

New York Vertical: Reflections on the Modern Skyline

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New York . . . is a city of geometric heights, a petrified desert of grids and lattices, an inferno of greenish abstraction under a flat sky, a real Metropolis from which man is absent by his very accumulation.

—Roland Barthes¹

And [New York] is the most beautiful city in the world? It is not far from it. No urban nights are like the nights there. I have looked down across the city from high windows. It is then that the great buildings lose reality and take on their magical powers. They are immaterial; that is to say one sees but the lighted windows. Squares after squares of flame, set and cut into the ether. Here is our poetry, for we have pulled down the stars to our will.

—Ezra Pound, *Patria Mia*²

I

This essay is about the modern skyline of New York. To bring the subject into focus, I would like to start by commenting briefly on Horst Hamann's recent

book of photography from which I have borrowed the title *New York Vertical*.³ Reminiscent in many ways of Berenice Abbot's urban photography of the 1930s—and in particular of her WPA project *Changing New York*⁴—Hamann's black and white city images stress not only the vertical components of New York's modern architecture, but also the interconnected geometry of those forms (Figure 1). The result is a collection of photographs that construct and define the city almost exclusively in terms of its verticality. Such a vision of New York is of course nothing new; and this is precisely what interests me about Hamann's photography. His work does more than reinforce a century-old image of New York as a city of extreme verticals. It also underlines in creative and often surprising ways the extent to which those verticals continue even today to dominate the cultural imagination of urban space. In this sense, Hamann's images highlight an important feature of the New York skyline. Its hypermediated silhouette contains what has become the most graphic and emblematic expression of the vertical city.

Pursuing this idea, I want to consider the ways in which the modern skyline has been represented and imagined at several key junctures in its vertical history. But first I should clarify that by “modern” here I specifically mean the skyline produced during the modernist moment in art and urbanism which so profoundly shaped aesthetic sensibilities from the late 1890s through the first few decades of the twentieth century. This, however, is not to disregard the much broader historical span, reaching back to the city's early-modern colonial roots as well as ahead towards its globalization, that can also be encompassed by the idea of a “modern” skyline. In fact, although the central focus of this essay is the historical period loosely corresponding to the relatively short-lived moment of modernism, my discussion also seeks to place the modern skyline in the broader context of New York's urban development from colonial settlement to contemporary global city. It is for this reason that my discussion goes on to comment not only on the World Trade Center and the post-9/11 landscape but also on the pre-history of the vertical city.

New York's cityscape has, of course, been the subject of a great deal of scholarly interest, particularly in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. For instance, in his recent study of New York metropolitanism, *The Unfinished City*, urban historian Thomas Bender devotes considerable attention to the symbiotic relationship between skyscraper and skyline, reasserting the long-standing argument that Manhattan's modern cityscape registers the near-total domination of the architecture of corporate capitalism over public space and culture.⁵ Similar scrutiny of the cityscape has also preoccupied a number of other, more mainstream studies of New York, including James Sander's lavishly illustrated *Celluloid Skyline: New York and the Movies* and Jan Seidler Ramirez's wide-ranging *Painting the Town: Cityscapes of New York*.⁶ Most recently, Douglas Tallack's far-reaching *New York Sights: Visualizing Old and New New York* shows the full extent to which visual culture—ranging from high art to ephemera—turned to the panoptic



Figure 1: Horst Hamann, 'Steel Triangle, Rockefeller Center', 1998. (Courtesy of Horst Hamann)

perspective of the cityscape view to register the seismic urban changes shaking Manhattan during the transitional years of the early 1900s.⁷ One feature shared by these books is an emphasis on the visual iconography of New York's modernity. Such an emphasis is arguably deserved, however, not least because of the continuing interpretive challenges posed by the modern city's visual heterogeneity.

While still engaging with issues of visuality, this essay broadens its scope beyond "the visual" to stress in addition the importance of "the textual" to the critique of cityscape. Specifically, my argument in this essay is that the modern skyline of New York figures across a full range of literary and cultural production as a highly unstable text to read and interpret, and that this site of instability and change is further distinguished by visions in which the city remains caught ambivalently between the sublime and the uncanny. To develop this line of thought, my discussion opens by revisiting a familiar view of the vertical city by Michel de Certeau in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, before considering a somewhat controversial commentary on the New York Skyline by Jean Baudrillard in his "Requiem for the Twin Towers." The related argument here is that, far from being unique to postmodernity, the contemporary city musings of Baudrillard and de Certeau belong to a long line of cultural critique extending back to the much earlier shoreline meditations of writers like Henry Adams, Abraham Cahan, Theodore Dreiser, Henry James, and James Weldon Johnson.

II

In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau begins his essay "Walking in the City" by reflecting on the experience of visiting the observation deck at the World Trade Center in the late 1970s. For de Certeau, the vertical journey to the top of a soaring skyscraper is one of liberation from the chaos and confinement of the city street:

To be lifted to the summit of the World Trade Center is to be lifted out of the city's grasp. One's body is no longer clasped by the streets that turn and return it according to an anonymous law; nor is it possessed . . . by the rumble of so many differences and by the nervousness of New York traffic. When one goes up there, he leaves behind the mass that carries off and mixes up in itself any identity of authors and spectators.⁸

Significantly, this euphoria of release from the city street is linked in de Certeau's thinking to the erotic pleasure of voyeurism—the pleasure, that is, of "seeing the whole."⁹ For what the observation deck provides through its sheer elevation is not only distance from the city but also a new visual perspective from which the urban expanse below appears as a whole, graspable image, a viewpoint impossible to achieve at the muddled and meandering level of the street.

Seen from above, the city is thus laid bare—revealed and exposed—to the prying curiosity of the urban gaze. The visitor is “transfigured into a voyeur.”¹⁰ And it is precisely in the guise of the voyeur that de Certeau, skimming and scanning the undulating surfaces of the city, describes his aerial view of Manhattan:

Seeing Manhattan from the 110th floor of the World Trade Center. Beneath the haze stirred up by the winds, the urban island, a sea in the middle of the sea, lifts up the skyscrapers over Wall Street, sinks down at Greenwich, then rises again to the crests of Midtown, quietly passing over Central Park and finally undulates off into the distance of Harlem. A wave of verticals. Its agitation is momentarily arrested by vision. The gigantic mass is immobilized before the eyes. It is transformed into a texturology in which extremes coincide—extremes of ambition and degradation, brutal oppositions of races and styles, contrasts between yesterday’s buildings, already transformed into trash cans, and today’s urban irruptions that block out its space. . . . A city composed of paroxysmal places in monumental reliefs. The spectator can read in it a universe that is constantly exploding. . . . On this stage of concrete, steel and glass, cut out between two oceans (the Atlantic and the American) by a frigid body of water, the tallest letters in the world compose a gigantic rhetoric of excess in both expenditure and production.¹¹

De Certeau’s urban panorama is marked by several distinctive features. Not least among these is the perception of the rigid geometry of New York’s highrise architecture in terms of motion and fluidity. Manhattan’s two principal clusters of skyscrapers—the vertical constellations of the downtown and midtown business districts—appear as “waves of verticals” surging up between the troughs of Greenwich Village, Central Park, and Harlem. Another distinctive feature of this aerial view is that the sense of motion is simultaneously countered by an effect of immobilization. New York’s “gigantic mass” is “momentarily arrested by vision,” stressing the city’s contrasts and extremes. Equally striking are the images of violent energy. Everywhere, the city is convulsed by spasms, agitations, paroxysms, eruptions, and explosions. But perhaps the most distinctive feature of de Certeau’s urban panorama is the transformation of the skyline into a text to be read. Most notably, the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center become “the tallest letters in the world,” spelling out a message of capitalist excess that is engraved throughout and across the skyline.

Today, it is no longer possible to see and experience New York from exactly the same perspective as Michel de Certeau in *The Practice of Everyday Life*. The terrorist attacks of September 11 that destroyed the Twin Towers of the

World Trade Center also destroyed this unique vantage point. And while the loss of this vantage point is meaningless when compared to the very real human tragedies of 9/11, it has nonetheless had a profound impact on the way people now look at and relate to the city.

One small example of this impact occurred in Brooklyn Heights just across the river from Manhattan. On the water-front promenade that faces out towards the prow of Lower Manhattan, local residents in the immediate wake of September 11 attached photographs of the skyline to the iron railing in an attempt to guide visitors in their observation of the city. The photographs all featured silhouettes of Manhattan that still included the distinctive profile of the Twin Towers, showing the location and appearance of the absent skyscrapers. The assumption—and indeed the reality—was that many visitors and residents came to the promenade precisely in order to see the alteration to the skyline. In a way, they came to experience an absence, to gaze upon an urban view that no longer existed. And in this abstract sense the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center have not entirely disappeared from the New York skyline. Rather, haunting the contemporary imagination, the two skyscrapers continue even now to exert a spectral presence over the city.

That people were drawn to vantage points in the wake of the terrorist attacks precisely because of what could no longer be seen in the urban panorama comments forcefully on the symbolic significance of both the Twin Towers themselves and the skyline to which they belonged. In his short contemplative essay, “Requiem for the Twin Towers,” Jean Baudrillard discusses exactly this subject while attempting to disentangle the Twin Towers in historical and architectural terms from the rest of New York’s skyscrapers. Despite making some outrageously vague statements and over-simplifying some highly complex issues, Baudrillard does offer some critical insight:

All Manhattan’s tall buildings had been content to confront each other in a competitive verticality, and the product of this was an architectural panorama reflecting the capitalist system itself—a pyramidal jungle, whose famous image stretched out before you as you arrived from the sea. That image changed after 1973, with the building of the World Trade Center. . . . Perfect parallelipeds, standing over 1,300 feet tall, on a square base. Perfectly balanced, blind communicating vessels. . . . The fact that there were two of them signifies the end of any original reference. If there had been only one, monopoly would not have been perfectly embodied. Only the doubling of the sign truly puts an end to what it designates. . . . However tall they may have been, the two towers signified, none the less, a halt to verticality. They were not the same breed as the other buildings. They culminated in the exact reflection of each other.¹²

Like de Certeau some twenty years before him, Baudrillard similarly sees the contours of New York's modern architecture in terms of energy and chaos. In addition, he also stresses the legibility of the city when seen from a distance, reading into its verticality an expression of the capitalist spirit of competition. The difference is that Baudrillard locates a schism in the skyline—one that de Certeau, standing on top of the source of that rupture, seems to overlook. Baudrillard's thinking is that, in architectural terms at least, the Twin Towers mark a departure from the city's "competitive verticality" precisely because of their structural solipsism. As perfect mirror images of each other, the two towers constitute their own self-referential system, no longer competing for height and visibility with the other buildings around them but instead endlessly reflecting their own identical images back at each other. De Certeau calls the Twin Towers "the tallest letters in the world" and Baudrillard, picking up on the same idea, refers to them as "signs." For Baudrillard, however, those signs designate a slightly different moment in the cultural history of capitalism than New York's other, older skyscrapers. In their semiotic and architectural "reduplication,"¹³ the Twin Towers represent powerful and highly visible symbols of the late-capitalist age of globalization. As Mark Wigley similarly suggests in *After the World Trade Center*, "the key symbolic role of the World Trade Center . . . was to represent the global marketplace. In a strange way, supersolid, supervisible, superlocated buildings stood as a figure for the dematerialized, invisible, placeless market."¹⁴ Baudrillard concludes that this symbolism is the reason the Twin Towers were destroyed: "the violence of globalization also involves architecture, and hence the violent protest against it also involves the destruction of that architecture."¹⁵

In the case of the World Trade Center, however, the link between architecture and violence is far more complicated than Baudrillard's comments would suggest. Given the global impact of the events of September 11, it is important to remember and acknowledge that the attacks on the Twin Towers were brought about by a highly complex set of political, historical, and cultural factors—factors that included but also exceeded the symbolic dimensions of the Twin Towers. But whether or not we agree with Baudrillard's reading of the Twin Towers, and in particular with his idea that the skyscrapers were somehow separate and distinct from all others in New York, his reflections touch on one of the city's most striking and enduring features. Manhattan has one of the most visually compelling and symbolically charged skylines in the world today.

In their philosophical musings on Manhattan, Jean Baudrillard and Michel de Certeau respond in broadly similar ways to the sprawl and spectacle of the urban panorama by presenting the skyline as a text to be read. In the process, I would argue, they both see the skyline as sublime—in the Burkean sense of an aesthetic marvel that awes and overwhelms. I would also argue that they both depict the skyline as uncanny—in the Freudian sense of an unnerving encounter with the familiar rendered strange and alien. And finally, I would suggest that,

through various metaphors of motion, they both identify the skyline as a site of instability and change that invites yet resists interpretation.

Far from being exclusive to our present global metropolitan age, however, such perspectives on New York have in fact dominated the cultural representation of the city's skyline from its first great moment of verticality onwards. Specifically, as I discuss next, the cultural history of the skyline in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is similarly marked not only by expressions of ambivalence but also by an emerging consciousness of the discursive dimensions of urban space. The result is graphic and enduring visions of the city as a sprawling urban text that mesmerizes and inspires yet also agitates and disturbs. In short, my argument is that, since the rise of the modern skyscraper, Manhattan has always been caught somewhere between the sublime and the uncanny.

III

The ever-changing skyline of New York has preoccupied writers ever since the city's low-rise beginnings as a Dutch trading post in the early seventeenth century. Even before that, the first European explorer to venture into New York Bay was moved to describe the scene in writing. In 1524 the Florentine navigator Giovanni da Verrazano chanced upon a "beautiful harbour" containing an "island of triangular form" during an expedition along the North American coast.¹⁶ His account of the voyage in a letter to the King of France contains the earliest recorded description in Western culture of the geographic location that eventually becomes home to the five-borough sprawl of New York City:

After proceeding one hundred leagues, we found a very pleasant situation among some steep hills, through which a very large river, deep at its mouth, forced its way to the sea. . . . But as we were riding at anchor in a good berth, we would not venture up in our vessel, without a knowledge of the mouth; therefore we took the boat, and entering the river, we found the country on its banks well peopled, the inhabitants not differing much from the others, being dressed out with the feathers of birds of various colours. . . . All of a sudden, as is wont to happen to navigators, a violent contrary wind blew in from the sea, and forced us to return to our ship, greatly regretting to leave this region which seemed so commodious and delightful, and which we supposed must also contain great riches.¹⁷

Despite the conspicuous absence of the city, this early skyline still has a powerful effect on the imagination of the observer. In this respect Verrazano's account shows how the draw of the New York skyline not only predates the city itself,

but also grows out of a much earlier encounter with the natural landscape. Indeed, it is this landscape—and in particular the unusual topography and wealth of natural resources noted by Verrazano—that underlies and enables the European colonization of the region and, through this process, the eventual growth of the city. It is also interesting to note that, in this first ever written description of New York Bay, Verrazano observes the land from the exact perspective that comes to dominate its cultural representation in the centuries that follow. Specifically, in what becomes the prevalent city-view from the seventeenth century onwards, the site is seen from the harbor looking northwards towards the prow of Lower Manhattan (Figure 2).

By the nineteenth century, as the transition from landscape to cityscape accelerates and New York begins to acquire its modern urban character and appearance, the skyline becomes a firmly established literary motif. For example, in *Domestic Manners of the Americans* (1832), the sensational precursor to Charles Dickens' *American Notes* (1842), the English novelist and travel writer Frances Trollope begins her account of visiting New York with this panoramic view of the city:

... my imagination is incapable of conceiving any thing of the kind more beautiful than the harbour of New York. Various and lovely are the objects which meet the eye on every side, but the naming of them would only be to give a list of words, without conveying the faintest idea of the scene. I doubt if ever the pencil of Turner could do it justice, bright and glorious as it rose upon us. We seemed to enter the harbour of New



Figure 2: Early skyline of Lower Manhattan: bird's-eye view of New Amsterdam, 1635. (Courtesy of the Picture Collection, The Branch Libraries, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations)

York upon waves of liquid gold, and as we darted past the green isles which rise from its bosom, like guardian sentinels of the fair city, the setting sun stretched his horizontal beams farther and farther at each moment, as if to point to us some new glory in the landscape.¹⁸

Like Verrazano some three hundred years earlier, Trollope is powerfully moved by the beauty of the harbor view. But although that view now contains one of the world's largest and most densely developed cities, the urban is almost completely glossed over in the language of the passage by the heavy stress on nature. There is even a certain reluctance on Trollope's part to see and acknowledge the expanding presence of the city. Moreover, her refusal to name the urban sights combined with her explicit reference to J. M. W. Turner, the Romantic landscape artist, further underlines this point, effectively inviting the reader to imagine the unnatural cityscape in terms of a natural landscape. Thus filtered through the eco-centric lens of pictorial Romanticism, Trollope's sensual vision of the skyline transfigures the blooming metropolis into an aesthetic wonder derived from and connected to the natural world that, in an ironic twist, New York's urban expansion was rapidly supplanting.

While Frances Trollope clearly responds with exuberance to New York's nineteenth-century skyline, other writers of the period are far less enthusiastic and forgiving about the city's horizontal spread. Most notably, for the transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau, who spent six months living on Staten Island in 1843,¹⁹ the sight of Manhattan's confused jumble across the water presented a hideous and unwelcome sight. As he complains in a letter to Ralph Waldo Emerson:

I don't like the city better, the more I see it, but worse. I am ashamed of my eyes that behold it. It is a thousand times meaner than I could have imagined. It will be something to hate,—that's the advantage it will be to me. . . . The pigs in the street are the most respectable part of the population. When will the world learn that a million men are of no importance compared to *one* man? But I must wait for a shower of shillings, or at least a slight dew or mizzling of sixpences, before I explore New York very far.²⁰

Such extreme expressions of disdain for the urban panorama are hardly surprising coming, as they do, from the future author of *Walden* (1854) in a letter to the outspoken author of *Nature* (1836). Yet it is revealing to learn that part of Thoreau's revulsion at the sight of Manhattan derives from a larger anxiety concerning the relation of the individual to the urban crowd. That anxiety, also explored by Edgar Allan Poe in his city story "The Man of the Crowd" (1840),

is one that Walter Benjamin specifically links to the social experience of modernity when he remarks on “the obliteration of the individual by the big-city crowd.”²¹ For Thoreau, who seeks to reclaim the individual from the anonymity of the crowd, the skyline represents precisely that process of obliteration and therefore becomes “something to hate.” And while we can only speculate about how far such urban experiences contributed towards Thoreau’s decision to retreat to nature in 1845, it is fair to say that his visual confrontation with the New York skyline does at least prompt him to begin commenting, however cursorily, on the issues of individualism and self-knowledge that go on to preoccupy so much of his later writing.

Furthermore, Thoreau’s closing remark about needing more money to explore the city comments on more than just the expense of urban tourism. It also touches on one of his underlying reasons for visiting New York in the first place. As his letters from Staten Island reveal, Thoreau was driven by financial need to make frequent trips into Manhattan in search of a market for his planned writing. So although he is repelled by the city on one level, the budding writer is nonetheless drawn to it on another one entirely. And in this reluctant attraction to the object of his disgust, Thoreau experiences yet another distinct urban phenomenon observed by Walter Benjamin in his critique of modernity—namely, that in the era of high capitalism the writer needs the city. “The true situation of the man of letters,” writes Benjamin, is that “he goes to the marketplace as a *flâneur*, supposedly to take a look at it, but in reality to find a buyer.”²² Benjamin may be writing about Baudelaire and Paris, but the comment equally applies to Thoreau and New York. After all, in his exploratory excursions into the city, Thoreau assumes the double role of sightseer and commodity in the urban marketplace.

In “Manhattan from the Bay,” a short fragment from his experimental prose memoir *Specimen Days* (1882), Walt Whitman recalls a view of the city encountered while pleasure-sailing around New York Bay on a lazy summer day in 1878:

And rising out of the midst [of sloops and schooner yachts], 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 centre—the green of the trees, and all the white, brown and gray of architecture well blended, as I see it, under a miracle of limpid sky, delicious light of heaven above, and June haze on the surface below.²³

The emergence of this modern, skyrocketing, and strangely “othered” metropolis is what the transitional cityscapes of Trollope and Thoreau begin to register. For as Peter Brooker suggests, “the future of New York City could already be

seen” by the 1850s.²⁴ And in glimpsing that future, writers like Trollope and Thoreau not only seem to anticipate the rise of the vertical city but also, in the process, prefigure the even more extreme urban visions of late nineteenth and early twentieth-century writers. Indeed, once New York turns vertical, the experience of wonder and estrangement already evident in the pre-vertical narratives of Trollope, Thoreau, and Whitman become significantly accentuated in literary and other artistic representations of the skyline.

One such representation occurs in Henry James’s early twentieth-century travelogue, *The American Scene* (1907). Returning home to the United States in 1904 after some twenty years living in Europe, James finds that the low-rise New York of his childhood has been replaced with a “strange vertiginous” city.²⁵ As he seeks to come to terms with this radical transformation, James offers this piercing critique of the modern skyline:

. . . the multitudinous sky-scrapers standing up to the view, from the water, like extravagant pins in a cushion already overplanted, and stuck in as in the dark, anywhere and anyhow, have 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. . . . You see the pin-cushion 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. . . . Such growths, you feel, have confessedly arisen but to be ‘picked,’ in time, with a shears. . . .²⁶

Seen here from the perspective of the harbor, Manhattan figures first as an over-stuffed pin-cushion and then as a disorderly bouquet of overgrown flowers waiting to be sliced apart by shears. In addition to the theme of excess, what links the two metaphors is the imagery of discomfort and incision: needle-points, sharp edges, and even the threat of decapitation. Moreover, this skyline also suffers from an absence of order. In James’s terms, the constellation of skyscrapers conforms to no visible pattern, suggesting a perceived need for some degree of rationality and restraint to be imposed upon the city’s upward growth.

For Henry James, then, the effect of gazing at the skyline after returning home from his extended stay in Europe is to experience both wonder and unease: wonder at the vertical excess and extravagance; and unease at the unfamiliarity of this new and animated urban spectacle. Here, as in the much later narrations of Baudrillard and de Certeau, the result is a dual sense of excitement and estrangement. The difference, however, is that in James’s text the uncanny ultimately comes to dominate much more forcefully over the sublime. One reason is that, as Morton and Lucia White argue in *The Intellectual versus the City*, James’s response to the modern cityscape is colored by a Eurocentric nostalgia for pre-vertical New York.²⁷ In a letter to Emerson from 1843 Thoreau mentions



Figure 3: New York skyscrapers from Jersey City, 1921. (Courtesy of the Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division)

visiting Henry James’s father at his home in Washington Square and reports that he “has naturalized and humanized New York for me.”²⁸ It is interesting, if not just a little ironic, that some sixty years later the son of the only person capable of making Thoreau feel at ease in New York cannot naturalize and humanize the new face of the city for himself.

In his 1919 essay on the uncanny, Freud suggests that the *unheimlich* “is in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old—established in the mind and which has become alienated.”²⁹ Building on Freud’s formulation, the architectural historian Anthony Vidler suggests that this “propensity of the familiar to turn on its owners, suddenly to become defamiliarized,”³⁰ is a phenomenon connected not only to the interior spaces of the psyche as per Freud, but also to the exterior spaces of the modern city as per Benjamin: “the uncanny, as Walter Benjamin noted, was also born out of the rise of the great cities, their disturbingly heterogeneous crowds and newly scaled spaces.”³¹ Vidler calls this “condition of modern anxiety” the “architectural uncanny,”³² and defines it as an aesthetic mode of estrangement endemic to capitalist modernity and closely linked to the spatial formations and social experiences of the city. In such terms, Henry James’s skyline in *The American Scene* can be understood as a manifestation of the architectural uncanny in the full sense that Vidler gives to the term. For what James ultimately reads into the text of the defamiliarized skyline is, quite literally, the *unhomeliness* of the modern city. The old and familiar is suddenly made new and strange.

A similarly fraught narration of the New York skyline appears in Henry Adams’ fictionalized autobiography, *The Education of Henry Adams* (1918). Paralleling James’s homecoming in *The American Scene*, the passage in question features the experience of another wandering American returning to the city after a long absence. Interestingly, the year is also 1904 and the skyline is observed from the same location and perspective as Henry James’s earlier text:

As he came up the bay again, November 5, 1904, . . . he found the approach more striking than ever—wonderful—unlike anything man had ever seen—and like nothing he had ever much cared to see. The outline of the city became frantic in its effort to explain something that defied meaning. Power seemed to have outgrown its servitude and to have asserted its freedom. The cylinder had exploded and thrown great masses of stone and steam against the sky. The city had the air and movement of hysteria, and the citizens were crying, in every accent of danger and alarm, that the new forces must at any cost be brought under control.³³

As Adams describes it, the skyline comes uncannily alive in the imagination of the observer, creating powerful feelings of awe, hysteria, and confusion, and also generating uneasy visions of movement, violence, and eruption. Like Henry James, moreover, Adams similarly expresses both anxiety over the cityscape's visual disorder as well as a desire to exert control over the seemingly autonomous urban machine.

More significantly, Adams goes slightly further than James to suggest in an explicit way that the defamiliarized skyline contains some kind of meaning. The problem, as he makes a point of stressing, is that the ever-shifting text of the new city resists interpretation: "the outline of the city became frantic in its effort to explain something that defied meaning."³⁴ But although Adams fails on this occasion to decipher the meaning he senses in the urban landscape, he does demonstrate an emerging consciousness of the discursive dimensions of urban space—the "gigantic rhetoric of excess in both expenditure and production" that de Certeau much later comes to call the "immense texturology" of the city.³⁵

Together, the textual cityscapes of writers like Henry James and Henry Adams construct a vision of the New York skyline in which the soaring verticals of the city function primarily as symbols of corporate capital—and this symbolism is one source of their shared anxiety about the skyrocketing development of the city. However, in the imagination of many immigrant and ethnic American writers, the New York skyline also functions in a slightly different way as a powerful symbol of social opportunity, albeit a frequently conflicted one.

For example, this other, more optimistic symbolism is stressed quite heavily in *The Rise of David Levinsky*, published in 1917 by Abraham Cahan, a Lithuanian-born Jewish writer, newspaper editor, and trade unionist who arrived in New York from Russia in 1882. In this fictional "rags to riches" autobiography about Jewish-American life in turn-of-the-century New York, Cahan pursues a concern that recurs throughout his creative and political writing. That concern is the transformative effect of the urban American experience on New York's immigrant population. In this respect, Cahan's perspective on the city differs

substantially from that of affluent, American-born writers like Henry James, whose nostalgic urban reflections often bemoan the passing of an exclusive and predominantly mono-cultural version of Old New York. As Shaun O’Connell notes in his literary history of New York, in contrast to James who “worried about the ways immigrants would change America,” socially-conscious immigrant writers like Abraham Cahan “examined the ways America transformed the immigrant.”³⁶ This difference of perspective registers in Cahan’s alternative version of the skyline, where the panoramic spectacle of New York, now filtered through the immigrant gaze, represents no longer an encoding of capital but instead a space of unbound possibility:

The immigrant’s arrival in his new home is like a second birth to him. Imagine a new-borne babe in possession of a fully developed intellect. Would it ever forget its entry into the world? Neither does the immigrant ever forget his entry into a country which is, for him, a new world in the profoundest sense of the term. . . . I conjure up the gorgeousness of the spectacle as it appeared to me on that clear June morning: the magnificent verdure of Staten Island, the tender blue of sea and sky, the dignified bustle of passing craft—above all, those floating, squatting, multitudinously windowed palaces which I subsequently learned to call ferries. It was all so utterly unlike anything I had ever seen or dreamed before. It unfolded itself like a divine revelation. I was in a trance or in something closely resembling one. . . . My transport of admiration, however, only added to my sense of helplessness and awe. Here on shipboard, I was sure of shelter and food, at least. How was I going to procure my sustenance on those magic shores? I wished the remaining hour could be prolonged indefinitely. . . . When I say that my first view of New York Bay struck me as something not of this earth it is not a mere figure of speech.³⁷

In Cahan’s rhetoric of renewal, the immigrant’s arrival in New York is depicted in terms of spiritual rebirth. The significance of the moment proves so overpowering that the visual experience of the landscape leaves the observer in a trance-like state of ungrounded delirium akin to religious ecstasy. The result is the transformation of the scene—at least in the narrator’s imagination—into a fantastical, other-worldly apparition.

This sort of sublime, revelatory vision is characteristic of Cahan’s long-distance views of New York. In another arrival moment from one of his earliest immigrant stories, “The Imported Bridegroom” (1898), Cahan offers a similar scene of sublimity and enchantment:

Can there be anything more beautiful, more sublime, and more uplifting than the view, on a clear summer morning, of New York harbor from an approaching ship? Shaya saw in the enchanting effect of sea, verdure, and sky a new version of his vision of paradise. . . . Yet, overborne with its looming grandeur, his heart grew heavy with suspense.³⁸

As in *The Rise of David Levinsky*, the immigrant gaze once again sees the landscape of New York in terms of an earthly paradise. In both cases, the distortion leads to a mental projection that sets impossibly high expectations for the immigrant's new life in America. This contrast between reverie and reality is of course the point of these quasi-supernatural skylines, both of which are also accompanied by a sense of foreboding and anxiety. Using the innocent, unknowing perspective of the arriving immigrant, Cahan deliberately sets up an ideal image waiting to be undermined by the experience of the city.

In *The Rise of David Levinsky*, this process of disillusionment begins almost immediately as the narrator disembarks into the carceral space of the "big Immigration Station,"³⁹ and continues in the city itself where, standing lost beneath the "hurtling and panting" elevated railway, "the active life of the great strange city" causes him to "feel like one abandoned in the midst of a jungle."⁴⁰ "The Imported Bridegroom" follows a similar pattern of estrangement and disorientation. Upon arrival in the city, Shaya, the titular object of "importation," is taken directly to a fine clothing store on Broadway where, in an attempt to make him look "Americanized," his importer decks him out in the trendiest "garb of Gentile civilization" and parades him along the street.⁴¹ The humiliating experience leaves him feeling "tied and fettered" and deeply unsure of his new identity. It also contributes to his growing sense of objectification.

Despite these critiques of the urban experience, Cahan's New York panoramas do not in themselves offer the sort of explicit treatment of the built environment of the city dominating the textual cityscapes of most other writers of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Skyscrapers, for instance, remain conspicuously absent, though almost everything else surrounding the vertical city, from the natural landscape to the maritime traffic, makes an appearance. The same also holds true in *Yekl* (1896), Cahan's earliest novel about immigrant New York, suggesting that the conspicuous absence of the city's most visible vertical elements is related to the nature of Cahan's interest in the skyline. In order to show the misplaced optimism of the immigrant gaze at the precise moment of arrival in the city, as well as to establish an ideal image of the city, Cahan presents a blinkered long-distance view in which the architectural uncanny of the modern metropolis is completely glossed over. To compensate for this oversight, however, Cahan does make a point of juxtaposing his sublime long-distance views with uncanny urban close-ups.

The paradox of New York's double significance as a symbol of liberation and estrangement is perhaps most graphically illustrated by the Harlem

Renaissance writer James Weldon Johnson, in whose work the skyline's power to enchant acquires a far more sinister overtone. In his innovative novel about the double consciousness of black life in America, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* (1912), Johnson offers a narrative of arrival in the vertical city that both identifies and problematizes the skyline's function as a symbol of opportunity. One of Johnson's central concerns in *The Autobiography* is "the dread power of the city"⁴² and the way large urban centers such as New York exploit the imagination of inexperienced newcomers. It is precisely this concern that underscores Johnson's description of the narrator's first encounter with New York. The event relates the modern African-American experience not of immigration but of migration—in this case from the agricultural South to the industrial North:

We steamed up into New York Harbour late one afternoon in spring. The last efforts of the sun were being put forth in turning the waters of the bay to glistening gold; the green islands on either side, in spite of their warlike mountings, looked calm and peaceful; the buildings of the town shone out in reflected light which gave the city an air of enchantment; and, truly, it is an enchanted spot. New York City is the most fatally fascinating thing in America. She sits like a great witch at the gate of the country, showing her alluring white face and hiding her crooked hands and feet under the folds of her wide garments—constantly enticing thousands from far within, and tempting those who come from across the seas to go no farther. And all these become the victims of her caprice. Some she at once crushes beneath her cruel feet; others she condemns to a fate like that of galley-slaves; a few she favours and fondles, riding them high on bubbles of fortune; then with a sudden breath she blows the bubble out and laughs mockingly as she watches them fall.⁴³

Here, as in the urban vistas of James, Adams, and Cahan, the New York skyline continues to figure as an exhilarating spectacle of the sublime and the uncanny. A slight difference, however, is that Johnson places more emphasis on the play and significance of color. Reminiscent of Frances Trollope's description of low-rise New York in terms of Romantic landscape painting, Johnson's penumbral urban panorama is framed by "green" scenery and bathed in "glistening gold" light. Rising from the center of this gilded composition is the "white-faced" city, ominously perceived by the narrator as a cruel Sphinx-like enchantress guarding the entrance to a world of wealth and opportunity.

The trope of New York as "gateway" to America has been a recurring metaphor for the city ever since its colonial beginnings. In Johnson's version,

however, the symbolically charged interplay between black observer and white metropolis subtly reshapes that familiar metaphor in terms of racial and ethnic difference. The clear message is that this white gate-keeper does not grant equal access to all, and certainly not to African-American migrants like Johnson's narrator. In this sense, the skyline functions as a false icon of opportunity. It seduces the unsuspecting victim into a life of economic hardship and social inequality—into the very condition of urban alienation that Johnson goes on to write about so powerfully in *Black Manhattan* (1930), his counter-cultural history of “the black metropolis within the heart of the great Western white metropolis.”⁴⁴

Johnson's representation of the New York skyline as both gateway and dead end reveals what Maria Balshaw describes in *Looking for Harlem* as “the paradoxical attitude to the city one finds structuring African American urban literature throughout the twentieth century.”⁴⁵ Like many other writers of the Harlem Renaissance, Johnson presents a double image of the modern metropolis that, in Balshaw's terms, not only contains a “passionate urbanism” in which “the city stands for the future, and in particular the future of the race” but also “paints the city as the site of deprivation, squalor and discontent.”⁴⁶ The result is “the paradox of the city of heaven that is also the city of hell.”⁴⁷ For Johnson, that urban paradox—so dramatically enunciated by the modern skyline—is what makes New York “the most fatally fascinating thing in America.”⁴⁸ It is a source of the city's aura of enchantment yet also a cause of its everyday horror.

The skyline's illusory and dream-like qualities are similarly a recurring concern for the naturalist writer Theodore Dreiser. In his 1926 collection of New York sketches, *The Color of a Great City*, Dreiser opens the volume with this urban dreamscape:

It was silent, the city of my dreams, marble and serene, due perhaps to the fact that in reality I knew nothing of crowds, poverty, the winds and storms of the inadequate that blow like a dust along the paths of life. It was an amazing city, so far-flung, so beautiful, so dead. There were tracks of iron stalking through the air, and streets that were as cañons, and stairways that mounted in vast flights to noble plazas, and steps that led down into deep places where were, strangely enough, underworld silences. . . . And then, after twenty years, here it stood, as amazing almost as my dream, save that in the waking the flush of life was over it. It possessed the tang of contests and dreams and enthusiasms and delights and terrors and despairs.⁴⁹

Blurring the distinctions between the imaginary and the real, Dreiser depicts the city even more emphatically than Abraham Cahan and James Weldon Johnson as an illusory space of contradictions and extremes. Reminiscent in many ways

of Fritz Lang's cinematic vision of the two-tiered city in *Metropolis* (1927), Dreiser's New York is polarized between majestic, vertiginous heights and gloomy, underworld depths. More disturbingly, the city is described as being both "dead" and "alive" at the same time, as if suspended in an indeterminate and uncanny state of undeath. The overall effect is to project a deeply conflicted image of vertical New York as enticing, beautiful, and familiar yet also frightening, strange, and unhomey.

It is significant, moreover, that Dreiser presents New York specifically in terms of a waking dream. Not only does this situate the meditative experience of city-gazing on the threshold between the conscious and unconscious minds, but it also reinforces the importance of image and illusion to the construction of the city's modern urban identity. In short, Dreiser's urban dreamscape reminds us that the vertical city is not just a physical place; it is also a state of mind.

Dreiser further develops this idea in "The Rivers of the Nameless Dead," a later sketch from *The Color of a Great City* in which he sees the skyline of Manhattan as a potentially deceptive image capable of luring the unsuspecting viewer into a false sense of the city:

There is an island surrounded by rivers, and about it the tide scurries fast and deep. It is a beautiful island, long, narrow, magnificently populated, and with such a wealth of life and interest as no island in the world before has ever possessed. . . . Enormous buildings and many splendid mansions line its streets. . . . If you were to . . . see the picture it presents to the coming eye, you would assume that it was all that it seemed. . . . A world of comfort and satisfaction for all who take up their abode within it—an island of beauty and delight. The sad part of it is, however, that the island and its beauty are, to a certain extent, a snare. Its seeming loveliness, which promises so much to the innocent eye, is not always easy of realization.⁵⁰

Like Abraham Cahan and James Weldon Johnson, Dreiser makes a point of emphasizing the importance of distinguishing between the harsh, everyday realities of urban life and the glossy, idealized image of the city projected by the skyline. In Dreiser's terms, problems arise when the "innocent eye" fails to make that distinction and, as a consequence, inaccurately reads into the distant silhouette of the "beautiful island" a false promise of wealth and opportunity. The implication is that gazing at the modern cityscape requires certain interpretive skills in order to see beneath or beyond the surface. Without these, the viewer is liable to be seduced by the superficial "beauty" and "delight" of the spectacle.

While Dreiser may be overstating the skyline's power to exert control over the imagination of the casual observer, he does make a significant point



Figure 4: Midtown Manhattan skyline, looking South, 1931. (Courtesy of the Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division)

concerning the cityscape itself. It is the same point that has underscored not only my own argument in this essay but also, as we have seen, the urban narratives of writers such as James, Adams, Cahan, and Johnson, and even the critical reflections of thinkers like Baudrillard and de Certeau. Namely, Dreiser suggests that to gaze upon the cityscape of vertical New York is to confront one of capitalist modernity's most emblematic and volatile urban texts.

IV

In *The Skyscraper in American Art, 1890-1931*, Merrill Schleier argues that, despite the exuberant urban optimism of artists like Charles Sheeler and Hugh Ferriss, New York's visual imagination most often responds to the rise of the vertical city in "ambivalent terms."⁵¹ Surveying a diverse body of literature, this essay finds that New York's textual imagination is similarly dominated by a profound ambivalence towards the city's first great moment of verticality. For many early twentieth-century writers, the most discernable place where this ambivalence registers is in the tension between the sublime and the uncanny underpinning their narrative treatments of the modern skyline. For Henry James and Henry Adams, who see Manhattan in terms of congestion and deformity, this tension arises out of an anxiety over the rapid pace of capitalist urbanization and, in particular, the consequent explosion of unfamiliar urban sights. For Abraham Cahan and James Weldon Johnson, who identify New York as a

problematic icon of opportunity, the tension is created by the skyline's power to enchant and mislead the immigrant/migrant gaze. And finally, for Theodore Dreiser, whose imaginative city sketches take the dreaminess of the skyline to conceptual extremes, the tension derives from the gap between the elusive city of the imagination and the lived city of everyday life.

In their shared ambivalence, these early reflections on the modern skyline reveal the extent to which New York's shape-shifting verticals have been a recurring cultural concern. Currently, as New York not only rebuilds but also reimagines its skyline in the settling wake of 9/11, this concern has acquired renewed significance. During this latest reshaping of the urban landscape, we need to remember that it is the fundamental nature of the New York skyline never to be complete—always to remain in flux between the sublime and the uncanny.

Notes

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