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The American Scene: Versions of the City

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Alan Trachtenberg

The American Scene: Versions of the City

As the toiler must live in the city's belly, so I
was compelled to live in its disordered mind

Scott Fitzgerald

THE IMPACT OF THE CITY upon American culture is one of the most obscure problems historians face. As a people we often seem hostile to cities—to all settlements in fact—in favor of open roads and endless horizons. Born in the country, according to a familiar idea, we resent our move to the big city, refuse to accept it, and stubbornly cling to ideals and values rooted in a rural or frontier way of life. As these values become more and more irrelevant, a neurotic split widens in America's personality. Scholars in turn have treated the city as if it were an alien and disruptive force, as if the age of cities, said to begin in the 1880's, distorted a traditional way of life and caused deep tremors in the American psyche. The city like the machine burst in upon a nation blessedly fulfilling, it believed, its agrarian and pastoral ideals. Instead of provoking a great awakening, the shock drove many Americans back even further to ancestral ideals as a defense against modern urban reality. Thus it is hard to say that the city has yet found a secure place for itself as a permanent fact in American life.

But what place *does* it occupy? Few scholars have addressed themselves to this problem, of delineating the exact outlines of the city in the ideas and feelings of Americans. One hindrance to such studies may be an uncertainty about the kind of knowledge most valuable. Where and how do we look for the impact

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of urbanism? What kinds of expressions register the impact? And what instruments do we need to measure it?

I want to argue by demonstration for a certain kind of literary analysis as a method toward a usable knowledge of the city. The work I will focus on is Henry James's *The American Scene* (1907), a collection of the novelist's impressions of his native land during a visit in 1904-05, after a twenty-five year absence. The book is an inestimable expression of urban culture, but its value as document depends upon *how* it is read. Although a work of non-fiction, it is highly fictive in technique. At its center is James himself, serving up his impressions as if he were a character of his own making, intensely self-aware and introspective, habitually indirect in his observations. The fact that the action of the book—its typically Jamesian “drama of awareness”—occurs within a real and concrete historical setting, adds to the complication. Personal to the point of idiosyncrasy, self-aware, perhaps to the point of solipsism, the book poses major methodological problems to the student of American culture. How do we treat an intensely subjective work? When a highly self-conscious writer, an expatriate, confronts his native culture, what weight do we give his words as expressions of that culture? Does he represent anyone but himself?

Some answers to these problems appear in a recent study by Morton and Lucia White, *The Intellectual Versus the City* (1962). It is a study of the hostility toward cities expressed by major American writers and thinkers, “the anti-urban roar,” as they put it, “produced in the national literary pantheon.” The evidence they marshal of a long-standing and inherited hostility is impressive. The city, they argue, is “one of our most distinctive social developments,” and our distinctive intellectuals, from Jefferson to Emerson to Melville to Henry Adams to Lewis Mumford have been critical of it in varying degrees. The Whites' study suffers from a failure to give sufficient weight to the difference between hostility and ambivalence; but they do establish the resistance of articulate Americans to the central social force of their times. “We have no persistent or pervasive tradition of romantic attachment to the city in our literature or

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in our philosophy,” and in light of the contemporary plight of the city, this is a serious matter indeed. The Whites’ thesis ought to lead to reconsideration of the role played by the articulate community of thought in influencing the direction of American social life.

But when we look in detail at the Whites’ evidence we find that their method raises more problems than it solves. Their approach is to search through the written works of their authors to find articulations of attitude and opinion. What matters for their thesis is the opinion itself, not its context, not its place within a total work. At first thought this may not appear to be troublesome; after all, an author will use various rhetorical devices to make his point, and what matters is the point itself. But true as this may be for certain works, it fails to apply to others, to works especially of literary art.

Shortcomings in the Whites’ method are apparent in their treatment of *The American Scene*. It is a major document in their chapter on Henry James, and from it they extract numerous ideas and prejudices which qualify James, in their language, as an anti-urbanist. He was dismayed, they write, at the absence of so many things in American cities: historical monuments and privacy and elevating conversation and gardens—all the refined forms of European society. Their description of the returned native’s complaints is accurate enough—in fact, can be multiplied several-fold. Not much in the new America was pleasant to his eyes. He found society still blank and thin, everything reduced “to an average of decent suitability,” the past violently pushed aside. Taken simply as a critic, James sounds often like a cross between a stuffy Matthew Arnold and a bitter Henry Adams. And it must be added that whether his criticism adds up to anti-urbanism or not (his chief attack seems to be that America had urbanized itself without acquiring urbanity), it is certainly, in itself, not very profound nor revealing. To look only at the ideas in this book is to see an unhappy displaced aristocrat, not quite the lost patrician of Henry Adams’ status, but sharing with him and with an entire class of Adamses, Lodges, Nortons, Hays, a sense of dispossession.

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Richard Hofstadter identifies this group as “a small imperialist elite.” They hated with patrician scorn the moneyed classes, industrial capitalists, Jews, as convenient symbols of both, cities, for containing Jews, immigrants in general, mobs, machine politics—and the loss both of their gentlemanly ideals of civic virtue and their sheer political power. These ideas, Hofstadter shows, linked the elite with a group they also despised, the Populists, who invoked in the closing years of the 19th century a moribund agrarian myth in a campaign not so much against the city as the industrial order. Many of James’ opinions, in short, echo sounds already familiar in the American air.

But there are crucial differences. For all his detachment James expresses a compassion we rarely find in Henry Adams. “The weight of the new remorseless monopolies . . . operates as no madness of ancient personal power,” he writes, adding, with a glance at the poverty in New York slums, “There is such a thing, in the United States . . . as freedom to grow up to be blighted, and it may be the only freedom in store for the smaller fry of future generations.”

Another difference is expressed in a letter he wrote to a bleak and impotent Henry Adams in 1914: “Of course we are lone survivors, of course the past that was our lives is at the bottom of an abyss. . . . [But] I still find my consciousness interesting. . . . It’s, I suppose, because I am that queer monster, the artist, an obstinate finality, an inexhaustible sensibility.” Unless we want simply another document of conservative criticism, the value of *The American Scene* must be found elsewhere than in its opinions—must be found, that is, in the “inexhaustible sensibility” it dramatizes.

But how do we deal with this value? The fault with the Whites’ approach is that it examines articulateness of only one order—the fully expressed idea *as* idea. A work of literary art, however, conveys itself as a whole experience in which idea and feeling co-exist and inform each other. An opinion in a literary work derives its meaning from its entire context. Susanne Langer’s distinction between discursive and presentational symbols is exactly to this point. In the discursive use of language,

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“units of meaning are combinable into larger units,” and meanings are understood successively, as they appear in sentences. Works of art, on the other hand, are presentational, in that the meanings of specific elements “are understood only through the meaning of the whole, through their relations within the total structure.” To understand the part, then, we need to experience the whole. This is not true, at least not in the same sense, of a reasoned exposition of ideas, as, say, Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America*. Because each element of a work of art depends for its function on its involvement with other elements, the work is “a simultaneous, integral presentation.”

Presentational forms are not expressions, therefore, of strictly rational thought, though Miss Langer emphasizes that since rationality is a total act of the mind, it includes affective as well as cognitive motions. “Indeed,” she quotes J. E. Creighton, “the character of the feeling in any experience may be taken as an index of the mind’s grasp of its object.” For an author to deal with the city presentationally, then, is not to disqualify his work for the historian. On the contrary, such a work may be more useful in cultural criticism than a reasoned exposition. For if the city exists as an objectively verifiable fact, whose changes can be measured with relative exactitude, it also exists in the feelings, as a mode of total experience. There is an affective as well as an ecological city: a city of imperial power, and a city of imaginative power. By allowing the feelings their due, and subjecting them to [a significant form,] works of art are promising sources of knowledge for the historian of culture.

Now as a work of art—or a presentational form—*The American Scene* poses some particular problems best approached indirectly, through a brief digression. In almost every way Walt Whitman is thought of as a foil to Henry James, especially in regard to the city. The Whites remind us how dearly Whitman loved New York, and contrast his democratic feelings with James’ sniffishness about rubbing shoulders with the vulgar. They cite “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” as the best example of the poet’s celebration of city and crowd. And surely they are right: the poem has splendid affirmations: “Ah, what can ever

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be more stately and admirable to me than mast-hemm'd Manhattan?" Whitman "felt the crowd as rapturously as Wordsworth felt the mountains," writes Henry's brother William, and we feel those "crowds of men and women attired in the usual costumes" as a significant presence in the poem. But if all we feel is the poet's rapture and his affirmations, we will miss much of the poem's meaning. At its heart are serious questions about the self's relation to the crowd and to the physical city. The questions are posed in presentational, that is, in formal ways, and it takes an explication of argument, rhythm, imagery, syntax, and especially, time structure, to bring the questions to the surface.

For my purpose here it will be enough to recall that the poem is a dialogue between the poet and his immediate experiences: the crowds on the ferry crossing with him at sun-down from Brooklyn to Manhattan, sights of the harbor, such as the seagulls, "floating with motionless wings" in "slow-wheeling circles," and the thoughts he has of those "others" who will cross the same waters in the future. Through a complex series of maneuvers, Whitman establishes in the first half of the poem a certain detachment from the immediate scene. He sees the flood-tide as an observer, "face to face"; the crowds are "curious" to him—"more curious to me than you suppose." And the thoughts of "others" leads him into an imagined dialogue which takes place in the future, so that he looks back upon the present tense, the now of the poem, as past. The implicit question is, on what grounds do I feel identity with you, in the future, and with my present surroundings, "The glories strung like beads on my smallest sights and hearings?"

The answer, when it comes toward the end of the poem, will be virtually ineffable, expressed by the rhythms of the poem itself: "What the study could not teach—what the preaching could not accomplish is accomplish'd, is it not?" One indication of how this is accomplished is in his repetition at the end of the poem of the famous catalogue of harbor details of section three. In section three the catalogue is in the past tense: Whitman speaking to "you," in the future, about himself in the poem's

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present. In the final section, the catalogue is in the imperative mode: instead of "Flood-tide below me! I see you face to face," it is now "Flow on, river! flow with the flood-tide." The mode creates a sense of release, a feeling of timelessness within time, and of the passage of things in space and time emanating from the poet himself. The imperative mode is one of Whitman's presentational ways of engendering a sense of experience mastered and possessed.

How is this mastery achieved? In section five, the very center of the poem, Whitman addresses the "others" in the future and asks: "What is it then between us?" The ambiguity of the word "between"—denoting separation and joining—is a clue to the entire work. The images that follow the question hint at the sources and motives of the poem. They are images of "dark patches," "curious abrupt questionings" which come upon the poet suddenly, among crowds or alone in bed. The emotions are obscurely sexual, and suggest a crisis in personal identity. This suggestion is heightened by the confessional tone, by the admission of guilt for hiding his shame and uncertainties, for "living the same life with the rest," and playing a role, the "part that still looks back upon the actor or actress." What is important is that the confession itself is enough, without any editorial comment, to overcome the sense of separateness, or at least to contain it within a larger emotion. The effect is musical; the rhythms of the next section imply the control of abrupt feelings: "Closer yet I approach you, / What thought you have of me now, I had as much of you"; "What is more subtle than this which ties me to the woman or man that looks in my face?" Oneness has been achieved: but it is a complex oneness; it retains the identity of the self, yet accepts the identity of the other. The image earlier in the poem, "Just as you stand and lean on the rail, yet hurry with the swift current, I stood yet hurried," we now realize, is emblematic of the whole. To remain in one place, yet hurry with the flux, is to be temporal and infinite, one's self and the world simultaneously.

The very last lines of the poem, addressed to "you dumb, beautiful ministers," the "others," whether people or nature or

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artifact, confirm the underlying motive: a need for wholeness and integration before a flux of indiscriminate experience. A threat of disintegration is always implicit. The poem asks, "What does it mean to be a self in a 'living crowd?' What holds the self together, gives it integrity and form and individuality?" Whitman accepts the crowd—the "dumb, beautiful ministers"—as essential to the self, but not glibly, not without interrogation. We are aware of flux and anonymity, of vague underlying restlessness, in street or bed, of role-playing that allows one to function on the street—all of which comprise an urban way of life. At its deepest level the poem expresses that way of life: Whitman invokes the city figuratively in order to master it.

Fifty years and an immeasurable distance of sensibility separate "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" and *The American Scene*. Moreover a prose work of over four hundred pages can hardly be measured in the same scale with an ode of less than two hundred lines. Nevertheless James's book is susceptible to a similar analysis and requires it. Of course we have to adjust our analysis to the fact that the work, while far more than reportage, is something less than poetry. The landscape in which the action occurs is real, historical, and thus the language necessarily has a certain referential quality, subject to judgment in light of the real historical things it symbolizes. But this kind of truth does not count for as much as the book's artistic truth. Calling the work "a prose poem of the first order," W. H. Auden referred to its "style of metaphorical description of the emotions." Together with an elaborate imagery the book contains specific passages structured as whole experiences, and these can be analysed with full attention to the nuances of language.

One such section, the chapter "New York Revisited," is devoted to the lower reaches of New York City, its harbors, its buildings and streets, and its most famous bridge. It begins with the observer, who calls himself a "restless analyst," on the water, rounding the tip of Manhattan—not, sad to say, on a ferry boat, but a train barge, returning from the Far West. The linkage with Whitman, however, becomes clear enough. On the barge James has the city face to face—a "happily-excited and

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amused view of the great face of New York,” and he feels “a positive prodigal beguilement.” In the following passage the echo of Whitman and the anticipation of Hart Crane is remarkable:

The extent, the ease, the energy, the quantity and number, all notes scattered about as if, in the whole business and in the splendid light, nature and science were joyously romping together, might have been taking on again, for their symbol, some collective presence of great circling and plunging, hovering and perching seabirds, white-winged images of the spirit, of the restless freedom of the Bay.

The remarkable note is the sound of rapturous celebration adopting the white-winged bird as its symbol. But the feeling will not last: like the seagull in the opening lines of Hart Crane’s “Proem: To Brooklyn Bridge,” this one too will soon forsake our eyes as more ominous images and emotions appear. Looking closely we see that James has already qualified the sense of freedom: the seabird is only a contingent symbol: it is “*as if . . . in the splendid light*” the scene “*might have been taking on*” the beautiful bird as its symbol. We cannot afford to miss the qualified tone, for two paragraphs later nature and science are no longer “romping”—they will be seen in another relation under a collective symbol of a far different order.

How James modulates the feeling is an important clue to the movements of the entire book. As a “restless analyst” he does not rest content until he understands all his responses, why he feels as he does. After all, viewed objectively, the New York harbor expresses nothing more than “things lately and currently *done*, done on a large impersonal stage and on the basis of inordinate gain.” Why then does it strike him as “commanding and thrilling”? Perhaps the source of feeling is his own “intellectual extravagance”: “in almost any large view of an intensity of life,” he writes, “his vibrations tend to become a matter difficult even for *him* to explain.” The scene itself has no apparent “sanction” for his exhilaration—except, he continues, in the “appeal of a particular type of dauntless power.”

The long paragraph that follows this discovery needs to be

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read in full in order to show how James uses images, especially of the mechanical parts of the huge suspension bridge over the East River, to shift the feeling from exhilaration to apprehension and a kind of terror:

The aspect the power wears then is indescribable; it is the power of the most extravagant of cities, rejoicing, as with the voice of the morning, in its might, its fortune, its unsurpassable conditions, and imparting to every object and element, to the motion and expression of every floating, hurrying, panting thing, to the throb of ferries and tugs, to the splash of waves and the play of winds and the glint of lights and the shrill of whistles and the quality and authority of breeze-borne cries—all, practically, a diffused, wasted clamor of *detonations*—something of its sharp free accent and, above all, of its sovereign sense of being “backed” and able to back. The universal *applied* passion struck me as shining unprecedentedly out of the composition; in the bigness and bravery and insolence, especially, of everything that rushed and shrieked; in the air as of a great intricate frenzied dance, half merry, half desperate, or at least half defiant, performed on the huge watery floor. This appearance of the bold lacing-together, across the waters, of the scattered members of the monstrous organism—lacing as by the ceaseless play of an enormous system of steam-shuttles or electric bobbins (I scarce know what to call them), commensurate in form with their infinite work—does perhaps more than anything else to give the pitch of the vision of energy. One has the sense that the monster grows and grows, flinging abroad its loose limbs even as some unmannered young giant at his “larks,” and that the binding stitches must forever fly further and faster and draw harder; the future complexity of the web, all under the sky and over the sea, becoming thus that of some colossal set of clockworks, some steel-souled machine-room of brandished arms and hammering fists and opening and closing jaws. The immeasurable bridges are but as the horizontal sheaths of pistons working at high pressure, day and night, and subject, one apprehends with perhaps inconsistent gloom, to certain, to fantastic, to merciless multiplication. In the light of this apprehension indeed the breezy brightness of the Bay puts on the semblance of the vast white page that awaits beyond any other perhaps the black overscoring of science.

The final image recalls a passage in *The Education of Henry Adams*, published privately the same year, 1907, in which

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Adams hears “hysteria” in the city’s air and citizens crying “that the new forces must at any cost be brought under control.” Science overscoring the whiteness of nature has other connotations for James—the personal relation, not the political, is his province. He has acknowledged two predominant feelings, exhilaration and apprehension, provoked by the same picture, and these feelings will continue to interplay, in a tense dialectical form.

As the barge proceeds up the East River, the new “tall buildings” come in view, striking James as “extravagant pins in a cushion already overplanted,” but having “at least the felicity of carrying out the fairness of tone, of taking the sun and the shade in the manner of towers of marble.” His treatment of the skyscrapers results in one of the major metaphors of the book. Images begin to exfoliate: “this loose nosegay of architectural flowers,” “the ‘American beauty,’ the rose of interminable stem.” Eventually the skyscraper becomes a vehicle of James’s most complex responses to the new city. It occurs to him that these buildings, “triumphant payers of dividends,” have no other purposes than money making. By their nature they are subject to change, renovation, “renewal,” at any moment. “Crowned not only with no history,” he writes, “but with no credible possibility of time for history, and consecrated by no uses save the commercial at any cost, they are simply the most piercing notes in that concert of the expensively provisional into which your supreme sense of New York resolves itself.” They lack, in short, “the authority of things of permanence.”

A sense of history and duration is a value James insists on, but for special reasons. Elsewhere in the book he explains that, for him, history does not mean “the immediate crudity of what ‘happens,’ but the much finer complexity of what we read into it and think of in connection with it.” This is a rejection of 19th century historicism, the idea of a continuous process operating within human activities, and of a consistent series of events that can be constructed into interpretive systems. History becomes “the fiddle-string of association,” and a walk across the Park,

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he writes, with a good friend on a warm day, could result in “a boundless evocation” and become “history of a splendid order.” At the core of this idea is a belief that personal identity depends in part on the aesthetic response to places—that the “fiddle-string of association” is a way of establishing, or re-establishing, a relation in which the self can possess its object. James’s sense of history is equivalent to a symbolic transformation, whereby the objects of sense experience become what Whitman calls “dumb, beautiful ministers,” furnishing their parts toward consciousness. James bases his symbolic relations upon past association, while Whitman, it is true, projects himself forward into an expanding present. But the motives are quite similar, to overcome a threat in urban experience.

In James the threat itself is far more explicit and far more is made of it. Coming upon the sight of the “ancient rotunda of Castle Garden,” a place he remembers “from far, far back with the indelibility of the childish vision,” he finds it overgrown by taller anonymous structures. This sight has the effect of acid dropped in his cup. Castle Garden was a “value,” repudiated in his own lifetime. “This impact of the whole condensed past at once produced a horrible, hateful sense of personal antiquity.” And the feeling of being personally closed out deepens as the chapter proceeds. The skyscrapers now seem “a world of immovably-closed doors behind which immense ‘material’ lurked, material for the artist.” But he has little hope that American literature will get at it. “New York,” he writes, “was not going . . . to produce both the maximum of ‘business’ spectacle and the maximum of ironic reflection of it.” It strikes him that “the monstrous phenomena themselves . . . with their immense momentum, got the start, got ahead of . . . any possibility of poetic, of dramatic capture.” The city had outstripped the mind’s ability to grasp and conceive.

Thus James seems to deny what he himself is doing at the moment, conceiving and placing the city in a relation to himself. But our clearest impression, finally, is of his inability, as he puts it, “to make a sense” of the scene before him. When objects and places, he writes later in the book, do not have an

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obvious “sense of their own, a mystic meaning proper to themselves,” he must *make* one. The last thing an artist can recognize is incoherence—“to recognize it,” he adds, “as baffling; though of course he may present and portray it, in all richness, *for* incoherence.” Then, explaining his relief at departing New York, he remarks: “That, I think, was what I had been mainly occupied with in New York.”

The most engaging drama of this chapter is a struggle for the “mystic meaning,” if only the meaning of incoherence. The drama reaches one of its climaxes at a moment when, standing in Wall Street, gazing “at the special skyscraper that overhangs poor old Trinity,” James learns to his “stupefaction” that “the very creators of the extinguisher are the churchwardens themselves.” Their conspiracy in thus consecrating the “inexorable law” that churches must grow invisible beneath the “monsters of the mere market,” is a case for him of “pitiless ferocity.” Especially since, at that moment, the skyscraper took on a certain physical appeal: “just then . . . the vast money-making structure quite horribly, quite romantically justified itself, looming through the weather with an insolent cliff-like sublimity.” This was “confusion carried to chaos for any intelligence, any perception; a welter of objects and sounds in which relief, detachment, dignity, meaning, perished utterly and lost all rights.”

I realize that this entire scene might seem precious and falsely ingenuous about the plain facts of industrial capitalism. Certainly James’ shock, which continues in the very next episode in a visit to Ellis Island, reveals a set of snobbish biases. We admire his honesty in admitting being shaken “to the depths” by the “inconceivable alien” begging to “share the sanctity of his American consciousness, the intimacy of his American patriotism,” but the fact of his response remains, and we may recall with a shudder his martial spirit against the barbaric German hordes in World War One. Moreover he writes as if he had never heard, and probably he never did hear, of Theodore Dreiser. But the point I want to stress once more is that the form James gives his experiences, not his particular

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ideas, is the chief value of this book to the student of American urbanism—not *what* he thinks but *how*. The value lies in the emotions aroused and contained by the act of mind playing over them. And the dominant emotion is of loss—loss of place, of relation, of detachment of mind. Many dozens of passages through the book can be cited, such as the jolt he feels when he approaches the site of his birthplace in Washington Square, to find the building “vanished from the earth.” In its place was “a high, square, impersonal structure.” The effect was “of having been amputated of half my history.” Casting himself as a Rip Van Winkle, James is vulnerable to jolts like this, but the lost and baffled Rip has a major place in our culture. In another episode James helps explain why: a house on Ashburton Place in Boston, where he lived during the Civil War, held memories of his earliest literary ambitions; he sought the place once more, found it, and recovered his echoes. A month later he returned for “another whiff of the fragrance,” and found “a gaping void, the brutal effacement of every related object, of the whole precious past. . . . It was as if the bottom had fallen out of one’s own biography, and one plunged backward into space without meeting anything.” Without a single technological image, James stirs up the feelings of loss and betrayal and fear which accompany the machine and change almost everywhere in American literature. What is threatened is not merely this or that memory or monument, but the integrity of time and the wholeness of self.

The American Scene can be read as an act of resistance to these sinking emotions. Rather than wander baffled like Rip, James resorts to that “inexhaustible sensibility” which supported him in his darkest days. To ask what it all means, and why he feels as he does, is the form resistance takes. And in this form it reveals in the conditions of urbanized America a crisis of mind, of the ability of mind to find meaning in its experience. Whitman was able to say, at the end of “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry”: “Appearances, now or henceforth, indicate what you are, / You necessary film, continue to envelop the soul.” For James the case had changed. “He doesn’t *know*,”

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he writes, "he can't *say*, before the facts . . . the facts themselves loom, before the understanding, in too large a mass for a mere mouthful: it is as if the syllable were too numerous to make a legible word." The legible word, of course, is the cognitive word which names the "mystic meaning"—what Hart Crane called the "imaged Word," by which America might appear to the spirit as a "mystical synthesis"; without it, the poet felt, the city was a tunnel of horrors. In one of his shrewdest comments James continues to say that by default, "the *illegible* word, accordingly, the great inscrutable answer to questions, hangs in the vast American sky . . . as something fantastic and *abracadabrant*, belonging to no known language."

For anyone familiar with the efforts of Americans in the late 19th century to make sense of their civilization, the word "inscrutable" has the ring of authenticity. That century was responsible for effacing happy beginnings of urbanism in earlier years, in community forms developed in New England and in a few centers like Philadelphia and Charleston. America now finds itself in the ambiguous position of being the most urbanized society on earth, without a tradition of self-conscious city life and a body of effective urban ideals. "America, my country," wrote Ezra Pound in 1913, "is almost a continent and hardly yet a nation, for no nation can be considered historically as such until it has achieved within itself a city to which all roads lead, and from which there goes out an authority." Yet *Life* magazine trumpeted recently: "The city is a mirror of Americans pursuing happiness." A strange way to put it, but strangely true. The city is probably the most expressive emblem of how we live and have lived. Nothing is more important than learning to "read" this emblem—than discovering its legibility. The presentational forms through which our writers have projected the city's disordered mind are thus of incalculable value as history and as art.