Some American Cities

There is one point, almost to be called a paradox, to be noted about New York; and that is that in one sense it is really new. The term very seldom has any relevance to the reality. The New Forest is nearly as old as the Conquest, and the New Theology is nearly as old as the Creed. Things have been offered to me as the new thought that might more properly be called the old thoughtlessness; and the thing we call the New Poor Law is already old enough to know better. But there is a sense in which New York is always new; in the sense that it is always being renewed. A stranger might well say that the chief industry of the citizens consists of destroying their city; but he soon realises that they always start it all over again with undiminished energy and hope. At first I had a fancy that they never quite finished putting up a big building without feeling that it was time to pull it down again; and that somebody began to dig up the first foundations while somebody else was putting on the last tiles. This fills the whole of this brilliant and bewildering place with a quite unique and unparalleled air of rapid ruin. Ruins spring up so suddenly like mushrooms, which with us are the growth of age like mosses, that one half expects to see ivy climbing quickly up the broken walls as in the nightmare of the Time Machine, or in some incredibly accelerated cinema.

There is no sight in any country that raises my own spirits so much as a scaffolding. It is a tragedy that they always take the scaffolding away, and leave us nothing but a mere building. If they would only take the building away and leave us a beautiful scaffolding, it would in most cases be a gain to the loveliness of earth. If I could analyse what it is that lifts the heart about the lightness and clarity of such a white and wooden skeleton, I could explain what it is that is really charming about New York; in spite of its suffering from the curse of cosmopolitanism and even the provincial superstition of progress. It is partly that all this destruction and reconstruction is an unexhausted artistic energy; but it is partly also that it is an artistic energy that does not take itself too seriously. It is first because man is here a carpenter; and secondly because he is a stage carpenter. Indeed there is about the whole scene the spirit of scene-shifting. It therefore touches whatever nerve in us has since childhood thrilled at all theatrical things. But the picture will be imperfect unless we realise something which gives it unity and marks its chief difference from the climate and colours of Western Europe. We may say that the back-scene remains the same. The sky remained, and in the depths of winter it seemed to be blue with summer; and so clear that I almost flattered myself that clouds were English products like primroses. An American would probably retort on my charge of scene-shifting by saying that at least he only shifted the towers and domes of the earth; and that in

England it is the heavens that are shifty. And indeed we have changes from day to day that would seem to him as distinct as different magic-lantern slides; one view showing the Bay of Naples and the next the North Pole. I do not mean, of course, that there are no changes in American weather; but as a matter of proportion it is true that the most unstable part of our scenery is the most stable part of theirs. Indeed we might almost be pardoned the boast that Britain alone really possesses the noble thing called weather; most other countries having to be content with climate. It must be confessed, however, that they often are content with it. And the beauty of New York, which is considerable, is very largely due to the clarity that brings out the colours of varied buildings against the equal colour of the sky. Strangely enough I found myself repeating about this vista of the West two vivid lines in which Mr. W. B. Yeats has called up a vision of the East:--

And coloured like the eastern birds At evening in their rainless skies.

To invoke a somewhat less poetic parallel, even the untravelled Englishman has probably seen American posters and trade advertisements of a patchy and gaudy kind, in which a white house or a yellow motor-car are cut out as in cardboard against a sky like blue marble. I used to think it was only New Art, but I found that it is really New York.

It is not for nothing that the very nature of local character has gained the nickname of local colour. Colour runs through all our experience; and we all know that our childhood found talismanic gems in the very paints in the paint-box, or even in their very names. And just as the very name of 'crimson lake' really suggested to me some sanguine and mysterious mere, dark yet red as blood, so the very name of 'burnt sienna' became afterwards tangled up in my mind with the notion of something traditional and tragic; as if some such golden Italian city had really been darkened by many conflagrations in the wars of mediaeval democracy. Now if one had the caprice of conceiving some city exactly contrary to one thus seared and seasoned by fire, its colour might be called up to a childish fancy by the mere name of 'raw umber'; and such a city is New York. I used to be puzzled by the name of 'raw umber,' being unable to imagine the effect of fried umber or stewed umber. But the colours of New York are exactly in that key; and might be adumbrated by phrases like raw pink or raw yellow. It is really in a sense like something uncooked; or something which the satiric would call half-baked. And yet the effect is not only beautiful, it is even delicate. I had no name for this nuance; until I saw that somebody had written of 'the pastel-tinted towers of New York'; and I knew that the name had been found. There are no paints dry enough to describe all that dry light; and it is not a box of colours but of crayons. If the Englishman returning to England is moved at the sight of a block of white chalk, the American sees rather a bundle of chalks. Nor can I imagine anything more moving. Fairy tales are told to children about a country

where the trees are like sugar-sticks and the lakes like treacle, but most children would feel almost as greedy for a fairyland where the trees were like brushes of green paint and the hills were of coloured chalks.

But here what accentuates this arid freshness is the fragmentary look of the continual reconstruction and change. The strong daylight finds everywhere the broken edges of things, and the sort of hues we see in newly-turned earth or the white sections of trees. And it is in this respect that the local colour can literally be taken as local character. For New York considered in itself is primarily a place of unrest, and those who sincerely love it, as many do, love it for the romance of its restlessness. A man almost looks at a building as he passes to wonder whether it will be there when he comes back from his walk; and the doubt is part of an indescribable notion, as of a white nightmare of daylight, which is increased by the very numbering of the streets, with its tangle of numerals which at first makes an English head reel. The detail is merely a symbol; and when he is used to it he can see that it is, like the most humdrum human customs, both worse and better than his own. '271 West 52nd Street' is the easiest of all addresses to find, but the hardest of all addresses to remember. He who is, like myself, so constituted as necessarily to lose any piece of paper he has particular reason to preserve, will find himself wishing the place were called 'Pine Crest' or 'Heather Crag' like any unobtrusive villa in Streatham. But his sense of some sort of incalculable calculations, as of the vision of a mad mathematician, is rooted in a more real impression. His first feeling that his head is turning round is due to something really dizzy in the movement of a life that turns dizzily like a wheel. If there be in the modern mind something paradoxical that can find peace in change, it is here that it has indeed built its habitation or rather is still building and unbuilding it. One might fancy that it changes in everything and that nothing endures but its invisible name; and even its name, as I have said, seems to make a boast of novelty.

That is something like a sincere first impression of the atmosphere of New York. Those who think that is the atmosphere of America have never got any farther than New York. We might almost say that they have never entered America, any more than if they had been detained like undesirable aliens at Ellis Island. And indeed there are a good many undesirable aliens detained in Manhattan Island too. But of that I will not speak, being myself an alien with no particular pretensions to be desirable. Anyhow, such is New York; but such is not the New World. The great American Republic contains very considerable varieties, and of these varieties I necessarily saw far too little to allow me to generalise. But from the little I did see, I should venture on the generalisation that the great part of America is singularly and even strikingly unlike New York. It goes without saying that New York is very unlike the vast agricultural plains and small agricultural towns of the Middle West, which I did see. It may be conjectured with some

confidence that it is very unlike what is called the Wild and sometimes the Woolly West, which I did not see. But I am here comparing New York, not with the newer states of the prairie or the mountains, but with the other older cities of the Atlantic coast. And New York, as it seems to me, is quite vitally different from the other historic cities of America. It is so different that it shows them all for the moment in a false light, as a long white searchlight will throw a light that is fantastic and theatrical upon ancient and quiet villages folded in the everlasting hills. Philadelphia and Boston and Baltimore are more like those quiet villages than they are like New York.

If I were to call this book 'The Antiquities of America,' I should give rise to misunderstanding and possibly to annoyance. And yet the double sense in such words is an undeserved misfortune for them. We talk of Plato or the Parthenon or the Greek passion for beauty as parts of the antique, but hardly of the antiquated. When we call them ancient it is not because they have perished, but rather because they have survived. In the same way I heard some New Yorkers refer to Philadelphia or Baltimore as 'dead towns.' They mean by a dead town a town that has had the impudence not to die. Such people are astonished to find an ancient thing alive, just as they are now astonished, and will be increasingly astonished, to find Poland or the Papacy or the French nation still alive. And what I mean by Philadelphia and Baltimore being alive is precisely what these people mean by their being dead; it is continuity; it is the presence of the life first breathed into them and of the purpose of their being; it is the benediction of the founders of the colonies and the fathers of the republic. This tradition is truly to be called life; for life alone can link the past and the future. It merely means that as what was done yesterday makes some difference to-day, so what is done to-day will make some difference to-morrow. In New York it is difficult to feel that any day will make any difference. These moderns only die daily without power to rise from the dead. But I can truly claim that in coming into some of these more stable cities of the States I felt something quite sincerely of that historic emotion which is satisfied in the eternal cities of the Mediterranean. I felt in America what many Americans suppose can only be felt in Europe. I have seldom had that sentiment stirred more simply and directly than when I saw from afar off, above the vast grey labyrinth of Philadelphia, great Penn upon his pinnacle like the graven figure of a god who had fashioned a new world; and remembered that his body lay buried in a field at the turning of a lane, a league from my own door.

For this aspect of America is rather neglected in the talk about electricity and headlines. Needless to say, the modern vulgarity of avarice and advertisement sprawls all over Philadelphia or Boston; but so it does over Winchester or Canterbury. But most people know that there is something else to be found in Canterbury or Winchester; many people know that it is rather more interesting; and some people know that Alfred can still walk in Winchester and that St.

Thomas at Canterbury was killed but did not die. It is at least as possible for a Philadelphian to feel the presence of Penn and Franklin as for an Englishman to see the ghosts of Alfred and of Becket. Tradition does not mean a dead town; it does not mean that the living are dead but that the dead are alive. It means that it still matters what Penn did two hundred years ago or what Franklin did a hundred years ago; I never could feel in New York that it mattered what anybody did an hour ago. And these things did and do matter. Quakerism is not my favourite creed; but on that day when William Penn stood unarmed upon that spot and made his treaty with the Red Indians, his creed of humanity did have a triumph and a triumph that has not turned back. The praise given to him is not a priggish fiction of our conventional history, though such fictions have illogically curtailed it. The Nonconformists have been rather unfair to Penn even in picking their praises; and they generally forget that toleration cuts both ways and that an open mind is open on all sides. Those who deify him for consenting to bargain with the savages cannot forgive him for consenting to bargain with the Stuarts. And the same is true of the other city, yet more closely connected with the tolerant experiment of the Stuarts. The state of Maryland was the first experiment in religious freedom in human history. Lord Baltimore and his Catholics were a long march ahead of William Penn and his Quakers on what is now called the path of progress. That the first religious toleration ever granted in the world was granted by Roman Catholics is one of those little informing details with which our Victorian histories did not exactly teem. But when I went into my hotel at Baltimore and found two priests waiting to see me, I was moved in a new fashion, for I felt that I touched the end of a living chain. Nor was the impression accidental; it will always remain with me with a mixture of gratitude and grief, for they brought a message of welcome from a great American whose name I had known from childhood and whose career was drawing to its close; for it was but a few days after I left the city that I learned that Cardinal Gibbons was dead.

On the top of a hill on one side of the town stood the first monument raised after the Revolution to Washington. Beyond it was a new monument saluting in the name of Lafayette the American soldiers who fell fighting in France in the Great War. Between them were steps and stone seats, and I sat down on one of them and talked to two children who were clambering about the bases of the monument. I felt a profound and radiant peace in the thought that they at any rate were not going to my lecture. It made me happy that in that talk neither they nor I had any names. I was full of that indescribable waking vision of the strangeness of life, and especially of the strangeness of locality; of how we find places and lose them; and see faces for a moment in a far-off land, and it is equally mysterious if we remember and mysterious if we forget. I had even stirring in my head the suggestion of some verses that I shall never finish--

If I ever go back to Baltimore The city of Maryland.

But the poem would have to contain far too much; for I was thinking of a thousand things at once; and wondering what the children would be like twenty years after and whether they would travel in white goods or be interested in oil, and I was not untouched (it may be said) by the fact that a neighbouring shop had provided the only sample of the substance called 'tea' ever found on the American continent; and in front of me soared up into the sky on wings of stone the column of all those high hopes of humanity a hundred years ago; and beyond there were lighted candles in the chapels and prayers in the ante-chambers, where perhaps already a Prince of the Church was dying. Only on a later page can I even attempt to comb out such a tangle of contrasts, which is indeed the tangle of America and this mortal life; but sitting there on that stone seat under that quiet sky, I had some experience of the thronging thousands of living thoughts and things, noisy and numberless as birds, that give its everlasting vivacity and vitality to a dead town.

Two other cities I visited which have this particular type of traditional character, the one being typical of the North and the other of the South. At least I may take as convenient anti-types the towns of Boston and St. Louis; and we might add Nashville as being a shade more truly southern than St. Louis. To the extreme South, in the sense of what is called the Black Belt, I never went at all. Now English travellers expect the South to be somewhat traditional; but they are not prepared for the aspects of Boston in the North which are even more so. If we wished only for an antic of antithesis, we might say that on one side the places are more prosaic than the names and on the other the names are more prosaic than the places. St. Louis is a fine town, and we recognise a fine instinct of the imagination that set on the hill overlooking the river the statue of that holy horseman who has christened the city. But the city is not as beautiful as its name; it could not be. Indeed these titles set up a standard to which the most splendid spires and turrets could not rise, and below which the commercial chimneys and sky-signs conspicuously sink. We should think it odd if Belfast had borne the name of Joan of Arc. We should be slightly shocked if the town of Johannesburg happened to be called Jesus Christ. But few have noted a blasphemy, or even a somewhat challenging benediction, to be found in the very name of San Francisco.

But on the other hand a place like Boston is much more beautiful than its name. And, as I have suggested, an Englishman's general information, or lack of information, leaves him in some ignorance of the type of beauty that turns up in that type of place. He has heard so much about the purely commercial North as against the agricultural and aristocratic South, and the traditions of Boston and Philadelphia are rather too tenuous and delicate to be seen from across the Atlantic. But here also there are traditions and a great deal of traditionalism. The

circle of old families, which still meets with a certain exclusiveness in Philadelphia, is the sort of thing that we in England should expect to find rather in New Orleans. The academic aristocracy of Boston, which Oliver Wendell Holmes called the Brahmins, is still a reality though it was always a minority and is now a very small minority. An epigram, invented by Yale at the expense of Harvard, describes it as very small indeed:--

Here is to jolly old Boston, the home of the bean and the cod, Where Cabots speak only to Lowells, and Lowells speak only to God.

But an aristocracy must be a minority, and it is arguable that the smaller it is the better. I am bound to say, however, that the distinguished Dr. Cabot, the present representative of the family, broke through any taboo that may tie his affections to his Creator and to Miss Amy Lowell, and broadened his sympathies so indiscriminately as to show kindness and hospitality to so lost a being as an English lecturer. But if the thing is hardly a limit it is very living as a memory; and Boston on this side is very much a place of memories. It would be paying it a very poor compliment merely to say that parts of it reminded me of England; for indeed they reminded me of English things that have largely vanished from England. There are old brown houses in the corners of squares and streets that are like glimpses of a man's forgotten childhood; and when I saw the long path with posts where the Autocrat may be supposed to have walked with the schoolmistress, I felt I had come to the land where old tales come true.

I pause in this place upon this particular aspect of America because it is very much missed in a mere contrast with England. I need not say that if I felt it even about slight figures of fiction, I felt it even more about solid figures of history. Such ghosts seemed particularly solid in the Southern States, precisely because of the comparative quietude and leisure of the atmosphere of the South. It was never more vivid to me than when coming in, at a quiet hour of the night, into the comparatively quiet hotel at Nashville in Tennessee, and mounting to a dim and deserted upper floor where I found myself before a faded picture; and from the dark canvas looked forth the face of Andrew Jackson, watchful like a white eagle.

At that moment, perhaps, I was in more than one sense alone. Most Englishmen know a good deal of American fiction, and nothing whatever of American history. They know more about the autocrat of the breakfast-table than about the autocrat of the army and the people, the one great democratic despot of modern times; the Napoleon of the New World. The only notion the English public ever got about American politics they got from a novel, Uncle Tom's Cabin; and to say the least of it, it was no exception to the prevalence of fiction over fact. Hundreds of us have heard of Tom Sawyer for one who has heard of Charles Sumner; and it is probable that most of us could pass a more detailed examination about Toddy

and Budge than about Lincoln and Lee. But in the case of Andrew Jackson it may be that I felt a special sense of individual isolation; for I believe that there are even fewer among Englishmen than among Americans who realise that the energy of that great man was largely directed towards saving us from the chief evil which destroys the nations to-day. He sought to cut down, as with a sword of simplicity, the new and nameless enormity of finance; and he must have known, as by a lightning flash, that the people were behind him, because all the politicians were against him. The end of that struggle is not yet; but if the bank is stronger than the sword or the sceptre of popular sovereignty, the end will be the end of democracy. It will have to choose between accepting an acknowledged dictator and accepting dictation which it dare not acknowledge. The process will have begun by giving power to people and refusing to give them their titles; and it will have ended by giving the power to people who refuse to give us their names.

But I have a special reason for ending this chapter on the name of the great popular dictator who made war on the politicians and the financiers. This chapter does not profess to touch on one in twenty of the interesting cities of America, even in this particular aspect of their relation to the history of America, which is so much neglected in England. If that were so, there would be a great deal to say even about the newest of them; Chicago, for instance, is certainly something more than the mere pork-packing yard that English tradition suggests; and it has been building a boulevard not unworthy of its splendid position on its splendid lake. But all these cities are defiled and even diseased with industrialism. It is due to the Americans to remember that they have deliberately preserved one of their cities from such defilement and such disease. And that is the presidential city, which stands in the American mind for the same ideal as the President; the idea of the Republic that rises above modern money-getting and endures. There has really been an effort to keep the White House white. No factories are allowed in that town; no more than the necessary shops are tolerated. It is a beautiful city; and really retains something of that classical serenity of the eighteenth century in which the Fathers of the Republic moved. With all respect to the colonial place of that name, I do not suppose that Wellington is particularly like Wellington. But Washington really is like Washington.

In this, as in so many things, there is no harm in our criticising foreigners, if only we would also criticise ourselves. In other words, the world might need even less of its new charity, if it had a little more of the old humility. When we complain of American individualism, we forget that we have fostered it by ourselves having far less of this impersonal ideal of the Republic or commonwealth as a whole. When we complain, very justly, for instance, of great pictures passing into the possession of American magnates, we ought to remember that we paved the way for it by allowing them all to accumulate in the possession of English magnates. It is bad that a public treasure should be in the possession of a private man in

America, but we took the first step in lightly letting it disappear into the private collection of a man in England. I know all about the genuine national tradition which treated the aristocracy as constituting the state; but these very foreign purchases go to prove that we ought to have had a state independent of the aristocracy. It is true that rich Americans do sometimes covet the monuments of our culture in a fashion that rightly revolts us as vulgar and irrational. They are said sometimes to want to take whole buildings away with them; and too many of such buildings are private and for sale. There were wilder stories of a millionaire wishing to transplant Glastonbury Abbey and similar buildings as if they were portable shrubs in pots. It is obvious that it is nonsense as well as vandalism to separate Glastonbury Abbey from Glastonbury. I can understand a man venerating it as a ruin; and I can understand a man despising it as a rubbish-heap. But it is senseless to insult a thing in order to idolatrise it; it is meaningless to desecrate the shrine in order to worship the stones. That sort of thing is the bad side of American appetite and ambition; and we are perfectly right to see it not only as a deliberate blasphemy but as an unconscious buffoonery. But there is another side to the American tradition, which is really too much lacking in our own tradition. And it is illustrated in this idea of preserving Washington as a sort of paradise of impersonal politics without personal commerce. Nobody could buy the White House or the Washington Monument; it may be hinted (as by an inhabitant of Glastonbury) that nobody wants to; but nobody could if he did want to. There is really a certain air of serenity and security about the place, lacking in every other American town. It is increased, of course, by the clear blue skies of that half-southern province, from which smoke has been banished. The effect is not so much in the mere buildings, though they are classical and often beautiful. But whatever else they have built, they have built a great blue dome, the largest dome in the world. And the place does express something in the inconsistent idealism of this strange people; and here at least they have lifted it higher than all the sky-scrapers, and set it in a stainless sky.