

are more than mere arteries; each one constitutes a social milieu.

You stop along these streets, meet people, drink, eat and linger. On Sundays, you get dressed and take a stroll for the sole pleasure of greeting friends, to see and be seen. These are the streets that inspired Jules Romains' "unanisme." They are filled with a communal spirit that changes from hour to hour.

Thus, my near-sighted European eyes, slowly venturing out, on the watch for everything, vainly tried to find something to arrest them. Anything at all—a row of houses suddenly barring the way, a street corner, or some old, time-mellowed house. But it was no use. New York is a city for far-sighted people, a city in which you can only "adjust" to infinity. My glance met nothing but space. It slid over blocks of identical houses, with nothing to arrest it; it was about to lose itself in empty space, at the horizon.

Céline has remarked of New York that "it is a vertical city." This is true, but it seemed to me, at first, like a lengthwise city. The traffic that comes to a standstill in the side streets is all-privileged and flows tirelessly down the avenues. How often the taxi-drivers, willing to take passengers from north to south, flatly refuse to take any for the east and west! The side streets have hardly any function other than to mark off the limits of the apartment houses between the avenues. They are cut by the avenues, spread and thrown toward the north. That was why I, a naïve tourist, vainly tried for a long time to find *quartiers*. In France we are surrounded and protected by urban centres; the prosperous districts protect the rich from the poor, and the poor districts protect us from the disdain of the rich, and similarly, the entire city protects us against Nature.

In New York, where the major axes are parallel avenues, I was unable to discover *quartiers* except on Lower Broadway. I could only find filmy atmospheres, longitudinally stretched masses with nothing to mark a beginning or end. I gradually learned to recognize the atmosphere of Third Avenue where, under the shadow of the noisy elevated railway, people meet, smile and chat without even knowing each other; and that

Chapter 10

New York, the Colonial City

I REALLY KNEW I would like New York, but I thought I'd be able to like it immediately, as I had liked the red brick of Venice and London's massive, sombre houses. I didn't know that, for the newly arrived European, there was a "New York sickness," like sea-sickness, air-sickness and mountain-sickness.

At midnight, an official bus took me from La Guardia Field to the Plaza Hotel. I had pressed my forehead against the window, but had been able to see only red and green lights and dark buildings. The next day, without any transition, I found myself at the corner of 58th Street and Fifth Avenue. I walked for a long time under the icy sky. It was a Sunday in January, 1945, a deserted Sunday. I was looking for New York and couldn't find it. The further I progressed along an avenue that seemed coldly mediocre and banal, the further the city seemed to retreat before me, like a ghost town. What I was looking for was probably a European city.

We Europeans live on the myth of the big city that we forged during the nineteenth century. American myths are not ours, and the American city is not our city; it has neither the same character nor the same functions. In Spain, Italy, Germany and France we find circular cities that were originally surrounded by ramparts meant not only to protect the inhabitants against enemy invasion, but also to conceal the inexorable presence of Nature. These cities are, moreover, divided into sections that are similarly round and closed. The piled-up tangle of houses weighs heavily on the soil. They seem to have a natural tendency to draw together, so much so that now and then we have to clear a way through with an axe, as in a virgin forest. Streets run into other streets. Closed at both ends, they do not look as though they lead outside the city. Inside them, you go around in circles. They

Irish bar in which a German, passing by my table, stopped for a minute to say: "Are you French? I'm a Jerry"; the reassuring comfort of the Lexington Avenue shops; the dreary elegance of Park Avenue; the cold luxury and stucco impassiveness of Fifth Avenue; the gay frivolity of Sixth and Seventh Avenues; the food markets on Ninth Avenue; and the No Man's Land of Tenth Avenue. Each avenue wraps its neighbouring streets in its own atmosphere, but one street down, you're suddenly plunged into another world. Not far from the palpitating silence of Park Avenue where glide the cars of the lords and masters, I come to First Avenue where the earth is constantly trembling under the passing of trucks. How am I to feel safe on one of those endless "north-south" highways when, a few steps away to east or west, other lengthwise worlds await me? Behind the Waldorf-Astoria and the blue and white canopies of "smart" buildings, I glimpse the "Elevated," which carries with it something of the Bowery's poverty.

All of New York is striped this way with parallel and non-communicating significances. These long, perfectly straight lines suddenly gave me the feeling of space. Our cities are constructed to protect us against it; the houses cluster like sheep. But space crosses through New York, quickening and expanding it. The space, the great, empty space of the steppes and pampas, flows through New York's arteries like a draught of cold air, separating one side from the other. An American friend who was showing me about the smart sections of Boston pointed to the left of a boulevard and said, "The 'nice' people live there." And then, pointing to the right side, he added ironically, "No one has ever been able to find out who lives here." The same is true of New York; between the two sides of a given street, you have all of space.

New York is half-way between a pedestrian's and a driver's city. You do not go for walks in New York; you fly through it; it is a city in motion. I feel at ease if I walk quickly; if I stop, I get flustered and wonder, "Why am I in this street rather than in one of the hundreds of others like it?" Why am I standing in front of this drug-store, or this Schrafft's or

Woolworth branch, rather than in front of any other of these thousands of identical ones?

And suddenly pure space looms into view. I imagine that if a triangle could become conscious of its position in space, it would be terrified at the realization of the rigorously of its defining co-ordinates, but that it would also be terrified to discover that it is merely any triangle, any place. You never lose your way in New York; one glance is enough for you to get your bearings; you are on the East Side, at the corner of 52nd Street and Lexington Avenue. But this spacial precision is not accompanied by any precision of feeling. In the numerical anonymity of the streets and avenues, I am simply anybody, anywhere. No matter where I may be, my position is marked out in longitude and latitude. But no valid reason justifies my presence in this place rather than in any other, since this one is so like another. You never lose your way, and you are always lost.

Is it a city I am lost in, or is it Nature? New York is no protection against Nature's violence. It is an open-skied city. Storms flood its wide streets that take so long to cross when it rains. Hurricanes shake the brick houses and rock the skyscrapers. They are announced formally over the radio, like declarations of war. In summer, the air vibrates between the houses; in winter, the city is flooded, so that you might think yourself in some Parisian suburb flooded by the Seine, but in America, it is only melting snow.

Nature weighs so heavily on New York that this most modern of cities is also the dirtiest. From my window I see thick, muddy papers, tossed by the wind, flitting over the pavement. When I go out, I walk in a blackish snow, a sort of puffy crust the same colour as the sidewalk, so that it looks as if the sidewalk itself is buckling. From the first of May, the heat crashes down on the city like an atomic bomb. The heat is Evil. People go up to one another and say, "It's murder!" The trains carry off millions of fleeing city-dwellers who, on descending from the train, leave damp marks on the seat, like snails. It is not the city they are fleeing, but Nature. Even in the depths of my apartment, I am open to attack from a mysterious and secretly hostile Nature. I feel as though

I were camping in the heart of a jungle crawling with insects. There is the wailing of the wind, the electric shocks I get each time I touch a doorbell or shake a friend's hand, the cockroaches that scoot across my kitchen, the elevators that make me nauseous and the inextinguishable thirst that rages in me from morning till night. New York is a colonial city, an outpost. All the hostility and cruelty of Nature are present in this city, the most prodigious monument man has ever erected to himself. It is a light city; its apparent lack of weight surprises most Europeans. In this immense and malevolent space, in this rocky desert that will tolerate no vegetation of any kind, millions of brick, wooden and reinforced concrete houses, that all look as if they are about to fly away, have been constructed.

I like New York. I learned to like it. I become accustomed to its massive groupings and its long vistas. My eyes no longer linger over the façades in quest of a house which might, by some remote chance, not be identical with the others. My eyes immediately slip by to the horizon to look for the buildings lost in fog, mere volumes, merely the sky's austere framework. One is rewarded when one has learned how to look at the two rows of apartment houses which, like cliffs, line a great artery; their mission is completed down there, at the avenue's end, in simple, harmonious lines; a scrap of sky floats between them.

New York reveals itself only at a certain height, a certain distance, and a certain speed; these are not the pedestrian's height, distance or speed. This city looks amazingly like the great plains of Andalusia—monotonous when travelled over on foot, magnificent and changing when seen from a car.

I learned to like New York's sky. In European cities where roofs are low, the sky crawls close to the earth and seems tamed. The New York sky is beautiful because the skyscrapers push it back, very far over our heads. Pure and lonely as a wild beast, it guards and watches over the city. And it is not only a local protection; one feels that it stretches out into the distance over all America; it is the whole world's sky.

I learned to like Manhattan's avenues. They are not sober little walks closed in between houses, but national highways.

The moment you set foot on one of them, you understand that it has to go on to Boston or Chicago. It fades away outside the city and the eye can almost follow it into the country. A wild sky over parallel rails, that, more than anything else, is New York. When you are at the heart of this city, you are at the heart of Nature.

I had to get used to it, but now that I have, there is no place in which I feel more free than in the New York crowds. This light, ephemeral city that looks every morning and evening, under the sun's inquisitive rays, like a simple juxtaposition of rectangular parallelepipeds, is never oppressing or depressing. You can experience the anguish of solitude here, but never that of oppression.

In Europe, we become attached to a neighbourhood, to a cluster of houses or a street-corner, and we are no longer free. But hardly have you plunged into New York than your life is completely cut to New York's size. You can gaze down in the evening from the top of the Queensborough Bridge, in the morning from New Jersey, at noon from the seventy-seventh storey of Rockefeller Center, but you will never be captivated by any of the city's streets, because none of them has a distinctive beauty of its own. There is beauty in all of them, as all of America's nature and sky is present in them. Nowhere will you ever have a stronger feeling of the simultaneity of human lives.

New York moves Europeans in spite of its austerity. Of course, we have learned to love our old cities, but their touching quality for us lies in a Roman wall that forms part of an inn's façade, or a house that Cervantes lived in, or the Place des Vosges, or the town hall at Rouen. We like museum-cities, and all our cities are rather like museums in which we wander about amidst ancestral homes. New York is not a museum-city, yet, for Frenchmen of my generation, it already possesses a melancholy of the past. When we were twenty, around 1925, we heard about the skyscrapers. For us they symbolized America's fabulous prosperity. We discovered them with amazement in the films. They were the architecture of the future, just as the cinema was the art of the future and jazz the music of the future. Today we know

what to think about jazz. We know that it has more of a past than a future. It is a music of popular, Negro inspiration, capable of limited development and in a process of slow decline. Jazz is outliving its day. The talking film has not fulfilled the promise of the silent one. Hollywood is making no headway in a well-worn rut.

The war has certainly taught the Americans that their country was the greatest power in the world. But the period of easy living is over; many economists fear a new depression. Thus, no more skyscrapers are being built. It seems they are too hard to rent.

The man who walked about in New York before 1930 saw in the big buildings that dominated the city the first signs of an architecture destined to radiate over the whole country. The skyscrapers were alive then. Today, for a Frenchman arriving from Europe, they are already mere historical monuments, relics of a bygone age. They still rear up against the sky, but my mind is no longer with them, and the New Yorkers pass by at their feet without even looking. I cannot think of them without a certain sadness; they tell of an age in which we thought that the very last war had just ended and when we believed in peace. They are already a bit run-down; tomorrow, perhaps, they will be torn down. In any case, their construction required a faith we no longer have.

I walk between the little brick houses the colour of dried blood. They are younger than Europe's houses, but their fragility makes them look much older. Far away I see the Empire State or the Chrysler Building reaching vainly toward the sky, and suddenly I think that New York is about to acquire a History and that it already possesses its ruins.

That is enough to lend a bit of softness to the world's harshest city.

(*Town and Country*, 1946)

Chapter 11

Departure and Return¹

BRICE PARAIN is a man on the march. He has still to arrive and does not even quite know his goal. But we can now begin to perceive the general direction of his journey. As I see it, it is a return. He himself has called one of his books *Return to France*. He says in this work, "I have learned, after a long period of unrestraint, that the mediating powers have been empowered to forbid man to exceed himself, that they set up barriers at his limits, beyond which he is threatened with destruction."

These few words suffice to date his undertaking. He has gone to extremes. He has tried to go beyond himself, and now he has returned. Does this not sum up all of post-World War I literary history? Men had been filled with great and inhuman ambitions. They had wanted to get at nature, both within man and outside him and to do so unassisted. They had entered the garden on tiptoe to surprise it and see it as it was when no one was there to see it. And then, in the thirties, encouraged, channelized and urged on by publishers, journalists and picture dealers, there was a general return to the human, a return to order. An effort was made to define a modest and practical wisdom in which contemplation would be subordinated to effective and limited action, in which the ambitious values of truth would give way to those of honesty, a wisdom which was neither pragmatism nor opportunism but rather a new compounding of values, illuminating action by knowledge and subduing knowledge to action, subjecting the individual to the social order and refusing to sacrifice it to him; in short, a wisdom of economy whose chief concern was to balance things. The youngest of us have now left it far behind, I fear. Events seem to be requiring both more and less.

¹ Concerning *Investigations into the Nature and Function of Language*.