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UGO RUBEO

Taking the "Organic" View: The Vertical/Horizontal Crux in Henry James's *The American Scene*

The critical rediscovery of Henry James's *The American Scene* over the past twenty years or so has greatly helped to unveil the intrinsic modernity of a book which keeps offering a rich, still partially untapped wealth of material for cultural analysis. One of the first tasks scholars and readers are confronted with, as Ross Posnock suggested, is making that reservoir of information "visible by contextualizing its elusive references, suggestions, and innuendoes" (251) — so intersected are the paths James follows in his tight travelogue, so abrupt the shifts in subject, the meandering digressions, the unexpected turns and occasional resumptions of his speculations throughout the entire book. As is clear right from his prefatory remarks, the writing of the Master does not allow for easy reading, for the entire construction of *Scene* is founded on the shifting base of his "impressions" — "I would in fact go to the stake for them" (xxv) is the author's initial admonition — a choice that heavily affects his style, expanding the role of visual perception and allowing his imagination freely to prevaricate upon referentiality. The elusiveness of the literary play James builds up throughout the book appears particularly intense and effective in the four successive chapters which he devotes to his controversial encounter with New York City, his native town, that in the twenty-one years of his absence has radically changed its look and nature and repeatedly baffles recognition. It is in those pages — roughly one third of the volume— that the language of the alienated and continuously shifting observer[1] registers his anxiety in a cluster of striking images and metaphors that are eventually organized into a paradigm based on the opposition between vertical and horizontal lines. Far from being sporadic or accidental, this contrastive pattern dramatizes the intense, relentless clash between two

articulated semantic fields that ultimately represent two opposite philosophies — an aggressive but intimately frail self-assertion linked to modernity, vis-a-vis the ongoing retreat of a rapidly vanishing past with its historically doomed sense of measure and proportion. While deeply bewildered by New York's drastic urban renewal, the literary dramatization of the contrast between the vertical and the horizontal expansion of the cityscape which James proposes in the book unveils the artist's concern for an "organic" development of the urban context, centered around a deeply-ingrained, though largely non-systematic consciousness of the social function that modern architecture and urban planning seem to have lost. If somehow politically inconsequential, the strongly ethical nature of his comments allows him to prefigure, in evocative and often abstract prose, some important developments of the cultural and scientific debate about the subject that will ensue in later years.

The dramatically uneven profile of New York City's skyline, dotted with the tops of the new "tall buildings," is the aspect that first strikes the restless analyst's perception, as he glides southwards along the waterfront of Manhattan on a barge on the Hudson River. In the white, beaming light of the morning, everything in the Bay speaks of vitality, movement, and relentless energy, giving a sense of vigorous, clamoring harmony to the entire picture — a scene that projects "the individual character of the place" at its best. It is in this setting, on the background of the stage provided by the "huge watery floor" of the Bay, that the skyscrapers make their first, menacing appearance — that of naïve usurpers of the city's glory, whose countless windows and fake marble facades catch and reflect the daylight, as if they were to artificially illuminate some popular "celebration." The impact that the view produces on the observer is rendered by James through a concentrated series of suggestive images that, from the opening pages of the second section of the book, concur to establish that particular sense of estrangement that will preside over his entire experience in New York. From the water, the buildings appear "like extravagant pins in a cushion already overplanted, and stuck in as

in the dark, anywhere and anyhow" (76), a simile that emphasizes the notion of a sudden, unruly development thriving on chaos, while at the same time obliquely hinting at the claustrophobic effect of the skyscrapers' concentration in space. Adding to the contrast with the gigantic proportions of the picture it describes, the diminutive size of a domestic object like the pin-cushion introduces an element of desecration and displacement, as it exorcises the disturbing presence of the intruder through comparison with such a familiar and insignificant item.[2] But perhaps what is even more disturbing in that image is an underlying association between the unruly development of the new buildings and the apparent lack of an orderly plan or logical design to accommodate them — an implicit anticipation of that state of ethical anarchy and general chaos which James repeatedly projects in vivid visual terms evoking the "bristling" effect that many an American city proudly exhibits to the observer's eyes.

From the very beginning, for the restless analyst in New York, the towering image of the skyscraper becomes an icon of that moral instability of the country he reads in the cult of visibility and endless renovation that is ravishing its major cities. Realizing that the new architectural exploits are not made to last in time, but are rather conceived simply as temporary agents of economic accumulation, to be promptly replaced once their profitability starts declining, he treats them as the main actors in a tragedy whose meaning they do not seem entirely able to grasp. While their vertical upthrust and massive exterior dimensions betray the somewhat brutal role they are called upon to play, those same features are seen by James as parts of a mere facade artfully designed by their creators to conceal what he repeatedly perceives as their inner "fragility." To be sure, that shortcoming has nothing to do with possible structural flaws in their design or construction — an aspect to which the author is entirely oblivious — but rather it is a predictable, though highly paradoxical consequence of the commercial success they enjoyed in recent years. As pure products of the market, the skyscrapers are thus represented by

James as *naturally* doomed to impermanence, their existence being entirely submitted to the unwritten, and often apparently illogical rules dictated by profit. Consequently, it is only fitting that the powerful metaphor he uses to convey the precariousness of their condition should be entirely constructed on natural images:

> You see the pin-cushion in profile, so to speak, on passing between Jersey City and Twenty-third Street, but you get it broadside on, this loose nosegay of architectural flowers, if you skirt the Battery, well out, and embrace the whole plantation. Then the "American beauty," the rose of interminable stem, becomes the token of the cluster at large — to that degree that, positively, this is all that is wanted for emphasis of your final impression. Such growths, you feel, have confessedly arisen but to be "picked," in time, with a shears; nipped short off, by waiting fate, as soon as "science," applied to gain, has put upon the table, from far up its sleeve, some more winning card. (76-77)

James's grasp of the cluster formed by anonymous economic interests, new technologies and political administrators that is responsible for the city's hectic renewal works wonders for his imagination — sharp and unsettling, both the "shears" of a determined gardener, and the "winning card" hidden up the sleeve of a consummate gambler are images directly alluding to the roughness of the game being played by that powerful and invisible trust. One way or the other, the survival of the indigenous "beauty," the poor long-stemmed rose, does not seem to stand a chance in a context dominated by the intricacies of the bureaucratic apparatus that guarantees the perfect functioning of the "laissez-faire" policy in the Progressive Era. In the semiotic system based on the opposition between vertical and horizontal expansion that James builds up in *The American Scene,* the height of the "tall-buildings" takes on a deeply ambiguous aspect — while their towering profiles vividly signal their current commercial triumph, that same feature obliquely prefigures the "germ" of their metaphorical ruin: that is the lethal predicament inscribed in their very nature of "triumphant payers of dividends" (76) whose fate is entirely

dependent on remunerative economic revenues. If the total devotion of the new constructions to the laws of the market grants them the unconditional favor of real-estate developers, on the basis of their capacity to multiply living spaces in crowded urban areas, that same condition calls for a constant renewal that drastically shortens the expected life span of commodities, turning newness into obsolescence in a relatively short time, as new and more profitable forms of investment supplant previous schemes. In short, though James's perception of the indigenous economic dynamics may seem in some way Europeanized — partial and removed as it sometimes appears — he proves quick and cynical enough in grasping the fact that the fundamental paradox of the skyscrapers' limited life expectancy is no less intrinsically linked to the efficiency of the economic cycle than is their construction.

On the other hand, his text constantly shows an intensely emotional participation in what he perceives as the systematic destruction of his native town's memory. Perhaps the most disturbing sign of that unscrupulous policy of radical renovation of the cityscape is the unrelenting demolition of old public landmarks and private shrines, which gradually annihilates the sense of the past, altogether depriving the "shuddering pilgrim" of the comfort of personal recollections. And as the shock of non-recognition reaches its peak in Washington Place, where a "high, square, impersonal structure" has replaced his birth-house leaving him "amputated of half [his] history" (91), James seems to find the ultimate sense of that "fifty-floor conspiracy against the very idea of ancient graces" (96) in what he judges is the characteristic tendency of contemporary New York to pursue exclusively its own economic interests. The vertical upthrust of the city, and the enormous waste of resources both moral and material that is involved with it, appears to James as the expression of an immature, unstable culture that deliberately forfeits its past in favour of a blind rush towards a future whose only distinguishable features seem to be uncertainty and impermanence. Repeatedly, in the four chapters under scrutiny, the shifting personae adopted by the

increasingly bewildered narrator reinforce this basic idea through a tight compound of reflections, comments and images that often take a surreal turn. Whenever the contact with the referential provokes a strong emotional reaction — and there is no doubt that skyscrapers do upset the Master — his language tends to abandon its usual realistic register in favor of a more abstract mode of expression, condensing, in a highly graphic image, the essence of the object observed. Thus James's imagination proceeds to depict the sky-piercing height of the new buildings as the acutest notes impressed on a musical score — those that with their long, thin neck actually pierce its upper line and that, once performed, produce the sharpest sounds to human hearing. The gradual expansion of the semantic area of verticality here follows an interesting course, since its original meaning spills over to include adjacent fields like that of sharpness, thinness and ultimately that of fragility and impermanence, or, to use the author's term, "provisionality," Circularly, the chain-like expansive process ends by restating its initial note. No matter how imposing the skyscrapers may appear, their life is actually doomed to be a short affair because they are essentially but the ephemeral product of a mercantile fiction:

> One story is good only till another is told, and sky-scrapers are the last word of economic ingenuity only till another word be written. This shall be possibly a word of still uglier meaning, but the vocabulary of thrift at any price shows boundless resources, and the consciousness of that truth, the consciousness of the finite, the menaced, the essentially *invented* state, twinkles ever, to my perception, in the thousand glassy eyes of these giants of the mere market. (77)

Being a "menaced" giant, however, does not necessarily imply that its sheer presence might not be in itself menacing to others - on the contrary, one's impending fate may often turn the prospective victim into a factual, if unconscious aggressor. By peculiarly treating objects and details of a given picture as if they were the actors of a drama;[3] James does not miss the opportunity to assign the skyscraper the role of the villain,

while he entrusts less imposing constructions - among them the old churches of the city - with that of the helpless victims. Nowhere is this pattern more clearly dramatized than in the "episode" centered on Trinity Church, an ancient landmark of downtown Manhattan consecrated in 1846, whose "soaring Neo-Gothic spire, surmounted by a gilded cross, dominated the skyline of lower Manhattan ... a welcoming beacon for ships sailing into New York Harbor."[4] Perhaps because of the realistic comparison James is about to propose, this time the monster "that overhangs poor Trinity to the north" is at least given the dignity of a stately natural object — namely, that of an Alpine mountain — albeit only to suggest the possible, catastrophic fall of an avalanche, like those that drop "from time to time, upon the village, and the village spire, at its foot" (83). Once again, the reader is confronted with an image that, by stressing the emotional and the poetic functions of language, establishes a direct connection between the vertical line and the idea of destruction. The rest of the passage, however, drastically modifies that judgement, since Trinity's prospected drama ends up in a bitterly ironic farce that displaces the logic of the deadly confrontation, as well as the roles of the two actors, so carefully built up in the earlier part of the episode. As it turns out, the case, "magnificent for pitiless ferocity," calls for at least a partial acquittal of the aggressor — "the extinguisher," as it is connoted this time — for, as one learns, its "very creators ... are the churchwardens themselves, or at least the trustees of the church property" (83), who sold the land to the realtors in the first place. James's tirade on the increasing invisibility of the churches in New York and their virtual effacement from the cityscape turns into a bleak parable of contemporary moral debasement, properly set at the corner between Broadway and Wall Street, where the church rises. The author, to be sure, does not draw any further conclusion on this apparent coincidence, though the astonishing candour with which, a hundred years later, Trinity's current churchwardens publicly describe their place seems to entirely justify the disillusion implicit in his comments.[5]

While not exactly a horror tale of urban cannibalism and greed, the New York sections of *Scene* nevertheless repeatedly dramatize, in semi-fictional terms, the battle that Old New York is hopelessly losing against the onslaught of "progress" — a battle in which what is at stake is not merely the effacement of the past brought about by urban renewal, but also the gradual loss of the city's old ethical standards that seems to be its natural consequence. The destructive potential James attributes to verticality — as the Trinity episode makes clear — is not strictly confined to the physical domain, since, quite obviously, its implications and repercussions have a negative effect upon the attitudes and customs of the entire population. A vivid example of this impending danger can be found in the amusing sketch James devotes to the "great religion of the Elevator," in "New York, Social Notes" — a telling episode, since the target of his attack is not so much the machinery itself, "fearfully and wonderfully working," but rather the psychological side-effects that the escalating mechanism seems to provoke on his fellow citizens. The observer appears objective enough to realize that if not a downright blessing, an elevator, inside a skyscraper, may come in handy; what, however, he cannot fully accept is the fact that the vertical development of the new buildings has already modified people's habits, such as having turned them into an apparently serene herd, passively waiting in front of a gate to be unnaturally suspended in mid air. What is ultimately at stake here is the limitation of personal freedom which James perceives as the unavoidable by-product of renewal and which, in this case, is exemplified by the general state of gregariousness that these new constructions force upon their visitors:

> To wait, perpetually, in a human bunch, in order to be hustled, under military drill, the imperative order to "step lively," into some tight mechanical receptacle ... is conceivable, no doubt, as a sad liability of our nature, but represents surely, when cherished and sacrificed to, a strange perversion of sympathies and ideals. (187)

Perversion is, of course, a strong word, implying full consciousness of the moral deviation in the misdoing one is about to commit, though considering the tone of genuine indignation that makes for much of the irony of the passage, it is doubtful that James would have looked for a milder expression. If the perverting agent is the "packed and hoisted basket," its victims, in their apparent stupor, seem to be perfectly at ease in being corrupted. What James seems to imply here, as in a number of similar examples interspersed throughout the text, is that the more the city keeps developing vertically, the more the social relations among its population will grow *unauthentic.* Though much of the same thing could naturally be said of other aspects of progress, from the congested streets to the packed streetcars, to the general compulsion and the lack of "quiet interspaces" he notices all around him, it is hard to dispute that he starts identifying modern architecture as the major cause for that particular form of estrangement, consisting in the repression of individuality and the imposition of standardized models. This concept, however, is hardly given consistent development. Wilfully ignoring what Marx had had to say a few decades earlier on alienation and the destructive effects of capitalist competition on the integrity of urbanized individuals[6] — James shows no real interest in the opportunity to give a "scientific" critique of the social and psychological impact of that phenomenon on the city's population, eventually turning his lucid analysis of an exquisitely social question into an academic defense of aesthetic principles and, finally, into a matter of personal taste:

> The whole thing (the ugliness of the new developments) is the vividest of lectures on the subject of individualism, and on the strange truth, no doubt, that this principle may in the field of art — at least if the art be architecture — often conjure away just that mystery of distinction which it sometimes so markedly promotes in the field of life.... And yet why *should* the charm ever fall out of the "personal," which is so often the very condition of the exquisite? Why should conformity and subordination, that acceptance of control and

> assent to collectivism in the name of which our age has seen such dreary things done, become on a given occasion the one *not* vulgar way of meeting a problem? (141-42)

James's predictable refusal to accept fully the political implications of his criticism, however, does not prevent him from producing some perceptive insights on the "normalization" of American society that modern architecture, with its strictly rational organization, is contributing to bring about. One of these is particularly cogent: his argument on the passive proclivity of large strata of the population to follow new habits and attitudes that are invariably grounded in conformism and that, to the critical eye of the "reinstated absentee," appear to be directly related to new, pre-packaged forms of socialization, made possible by the "marriage of convenience" between the innovative managerial strategies of economic enterprise and the rigidly planned exploitation of space of the new constructions. Far from being a mere insult to the artist's aesthetic sensibility, the skyscrapers' glittering surfaces as well as their heavily ornamented, highly organized interiors are perceived by the author as powerful conditioning agents that, both offending the taste and debasing the citizen's ethos, make it imperative to distance oneself from the rest of the sentient crowd. The explosive pages dedicated to his visit to the Waldorf-Astoria, as well as those on the "Amazing Hotel-World"[7] in the final chapter on Florida, are in this respect exemplary both of the detachment James manages to achieve as an external observer of that gilded "caravanserary," and of the genuine astonishment, occasionally verging on disgust, he feels in being surrounded by that "promiscuous" herd of half-stupefied, enthusiastic "boarders." The hotel-spirit, a pure product of the national aspiration to comfort and luxury, is abstractly personified and represented as an "omniscient genius" which perversely extends its power upon his guests well beyond the limits of gracious hospitality. While it adds to their "all-gregarious and generalized life," so that the "whole housed

populace move as in mild and consenting suspicion of its captured and governed state" (441), it is also seen as directly responsible for a bourgeois standardization of types and manners, for a "neutrality of respectability" that the Master translates into "a great grey wash of some charged moist brush" (455). A "tall building" in its own right, the modern hotel — "proclaiming itself of course, with all the eloquence of an interminable towered and pinnacled and gabled and bannered sky-line, the biggest thing of its sort in the world" (443) — finds in the exasperated rationalism of modern architecture its best ally to reduce everybody and everything to "an average of decent suitability." A thing that, if perfectly functional to successful business, appears to the author as an unmistakable sign of moral passivity.

Most of the time, strolling along the streets of New York proves a dramatic experience of loss and disillusion for James, since the material destruction upon which the city keeps on renewing its look makes it impossible for him to recognize the familiar aspects of the old town, and prevents even the possibility of a backward glance through memory. However, while the blank facades of the new buildings, so entirely void of history as to block the retrospective view forever, make "the very idea of the ancient graces" (92) rapidly fade away before his eyes, the estranged observer is at times comforted by the view of a spot that, "as the old ivory of an overscored tablet" (88), dissolves his alienation turning him back into a participating and sensitive onlooker. The inordinate appreciation James shows for the refreshing quality of any particular urban background that has been able to preserve its "tone" is mainly based on the perception of the sense of proportions, utterly ignored by the new developments of the city, that those aspects have managed to keep. While apparently dictated by the aesthetic inclination of the urban archaeologist, whose role James at times likes to assume, such a notion, on the contrary, seems to directly derive from the acknowledgment of the social function that some specific sites — whether street corners, single buildings, or general perspectives — still perform within the community. In

this sense, the particular view James develops may be said to be grounded on an "organic" basis, inasmuch as his interest is repeatedly captured by the functional relationship that a limited number of urban areas and specific features can still offer to city dwellers. Both balanced and dynamic, that relationship is the result of a reciprocal interaction between people and their living space — a notion that, rhapsodic and non-systematic as it remains throughout *Scene*, nevertheless foreshadows the conceptual core of the theory on the organic development of urban centers that Lewis Mumford was to propose in years to come.[8] The following examples, whose common denominator is the explicit denial of the "great religion of the Elevator," should serve to illustrate how James's argument against modern urban planning stems from his conviction that the disruption of the relationship between man and space it has brought about is highly symbolic of the unnatural course into which the hegemony of economic interests has precipitated American social relationships.

It is while walking in the "space between Fourteenth Street and Washington Square" (88) — the "quiet precinct" in which, years earlier, Catherine Sloper's dwelling "had begun . . . to be called an 'old' house" *(Washington Square* 165) — that the restless analyst finds, quite unexpectedly, a blessed island of serenity and recognition, strongly reminiscent of the peaceful, secluded atmosphere that the place had enjoyed in his early novel. Properly emphasized, this congenial impression is celebrated with a metaphor in which the generous, lively amplitude of the downtown surroundings is played against the smothering tangle of the more modern northern boroughs:

> . . . when the upper avenues had become as so many congested bottle-necks, through which the wine of life simply refused to be decanted, getting back to these latitudes resembled really a return from the North Pole to the Temperate Zone: it was as if the wine of life had been poured for you, in advance, into some pleasant old punch-bowl that would support you through the temporary stress. (88)

Based, once again, on the initial opposition between vertical and horizontal images, the complex compound of associations evolves by following a distinctly organic logic that, hinged on the traditional use of wine as a symbol for blood, is extended through a parallel between the clogged arteries of the upper part of town — where the flow of life is considerably slowed down — and the analogous physical phenomenon of vessel constriction. Equating the regenerating effect of his experience in that mild corner of downtown New York to the new, free flowing of the wine/blood once it finally expands freely inside the large, capacious bowl, James makes more explicit the analogy between the city and a living organism whose general welfare is provided by the interdependent functioning of its various parts. As the vitality of the city seems to be fully, if only temporarily, recovered once the "shrinkage of life so marked in the higher latitude" (89) is replaced by the peaceful, harmonic clearance of the familiar streets that lead South to the Village, so is that of its occupants, once the possibility of mutual interaction with their living space is finally recuperated.

The feeling of a wholesome reconciliation with a city that has not entirely lost the ability to express a socially meaningful relationship with its inhabitants is further reinforced by James's encounter with the "divine little City Hall," an old landmark that has miraculously managed to preserve the uncompromised state of its origins, and the moral authority that, in spite of the misdoings of local administrators, remains attached to it. The "hovering kindly critic" — the persona which the author chooses to identify with in this case — repeatedly emphasizes the connection between the aesthetic value of the old building, largely due to its reduced scale and to the general harmony of its "just proportions," and its "conscious" ability to interpret a vital role in the social context, as a great testimony of "all the Style the community is likely to get" (97). Organicism, once more, works as the inspiring philosophy of James's analysis in this crucial passage — City Hall becomes a precious illuminating presence, a rich reservoir of experience harmoniously situated in a recognizable space

and engaged in an intense, non-verbal dialogue with the observer. Anticipating, in its essence, the technique of Joycean "epiphany," the event relies entirely on the singular synthesis of time and space that the building produces and physically represents — an experience that, by illuminating the consciousness of the author of *Scene* with a sudden glimpse of revelation, is strongly reminiscent of the analogous effect that Salem's Custom House provokes on the narrator of the "Introduction" to *The Scarlet Letter*.[9] An exemplary illustration of the Master's increasingly abstract use of realistic techniques which he freely exhibits in his American memoirs, the episode stands as a revealing instance of that magic quality — "style" — he attributes to the old City Hall. Used as a synonym for the character the building has been able to accumulate through time behind its cozy façade, style is indeed the essential feature of a spot that not only has a story to tell, but that has also maintained the essential resources to do it. Though "alone and unprotected," faced with the siege that modern interests have insistently staged, City Hall appears to James as having substantially preserved the "harmony of parts" of its original design, while at the same time maintaining "the living look" that testifies to its connection with the present. As a distinctive feature of the ancient town that has had time enough to accumulate history and to become "old," that unique site is endowed with precisely all those qualities that the new anonymous constructions — the mark of impermanence stamped on their blank faces — will never manage to attain.

The strategic relevance of the City Hall case within the general economy of *The American Scene* appears even more conspicuous if read in the light of Michail Bachtin's theory of literary "chronotopes,"[10] a viable interpretive scheme to verify both the essentially dialogical patterns operating within James's macrotext, and his effective use of the interaction between spacial and time structures. Regarding the last point in particular, the case of the ancient building, whose inner spaces disclose to the "further and further unchallenged penetration" (98) of the visitor a crucial revelation of its kept "mysteries," proves a paradigmatic illustration

of how the mutual convergence of a fraction of time in a given space can turn for the subject into a cognitive experience of inestimable value. As, following the horizontal lay-out of the house, he gradually advances within those premises, that space affords him an "unexpected view into the old official ... municipal world" (98) that amounts to a veritable backward voyage through time.[11] Not only do those stately chambers allow for an encounter with the "florid ghosts" — "looking so unsophisticated now" — of all of the city's past administrators and worthies that have shaped its destiny, but, what is more important to the critic's inquisitive nature, that precious look into the recesses of the collective memory will ultimately prove "an unsurpassed demonstration of the real reasons of things" (99). Establishing a crystal-clear connection between remote causes and present effects — one of the strategic aims of the chronotopes' structure — this happy incident suddenly enables James to grasp the truth concerning the mysteries of New York, once the "exceedingly gilded frames" out of which the ghostly portraits project their stares provide him with a final symbolic clue "to understand ... why nothing could have been otherwise" (99). The testimony of the local forefathers, whose "quite touching" provincialism would seem to testify to an amiable aspect of the town's character, now forever lost, actually becomes a "copious tell-tale document" that, by shedding light on the true nature of their original sin, allows the inquisitive observer to grasp the remote causes of the city's current predicament.

If the revelation obtained at the ancient shrine of New York's municipality gives James the confidence to keep loitering — an individual reaction to the rhythm of the "mighty clock, the clock that never, never stops" (85) — while cultivating his cherished impressions under the benign influence of spring,[12] it is while walking along the streets of midtown that his passion for the comforting presence of low-rise, horizontal constructions and spaces is suddenly rekindled. On the corner between Fifth Avenue and 42nd Street, the Public Library, though still in its unfinished state, appears to him as lifting "from the heart the weight of

the 'tall' building it apparently doesn't propose to become" (186), while engaged in pursuing its noble mission of unifying in a centralized system the enormous resources still scattered around town. Probably more than any other trait, James's wholehearted admiration for public and university libraries — a note that he repeatedly strikes throughout his American journey— discloses his latent wish for an ideal community that can naturally provide the "strained pilgrim" with a "blessedly restful perch" — a temporary haven that, much like "the mast-heads on which spent birds sometimes alight in the expanses of ocean" (389), offers at all times free protection to the stray. Though intensely romantic, the view initially evoked by the "student of manners" while trying to reconcile himself with the cultural desolation of Richmond, Virginia,[13] soon turns into a detailed appraisal of the libraries' totally disinterested commitment to social life, a strong realistic defense of their mission, disarmingly antithetical to the logic of widespread commercialism:

> It is to the inordinate value, in the picture, of the non-commercial, non-industrial, non-financial note that they owe their rich relief; being, with the Universities, as one never wearied of noting, charged with the *whole* expression of that part of the national energy that is not calculable in terms of mere arithmetic. (389)

As the epitome of non-commercial enterprises, the grandiose low-rise frame of the New York Public Library is therefore used by James as a symbolic synthesis of his critical discourse on modern architecture's subservience to the hegemony of economic interest, whose most eloquent sign is precisely represented by its unnatural emphasis on vertical expansion. A perfect example of socially-oriented, horizontal growth, the library structure, on the contrary, performs a soothing function both for the spirit and for the imagination, since when a building "presents itself as seated rather than as standing ... you ask it no question, you give it a free field, content only if it will sit and sit and sit" (186). Thus, delighted at the mere perspective that the conditions of that "inestimable struc-

ture ... engage for a covering of the earth rather than an invasion of the air" (186), the Master goes so far as to foresee the "splendid ease" its future visitors will be able to enjoy as soon as the construction works of the building, already offering to his view the gentle embrace of its wide, generous proportions, will be completed.

In a similar manner, James's appreciation of the old Tiffany building, just erected by Stanford White at 37th St. and Fifth Ave., appears to be grounded on its uncommon capacity to impress at a first glance with an individual "style" — a blessed deviation "into the liberal and charming" — that allows for a sudden interruption of the anonymous note which dominates its surroundings. Once more, James's laudatory judgment, apparently based on strictly aesthetic grounds, turns out to be motivated by a broader set of considerations, as the strikingly refreshing effect of the construction's diminutive size upon the street viewer, heightened by the suggestive power of its classical Palladian façade, is the result of its intriguing connection both with the people and with the American space. Even though the building, "a great miscellaneous shop," is clearly a modern replica of the Venetian original — openly dubbed as "a more or less pious *pastiche* or reproduction" (185) — its "great nobleness of white marble," properly magnified by the natural glow of the city's "friendly sky," effectively disrupts the dullness of the neighborhood, suffusing it with an individual note of humanity and sociability immediately traceable in the limited proportions of its classical design:

> One is so thankful to it, I recognize, for not having twenty-five stories, which it might easily have had, I suppose, in the wantonness of wealth or of greed, that one gives it a double greeting, rejoicing to excess perhaps at its merely remaining, with the three fine arched and columned stages above its high basement, within the conditions of sociable symmetry. (185)

This is where James's "organic" view appears to be most original and effective, for the visual impact of the Tiffany building — whose strong individual character derives from the substantial coherence of its lines —

is seen as the crucial element to re-establish a significant form of interaction with the street, the site for social exchange. Introducing a decided note of aesthetic discontinuity with its immediate surroundings, such a surprising architectural element restores a relationship with the New Yorkers of the early 20th century that, as with the original model from which it is derived, is based on its heightened scenic magnetism. By attracting the attention of the observer with the unexpected brilliancy of its perfectly balanced design, the Venetian palace on Fifth Avenue provides him both with an accessible and genial focal point that projects to his eyes a friendly, mirror-like image of the perfectly symmetrical proportions of the human body. Based on an act of mutual recognition and the use of a common language, this dialogue allows for a temporary restoration of the original interdependency between man and space that the modern city has lost track of. The conclusion of the episode unveils yet another stage of James's organicism as, with a mildly paradoxical turn, he strikes the note of the indigenous idyll. Far from diminishing the visual impact of the building — and consequently the intensity of the relationship just described — its shrewd re-contextualization in what would seem a strange and inappropriate geography, *de facto* ends up by giving its statement an inimitable emphasis — a sharp, assertive accent that the unusually peremptory intimation of the author reproduces and amplifies:

> Look for interest where you may, cultivate a working felicity, press the spring hard, and you will see that, to whatever air-Palladian Piles may have been native, they can nowhere tell their cold calculated story, in measured chapter and verse, better than to the strong sea-light of New York. (186)

Finally, the gradual but steady rediscovery that specific spots of the city have managed to retain an empathic potential even in the midst of a context whose general expression "is the expression of violence" makes it fitting that one of James's last impressions in New York should be dedicated to the Presbyterian Hospital — an institution embodying in itself the notions of human piety and disinterested participation. The episode,

revealing a deeply-felt need for some kind of reconciliation with the "terrible" town, occupies a memorable passage of quasi-poetic prose suffused with a note of exquisite stillness that is hardly matched throughout the New York sections of *Scene.* The "homely kindness of diffused red brick" (188) that greets the analyst in the warm sunset, immediately dispelling his persistent restlessness, sets the tone for a decided resurgence of the idyllic motive, in which, not surprisingly, the influence of nature's organic harmony plays a major role. If the peculiar sea-light of the city had been praised earlier for giving an unparalleled relief to its worthy monuments, here it is "the image of some garden of the finest flowers" (188) which strikes the observer as emphasizing, beyond measure, the "spell" and "character" of that construction. Apart from exhibiting mere beauty, the hospital garden also takes on a kindly protective function, bounded as it is by "an enormous bristling hedge of defensive and aggressive vegetation" (188-89) that isolates and preserves those "halls of pain" from the assaulting roar of the adjacent streets. Not unlike the "beautiful but almost crushing mission" defined in a previous chapter as the "burden" of Central Park[14] — a duty it "consistently and bravely" performs to meet the various needs of the city dwellers — the garden complements the social mission of the Hospital on behalf of the common welfare with such a perfectly balanced sense of piety, determination and beauty as to become itself the pulsating center of the entire scene:

> My Presbyterian Hospital was somehow in the garden, just where the soil, the very human soil itself was richest, and ... it affected me, amid its summer airs and its boundless, soundless business, as surpassingly delicate. *There,* if nowhere else, was adjustment of tone; there was the note of mildness and the sense of manners ... (189)

Thus, though right in the middle of the most gentrified piece of land in America, the indigenous soil offers the pacified analyst yet a final chance for his capacity for wonder, presenting him with an image of unsophisticated, natural synthesis between tone and manners — the basic qualities of a sensible and essential testimony that, at least momentarily, effec-

tively dispels the intrusive clangor of that overcivilized borough.

As James's encounter with New York draws to an end, eventually sliding towards a peaceful, intense immersion into "The Sense of Newport,"[15] his preoccupation with the "waste of growth" — a recurring issue largely related to the city's chaotic expansion — gradually turns into a major discriminating principle to evaluate the ethical soundness of the contemporary American experience at large. It is not merely a matter of resources being carelessly dilapidated, but rather a question that ultimately involves the moral standards of the nation's decision-makers and of its easily corruptible ruling class — a substantial lack of the fundamentals of civic ethics that inevitably manifests itself in a public exhibition of arrogance, accompanied, as it were, by an utter absence of "tone" and "manners."[16] Often distressing, James's repeated confrontations with New York's cult for the gigantic or with disheartening shows such as the "Vanity Fair in full blast" of Florida's luxury hotels foreshadow the dominant pessimistic mood of the latter part of the book, notably that of the five concluding pages which — perhaps not accidentally — did not appear in the original American edition.[17] As the central clash between the increasing visibility of the modern forms of self-celebration and the vanishing spareness of genuine human attitudes proceeds towards its foregone solution, James repeatedly turns to an instinctive defense of the minor key, mourning over the loss of that "beautifully fine economy" of means that somehow betrays the strong roots of his Calvinist education. Though at times a seemingly naïve intellectual exercise, his plea for a sense of simplicity that American society seems to have lost is consistent with his idea of a progress in which social responsibility and moderation of appearances are like the two faces of a coin. For this reason, his criticism of the most prominent excesses of modernity, from the vertical onrush of New York's buildings, to the emerging forms of massification and de-individualization of its population, goes hand in hand with his unconditioned praise for the sense of measure of classical forms and the unaffectedness of individual

character. His cherished impressions of the American Scene, consequently, can hardly be interpreted as the result of an aristocratic, Europeanized perception, but rather as the product of a responsible effort by a repatriated American to verify the meaning of democratic citizenship. Significantly, the difficulties encountered by James in that process lead him back to the essentials — to an organic vision based on reciprocity and symmetry, adjustment of tone and natural spareness, in one word, to the rich, unsophisticated nature of the "very human soil."

NOTES

1. In his *Henry James and the Art of Nonfiction,* Tony Tanner maintains that the use of this device "is partly humorous (there is often more than a note of protective self-parody in his self-depictions); partly it is simply James the writer who loved plethora and proliferation. ... The other reason for this multiplicity of terms is not that James is a shape-shifter, an endlessly metamorphosing man of many risks; rather, it is that he wants to dissolve away any sense of a distinct, historically defined and culturally delimited individual ... and diffuse himself into an infinitely porous and suggestible, almost protoplasmic or even disembodied presence" (5-6).

2. Another telling example of this technique is the metaphor used to describe New York's skyline as a "colossal hair-comb turned upward and so deprived of half his teeth that the others, at their uneven intervals, count doubly as sharp spikes" (139-40).

3. In "'Oh, the *land's* all right!': Landscape in James's *American Scene",* Stove makes a similar point when speaking of James's tendency to treat the American land"...as an actor in the human drama" (49).

4. "The History of Trinity Church" (2005): www.trinitywallstreet.org

5. The description of the Church currently on line reads as follows: "Though skyscrapers have risen all around it, Trinity Church still stands as a significant

statement of spiritual values in the heart of Downtown Manhattan and serves as a center for contemplation, worship, and Christian community." The site also illustrates the current properties and activities of the Trinity Real-Eastate.

6. Karl Marx had first made this point as early as the mid-1840s in his *Parisian Economic and Political Papers of 1844.*

7. For a thorough discussion of this topic, see Posnock 250-84 and Agnew 67-100.

8. In his most influential book, *The City in History* (1961), Lewis Mumford criticizes the exasperated use of vertical developments as unnatural, while repeatedly advocating an organic relationship between people and urban space.

9. The analogy between James's City Hall and Hawthorne's Custom House lies in the similar function they serve in terms of literary "indicators" in which, according to M. Bakhtin, the fusion of time and space allows for a crucial cognitive experience.

10. For a definition of literary "chronotopes," see Bakhtin 84-254.

11. In the concluding passage of that same paragraph, James significantly alludes to "the thick stream of local history" which becomes "transparent" as he walks in front of the portraits collection inside City Hall.

12. The title of chapter 3 of the book reads "New York and the Hudson. Spring Impressions."

13. The previous and the following quotations are excerpted form a paragraph of Chapter 12 of *Scene,* "Richmond," subheaded "The Relief of the Libraries."

14. For a further discussion of James's treatment of Central Park *(Scene* 174-85), see Mamoli Zorzi 285-96.

15. This is the title of Chapter 6 of *Scene,* immediately following the four sections dedicated to New York City.

16. In an interview published in *Metropolis Magazine* (June 2001), Jane Jacobs, the author of *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961), describes her feelings about New York's urban planning in the 1950s in terms that are strikingly similar to those used by James fifty years earlier: "Well what was getting immediately under

my skin was this mad spree of deceptions and vandalism and waste that was called urban renewal."

17. The five final pages (Section VII of Chapter 14, "Florida") and the running heads on every other page were omitted in the American edition by Harper and Brothers (February 1907), while they appeared in the English edition by Chapman and Hall (January 1907). For further information, see Hewitt, and Leon Edel's "Introduction" to *The American Scene.*

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