

States of the Union

NEW YORK IN SEARCH OF A BARD

BY RICHARD J. MARGOLIS

*A stillness and a sadness
Pervade the City Hall,
And speculating madness*

Has left the street of Wall . . .

—GEORGE POPE MORRIS,
Dark Days (c. 1860)

*No one should come to New
York unless he is willing to be
lucky.*

—E. B. WHITE,
Here is New York (1949)

NEW YORK finally got lucky in its loans; no longer can the President of the United States laugh all the way to the bankruptcy. Of course, before he endorsed the \$2.3 billion assistance package he made the city prove its bad intentions—to shut down clinics, reduce child-care programs, curtail welfare payments, cancel housing construction projects . . . in short, to follow the example set by the Ford Administration. It mattered not that many of the scuttled programs had nourished, sheltered and sustained life; the President was telling the city and its mayor to live and let die.

And the city's response pleased the Chief Executive. "I have quite frankly been surprised that they have come as far as they have," he remarked to reporters the day before Thanksgiving. "I doubted that they would act unless ordered to do so by a Federal court." Gerald Ford's message to Mayor Abraham Beame was straight from *Alice in Wonderland*:

*"And hast thou slain the
Jabberwock?*

*Come to my arms, my beamish
boy!*

*O frabjous day! Callooh! Callay!"
He chortled in his joy.*

But let me return to George Pope Morris, founder of the *New York Mirror* and coiner of "Tippencanoe and Tyler, too," the slogan that carried William Henry Harrison to the White House and thence to the grave (he caught pneumonia in the chill Inaugural rain). Morris was plainly a rotten poet, but he occasionally did get off a memorable line—e.g., "Woodman, spare that tree"—and in his ungainly verse cited at the outset he at least caught

the mood of New York during one of its unfortunate lapses into fiscal melancholia.

It was not the last time that the city lapsed or that writers groped for metaphors that might suitably describe its special predicament. Moreover, much of the writing about New York has been remarkably bad, full of fraudulent rhythms and neon-like contrivances. The subject seems to have brought out the worst in America's writers—an unpleasant mixture of hostility and inanity.

"New York is a sucked orange," announced Ralph Waldo Emerson, a Bostonian's complacent reference, it appears, to New York's culture and not to its coffers. O. Henry, meanwhile, was christening the city with such affectionate nicknames as "Yaptown-on-the-Hudson" and "Noisyville-on-the-Subway." In addition, the short-story writer was first to pose the following important and still unanswered question: "What else can you expect from a town that's shut off from the world by the ocean on one side and New Jersey on the other?"

As things turned out the ocean became a highway for immigrants, which is why Emerson's "sucked orange" eventually was dropped into *The Melting Pot*, Israel Zangwill's fresh figure of speech—soon to be a tired cliché—for New York's pluralistic stew. Zangwill, an Englishman, dedicated his 1909 drama to Theodore Roosevelt, "in respectful recognition of his strenuous struggle against the forces that threaten to shipwreck the Great Republic. . . ." If you were going to dedicate your play to TR, it made no sense to understate the matter. In any case, Roosevelt is said to have attended opening night at the Columbia Theatre in Washington and to have pronounced the play bully.

In truth, it was an embarrassingly flimsy work—"romantic claptrap," declared the *New York Times* reviewer—about a young, poverty-

stricken composer named David Quixano, a Jewish immigrant, who falls in love with a rich, beautiful gentile of the sort that is capable of exclaiming, "Oh, David. And to think that I was brought up to despise your race." He is no great catch, either, being given to boring bouts of humility ("It is a dream. You cannot care for me—you so far above me") and to long, grandiloquent speeches about The Meaning of America. The play's climax is awash with Whitmanesque prophecy as the two lovers come together in a kind of mutual and molten assimilation, living proof that the melting pot works. "Can't you hear the roaring and the bubbling?" David asks as together they gaze out over New York harbor. "Ah, what a stirring and a seething!"

Silly as the play is, it did give New Yorkers something to ponder 65 years ago—a sense, perhaps, of their nuclear importance in the unfolding American drama. Zangwill, remarked Jane Addams, performed "a great service to America by reminding us of the high hopes of the Founders of the Republic," and while she did not specify which hopes she had in mind, most people doubtless assumed she was drawing some vital connection between the Founding Fathers and those tired, poor, and huddled masses who were pouring into Ellis Island. The Statue of Liberty arrived in 1886, but it wasn't until 30 years later that the U.S. government decided to illuminate it with floodlights. With the throwing of the switch New York City and the melting pot could be said to have become part of the American mystique.

After that it became more common for writers to confuse the city with the whole country. "New York," rhapsodized Christopher Morley in 1939, "the nation's thyroid gland!"—meaning, one guesses, that as the city's metabolism went so went the nation's. (Mayor Beame was telling the President something

similar all this past summer and autumn.)

By the 1950s the urban glow was definitely fading—possibly it had fled to the suburbs—and what had seemed romantic and freighted with democratic symbolism to previous generations of writers now seemed tawdry and trivial to their successors. E. B. White's gossamer offering, *Here Is New York* (1949), and Alfred Kazin's loving reminiscence, *Walker in the City* (1951), may have been the last ungrudging, unstinting paeans to New York, the end of a votive tradition that began, possibly, with James Fenimore Cooper's praise of "Gotham," or a bit later with Whitman's extravagant tribute to his "City of orgies, walks, and joys."

IN THEIR place came urban planners, social scientists and politicians, replete with jeremiads. In 1958, in a preface to Max Weber's *The City*, the sociologist Don Martindale declared that "The age of the city seems to be at an end," and used New York as a salient example. A decade later, in *The Economy of Cities*, Jane Jacobs made the same devastating point and listed some of the many signs of erosion:

"... absolute declines in the sheer numbers of enterprises in New York; persistent growth in the numbers of idle and underemployed poor; remarkable growth of unproductive make-work in the city bureaucracies... which is depended on to take up the slack of insufficient useful work for the city's high school and college graduates; piling up of undone work and unsolved practical problems; lack of new kinds of manufacturing work to compensate for the losses of the old; a seemingly compulsive repetition of existing ways of doing things even though it is evident that what are being compulsively repeated are mistakes... All these are classic signs that a great city is dying economically..."

Is it any wonder that even Mayor John V. Lindsay, that no-sweat optimist from Manhattan's affluent Upper East Side, was beginning to feel edgy about New York, maybe even a bit paranoid? "We're trying to hold the city together against the forces that are steadily eating away at it," he confided in 1970 to readers of his book, *The City*. Lindsay never named the forces, but no doubt they were the very ones that Zangwill had mentioned to Teddy Roosevelt—"the forces that threaten to shipwreck the Great Republic."

In the same book Lindsay struck a note of complaint his successor would happily return to again and again. "I believe," said Lindsay, "that... the [view] of urban America as a dark desolate place underserving of support or help has become fixed in the American consciousness. And we are paying for that attitude in our cities today." This may be true, but only up to a point. Many Americans still believe in New York as melting pot, thyroid gland and city of joys.

Recently in Washington I was privy to a conversation about New York between Aaron Henry, the veteran Mississippi civil rights leader, and Democratic Senator James Abourezk, the capable populist from South Dakota. The Senator expressed doubts about the wisdom of using Federal funds to rescue New York from bankruptcy. Why should the United States government bail out Chase Manhattan? he wanted to know. This was Aaron Henry's answer:

"My concerns aren't fiscal. I speak from the heart, not the head, and I say that if the people of New York need my help, I'll be right there with it. You know, during the '60s when we in the South were morally bankrupt, many New Yorkers rushed to our aid. Some of them, like Michael Schwerner and Andrew Goodman, gave their lives for us. So there's no way Senator, that I'll turn my back on New York City."