

April 2006

Walt Whitman: Nineteenth-century Popular Culture

Brett Barney

University of Nebraska - Lincoln, bbarney2@unl.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/libraryscience>



Part of the [Library and Information Science Commons](#)

Barney, Brett, "Walt Whitman: Nineteenth-century Popular Culture" (2006). *Faculty Publications, UNL Libraries*. 111.
<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/libraryscience/111>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Libraries at University of Nebraska-Lincoln at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications, UNL Libraries by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Chapter 15

Nineteenth-century Popular Culture

Brett Barney

It has been said that although “Whitman never used the term ‘popular culture’ . . . he came to personify it” (Fishwick 1999: 10), and a substantial body of recent criticism has been devoted to proving the truth of that statement. The most prominent examples of this trend are David S. Reynolds’s acclaimed books, *Beneath the American Renaissance* and *Walt Whitman’s America*. In the first, Reynolds discusses Whitman as one of seven “responsive authors” who created “the major literature” of the antebellum era by transforming the “language and value systems [. . .] of popular culture,” into “dense literary texts” (Reynolds 1988: 3). In *Walt Whitman’s America*, Reynolds develops this argument further to show that Whitman drew from such discursive fields as sentimental fiction, theatrical performance, pornography, and charismatic religious movements, in each case “transforming them through his powerful personality into art” (Reynolds 1995: 590). Reynolds’s approach typifies the way “popular culture” has been employed in Whitman criticism: to define, implicitly, a category of products and practices as artistically and/or intellectually inferior to the productions of “high culture” or “elite culture” (Reynolds’s “dense literary texts” and “art”).

Scholarship that traces connections between Whitman and so-called “subliterary” forms is valuable, as it makes us more competent readers, better equipped to navigate the allusive terrain of Whitman’s writing and to assess Whitman’s achievements in historical context. This essay will, in part, contribute to the growing “inventory” of Whitman’s affinities with currently devalued literary and social forms. In addition, though, I will attempt to redress the problem of anachronism that exists in current scholarship on Whitman and popular culture, exploring his literary career in the context of contemporaneous nineteenth-century understandings of culture. Lawrence Levine has pointed out that to define popular culture “aesthetically rather than literally,” as has become customary, is to “obscure the dynamic complexity of American culture in the nineteenth century” (Levine 1988: 31). He and others have demonstrated that rigid boundaries between elite and nonelite entertainment simply did not exist until around the turn of the twentieth century. Furthermore, when ap-

plied in the realm of human activity prior to the mid-nineteenth century, “culture” almost always denoted nurturance – a metaphorical extension of its original reference to agricultural husbandry. Only later was it commonly used to mean either “aesthetic sophistication” or “a way of life,” its most usual senses today (Williams 1976: 80). Richard Teichgraber has observed that the word was ambiguous and unstable in nineteenth-century America, but that at least until after the Civil War, “culture for most Americans” meant “individual self-development or self-construction,” and thus “remained roughly synonymous with ‘self-culture’ . . .” (Teichgraber 1999: 11, 13).

Self-culture and Rational Amusement

For antebellum writers, especially Unitarians and Transcendentalists, self-culture was a common theme. Rev. William Ellery Channing’s influential 1838 sermon on the topic was apparently important to Whitman, though its influence has received little attention. Whitman recommended the text to readers of the *Brooklyn Eagle* in 1847, saying, “No terms are too high for speaking in favor of this little work – [. . .] vaster than many great libraries in the objects which it involves, and the large purpose it so clearly elucidates. . .” (*Brooklyn Daily Eagle Online*, June 28, 1847: 2). It is easy to understand Whitman’s enthusiasm; the sermon reads like an introduction to the poet’s thinking on many topics. For instance, Channing declares that “every man, in every condition, is great” (Channing [1838] 1969: 6); identifies with and honors manual laborers (pp. 5–6); sees America as a unique field of opportunity for average persons (p. 11); and treats the soul as an authority higher than custom or the opinions of others (pp. 43–5). He defines self-culture broadly, as “the care which every man owes to himself to the unfolding and perfecting of his nature” (p. 11), and recommends a balanced approach, believing that “all the principles of our nature grow at once by joint harmonious action [. . .]” (p. 15). A program of self-culture involves, therefore, “a regard to the rights and happiness of other beings” (p. 16); attention to one’s spiritual self (p. 17); the strengthening of instinctive affections “which bind together” family members, neighbors, and humanity (p. 23); and an effort to become “efficient in whatever we undertake” (p. 23). Channing further observes that although intellectual cultivation is important, “we are in no danger of overlooking” it, as “it draws more attention than any” other principle. He therefore warns against a course of “exclusively intellectual training” that emphasizes “accumulating information,” instead recommending the “building up a force of thought which may be turned at will on any subjects. . .” (pp. 18, 20–1).

Besides agreeing with the tenets of *Self-Culture*, Whitman must have drawn personal inspiration from Channing’s message that “[s]elf-culture is something possible. It is not a dream” (Channing 1969: 12). Ed Folsom has characterized Whitman’s education as “the original relativistic training,” drawing attention to the contrast between his self-directed study (plus six years of public schooling) and the norm of “classical, structured educations” for literary artists (Folsom 1990: 139). In *Specimen Days* Whit-

man recalls receiving, at the age of about 11, a subscription to “a big circulating library” – an act he terms “the signal event of my life up to that time.” Later, during the years immediately before and after the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, he poured considerable energy into studying newspapers, periodicals, and reference books. In his account of the “leading sources and formative stamps to [his] character,” Whitman emphasizes the educational importance of a wide range of experiences: boyhood explorations of Long Island, training in newspaper publishing, membership in debating societies, observing life from the ferries and omnibuses of Brooklyn and New York, and “experiences afterward in the secession outbreak” (*PW*, 1: 10–23). Education is one of the most frequent topics of Whitman’s early editorial writing, where he explicitly endorses Channing’s brand of self-culture. Several times, he advocates a broad informal education for people in whatever circumstance. For example, in an 1846 article Whitman argues that, whether “old or young, mechanic, man of business, or man of leisure [. . .] [e]very one owes it to himself to cultivate those powers which God has given him . . .” (*Brooklyn Daily Eagle Online*, Nov. 6, 1846: 2). The same year, Whitman advised the “young men of Brooklyn, instead of spending so many hours, idling in bar-rooms, and places of vapid, irrational un-amusement,” to “occupy that time in improving themselves in knowledge . . .” (*ibid.*, Dec. 17, 1846: 2). The phrase “irrational un-amusement” is worth noting as a humorous negation of “rational amusement,” a term commonly understood in Whitman’s time as shorthand for the widely held belief, most famously articulated by Rousseau, that the pleasures of entertainment could and should be made to serve intellectual and moral development. As we will see, “rational amusement” was an elastic term that could accommodate a surprising assortment of enterprises.

The belief that the laboring classes could improve themselves through a program of self-culture informed the ways Whitman thought about his own writing. From the beginning of his quest to become the American bard, Whitman conceived his project as an effort to cultivate the masses. The 1855 Preface announces that “the genius of the United States” is not in its political and religious leaders, “but always most in the common people” (Whitman 1855: iii). Even more forceful is his statement, in an essay from about the same time, that “the great mass of mechanics, farmers, men following the water, and all laboring persons” are “to all intents and purposes, the American nation, the people” (*NUPM*, 6: 2120). As their model representative, “commensurate with a people,” the American bard invites them to see themselves clearly, as he does: “You shall stand by my side and look in the mirror with me” (Whitman 1855: iv, vii). The poems themselves continue the theme of poet-as-teacher. In what later became “Song of Myself” Whitman proclaims, “I am the teacher of athletes / [. . .] He most honors my style who learns under it to destroy the teacher.” Another poem indicates that the words of the poet are “no lesson,” but they “[let] down the bars to a good lesson,” so that the poet is able to “remind you, and you can think [his thoughts] and know them to be true. . .” (Whitman 1855: 52, 53, 92).

In announcing himself the “teacher of athletes,” Whitman introduced what proved to be a key concept of his writing philosophy: in the “classroom” of literary

study, readers become fit through exertion. Whitman expresses this idea in the introductory poem of the 1860 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, later titled “Starting from Pausanok,” when he writes, “I have arrived, / To be wrestled with as I pass, for the solid prizes of the universe, / For such I afford whoever can persevere to win them” (Whitman 1860: 20). The image also appears in *Democratic Vistas*, which asserts that “the process of reading is not a half-sleep, but, in highest sense, an exercise, a gymnast’s struggle.” Because of this, literature has the potential to “make a nation of supple and athletic minds, well-train’d, intuitive, used to depend on themselves, and not on a few coteries of writers” (*PW*, 2: 424–5). Statements of this kind recur frequently in Whitman’s writings; figuring personal growth through reading as athletic development gave Whitman a way to think about his readers and his relationship to them, and this conception of the relationship became habitual.

Besides its value as metaphor, physical training also has a literal value in the program of self-culture that Whitman recommends. Interestingly, when advocating physical activity he often treats intellectual cultivation as an oppositional rather than a complementary process. In *Democratic Vistas* he writes, “[A] clear-blooded, strong-fibred physique, is indispensable; the questions of food, drink, air, exercise, assimilation, digestion, can never be intermitted.” The “enlargement of intellect,” on the other hand, “especially in America, is so overweening [. . .] that, important as it is, it really needs nothing of us here – except, indeed, a phrase of warning and restraint” (*PW*, 2: 397). While pronouncements like this have led some to talk of Whitman’s turn toward anti-intellectualism, he had long held this view. It should be noted that Whitman’s sentiments closely echo Channing’s, and Whitman had expressed the same reservations in his 1840s editorials for the *Eagle*. In one, he had denounced a too-exclusive “devotion to learning” – to the forgetfulness of every thing else, of the laws of physical health, and the claims which the ordinary things of life have upon a man . . .” (*Brooklyn Daily Eagle Online*, Aug. 21, 1846: 2). In another, on “Fostering Precocity in Children,” he takes “the liberty of deprecating too much mental exercise” and suggesting “plenty of out-door exercise – active physical recreation and employment” (*ibid.*, Jan. 4, 1847: 2). Whitman was committed, early and late, to the idea that the populace should cultivate both mind and body.

Gymnastics and the Circus

The combination of physical and mental cultivation that Whitman recommended is strongly reminiscent of the ideas about “gymnastics” or physical training developed by Friedrich GutsMuths and spread in America through “Turner societies” established by German immigrants. According to GutsMuths, “orthodox education methods neglect the body and practise an excessive ‘refinement’ which leads to debility.” Because “body and mind interact intimately and continuously upon one another,” proper education “seek[s] to promote harmony between them” (Dixon 1981: 117). New York City’s Turner society was, in 1848, one of the first of scores that

were established before the Civil War. Their mission, according to Emmett Rice, was “to promote physical education, intellectual enlightenment and sociability among the members.” To that end, their buildings included libraries and facilities for lectures and debates, as well as gymnasia that accommodated men, women, and children. Rice observes that “[a]n atmosphere of brotherhood and friendship pervaded all the activities of the society” (Rice 1929: 162). Turner societies implemented many of the ideas and practices in Whitman’s vision of “a perfect school”: “gymnastic, moral, mental and sentimental, – in which magnificent men are formed. – old persons come just as much as youth – gymnastics, physiology, music, swimming bath, – conversation, – declamation – – large saloons adorned with pictures and sculpture – great ideas not taught in sermons but imbibed as health is imbibed – (“Poem – A Perfect School,” Folsom and Price 1995–). Whitman may have encountered “German” gymnastics philosophy in Phokion Heinrich (a.k.a. Peter Henry) Clias’s *Elementary Course of Gymnastics*, a manual also based on the work of GutsMuths and translated into English in 1823; a citation for the often reprinted book appears in one of Whitman’s early notebooks (*NUPM*, 1: 248). Regardless of his level of familiarity with any particular school of gymnastics, Whitman showed a strong interest in physical fitness. In 1842 he wrote a short notice, favorable though unenthusiastic, of “Hudson & Ottignon’s gymnasium,” where he claims to have spent “an hour’s lounge,” first taking “a few shots in the pistol gallery” and then “observ[ing] the feats of those who were practising on the various gymnastic apparatus. . .” (*Jour*, 1: 84). Furthermore, he clipped and, summarized articles on fitness and even apparently planned to publish an original series of articles on the topic of “Manly Health and Training,” draft advertisements for which are partially extant (*NUPM*, 6: 2257–8).

Whitman’s comments about Hudson & Ottignon’s make it clear that a visit to the gymnasium was part education, part entertainment. During the poet’s early adult life, Brooklyn and New York offered a multitude of amusements described (and thereby justified) as “rational,” many of which are no longer familiar – at least not as educational. One example is the circus, which, in 1854 New York was “still the most popular of public amusements. . .” (*Places of Public Amusement* 1854: 152). Like gymnastics generally, the circus benefited from a historical association with the military. Circus performers demonstrated physical feats of all kinds, including horseback performances by former cavalymen or their imitators. By most accounts, the modern circus came into being when “hippodrama,” the exhibition of equestrian stunts, merged with the traveling menagerie in the 1830s. Typically, the circus also featured acrobatic gymnasts, sometimes on apparatus, and by midcentury these gymnastic performances had assumed an increasingly visible role (Flint 1983: 212). At the same time, circus acrobats were often criticized for endangering public morality, either because they encouraged dangerous behavior or because their bodies were too conspicuously displayed (Flint 1979: 187–8, Lewis 2003: 108–9).

In the summer of 1856, Whitman attended one of the most renowned circuses and wrote a review that reflects upon the value of circus as a type of physical education, as well as upon two other of his characteristic preoccupations: crowd behav-

ior and American nationalism. Observing that the circus is for many “the only public amusement which breaks the monotony of the year,” Whitman also maintains that it is no mere entertainment, but “a national institution” that “has here reached a perfection attained nowhere else” (Whitman 1936: 193). To judge by the space devoted to different aspects of the event, the crowd of spectators was as meaningful to Whitman as anything else. In 1855, Whitman had claimed the ability to participate fully in events and at the same time to record them objectively, to be “[b]oth in and out of the game, and watching and wondering at it” (Whitman 1855: 15). He displays this kind of dual enjoyment in his account of the circus, where he is “one of a compressed mass of human beings melting under the tent. . . .” The “[s]even thousand persons [. . .] seated in great ascending circles around the ring” are “a stilled whirlpool of human faces” and constitute “a moral lesson” of orderly and respectful behavior, “admirable to witness” (Whitman 1936: 195). Besides this “moral lesson,” Whitman finds the circus also commendable as athletic instruction. He pronounces the various human performers “all perfect in their several ways,” especially appreciating them as “evidence of what practice will enable men to do.” He specifically sanctions children’s attendance, using language that recalls his arguments against narrow intellectualism. He maintains that “[i]t can do no harm to boys to see a set of limbs display all their agility,” and “although [i]t is a pity [. . .] that the education of any man should be confined to his legs,” it is equally “a pity [. . .] that the education of any man should be confined to his brain.” And since children are allowed to be taught at school by “men who have no other than a brain development,” we should “not refuse occasionally to let them attend the evening school of these wonderfully leg-developed individuals” (Whitman 1936: 195–6). In the circus, Whitman saw a double-duty classroom: a place to observe proper social behavior and to learn lessons in human anatomy and locomotion.

The few faults Whitman finds with the circus have to do with the performance of its “star,” Dan Rice. As steward of an institution “which amuses a million persons a year,” the circus manager, Whitman asserts, “should regard himself somewhat in the light of a public instructor.” Whitman professes to have been “entertained exceedingly,” but he expresses some qualms over Rice’s occasional “approach to a double entendre” (Whitman 1936: 193–4). In addition, Whitman finds Rice’s idiosyncratic pronunciation irritating and judges the famous clown “not equal to his reputation” (p. 195). That Whitman mentions Rice’s reputation is interesting; from it he very possibly gained another memorable and practical lesson – the value of publicity. Like newspaper editor James Gordon Bennett and novelist George Lippard, whom David Reynolds has discussed as pioneers in the “commercialization of controversy” (Reynolds 1995: 355), Rice welcomed notoriety, counting denunciations from the pulpit and arrests for vagrancy as particularly effective and inexpensive advertising (Toll 1976: 61). Whitman may or may not have consciously followed Rice’s model for turning negative publicity to his advantage, but he was certainly familiar with the showman’s reputation, and it is reasonable to think that the circus formed part of Whitman’s schooling in the art of cultivating celebrity.

Commercial Museums

Although Rice's fame has faded, that of another nineteenth-century circus manager has endured; even today the name P. T. Barnum epitomizes self-promotion through controversy. That well-deserved reputation was established, in fact, decades before 1871, when Barnum began his association with the circus company that his name still calls to mind. To Whitman and his contemporaries in the 1840s and 1850s, Barnum was the famous operator of New York's American Museum, located at the intersection of Broadway and Ann Street, an area to which Whitman made frequent visits and in which he lived and worked for a time. After buying the museum in 1841, Barnum transformed it into a business venture so successful that by 1850 it had become "the premier attraction of New York City" (Bogdan 1988: 33), hosting during its 23-year existence 38 million customers – a number, in proportion to the national population, unmatched by Disneyland (Saxon 1989: 107–8). Even before buying the museum, Barnum was well-known as the owner/exhibitor of Joice Heth, a slave billed as George Washington's 165-year-old nursemaid. The public's curiosity in her was heightened by denunciations that Barnum sent – anonymously – to newspapers. Barnum frequently employed such methods, the logic of which his ticket seller spelled out: "First he humbugs them, and then they pay to hear him tell how he did it" (Washburn 1990: 201). In words that Whitman might have penned to describe the marketing of *Leaves of Grass*, Barnum explained: "I thoroughly understood the art of advertising, not merely by means of printer's ink, (. . .) but by turning every possible circumstance to my account. It was my monomania to make the Museum the town wonder and talk" (Toll 1976: 31). Barnum's tireless pursuit (and creation) of the bizarre ensured that the town always had plenty to discuss.

From the distance of a century and a half it may be difficult to comprehend, but mid-nineteenth-century America could view Barnum's collection of unusual animals, human curiosities, waxworks, art, and miscellany as the stuff not just of respectable entertainment but even of intellectual and morally uplifting instruction. This is true in part because, while he certainly pushed the boundaries of sensationalism in some of his exhibits, Barnum worked within an established museum tradition in which paintings by famous artists commonly appeared alongside two-headed calves, cases of rocks, and wax depictions of notorious crimes. Charles Willson Peale, most of whose collections Barnum eventually purchased, is generally credited with establishing the museum tradition in the United States. To emphasize its educational value, above the door of his pioneering Philadelphia Museum Peale posted the motto "Whoso would learn Wisdom, let him enter here!" and on the first admission tickets printed an open book with the words "The Birds and Beasts will teach thee!" (Dennett 1997: 13, Porter 1999: 2). Peale promoted his museum as "a fund of rational and agreeable amusement to all" (Peale 1991: 422) – a fund that included an 80-pound turnip, wood from the English coronation chair, a chicken with two sets of wings and feet, and the preserved finger of a murderer (Hudson 1975: 35). A few people did express doubts about the educational and moral value of such museum

exhibits, and Whitman himself disapproved of a particularly gruesome collection of waxworks that visited Brooklyn in 1847 (*Brooklyn Daily Eagle Online*, May 8, 1847: 2). But museums like Peale's were generally thought to serve an important patriotic and educational function. Barnum carefully nurtured this reputation, proclaiming his to be "the focal point of attraction, to the lovers of rational amusement, from every section of the union" (Lewis 2003: 30). Cast in this light, museums like Barnum's seemed an almost ideal tool for fostering the wide-ranging curiosity that Whitman believed in. In *Democratic Vistas*, he looks forward to a day when "in the cities of These States" there will be "immense Museums, [. . .] containing samples and illustrations from all places and peoples of the earth." In them, "[h]istory itself [. . .] will become a friend, a venerable teacher . . ." (*PW*, 2: 755).

Upon his return from Europe in 1846, Barnum was interviewed by Whitman, who approvingly relates the assessment that there "every thing is frozen – kings and things –" whereas "here it is *life*. Here it is freedom, and here are men" (*Brooklyn Daily Eagle Online*, May 25, 1846: 2). We know that Whitman also went to the museum at least twice because he recorded those visits in newspaper pieces. In one of these, written in March 1842, Whitman terms his visit the renewal of "an old custom [. . .] long since disused." Once at the museum, he immediately positions a chair in front of a window, where he can watch the passing traffic, "the busiest spectacle this busy city can present." He divides the scene into three groups: omnibuses and their drivers, fashionable women, and imitators of European aristocracy. Notably missing is any description – or even mention – of a single museum attraction (*Jour.*, 1: 66–7). As with his visit to the circus, Whitman's "old custom" of going to the museum is an occasion for cultivating an understanding and appreciation of humans, who make a more educational and entertaining display than the deliberately constructed exhibits. It is odd that in this editorial Whitman betrays no hint of interest in the museum's "curiosities," but other of his writings do suggest that museum displays influenced his thinking in important ways. Most obviously, they served as resources of factual information. The best-documented example of Whitman's use of a museum for this purpose involves Henry Abbott's Egyptian Museum, which he frequented around the time of the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*. In an article for *Life Illustrated* entitled "One of the Lessons Bordering Broadway" Whitman announces that "there is probably nothing in New York more deeply interesting" than the museum and recommends it as "a place to go when one would ponder and evolve great thoughts" (Whitman 1936: 40). The memory of Abbott's museum as an important educational site remained with the poet. In *Specimen Days*, he recalls visiting Abbott's museum "many many times," having liberal access to "the formidable catalogue" of artifacts, and benefiting from the "invaluable personal talk, correction, illustration and guidance of Dr. A. himself" (*PW*, 1: 696). Images of Egypt are prominent in several Whitman poems, especially "Song of Myself" and "Salut au Monde!" and the ideas they express about Egyptian philosophy and everyday life owe much to Abbott's museum, as well as to popular texts and lectures, some of which Abbott may have recommended. Critics have seen Osiris – figures of which abounded at the

museum – as an important model for Whitman’s immortal and transpersonal persona, and they have pointed out other echoes in *Leaves of Grass* of museums’ representations of Egypt (see Tapscott 1978, Gates 1987). Perhaps Whitman was willing to credit the Egyptian Museum openly because no one could mistake it for the American Museum. For one thing, in contrast to the many hoaxes that had generated controversy (and revenue) at Barnum’s, the artifacts at Abbott’s museum, Whitman assures readers, are absolutely authentic: “[A]mong antiquaries there has never been any question of the collection being bona fide.” Even the collection’s lack of economic success is evidence of its worthiness as a place of study: “It is not the kind of an exhibition that would attract crowds. Only. . . a thoughtful and inquiring person” is likely to find it interesting (Whitman 1936: 40). But despite Whitman’s apparent pains to distinguish between “serious” museums and what would later be known as “dime museums,” in the 1850s no clear boundaries divided the two. As a historian of dime museums has explained, even the most reputable museums, lacking governmental support, featured sensational items in hopes of attracting customers, so that “[b]y mid-century they had become venues for all sorts of popular entertainments and their education agenda virtually had vanished” (Dennett 1997: 22). We know that Whitman patronized and enjoyed proprietary museums, at least occasionally, and his writing bears the direct or indirect impressions that they made.

In an 1862 newspaper article Whitman remembered an eighteenth-century steam-driven fire engine as “almost as great a curiosity as anything in Barnum’s Museum” (Whitman 1921, 2: 279). Museum attractions furnished a rich stock of metaphors, perhaps the most pervasive of which is the poet’s custom of seeing things, people, and events as “specimens.” Comparisons to fossils also abound, almost always as a signal of disapproval. The word is used, for example, to describe various kinds of stagnation: in language (*PW*, 2: 577), in religion (*NUPM*, 5: 1723, 6: 2091, *PW*, 2: 409), and in society generally (*PW*, 2: 383, 389, 423, 519). Displays of insects also piqued Whitman’s imagination; twice he jotted memos to get a complete list of insects from “Mr. Arkhurst,” a taxidermist who probably operated a small “cabinet of curiosity.” It was Whitman’s intention to write a “little poem” that would “simply enumerate them with their sizes, colors, habits, lives, shortness or length of life – what they feed upon” (*NUPM*, 1: 287,4: 1349). He never published such a poem, but the image of museum cases filled with insects does appear in the 1860 poem “Unnamed Lands,” where the poet envisions the earth’s dead inhabitants standing in a variety of poses, “[s]ome naked and savage – some like huge collections of insects” (Whitman 1860: 413). One of the most striking museum-inspired descriptions comes, appropriately, from *Specimen Days*, where Whitman tells of seeing a group of Union soldiers who had been released from Confederate prisons. Alluding to several kinds of museum exhibits at once, he asks, “Can those be men – those little livid brown, ash-streak’d, monkey-looking dwarfs? – are they really not mummied, dwindled corpses?” (*PW*, 1: 100).

Dwarfs were a cornerstone of museums’ human exhibitions, the most famous being Charles Stratton (“Tom Thumb”), one of Barnum’s first and most lucrative

museum attractions. In the draft of an apparently unpublished essay, Whitman calls Stratton “my little friend Tom Thumb” (*NUPM*, 1: 244). Whether the two ever met – let alone became friends – is uncertain, but such was Stratton’s fame that 20 million people are said to have paid to see him during his lifetime (Wallace 1967: 112). During the years Whitman was formulating his distinctive poetry, Stratton’s celebrity made him unavoidable. Nor could Whitman easily have avoided acquaintance with another of the century’s famous human curiosities, Chang and Eng Bunker, the “Siamese” conjoined twins. Beginning in 1829 the two exhibited themselves around the country, and by the time of their highly lucrative engagement at Barnum’s in 1860, “Siamese Twins” had entered the vernacular in various ways; it was a popular play, a boat, and a figure of speech for any pair of objects or ideas thought to be “inseparably joined,” as the Bunkers were almost invariably characterized. Later in the decade, the museum featured “the Two Headed Nightingale,” conjoined twins “Millie-Christine,” who had been born into Southern slavery. The question of whether conjoined twins could be surgically separated fascinated the public and conjured up an image strongly suggestive of the country’s sectional strife. During the Bunkers’ 1865 tour, a reporter remarked, “As long as they go in for Union, they will do,” but “the moment they attempt to separate they will perish as the Confederates perished” (Kunhardt, Kunhardt, and Kunhardt 1995: 147). In a similar vein, Whitman alluded to the dilemma of conjoined twins when he wrote in 1867 that “Democracy” and its “twin-sister,” “the indissoluble Union of These States” are “so ligatured [. . .] that either’s death, if not the other’s also, would make that other live out life, dragging a corpse [. . .],” (Whitman 1867: 927).

Nineteenth-century museum displays furnished Whitman with more than vivid images; they also offered models for some of his most characteristic rhetorical strategies. One that he assiduously cultivated and that drew frequent comment in early reviews (his own anonymously written ones included) was the candid and unabashed exhibition of the self. A vivid example is found in the second poem of the 1855 edition, where the poetic persona entreats the reader:

Come closer to me,
 Push close my lovers and take the best I possess,
 [. . .]
 I pass so poorly with paper and types. . . I must pass with the contact of bodies
 and souls.

(Whitman 1855: 57)

The combination of attraction and discomfort evoked by this solicitation was familiar to visitors at the American Museum. One way Barnum encouraged interactions between spectators and human exhibits was by posting explicit invitations. Next to the bearded lady, for example, a sign read, “Visitors are allowed to touch the beard” (Fern 1854: 373). As another commentator has pointed out, such interactions created an unusual dynamic, in which “part of the fascination was [. . .] identifying with [. . .] these

perplexing, bewildering, mysterious creations of God's universe" (Lewis 2003: 53). The reviewer of *Leaves of Grass* for the *London Weekly Dispatch* betrayed just this sort of fascination, declaring it "one of the most extraordinary specimens of Yankee intelligence and American eccentricity in authorship," possessing "an air at once so novel, so audacious, and so strange as to verge upon absurdity. . ." (Price 1996: 41).

More remarkable than the direct address of the narrative voice was Whitman's frank and explicit treatments of the body. The 1855 edition's opening poem insists, "Welcome is every organ and attribute of me (. . .] / Not an inch nor a particle of an inch is vile, and none shall be less familiar than the rest" (Whitman 1855: 14) – a pledge made good by the addition, in 1856, of a long section to the poem that would become "I Sing the Body Electric." This famous list is, by turns, unflinchingly mundane (e.g., "roof of the mouth," "freckles," "digestion") and routinely indecorous (e.g., "man-balls," "bowels sweet and clean," "teats"). As others have pointed out, precedent for both the content and tone in Whitman's treatment of the body is found in nineteenth-century anatomical texts written for general audiences. Some of these were published by the same firm and at the same time as Whitman's first edition. Museums were an important source as well. In a manuscript note that appears to be the germ for the catalogue in "I Sing the Body Electric," Whitman plans "(a) poem in which is minutely described the whole particulars and ensemble of a first-rate healthy Human Body." Besides reading and talking with doctors, Whitman plans to study printed illustrations and "casts of figures in the collections of design" (NUPM, 1: 304). This last reference is probably to exhibits like the "Pathological Museum" of "Dr. J. J. Hull," a description of which Whitman wrote in 1862 for the *New York Leader*. Hull's museum contained "marked illustrations of disease, deformity" as well as "interesting normal specimens of anatomy, &c.," all displayed "for surgical, medical, and scientific enlightenment" (Whitman 1933: 32). An 1850 advertisement for another of the area's "anatomical museums" similarly justifies its exhibits as instructional, even while it highlights their voyeuristic appeal. A visitor, we are told, will gain a "perfect idea of the organs and functions of his own body" by examining "two life-like figures, capable of being dissected, so as to show all the muscles, and viscera in their natural positions." Also on display are a cadaver "divested of the skin"; life-size models of "exquisite venuses" with "the fetus in utero in sight"; and "more than two hundred" body parts illustrating "[d]isease in all its forms, [. . .] upon the skin, the scalp, the limbs, the eyes, nose, lips, and organs of reproduction, etc." (*Brooklyn Daily Eagle Online* 1850). An echo of New York's anatomical museums' combination of clinical detachment and titillation can be heard in Whitman's poems.

Furthermore, like the range of other exhibitionary forms that critics have more commonly treated, commercial museums of various kinds were important nonliterary analogues for the catalogue itself, one of the most characteristic features of *Leaves of Grass*. Whitman's listing technique, described by Miles Orvell as an apparently "loose, free-flowing, disorganized encyclopedia" (Orvell 1989: 28), has been linked to art gallery exhibitions, daguerreotype studios, and world's fairs, each of which displayed objects in such large numbers and variety that they could be thought

to collectively represent the entire world. Whitman's interest in paintings, photography, and international expositions is well documented, and each undeniably left a lasting impression on him and his poetry. As aggregations of diverse and abundant materials, however, these forms were building on a framework that was already well established in the institution of the museum. By Whitman's time, the museum was an emblem of the encyclopedic and educational – as attested by the emergence of several popular journals that incorporated “Museum” into their titles. *Merry's Museum*, for example, began publication in the late 1830s in New York to educate children in “the most abstruse subjects [. . .] in a manner intelligible to all. . .” (*Brooklyn Daily Eagle Online*, June 7, 1842: 2). Likewise, *The Philadelphia Saturday Museum* was begun as “a newspaper for all classes” and “devoted to the useful Arts, Education, Morals, Health and Amusement” (*ibid.*, May 15, 1843). Charles Willson Peale had opened his museum in 1784 as “a collection of everything useful or curious – A world in miniature!” (Peale 1988: 274). Barnum similarly advertised his museum as an “encyclopedic synopsis of everything worth seeing in this curious world” (Dennett 1997: 27), an idea also communicated visually by the assortment of international flags lining the roof and by the “Cosmographic Department,” where visitors gazed through peepholes at detailed representations of 194 faraway locales (Kunhardt et al. 1995: 140). Whitman's famous boast, “I am large. . . I contain multitudes” (Whitman 1855: 55), would have made an apt marketing slogan for the American Museum.

In Whitman's poems, particularly the early ones, the seemingly exhaustive lists enact Whitman's commitment to be “the arbiter of the diverse and [. . .] the key” (Whitman 1855: iv). We are repeatedly told that, like a museum, the poet represents the entire world. He is “a kosmos” (1855: 29); “an acme of things accomplished, and [. . .] an encloser of things to be” (p. 50). His words, “[i]f they do not enclose everything [. . .] are next to nothing (p. 24). The 1855 passage that eventually became section 31 of “Song of Myself” resembles, in fact, nothing so much as a museum guidebook description:

I find I incorporate gneiss and coal and long-threaded moss and fruits and
grains and esculent roots,
And am stucco'd with quadrupeds and birds all over,
[. . .]
In vain the plutonic rocks send their old heat against my approach,
In vain the mastadon retreats beneath its own powdered bones,
In vain objects stand leagues off and assume manifold shapes,
In vain the ocean settling in hollows and the great monsters lying low,
In vain the buzzard houses herself with the sky,
In vain the snake slides through the creepers and logs,
In vain the elk takes to the inner passes of the woods,
In vain the razorbilled auk sails far north to Labrador [. . .]

(Whitman 1855: 34).

The mention of “the mastadon” [sic] is telling. Peale's museum had had its first “hit” with the 1801 exhibition of a mastodon skeleton, which Barnum acquired at auction

in 1849. By the time Whitman's lines appeared six years later, other skeletons were being unearthed and exhibited with some frequency and the mastodon was becoming a defining symbol of museums. The lines also contain what is likely an intentional and rather direct comparison between the poet and Barnum's museum. The claim to be "stucco'd with quadrupeds and birds all over" has been called "presurrealistic" and linked to the "distortions and odd juxtapositions" sometimes seen in human exhibits and in the visual arts of the day (Reynolds 1995: 304–5). But Whitman's readers in the 1850s would more probably have seen in this line a reference to the striking and famous facade of the American Museum building itself, which Barnum decorated with several dozen large color images of exotic animals (see Plate 15.1).

Among the most striking of Whitman's gestures of inclusiveness are his ethnographic sketches, and it is perhaps in these, more than anywhere else, that he relies on museum discourse. In the late eighteenth century, Peale had presented a group of wax figures depicting natives from Africa, Kamchatka, China, Hawai'i, and North and South America to "make a group of contrasting races of mankind" (Sellers 1980: 92), and around 1850 Barnum made plans to exhibit, under the title "Congress

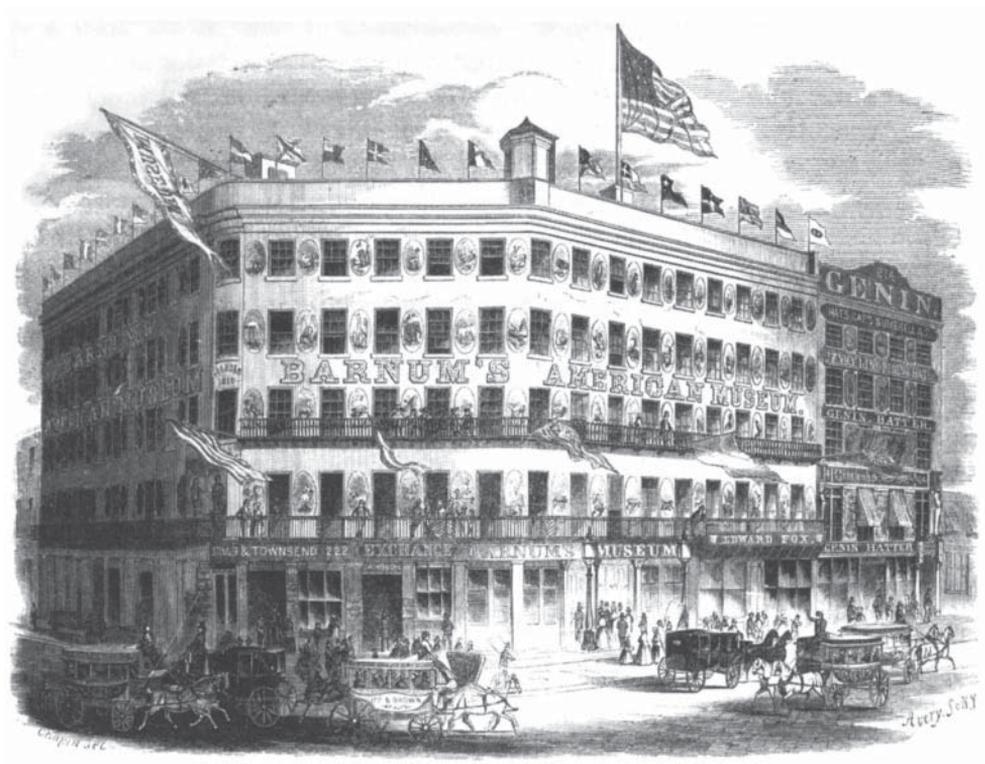


Plate 15.1 Engraving of Barnum's American Museum from Gleason's Pictorial Drawing Room Companion (1853). Gleason's pictorial. PS 501.G43, Clifton Waller Barrett Library of American Literature, Special Collections, University of Virginia Library.

of Nations,” live male and female specimens of “every accessible people, civilized and barbarous, on the face of the globe.” Although he abandoned this project, “living curiosities” always figured prominently in his museum, and he very often created names for them based on ethnic designations – usually pure fabrications – which were reinforced by simple visual cues such as “exotic” hairstyles, clothing, or props to imply stereotypical, often primitive identities. Thus mentally retarded men and women that Barnum brought from around the United States were transformed into “Wild Men of Borneo,” “Wild Australian Children,” “Aztec Children,” and “The What Is It?” or “Man-Monkey.” As an institution of popular education, the museum conveyed the message that ethnic others were “our” developmental precursors, adequately represented by the caricature-like “specimens” on display. The portrayal of human variety was expansive, but also inculcated in patrons a comforting sense that clear boundaries separated them from the ethnically alien.

Leaves of Grass evinces a similar strategy of affirmation and denial. The third poem of 1855 (later titled “To Think of Time”) declares that “[t]he barbarians of Africa and Asia are not nothing,” and neither are “the American aborigines,” or “[a] zambo or a foreheadless Crowfoot or Camanche.” The awkward and dismissive wording in this expression of willingness to ignore race in defining humanity holds the “included” groups clearly apart and subordinate. Acknowledged to count in the totality of humanity – but just barely – they are grouped with such others as “[t]he interminable hordes of the ignorant and wicked,” lower-class Europeans, diseased immigrants, murderers, and prostitutes. These, too, are “not nothing” (Whitman 1855: 68). In the 1856 “Poem of Salutation” (later “Salut au Monde!”), the ethnic cataloguing is more extravagant, but similarly ambivalent. Those peoples considered most remote from White America are largely segregated into separate sections, most strikingly in a list near the end, where the poet addresses, among others, a “Hottentot with clicking palate,” a “dwarf’d Kamtschatkan,” a “haggard, uncouth, untutored Bedowee,” and a “benighted roamer of Amazonia” (Whitman 1856: 119–20). Whitman’s poems and popular museums shared an understanding of the value of ethnographic displays, which were used to promote knowledge of and curiosity toward the larger world in a way that upheld American assumptions of racial superiority.

Of course, the most frequently exhibited “savages” at Barnum’s and other museums were American Indians. In Whitman’s own portrayal of Indians, there is evidence that he not only shared with museums an established racial ideology, but that he also drew directly on their exhibitions, especially the traveling “Indian Gallery” (1837–39) of George Catlin, whom he remembered as “a wise, informed, vital character” (Traubel 1908: 354). During his tour of the Eastern United States, Catlin gave lectures and exhibited not only the paintings for which he is famous, but also Native American artifacts such as clothing, weapons, and an entire teepee. On some occasions he dressed as a Blackfoot medicine man in full regalia, and on others he presented members of Indian delegations. Beginning in 1843 the American Museum, too, put Indians on display. The precise nature of Whitman’s acquaintance with Catlin is uncertain, but on the wall of his house in Camden hung a print of the artist’s portrait of Osceola

la (Traubel 1908: 348, 354), and he told Horace Traubel that his 1890 poem about the Seminole chief was “given almost word for word out of conversations [he had] had with Catlin” (Traubel 1982: 400). Martin Murray has argued that Whitman could not have met Catlin until the early 1870s (Murray 1999), and Whitman’s own statements are contradictory. He said in 1888 that they had met when the painter was “already old” but “before the war, maybe as many as forty years ago” (Traubel 1908: 348, 354). All in all, however, it seems most likely that Whitman received the portrait during a visit to Catlin’s show in the summer of 1839, not long after the prints were produced as promotional items. In any case, Whitman’s American Indians often bear traces of having been drawn from a museum exhibit, whether Catlin’s or another. A manuscript fragment apparently drafted for the unpublished pre-1855 poem “Pictures” reads:

And here a tent and domestic utensils of the primitive Chippewa, the red-faced
aborigines,
See you, the tann’d buffalo hides, the wooden dish, the drinking vessels of horn [. . .]
(LG: 649)

As Paul Reddin points out, “the ‘domestic implements’ “ in Catlin’s exhibit were unusual in “reveal[ing] a home life usually obscured” (Reddin 1999: 23). The initial poem of *Leaves of Grass* 1855 contains at least two references to Indian women. In the first, Whitman depicts the marriage of a “red girl” to a trapper (Whitman 1855: 18–19) – a section that others have shown to be based on the work of artist Jacob Miller. The other is a single line: “The squaw wrapt in her yellow-hemmed cloth is offering moccasins and beadbags for sale.” The context in which this line appears is significant. In a structure that recalls the combination of chaos and order of Barnum’s museum, Whitman presents a series of brief snapshots showing people engaged in sundry tasks. Images are piled up and juxtaposed as the reader moves through the poem, unable to predict what relation the next line will bear to the current one. Some consecutive lines seem wholly unrelated; some are clearly linked together logically and grammatically; others have an ambiguous connection. Intentionally or not, the line that follows the description of the woman selling handicrafts appears to reflect the extent to which Whitman’s Indians were drawn from exhibits: “The connoisseur peers along the exhibition-gallery with half shut eyes bent sideways. . .” (Whitman 1855: 22).

Images of the museum-made Indian persisted in Whitman’s writing, even after his work in the Indian Bureau in 1865 gave him unusual opportunities for personal interaction. In his account of those months, “An Indian Bureau Reminiscence,” Whitman employs a steady stream of language derived from museum exhibits, representing Indians as specimens, either of nature or of nature revealed through art. The first published version of the piece refers to meetings with Indian delegations as “exhibitions” (later revised to “conference collections”); the visitors themselves are “the most wonderful proofs of what Nature can produce,” other “frailer samples” having been eliminated through evolutionary processes. “Every head and face is impressive, even artistic,” and while the older men have a “unique picturesqueness,” some

of the younger ones are “magnificent and beautiful animals.” From these meetings Whitman has formed “one very definite conviction.” This turns out to be a version of the idea that we’ve already observed as characteristic of museum-style encounters with alien others: Indians, “in their highest characteristic representations, essential traits, and the ensemble of their physique and physiognomy,” possess “something very remote, very lofty. . . .” The Indians, profoundly incommensurable, even if tantalizingly near, remain “great aboriginal specimens” (*PW*, 2: 577–80). Thus personal encounters, rather than modifying Whitman’s simplistic notions of Indians, instead were themselves modified to fit the museum logic of his earlier poems.

Moving Panoramas

In another of his published reminiscences, Whitman writes of his “debt” to “the stage in New York [. . .] and to plays and operas generally” (*PW*, 2: 693–4). Decades of critics have demonstrated his indebtedness to opera and other forms of drama. However, considerable work remains to be done regarding Whitman’s ties to stage entertainments, especially those now considered unsophisticated. At the beginning of Whitman’s career, drama of all sorts, including opera, was tainted by associations with prostitution and other practices that disqualified them as rational entertainment, and as a journalist Whitman wrote several pieces calling for theater reform. He tended, however, to view the problems of the theater in patriotic rather than simplistic moral terms, calling for “some great revolution [. . .], modernizing and Americanizing the drama,” that would allow it to attain “the first rank of intellectual entertainments” and become “one of those agents of refining public manners and doing good” (*Jour.*, 2: 251). Society at large did not share Whitman’s perspective on the problem. Instead, as Richard Butsch explains, theaters were disreputable because “they endangered the reputation of a middle-class woman.” Certain stage entertainments successfully overcame anti-theatrical bias simply by avoiding theatrical terminology and appealing to a respectable female clientele, museums being “the first to systematically seek women, particularly mothers,” to fill their “[t]heaters disguised as ‘lecture rooms’” (Butsch 2000: 67, 71).

One of the prominent features of the American Museum was such a hall, in which Barnum presented entertainments free “of the dissipation, debaucheries, profanity, vulgarity, and other abominations” of regular theater (Toll 1976: 30). Performances in Barnum’s “Moral Lecture Room” benefited from the respectability of lectures and museums. After renovating the hall in 1850 to accommodate 3,000 persons, Barnum told the audience that he had been motivated by a community need for a “place of public amusement, where we might take our children, and secure much rational enjoyment, as well as valuable instruction, without the risk of imbibing moral poisons . . .” (Barnum’s Museum 1850). Not surprisingly, performances incorporated a variety of elements calculated to give the medicine of moral improvement an enticing flavor. For example, in “The Drunkard,” which depicted the decline and redemption of the title character in a run of over 100 performances, no fewer than four of the museum’s human curiosi-

ties appeared: a fat boy, two dwarfs, and a “nigger chap that is turning himself white” (*Brooklyn Daily Eagle Online*, Sept. 11, 1850). Performances of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* a few years later “featured a beautiful panoramic view of a Mississippi River sunrise and a riverboat that smoked grandly as it moved across the stage” (Foll 1976: 153).

This use of elaborate scenery and mechanical contrivances to produce startlingly realistic effects was by no means unique. In fact, various techniques formed the basis of several “panoramic” forms that were staged as rational entertainments in their own right. Any discussion of the nineteenth-century panorama must acknowledge the ambiguity of the term, which was widely adopted to denote two rather different commercial public entertainments. The first was a circular hall with interior walls painted to offer an accurate 360° scenic view to spectators standing on a central platform. It was for this 1789 invention that the word “panorama” was coined, from Greek words meaning “view all.” Panorama was also the name given to a kind of enormous painting executed on sheets of canvas and scrolled from one large spool to another (see Plate 15.2). Yet another related form, sometimes also called “panorama” but more generally known as “diorama,” was distinguished by the use of various lighting effects to create the impression of movement or change. The situation is further complicated by the fact that both “true” panorama forms sometimes went by other names and by the existence of hybrid forms, such as the “moving diorama.”

Recent critics have pointed out correspondences between nineteenth-century panoramas and Whitman’s poetry, most often in terms of what might be called the

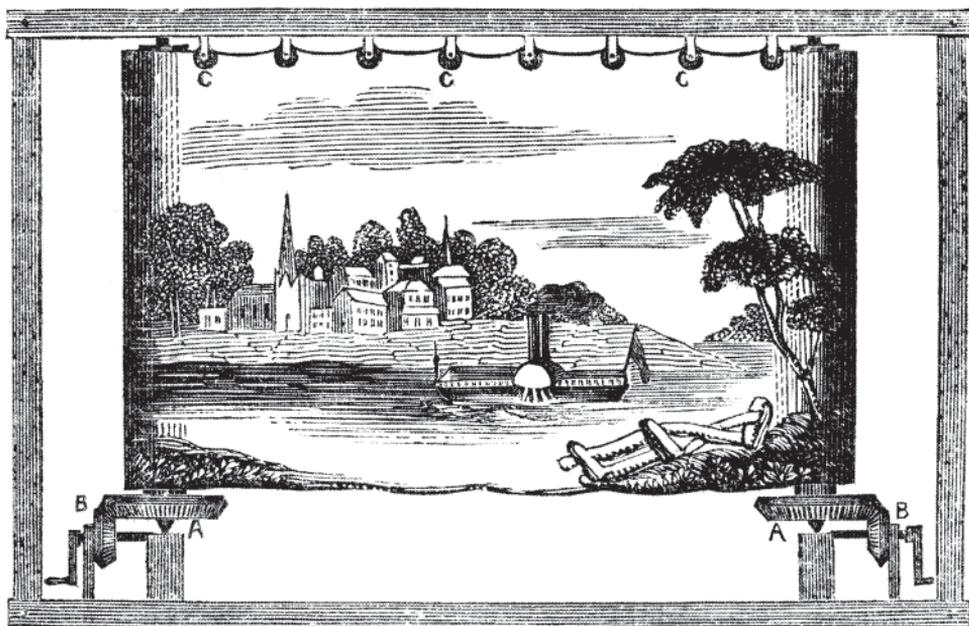


Plate 15.2 Engraving of Banvard’s moving panorama from *Scientific American* Vol. 4, No. 13, 1848, p.100, Love Library at University of Nebraska–Lincoln.

“panoramic mode,” a way of apprehending and representing the world as expansive that was manifested in a broad range of pictorial (and literary) forms (see Bergman 1985, Orvell 1989). These studies, by demonstrating that Whitman’s own expansive mode paralleled the development in the visual arts of techniques to “view all,” have begun to restore an important aspect of the social context in which Whitman’s poetry emerged, but a number of clarifications are warranted and will perhaps foster further scholarship. One thing to note is that no definite proof exists of Whitman’s ever having visited a panorama of any kind. The first that he might have seen were the circular variety, for which at least three exhibition rotundas were built in New York during the first four decades of the century. The last and most successful of these belonged to Frederick Catherwood, who opened it in 1838. Before it burned in 1842, Catherwood’s Panorama displayed depictions of Jerusalem, Niagara Falls, Lima, Thebes, and Mayan ruins in Central America to enthusiastic crowds (Oettermann 1997: 320–3). By the late 1840s, however, “moving panoramas,” first introduced in about 1830, had become the form clearly preferred in the United States.

Given their popularity and Whitman’s love of crowds, stagecraft, and the visual arts – not to mention his thirst for the historical and geographical information that many of the panoramas touted – it is hard to believe that Whitman saw none of the scores of moving panoramas that New York hosted in the 1840s and 1850s. In fact, what appears to be a manuscript fragment from Whitman’s review of a moving panorama from this period is preserved at Amherst College. In any case, the moving panorama’s phenomenal success during the very years when *Leaves of Grass* was taking form affected the development of Whitman’s masterpiece in profound ways. As Oettermann argues, panoramas (of whatever kind) “became a medium of instruction on how to see,” their lessons specifically fitted to people’s need to cope with the expanding horizons of the nineteenth century: the development of “[p]anoramic’ vision [was] a way of getting a grip on things. . .” (Oettermann 1997: 22). Moving panoramas had particular appeal for Americans, who were “dealing with dimensions in their own country that could not be grasped or conquered [through the simulated experience of] climbing to an elevated point and surveying the horizon.” For them, “[t]he circular painting was visually inadequate to the situation in which they found themselves.” In contrast, the method of the moving panorama, in which the painted canvases moved across the stage in front of the audience, could accommodate a subject of potentially limitless scope. The most celebrated moving panoramas illustrate a stunning exploitation of that advantage. Advertisements for Samuel Hudson’s 1848 “Mammoth Panorama of the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers,” for example, claim that it covered “over 20,000 feet of canvass,” making it “by far the largest painting ever before executed.” During its year-long tour, half a million people paid 25 cents each to watch the “over 1400 miles of River Scenery, bordering on nine different States,” pass before them while a lecturer provided instructive commentary (*Brooklyn Daily Eagle Online*, June 15, 1848: 2, Oettermann 1997: 326).

Moving panoramas were especially well suited to depict long journeys, so it is not surprising that river scenery was the most common subject; at the peak of their

popularity in the late 1840s and early 1850s, residents of large cities could sometimes choose among competing panoramas of the Mississippi. However, the format of the continuous, moveable canvas was also highly adaptable, and, contrary to the assumptions of some commentators, a number of moving panoramas were rendered and presented not as single continuous landscapes but as series of related scenes or as a combination of static and moving scenes. For example, “Evers’ Grand Original, Gigantic Series of Moving Panoramas” – proclaimed, as usual, “the largest painting in the world” – comprised depictions of “New York city, city of Brooklyn, Williamsburgh, East River, Hudson River, and the Atlantic Ocean” (*Brooklyn Daily Eagle Online*, Nov. 19, 1849: 3). Moreover, to renew audiences’ interest or to respond to the work of competitors, a panorama artist could add additional scenes. Like the world itself, panoramas were conceptually infinite. Another popular moving panorama depicted scenes from *Pilgrim’s Progress*, advertisements declaring that “while it fascinates and charms with its loveliness, it instructs and teaches lessons never to be forgotten” (*ibid.*, May 8, 1850: 2). Still other moving panoramas taught viewers about the life of Napoleon, famous battles, the New Testament, Mormon history, Mammoth Cave, a whaling voyage, and Indian history and archeology (Oettermann 1997: 314, 337–40, *Brooklyn Daily Eagle Online*, May 8, 1855: 2).

In *Specimen Days*, Whitman writes of his life in New York and Brooklyn during the period from about 1840 to 1860 as “curiously identified with Fulton ferry,” which he rode frequently, “often” ascending to the pilot house to “get a full sweep, absorbing shows, accompaniments, surroundings.” From there, he enjoyed sights of “great tides of humanity,” “river and bay scenery,” and “the changing panorama of steamers, all sizes. . .” (*PW*, 2: 16). Both Charles Zarobila and Eugene McNamara have commented on a striking three-way similarity among this passage, “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,” and panoramic entertainments. Zarobila, who found “a dozen or so instances” of the word “panorama” in all of Whitman’s writings, sees the passage as evidence that the panorama gave the poet a way “to organize that famous poem which seeks to describe the unity of all men” (McNamara 1984, Zarobila 1979: 58). James Dougherty has also developed this idea, although he sees the circular panorama and the diorama as the pertinent models, and has argued that two of Whitman’s other poetic mentions of “panorama” allude to the circular form as well. One of these is in the 1855 version of the poem that eventually became “Song of Myself”:

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

[. . .]

The panorama of the sea. . . . but the sea itself?

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

(Whitman 1855: 47)

As Dougherty perceptively notes, this passage treats the panorama as an “artifact” that “delivers us into the presence of the reality,” one that, like the photograph, “open[s] a new path by making sight self-conscious” (Dougherty 1993: 165). The

other passage in which Dougherty detects a reference to circular panoramas comes near the end of “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d,” where the poet records scenes of war that appear in “long panoramas of visions.”

While much of the critical commentary on the importance of panoramic techniques to Whitman’s poetry is provocative and compelling, insufficient emphasis has been placed on the moving panorama as a particular form. By the time *Leaves of Grass* debuted, the moving panorama had become so successful and dominant in America that the word “panorama” alone, without the modifier, would almost inevitably have brought to mind the image of a long, horizontally moving canvas. More to the point, as far as I’ve been able to determine, although Whitman frequently used the word in ways that unambiguously refer to the moving panorama, none of his uses can be certainly identified with either the circular panorama or the diorama. As Dougherty acknowledges, the passages Zarobila identified “suggest that most often Whitman was thinking of the moving panorama that unreeled before its viewers. . .” (Dougherty 1993: 165). Many of the over one dozen additional occurrences I’ve been able to locate are even more strongly suggestive, and several of them use the specific term “moving panorama.”

Like the museum, the moving panorama was a richly suggestive analogue for Whitman’s own poetic project, a device capable of teaching the American people to see the greatness of their country and themselves. One of the most successful panoramas was John Banvard’s “Panorama of the Mississippi River, Painted on Three Miles of Canvas,” first shown in 1846 and “promoted in Barnum-like fashion [. . .] as family entertainment,” with special free showings for school groups (Oettermann 1997: 328, Hanners 1993: 45). In a statement reminiscent of Whitman’s comment about the American bard, Banvard said that he had been motivated by the thought that “America has not the artists commensurate with the grandeur and extent of her scenery” (Hanners 1993: 38). Banvard claimed to have displayed his panorama for 400,000 persons in the United States (Oettermann 1997: 330), and despite the detractions of reviewers and modern critics (see, for example, Dougherty 1993: 166), a number of contemporary anecdotes suggest that for average audience members Banvard’s and other river panoramas possessed a powerful verisimilitude (Hanners 1993: 44, Orvell 1989: 22, Oettermann 1997: 335).

Whitman must have been impressed, for he came to see much of the world – and more importantly his own work – in terms of a moving panorama. Because of the large number of moving panoramas devoted to water voyages, it is not surprising that the poet’s own descriptions of river and ocean scenery often betray an indebtedness to the scrolling format. Two journalistic descriptions of New York’s river and bay scenery during the mid-1840s make reference to moving panoramas, and similar images reappear in newspaper pieces and letters written between 1849 and 1880. Seen from the middle of the East River, a “moving panorama is upon all parts of the waters” (Whitman 1973: 350); on one trip up the Hudson, the poet remarks “the constantly changing but ever beautiful panorama on both sides of the river” (*PW*, 1: 167); on another trip the Hudson’s “panorama [. . .] seems inimitable, increases in interest and variety” (*PW*, 1: 191). Likewise, Whitman developed the habit of describing another of his favorite

subjects – crowds of people – as a river panorama. Very often after about 1862, panoramas and rivers and bustling crowds merge in an image that is at once chaotic and beautiful, thrilling and overwhelming. A prime example is the letter Whitman wrote to his friend Peter Doyle, detailing a scene much like the one he had witnessed 20 years earlier, while seated at a window in the American Museum. In a very long sentence with periodic syntax, Whitman breathlessly describes the “never-ending amusement & study & recreation” of riding a stage up and down Broadway. There, “[y]ou see everything as you pass, a sort of living, endless panorama” of storefronts, “crowds of women [. . .] continually passing [. . .] – in fact a perfect stream of people, men too dressed in high style, & plenty of foreigners,” the street jammed with “carriages, stages, carts, hotel & private coaches, [. . .] mile after mile,” impressive buildings, “& the gayety & motion on every side. . . .” Whitman concludes by reminding Doyle “how much attraction” such a sight must be to him, “who enjoys so much seeing the busy world move by him, & exhibiting itself for his amusement. . . .” (*Corr.*, 2: 56–7).

The moving panorama also gave Whitman a way of thinking about and indicating his sense of the enormity of the Civil War. The passage from “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d,” noted above, recalls a letter Whitman wrote to his mother in 1865, in which he mentions a parade of Civil War soldiers, saying that “it was very grand – it was too much & too impressive, to be described. . . .” After a description even longer than the one of Broadway, he writes, “well, dear mother, that is a brief sketch, give you some idea of the great panorama of the Armies that have been passing. . . .” (*Corr.*, 1: 260–1). But the importance of the panorama to Whitman’s conception of the war is most vividly expressed in the Preface to the “Centennial Edition” of his works, published in 1876. In what is also his clearest allusion to the specific method of the moving panorama, he says that he has included “passing and rapid but actual glimpses of the Civil War, “as the fierce and bloody panorama of that contest unroll’d itself. . . .” He adds that “the whole Book, indeed, revolves around that Four Years’ War, which [. . .] becomes [. . .] pivotal to the rest entire. . . .” (*PW*, 2: 469). A few years before, in the poem “To Thee Old Cause,” he had characterized *Leaves of Grass* and its relation to the war in similar terms. Although the poem doesn’t mention the moving panorama by name, its movement and magnitude are invoked. Whitman writes of “the strange sad war revolving” around the “old cause,” which he defines elsewhere as “the progress and freedom of the race” (Whitman 1871: 12, 369). He continues,

[. . .] my Book and the War are one,
Merged in spirit I and mine – as the contest hinged on thee,
As a wheel on its axis turns, this Book, unwitting to itself,
Around the Idea of thee.

(Whitman 1871: 12)

By the time these lines appeared, the moving panorama was no longer a lucrative commercial entertainment, but it had been deeply assimilated into Whitman’s poetry as a fixed referent, a trope used to structure the most fundamental meanings of *Leaves*

of *Grass* itself. In the moving panorama Whitman recognized a medium with the simultaneously encompassing and expansive qualities he desired for his poetry, a form that demonstrated the possibility of both providing a frame and transgressing it.

In fact, by the 1870s all of the commercial entertainments that I have discussed had undergone important changes. The American Museum had burned, reopened, and burned again; Barnum had begun applying his transformative entrepreneurial skills to the circus; moving panoramas had become passé. What's more, the very notion of "culture" had begun to shift. Whitman continued to believe in the ideas that he had found inspirational in Channing's sermon decades earlier – in culture as a comprehensive program of self-improvement for the masses – but he could no longer assume his readers shared his understanding. In *Democratic Vistas*, he remarks that "[t]he word of the modern [. . .] is the word Culture," which he now calls "the enemy" because of "what it has come to represent": superficial refinement. But he reaffirms his dedication to the principles it had traditionally expressed. He calls for a "programme of culture [. . .] not for a single class alone, or for the parlors or lecture-rooms, but with an eye to practical life . . ." and with "a scope generous enough to include the widest human area" (*PW*; 2: 395–6). A few years later, in "A Thought of Culture," he wrote that in America "there is one field, and the grandest of all, that is left open for our cultus [i.e., cultivation]": "to fashion on a free scale for the average masses [. . .] a splendid and perfect Personality," "specimens" of "masses of free men and women [. . .] in their physical, moral, mental, and emotional elements, and filling all the departments of farming and working life." As part of that cultivation, he advises a study of "the past and the foreign in the best books, relics, museums, pictures" – as well as firsthand experience closer to home (Whitman 1921, 2: 55).

Whitman also continued to present *Leaves of Grass* as his own contribution to the cause of self-culture. He told a visitor to his home in Camden in 1884, "I don't value the poetry in what I have written so much as the teaching; the poetry is only a horse for the other to ride" (Thayer 1919: 678). In a similar vein, his Centennial Edition introduction had declared that he "meant 'Leaves of Grass,' as publish'd, to be the Poem of average Identity," an illustration of the idea that "man is most acceptable in living well the practical life. . ." in which "he preserves his physique, ascends, developing, radiating himself in other regions [. . .]," and "fully realizes the conscience, the spiritual, the divine faculty, cultivated well. . ." (*PW*, 2: 470–1). Whitman had fashioned himself in these terms partly through recourse to the institutions of "rational amusement," and his work he fashioned as a projection of himself – both the result and the means of popular culture.

REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

- Barnum's Museum (1850). *New York Tribune*, June 19. Available at <http://chnm.gmu.edu/lost-museum/lm/22/>.
- Bergman, H. (1985). Panoramas of New York, 1845–1860. *Prospects*, 10: 119–37.
- Bogdan, R. (1988). *Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

- Brooklyn Daily Eagle Online (1841–1902). <http://www.brooklynpubliclibrary.org/eagle/>
- Butsch, R. (2000). *The Making of American Audiences: From Stage to Television, 1750–1990*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Channing, W. E. ([1838] 1969). *Self-Culture*. New York: Arno.
- Dennett, A. S. (1997). *Weird and Wonderful: The Dime Museum in America*. New York: New York University Press.
- Dixon, J. G. (1981). Prussia, Politics, and Physical Education. In P. C. McIntosh, J. G. Dixon, A. D. Munrow, and R. F. Willetts. *Landmarks in the History of Physical Education*. London: Routledge, pp. 112–55.
- Dougherty, J. (1993). *Walt Whitman and the Citizen's Eye*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press.
- Fern, F. (1854). *Fern Leaves from Fanny's Port-Folio*, 2nd Series. Auburn and Buffalo, NY: Miller, Orton & Mulligan.
- Fishwick, M. W. (1999). *Popular Culture: Cavespace to Cyberspace*. New York: Haworth.
- Flint, R. W. (1979). The Evolution of the Circus in Nineteenth-century America. In M. Matlaw (ed.), *American Popular Entertainment: Papers and Proceedings of the Conference on the History of American Popular Entertainment*. Westport, CT: Greenwood, pp. 188–95.
- Flint, R. W. (1983). The Circus in America: The World's Largest, Grandest, Best Amusement Institution. *The Quarterly Journal of the Library of Congress*, 40: 202–33.
- Folsom, E. (1990). "Scattering it freely forever": Whitman in a Seminar on Nineteenth-century American Culture. In D. Kummings (ed.), *Approaches to Teaching Whitman's Leaves of Grass*. New York: Modern Language Association of America, pp. 139–45.
- Folsom, E. (1994). *Walt Whitman's Native Representations*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Folsom, Ed, and Price, Kenneth M. (1995–). The Walt Whitman Archive. <http://www.whitmanarchive.org/>
- Gates, R. L. (1987). Egyptian Myth and Whitman's "Lilacs." *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review*, 5: 21–31.
- Hanners, J. (1993). *"It Was Play or Starve": Acting in the Nineteenth-Century American Popular Theatre*. Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press.
- Hudson, K. (1975). *A Social History of Museums: What the Visitors Saw*. London: Macmillan.
- Kunhardt, P. B., Jr., Kunhardt, P. B., III, and Kunhardt, P. W. (1995). *P. T. Barnum: America's Greatest Showman*. New York: Knopf.
- Levine, L. (1988). *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Lewis, R. M. (ed.) (2003). *From Traveling Show to Vaudeville: Theatrical Spectacle in America, 1830–1910*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- McNamara, E. (1984). "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry": The Shaping Imagination. *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review*, 2: 32–5.
- Murray, M. (1999). The Poet-Chief Greets the Sioux. *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review*, 17: 25–1, 37.
- Oettermann, S. (1997). *The Panorama: History of a Mass Medium*, trans. D. L. Schneider. New York: Zone Books.
- Orvell, M. (1989). *The Real Thing: Imitation and Authenticity in American Culture, 1880–1940*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Peale, C. W. (1988). *Charles Willson Peale: The Artist as Museum Keeper, 1791–1810*, vol. 2 of *The Selected Papers of Charles Willson Peale and His Family*, ed. L. B. Miller, Sidney Hart, and David C. Ward. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Peale, C. W. (1991). *The Bedford Farm Years, 1810–1820*, vol. 3 of *The Selected Papers of Charles Willson Peale and His Family*, ed. L. B. Miller, Sidney Hart, and David C. Ward. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

- Places of Public Amusement (1854). *Putnam's Monthly*, 3: 141–52.
- Porter, C. M. (1999). The Natural History Museum. In M. S. Shapiro (ed.), *The Museum: A Reference Guide*. New York: Greenwood, pp. 1–30.
- Price, K. M. (ed.) (1996). *Walt Whitman: The Contemporary Reviews*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Reddin, P. (1999). *Wild West Shows*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.
- Reynolds, D. S. (1988). *Beneath the American Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville*. New York: Knopf.
- Reynolds, D. S. (1995). *Walt Whitman's America: A Cultural Biography*. New York: Knopf.
- Rice, E. A. (1929). *A Brief History of Physical Education*, revised and enlarged. New York: A. S. Barnes.
- Saxon, A. H. (1989). *P. T. Barnum: The Legend and the Man*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Sellers, C. C. (1980). *Mr. Peale's Museum: Charles Willson Peale and the First Popular Museum of Natural Science and Art*. New York: Norton.
- Stovall, F. (1974). *The Foreground of Leaves of Grass*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press.
- Tapscott, S. J. (1978). Leaves of Myself: Whitman's Egypt in "Song of Myself." *American Literature*, 50: 49–73.
- Teichgraber, R. F., III. (1999). "Culture" in Industrializing America. *Intellectual History Newsletter*, 21: 11–23.
- Thayer, W. R. (1919). Personal Recollections of Walt Whitman. *Scribner's Magazine*, 65: 674–87.
- Toll, R. C. (1976). *On with the Show!: The First Century of Show Business in America*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Traubel, Horace (1908). *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, vol. 2. New York: Appleton.
- Traubel, Horace (1982). *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, vol. 6, ed. Gertrude Traubel and William White. Carbondale: University of Southern Illinois Press.
- Wallace, I. (1967). *The Fabulous Showman: The Life and Times of P. T. Barnum*. New York: Knopf.
- Washburn, W. E. (1990). Museum Exhibition. In M. S. Shapiro (ed.), *The Museum: A Reference Guide*. New York: Greenwood, pp. 199–230.
- Whitman, Walt (1867). Democracy. *Galaxy*, 4: 919–33. Available at <http://cdl.library.cornell.edu/cgi-bin/moa/sgml/moa-idx?notisid=ACB8727-0004-118>
- Whitman, Walt (1921). *Uncollected Poetry and Prose*, ed. Emory Holloway, 2 vols. Garden City: Doubleday.
- Whitman, Walt (1933). City Photographs. In *Walt Whitman and the Civil War: A Collection of Original Articles and Manuscripts*, ed. Charles I. Glicksberg. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Whitman, Walt (1936). *New York Dissected, by Walt Whitman; A Sheaf of Recently Discovered Newspaper Articles by the Author of Leaves of Grass*, ed. Emory Holloway and Ralph Adimari. New York: R. R. Wilson.
- Whitman, Walt (1973). Letters from a Travelling Bachelor. In J. J. Rubin, *The Historic Whitman*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, pp. 311–54.
- Williams, R. (1976). *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*. London: Croom Helm.
- Zarobila, C. (1979). Walt Whitman and the Panorama. *Walt Whitman Review*, 25: 51–9.