

## M Visiting Walt

Visiting the house where an author or poet once lived is an activity frowned upon by many latter-day literary scholars, who maintain that it is only the text, not the person behind it, nor his or her belongings, that should be the object of study and interest. "Gravespotting", i.e. finding the grave of an author (or some other celebrity) – just out of curiosity or maybe to pay some kind of respect – is, by the same token, even more suspicious. Nevertheless, many people indulge in such activities, and often the visiting places have become focal points in the local tourist industry. Stratford-on-Avon (Shakespeare), Graceland (Elvis), the Père-Lachaise cemetery (Balzac, Chopin, Morrison, Piaf, Wilde, etc.), and Sweden's 'Blue Tower' (Strindberg) and Mårbacka (Selma Lagerlöf), are all examples of shrines to which tourist-pilgrims flock.

As one who thinks that poets are interesting people and that knowing about their physical environment adds to one's enjoyment and understanding of them, I had decided early on that my extended spring 2006 visit to the University of Delaware would have to include a day trip to nearby Camden, New Jersey, to see the house where Walt Whitman lived towards the end of his life, as well as his final resting-place there. But whenever I mentioned this plan, people would look at me with big, incredulous eyes. "Camden? You can't go there. It isn't safe!" A naïve European, I wasn't aware that Camden, the neighbour across the Delaware River of the great city of Philadelphia, is one of those places competing for the title 'armpit of America', and in addition the most violent city in the country, according to recent crime statistics.

After some hesitation and a reassuring phone call to the curator of the Whitman house, my wife and I the next day decided to give Whitman a go anyway, armpit or no armpit. The drive took less than an hour and then we found ourselves in an urban environment which, indeed, did leave a lot to be desired, from the point of view of pleasantness. But suddenly, there was a street sign pointing in the direction of the "Whitman House" and soon we had parked right outside the building in Mickle Boulevard (Mickle Street in Whitman's days).



The final home of arguably the most influential poet of the 19<sup>th</sup> century – the only house Whitman ever owned – is an insignificant two-storey wooden building that used to be part of a block of row houses alongside the street. Now only one house on either side of the Whitman house remains. The buildings are surreally surrounded on one side by a large derelict empty space that looks like a no-man's-land in a war zone, and on the other, unbelievably, a huge modern prison! (Imagine somebody suggesting the building of a prison



across the street from Shakespeare's birthplace!)

A sign told us to knock on the front door and we were welcomed by the friendly curator, who, luckily, had been expecting us because of our concerned phone call the day before. It turned out that the little house only admits prebooked visits and no more than a handful of people at a time. We were excellently shown round for well over an hour by a very knowledgeable park ranger, who told us quaint details about Whitman's cleanliness obsession, his galoshes, his appreciation of the new street lights outside, which enabled him to read at night, until he realised that they also prevented him from sleeping, so he had to have wooden venetian blinds installed, which are still there. We were also shown a facsimile of the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, which would have made a wonderful souvenir, but alas, there was not so much as a postcard to be bought in this extremely non-commercial museum. We hear that there had been suggestions to open a proper café and visitors' centre in one of the adjoining buildings, but funds could not be procured. For the same reason, the curator had to take it upon himself to paint the house two years ago.

Strange as this frugality may seem, it may be an apposite reflection of many of the things that Whitman stood for. Already in Whitman's days, Camden was a rough working-class place, and that is indeed one of the reasons why he decided to settle there. He was a man of the people and a poet who celebrated the labour of the common American working-man. Maybe there could be no better physical memorial of him than this anti-monument. Or in his own words: "If you want me again, look for me under your boot-soles."

Well, not quite. Towards the end of his life, Whitman apparently started taking an obsessive interest in his physical afterlife, spending a great deal of time and energy (and money) proudly planning and designing a magnificent granite-and-marble tomb for himself, his parents, and a few other close relatives. He insisted on, and got, a perfect plot on a gentle slope in the newly established Harleigh Cemetery, a couple of miles from his house. A monument worthy of a Prince of Poetry, but one where, unlike his poetry, dilapidation is making itself felt. So in the end, under the boot-soles is probably the best place to look for him.

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Text & photos

