

## The Flâneur in Baudelaire and Whitman

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### Abstract

This paper discusses the trans-cultural affinities between Whitman and Baudelaire through the question of the flâneur, a figure whose emergence coincides with the booming development of economic industry in the nineteenth century. Although there is no historical evidence that Whitman had any real connection with Baudelaire in his life, both Baudelaire and Whitman are poets of modern life and share a mutual infatuation with modernity. Both poets also innovatively demonstrate their poetic power by creating a poetic world dominated by visual imagery, with their poetic visions deeply rooted in the open realities of modern urban life, revealing a particular modernist mode of urban experience. In exploring a possible connection between Baudelaire and Whitman, this paper concludes that the relation between the two poets is one of confluence rather than influence. Although deployed in the mode of the flâneur, Whitman's poetics is essentially distinct from this French model. More than just a flâneur, Whitman is the poet of the city, the crowd, the body, the soul and the nation. By discussing the role of the flâneur in Whitman and Baudelaire, this paper manages to provide new material for a comparative study of the two poets.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

This paper explores the relation between the American poet Walt Whitman and the French poet Charles Baudelaire, and discusses how Whitman enhances his poetic achievement in *Leaves of Grass* through his use of the 'flâneur.'<sup>1</sup> The flâneur is the one who is passionately interested in people, full of curiosity, who roams the streets in search of something fascinating, being incognito and anonymous. As Baudelaire articulates in his essay *The Painter of Modern Life*, for the perfect flâneur, 'his passion and his profession are to become one flesh with the crowd... to see the world, to be at the centre of the world, and yet to remain hidden from the world' (9).

<sup>1</sup> William Wordsworth in 1805 wrote classic accounts of London street-walking in 'The Prelude'.

Baudelaire's notion of the 'flâneur' is not archetypal, but part of a long genealogy in which the flâneur is just one formulation.

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Baudelaire's theorised concept of the flâneur, the city-dweller who plays his role by participating in and portraying urban life, has been of immense importance as a reference point not only for understanding modern urban life, but also for understanding modernity and modern literature. Tim Armstrong, in his study *Modernism: A Cultural History*, notes that many accounts of modern literature have begun with 'the metropolitan centre: Paris in the 1840s, the detached and ironic gaze of the masculine walker, the flâneur, and Baudelaire's essay on "The Painter of Modern Life"' (23). Therefore, in exploring the relation between Baudelaire and Whitman, I will discuss how Whitman moves the metropolitan setting of Paris to the open landscape of the United States in *Leaves of Grass*, and how Whitman uses the gaze of the 'flâneur' to depict the crowd around him.

## 2. Whitman and Baudelaire

My argument begins with Betsy Erkkila's *Walt Whitman among the French*. Erkkila, an influential scholar of Whitman, suggests some similarities between Baudelaire and Whitman, arguing that both poets 'look upon their poems as both a record of individual experience and a mirror of the collective experience of mankind,' and 'open their respective works by implicating the reader in the vision of human life they are about to describe' (54). Also, '[n]ot only did both poets introduce the imagery of the contemporary urban landscape into their poems, but they also broke through the limits of conventional propriety in order to open poetry to a more candid treatment of sex, the common, the vulgar, and the ugly' (Ibid). Although there is no historical evidence that Whitman had any real connection with Baudelaire in his life, Erkkila sees parallel between Baudelaire and what Whitman does in *Leaves of Grass*, in which the lines, like the lines in Baudelaire's *Flowers of Evil* (*Fleurs du mal*), are not usually organised into stanzas, but look more like ordinary sentences articulated by the flâneur, the city-walker filled with childlike curiosity, journeying into the crowd on the streets of metropolis.

As the concept of the flâneur is the essence of both Whitman's and Baudelaire's works, what are the concrete features of Baudelaire's concept of the flâneur? In his essay, Baudelaire defines the characteristics of the flâneur by comparing Constantine Guys, a nineteenth century draftsman Baudelaire admires, to the narrator in Edgar Allen Poe's 'The Man of the Crowd,' a tale which Baudelaire translates 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' (155). He ventures out into the hustle and bustle of city life to study a suspicious man, after observing passers-by for hours behind a window inside a coffee-house. Spending an entire night studying people in the metropolitan streets secretly and hanging around the city of London, the narrator creates an image of the modern city life.

Probably inspired by Poe's convalescent, Baudelaire develops his concept of the flâneur on the basis of two main characteristics. First, the flâneur always has a zealous enthusiasm toward the crowd around him: 'The crowd is his element, as the air is that of birds and water of fishes...for the passionate spectator, it is an immense joy to set up house in the heart of the multitude, amid the ebb and flow of movement, in the midst of the fugitive and the infinite' (*The Painter of Modern Life* 9). Second, in addition to feeling passionately in love with the crowd, the flâneur is at the same time anonymous: 'The spectator is a prince who everywhere rejoices his incognito' (Ibid). In other words, although seeming one flesh of the crowd, the

flâneur is actually detached from it, fully enjoying his anonymity and free from any interaction with the crowd.

Apparently, from the viewpoint of the second characteristic of Baudelaire's flâneur, it is easy to perceive that the flâneur in Whitman is not typical of Baudelaire's concept of the flâneur. Although the 'I' in Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* enjoy observing people and becoming part of the crowd, he neither adopts a detached stance nor makes himself anonymous. Particularly, Whitman in 'Song of Myself,' the longest and well-known poem in *Leaves of Grass*, was voicing his real name and showing his own identity with loudness and defiance in section 24 of the poem:

Walt Whitman, a kosmos, of Manhattan the son,  
Turbulent, fleshy, sensual, eating, drinking and breeding,  
No sentimentalist, no stander above men and women or apart from them,  
No more modest than immodest.  
Unscrew the locks from the doors!  
Unscrew the doors themselves from their jambs!  
Whoever degrades another degrades me,  
And whatever is done or said returns at last to me.  
Through me the afflatus surging and surging, through me the current and index.  
I speak the pass-word primeval, I give the sign of democracy,  
[...]  
Through me many long dumb voices,  
[...]  
Through me forbidden voices.

(492-512)

The 'I' is full of strong ambition. Different from Baudelaire's flâneur who, as Benjamin puts it, 'cast glances in all directions which still appeared to be aimless' (*Illuminations* 175), Whitman's flâneur has a more definite goal in his mind. More than the flâneur who gazes and describes, Whitman aims to voice for the subjects he observes. Though putting himself as the centre of the poem and beginning 'Song of Myself' with 'I celebrate myself, and sing myself,' Whitman does not really write about himself. Instead, he explodes the conventional boundaries

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of the self. He plans to convey all kinds of voices from the crowd, including the unheard and even the 'forbidden' ones.

To achieve this aim, Whitman adopts in his poetics the magical electric force, or mesmeric energy, which symbolically becomes the binder that links and accelerates the poet's fusing with the crowd. According to Harold Aspiz, Whitman is like a skillful mesmerist appearing as 'a medium or clairvoyant who can penetrate cloth, flesh, or the solid earth; make contact with the innermost consciousness of men and women; heal the sick; behind the future and the past; interact with the powers that animate the universe; and, with impassioned lyricism, reveal what he has experienced' (162). In this fashion, in section 16 of 'Song of Myself,' for instance, Whitman is able to develop his composite self:

I am of old and young, of the foolish as much as the wise,  
Regardless of others, ever regardful of others,  
Maternal as well as paternal, a child as well as a man,  
Stuff'd with the stuff that is coarse and stuff'd with the stuff that is fine.

(322-325)

As the notion of mesmerism has become one significant discussion of urban phantasmagoria that takes place in Whitman's poetry, it 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' (*The Painter of Modern Life* 10). For Baudelaire, the flâneur becomes the modern painter whose 'genius is nothing more nor less than childhood recovered at will' (Ibid. 8). Being designed 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 poems like 'I Sing the Body Electric' and 'The Sleepers,' Aspiz points out, 'Whitman used electrical concepts to illustrate the dynamism and intuition that qualified him to be his nation's poet' (150). American spiritual energy enters into the description of the crowd through this mesmerist figure, or the drunk flâneur in Whitman, and Whitman significantly makes his poetry a unique revolutionary literary achievement in American poetry.

### **3. The Drunk Flâneur**

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, free from his own body, actively sharing people's dreams by identifying his consciousness with others. Here I will offer a sketch of the 'drunk' flâneur, or Whitman's alternate-consciousness. However, since Whitman does not really use the term 'drunk' for mesmeric fluidity, I intend to use the term in a more metaphorical way, namely drunkenness as intoxication, as the collapse of social boundaries, as mesmerism or a kind of addiction to the energies of the city.

In discussing the representation of 'drunk flâneur, or mesmerism in Whitman; it is worth noting that Baudelaire also metaphorically refers to drunkenness as one important feature a city walker embraces. The city walker in Poe's 'The Man of the Crowd' is a convalescent feeling 'a calm but inquisitive interest in everything' (155). However, in Baudelaire's hands, this 'calm' city walker transforms into a 'drunk' child. 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 colour. 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 (*The Painter of Modern Life* 8).

To Baudelaire, Guy's drunkenness with consciousness vanishing in the mesmeric state engendered by the hypnotizer – the crowd on the streets of Paris – does not paralyze the draftsman. 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 create 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 dazzling world of perception made possible by the growth of modern commodity culture. A drunk artist returning to

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childhood, the flâneur changes his perceptive pleasure into powerful imagination so as to express modernity. Baudelaire 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 (*The Painter of Modern Life* 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 fashion and by the penetration of commodity display which, as Benjamin suggests, the flâneur never would have registered ‘had it not passed like a magnet over the iron ore of his imagination’ (*The Arcades Project* 368). Embracing children’s sensitive perception to colours and the artificial, the artist makes ‘colours’ and ‘shimmering stuffs’ the powerful important sign that speaks the transient beauty of modernity.

However, Benjamin notes, 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’ (Ibid. 345), the flâneur emphasizes that it is the memory that ‘brings about the convergence of imagination and thinking’ (Ibid. 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. 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. 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...’ (‘Je n’ai pas oublié...’), ‘That kind heart you were jealous of...’ (‘La servante au grand coeur...’), and above all, ‘Benediction’ (‘Bénédictio’n’), in which Baudelaire reveals his longing for a lost paradise and eternal happiness which, as Poulet suggests, like Adam dreams of his ‘lost Eden’ (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' (*The Arcades Project* 376). For Baudelaire, the modern metropolis becomes an infernal place where the individual is commoditized, with the increasing display of 'the physiognomy of the commodity' (Ibid. 368).

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. Because of his ambivalent spiritual direction, Whitman reveals a dynamism in many of his post-Civil War poems. It is only in dreams can Whitman return to the past, pick up the sad memory of the Revolutionary War (section five of 'The Sleepers'), behold the precious peace, and expect the coming of paradisiacal happiness, envisioning the possible union of the historical, the modern, and the future. Whitman writes in section 17, 18, and 19 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.

(164-166)

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.

(167-170)

The sleepers that lived and died wait – the far advanced are to go on in their turns,  
and the far behind are to come on in their turns,

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

(179-180)

Aspiz suggests that it is only in this ‘luminous dream’ can Whitman complete his ‘happy prophecy’ (174). Howard J. Waskow also points out, 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’ (30). The representation of the drunk flâneur becomes Whitman’s style to mentally traverse and contact the opposites, the past and the present. Like Baudelaire’s flâneur imagining returning to childhood and engaging in the urban world of perception, Whitman uses the image of ‘flight or a wild dance’ to represent his play of imagination which, according to Waskow, serves as ‘the engagement of the “organic soul” in the flux of the universe’ (41). For instance, in section three of ‘The Sleepers,’ after wandering in his visual world, dreaming in his dream ‘all the dreams of the other dreamers’ (l. 30) and becoming ‘the other dreamers’ (l. 31), 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.

(32-35)

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 or 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:



Now I will do nothing but listen,  
To accrue what I hear into this song, to let sounds contribute toward it.  
[...]  
Sounds of the city, and sounds out of the city—sounds of the day and night;  
Talkative young ones to those that like them—the loud laugh of work-people at their  
meals;  
The angry base of disjointed friendship—the faint tones of the sick;  
The judge with hands tight to the desk, his pallid lips pronouncing a death-  
sentence;  
The heave'e'yo of stevedores unlading ships by the wharves—the refrain of the  
anchor-lifters;  
The ring of alarm-bells—the cry of fire—the whirr of swift-streaking engines and  
hose-carts, with premonitory tinkles, and colour'd lights;  
The steam-whistle—the solid roll of the train of approaching cars;  
The slow-march play'd at the head of the association, marching two and two,  
(They go to guard some corpse—the flag-tops are draped with black muslin.)

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.

(579 - 607)

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

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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.

However, although both Baudelaire and Whitman are driven by the magnetic power of urban phantasmagoria, while the flâneur in Baudelaire passively fights against the worldly material world around him by excluding his consciousness and imagining a childhood long gone, Whitman recognizes his current location within the present, demonstrating his consciousness in the social context of the booming market economy. In particular, in section three 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, and others taking great  
interest in them...

(25-27)

M. Wynn Thomas notes, 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 (35). Also, Stephen A. Black suggests, 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 (120). In a nutshell, as the theme of drunkenness has been articulated in Baudelaire's concept of the flâneur, the representation of the drunk flâneur with mesmeric dynamism in Whitman also expands the poet's power to perceive different sides of the crowd, dramatizing the poet's way of observation and accelerating his immersing into the crowd. Whitman manipulates his interest in mesmerism and skillfully utilizes his aesthetic implication of electric force, helping create unique poetic vision in *Leaves of Grass*.

#### 4. 'Good' and 'Evil'

Both Baudelaire and Whitman innovatively demonstrate their poetic strength by establishing a poetic world dominated by visual images, with their poetic visions deeply rooted in the frank realities of modern urban life. In addition, setting their poetry in a plain format with a down-to-earth tone, both poets make poetry nothing about elitism but accessible to everyone. In content, *Leaves of Grass* is interwoven with Baudelaire's aesthetics of the flâneur as well as the elements of urban phantasmagoria. However, although this paper has investigated a possible link between Baudelaire and Whitman, my conclusion is that the relationship between

the two poets is one of confluence rather than influence, and Whitman's unique poetics is in essence apart from this French poetic model.

Why Whitman is not a follower of Baudelaire? This question is at first well answered by Erkkila, who puts it that because Whitman is more concerned with 'the scientific and cosmic spirit,' Erkkila suggests that in the 1876 Preface, Whitman considered 'Scientism' part of the realm of art, and viewed 'science' as 'one of the central and inspirational themes of his poems,' 'an underlying impetus to the poetry of modern life' (54-55). As Erkkila suggests, compared to Baudelaire, Whitman brings 'a more cosmic and metaphysical spirit to verse' (54). Erkkila's study on the poetics of Baudelaire and Whitman establishes a possible confluence between *The Flowers of Evil* and *Leaves of Grass*, preparing the ground for a comparative literary study between the poets. I agree with Erkkila's assertion that both Whitman and Baudelaire 'break down the traditional barrier between poetry and prose,' 'express the vastness and complexity of modern life,' and 'voice the desire for a new, freer form in which to express the teeming life of the contemporary urban landscape' (56-57). This assertion makes it most appropriate to study the similarities between Whitman and Baudelaire.

Through the role of the flâneur, both of Baudelaire and Whitman make their poetic visions unfold a particular Modernist mode of urban experience. Yet, in terms of themes and imagery, Whitman's poems are filled with more philosophic meditative concepts, which are 'more truly metaphysical than those of Baudelaire,' as Erkkila asserts:

In his poetry, Baudelaire was more concerned with good and evil than with metaphysics. Like Whitman, he recognized the intricate involvement of good with evil in the material universe. But whereas Baudelaire's vision of the universe tended to be a more purely Catholic one, in which good and evil were in perpetual opposition, Whitman's vision tended to be a dialectical one, in which evil would be reconciled with good in some future and perfect union (55-56).

This assertion implies that although both poets' poems all reveal a very present vision of the urban material world, Baudelaire's poetry, in comparison, deeply evokes the fixed dichotomy of good and evil, in which 'evil' is the negative force that drives people against their will to goodness. For Baudelaire, the two opposite forces can never be reconciled in the future or meet their union in the historical process; instead, evil finds its energy reinforced and its power exacerbated by the flight of time, namely the speed of modernization, which results in a sense of permanent melancholy in the poet's mind. Facing Paris reconstructed at the time of Second Empire, Baudelaire feels his inner self 'partially dead, frozen and immobile' as the world of modernity keeps changing and transforming. As Katherine Elkins points out that as the form of urban phantasmagoria continually changes, the speaker in 'The Swan' ('Le Cygne') mirrors the poet's turbulent moods, with his 'self that experiences the present through mourning – seeing itself as voice for multiple lost pasts' (14). Baudelaire writes in section two of the poem:

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Paris may change, but in my melancholy mood.  
Nothing has budged! New palaces, blocks, scaffoldings,  
All neighborhoods, are allegorical for me,  
And my dear memories are heavier than stone.

(29-32)

The phrase ‘memories heavier than stone’ reflects Baudelaire’s feeling of melancholy and leaves open the poet’s endless nostalgia for a lost goodness and pre-modern values. As discussed earlier, Baudelaire is opposed to economic modernization, which in part informs and accelerates the birth of modernity. As the image of the hellish city becomes in every way characteristic of Baudelaire’s poetry, ‘To the Reader’ (‘Au lecteur’), the poem that opens *The Flowers of Evil*, bears the best insight into Baudelaire’s reflection about people’s existence in the world of the commodity economy. In this poem, Baudelaire suggests that human beings serve as Satan’s puppets in the fluid world of modernity:

Our sins are stubborn, our contrition lax;  
We offer lavishly our vows of faith  
And turn back gladly to the path of filth,  
Thinking mean tears will wash away our stains.

On evil’s pillow lies the alchemist  
Satan Thrice-Great, who lulls our captive soul,  
And all the richest metal of our will  
Is vaporized by his hermetic arts.

Truly the Devil pulls on all our strings!

(5-13)

Being the flâneur immersing in the flow of people on the metropolitan streets, in which commerce constitutes the new practice of merchandising, Baudelaire sees the prosperous society of the Second Empire haunted by endless images of vulgarity, decay, and evil, stating ironically that ‘civilized man has invented the doctrine of Progress to console himself for his

surrender and decay' (*Painters of Modern Life* 99). As the flâneur cruising through the urban landscape of commodity display, Baudelaire is the flâneur intoxicated by the crowd and by every spectacle offered in the urban streets. However, as Benjamin notes, the 'intoxication to which the flâneur surrenders' is ambivalently 'the intoxication of the commodity around which surges the stream of customers' (*Charles Baudelaire* 55). In other words, the power of the crowds is in fact solidly based on the world of commerce; the charm of the crowds is deeply derived from the display of commodity culture, which in turn enhances Baudelaire's concept of evil. Alerting the fatal power of commodity economy but resisting recoiling from its attraction, Baudelaire cannot help but make self-contradiction embodied in his radical form of modern poetics. Behind his act of resisting floods currents of incessant desire that Benjamin terms 'empathy,' which is 'the nature of the intoxication to which the flâneur abandons himself in the crowd' (Ibid). Accordingly, with the crowds bringing the flâneur to the verge of self-abandonment, the poet strolling through the city streets inevitably shares the situation of modern commerce, eventually stepping into the unfathomed abyss of evil.

Like *The Flowers of Evil*, which Benjamin terms 'the first book that used in poetry not only words of ordinary provenance but words of urban origin as well' (Ibid. 100), Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* not only shares American urban images but also records Whitman's reactions to the crowds. Peering into the flow of people while roaming through the thick and thin of American broad landscape, Whitman makes his poetry socially concerned and rich in humanistic philosophy, with his poetic vision occupied with every crucial historical moment or major national crisis, particularly the battles over slavery, which serves as a major crisis for Whitman as well.<sup>2</sup> Erkkilä points out, although the representation of 'good coming from evil' serves as a fundamental poetic theme in both *The Flowers of Evil* and *Leaves of Grass*, while 'Baudelaire saw the involvement of good with evil as a symbol of the irony and ambiguity of the human condition,' 'Whitman saw good coming from evil as a symbolic affirmation of the movement of the world towards the ideal' (56).

Nevertheless, different from Baudelaire whose idea of evil permeates the modern capitalist society, the evil situation Whitman faces is linked most closely to slavery and the Civil War. In spite of his hatred of war, Whitman perceives the virtues coming from conflict an important incentive to his poetic creation. According to Reynolds, because of Hegel's influence on Whitman, the War becomes 'a time of purgation and realization of many of the ideals' the poet used to offer in his early works, as well as 'a retrospective touchstone' for the rest of the poet's life (449). Reynolds points out, Whitman's late interest in Hegel makes his poetry interwoven with 'elements of Hegelianism,' as the poet absorbs Hegel's confidence in idealism, revealing a progressive vision of the future and 'an idealistic denial of the finality of

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<sup>2</sup> Arthur E. Briggs views *Leaves of Grass* as the result of four successive crises. The first one is the stimulus provided in the interval between his newspaper editorship and the first publication of *Leaves of Grass*. The second one is a twofold cause: his disappointment at the slack reception of his work and distress from the Civil War. The fourth one was his paralysis in 1873. See *Walt Whitman: Thinker and Artist*. New York: Greenwood Press, 1968. 25-26.

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evil’ in his works, particularly in the poem ‘Roaming in the Thought (After reading Hegel)’ (254):

Roaming in thought over the Universe, I saw the little that is Good steadily  
hastening towards immortality,

And the vast all that is call’d Evil I saw hastening to merge itself and become lost and  
dead.

Whitman looks to Hegelian idealism as a mode of philosophically positing the ideal attached to the nation, as well as a reconciliation of opposites (‘Good’ and ‘Evil’) in the future, believing that Hegelian philosophy will resolve national problems in time and work out everything, including ‘the democratic political’ problem and ‘the material wealth spoiled by greed and materialism’ (Ibid. 480).

Accordingly, because of Whitman’s debt to Hegelian idealism, the warlike visual information running through Whitman’s memorial *Drum Taps* poems tells his audience that the War must revive the country, and the United States will transform itself into a promising union of democracy, a world of equality. In other words, though detesting the idea of war, being a Democrat abhorring slavery, Whitman is able to see the War as something pushing America to national democracy in a larger aspect, interpreting his country as a pulsating organism impregnated with all races. Anticipating American democracy and ideals through the War, Whitman incorporates his intensity of passion into his war writing, making his poetic vision pervasive in potent images of democracy. Whitman writes in ‘Rise O Days from Your Fathomless Deeps’:

What was that swell I saw on the ocean? Behold what comes here,  
How it climbs with daring feet and hands—how it dashes!

How Democracy with desperate vengeful port strides on,  
Shown through the dark by those flashes of lighting!

(Yet a mournful wail and low sob I fancied I heard through the dark,  
In a lull of the deafening confusion.)

Thunder on! Stride on, Democracy! Strike with vengeful stroke!

And do you rise higher than ever yet O days, O cities!  
Crash heavier, heavier yet O storms! You have done me good,  
My soul prepared in the mountains absorbs your immortal strong

nutriment,...

(27-36)

Visualizing the War in black images, Whitman metaphorically relates the battlefield to a fierce storm on the dark ocean, with 'flashes of lightning' accompanying the intimidating waves, where 'Democracy' struggles to make its way, madly pushing upon the land. In depicting the dark war world, Whitman juxtaposes his double concern for the ideal democracy and the American people, linking his poetic attention of severe military action to sufferers' mourning and grief. Accordingly, more than being a poet writing warlike reportage, Whitman declares his humanistic philosophy through his poetic images.

In addition to the representation of humanistic significance in his poetic works, Whitman further infuses the national fratricidal conflict with his sensitivity to human relations, linking them to the natural cycle of life and death in many of his poems. Nevertheless, Whitman also tells his audience that the Civil War in part devastates his original idealism. In his poetic reportage of the shocking war scenes, Whitman recalls the horrifying results the War brought forth, with his poems acutely representing the United States in the last nineteenth century as a chaotic world, which Folsom terms a situation of 'clutter', or 'a societal chaos, a crowded confusion' (114). For instance, Whitman writes in Section 18 of 'When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd':

And I saw askant the armies,  
I saw as in noiseless dreams hundreds of battle-flags,  
Borne through the smoke of the battles and pierc'd with missiles I saw  
them,  
And carried hither and yon through the smoke, and torn and bloody,  
And at last but a few shreds left on the staffs, (and all in silence,)  
And the staffs all splinter'd and broken.  
  
I saw battle-corpses, myriads of them,  
And the white skeletons of young men, I saw them,  
I saw the debris and debris of all the slain soldiers of the war.

(172-180)

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Here, the bloody and violent image of the War turns more pervasive and haunting, with the poet's depicting soldiers' corpse piled like mountains, and soldiers' body fragmented and repeated like 'debris.' According to Folsom, the repetitive word 'debris' significantly points to the fact of modern life Whitman faces while exploring 'the cultural resonance of clutter' with the role as the flâneur, and during the War days, 'debris' combined with 'clutter' forms a particular poetic resonance for Whitman. Folsom puts it, 'clutter' is 'a word applied to developing urban experiences that mixed classes, juggled hierarchies, threw people together in unlikely relationships' (114). Folsom says:

When we encounter descriptions of the 'teeming' cities or the 'masses' of immigrants, when we read of the chaotic changes brought on by industrialization and urbanization with all the resultant filth and growing anarchistic desires, what we are hearing are verbalizations of an uneasy new relationship with clutter (Ibid).

Whitman's observation of the soldiers during the Civil War, or his way of depicting the crowds of all kinds, specifically reveals the cultural aspect of 'clutter', which is poignantly pronounced in his poetic visual information. The movements of the crowds, which Whitman follows and absorbs into his mode of perception in *Leaves of Grass*, are spectacles figured as American tapestry in the flux of the modern world around him. From the urban marketplace to the warlike space, where the matrix of clutter expands from the labyrinth of city to the waste state of battlefields, Whitman gives his rhetoric of vision something metaphorical that reminds his audience of the universal nature of life embodied in the symbolic image of 'leaves'. To Whitman, more and more 'leaves' will renew their life from the old and the decay, budding the hope of peace while breathing out the coming of the ideal. Folsom points to the significance of the poet's play on this poetic symbol: 'For Whitman, always, the leavings, the litter, are also the leaf-ings, the new beginnings. Life emerges only from compost; to *compose* (put together), we must first *compost* (take apart)' (Ibid). Although *Leaves of Grass* is mapped with images of clutter in the world of modernity, it defiantly speaks Whitman's belief in universal organicism that in the near future, on the waste land of clutters and wars, a budding American democratic society will emerge, regenerating American people to a solid democratic comradeship and leading them to the path of ideal progress.

### 5. CONCLUSION

This paper has explored the link between Charles Baudelaire's formulated concept of the 'flâneur' and Whitman's intricate observations of the urban phantasmagoria in *Leaves of Grass*, in which American experience enters into the description of the crowd in the poet's eye. First published in 1855 with its daguerreotype engraving of the author's portrait on its cover, *Leaves of Grass* not only significantly reveals the birth of the first American poet in the mode of the 'flâneur,' but also informs the world how the poet's camera eye is going to change the way people perceive the United States.

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 is particularly worthy of being exalted as the first American poet of the flâneur, who successfully changes the metropolitan setting from Baudelaire's Paris to America and corroborate the diversity of American culture in the nineteenth century. More than simply a flâneur, Whitman is the poet of the city, the crowds, the body, the soul, and the nation of United States.

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**AUTHOR’S BIO**

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