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Andrew Taylor

Henry James's 'crushing mission': utopianism on Manhattan Island

A great city is a great sore—a sore which never can be cured. The greater the city, the greater the sore. It necessarily follows that New York, being the greatest city in the Union, is the vilest sore on our body politic.¹

So read the opening lines from a chapter entitled 'Our Cities' in a now long forgotten state-of-the-nation analysis from 1889. John Habberton's words here evince a supremely confident syllogistic logic, a logic informed by an anxiety of urbanisation in general and of New York modernity in particular. New York is the best America has to offer—it is 'the greatest city in the Union'—but in the deductive framework of John Habberton's equation, this is nothing more than damning with faint praise. As Amy Kaplan has noted, 'In both fiction and nonfiction, "the city" often signifies "the unreal" ... [It] figures as a spatial metonymy for the elusive process of social change', acting as a challenge to the writer to 'combat its otherness' by arresting the manifold changes that define the urban space.² This essay examines the status of New York as it is refracted through the anxious perspective of Henry James's returning gaze; in particular I am concerned to reveal the strategies by which James manipulates his urban scene to accommodate, and even neutralize, the disruption to his ordering consciousness that the unfamiliar metropolis provokes. His visit to the United States in 1904–1905 was, in part, a desire to see what his native land had made of itself during his absence, and in the Preface to *The American Scene* James writes of his 'freshness of eye' and an anticipation that he 'should vibrate with

1. John Habberton, *Our Country's Future* (Philadelphia: Miller-Megee, 1889), 61.

2. Amy Kaplan, *The Social Construction of American Realism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 44.