

## WHITMAN, WORDSWORTH AND THE CITIES: POETRY, URBANISM AND IDENTITY

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**ABSTRACT:** The present article intends to explore the issue of the imagined poetic city present in the poetry of Walt Whitman and William Wordsworth as a site of multiple belongings. From their poetry, we interrogate how notions of identity and belonging are illustrated by their depictions of the geographical space within their cities, respectively New York and London. Our readings take us to question the role of the (imagined) place created between the poet and the reader, and if the city is a real place or a non-place, where identities and memories are created to produce a third space.

**KEYWORDS:** Walt Whitman; William Wordsworth; city and identity

**RESUMO:** O presente artigo pretende explorar a questão da cidade poética imaginada conforme presente na poesia de Walt Whitman e de William Wordsworth, isto é, vista como um sítio de múltiplos pertencimentos. De suas poesias, questionamos de que maneira noções de identidade e pertencimento são ilustradas através das representações do espaço geográfico de suas cidades, respectivamente Nova York e Londres. Nossas leituras nos levam a questionar o papel do lugar (imaginado) criado entre poeta e leitor, e se a cidade é um lugar real ou um não-lugar, onde identidades e memórias são criadas para produzirem um terceiro espaço.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Walt Whitman; William Wordsworth; cidade e identidade

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Identity is the sense of oneself as an individual and the sense of oneself belonging to a collective. A person acquires a sense of him/herself as an individual by increasing awareness of his/her spiritual, physical, and social being. The factors that contribute to this sense of self as an individual may be synonymous with the factors that contribute to a sense of oneself belonging to a collective. A sense of belonging to a collective may be based on shared physical features, heritage, history, dwelling, lived experiences, cultural practices and values, and geopolitical spaces, among others. There is an analogy with the arts here. The city environment has at times been compared to a work of art (OLSEN, 1986), and even though cities and works of art, in the case of this article – poetry, are at first sight very different entities, a closer analysis reveals remarkable similarities. Poetry also requires attention; one cannot appreciate it appropriately without having observed its characteristics carefully enough. Unfamiliarity is among the features that one can encounter both in poetry and in an urban environment, which is what often makes them appealing and challenging.

In addition, neither poetry nor cities are trouble-free and manageable. In order to understand, manage, and appreciate them there is often a considerable effort required. The idea of belonging to a city, or associating oneself to a *locus* can come in many different forms. One of those that we intend to explore here is the imagined poetic city present in the poetry of Walt Whitman and William Wordsworth. In their poetry, the cities, respectively New York and London, become a site of multiple belongings. From their poetry, we interrogate how notions of identity and belonging are illustrated by their depictions of the geographical space within their cities. Our readings take us to question the role of the (imagined) place created between the poet and the reader, and is the city a real place or is it a non-place, where identities and memories created there produce a ‘third space’? (BHABA, 1994).

This space suggested by Bhabha argues that one’s identity is a collection of characteristics, values and beliefs that permeates each of the role-related identities of an individual. However, there are also physical dimensions and characteristics that help to define and are incorporated by that identity. Furthermore, there is a general place for each individual, whether it is his/her hometown, or chosen city to live, which reflects his or her unique socialization in the physical world. In this case of one’s identity, the environment (the place, in this paper – the city) helps to define the dimensions of self, thus, that ones that define the

individual's personal identity in relation to the physical space by means of a complex pattern of conscious and unconscious ideas, feelings, values, preferences, skills, and tendencies relevant to a specific city.

Among poetic genres, the poetry about cities stands out as being relatively new in comparison to other genres more easily recognized. The romantic poets, for instance, would rather write about the countryside, the fields, the moors, and flowers, usually approaching nature and staying away from cities. Future literary critics would associate this very status of going against culture and industrialization to the Romantic Movement.

Only in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century two poets would become known as representative of a poetry that uncovers the beauty, the interest, and the vitality of the cities; Walt Whitman in America and Charles Baudelaire in Europe. They were possibly attracted to the challenges this theme, then pioneer, presented. The challenge lay in the cities' own characteristics of that time, places lacking infrastructure, filthy streets filled with misery, violence, disease, and death. These poets may have faced the conundrum: how to find beauty in this environment?

As mentioned before, our focus shall remain on two English language poets, Whitman and Wordsworth. The former presented, in the bulk of his production about cities, poems that descanted mainly about New York City, especially about Brooklyn. In his poetry, there are two distinct aspects; in one, it is possible to see the presence of the journalist, i.e., Whitman as a reporter wrote influenced by a photojournalist point of view, depicted urban reality in a denotative manner. The other aspect brings a metaphorical description of the city, as a symbol, and a connotative figure that represents the human community and the interactions among its members.

Writers before him have come across the problem of describing such a heterogeneous community. Dickens, Defoe and Balzac, to name a few, had already dealt with the fact that whether describing several individual characters who inhabited this microcosm would be enough to depict a greater Picture.

They have all written about the interactions among members of their communities, at most times not really urban, in the sense of being courteous and civilized, and, often, about unpredictable encounters. Differently from smaller communities, villages, where everyone knows each other and about each other's lives, the city reveals itself to be a place of mystery, anonymity, an unknown locus,

in this sense. Besides that, the city is the place where one can lose his/her identity, as well as where one can lose any sense of individual hegemony, since one does not have any more absolute authority over his/her own desires, and wishes, and welfare is limited and authorized by the will and welfare of the other, the neighbor, one could say (WEINSTEIN, 1997).

An individual is not enough to represent a city. An individual is only a fragment of a greater scheme, a single piece of the jigsaw. Whitman describes this idea in his biggest urban poem, entitled *Crossing Brooklyn Ferry*, part of his collection *Leaves of Grass* (1855 edition):

The impalpable sustenance of me from all things, at all hours  
of the day;  
The simple, compact, well-join'd scheme—myself  
disintegrated, every one disintegrated, yet part of the scheme:  
The similitudes of the past, and those of the future (WHITMAN,  
2005, p. 193).

He depicts not only the nervousness and intensity of the big cities, but also the feeling each citizen shares with each other. The poem, as the name suggests, takes place during a river crossing of the ferry. The river in this case becomes even more symbolic of such passage. Leaving one bank to reach the other, carrying with oneself hopes, dreams and experiences to land on the other shore, to become another individual who carries the being one was before to add to the new one in the opposite shore. The vessel, full of observing passengers who take part in exactly such observations and ponder about the crossing and the shared experienced resulting from this very trip:

Others will see the islands large and small;  
Fifty years hence, others will see them as they cross, the sun  
half an hour high;  
A hundred years hence, or ever so many hundred years hence,  
others will see them,  
Will enjoy the sunset, the pouring in of the flood-tide, the  
falling back to the sea of the ebb-tide (WHITMAN, 2005, p.  
194).

Though one cannot be sure whether Whitman chose the river and the ferry to represent this fragmentation and also amalgamation one's identity may suffer coming to the big city, the poem is clear to say that the city and its crossing

will remain, differently in the perception of different eyes, but nevertheless, long lasting.

Other writers and thinkers, such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, or James Joyce for example, would say that citizens share in a given situation as this one a moment of epiphany, the instant when all are able to see with clarity what was once obnubilated, not Whitman, though. Whitman claimed that the passengers in the ferry would share the inquiries, the lack of comprehension, the seeking of understanding, the mystery, the question and not the answer or the revelation.

More than that, Whitman intended to create a bond with his reader, He wants to partake more, and he wants identification:

It is not you alone who know what it is to be evil;  
I am he who knew what it was to be evil;  
I too knitted the old knot of contrariety,  
Blabb'd, blush'd, resented, lied, stole, grudg'd,  
Had guile, anger, lust, hot wishes I dared not speak,  
Was wayward, vain, greedy, shallow, sly, cowardly, malignant;  
(WHITMAN, 2005, p. 197)

This quest for identification goes beyond the one among the people on the ferry crossing Brooklyn, the one between poet and reader; it leaps in time and advances to the future, when the poet addresses his contemporaries and future generations of people who still cross the river till this day. He tries to convince today's reader that one can experience the same he did. He invites us to a pact. And we, when reading his poem written over a hundred and fifty years ago, share with him and legitimize what he has written. We, present readers, make his prophecy possible. However, the long ago scheduled meeting takes place, and this is one of the Wonders of the art, and literature; and the meeting is the soul of the urban theme.

I am with you, you men and women of a generation, or ever so many generations hence; (...)  
Just as you feel when you look on the river and sky, so I felt;  
Just as any of you is one of a living crowd, I was one of a crowd;  
(...)  
What is it, then, between us?  
What is the count of the scores or hundreds of years between us?  
Whatever it is, it avails not—distance avails not, and place avails not. (...)

I too lived—Brooklyn, of ample hills, was mine;  
I too walk'd the streets of Manhattan Island, and bathed in the  
waters around it;  
(WHITMAN, 2005, p. 196)

No need to say that Whitman's Manhattan is very different from the present one. Clearly there are not many people who bathe in the waters in its surroundings, nor it is possible to hear the hooves of horses trotting on the cobblestone streets as it is described in the following passage, section 8 of the 1855 version of *Song of Myself*, from *Leaves of Grass*:

The blab of the pave . . . the tires of carts and sluff of bootsoles  
and talk of the promenaders, The heavy omnibus, the driver  
with his interrogating thumb, the clank of the shod horses on  
the granite floor (WHITMAN, 2005, p. 46).

The first manifestations of urban life can be not only read, but heard, as in one more passage from *Song of Myself*:

The carnival of sleighs, the clinking and shouted jokes and pelts  
of snowballs;  
The hurrahs for popular favorites . . . the fury of roused mobs,  
The flap of the curtained litter--the sick man inside, borne to  
the hospital,  
The meeting of enemies, the sudden oath, the blows and fall,  
The excited crowd--the policeman with his star quickly working  
his passage to the centre of the crowd;  
(WHITMAN, 2005, p.46)

These are chronicles of urban spectacles as Whitman sees them. The city reveals itself as a big arena, a huge stage where crises arise and dissipate. This is the vision of the reporter, keen for details that cumulatively together portray the city. That was already the Melting Pot New York, with citizens from several different countries around the globe:

The countries there with their populations, the millions en-  
masse are curiously here, The swarming market-places, the  
temples with idols ranged along the sides or at the end, bonze,  
brahmin, and llama, Mandarin, farmer, merchant, mechanic,  
and fisherman, The singing-girl and the dancing-girl, the  
ecstatic persons, the secluded emperors, Confucius himself,  
the great poets and heroes, the warriors, the castes,  
all, Trooping up, crowding from all directions, from the Altay

mountains, From Thibet, from the four winding and far-flowing rivers of China, From the southern peninsulas and the demi-continental islands, from Malaysia (WHITMAN, 2005, p.294).

Whitman describes the flow of immigrants, and, with them, the insertion of world cultures in this very city. He invents the city as a symbol that surpasses every nation. Whitman had already a multicultural view. He knew, nonetheless, that this same flow that shelters this cultural multiplicity creates conflicts. However, these conflicts are responsible for the vitality of this urban space. This brings, naturally, an array of possibilities for fiction in general, more specifically, for poetry. At the same time, Whitman sees the city experience as something fraternal. The mystery and vitality are shared by all, therefore, the city is, in this sense, a place of brotherhood.

Ilan Stavans (2001) says that since we are children, we acquire a sense of uniqueness, of self, when we begin to “distinguish what is and isn’t” ours (p.1). In a nutshell, our *id* (inner selves) formulates its own identity, interacting dynamically with parents who are part of a group that will reaffirm (and/or modify) the identity. One adopts the principles of an even larger group, his community, nation and culture. Providing a definition of identity is directly related to concepts such as ethnicity, nation and nation-state. Rien Segers (2001) when trying to define a nation:

A nation is a far more self-conscious community than an ethnicity. Formed from one or more ethnicities, and normally identified by a literature of its own, it possesses or claims the right to political identity and autonomy as a people, together with the control of specific territory [...] a state which identifies itself in terms of one specific nation whose people are not seen simply as subjects of the sovereign but as a horizontally bonded society to whom the state in a sense belongs [...] there is basic equivalence between the borders and character of the political unit upon the one hand and a self-conscious cultural community on the other (p.53).

Still in the same article, Seger says that there are different views for the concept of identity. One of them is that it can be regarded as the cultural identity of a particular group or people that can be partly determined by their national identity. On the other hand, when an individual belongs to a particular state is only one way to describe one’s self identity among many others. Cultural identity is usually regarded as a variety of characteristics which are unique for a specific culture of a

particular people. That is how Whitman probably saw his America, more specifically, New York City. The experience of living in such city is for sure unique.

Another poem that called attention due to its allusion to the differences between life in the city and in the countryside is *The Splendid Silent Sun*. The poem begins with an invocation of the rural life in a very traditional manner, presenting predictable elements – birds singing, fruits, flowers and trees:

Give me the splendid silent sun with all his beams full-dazzling  
Give me autumnal fruit ripe and red from the orchard  
Give me a field where the unmow'd grass grows  
Give me an arbor, give me the trellis'd grape  
(WHITMAN, 2005, p. 373)

The second part of the poem is marked by an inversion. The poet does not exactly toss the previously idealized landscape – the romantic project – still, he, indubitably, shifts the center of gravity from the field to the city, where he recognizes as being the place where action develops, grows, and where the opportunities are. Urban activity is certainly a new challenge. This work brings back the question of anonymity, of your unknown neighbor; the poet asks women, comrades, and lovers by the thousands, and each of them unknown and different from each other to:

Keep your splendid silent sun,  
Keep your woods O Nature, and the quiet places by the woods,  
Keep your fields of clover and timothy, and your corn-fields  
and orchards,  
Keep the blossoming buckwheat fields where the Ninth-month  
bees hum;  
Give me faces and streets--give me these phantoms incessant  
and  
endless along the trottoirs!  
Give me interminable eyes--give me women--give me  
comrades and  
lovers by the thousand!  
Let me see new ones every day--let me hold new ones by the  
hand every day!  
Give me such shows--give me the streets of Manhattan!  
Give me Broadway  
(WHITMAN, 2005, p. 374)

The poem *Sparkles from the Wheel*, though simple and simple in terms of rhetoric, is sweet, we dare to say, depicting a common place and city scene in a beautiful way. The action is equally simple – a man walks on the street and sees this



knife-grinder doing his work. At each rotation of the wheel, golden sparks and sparkles are produced when in contact with the metal of the knife blade, and there is a group of people around observing these sparkles, these drops of gold, and one can notice the richness of the event that is recognized by its spectators with awe. This scene supports the poet's argument and his ideology, when a simple stroll by the city streets can grant such spectacles filled with grandeur while being an everyday life event. This is possible, for the poet, when one walks around the city and one can trip in such moments and be marveled by their great beauty, great poetry.

WHERE the city's ceaseless crowd moves on the livelong day,  
Withdrawn I join a group of children watching, I pause aside  
with them.  
By the curb toward the edge of the flagging,  
A knife-grinder works at his wheel sharpening a great knife,  
Bending over he carefully holds it to the stone, by foot and  
knee,  
With measur'd tread he turns rapidly, as he presses with light  
but firm hand,  
Forth issue then in copious golden jets,  
Sparkles from the wheel.  
(WHITMAN, 2005, p. 463)

Whitman could present a plain episode within city life and find its beauty and poetry. This portrayal of a beautiful life in the city, which could be appreciated in the smallest events, reflects the poet's love and admiration for his city. Such favorable depictions convey an extreme love and identification with the city. Though the poets were not from the same city, neither from the same writing period, one can see these characteristics regarding one's city in the poem *Upon Westminster Bridge* by the English poet William Wordsworth (all quotes from WORDSWORTH, 2008, p. 285).

This poem was written in 1802 while Europe, the city of London and the poet himself were going through many changes and revolutions of different kinds. It was written at around the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in Georgian times, to illustrate the authors' views on the city of London. At this time, the industrial revolution was underway and there was great growth in the population, due to medical advances and people having more children, and also mechanic and scientific progress.

This progress brought a sense of wondrous and astonishment to many writers, but Wordsworth chose a time of the day to observe his city in which all its inhabitants and the wheels of progress were still asleep right before the hustling and bustling of the day started. His poem shows his feelings for London in a figurative way. He personifies the sun, river and the city. He gives them human aspects and actions such as wearing clothes. He says "The City now doth like a garment wear the beauty of the morning", in the first line. This gives the idea that the city is alive, not just an inanimate collection of buildings. Clothes are used to protect but also to hide. Maybe the author wanted to protect his city from the perils from the progress or from the government or perhaps what both could bring upon London. Perhaps the line means that the city takes the beauty of the morning to disguise its dirtiness and ugliness. Maybe this imagery of a clothed city was, as he plainly states, only to portray the beauty of the early morning.

He continues the personification when he gives the river 'a will', something which is unique to people (a biblical fact that God has given us a free will to do as we please). Not only are the natural elements given human qualities, but also the houses, which "seem asleep". The houses are a representation of its dwellers, who in that wee hour of the day are still asleep themselves.

The poet praises both nature and man's achievements, in the shape of the constructions and buildings of the city and the nature as in line 10 "splendour valley, rock, or hill". The "Ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples" are also part of the "splendor" of the city and as the houses they still slumber moments before they awake. The qualities and fairness of the city is recognized even by the king star, the sun, "never did sun more beautifully steep".

Wordsworth shares with the reader how he feels in the line "Dull would he be of soul who could pass by, a sight so touching in its majesty." The poet infers that the sight of London would evoke strong views in everyone who sees it. It is up to the reader to decide whether this is a compliment or a criticism. In one reading one can identify romantic characteristics in this poem, such as the sense of extreme zealotry for his native land, almost idealized, but on the other hand, the poet was somewhat dissatisfied with the course of things in his beloved city and tried to hide its figurative (or perhaps not as much) ugliness (in a political and moral sense) and cover it with the bright sun, with the vibrant and lively river, with the gifts mother Earth bestowed upon the place.

Wordsworth's poem, rather a sonnet, describes London as "glittering in the smokeless air" and having a soothing aura. These lines can be construed as sarcastic even. At the time they were written the Industrial age was a present and strong reality and the chimneys of London would be expelling out thick dark smoke, as it can be seen before him in Blake's poems. Also to describe London as a calm and quiet place seems to be a huge stretch. London is the heart of the United Kingdom, a port and an important center of commerce. It is now and it was much more on those days. It is almost impossible to imagine it to be such a "silent, bare" place, where everyone and everything lies still.

The poem is made more compelling in the line before last where he says "Dear God! The very houses seem asleep". He is so overwhelmed by the tranquility of London that he feels the need to invoke the name of God. He uses direct speech to heighten the emotion. Is it a plea to God to awaken its sleepy inhabitants, morally and politically sleepers, or is it just a sigh of admiration for his own land? It seems to be easily understandable on a first reading, but after a few (many and more) times, the message does not seem as clear anymore. Perhaps it could be just London at one moment in the morning. Nothing in it could be interpreted as relating to London's people or what the future holds for them.

The last, but not least, one of the most important parts of any piece of literature is the title. It forms a cohesive "banner" under which the main idea of the piece is conveyed. Anyone who has ever been to London and stood on the Westminster Bridge has felt a little awed him or herself pretty much as the author. Upon the Westminster Bridge one can see the Thames river, with its importance and beauty (especially now that it is not polluted anymore), the majestic Parliament, the Big Ben, with its legends, the Eye of London, and so on. Trying to put oneself in Wordsworth's shoes and see London through his eyes, the London of his time, and it is overwhelmingly difficult, can lead one to see his feelings for London the same way one can see Whitman's feelings for New York City.

Singing praises of everyday life and even structural aspects of one's city shows clearly a love and identification with such space. Although, identity is a very personal concept for each one, in sum, it defines who or what we think we are. This identity is clearly attached to the space we inhabit and consider our home. This space carries a particular culture which is regarded as a range of characteristics which are all related to each other. This identity can be considered as a construction, "the

cultural identity of a particular nation [...] can be attached to [...] formal characteristics [...]” (SEGERS, 2001, p.58). If we consider identity as a construction as mentioned previously, this means that it is a “mental conception which may vary according to the constructor, the time and the place of construction” (p.59). Thus, there are as many identities as there are times, places and people that construct it, and Whitman and Wordsworth have shown their poetic identities and their relationship to their cities through their work.

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