

On pinions free

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PETER CONRAD

The Art of the City: Views and versions of New York
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This book is less a study of the art and literature of New York than a Dionysiac revel, with a few hundred writers, painters and photographers as its more or less willing participants. As in the *Bacchae* – the best commentary on Peter Conrad's book – the orgiastic all have a rollicking time, for a while. Social distinctions dissolve. Individuals seem interchangeable. As long as the party lasts, anyone can do anything, make anything, be anything. And woe to legalistic Pentheus, intent on discriminations and distinctions, when he tries to look in.

Walt Whitman, "the genius loci of this book, as he is of New York", serves as Conrad's Dionysus. His Pentheus is Henry James, who receives hard knocks for writing of a New York that "enforces social distinctions that Whitman's city abolishes". Pentheus excepted, almost everyone is welcome – in the words of Euripides' Dionysus, "compelled to wear my orgies' livery". From Washington Irving and Stephen Crane, through Alfred Stieglitz and the photographer who styled himself Weegee, to Robert Rauschenberg and Claes Oldenburg, one celebrant after another dances to Conrad's tune. Some provide epic origins for New York; others bring back images from its slums or report on the views through neighbours' windows; still others reshape the city into abstraction or collage: some praise its affluent towers or probe its criminal depth; some perch on its bridges, some accumulate its junk. Some manage to be in two places at once. A photograph by Margaret Bourke-White discussed on page 96 is reproduced on page 255. A painting by John Sloan reproduced on page 91 is discussed on page 271. No cross-references are provided, and the index is no help (it also tends to omit hard-to-spell names like Jindrich Styrsky). Perhaps this is deliberate. Seating-plans are seldom provided at an orgy.

Euripides' Dionysus summoned all the Theban women to Citheron "rich and poor alike, even the daughters of Cadmus". Conrad is almost as inclusive. Few books of cultural history have accommodated so many artists and works without degenerating into lists of names and titles. The revellers all receive a sentence or two of interpretation, even if the prevailing frenzy compels them to shed their dates of birth and death, historical background, and anything resembling a career with a beginning, middle, or end. The guests are too busy tumbling in for Conrad to bother with introductions. Melville's *Pierre* and Pynchon's *V* get left outside, but Conrad is admirably quick to admit neglected thrillers like Vera Caspary's *Laura* and Cornell Woolrich's *Phantom Lady*. He goes out of his way to put some splendid 1930 woodcuts by Joaquin Vaquero (four of them previously unpublished) in positions of honour at the head of each chapter. Where he is surprisingly restrictive is in his imposition of a colour-bar. No blacks are admitted. A few intrepid artists and writers – Van Vechten, Lorca, Le Corbusier – make side trips to Harlem, and Fitzgerald looks down on the place from a train; but they merely watch the dancing and return alone. In Conrad's New York the Harlem Renaissance never occurred.

The reason may be that Conrad's New York is implicitly a projection of himself rather than a city shaped by those who live there. Whitman, his model and hero, was expert in the "exponentiation of himself". "He holds within him a germinal city", Conrad writes: "In furnishing that city, he's running off copies of himself, in a typographic feat of self-renewal." As Whitman filled Manhattan with Whitmans, so Conrad would people the isle with Conrads. Whitman "likened his own creativity to the cloning of 'the many-cylinder' d steam printing-press", and found in typesetting a process similar to that whereby he postulated the democratic city of New York and filled it with self-images." In a sentence like this (the book has many like it) Whitman becomes a self-image of Conrad. The quotation in the first half claims authority for the assertion in the second, but in fact the assertion is strictly Conrad's own. Here

and elsewhere Conrad seems less an avatar of Whitman than an adept at a rhetorical shell-game. When a writer does not say what he wants him to say, he is glad to make up the deficiency. He writes: "In 'A Font of Type' Whitman describes the mechanical letters as a seedbed". Whitman's poem does nothing of the kind. Even when Conrad provides an extended quotation he does not hesitate to mispresent it immediately after. Quoting Ayn Rand on skyscrapers under construction whose "girders stuck out like bones through broken skin", he contrives to find in that phrase the nearly opposite suggestion "that the skyscraper is a body which has dispensed with the soft cladding of flesh".

Even more than black faces and Henry James, prim Consistency and fussy Accuracy find a cold welcome at Conrad's revels. On page 24 the development of Manhattan moves "up and across the island"; on page 25 it moves "up not across". The city's "bequest to us is to collectivize us" on page 3; on page 28 "the city makes lost souls of us all". In one chapter, the criminals photographed by Weegee, when "hustled into the police wagon, hide their faces behind handkerchiefs and vainly beg Weegee not to publicize their shame". A few chapters later, Weegee's "criminals cooperated, he noted, by posing as they stepped down from the police wagon". Perhaps a quick ride in the Black Maria was enough to change their attitude. A Paul Cadmus painting, as Conrad sees it, shows "a litter of emptied bottles and circumcised consumed bananas". The painting itself, for good iconographic reasons, shows only one bottle and one banana-peel, no more circumcised than any other. But even Pen-

theus, when Dionysus got hold of him, saw double.

Euripides' bacchants made wine spring from the earth. Conrad's artists wield powers a bacchant might envy. Manet, for example, makes almost anything happen. It is not enough that "Impressionism is inaugurated when, in 1853, Manet's model takes off her clothes to enjoy her lunch on the grass" (she probably didn't, by the way, since "Manet's model" was Raphael); in another chapter it is "Realism" that "begins with . . . Manet's girl at the picnic". Weegee's many powers, anywhere outside this book, would be mutually exclusive. On page 155 his "photographic act is the equivalent of a hold-up", on page 273 "the equivalent of an arraignment". Elsewhere the photographic act "is electrocution" and even "approaches detonation". Identities are as fluid in Conrad's New York as they are in any bacchic ecstasies. "Those bundled Sunday newspapers strewn on the sidewalk at the beginning of *Naked City* could just as well be corpses". Sooner or later, everything in this book turns into something else. "Implantation makes the globe an egg." "At a certain point, New York grows so tall that it leaves the earth and enters orbit: then the overreaching Trylon becomes the turning Perisphere." Four American presidents could not dislodge J. Edgar Hoover from the office of FBI director; one touch of Conrad's wand and Herbert Hoover is there instead. It is a short step from the state of mind in which persons are indistinguishable to the state of mind in which they are dispensable. One of Conrad's favourite and recurring images is that of F. Scott Fitzgerald as he ended a solitary alcoholic rampage on Fifth Avenue "and instigated a

giddy parade by rolling empty champagne bottles down the roadway".

Aspiring to the powers of Dionysus, Conrad tends to sound more like Euripides' Teiresias, decked out incongruously in fawnskin while delivering a learned lecture on philology. His prose, although flecked with glittering phrases, is almost impenetrably glutinous. Reading 300 pages of it feels like swimming through a sea of oatmeal. It can be an awfully long haul to the end of some of his sentences: "In its transit through the body the city has been ingested impressionistically and regurgitated abstractly, consumed as material or sensual food but transformed within Picabia into an unnutritious idea, a conceit, or what Duchamp called a 'cervellité.'" Or: "American romanticism isn't an individual retrenchment from the indifferent many but the individual's dilation to beget or contain the many, and even when Whitman surveys the empty western plains, he sees them, like the city, as congested – infinitudes, not vacancies, 'that vast Something, stretched out on its own unbounded scale, unconfined.'" No wonder Conrad often seems exhausted by what he calls "the chore of symbolism". When the going gets especially burdensome, he tries to ease the way with studied informalities, such as the elision of "is" in sentences that include terms from Greek rhetoric; eg, "The shoe's a metonym for the buildings".

Conrad describes this book as "an attempt to understand a place that fascinates me, and to understand my own fascination". Whatever the value of *The Art of the City* to readers interested in the art of the city, Peter Conrad's book will have enormous value to readers who want to understand his fascination with it.