

WHITMAN AND MANNAHATTA

By GEORGE J. SMITH

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It is not to Whitman that we would go for discouraged and discouraging views of America. It may be granted that matters American are not all in roseate and hopeful condition; even the robust optimism of Whitman was occasionally shaken by unpleasant facts that forced themselves upon his attention. For instance, his indignation at a certain "filthy Presidentiad" will be remembered; and his far more serious dissatisfaction with the present average of American womanhood.

With all thy gifts, America, . . .
Power, wealth, extent, vouchsafed to thee, . . .
What if one gift thou lackest? (the ultimate human problem never solving,)
The gift of perfect women fit for thee, . . .
The mothers fit for thee?

However, since it is in the soundness and progress of the great average people of the land that Whitman made fast his anchor of optimism—since he counted on these as on the future of "orchards divine and certain"—it is only what might have been expected that this great human presentment, this singular congeries of cities "nested in bays," the Mannahatta of the new charter, should have been as a tonic to his soul, and have called forth an enthusiasm that more than once becomes a rapture. In speaking of his city

he runs to superlatives and ample encomiums. Her vastness, her wealth, her manifold energies and ceaseless vital movement, her queenly superbness as a product and manifestation of human power, strike him with wonder and exultant delight.

The merely physical aspects and surroundings of this "rocky-founded island" of Manhattan evoke these emotions. It presents, he declares, "the grandest physical habitat and surroundings of land and water the globe affords." The great irregular bay and rivers, with their islands and their many moving craft, not crowded, but "sown, as stars in the sky," and with their ample, gleaming "hurrying, splashing sea-tides" (whose tumultuous play was so keen a delight to him), were fitly bounded by the distant hills of Brooklyn and by "the North River, with its far vista . . . the Palisades, and the gradually receding blue, lost in the distance." The possibilities of such a situation for a city can scarcely be called less than magnificent. An island, "solid-founded," "hemm'd thick with ships," a City of hurried and sparkling waters! City of spires and masts—

well may the beholder of her cry with her poet-lover:

Oh! what can ever be more stately and admirable to me
than mast-hemm'd Manhattan?

At times this "superb-faced" city he takes in as a whole. As is natural and proper, he sees her under clear skies, with

The summer air, the bright sun shining, and the sailing
clouds aloft.

Then, with his felicitous and effective word-touches, he sets down the impressions of the seeing eye. He beholds, rising out of the free-blown waters, "tall-topt, ship-hemm'd, modern, American, yet strangely oriental, V-shaped Manhattan, with its compact mass, its spires, its cloud-touching

edifices group'd at the center—the green of the trees, and all the white, brown and gray of the architecture well blended, under a miracle of limpid sky."

At other times, various special features hold his attention: perhaps it is the great buildings, those "tall-topt marble and iron beauties," which he sees as "high growths, slender, strong, light, splendidly uprising toward clear skies;" and we are sure that our recentest sky-scrapers would have called out his unstinted and admiring approval. Then, more likely, the vessels, the countless masts, the boats, the steamers, the fleets of sailing craft, catch his eye. They make an ever-interesting panorama. Who ever saw more in and from a ferryboat than he? The yachts are especially a joy to him. In one place he calls them "marvelously beautiful;" and in another he writes of them with a master-poet's pen, though in prose: "Those daring, careening things of grace and wonder, those white and shaded swift-darting fish birds (I wonder if shore or sea elsewhere can outvie them), ever with their slanting spars, and fierce, pure, hawk-like beauty and motion." Or it may be the great ocean steamers that Whitman, with his instinct for the immense and powerful, is drawn to. The "departing of the big steamers, noons or afternoons," how it stirs him!—"the proud, steady, noiseless cleaving of the grand oceaner down the bay," these great vessels, so "magnificent in size and power, fill'd with their incalculable value of human life and precious merchandise"—how should their emotional significance escape this poet of the modern, who chants a pæon even to the locomotive?

But, after and above all material or natural displays, it is of course the men and women of New York that remained the paramount interest in the city to Walt Whitman. For he is the poet who cried, at length:

Keep your splendid, silent sun;
Keep your woods, O Nature, and the quiet places by the
woods.

Give me faces and streets—give me these phantoms incessant and endless along the trottoirs !

Give me interminable eyes—give me women—give me comrades and lovers by the thousand !

Being an observer of life as well as a participant in it, he sees the people of New York first as a great spectacle. Merely as movement, mass, energy, the populations of these streets are amazing. Repeatedly, as he gazes at them, he has in mind the waters that wash the shores of Manhattan. He sees them as "great tides of humanity;" he speaks of the "hurrying and vast amplitude of those never ending human currents;" or again of the "great, seething, oceanic populations, bubbling and whirling and moving." The myriad people of New York are "on the scale of the oceans and tides."

The congestion of certain streets and regions of the city fascinates him. He calls them "brilliant, animated, crowded, spectacular human presentations." Of course, there is Broadway—

Visor'd, vast, unspeakable show and lesson !—

and especially the busy district about Fourteenth street and Union Square (as it was a score of years ago), where the wide walks "and the spaces ample and free" contain, of a fine afternoon, maybe "thirty or forty thousand finely dress'd people," as our observer puts it, "all in motion, plenty of them good-looking, many beautiful women," . . . "As if New York would show what it can do in its humanity, its choicest physique and physiognomy, and its countless prodigality of locomotion, dry-goods, glitter, magnetism, and happiness." Then there is the great afternoon "carriage carnival" of Fifth Avenue, say at Fortieth street. It is "a Mississippi of horses and rich vehicles, not by dozens and scores, but hundreds and thousands,—the broad avenue fill'd and cramm'd with them—a moving, sparkling, hurrying crush for more than two miles. . . . Altogether,"

he says, "it is to me the marvel sight of New York." Similar, of course, is the parade of the "ten thousand vehicles careering through" Central Park, presenting "the full oceanic tide of New York's wealth and 'gentility.'" And yet it is precisely in observing this spectacle that Whitman utters a note of disappointment and distaste. There was too little "of sterling America, either in spirit or countenance." Through the windows of two or three of the richest carriages he saw "faces almost corpse-like, so ashy and listless."

Far otherwise is it with him as he looks lovingly upon the general people of the city, now no longer as parts of a spectacle but as individual men and women. When after some years' absence he returns to New York, the great heart of the man is thrilled with pride, sympathy, hope, confidence. The "brief total of my impressions," he says, "the human qualities of these vast cities, is to me comforting, even heroic, beyond statement." "Fine clear voices, alertness, generally fine physique, clear eyes that look straight at you, a singular combination of reticence and self possession, with good nature and friendliness, . . . and a palpable out-cropping of that personal comradeship I look forward to as the subtlest, strongest future hold of this many item'd Union—are not only constantly visible here in these mighty channels of men, but they form the rule and average." "The solution of that paradox, the eligibility of the free and fully develop'd individual with the paramount aggregate," he believed the people of this great American city demonstrated as possible. No longer young, and fully aware of what can be said on the other side, he found in his daily contact and rapport with the people of New York his hope confirmed for the future "city of superb democracy."

Is it not good and bracing to come into touch with red-blooded and cheery views like these? Surely courage and hope are better than puling sickly doubt and desponding question. And after all, was Walt Whitman mistaken in

his beloved city? I, for one, cannot believe it. The student of New York may find plenty of food for misgivings, no doubt, but is not the unnarrowed view always encouraging? I came to New York with little feeling of attraction toward the city. I have been won over; and I can heartily voice every word of Walt Whitman's pride and joy and confidence in his beloved Mannahatta. Certainly in its physical aspects this vast city is a marvelous human work, and, as one remarked with whom I lately visited a roomful of great whirring newspaper presses, "the works of man are as wonderful as God's." Then, too, as to the spiritual aspect of this great metropolitan democracy, have we not deep ground for trust in the outcome of the American experiment? Surely our unparalleled opportunity will not have been had in vain.

Not wan from Asia's fetiches,
Nor red from Europe's old dynastic slaughter-house,
(Area of murder-plots of thrones, with scent left yet of wars
and scaffolds everywhere,)
But come from Nature's long and harmless throes, peacefully builded thence,
These virgin lands, lands of the Western shore,
To the new culminating man.