

THE DRUNK FLÂNEUR IN WHITMAN AND BAUDELAIRE

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Abstract

Although there is no historical evidence that Whitman had any real connection with Baudelaire in his life, this paper considers parallels between Whitman and Baudelaire through the question of the drunk flâneur. In seeing both Whitman and Baudelaire as the poets of the city and modern life, this paper places emphasis on the sense of intoxication derived from the drunk flâneur's perceptive pleasure. The notion of mesmerism has become one of the primary discussions of urban phantasmagoria that takes place in *Leaves of Grass*; it also sheds some light on Whitman's thoughts on the city as a mesmerist or a site of electrical science, which is similar to Baudelaire's literary depiction of the crowd in the metropolis as 'an immense reservoir of electrical energy', in which the flâneur becomes the modern painter whose 'genius is nothing more nor less than childhood recovered at will' ('The Painter of Modern Life' 10). Although Whitman did not really use the term 'drunk' for mesmeric fluidity, I intend to use the term in a more metaphorical way for Whitman, namely drunkenness as intoxication, as the collapse of social boundaries, or drunkenness as mesmerism and a kind of addiction to the energies of the city. For Baudelaire, being disguised as a 'drunk' child in a joyful state enables the flâneur to embrace the essence of a true artist, for returning to childhood grants the artist with the perceptive freshness as well as the extraordinary ability to express the particular sensation to the reader. For Whitman, in his emphasis on the magnetic force in 'I Sing the Body Electric' and 'The Sleepers', American spiritual energy enters into the description of the crowd in *Leaves of Grass*. *Leaves of Grass* changes the metropolitan setting from Baudelaire's Paris to America, corroborating the strength of American visual culture in the nineteenth century.

I wander all night in my vision,
Stepping with light feet, swiftly and noiselessly stepping and stopping,
Bending with open eyes over the shut eyes of sleepers,
Wandering and confused, lost to myself, ill-assorted, contradictory,
Pausing, gazing, bending, and stopping.

(1-5)

This is the famous night-walking scene that opens ‘The Sleepers,’ in which Whitman sets out his night tour in a dreamlike tone, represents himself as a ‘clairvoyant sleepwalker’ free from his own body, actively engaged in the interior world of both male and female, sharing people’s dreams by identifying his consciousness with others (Aspiz 172). The image of the poet in the somnambulistic or mesmeric state, with his role as a spokesman for the spirits of both living and dead has significantly anticipated the development of surrealist poetry in the twentieth century.¹The main purpose of this paper is to offer a sketch of the ‘drunk’ flâneur, namely Whitman’s ‘magnetic sleep’ and alternate-consciousness, which not only makes ‘The Sleepers’ a vital progenitor of surrealist American poems, but also helps Whitman illustrate American experience, mediate between the past and the present, and reinforce *Leaves of Grass* as a landmark of American poetic achievement.¹¹However, since Whitman did not really use the term ‘drunk’ for mesmeric fluidity, I intend to use the term in a more metaphorical way for Whitman, namely drunkenness as intoxication, as the collapse of social boundaries, or drunkenness as mesmerism and a kind of addiction to the energies of the city.

Although the main concern here is the representation of ‘drunk’ Whitman, or mesmerism in Whitman, Baudelaire in ‘The Painter of Modern Life’ also metaphorically refers to drunkenness as one of the characteristics a city walker embraces. William Wordsworth wrote classic accounts of London street-walking in ‘The Prelude’ (1805); Baudelaire’s notion of the flâneur is not archetypal, but part of a long genealogy in which the flâneur is one significant formulation. In his article, Baudelaire compares Guys to the narrator in Edgar Allen Poe’s ‘The Man of the Crowd’, a famous tale which Baudelaire has translated into French. Set in London, the story is related by a convalescent, who just recovers from a long sickness, feels ‘a calm but inquisitive interest in everything’ and ventures out into the hustle and bustle of city life to study a suspicious man, after observing pedestrians for hours behind a window inside a coffee-house in an autumn afternoon (155). In Baudelaire’s hands, however, this ‘calm’ city walker transforms into a ‘drunk’ child while being incognito and ‘one flesh with the crowd’ (9). Baudelaire writes:

The child sees everything in a state of newness; he is always *drunk*. Nothing more resembles what we call inspiration than the delight with which a child absorbs form and color. I am prepared to go even further and assert that inspiration has something in common with a convulsion, and that every sublime thought is accompanied by a more or less violent nervous shock which has its repercussion in the very core of the brain. The man of genius has sound nerves, while those of the child are weak. With the one, Reason has taken up a considerable position; with the other, Sensibility is almost the whole being (8).

For Baudelaire, Guys's drunkenness with consciousness vanishing in the mesmeric state engendered by the hypnotizer—the crowd on the streets of Paris— does not paralyze him. Instead, by imagining his returning to the paradisiacal world of childhood, this artist recreates and spiritualizes the material world of perception, carries out his energy reserved from the crowd, demonstrating his talent in depicting the flow of people around him. The return to childhood enables the artist to freely enjoy the artificial effects of modern city life, where he absorbs visual delight into his imagination, and further transmits his aesthetic sensibility to effect an impression in the mind of the observer. To put it another way, Baudelaire's version of the flâneur aims to seek and experience the transitory and fugitive element of modernity with childlike wonderment. Always in a state of drunkenness, the flâneur enjoys a kind of ecstatic happiness in the world of perception, where whatever comes to his eyes is illumined by colorful and dazzling brilliance from 'the materiality of the perceptible life' (Poulet 133). The flâneur is a drunk artist returning to childhood, who changes his perceptive pleasure into powerful imagination so as to express modernity. As Calinescu notes, 'the proper functioning of imagination seems to imply for Baudelaire a forgetful immersion in the "now," the equivalent of the real source of "all our originality"' (49). Baudelaire further illustrates the characteristics of modernity which the child (flâneur) perceives as well as the sense of wonder the child feels in being part of the crowd:

It is by this deep and joyful curiosity that we may explain the fixed and animally ecstatic gaze of a child confronted with something new, whatever it be, whether a face or a landscape, gilding, colours, shimmering stuffs, or the magic of physical beauty assisted by the cosmetic art (8).

Obsessed with physical beauty and artificial fashion, the child is curious to know the trend of modernity and takes a passionate interest in people clothed in the costume of their own time. He perceives a sense of freshness and novelty in the colorful and the artificial made possible by the growth of modern commodity culture and by the penetration of commodity display, which the flâneur never would have registered 'had it not passed like a magnet over the iron ore of his imagination' (Benjamin 368). Embracing children's sensitive perception to colors and the artificial, the artist makes 'colours' and 'shimmering stuffs' the powerful important sign that speaks the transient beauty of modernity.

However, as the child's 'thirst for the new is quenched by the crowd, which appears self-impelled and endowed with a soul of its own', it is the memory that 'brings about the convergence of imagination and thinking', which contributes to Baudelaire's poetry (Benjamin 345, 346). The relationship between city and memory has been considered one of the most significant motifs among urban writing, providing a metaphysical nexus through which many different associations of the concept of modernity have been developed. For Baudelaire, despite the flâneur's wandering in the metropolis seeking childlike ecstasy, eternal happiness is not promised to the city walker in his process of pursuit. Like what Benjamin explores in *Berlin Childhood around 1900*, childhood itself is 'no state of blissful innocence' (Gilloch 65). Predictably, the return to childhood makes the flâneur struck by the experience of losing himself in time, ruefully plunging into the experience of loss in the past, as it is remembered just as it is forgotten. The search for the ecstatic childhood, or the articulated memories of childhood, is one of Baudelaire's poetic matrices which develops in many of his poems such as 'I have not forgotten...', 'That kind heart you were jealous of...', and above all, 'Benediction', in which

Baudelaire reveals his longing for a lost paradise and eternal happiness, like Adam dreams of his ‘lost Eden’ (Poulet 133):

Still, with an angel guarding secretly,
 The misfit child grows drunk on sunny air;
 In all he drinks or eats in ecstasy
 He finds sweet nectar and ambrosia there.
 (21-24)

Fascinated by the unworldly or the intoxicating lost paradise, Baudelaire is obsessed with the sweet memories of the childhood long gone. Nevertheless, to probe Baudelaire’s search for childhood is to encounter Baudelaire’s ambivalent feelings toward the role of the flâneur: while part of his mind is fascinated by the world filled with images of commodity culture and the ‘impressionistic representation’ of the city, the half part of his mind, in contrast, turns to seek retreat from the worldly to the unworldly, which as R. K. R. Thornton puts it, ‘moves in natural stages to the anti-worldly, the anti-natural, the artificial and the unnatural’ (27). According to Benjamin, the key reason for Baudelaire’s seeking for the heavenly paradise is that although he recognizes the modern city as intoxicating, the city is also Baudelaire’s aspect of Hell, where it offers a marketplace for commerce, which is in essence ‘satanic’: ‘Commerce is satanic because it is one of the forms of egoism—the lowest and vilest’ (376). Benjamin suggests that with the increasing display of ‘the physiognomy of the commodity’, the modern metropolis becomes a place where the individual is commoditized (368).

As with Baudelaire, Whitman’s ‘drunk’ flâneur is ambivalently caught between two polarities as well: on the one hand, he is drawn by the modern world which he sees in a fleeting impression, while on the other hand he yearns to explore the possibility of the eternal ideal. However, because of his ambivalent spiritual direction, Whitman reveals a dynamism in many of his post-Civil War poems, which he revised and rearranged several times. It is only in dreams can Whitman return to the past, pick up the sad memory of the Revolutionary War (section 5 of ‘The Sleepers’), behold the precious peace and expects the coming of paradisiacal happiness, envisioning the possible union of the historical, the modern, and the future. He writes in section 7 of ‘The Sleepers’:

I swear they are all beautiful,
 Every one that sleeps is beautiful, every thing in the dim light is beautiful,
 The wildest and bloodiest is over, and all is peace.

Peace is always beautiful,
 The myth of heaven indicates peace and night.

The myth of heaven indicates the soul,
 The soul is always beautiful, it appears more or it appears less, it comes or it lags behind,

.....
 The diverse shall be no less diverse, but they shall flow and unite—they unite now.

(144-160)

Aspiz suggests that it is only in this ‘luminous dream’ can Whitman complete his ‘happy prophecy’ (174). Also, Howard J. Waskow indicates, this Whitman ‘who mediates between the particular and the universal, and who insists on moderation and “place” even as he celebrates progress and the destruction of barriers, embodies his vision in two images—marriage, the union of opposites, and the procession, a measured journey’ (22). The representation of the drunk flâneur becomes Whitman’s style to mentally traverse and contact the opposites, the past and the present, in attempting to restlessly journey through the rapid changes of modernity. While Whitman makes mesmerism the medium for jumping across time and space to explore both the old and the new worlds as in ‘The Sleepers’, his attempt to connect the two polarities does not always produce a true union. Oftentimes, like Baudelaire’s flâneur, who needs imagination to engage in the urban world of perception, Whitman metaphorically uses the image of ‘flight or a wild dance’ to represent his play of imagination, which as Waskow observes, serves as ‘the engagement of the “organic soul” in the flux of the universe’ (41). For instance, after wandering in his visual world, dreaming in his dream ‘all the dreams of the other dreamers’ and becoming ‘the other dreamers’, the drunk flâneur in Whitman cries out in a joyful tone:

I am a dance—play up there! The fit is whirling me fast!
I am the ever-laughing—it is new moon and twilight,
I see the hiding of douceurs, I see nimble ghosts whichever way I look,
Cache and cache again deep in the ground and sea,
and where it is neither ground nor sea.
(31-35)

In this moment of ecstasy, Whitman makes the symbolic ‘dance’ the basis for traversing time and space to bring different images of the crowd. In this way, there is no barrier to his observation and no limit to his vision. In a similar fashion, ‘The Sleepers’ recalls section 26 of ‘Song of Myself’, in which Whitman’s attempt to have a clairvoyant perspectives of the crowd and to communicate with both the old and the new generations results in a mystic somnambulistic trance, along with his instantaneous flight of imagination. It begins this way:

Now I will do nothing but listen,
To accrue what I hear into this song, to let sounds contribute toward it.
....
I hear the train’d soprano (what work with hers is this?)
The orchestra whirls me wider than Uranus flies,
It wrenches such ardors from me I did not know I possess’d them,
It sails me, I dab with bare feet, they are lick’d by the indolent waves,
I am cut by bitter and angry hail, I lose my breath,
Steep’d amid honey’d morphine, my windpipe throttled in fakes of death,
At length let up again to feel the puzzle of puzzles,
And that we call Being.
(581-610)

Here, with the medium of music, Whitman develops his magnetic sleep to create various images of the crowd in poetry. Reynolds notes that Whitman initiates ‘the craze of trance performances’ that swept the United States in the 1850s; whether Whitman himself has ‘a

trancelike mystical experience’, he becomes ‘a cultural ventriloquist’ whose poetry has given expression to the mass interest in trances (27). The mesmeric force instructs Whitman to form an alternate consciousness, enables him to contact with the innermost consciousness of people from every walk of life, representing the multiple images of the crowd such as ‘the loud laugh of work people’ and the ‘heave’e’yo of stevedores unloading ships by the wharves’ (l. 588, 591).

Moreover, in ‘The Sleepers’, while depicting people’s mind in sleep, Whitman even engages in spiritual healing:

I stand in the dark with drooping eyes by the worst-suffering and the most restless,
I pass my hands soothingly to and fro to a few inches from them,
The restless sink in their beds, they fitfully sleep.
(22-25)

Here, the drunk flâneur’s mesmeric healing power, through the sense of touch which dominates over the physical body, demands particular attention. Transformed into a mesmerist, Whitman declares his electric power to heal wounds and ills, including those left in the Civil War. Aspiz argues that Whitman uses the concept of mesmerism to illustrate his belief that “‘electricity’ bestowed by healthy and strong-willed persons can restore their weaker brethren to health’, if conveyed by physical touch (153). Therefore, Whitman’s metaphor of ‘the body electric’ should be viewed as more than an electric-magnetic power; instead, as Aspiz suggests, it is a transferable flood incurrent inside the physical, which Whitman uses as his poetic rhetoric to achieve and ‘symbolize human and poetic transcendence’ (150). Whitman writes:

I sing the body electric,
The armies of those I love engirth me and I engirth them,
They will not let me off till I go with them, respond to them,
And discorrupt them, and charge them full with the charge of the soul.
(1-4)

Whitman merges his love of the crowd with the electricity emanating from each physical body, providing mystic vision for *Leaves of Grass*. The notion of ‘electric body’ constitutes much of Whitman’s poetic language and imagery, serving as a binder between ‘the physical, mental, and spiritual worlds’; as Aspiz rightly notes, ‘some of the most dazzling imagery in *Leaves of Grass* derives from the new science of electricity, which many of Whitman’s contemporaries believed would unlock the secrets of the universe and bridge the chasm between materialism and the idealistic faith’ (150, 143).

In a comparative study between Baudelaire and Whitman, Erkkila argues, unlike Baudelaire who makes ‘realistic description the basis for his rejection of the nastiness of the material world in favor of the ideal world of spirit’, Whitman’s ‘faithful description of the real’ leads him to ‘a pantheistic embrace of both matter and spirit’ (54). Indeed, both Baudelaire and Whitman are the flâneur driven by the magnetic power of urban phantasmagoria. Yet, while Baudelaire passively fights against the worldly material world around him by excluding his consciousness and imagining a past or the sweet memories of childhood long gone, Whitman clearly recognizes his current location within the present, demonstrating his strong consciousness and possessive individualism in the social context of the new market economy. In particular, in section 3 of ‘To Think of Time’, Whitman writes:

To think the thought of death merged in the thought of materials,
To think of all these wonders of city and country,...

To think how eager we are in building our houses,
To think others shall be just as eager, and we quite indifferent.
(25-28)

Although Whitman's diffusing his sense of self among every subject he perceives constitutes the very psyche of *Leaves of Grass*, in this poem, Whitman makes himself a 'social leveler', who in a retrospection of time and memory, responds to the development of modern capitalist society, reacting 'primarily to the economically induced inequalities of his own society, in which carpenters, masons, and laborers were indeed persuaded to translate their experience of social helplessness into a sense of personal worthlessness' (Thomas 35). Embracing the voice of the crowds and critical acuteness, from 'Song of Myself', 'The Sleepers' to 'To Think of Time', the tendency of Whitman's poetry moves from a literal depiction of urban life to a more socially critical direction. As Stephen A. Black suggests, "'The Sleepers' and 'To Think of Time' have the most to tell us about the psychological patterns fundamental to Whitman's growing vocation and to the growth of *Leaves of Grass*' (120).

The theme of drunkenness in the flâneur deserves people's particular attention. In addition to being both the dreamer and the participant of other people's dreams as in 'The Sleepers', the drunk flâneur in Whitman not only demonstrates his dramatic way of observation as well as his infatuation with the multiplicity of urban life, but also leads us to perceive different sides of the crowds. Also, the representation of the drunk Whitman in *Leaves of Grass* expands Whitman's power of observation, accelerating and encouraging Whitman's immersing into the crowd. Whitman manipulates his interest in mesmerism and skillfully utilizes his aesthetic implication of electric force that helps create unique poetic vision in *Leaves of Grass*. Whitman's visionary experience as a flâneur accentuates the electrical nature of the crowd; like what Baudelaire indicates in *The Painter of Modern Life*, the crowd is nothing less than 'an immense reservoir of electrical energy' or 'a kaleidoscope', where the flâneur can find delightful perceptive pleasure (10). As this electro-magnetic power exercised by Whitman links him to the crowd, the city as a whole is a mesmerist or a site of electrical science, where the flâneur is able to exert his healing powers to heal both the souls and bodies of the suffers, as well as to obtain his electric clairvoyance of the crowds. Whitman thus has the following expression of ecstasy in 'Rise O Days from Your Fathomless Deeps':

I have witness'd the true lightning, I have witness'd my cities electric,
I have lived to behold man burst forth and warlike America rise,
Hence I will seek no more the food of the northern solitary wilds,
No more the mountains roam or sail the stormy sea.
(45-48)

The flâneur is the very theme of *Leaves of Grass*. From the above discussion, it is right to say that *Leaves of Grass* is a revolutionary experiment in the form of American new poetry and Whitman is a pioneer in setting up this model. Whitman makes his poetry a literary departure in American poetry.

Notes

ⁱMichael Moon suggests that ‘The Sleepers’ is perhaps the only surrealist American poem of the nineteenth century (356).

ⁱⁱMarquis de Puységur coins the term in 1784, along with five characteristics of magnetic sleep: a sleep-waking kind of consciousness, a rapport or special connection with the magnetizer, suggestibility, amnesia in the waking state for events in the magnetized state, and a notable alteration in personality. See Adam Crabtree, *From Mesmer to Freud: Magnetic Sleep and the Roots of Psychological Healing* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993).

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