur in the modern city." (On the very first page of the 1855 Preface, Whitman had extolled the country's "details magnificently moving in vast masses" and the "tremendous audacity of its crowds and groupings.""). Saisselin is speaking here primarily of the European city, of Paris especially, but his observations are valuable in considering the sources of Whitman's art, for they point to a relationship between poetry and the urban milieu that has been generally overlooked.

Saisselin associates this new urban observer with the photographer, whose gaze was also ubiquitous, surveying urban types and spaces. In fact, during Whitman's formative years—the 1840s—the camera was just being introduced to America and was an immediate popular sensation, taking on myriad functions from the portrait to the landscape, from the art photograph to the scientific study; and it be-
came, I would argue, a crucial metaphor and model for the poet's own creative processes, standing for the peculiarly modern apprehension of reality. For Whitman approached the world not on the terms of an extended meditation, as did Bryant, Longfellow, and Emerson, but with the relatively brief perception of discrete particulars made possible by the camera. Susan Sontag has remarked on how twentieth-century photography has fulfilled Whitman's own large aesthetic embrace of the world—indeed parodied it in recent years—by embracing low subjects, the ugly, along with the beautiful; what she failed to note was the degree to which Whitman's own eye was transformed by photography.11

"Poet! beware lest your poems are made in the spirit that comes from the study of pictures of things," Whitman warned, "—and not from the spirit that comes from the contact with real things themselves."12 But what exactly does it mean to model your poem on "real things themselves"? The particular kind of "contact" Whitman wanted was based not upon the traditional imagery of painting, with its inevitable distance from reality, and its idealization of actuality; rather, it is based upon the new mechanical process of representing the reality immediately before the camera lens that had become, by the 1850s, a common feature of urban life, one that was changing the way the world was perceived and structured. In fact, Whitman may be the first poet to throw out the traditional Horatian analogy of poetry to painting (ut pictura poesis) and put in its place what would become, for many writers, the new prevailing analogy: ut camera poesis.13 Emerson had offered Whitman an image that would be close to the latter's own habits when he had pictured the rich poets as mirrors, "carried through the street, ready to render an image of every created thing."14 But Emerson's mirror was not quite what Whitman needed; it suggested a removal from reality that was at odds with the poet's need for "contact," for a poetry in which "nothing is poetized, no divergence, not a step, not an inch, nothing for beauty's sake, no euphemism, no rhyme." For his approach to the world Whitman preferred instead the contemporary, the scientific metaphor—not the mirror but the camera: "In these Leaves everything is literally photographed."15

Edward Everett Hale was alert to just this quality in Whitman—his concrete picturing of reality—when he noted in a review that some parts of Leaves of Grass "strike us as real,—so real that we wonder how they came on paper."16 Hale's phrasing interestingly recalls the universal amazement that greeted the first permanent transfers of visual images of the real world onto a flat surface—the daguerreotype process, which was at its peak of popularity in the late 1840s and early 1850s.17 Whether or not the allusion was intended by Hale, it is one the poet himself used on several occasions and it is a telling metaphor for Whitman's creative process, at times explicitly named, at other times only hinted at obliquely.

The notion of the poet as camera plate, for example, seems hovering in the background of the famous lyric about the making of the poet in the 1855 edition:

There was a child went forth every day,
And the first object he look'd upon, that object he became
And that object became part of him for the day or a part of
the day,
Or for many years or stretching cycles of years.18

Whitman here pictures himself as taking the imprint of the objects of the world, the city, the country, crowds, streets, goods, absorbing the world into the receptive plate of his consciousness until the later "development" of his poetry. Five years later, another poem about his formative years (taken to refer to the New Orleans sojourn) would make the metaphor even more explicit:

Once I pass'd through a populous city imprinting my brain
for future use with its shows, architecture, customs, traditions (p. 109)

More inventive, if less explicit, is the metaphor Whitman uses in "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" (1856), which likewise speaks of the poet's genesis and seems to offer allusions to chemical processes (cosmic as well as photographic) and to the new technologies of mass production, as if Whitman's "representative" quality derived from his being "reproduced" by contemporary industrial processes (with a touch of alchemical ones too, perhaps):19

I too had been struck from the float forever held in solution,
I too had receiv'd identity by my body (p. 162)
In retrospect, it seems inevitable that Whitman would introduce himself to the world with a frontispiece daguerreotype portrait of himself (reproduced as an engraving) that sets the style and tone of the whole of *Leaves of Grass* to follow and establishes implicitly its relationship to several major strands in the popular scientific culture of the age. (The soul “makes itself visible only through matter,” Whitman had written in an early notebook.) Whitman calls attention to the photographic image in one of his audacious self-reviews, this one written for the *Brooklyn Eagle*, when he notes that “its author is Walt Whitman and his book is a reproduction of the author. His name is not on the frontispiece, but his portrait, half-length, is. The contents of the book form a daguerreotype of his inner being, and the title page bears a representation of its physical tabernacle.” It is a striking conception, a linked circle of equivalents: portrait equals author equals book equals inner being equals body equals portrait equals book. . . . Taking the mechanical process of the daguerreotype as his starting point, Whitman moves to an interlocking vision of his volume—“a reproduction of the author”—that fulfills in practice the theories of organic form that Emerson, Greenough, and others were contemporaneously developing in their essays. It is not just that the portrait shows us the author of the poem that follows; the represented image is also the subject of the poem.

Moreover, the photographic image embodies exactly the kind of representation of self Whitman was aiming at in the whole of *Leaves of Grass*: it was simultaneously a literal image and a representative one, both a “real thing” in itself and a larger, more suggestive, exemplary type of itself. (“Convey what I want to convey by models or illustrations of the results I demand,” Whitman had written to himself in a notebook of the mid-1850s.) Mathew Brady had capitalized on this aspect of photography early on, simultaneously exploiting and bestowing a national celebrity status upon politicians, soldiers, writers, and other prominent figures. And interestingly Whitman claimed, in conversation with Horace Traubel in later years, that he himself gave Brady the idea of a gallery of great historical figures, thinking how much better it would be, “rather than having a lot of contradictory records by witnesses or historians—say of Caesar, Socrates, Epicure—other—if we could have three or four or half a dozen portraits—very accurate—of the men: that would be history—the best history—a history from which there could be no appeal.”

Incidentally, Whitman’s recollection is probably flawed—Edward Anthony’s National Daguerreotype Miniature Gallery was founded a year or two before Brady opened his similar collection in 1845—but it is significant that Whitman should so readily identify himself with Brady’s purposes as to make the claim. In any case, daguerreotypes of famous persons—from the arts, politics, religion, the military—reached the public not only through the many galleries in the major American cities, but also through the publication of books based on the gallery as metaphor—Plumbe’s *National Plumeotype Gallery* (1847), with its mass-produced lithographs, and Brady’s dozen lithographs, published as *The Gallery of Illustrious Americans* (1850). In taking himself as a national prototype, then, Whitman had the precedent of the portrait galleries, just as in taking himself as a representative spiritual type he had the sanction of Emerson’s *Representative Men* (1850).

The fact that Whitman used a daguerreotype portrait as a surrogate for his name (the title page, set in type by Whitman himself, otherwise lacks any authorial identification) is itself symptomatic of the visual orientation of *Leaves of Grass*, and in subsequent editions photographs would continue to play an integral role in the poet’s theatrical presentation of himself, with the image changing as the poet’s self-conception changed. But just as important, in this first edition, is the particular image offered, which was clearly as carefully constructed as the lines that follow it. For Whitman strode into American poetry in 1855 in a manner deliberately and self-consciously calculated to overturn his reader’s assumptions about the place and provenance of poetry in modern society.

What does a poet look like? Glance at the frontispiece portraits of Whitman’s contemporaries and you see gentlemen: black coat, shirt closed at collar, black tie, hat off in deference to indoor protocol. Usually you see a bust of the author, rarely a view below the waist. (Even ten years later, Marcus A. Root, in one of the major discussions of photography of the time, would affirm that the poet or historian or editor should be photographed in a seated position, since to do otherwise would embarrass him by the novelty of the attitude; “statesmen, lawyers, clergy men, and public speakers generally,” on the other hand, should be taken in a “standing posture.”) Practically the first thing Whitman rushed to tell his reader, as witness the frontispiece, was that he was not sedentary, and not a gentleman. The engraving facing the title page, based on a daguerreotype taken in the summer
Frontispiece, Leaves of Grass, 1855 edition, engraving based on daguerreotype of Whitman made by Gabriel Harrison (Courtesy of Pierpont Morgan Library, New York City)

Full-plate daguerreotype of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, ca. 1850 (Courtesy of Longfellow National Historic Site, Cambridge, Mass.)
of 1854 by Gabriel Harrison (a well known “artistic” practitioner), is a conscious assault on the Longfellow conventions and an effort to establish in their place a new type of poet who challenges the restrictive authority of gentility: floating in space on the large quarto page is the figure of a man, seen from the knees up. He is standing with one arm akimbo, hand on hip, the other hand in his pocket; his face is bearded, he is wearing a broad-brimmed hat tilted at an angle, and a blouse (no formal jacket) open at the throat, exposing his undershirt; his trousers seem made of durable, sturdy cloth. It is an image of informality, of casualness, of man outdoors; we are looking at a kind of worker, perhaps; certainly not a gentleman in a study.

Sometime around 1855 Whitman wrote a note to himself for an undelivered lecture on Leaves of Grass (why should not the poet assume that he would become instantly famous, that he would lecture?) in which he distinguishes himself from the traditional literate: “Literature to these gentlemen is a parlor in which no person is to be welcomed unless he come attired in dress coat and observing the approved decorums with the fashionable.”

The lack of dress coat came across clearly to his contemporaries, who thought it worthy remarking in several of the first reviews of Leaves of Grass. One, for example, noted the absence of superfluous appendage of coat or waistcoat, the “air of mild defiance, and an expression of pensive insolence in his face.” An English reviewer alert to violations of social class caught Whitman’s stance even more directly, and with some offense: “This portrait expresses all the features of the hard democrat, and none of the flexible delicacy of the civilized poet. The damaged hat, the rough beard, the naked throat, the shirt exposed to the waist, are each and all presented to show that the man to whom these articles belongs scorns the delicate arts of civilization.” But the image is more of a puzzle, more of an incongruity, than at first appears, for others have properly seen through the rough pretense to an essentially civilized poet underneath. Thus a British reviewer in 1856 notes the portrait of a “bearded gentleman in his shirt-sleeves and a Spanish hat.” And more recently Gay Wilson Allen has added the nice observation that despite the nonchalance and unconventionality of the image, the poet “does not appear to be rough, disorderly, sensual, or even fleshy if the word means overweight. His Van Dyke beard is neatly trimmed, his hat looks like an expensive beaver, and his genial countenance has a certain air of refinement.”

These inconsistencies reflect perhaps the instability and ambiguity of costume semantics, but they are worth calling attention to because they more importantly argue certain tensions within Whitman, pointing to the willed fusion of contraries within his own person that was an essential part of the cultural program he was announcing. Whitman in 1855 was an ironic oxymoron, embodying a central contradiction that would remain throughout his lifetime, the contradiction between his working-class sympathies and his elite literary ties, his identification with the common people and his sense of apartness. “The genius of the United States [is] always most in the common people,” he could say in the 1855 Preface: “Their manners speech dress friendships—the freshness and candor of their physiognomy—the picturesque looseness of their carriage.” But elsewhere in Leaves of Grass he would depict himself starkly separated from the “common people”—“apart from the pulling and hauling standing what I am.” That doubleness—“Both in and out of the game and watching and wondering at it”—was shared of course by Thoreau and Emerson, by Hawthorne and by Melville; yet Whitman, unlike the others, turned his inconsistencies and ambiguities into an act of social affirmation, achieving wholeness, or at least the appearance of wholeness, in his persona and poem, if not exactly in his life. What Erik Erikson would say of national identity in general—that it is based on opposing characteristics, and derives its “unique style” from the ways in which these “opposite potentialities” are counterpointed rather than allowed to “disintegrate into mere contradiction”—is no less true of Whitman, whose contradictions were much more a source of his complex identity than the bland assurance of “Song of Myself” (“Do I contradict myself? / Very well then I contradict myself”) would lead us to think.

The daguerreotype frontispiece can take us even further into an understanding of Whitman’s connections with popular notions of representation, for it insists that we notice the sheer physicality of the image, a frank acceptance of the body that is of course carried explicitity into the poem and that marks the influence of phrenology on Whitman. Surely Walt’s personal pride in his own phrenological reading—he had it printed on several occasions as proof of his ample capacities—led him in the first place to offer his body as frontispiece signature. But clearly it is not for Whitman a question of the body or the soul; rather, it is a fusion of the body and the soul, a union of
opposites, that Whitman repeatedly affirms in his poem, and this union is the ground on which the other unifications of opposites in *Leaves of Grass* are also built. For the vision Whitman carried into the making of his poem affirmed not only the oneness of body and soul, but the parallel oneness of the form of the poem and its purpose.

Paul Zweig has most recently made clear just how deeply Whitman was influenced by the currents of phrenology that were flowing through New York society in the 1840s and 1850s. I myself want to emphasize the sense in which the whole foundation of phrenology provides a parallel premise for Whitman's invention of a poetic form. For implicit in the phrenologist's practice of reading the bumps on the cranium is the assumption that the outward form of the skull was an index to the individual's mental faculties, social proclivities, and personality: to the phrenologist, in other words, outer equals inner. And despite the inner conflicts and dodges represented in *Song of Myself*, despite the terrible doubt of appearances that Whitman exposed in moments of acute self-confrontation, the aesthetic principle of *Leaves of Grass* affirms a similar identity of appearance and reality. In making this identity his foundation principle Whitman of course runs deeply counter to such contemporaries as Hawthorne and Melville, for whom ambiguity of appearance and concealment of purpose were central concerns.

In addition to phrenology, another important influence was the "science" of physiognomy, a way of understanding character that evolved in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries based on a reading of the face. Physiognomy was largely based on John Caspar Lavater's widely popular *Essays on Physiognomy*, in which an equation is posited between facial type and the moral and personal qualities of the individual. For Lavater, "physiognomy is the science of discovering the relation between the exterior and the interior—between the visible surface and the invisible spirit which it covers—between the animated, perceptible matter, and the imperceptible principle which impresses this character of life upon it—between the apparent effect, and the concealed cause which produces it." Whitman's "Faces," a poem first published in the 1855 edition, is based on just this notion of congruence, with many of the lines consisting of a distinct metaphor sealing the character of each subject within a brief but vivid description, ranging from bilious satire—
This face is a dog’s snout sniffing for garbage,  
Snakes nest in that mouth, I hear the sibilant threat.  
This face is a haze more chill than the arctic sea,  
Its sleepy and wabbling icebergs crunch as they go (p. 464)

to a more benign portraiture—

Behold a woman!  
She looks out from her quaker cap, her face is clearer  
and more beautiful than the sky. (p. 467)

Though Lavater admitted the fallibility of the physiognomist, he held firm to the science itself, using a huge variety of graphic representations of the face as the material for his studies; but the practice of reading faces extended to everyday situations as well in nineteenth-century America, as Godey’s Lady’s Book shows in discussing the variety of ways women’s feelings are registered: “There is the timid glance of modesty, the bold stare of insolence, the warm glow of passion, the glassy look of indifference,” etc.  
 That this catalogue of appearances (including “the open frankness of candor”) might induce the reader to compose her face as well, leading to the theatricalization of manners, was perhaps inevitable; but the goal was a character of simplicity and courtesy, evidencing a harmony of inner quality and appearance.  

Whitman’s own school for learning the face was the street and crowds that he loved so much, but it was also, and perhaps more importantly, the daguerreotype gallery. There Whitman learned not merely the art of observation, but the art of organization as well. It was in the daguerreotype gallery that one was allowed to do what would otherwise have been difficult in polite society: stare. (The exactness of the reproduction, together with the common frontal pose, would make the experience far more vivid than looking at a painting.)  
 We know, in fact, that the act of staring, of reading a face, of imagining a character in the image before him, particularly excited Whitman, who frequented the many daguerreotype galleries in Manhattan and wrote about them on several occasions during the 1840s: “You will see more life there—more variety, more human nature,” than anywhere else, he wrote in the Brooklyn Eagle on July 2, 1846.  
Broadway, of course, had its full share of the more than one hundred galleries in Manhattan and Brooklyn at the time, including Mathew Brady’s and John Plume’s, where the visitor typically would enter a large room furnished comfortably with carpets, seats, lamps, and above all with the samples of the daguerreotypist’s art hung on the surrounding walls. (The picture itself would be taken in a smaller “operating room” off the main gallery.) “What a spectacle!” Whitman wrote after his visit to Plume’s: “In whatever direction you turn your peering gaze, you see naught but human faces! There they stretch, from floor to ceiling—hundreds of them. Ah! what tales might those pictures tell if their mute lips had the power of speech! How romance then, would be infinitely outdone by fact.” And he goes on to imagine several dramatic biographies—e.g., “Is the husband yet tender to his bride?”—in the faces on view. He is especially fascinated by the eyes of the portraits, which sometimes go beyond “what comes from the real orbs themselves.”  
Clearly what added to Whitman’s pleasure was the dialectical fancy that the daguerreotype, inviting the romance of speculation, was at the same time a “fact.” The gallery was an “immense Phantom concourse,” he wrote, “speechless and motionless, but yet realities.”  

But it was not simply as a place where he might exercise his imagination or learn the subtleties of physiognomy that the daguerreotype gallery served Whitman. It was also, by its very structural properties, an organizational model for Leaves of Grass, providing a microcosm of the diversity of American society, a way of gathering into one whole the plurality of peoples and types that composed America. The daguerreotype gallery was only one of a whole category of new urban structures that were providing fresh experiences in the mid-nineteenth century. John H. I. Browere, as early as 1828, opened a “Gallery of Busts,” consisting of life masks that he had made in his travels around the country, and that he hoped would be the basis of a national museum.  
And busts of a more “scientific” nature were on display in the numerous phrenological galleries throughout the 1840s and 1850s, serving as models of types of character and personality. (The phrenological bust itself, with its separate faculties spatially mapped, was yet another amalgam of discrete elements.) Another instance is P. T. Barnum’s Gallery of American Female Beauty, instituted in the year Leaves of Grass was first published, as part of a scheme for an international beauty contest based on submissions from all over the country, which were to be judged by the New York
important to Whitman because what he was seeking, as a self-consciously modern poet, was precisely a way of organizing experience—
the "broad show of artificial things"—that would be commensurate
with the multiplicities of the new age, a form that would be equal to
his culture's habits and experiences. What David Grimsled has said of
late nineteenth-century melodrama applies equally well, I think, to
these omnibus forms of Whitman's age—that "if there are certain
common assumptions that bind together a particular society in a
given age—what Alfred North Whitehead calls 'first principles almost
too obvious to need expression, and almost too general to be capable
of expression'—perhaps nothing is more revealing of them than the
most popular of cultural forms." For Whitman, the first principles
were the spectacles that had come to dominate urban culture—from
the great displays of daguerreotypes in the Broadway galleries to the
exhibition halls he loved to frequent.

In seeking the proper shape of containment, Whitman evidently
arrived at a formal equation between poet, poem, and gallery early
on. How conscious he was of the gallery as a model is evident from a
poem written before the 1855 edition and not published in Whitman's
lifetime, "Pictures," which makes explicit the connection between the
poet's mental storehouse of images and the public storehouse of im-
ages. It begins,

In a little house pictures I keep, many pictures
hanging suspended—It is not a fixed house,
It is round—it is but a few inches from one side of it to
the other side,
But behold! it has room enough—in it, hundreds and
thousands—all the varieties;

And there, on the walls hanging, portraits of women and men,
carefully kept (p. 642)

Ranging from scenes of contemporary America to scenes of world
history, Whitman's "Pictures" evokes, at the beginning of his career,
the sense of wonder the poet felt at the power of the word to create a
world by speaking it. Although Whitman did not publish the entirety
of this long poem in his lifetime, he did like the opening well enough
to print it many years later (1880) as a short poem, "My Picture-
Gallery."
Grass: the panorama. Like the gallery, the panorama is an omnibus form, encompassing within its boundaries a multiplicity of images, scenes, facts; but while the gallery is an architectural space through which the viewer wanders at will, the panorama is a large painted surface, which was displayed in two different ways—either mounted on the walls of a cylindrical viewing room, encompassing the viewer at the center; or unrolled from a drum before a stationary audience, the scenes passing in view as the canvas was unfurled. In the former case, the viewer’s eye moves across the detailed scene, reading the parts at his or her own pace; in the latter instance, the pace and view are determined by the unrolling canvas; but in either case the viewer must assimilate the shifts of perspective and integrate the experience into a whole. Painted panoramas were hugely popular in New York, especially during the 1840s and 1850s (though continuing for decades more), with several exhibits running simultaneously, some displaying the American landscape (the West was a favorite), and others such exotic subject matter as “Egypt and the Holy Land,” “The Antediluvian World,” and “Voyage to the Moon.” Where the gallery, especially the daguerreotype gallery, featured images of illustrious persons, the panorama offered the unified image of an illustrious landscape, either as an object of admiration in itself or peopled with historic figures and incidents.\textsuperscript{47}

There were also during these years exhibitions of panoramic landscape views in more direct representational media—the daguerreotype and the scale-model—which claimed a unique mimetic authority. Robert H. Vance, for example, exhibited his images of gold-rush California in 1851, boasting of his three hundred views that they were “no exaggerated and high-colored sketches, got up to produce effect, but are as every daguerreotype must be, the stereotyped impression of the real thing itself.”\textsuperscript{48} Yet another daguerreotypist, H. E. Insley, of New York, conceived the idea of producing a series of daguerreotypes featuring American cities and communities, and he called for images from across the country. And in New York City in 1846, E. Porter Belden put on display a much-acclaimed, carved wooden miniature model of the city. “It is a perfect \textit{fac-simile} of New York,” one of the promotional flyers announced, “representing every street, lane, building, shed, park, fence, tree, and every other object in the city.”\textsuperscript{49}

Behind the enthusiasm for panoramas and models lay a combination of appeals. Contemporary commentators evince, at the most ba-
sic level, a sheer delight in the accuracy of representation: here was an art that was literal and informative, giving “exact” likenesses and a general knowledge of places beyond the experience of most city dwellers, especially on the East Coast. (Scenes closer to home but distant in time could also fascinate the public; Whitman delighted, for example, in F. Guy’s “A Snow Scene in Brooklyn,” “a literal portrait of the scene as it appeared from his window,” created by the painter’s constructing a large frame in his window enclosing the desired view, thus containing the reality of the street within the perimeter of the painting.) The panoramas deliberately appealed to all classes (you did not need to read to enjoy them), and often were presented in theaters where the artist, or some other person, would narrate the scenes as they unfolded before the audience. Though painted somewhat crudely, judged by the academic standards of the day, the panoramas made up in scale and size what they may have lacked in subtlety, evoking the wildness of the American continent, and the drama of world-historical scenes, on an almost mythic scale. Yet to the contemporary viewer, the illusion of reality was apparently very strong, as an 1849 letter about a Mississippi panorama makes clear: “the artist had succeeded in imposing on the sense of the beholder and inducing him to believe that he is gazing, not on canvas, but on scenes of actual and sensible nature.”

The panorama appealed as well to the nationalistic sense of the average American, confirming his need for a physical setting commensurate with his dreams about America, and rivalling—or surpassing—the more established imagery of Europe. Here was a vicarious experience of travel, of sights and scenes, without the necessity of undergoing hardship; and the viewer’s delight in its encyclopedic “completeness” must have matched his delight in its accuracy. The American landscape, with its vast expanse of variegated scenery, seemed especially designed for display in the panorama.

Whitman was surely voicing this popular response to the American geography when he declared in his 1855 Preface, “The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem.” (If poems could be “real things,” why could real things not be “poems”?) And he went on, characteristically, to define the poet’s role as tallying the Me and the Not Me, the soul and reality. The American bard must respond to “his country’s spirit . . . he incarnates its geography and natural life and rivers and lakes. Mississippi with annual freshets and changing chutes, Missouri and Columbia and Ohio and Saint Lawrence with the falls and beautiful masculine Hudson, do not embouchure where they spend themselves more than they embouchure into him.” If Whitman was indeed the poet of panoramas, encompassing in his imagery a sense of space and scale that rivalled the synoptic effects of the visual panoramas, he produced his effects by doing what no actual panorama could do—i.e., by making leaps of space and scene beyond the means of any merely physical traveler, as in the astonishing Section 35 of “Song of Myself,” which begins, “I skirt sierras, my palms cover continents, / I am afoot with my vision”:

Scaling mountains, pulling myself cautiously up, holding on by low scragged limbs,
Walking the path worn in the grass and beat through the leaves of the brush,
Where sun-down shadows lengthen over the limitless and lonesome prairie,
Where herds of buffalo make a crawling spread of the square miles far and near,
Where the humming-bird shimmers, where the neck of the long-lived swan is curving and winding,
Looking in at the shop-windows of Broadway the whole forenoon, flatting the flesh of my nose on the thick plate glass,
Wandering the same afternoon with my face turn’d up to the clouds, or down a lane or along the beach (pp. 62, 65, 64)

By moving the reader’s eye from scene to scene, Whitman imitates the unrolling of the painted panorama before the viewer’s sight, thus giving shape in his geographical catalogues to the new sense of American space that had already found popular expression in the galleries and exhibition halls of the country.

Whitman’s invention of an ever-expandable verse form mirrored the new nation’s sense of its natural resources and population; but it was also a perfect vehicle for celebrating the new material wealth of the country, a wealth more and more based on commerce, technology, and manufactures. During the period of Whitman’s maturity,
America went from the beginnings of industrialization to an economy more and more dominated by mechanization: in the workplace, in the home, in transportation technologies. By the start of the Civil War, America was still predominantly an agricultural nation, but between 1840 and 1860, the years of Whitman's poetic maturation, net income from manufacturing grew threefold, from $162 to $495 million. Moreover, manufacturing began to account for a proportionally larger share of the national commodity output during the mid-century, rising from 17 percent in 1859 to 47 percent in 1879. The combination of rich resources and technological mastery was making America the fastest growing society in the world.

Among the materials the poet must assimilate, Whitman had declared in his 1855 Preface, were “the factories and mercantile life and laborsaving machinery.” And to Emerson (in an 1856 letter) he had added that among the things the poet must establish contact with were “real articles, the different trades, mechanics . . . money, electric-telegraphs, free-trade, iron and the iron mines.” While Whitman thus celebrated the new technological civilization, Emerson himself had come to fear that the machine would get between man and his natural eyes: “Machinery is good,” he wrote in his journal, “but mother-wit is better. Telegraph, steam, and balloon and newspaper are like spectacles on the nose of age, but we will give them all gladly to have back again our young eyes.” And though Whitman would himself later feel that materialism was undermining the life of the spirit, his initial confidence in his own transformed eye was sufficient to encompass happily the growing industrial density of the civilization.

From the first edition of Leaves of Grass in 1855 Whitman had enunciated a whole new department of American poetry by virtue of his affirmation of the common, everyday things of the material environment, and by his direct treatment of things. The new poets, he had written in the preface to Leaves of Grass, “shall find their inspiration in real objects today, symptoms of the past and future”; into the poet shall “enter the essences of the real things.” And it is this aspect of Whitman that a reviewer of the 1855 edition particularly emphasized when he wrote, in the United States Review, that the author of Leaves of Grass is a “lover of things,” and of men and women; he is surrounded by common objects, the sweeping movement of “commerce, manufactures, arsenals, steamships, railroads, telegraphs, cities with paved streets, and aqueducts, and police, and gas— . . . all the features and processes of the nineteenth century.” That Whitman himself had written the review—yet another of the many he had composed in his effort to celebrate himself and encourage his readership to do the same—makes all the more evident how important the point was as a foundational principle.

The chief vehicle for the display of manufactured goods—before the advent of the department store later in the century—was the trade fair or exposition. There one could see gathered at one time and in one place the otherwise dispersed evidence of the manifold changes in the U.S. economy. Like the public gallery, the exposition was a nineteenth-century invention that combined education and entertainment, framing within its halls an encyclopedia of objects, a dictionary of technological miracles that subsumed the individual thing under the aggregate spectacle. The first such display of arts and manufactures was held in London in 1851 in a glass and iron structure that came to be known as the Crystal Palace. New York followed almost immediately (1853) with its own world’s fair, also housed in a “Crystal Palace,” but distinct from the London exhibition in that New York’s proclaimed an ostensibly democratic purpose—to raise the level of taste in America, to diffuse art among “the mechanic and tradesman as well as the opulent and noble,” as the illustrated catalogue put it; “if the beautiful were daily placed before us, surely our social life could not fail to be ameliorated and exalted by its silent eloquence.” What was in fact placed before the visitor was an enormous range of the fine and practical arts, with many European examples, and many American goods that seem from the present perspective virtually indistinguishable from the European articles; if there was a democratic, an American aesthetic, it was more visible in the rhetoric of the catalogue than in the objects on display.

Still, Whitman was enthralled by the Crystal Palace, as much by the building as by its contents. “Iron and glass are going to enter more largely into the composition of buildings,” he wrote prophetically in 1857. The Crystal Palace was “an original, esthetic, perfectly proportioned American edifice—one of the few that put modern times not beneath old times, but on an equality with the best of them.” It was, we might say in retrospect, an architectural parallel to Leaves of Grass, a functional, organic structure, compendious in its myriad containments, inviting multitudes, modern and scientific; both were
commensurate with the requirements of a democratic art. (In his notebooks he had inscribed, “Rules for Composition—A perfectly transparent, plate-glassy style, artless, with no ornaments.”)

Whitman probably visited the Crystal Palace as much as any other American of his time, enthralled by the “phantasmagoria” (to use Walter Benjamin’s word) that all such exhibitions offered to the nineteenth-century urban observer. He went a long time (nearly a year),” Whitman wrote, “days and nights—especially the latter—as it was finely lighted”; he was especially interested in the display of European art, and in the “fabrics and products and handiwork from the workers of all nations.” These were of course the years when Whitman was composing the first Leaves of Grass, and the exuberant materialism of the world exposition seems to have entered into the spirit of Whitman’s own affirmation of the real things of America, as the large container of the hall itself would have reinforced the evolving design of the poem.
Thus in reinventing poetry for the modern age, Whitman had found models in urban popular culture far more significant than we have previously realized. In photography, Whitman had found a central metaphor for his own creative processes, a way of looking at the world that was attentive to fact, literal in its reporting, yet suggestive of typicality. Moreover, like the new photographic techniques of imprinting living shapes upon a chemically sensitized plate, Whitman’s verse was both art and science, comfortable with its literalism, yet striving for a lifelike representation of self and nation that was anything but mechanical. Given the equation between poet and poem, the deliberately stylized daguerreotype portrait that appears as the frontispiece in the 1855 edition could not have been a fitter emblem of the poet who would reproduce himself so self-consciously in the pages that follow.

And in eschewing the tight organization of conventional poetry in favor of a loose, free-flowing, disorganized encyclopedia, Whitman had found the literary equivalent for one of the key patterns in nineteenth-century popular culture, the organizational principle underlying the gallery, the panorama, and the exhibition hall—the containment of an infinitely expandable number of parts in an encompassing whole. The one book, *Leaves of Grass*, could grow from edition to edition simply by expanding or rearranging at any point: he had found a form perfectly suited to a society of discrete individuals, loosely associated as members of a non-hierarchical collection (at least in theory), a society in which number and volume were becoming ruling principles. By echoing the omnibus structure of the gallery in his poetry, Whitman was taking from the popular culture of his time one of the determining forms of experience, transforming a visual model into a literary one, and in the process implicitly evoking the power of popular forms to educate the common reader. Moreover, in discovering the formal equivalent, in poetry, for the new urban, industrial culture, Whitman managed to have it both ways: he was modern, alert to the latest scientific discoveries, he was at one with Broadway and the Crystal Palace and the Galleries; but he had also invented a form that was flexible, organic, and breathing, a “hand-made” form that took its exact shape from the length of the variable line and from the thought, that could go on for a few lines, or a few thousand lines.

Thus the exemplary wholeness of *Leaves of Grass*, its power as an act of social ethics, lay in its providing an ideal remedy of sorts for the inadequate definition of “being human” that was evolving out of the nineteenth century’s response to technology and industrialization; for if one strong characteristic of urban industrial life was its separation of man from nature and from his work, and the loss of Emersonian wholeness, then Whitman was providing in his poetry and person a way of embracing that same civilization on an ideal plane where the self was not constrained by the new technologies, but rather was enlarged. Locating Whitman within the matrix of mid-nineteenth-century popular culture may likewise enlarge our own reading of *Leaves of Grass*. Whitman’s achievement was not to have escaped his time and entered the literary pantheon of transcendental values; it was to have immersed himself in his time and in the most characteristic features of its urban culture; it was to have devised a structure that, like the steamboat or the locomotive, was a new invention, an expression of the energies and needs of his culture in a substantially new shape. For the artist intent on finding forms that could reflect a contact with the real things of American life, with the authentic, with the forces of contemporary science and technology, with the totality of American civilization, Whitman would provide, as we shall see, a durable touchstone and inspiration, especially to those coming of age in the twentieth century, when his example would gain a relevance it never had in the nineteenth.