Literature of New York

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Edited by

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INTRODUCTION

LITERATURE OF NEW YORK

SABRINA FUCHS-ABRAMS

"The most extravagant of cities," "that sprawling metropolis," "mongrel Manhattan"—these are some of the phrases used to describe New York over its four hundred year history. This volume will look at both historical and contemporary images of New York through an examination of its literary history. While there are studies about the city in literature, collections of primary texts about the culture of New York, and a few general literary histories of New York,[1] this is the first collection of essays to take an in-depth look at individual works of literature by New York writers about New York.

New York is a study in contradictions. As many seminal studies of urban literature have noted, urban life is viewed with a kind of trepidation, offering at once a sense of possibility, cultivation, civilization, self-realization and a fear of corruption, decay, dissolution, and despair. The contrast between city and country, culture and nature, intellect and feelings, experience and innocence can be traced back to a romanticized vision of a pastoral, agrarian past. As Raymond Williams notes in *The Country and the City* (1975) "On the country has gathered the idea of a natural way of life: of peace, innocence, and simple virtue. On the city has gathered the idea of an achieved centre: of learning, communication, light. Powerful hostile associations have also developed: on the city as a place of noise, worldliness and ambition; on the country as a place of backwardness, ignorance, limitation." Williams captures the ambiguity surrounding the city, a place to which the seeker of knowledge and experience is at once drawn and from which he retreats. In his essay "The City in Literature," Irving Howe traces the "hostility" and "suspicion" with which writers from Dickens to Dostoevsky have viewed the city (be it London, Paris, Prague, St. Petersburg, or New York) "that pesthole and madhouse, the prison and setting of spiritual void"; yet he also sees the city with its range of social types and individual characters to be a source

of literary wealth from which the social novel of the 19th century was created. Despite its potential ugliness, argues Howe, the city is here to stay; besides, says Howe, asking the inevitable question echoed by generations of writers and inhabitants of New York, where else would you rather live and write? To which, one might add, what else would you rather write about?

The literature of New York is representative of American national identity and of the unique nature of the metropolitan, urban experience. New York can be seen as the embodiment of the American dream, at least in theory, of liberty, equality and opportunity. In its four hundred year history from Henry Hudson's voyage across the Hudson River in 1609, New York City has emerged as a significant commercial and cultural capital of the world. The first internationally recognized American writer in the nineteenth-century, Washington Irving, was himself a New Yorker who wrote a satiric treatment in his *History of New York* as well as haunting tales of the landscape and legend of the Hudson River Valley in *The Sketchbook*. The self-proclaimed American national poet and great "democratic bard," Walt Whitman, "of Manhattan the son" famously catalogues and celebrates the rich diversity of the city, where prostitutes and presidents, patricians and beggars, Native Americans, blacks, and whites, men and women speak in the unified voice of the "democratic En-Masse." Herman Melville anticipates the modern sense of the alienation of the individual brought by urbanization and industrialization. Realist writers like Edith Wharton and Henry James express the Gilded Age anxiety and nostalgia for the "old New York" aristocracy with the influx of immigrants and the rise of a new mercantile and industrial class in New York at the turn of the nineteenth-century.

The contradictory nature of New York and the American dream find full expression in the post World War I literature of the 1920s. Writers like F. Scott Fitzgerald express the disillusionment of the "lost generation" while capturing the excess and exhilaration associated with the Jazz Age. In this era of prohibition, bootlegging, speakeasies, birth control, women's suffrage there was an air of permissiveness and gaiety that found expression in the literature and culture of New York. From the flowering of African-American literature with Harlem Renaissance writers like Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, Zora Neale Hurston, Nella Larsen and James Weldon Johnston to the growth of publishing houses and magazines like *Vanity Fair* and *The New Yorker* and the literary coterie surrounding the Algonquin Round Table in Midtown Manhattan including Dorothy Parker, Robert Benchley, Alexander Woollcott, and F.P. Adams to the flourishing of little magazines and the café culture in Greenwich Village

including poets Edna St. Vincent Millay and Marianne Moore, New York emerged as a significant cultural and financial center.

With the stock market crash of 1929 and the Depression that followed, the literary history of New York pointed to a sense of crisis and despair in such later works as F.Scott Fitzgerald's *The Crack-Up* essays. There emerged in the 1930s a literature of social consciousness and protest heightened by the immigrant experience and urban decay of the city. Writers like Anzia Yezierska, Henry Roth, Michael Gold and Daniel Fuchs expressed the conflict of assimilation and identity of the Jewish-American immigrant experience. In the 1930s and 40s New York City distinguished itself as an intellectual center with the rise of the so-called "New York intellectuals," a largely Jewish group of immigrants many of whom were educated at City College and Columbia University with a cosmopolitan outlook, modernist sensibility, and leftist political leanings, many of whom were associated with liberal magazines like *Partisan Review* and *Commentary*. The New York intellectuals included writers and critics like Irving Howe, Alfred Kazin, Lionel Trilling, Delmore Schwartz, and Philip Rahv. With the rise of fascism in Nazi Germany and totalitarianism in Stalinist Russia, many of the New York intellectuals suffered disillusionment with Marxism and turned toward revisionist liberalism and liberal anti-Communism.

The period following World War II was a time of great literary achievement in New York, particularly among Jewish-American novelists like Saul Bellow, Bernard Malamud, Norman Mailer, Philip Roth and Cynthia Ozick as well as African-American writers like Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin. New York was also growing as a commercial and urban center in the 1950s and 60s with the expansion of highways, the development of buildings and skyscrapers, the building of museums and cultural arts centers, the expansion of universities, and the growth in population. While some New Yorkers were migrating to the suburbs, many were drawn to the City as a source of literary inspiration. The 1950s and 60s saw the growth of a new radicalism in Beat writers like Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, and William Burroughs in New York's Greenwich Village and the development of the "New York school of poets" like John Ashbery, Frank O'Hara, Kenneth Koch, and James Schuyler along with abstract expressionist painters like Willem de Kooning and Jackson Pollock.

The 1970s, with the Vietnam War and Watergate as well as the momentum of the sexual revolution and Civil Rights Movement, was a time of national turmoil and uncertainty. Precipitated by a financial crisis in the City, New York suffered a period of increased crime, poverty, and

decline. The financial boom of the 1980s under Ronald Reagan precipitated an age of material success and moral vacuousness depicted by postmodern, "blank fiction" writers like Bret Easton Ellis and Jay McInerney. With the election of Mayor Rudolph Guiliani in the 1990s New York has experienced a revitalization with a marked decrease in crime and prostitution and an upsurge in urban growth and popularity as evidenced in popular culture with the success of television shows like *Seinfeld* and *Friends* depicting the appeal of young, urban life in Manhattan. The security and one might say superiority of New Yorkers was shaken by the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. The effect of this crisis on the literature and culture of New York has yet to be fully measured, but one can expect that, through conflict and crisis, the literature of New York will draw a constant source of creative inspiration.

The essays in this collection are arranged chronologically to reflect the changing significance of the city in relation to various movements in American literary and cultural history. In "Whitman at Pfaff's : Personal Space, a Public Place, and the Boundary-Breaking Poems of *Leaves of Grass* (1860)", Whitman scholar Karen Karbiener takes an original look at the 1860 edition of *Leaves of Grass* noting how urban public space, in particular the circle of intimates Whitman shared at Pfaff's Cellar at 653 Broadway in New York City, influenced the shift in tone and content from the more overtly political and public 1856, second edition of *Leaves of Grass* to the more personal, revealing, and autobiographical verse of the 1860, third edition of *Leaves of Grass* with the inclusion of poems like "Calamus" and "Enfans d'Adam" and the elaboration of themes of friendship and hetero- and homosexual love. Using research on Manhattan's architecture and public spaces, theories of urban "loose spaces" elaborated by Karen Franck and Quentin Stevens, theories of "queer space" used by Aaron Betsky and her own on-site research at the extant site of Pfaff's, Karbiener "attempts to construct the ambiance of Pfaff's" and discuss it's significance in Whitman's poetry. In "City of Surveillance", Mark James Noonan explores the theme of surveillance in the literature of New York. From the communal effect of looking in the opening of Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* (1905) to the distancing and dehumanizing effect of objectifying the "other" in Ann Petry's *The Street* (1946) to the use of surveillance as a means of attempted control as portrayed in Herman Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener" (1853), argues Noonan, the act of looking and being looked at is part of a "vast, unspeakable show and lesson" in the literature of New York.

The increasing urbanization of New York City at the turn of the nineteenth century with the growth of capitalism, industrialization, the rise of the new mercantile class, the influx of new immigrants and the migration of African-Americans from the south created an atmosphere of opportunity and for some anxiety and fear of change. A number of essays collected here address the changes, both positive and negative, and the resulting flowering of literature by New Yorkers and about New York from the 1900s through the 1920s. In "A Bulwark Against the Modernity of New York: Mutual Delusion as Conservative Self-Defense in James's 'The Jolly Corner'", Jonathan Readey addresses the conservative response of Henry James' traditional characters in their projection of their fear of the "cultural Other within modern New York--including changes like skyscrapers, urban expansion, the immigration boom and social mobility, capitalism, and the growing cultural influence of African-Americans" onto an imagined ghost. In disavowing the "ghostly capitalist alter ego that is representative of the 'modern' New York City," the conservative New Yorkers reassert their love and their resistance to change.

In "Roving the Crowd: Flânerie in Dos Passos' *Manhattan Transfer*" (1925), Heidi Bollinger shows how the novel "uses the frenetic and changeable setting of New York City to emphasize both the dynamic energy and increasing anxiety of the modern American cityscape." The perpetual action and non-sequential order of the narrative, says Bollinger, invite the reader to participate in the novel "as Baudelaire's *flâneur*, an idle stroller of the streets" while the novel's multiple narrative threads defy closure and attempts to seek a specific destination "will result only in a dead end." In this way, perhaps, the modern urban cityscape defies a fixed meaning while offering multiple possible interpretations. In her essay, "Dorothy Parker's New York Satire", Sabrina Fuchs-Abrams draws on recently collected stories and sketches by Dorothy Parker that satirize the literary and social scene of New York in the 1920s and 30s. The most prominent woman among the famed literary luncheon circle, the Algonquin Wits, Parker stood somewhat on the periphery of the largely male-dominated New York literary scene. This marginalized position gave Parker a perspective from which to critique the New York society to which she partially belonged. In looking at feminist approaches to women's humor, Fuchs-Abrams shows how Parker uses her satire as a form of social protest to expose the superficiality and excess of the New York elite and the limitations of gender roles at the time.

In "Claiming the 'House of Difference': New York as Home Space in the Narratives of Audre Lorde and Diane di Prima", Kirsten Bartholomew Ortega delves further into women's responses to city spaces and

geography. Through a comparison of Audre Lorde's "biomythography," *Zami*, and Diane de Prima's *Memoirs of a Beatnik*, Ortega considers "the conjunction of two women's responses to post-WWII New York City in fictionalized autobiography." The city, argues Ortega, allowed these writers, "aligned by interest in poetry and as social outsiders, but differing in racial background, sexual orientation, and, to some degree, politics - to construct identities outside the confines of suburban domesticity" and to "disrupt stable notions of fact and fiction (autobiography and novel), writing themselves and the city into being in their texts." Employing theories of flânerie based in Walter Benjamin's definition of it and Anne Friedberg and Janet Wolff's complication of it, Ortega explores how Lorde and de Prima practice a female form of flânerie using "observation of the city as a means of both creative productivity and identity formation." In "Superfluid Chatter, Superchatty Fluid: Ted Berrigan's Phase Changes and Their New York School Reverberations", Michael Angelo Tata looks at the poetics of second generation New York School poet Ted Berrigan as both a continuation of and departure from such writers as Frank O'Hara, James Schuyler, and John Ashbery, among others. "Berrigan's work," argues Tata, "continues to keep New York City on the poetic map, carrying the New York School forward and bridging the gap between its personal and figurative excesses and the impersonal mechanics of Language Poetry." His poetry, says Tata, reflects "the noise and chaos of the city he loved enough to immortalize."

The final two essays of the collection look at the representation of New York in the fiction of postmodern writers Don DeLillo and Jay McInerney, depicting at once a sense of loss at the inability to return to the old neighborhood of the past in DeLillo's *Cosmopolis* (2003) and the possibility of reasserting order and meaning amidst the chaos and terror of post-911 New York in McInerney's *The Good Life* (2006). In "Don DeLillo's *Cosmopolis* and the Nostalgic Spatio-Linguistics of America's Global City", Jessica Maucione argues that the protagonist's search for "the always impossible recovery of the old neighborhood involves spatial as well as linguistic shifts that collapse post-neighborhood America with postmodern America via DeLillo's simultaneous employment of and critique of nostalgic discourse". Engaging theories of the postmodern invoked by Frederick Jameson and revised by Linda Hutcheon, Maucione argues that DeLillo's critique of the effects of postmodernism manifest itself through the protagonist's engagement as much "with lost languages as with lost places," and, "by launching the protagonist finally beyond New York City into a metaphysical future-space," *Cosmopolis* "rejects the very nostaglic discourse that guides [its protagonist's] journey" through

the city. In "Post-9/11 New York: Jay McInerney's *The Good Life* (2006)", Sonia Baelo-Allué addresses claims by critics like Roger Rosenblatt and William J. Bennett that 9/11 has caused the "death of irony" or the "death of postmodernism" by showing how McInerney's most recent novel is a departure from the earlier depiction by him and other "blank fiction" writers like Bret Easton Ellis of the narcissism and materialism of contemporary urban life. In *The Good Life*, argues Baelo-Allué, McInerney "seems to leave his blank fiction past behind and construct a touching story in which the physical disintegration of the city [after 911] causes the temporal disintegration of the glitterati's narcissistic values."

While the essays collected here are by no means comprehensive, they are representative of contemporary critical approaches to some of the time-honored literature about New York and some of the most important recent poetry and fiction about the City. This collection will find an audience in general readers who love or live in New York, those with an interest in the history, literature and culture of the City, and scholars of urban studies, American studies, and literary and cultural studies. Whether expressing nostalgia for the past, hope for the future, fear of the unknown, or the possibility of self-actualization, the literature of New York continues to draw inspiration from its locale and is as complex, contradictory, and creative as the City itself.

Notes

[1] General Works about urban history, literature, and culture include Louis Mumford, *The City in History: Its Origins, Its Transformations, and Its Prospects* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1968); Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973); Burton Pike, *The Image of the City in Modern Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981); Irving Howe, "The City in Literature" *Commentary 51* (May 1971) 60-68; Richard Lehan, *The City in Literature: An Intellectual and Cultural History* (University of California Press, 1998); Robert Alter, *Imagined Cities: Urban Experience and the Language of the Novel* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005); Desmond Harding, *Writing the City: Urban Visions and Literary Modernism* (New York: Routledge, 2003). Anthologies of primary sources about the history and literature of New York include Susan Edmiston and Linda D. Cirino, *Literary New York: A History and Guide* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1976); William Cole, ed. *New York: A Literary Companion* (New York: Penguin Books, 1992); Peter Conrad, *The Art of the City: Views and Versions of New York* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984); William Corbett, *New York Literary Lights* (Gray Wolf Press, 1998); Kenneth T. Jackson and David S. Dunbar, eds., *Empire City: New York Through the Centuries* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002); Phillip

Lopate, *Writing New York: A Literary Anthology* (New York: Library of America, 2008). Among the few literary critical studies of New York are Shaun O'Connell, *Remarkable, Unspeakable New York: A Literary History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), an overview of New York's literary history; Susan Merrill Squier, ed. *Women Writers and the City* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1984), a study of feminist literary criticism about the city; Ann Douglas, *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1995), a comprehensive look at black and white literature and culture of New York in the 1920s; Edward Margolies, *New York and the Literary Imagination: The City in Twentieth Century Fiction and Drama* (Jefferson: North Carolina and London: McFarland & Co. Pub., 2008) a study of selected modern fiction and drama set in New York.

WHITMAN AT PFAFF'S: PERSONAL SPACE, A PUBLIC PLACE, AND THE BOUNDARY-BREAKING POEMS OF *LEAVES OF GRASS* (1860)

KAREN KARBIENER

One flitting glimpse, caught through an interstice,
Of a crowd of workmen and drivers in a bar-room, around the stove, late of a winter night—And I unremarked, seated in a corner;
Of a youth who loves me, and whom I love, silently approaching, and seating himself near, that he may hold me by the hand;
A long while, amid the noises of coming and going—of drinking and oath and smutty jest,
There we two, content, happy in being together, speaking little, perhaps not a word.
—"Calamus 29"

Just for a moment, he permits a look within. And the moment expands and intensifies for us as Walt Whitman revels in his vision. Though "Calamus 29" is set in a public place, it allows us into what is conventionally considered personal space. We as readers of Whitman's first two editions of *Leaves of Grass* know that the poet assumes our presence, often recognizes and sometimes even addresses us. "Listener up there!" he calls from the first poem of 1855; "Who knows but I am as good as looking at you now, for all you cannot see me?" he teases in "Sun-Down Poem" of 1856. In this new poem of the third edition, we are unacknowledged observers—and though the speaker claims that he is "unremarked," he is viewed by us in a scene of seemingly unselfconscious intimacy. His description evokes the ease and unaffectedness more often associated with kitchen tables or living room loveseats than barroom corners. It is a rare pleasure to observe the poet at such a moment, in such a mindset; we have found him, for once, "at home." Private life is exposed to common light in the "Calamus" poems, the very interstices of Whitman's body of poetry.

From the publication of the second edition of *Leaves of Grass* in 1856 to the third in 1860, Whitman reconceptualized his literary project. The raw, declarative, overtly political tone of the earlier verse was modulated by the inclusion of more than 120 new poems that challenged common understandings of the boundaries between public and private, interiors and exteriors. The "Calamus" cluster of poems, in particular, attempted to obviate such distinctions in two ways: by exposing the private sphere, specifically Whitman's deepest feelings and intimate actions, to the public eye (as we have seen in "Calamus 29"): and by developing a new concept of nationhood held together by love, empowered by "the institution of the dear love of comrades" ("Calamus 24"). What was private is now public, and the new American national salute is a kiss on the lips exchanged "in the public room, or on the crossing of the street, or on the ship's deck" ("Calamus 19"). Whitman walks out of "houses and rooms… full of perfumes" on the first pages of both the first and second editions of *Leaves of Grass;* in the third, he announces his desire to "remain in the same room with you" to feel the "subtle electric fire that for your sake is playing within me" ("Calamus 43"). Claustrophobic feelings have been overcome and substituted with an urge to dive deep and inside, and a belief that intimate moments of connection can help bring together a divided nation. The demands of writing such boundary-breaking verse are visible in Whitman's revisions to these poems, in which he often modified or obliterated his most radical visions of public privacy ("Calamus 16") or his 'passionate democracy' ("Calamus 5").

What enabled Whitman to think beyond restrictive binaries of public and private space that preoccupied him before and after the 1860 edition? I assert that Whitman's new focus on intimacy as a subject of poetry was influenced by a change in his choice of physical environs after he finished the second edition. "He was first the absorber of the sunlight, and then of interiors," Whitman's friend Richard Maurice Bucke noted of this period of the poet's life ("The Story of Whitman's Life" 201). And the interior that first drew him in was Pfaff's Cellar, where he claimed to spend "most nights" in the year or so preceding the May 1860 publication of the *Leaves*. Though Whitman scholarship has focused on Whitman's participation in the social and intellectual coterie meeting at Pfaff's from 1858 through 1862, I aim to explore how the features and experience of this particular place affected the development of his radical new poetry. Pfaff's was the first public space in which Whitman claimed to feel at home; he was at ease here to express himself in person and on paper and even to allow others onto the pages of his private notebooks. Establishing a comfortable personal space in this public house, Whitman inhabited an

arena that brought together the features of public and domestic spheres—a space that did not require or assert conventional responses or known patterns of behavior. While frequenting this spot, Whitman was at work on the boundary-breaking poems of *Calamus*. This study aims to demonstrate the importance of place in Whitman's creative process, by examining how the physical details and ambience of Pfaff's provided a setting that might have encouraged and even enabled such moments of intimacy and connectivity as we find in "Calamus 29."

I. "in a little boat, putting off, and rowing": The search for personal space

"I am enamored of growing outdoors," Whitman announces in the first poem of his first edition. The title *Leaves of Grass* reflects the proud Brooklynite's interest in going out and staying out, and the poems of the first two editions are of panoramic and mobile scope. His 'urban affections'[1] are displayed in sweeping cityscapes: the Manhattan street scenes of the poems that would become known as "Song of Myself" and "Faces", the view from the deck of a ferry crossing the East River in "Sun-Down Poem" of 1856. For a man who spent most of his life living and working in Brooklyn and Manhattan, the poet and his poetry are seldom found indoors in the first and second editions of the *Leaves*. Descriptions of city people and places in his notebooks of the time suggest that Whitman was an active participant in street culture, a poet whose art developed not at a desk but on the East River or in a Brooklyn park. The frequent mention of fair-weather scenes in the first two editions of the *Leaves* may indicate that he also enjoyed writing outdoors, and thus composed seasonally in favorable conditions: "summer grass" and "April rain", open-air bathing parties and ninth-month seagulls enliven the contents within the green covers blind-stamped with foliage.

Whitman's urban milieu, then, was his classroom, teacher, and possibly even his writing table. Though he cultivated the image of "Walt Whitman, a kosmos, of Manhattan the son" over time, the poet and his poetry may have been born on city streets out of necessity. For the period in which Whitman claimed *Leaves of Grass* "began to take a sort of unconscious shape" in his mind (Bucke 24), Whitman did not have a desk—never mind a room—of his own. In fact, he purchased his first home at the age of 64 and still pondered his new status as homeowner a year later in a third-person account for *The Critic*: "It is not a little difficult to write an article about Walt Whitman's *home*, for it was humorously said by himself not long ago that he had all his life possessed a home only in

the sense that a ship possesses one" ("Selwyn" 97). The comment demonstrates Whitman's lifelong ambivalence regarding interior spaces, and romanticizes the frequent moves and cramped living conditions of his early life. The second of eight children in a financially troubled family, Whitman in 1819 became the youngest of the ten residents of a small Long Island farmhouse (with three beds). When Whitman Senior decided to try his luck in Brooklyn's house-building boom in 1823, he initiated a decade-long period in which the family moved every year or two to accommodate new building or renovation projects. The young Walt experienced his most independent lifestyle when "boarding round", as he put it, in the 1830s and '40s. He seems to have valued this freedom and personal space: in the summer of 1847, his income from his steady job at the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* allowed him to move out of his father's house and into his own rented room on Adams Street (Loving 106). By 1849, he was back under the same roof with his family at 106 Myrtle Avenue in Brooklyn. Through the seed-time and production of the first three editions of the *Leaves*, the Whitmans' financial trials kept the family physically together in cramped spaces.

Most information regarding Whitman's living situations is related by visitors desiring to meet the author of *Leaves of Grass.* Significantly, many found Whitman not at home upon first call. Journeying to the Whitmans' home on Ryerson Street—"out of Brooklyn, nearly"—in 1855, Moncure Conway was redirected to the Rome Printing Office and conversed with Whitman there, "where he often is" (Conway 215). Conway made another visit in 1857, by which time the Whitmans had moved further east to 91 ½ Classon Avenue. This time Conway found Whitman "at the top of a hill near by lying on his back and gazing at the sky" (218). The two men planned a day of outdoor adventure, but Whitman needed to return home first. Conway records the bleak appearance of the attic room Walt shared with his disabled brother Eddy, and notes Whitman's own emphasis on the view outside rather than the interior space:

> It was a small frame house. He took me to his little room with its cot, and poor furniture the only decoration being two engravings, one of Silenus and the other of Bacchus. What he brought me up there to see was the barren solitude stretching from beneath his window to the sea. (Conway 218)

In November of that year, Whitman was not home to welcome Bronson Alcott, Sarah Tyndale, and Henry David Thoreau; when they returned the

next day, Whitman was notably reticent as his guests viewed the brothers' unmade bed, with "vessel scarcely hidden underneath" (Loving 225).

In the wake of the Great Panic of 1857, the Whitmans moved to even tighter quarters (with the addition of Thomas Jefferson Whitman's new wife) at Portland Avenue, just south of the Brooklyn Navy Yard. Whitman could usually find some relief from family life at work in his office, but he discontinued writing for the *Brooklyn Daily Times* in mid-1859. Formerly reliable friendships and business partnerships, such as his relationship with Fowler and Wells, were now sources of stress and discontent; favorite haunts such as Dr. Abbott's display of Egyptian antiquities at the Stuyvesant Institute and the Crystal Palace had closed (in 1855) or burned down (in 1858). His debilitating sunstroke of 1858 and the "terrible sloughs" he reported in 1859 may have been manifestations of his emotional ill health. Whitman was, to use nineteenth-century printer's terminology, "out of sorts."

Such newly imposed limitations would have been overwhelming at any time, but they now coincided with Whitman's attempts to write and publish a third edition of *Leaves of Grass.* On July 20, 1857, Whitman wrote to Sarah Tyndale of his determination to produce his greatest work yet:

> In the forthcoming vol. I shall have, as I said, a hundred poems (no letters to or from Emerson—no notices, or any thing of that sort.) – I know well enough, that that must be the *true* Leaves of Grass—I think it (the new vol.) has an aspect of completeness, and makes its case clearer. (from Whitman's letter to Sarah Tyndale, July 20, 1857; Huntington Manuscript 6848)

Yet Whitman and Tyndale must have both wondered if this work would ever see the light of day. After producing two editions of the *Leaves* in two years, Whitman faced brutal criticism, publishers' rejections, and embarrassing personal debt. Forty years old and living in his mother's house, out of work with no prospects for his latest book project, Whitman was in search of the supportive environment and personal space required in which to conceive this "new American Bible."

Not for the first time in Whitman's life, his changing needs and desires syncopated with the growing resources of New York City. With no home or job, Whitman wandered the streets in search of sustenance—both physical and emotional— and found himself caught up in the "restaurant revolution" sweeping through the city (Pillsbury 24, 30). New York's economic boom of the 1840s led to an increased urban appetite for places to relax, eat, and drink; additionally, the crowds patronizing the theaters

and venues on Broadway in the 1850s ensured the proliferation of restaurants and concert saloons along Whitman's favorite boulevard (Batterberry 56). At Broadway's Metropolitan Hotel, the cocktail was popularized by the "father of American mixology" Jerry Thomas just as the terms "restaurant," "eating house", "restorator", "dining room", and "coffee house" entered common parlance in the city (Batterberry 81, Pillsbury 23). Beer gardens and lager bier saloons multiplied in Manhattan's Kleindeutschland; oyster cellars were concentrated along Canal Street, their late hours attracting boisterous crowds (Batterberry 98). "In walking up Broadway by day or by night but more especially by night the stranger cannot but remark the great number of " Oyster Saloons," " Oyster and Coffee Saloons," and " Oyster and Lager Beer Saloons," which solicit him at every turn to stop and taste," noted Charles MacKay when he visited the city in 1857 (25). New York, in short, saw the dawning of its drinking and dining night life—prompting the publication of works such as George Foster's *New York By Gaslight, With Here and There a Streak of Sunshine (1850).* A representative New York flaneur, Foster delighted in the variety of establishments as well as their individual attractions. "A New York eating-house at high-tide is a scene which would repay the labors of an antiquarian or a panoramist, if its spirit and details could be but half-preserved," he remarked in *New York in Slices: By an Experienced Carver* (1849; 67).

Whitman, too, observed and marveled at the "thriving business" of Manhattan hotel bars and Brooklyn's beer saloons, and described these scenes for *Brooklyn Daily Times* readers in 1858 (*I Sit and Look Out* 149, 151). But his interest in the drama of drinking culture was already evident in the early 1840s, with the publication of his temperance novel *Franklin Evans; or, The Inebriate* (1842). The title character arrives in New York City from the country and, before the fourth chapter has ended, experiences the "fatal pleasure" of a saloon. "How delicious everything seemed!" Evans raves as he takes in his first view of café society—and first taste of alcohol.

> Colby saw at length that he had been too heedless with me. Used as he was to the dissipation of city life, he forgot that I was from the country, and never in my life before engaged in such a *scene of pleasure*. (27-28)

This mix of fear and fascination colored Whitman's images of saloons and barrooms in the short stories and essays of the 1840s, and apparently kept him out of such places through 1855. But by 1856, writer Thomas Butler Gunn remarked that Whitman was to be found "at the Waverly most Saturday nights" (McDermott 317), and that they drank together at least

twice at lager beer cellars near Nassau Street (ibid 318). Whitman's notebooks of the late '50s and early '60s indicate that his taste for lager saloons and ale houses led him to places such as "Hayter's Ale Cellar Pine Street south side half way between Broadway and Nassau" ("Poet at Work" Notebook #94 10) and the famous "Lindenmuller's Halle 201 Bowery" ("Poet at Work" Notebook #92 47). Most significantly, by 1859 he had become a habitué of a saloon called Pfaff's Cellar, near the corner of Broadway and Bleecker.

Early Whitman biographers like Frederick Schyberg and Henry Binns linked Whitman's first and only regular patronage of a saloon to "some temporary failing of moral will" (Stansell 108); such judgments might today give way to speculation regarding the synchronization between the 1855 death of Whitman Senior—a probable alcoholic— and his son's liberated attitude towards drinking. It is also credible that the minor success of his first two editions of the *Leaves* introduced Whitman to new ideas of social ritual; Bronson Alcott, for example, took Whitman to Taylor's Saloon in New York during his 1856 pilgrimage to the poet's house (Krieg 35). Whitman did in fact learn to enjoy the pleasures of alcohol, particularly lager beer, during this time. His love of champagne, cultivated by Charles Pfaff himself, gave him much satisfaction even when illness weakened his appetite just before his death (*With Walt Whitman In Camden* 9:294). Brandy, too, was a favorite "digestive" in his later years (ibid 426), enjoyed in moderate quantities and in the presence of friends.[2] Yet he never did acquire a drinking habit, neither at Pfaff's nor anywhere else. His brother George claimed that he had never seen Whitman under the influence (*In Re* 37), and another source claimed that Whitman was "never seen tipsy" (Loving 236). Furthermore, Whitman did not develop an interest in going to bars or pubs after his stint at Pfaff's. Writing to his former Pfaffian acquaintances from the Civil War front in 1863, he boasted that he had given Washington pubs a try but "there is not good lager here… here I go nowhere for mere amusement" (*Correspondence* I:126). And Whitman seems to have done little more than watch over the sleeping Pete Doyle in the bar of Georgetown's Union Hotel, where the two spent evenings in the late 1860s (Murray 28; notably Whitman later described Doyle to Traubel as "a little too fond of his beer, now and then"; Traubel 1:542-543).

Rather than frequenting Pfaff's to get drunk, Whitman seems to have gone to Pfaff's… to go to Pfaff's. For once, he indulged in the idea of being "a regular", one everyday pleasure he had not explored in his life or his poetry. Of all the establishments Whitman entered between 1856 and 1860, Pfaff's was the only saloon that he integrated into his daily routine.

He wrote most about Pfaff's; was most observed in Pfaff's; it was his one favorite hangout in which he seemed to be at his ease. Nearly twenty years after he had his first taste of Pfaff's lager, Whitman continued to rave about described his patronage of the cellar bar in an interview for the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*.

> I used to go to Pfaff's nearly every night. It used to be a pleasant place to go in the evening after taking a bath and finishing the work of the day. When it began to grow dark Pfaff would politely invite everybody who happened to be sitting in the cave he had under the sidewalk to some other part of the restaurant. There was a long table extending the length of this cave; and as soon as the Bohemians put in an appearance Henry Clapp would take a seat at the head of this table. I think there was as good talk around that table as took place anywhere in the world. (*Brooklyn Daily Eagle* 11 July 1888: 10)

Here is another "pleasant" scene akin to those described by the still-green Franklin Evans; this time, however, the pleasure is homey rather than glamorous, rustic rather than refined— more like going home than going out. The ritual of ending the day at Pfaff's, and of partaking in the saloon's own set schedule and patterns, must have been comforts in these years of uncertainty and disappointment. And Whitman's desire to remember and relive this routine, without embellishment, for two decades indicates its exceptionality in his life. Whitman's daily Pfaffian pilgrimage was so well known, in fact, that the editor of the *Brooklyn Standard* offered this portrait of his staff writer in 1860:

> Walter crosses the Fulton Ferry as usual, views the tall waves and the sky as placidly, contemplates the forest of tall masts, the laboring tug-boats, the big ships bound in or out, and the details of that great picture, our busy bay, with the same studious and undazzled vision. Walter exchanges his accustomed joke with the deck hands, and winks to the pilot just the same as ever, and over at Pfaff's, where the convivial coteries of Bohemia are wont to congregate, no happier soul shines forth its radiance o'er the festive scene than Walter's. There where New York tramps ten thousand heels over the heads from which emanate her wit and poetry, Walter occupies the same jovial place. (*New York Dissected* 175)

News of his regular patronage of the cellar saloon may have been toasted by some of Whitman's friends, but critics considered his daily habit with suspicion. In the *Westminster Review* of 1 October 1860, the writer suggests that Whitman's excessive drinking at Pfaff's helps account for the profanity of *Leaves of Grass* (1860). After noting that the "moral

disorganization in the States" is clearly indicated in Whitman's "loose thinking and tall talk", he decries:

> That a drunken Helot should display himself without shame in the market place, speaks sad reproach to the public that does not scourge him back to the cellar. (*New York Dissected* 174)

Gossip regarding Whitman's boozing at Pfaff's may have traveled overseas, but his own recollections of the saloon rarely included the consumption of alcohol. Instead, Pfaff's brought to his mind good company, camaraderie, and the best of the comforts of home. "I often recall the old times in New York, or on Broadway, or at Pfaff's—and the faces and voices of *the boys*," he wrote in a letter dated 26 November 1875 (*With Walt Whitman in Camden* 3:409). A rare late visit to New York in 1881 included a pilgrimage to Pfaff's new location on 24th Street, where the two aging friends recalled "ante-bellum times, '59 and '60, and the jovial suppers at his then Broadway place, near Bleecker Street" (*Specimen* Days 188). In 1888, Whitman favorably compared his Mickle Street bedroom to the space of Pfaff's Cellar: "it was a place, say, like this room, with an area extending under the pavement… we talked, discussed, all sorts of questions were up," he told Traubel (*With Walt Whitman in Camden* 3:116). The beer hall was clearly a space of personal importance to him; indeed, it was Whitman's first room of his own. As his bedroom did in later years, Pfaff's functioned as sanctuary and playground, a place for comfort and for stimulation-- a home and a haunt at once.

II. "the noises of coming and going": The scene at Pfaff's

Conventionally, Whitman's critics have considered the Bohemian patrons of Pfaff's as Whitman's motivation for frequenting the cellar bar. Indeed, the progressive, artsy group who described themselves as America's first Bohemians was probably what first brought Whitman down the Cellar's steps. Henry Clapp, the American writer who had been inspired by encounters with *la vie de boh*eme in the Latin Quarter, was the founder and center of the circle. Returning from Paris in the 1850s, Clapp intended to set up his own "gypsy camp" in New York.

Choosing Pfaff's as headquarters in 1856 (allegedly because of its excellent lager beer, but probably for its European ambience as well),[3] Clapp soon brought a group of like-minded iconoclasts together in the Cellar. "Beneath the sidewalk of Broadway," wrote Bohemian critic and poet William Winter,

> There was a sort of cave, in which was a long table, and after Henry Clapp had assumed the scepter as Prince of Bohemia, that table and cave were pre-empted by him and his votaries, at certain hours of the day and night, and no stranger ventured to intrude into their magical realm. (Winter 64)

Stories of fantastic Bohemian stagings spread by word of mouth as well as through the press. Related activities were broadcast in "Bohemian Walks and Talks", a lively and irreverent column that ran from November 7, 1857 through March 6, 1858 in *Harper's Weekly*. Many of the Bohemian writers at Pfaff's had already been a source of interest to Whitman: Bayard Taylor, whose work Whitman had read with "much enjoyment" in 1846, was attraction enough (as Whitman confirmed in a complimentary blurb on Taylor for the March 22, 1859 edition of the *Brooklyn Daily Times* of March 22, 1859; *I Sit and Look Out* 215, 69). Intrigued by either the hype or the possibility of boosting his career, Whitman found his way to Pfaff's and into the company of Bohemians like Edmund Clarence Stedman (who devoted a full thirteen pages to Whitman in his *Library of American Literature*) and James R. Osgood (who eventually published an edition of the *Leaves*). According to Parry, Clapp's *New York Saturday Press* "began its career by pioneering the praise of Walt Whitman into the skeptical ears of his contemporaries" (24-25), and published eleven of his poems from December 1859 to December 1860.

But Whitman was neither a groupie nor a joiner. He expressed trepidation at the idea of mingling with the Bohemians from the start. On January 16, 1868, an article on "Bohemian New York" in the series "Bohemian Walks and Talks" responds to a negative article in the *Brooklyn Daily Times* on bohemianism, presumably written by Whitman. The article quotes the *Times* critique directly:

> It would be better to cultivate a familiarity with any kind of coarse and honest art, or any sort of regular employment, than to become refined and artistic only to fall into the company of the Bohemians. They are seductive in their ways, and they hold the finest sentiments, and have a distinctive aversion of any thing that is low or mean, or common or inelegant. (35)

The writer for *Harper's Weekly* agrees partly with these sentiments, though the purpose of the article is to clarify and enhance the *Times*' pejorative viewpoint on Bohemianism. "I do not think that even the *Times* writer would object to being called a Bohemian, when he thoroughly understands the definition of the term," the writer closes the piece (ibid.). Whitman wrote another negative critique entitled "Bohemianism in

Literary Circles" for the *Times* of September 8, 1858 *(I Sit and Look Out* 67). In between that time and the publication of "A Child's Reminiscence" in the *Saturday Press* of December 24, 1859, Whitman had become a steady enough patron of Pfaff's to establish a relationship with Clapp.

Within two weeks' time of his poem's publication, however, Whitman found himself defending his poetry and philosophy in an essay entitled "All About a Mocking-Bird" (January 7, 1860). This stance was a common one for him among the Bohemians, particularly during the time spent at Pfaff's before the publication of the third edition of the *Leaves* in May 1860. Reviews of the impressive-looking volume—both good and bad—brought attention and admirers to Whitman's table at Pfaff's, and the literary outlier won a new insider's status among some of the writers in the group. But during what was probably the most vulnerable time in his life, Bohemian opinion of Whitman remained rather low. For all its promotion of Whitman, the *Saturday Press* published numerous parodies and scathing reviews, some by Clapp himself. Upon meeting Whitman at Pfaff's in the late 1850s, artist Elihu Vedder remarked that the poet "had not become famous yet, and I then regarded many of the [Bohemian] Boys as his superiors, as they did themselves" (226). William Winter is more pointedly critical in his memoir, describing Whitman as a "commonplace, uncouth, and sometimes obnoxiously coarse writer, trying to be original by using a formless style" (140). Stansell claims that "Whitman's strongest memory of Pfaff's was of 'hearing the truth' about *Leaves of Grass* as it came straight from Printing House Square one night" (118). The Bohemians' mockery of his poems hurt him to the quick, and he remembered the pain vividly when he related the tale to Traubel in 1888. "I don't know if you have ever realized it- ever realized what it means to be a horror in the sight of people about you; but there was a time when I felt it to the full—when the enemy—and nearly all were the enemy then—wanted for nothing better or more than simply without remorse, to crush me" (*With Walt Whitman in Camden* 3:116). The sting of their criticism may have provoked Whitman's insulting remarks about Winter (whom he allegedly denounced as "a young Longfellow") and Aldrich, whose poems he called "tinkles" (Winter 140).

As much as Whitman sympathized with their radical opinions and benefited from their patronage, then, he had reason to maintain an emotional as well as a physical distance between himself and the regulars under the vault. Whitman's separation from the Bohemian core at Pfaff's can be detected in a note written by John Swinton, one of the few lifelong friends Whitman made at Pfaff's. Writing to Whitman after the poet had

left for the Civil War front, Swinton appeased Whitman by suggesting that his "good work in Washington… must be even more refreshing than to sit by Pfaff's privy and eat sweet-breads and drink coffee, and listen to the intolerable wit of the crack-brains" (*With Walt Whitman in Camden* 1: 416). Rereading Swinton's note in 1888, Whitman responded:

> John was always a bit sarcastic about Pfaff's: he was like a quick blade—crossed swords with many a man there. My own greatest pleasure at Pfaff's was to look on—to see, talk little, absorb. I never was a great discusser, anyway—never. I was much better satisfied to listen to a fight than take part in it. (ibid 417)

Despite the confines of the narrow cellar space, Pfaff's provided ample opportunity for Whitman to assume his favored position vis-à-vis his potential subject. As "I lean on a cane and observe", as "I sit and look out", he was undisturbed and almost unnoticed by others. A positive side effect to his placement outside the center of Bohemian attention was an uninterrupted view of the people and the action at Pfaff's.

And there was indeed much to "absorb and translate." Though the Bohemians put Pfaff's on the map with their literary pretensions and high table antics, they were only the most visible part of Pfaff's democratic mix. Here, men of letters drank side by side with Bowery b'hoys and counterjumpers; lawyers ruined by the Panic of 1857 mingled with stage-coach drivers who had been disabled by accidents. In a city that still segregated women and men in its fine dining rooms, Charles Pfaff's open-door policy for women was daringly progressive. Actress Ellen Grey, dancer Lola Montez, and literary critic Juliette Beach were among the female habitués of Pfaff's with whom Whitman was acquainted.

Most significantly for Whitman, all forms of friendship and affection were accepted and displayed in the cellar. The 'Fred Gray Association', perhaps New York's first gay society, formed and met at Pfaff's. None of these men were literary types, besides Whitman himself: as Edwin Miller explains, John F.S. ("Fred") Gray was the son of a noted New York homeopathic physician, and became a doctor himself after the Civil War (*Correspondenc*e I: 11n), Charles Chauncey was listed as an "importer" and Benjamin Knower as a "clerk" in the *New York City Directories* of 1862-3 (ibid 84n). Whitman described member Charles Kingsley as "a young man, upper class, at Pfaff's &c—fond of training for boat-racing &c.—June, July, 1862" (*Correspondence* 1:126n) and Nat Bloom as "direct, plain-spoken, natural-hearted, gentle-tempered, but awful when roused—cartman" (*Correspondence* I:80n). These men used Pfaff's as both a rendezvous and as a private address: "I called in at Pfaffs two

evenings in succession but did not find you on hand," wrote Association member Fred Vaughn to his cherished friend Whitman in 1860. "I am quite anxious to hear about how matters are progressing with you"[4]. Pfaff's was also a trusted arena for the deepest soul searches and darkest secrets. When Fred Gray returned from Antietem in September 1862, he chose to narrate the harrowing details to Whitman at Pfaff's—as critical a moment for Gray as for Whitman, whose seemingly quick decision to travel to the Civil War front three months later may have been influenced by this conversation (*Correspondence* I:80n).

Whitman may have come to Pfaff's to ogle the Bohemians, but he stayed for the view of the whole scene. The saloon's heterogeneous clientele and permissive atmosphere made it a microcosm of Whitman's New York. The poet of "old and young, of the foolish as much as the wise" had found himself as well as his vision of American democracy in the confines of a cellar bar. Pfaff's was much more than a stage for Bohemian antics, or a place to schmooze with New York's most connected writers. It is the interstice through which Whitman observed the crossover between his public persona and his private life; through which we glimpse Whitman at home and at ease in one of his great American catalogues.

III. "away from the clank of the world": Down in the Cellar

For an out-of-work and much-maligned author living with his mother deep in Brooklyn, the long trip to Pfaff's was a voyage to the center of the universe—both in terms of Whitman's concepts of adhesiveness and camaraderie, and his placement of Manhattan's heart center. When Charles Pfaff opened his saloon in the mid-1850s, its location at 647 Broadway was at the hub of the "most intense cultural commerce" in America's fastest growing metropolis (Stansell 115). The great marketplace of Broadway bustled with activity; the Tivoli Theater and Vauxhall Garden Theater were two blocks east, Niblo's Garden was a few blocks south, the African Grove and New York University located due west and the Astor Place Opera and Cooper Institute were a short walk north. Its location was convenient for those artists and writers who either worked or reported on the cultural attractions of the immediate neighborhood; Whitman's lists of addresses in his notebooks indicated that many of his Pfaffian acquaintances also resided much closer to the saloon than he did.[5] Making the six-mile roundtrip from Brooklyn by foot, ferry, and at least one omnibus connection, Whitman invested considerable time and money into becoming a regular at Pfaff's.

Effort, too, was needed to locate the easily overlooked entrance to the cellar. Despite Pfaff's central importance in the history of American counterculture, it was-- and continues to be-- difficult to find. According to his obituary in the *New York Times*, Charles Pfaff was born in Baden and immigrated to America in 1855. He first established a saloon and restaurant on Broadway, near Amity Street, "managed this place and one at 645 Broadway for about five years, and then opened the house at 653 that became the favorite resort of all the prominent actors, authors, artists, musicians, newspapermen, and men-about-town of the time" ("In and About New York" 2). Scholars Eugene Lalor and Albert Parry list 653 Broadway as the location Whitman frequented (Parry 21), and a walking tour at the Academy of American Poets pinpoints Han's Deli at 645 Broadway, as the location of Whitman's hangout (Kray). Yet advertisements for Pfaff's posted in the *Saturday Press* from December 21, 1859 to 3 March 1860 boast of a "Pfaff's Restaurant and Lager Bier Saloon, No. 647 Broadway, New York." Furthermore, an 1863 brass token inscribed "CHES PFAFF RESTAURANT 647 BROADWAY NY" indicates that Pfaff's Cellar was located at this address through Whitman's last possible date of patronage in December 1862 ("Civil War Token"). When the *Saturday Press* resumed publication in 1865 after a hiatus, the August 5th edition advertised Pfaff's at 653 Broadway. So Whitman's cellar bar was certainly found at 647 Broadway, the mirror image of the tenement located at 645 (which may indeed account for some of the confusion regarding the address). Quite wonderfully, the building still stands, cellar intact and in use—though there is no marker or sign of the saloon or its history.

As many modern-day New Yorkers strolling up the west side of Broadway are oblivious to the important history under their feet, a nineteenth-century flaneur could easily miss the gateway to this Bohemian lair. According to a tribute to Pfaff's in the *Saturday Press* of December 3, 1859, the entrance at 647 Broadway was marked by two faint words: "PFAFF" and "RESTAURATION", a long-established term for "restaurant" still used today to designate less formal eateries in Switzerland and France. The foreign-looking descriptors must have given many hopeful Pfaffian initiates pause. What sort of 'restauration' was taking place at the bottom of those steps—political, social, or perhaps epicurean? Was a Swiss national celebrating the recent return to federalism (known officially as the "Restauration"), or were restorative exotic brews on offer? Charles Pfaff was clearly not concerned with mass marketing his establishment, or catering to an American middle-class sensibility. In contrast, every oyster cellar in New York was marked by a prominent, identical sign: a balloon