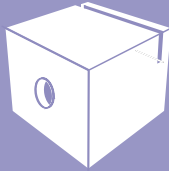


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C I C A N T

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LITERATURE AND PANORAMIC STRUCTURE

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Abstract

American writer John Greenleaf Whittier composed his ambitious poem "The Panorama" in late 1855, not long before the Civil War of the States (1861-1865). Literarily, it was meant to dissuade the North and new western territories from following the example of the southern Democrats, and to abolish black slavery. For us today, interest rests also in the way this poem was structured. Whittier must have witnessed a "moving-Panorama" spectacle in his native New England and determined that he would apply that same mechanism for revelation, as structural basis for his lengthy, sententious poem. The political message of this work has earned notable attention, but its reliance on a mid-nineteenth-century popular spectacle had been mentioned just in passing. My aim is to demonstrate intricately how that popular spectacle was applied in this poem.

Keywords: abolition of slavery, American Civil War, panorama spectacles, perceptual effects, New Bedford, Massachusetts

John Greenleaf Whittier (17 Dec. 1807-7 Sept. 1892) is one of the best-known American poets in the traditional manner that we associate with the birth and early growth of the United States. Stylistically considered, he is out of date—certainly not a “modern” American poet—but he could rightly lay claim to ideological views that today fall within the realm of “burning questions”, most notably issues of race as those pertained to slavery. A devoted child of New England (born in Haverhill, Massachusetts, and buried in nearby Amesbury), his spiritual and intellectual interests spanned territories much broader. He eventually came to be known as a staunch abolitionist, and his voice rang loud and clear against slavery; perhaps never so loudly as in his lengthy poem, “The Panorama”, presented first toward the end of 1855 and published in 1856¹.

“The Panorama” is a resounding outcry against the slave system that had become the backbone of the economic framework of southern states, which gained headway in the “New West” and mid-west, and which then threatened to gain increasing appeal in northern states, such as his own.² The most acute students and commentators of this poem have ably explicated it in such a way as to underscore its complicated meaning. That is, complicated in the sense that the poem rails against not just the racial slavery that bolstered the economies of southern and some “new-western” and mid-western United States in the first half of the nineteenth

century, but also against the precarious stance of some northerners, in regard to slavery. Nearly half a century ago, Lewis Perry published a remarkable interpretation of the poem (Perry, 1976), and twenty years later David Grant published a sweeping, masterful explication of it, even if his explication is a bit difficult to grasp, for its wealth of historical trappings (Grant, 1996).

With such a meaty theme as that, “The Panorama”, to my knowledge, has always been approached from a historical and ideological viewpoint. That has been as it should, especially for the reason of the poet’s intention. Granted his relative fame, he would steer opinion broadly, as a cautionary measure against the explosion of slavery in the then “mystic West”, as Whittier called it, and against any conceivable appeal of the slave system in northern states. To this purpose, he appoints a sort of barker (“the Showman”) in the poem, as we shall see. Notwithstanding the weightiness of the poet’s theme, it seems to me that this literary landmark should not go unnoticed, either, by a public whose concern is visual spectacle; specifically, in the visual spectacle that was the nineteenth-century panorama.

“Panorama” could refer at the time to the spectacles that were introduced as a result of early photography’s advancement in the form of the glass-plate negative, barely half a decade

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1. The full version of John Greenleaf Whittier’s poem ‘The Panorama’ can be accessed here: <https://archive.org/details/panoramaandother-00whitrich/mode/2up>
 2. In 1854, the Republican party emerged to counter expansion of slavery into the American territories. In that year the Kansas-Nebraska Act was passed, ostensibly to facilitate development of the transcontinental railroad. In effect, this Act repealed the 1820 agreement (the Missouri Compromise), which admitted Missouri as slave state and Maine as free state. That Compromise also had prohibited slavery in the remaining lands of the Louisiana Purchase, north of the 36-30 parallel. From March 1853 to March 1861, there were two one-term Democrat Presidents: Franklin Pierce and James Buchanan.

before Whittier's poem: photographs almost seamlessly pieced together to form remarkable horizontal spans. But such photographic exemplars were doubtlessly so-called by analogy with the painted panoramic views that had become public spectacle since the late eighteenth-century, and which had gained secure commercial foothold in the first half of the nineteenth, most notably among urban audiences. The painted panorama quickly became an international rage.³

Varying structures of panoramas coexisted, quite naturally. One early form that they took was set up in such a way that the viewer—a paying viewer, of course—stepped upward to a platform, from which the viewer looked down and around, sometimes in a complete circle, so as to appreciate the expanse of the subject on display. Other panoramas were kept more at eye-level, and so the viewer had a view that was a bit less *à vol d'oiseau*, but possibly more involving. Panoramas were eventually enhanced by the application of photography in the visual phenomenon, although this is not the medium that concerns us when addressing Whittier's poem. Availing herself of photographs (almost certainly, those made by her husband Edward King-Tenison), Lady Louisa Tenison cooperated on Burford's panoramic representation of Granada, in Leicester Square, London (1853). (The Tenisons had resided temporarily in Granada, as early as 1851.) Shortly after, there was Francis Frith's seven-segment panorama of Cairo (1858) and, later, the very extensive panorama made by Pascal Sébah, of Constantinople. Eadweard Muybridge's rather

newsy views of the Modoc War (1873) in California, his travel views of Guatemala City (in eleven segments), and his panoramas of San Francisco (1877-1878) are more examples of the application of photography in panoramas (Fontanella, 2017, pp.112-115).

Yet another form that the panorama took was the "spool" version, in which a massive and continuous painting was unwound and correspondingly rewound before the spectators, and during which a spokesman would narrate, in accord with the content of the visual; in effect, guiding the winders of the two coordinated spools. It did not oblige the viewer to skills of literacy. It customarily involved a verbal exposition in keeping with the linear direction of the painting that devolved before the spectators' eyes. It could be diachronic in the degree to which either the artist or the narrator chose to make it, either one indicating milestones along the linear path that was the result of the spools winding in coordination. And it could be paced according to one's discretion (but not to the discretion of the viewers). The spool version of the panorama was a presentation before a rapt audience; an audience not very individually active in its own personal interpretation of the sense of the panorama, the logic of which rested in the hands of the artist and/or live narrator. This approach to the panoramic phenomenon was unlike those very early formats (platform viewing) in which the spectator was the interpreter in control; in control of both pace and inference regarding what was being viewed.

3. I am guided principally by three sources. Ralph Hyde wrote an exhibition (3 Nov. 1988-15 Jan. 1989) book for the Barbican Art Gallery of London: *Panorabilia: the Art and Entertainment of the "All-embracing" View*, Trefoil Pub. Not long after (1993), there appeared Bernard Comment's *The Painted Panorama*, in a London (1999) edition, then in New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2000. Almost contemporaneously with Comment, we had Stephan Oettermann, *The Panorama: History of a Mass Medium*, New York: Zone, 1997.

These are cursory observations about the *perceptual effects* of panoramic viewing, which are dependent on the technical class of panorama in question. In this respect, Angela Miller wrote an excellent article, in which she delineated subtle distinctions among the perceptual effects brought about by various sorts of panoramas; most generally speaking, between “stationary” and “moving” panoramas (Miller, 1996)⁴. She opens with an observation that interests us for the purposes of the present study concerning Whittier’s “The Panorama”: “The panoramic enjoyed a metaphoric reach that satisfied the nineteenth-century craving for visual—and by extension physical and political—control over a rapidly expanding world. In its moving form, the panorama captured not only spatial extension but the passage of time and the grand sweep of history, a history that now needed to be marshalled and organized in accordance with the imperial dreams of the new nation-states of Europe and the United States.” And she closes with pertinent remarks about one James Ball: “In 1855, a black daguerrotypist named James Ball, assisted by a team of black artists, produced a panorama billed as anti-slavery work. Entitled ‘Ball’s Pictorial Tour of the United States,’ [he] seems to have represented the human landscape of slavery upon which the vast machinery of interregional commerce and national prosperity was grounded. . . . The critical message of Ball’s panorama may be measured against D.W. Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation* (1915).” (Fig.1) Only in a final footnote does Miller mention “an extended poem by John Greenleaf Whittier entitled ‘The Panorama’, more than likely inspired by Ball’s abolitionist panorama.” Whittier’s literary application of the panorama is

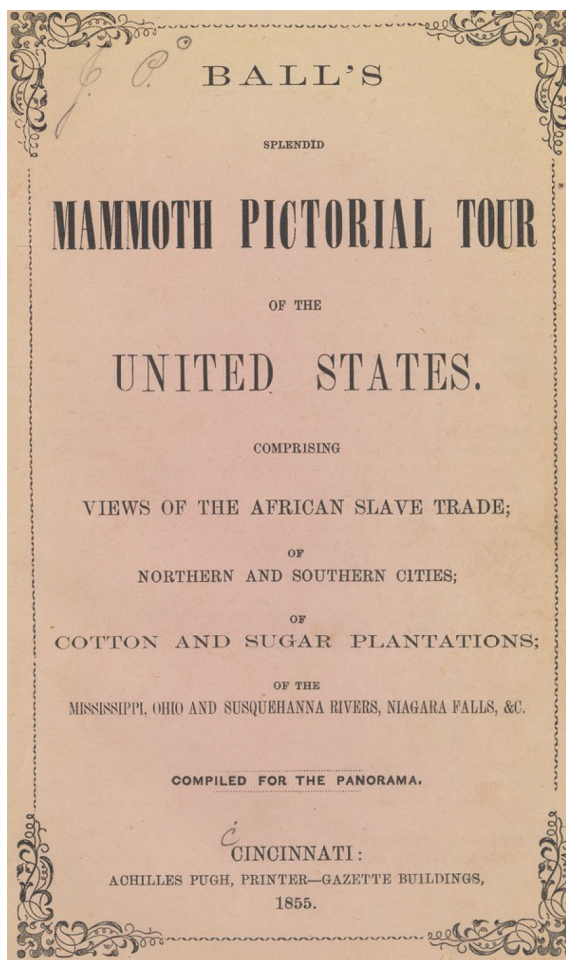


Fig 1 Pamphlet of John Ball’s Mammoth Pictorial Tour of the United States compiled for the Panorama, 1855

4. Miller is indebted to Comment Oettermann, and Hyde (see note 2) for history, and for “effects theory” to Jonathan Crary’s *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (1990).

elaborated upon, to some extent, by Jamie L. Jones, contributing writer for the New Bedford Whaling Museum (see note 8). One wonders, also, if Ball's work bore relation to a recent find by Victor Flores, who discovered in Oxford's Bodleian Library the announcement that heralded a "Grand moving PANORAMA illustrative of the Great African and American Slave Trade!"⁵ I leave it to Prof. Flores to explain in greater detail. Suffice it to say that this slave-trade panorama, displayed in London, was accompanied by music and a lecture, and the printed tale of an identified "fugitive slave" could be purchased on the premises. Evidently, the panorama shows could be occasions for fanfare, and the reference to the "lecture" announced for the "Grand moving Panorama" may have referred to the Narrator's speech.

Naturally, it was the more passive-audience result rendered by the spool version of the panorama—the moving panorama—which suited Whittier as metaphorical setting for his poem. For Whittier had the most serious of messages to deliver, and difficult, urgent arguments to win. A stationary panorama would not have sufficed as metaphoric background. In contrast to a moving panorama, the stationary one would not (so

readily) have indicated *progression* in time and *development* of Whittier's argument, factors of which the aforementioned Jamie L. Jones appears to have been aware.⁶

I cannot help but wonder if Whittier had occasion to view the spool panorama of New Bedford, Massachusetts, which had been exhibited there some seven years before his "The Panorama".⁷ It would have been an almost casual sojourn from his habitual residence to New Bedford, one of the most renown whaling capitals of the day. Who from the region, having heard of the spectacle wrought in New Bedford, would not have desired to see it? The work of whaling artist Benjamin Russell (1804-85) and comparably practical painter Caleb Purrington (1812-76), this spool panorama remains today the world's longest painting. It measures over 388 meters over its four sections, with a missing fifth section that (speculatively) may have brought the total meters to nearly 500.⁸ In this Museum book depicting the panoramic whaling voyage, Keith Kauppila (vol. I, p.72) tells of a handbill that announced a showing of the New Bedford panorama in Boston's Amory Hall, in April 1849. Whittier could also have attended this showing, I imagine, since for him Boston

5. Flores is professor in Lisbon's Universidade Lusófona. He spearheads technologically advanced innovations in the appreciation of nineteenth-century panoramas, among other related projects concerning visual phenomena and their effects.

6. Notable exceptions to this are, just for example, Keats's Grecian urn, the frieze in the *Aeneid* depicting battle, countless grand tapestries, and the frescos in the Hall of Battles in El Escorial, where we find depicted, among others, the battle of St. Quentin, the victory commemorated by the building of this monastery-palace.

7. In early 1848, Whittier was in Washington; in April 1851, he was ill enough to be near death; in early 1852, he is accused of treason...all this, in addition to having become deeply involved in political matters and literary achievements. See Mordell, A. (1933) *Quaker Militant, John Greenleaf Whittier*. Boston & New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., chronology.

8. In 2018, the New Bedford Whaling Museum (Massachusetts) published a two-volume set about their exceptional panorama: *A Spectacle in Motion: the Grand Panorama of a Whaling Voyage 'Round the World*. "The world", here, of course included several lands that were Portuguese or historically connected to Portugal—the Azores, Rio de Janeiro, the Cape Verde Islands, St. Helena Island—all reminiscent of the fundamental Portuguese roots of the eminent whaling city of New Bedford, Massachusetts.

was at least as accessible as New Bedford. It is also entirely possible that Whittier attended the spectacle of the famous moving panorama by John Banvard, which toured Boston at some point between 1846 and 1848 (Comment, 1999, pp. 63-64)⁹. Such experiences must have stirred in him the idea for the structure of "The Panorama".

So far, we have seen likely thematic relations between the James Ball panorama (and the item found by Victor Flores, too?). And it is likely that Whittier had seen the New Bedford panorama, somewhere not uncomfortably far from his home, but the significance of this would be not thematic, rather technical. The Bodleian panorama announcement concerns a "grand moving panorama", which is the precise technical nature of the New Bedford panorama, also, although it is unclear if this was true for James Ball's creation.

Of course, in applying the relatively new vogue of the highly visual panorama spectacle, Whittier meant to have his poem depict an irresistible perspective of his topic, one before which all would sit up and pay heed. The Showman does guide the public with his verbal directives. But I am implying that the figurative panorama, which he pretends to be manipulating and explaining to the public, *in itself* serves as a structural motive for advancing both the poem and its meaning. The moving panorama's singular direction begs progression toward an end, and so, as metaphorical background, it was eminently apt. The flowing Mississippi (the Boston show) and the Whaling Voyage (the New Bedford show) are visual narratives (with rehearsed verbal accompaniment) that are part and parcel of

a continuous turning of the spools: the grand horizontal phenomenon that unfolds before the audience. Whittier is developing and promoting his argument in an insistent, forceful manner. It is an argument crucial to the future development of the nation, and it must rely upon the technique of a *moving* panorama, analogous to the progress and advancement that is implicit in this type of spectacle's very technique: movement forward.

Whittier's long, 519-line poem, was both a warning—a purposeful awakening—and a plea. It foretold inhumane disaster, should the North and the new West not direct themselves away from the temptations of slave-holding, and toward abolitionism instead. History shows that there were numerous enlightened men and women in Whittier's circle, individuals whom history has held in importance as political figures (such as Charles Sumner [1811-74]), writers (such as Ralph Waldo Emerson [1803-82]), and many other inspirational cohorts. It was Whittier's task as poet to make his appeal in a manner that must have seemed as desirably modern to him as did abolitionism itself, the very theme of "The Panorama".

What the Showman unfurls is a panorama of the country as it stood at the time, making the term "panorama" serve a double use in this poem: a perspective of the country, as displayed through the technique of the moving, painted picture that was indeed Panorama. So it was that the image of the moving, or spool panorama should have bolstered the motif of the poem. Just 11 lines into the poem an impatient audience calls out for the Showman to "Roll up your curtain!" and "Let the show

9. Banvard's moving canvas was *Mississippi from the Mouth of the Missouri to New Orleans*; not insignificantly, the partial geography of which shows up unfavorably in Whittier's "The Panorama".

begin." As if we ourselves sat there with the rest of them while the curtain rose, just as in the case of the Bodleian panorama announcement, we hear the swell of "music clear and loud" (l. 14). The poem suggests progressive movement ("Wave after wave the billowy greenness pours"), as we experience all sorts of topographical marvels in "an age unguessed", probably because what the Showman is about to admonish does have to do with the most sweeping humane concerns...across both space and time.

Whereupon the curtain falls (l. 45). It is a purposeful interruption in the movement of the poem, so that the Showman may suggest the theme of North/South. When an audience member interrupts (l. 57)—on one level, an example of the participatory potential of the spool panorama, as opposed to the stationary one—it affords the Showman an occasion to warn all of us that we in the present have the potential to predicate both "holiness and sin" (l. 69). And so we are admonished that we shoulder a burden; that we have a moral responsibility to listen attentively and, ultimately, to choose responsibly. The Showman will provide for us the alternatives (l.89), and by virtue of his manipulation of the new panoramic technology, guide us suggestively to the acceptable conclusion. I am convinced that Whittier could not have structured his poem in the way he did, had he not experienced a spectacle of moving panorama, complete with Showman, musical embellishment, perhaps also a man shouting from the audience. Nor is it out of the question that that spectacle may have been the relatively new "Whaling Voyage" of New Bedford, especially when some of the topographic and maritime features in the fictional paintings in the poem seem not that far afield from those in the "Whaling Voyage" of New Bedford.

Understood on another level, Whittier is using the moving panorama and the Showman metaphorically to project his abolitionist views, and to win to his side (especially) those northerners who might be tempted to espouse less humane leanings, probably for economic gain. ("Men of the North!", shouts the Showman (l. 219); a clear indication that his primary directive is to them.) Granted that that was his objective and his poetic method, we might anticipate a certain amount of "rough seas ahead" and a Showman (Whittier, in effect) who must be compelling, in the face of opposition ("rough seas"). The metaphoric spool panorama has to prove to be an effective ally in this effort.

Once again (l. 90) musical accompaniment is key, and for some 45 successive lines it plays an important role, ranging from "a burst of music, touching all the keys of thrifty life" to the funereal music that accompanies the inhumane treatment of fellow man in the southern scene, a sorry tableau that could be visited upon an adolescent West. By this point (as the spool panorama unfolds toward the new West and the South), the foregoing splendid (painted) scenes have turned dissonant, motley, brutish, baleful, heartless, as we move toward the realms of "Ponchartrain" (Louisiana) and slave auctions and southern plantations (ll. 129-189). All things—things both wondrous and condemnable—are the stuff of America's current panorama. As the poet has the panorama unwind, so, too, does he cover the entire land, "the New World's zone", "from sea to sea"; a panorama, in effect.

The curtain once again falls (l. 197), as the audience, visibly aghast before the scenes of the South to which they have just been witness, catches its breath. It is a way of the poet's

congratulating himself for his (at least temporary) success at having moved his audience thus far; a minor achievement by comparison with the vote that he is aiming to secure in the real political world, by virtue of his poem, against southern Democrats and in favor of the new Republican party, which Lincoln would come to represent.

This “two-fronted Future” (l. 209) is what the Showman (Whittier) must now confront. He must interpret “this poor trick of paint” for those who require instruction; which includes those who may not be able to read for themselves Whittier’s continual abolitionist publications, much less hear them in one of Whittier’s social or intellectual gatherings. At the point when 38 percent of the poem has been “unfurled”, all of the panorama has been unfurled, to the relief of the gasping crowd. Only then can the Showman actually *preach* his message in a less metaphoric, less compromising manner, making clear his interpretation of the “trick of paint”. He must seize this moment—three-fifths of the poem; the remainder of it—to make himself clear, to be no longer figurative, as he was, often, during the unfurling of his panorama. This is his moment, because he has weakened his audience to a point. They “all drew a freer breath, as men are wont to do when mournful death is covered from their sight”, when the curtain fell, shielding the audience from the scenes of the South that had the potential of contagion in the new West and the North. As the curtain fell, he relieved them of the visual strain of having to regard the South’s inhumanity. Then he took advantage of their relative weakness to deliver his message.

The subtleties of that message, as I said early on, have been interpreted by capable historians Perry and Grant, nearly half a

century and just over a quarter-century ago, respectively. The Showman (Whittier) leaves little to doubt. Perhaps the most surprising element here is that “The Panorama” is a poem directed chiefly to a susceptible North, which can still be led morally astray if it espouses slavery, whereas the intransigent South (Democrats) is likely beyond being susceptible to the moral correction that is the abolitionist’s goal.

My own purpose has been without subtlety, I hope: to demonstrate how an important American poet in the time of an incipient Republican party, just a few years before the Civil War, used the panorama as metaphor for the expression of a highly contentious idea that could have failed on the level of reality. I have also meant to suggest some possible relations—perhaps meaningful sources—between certain panoramic spectacles in the real world, on the one hand, and Whittier’s poem, on the other.

I would note additionally that in late 1855, the date of Whittier’s composition, visual spectacle was evidently in the service of literature. Today we read this poetry differently, almost as if the reverse were true, which is implicit in my having paid attention to Whittier’s poem for publication in a medium dedicated to visual media. Literature now fascinates for its connection to antiquated visual spectacle, although I probably could not have written this without considerable literary training. This does not mean that “les jeux sont faits”, and that literature has lost. In the richest of worlds, each art is stronger in participation with the other. It does appear, however, that the once-servant (the painted panorama) has grown to be more stunning—at least, more of a curious focus—than the once-master (somewhat sermonical poetry). For the particular

case that interests us, Whittier's poem, the pity would be that current fascination with the visual should dislodge and displace, instead of bolster and reinforce, the important social and humanistic implications of the Showman's message: the socio-political panorama that he saw unfolding to the rhythm of the increasingly encompassing perspective of the nation.

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