

FALL 2019

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Translated from the Russian by J. Kates

MANHATTAN

And I too of the Mannahatta, singing thereof...

Morning. An elevated electric train dives under the East River and emerges on the island of Manhattan.

There are many Asians and Mexicans on the train.

An elderly man comes in. Accompanying himself on a guitar, he sings a song in Spanish. His voice is soft. He sings a little, walks through the car with his hat out, asking for money, but no one gives. He stops beside me, waits for me to give him some change.

A black man appears, sings to himself, paying attention to no one else. Leaning against the door, he gestures with his hands. A black, silvered, slightly gray-haired trail of braids dances down his back, dances by itself, twists in a free rhythm, long, like a line of Whitman's free verse.

Whitman came to poetry late in life—when he was over thirty-five, you might say, he'd lived half his life.

It seemed that nothing predicted that he was chosen by the muses, until suddenly his volcano began to erupt, taking everyone around him by surprise.

His creative phenomenon is somewhat reminiscent of a shamanic illness, when a person, if it's written in his genes, can not help but take on the role of a shaman.

I and my old American friend Dan Plumley, an ecologist from the Adirondacks, who accompanied me on a walk through Manhattan, stopped for a snack in a small cafeteria. It's nice to sit at a table on the sidewalk in the shadow of skyscrapers, taking small sips of coffee and smoking Marlboros, which I had stocked up on in Ulan-Ude before coming to the States. Awareness that you are in the heart of New York pleasantly tickles your self-esteem.

A young Asian passerby, most likely Chinese, distracts me from contemplating the street and asks for a smoke. (In the U.S.A. a pack of Marlboros costs twelve dollars, more than the morning breakfast with Dan). I kindly offer him a cigarette and ask his nationality, and he answers: I'm from California.

METAMORPHOSES

Limousines of all makes and models sweep past the sidewalk. In this stream of automobiles, bright yellow taxicabs, an awkward omnibus with a bearded blue-eyed man in a top-hat sitting on the goats next to the coachman suddenly appears (or so it seemed to me). Unexpectedly, the bearded man—as if he had stopped fitting between his shoes and his hat—began to stretch out in all his fantastic growth, and, waving good-bye with his hand raised above the skyscrapers, melted into thin air, and only a cloud sliding along the spire of a skyscraper left a memory of his silver beard.

Whitman is a poet who is constantly choking on his own overflowing pathos of the self-affirmation of his song.

It resembles a river that cannot hold the current flow between its banks, and the waves now and then roll over the channel, spraying the whole world.

His long poems and poems, which fit into one single book under the extremely precise and capacious title "Leaves of Grass," recall an enchanting saga of time, space, and self.

We walked along Madison Avenue, the avenue of bankers, as Dan explained to me. We crossed it, and took a taxi to 1000 Fifth Avenue, where an all-powerful invisible magnet attracts hordes of people from all around to the Metropolitan Museum, like a temple of art in the heart of Manhattan, created by the Golden Calf to justify its cult for the sake of a shaky balance between the divine and the satanic.

Merging with the flow of tourists spreading through the numerous halls, Dan and I wander like two pilgrims through eras, epochs and civilizations,

—Is it really possible to take in this universe of colors, lines, forms, and outlines with the human eye, the universe of harmony, wisdom and beauty,

where Egyptian pharaohs and Mesopotamian priests, shaking their square beards, look back through the ages to miniature statuettes of Greek goddesses, frozen in graceful stately poses—Aphrodite, whose body, in electric light, seems to flow with the Aegean blue sea foam from which she was born, and Pallas Athena, holding in her raised hand an owl—the bird personifying her Olympic wisdom,

where the giant Mahayana Bodhisattvas are sitting with haloes, stretching to the very ceiling: o wise Manchzhushri, who cuts the darkness of ignorance with his sword, oh, omniscient Avalokiteshvara, purifying the world with a tear of compassion—om mani padme hum!,

where the irresistible fascination of a naked female body pours out a white and bronze radiance like a smile of samsara on the canvases of Renoir and Gauguin,

where the *Chrysanthemums* of Claude Monet blossom into the Great Bear of Van Gogh's *Starry Night* in MoMA, where I also visited, on the Museum Mile of Fifth Avenue, also a metropolitan museum.

Drawn into the whirlpool of artistic worlds created by the fecund genius of the human "I" under the sign of eternity, and touching immortality for an instant, and stunned by the divine roar of the great sea of Art, Dan and I emerge from the halls, passing the tourists sitting on the steps of the museum across from a thin black man artistically playing jazz on a saxophone, we turn the corner of the museum into Central Park.

It helps that everything here is familiar to Dan, it's like a piece of his native Adirondacks, a national park-reserve located in the mountain range in northeast New York State. Yes, there really is a piece of the Adirondacks, true, man-made, sandwiched among the skyscrapers like a handful of needles in the palm of your hand. Here you can take it easy for at least half an hour and, following the Manhattan singer, "I lean and loaf at my ease observing a spear of summer grass."

The squirrels feel like touch-me-not-princesses in this green kingdom.

Bicycle taxis and handsome horses harnessed to carriages carry tourists.

The lawns, bordered by footpaths, wave with emerald grass.

A girl flies by on rollerblades.

In the shade of a wide alley of elms, a street artist sits at an easel, memorializing those who ask him.

A guitarist in a white T-shirt that emphasizes the black basalt of his face, in faded blue jeans and brown shoes, sings to idle passers-by. Peering through the strings of his red guitar with a black fingerboard, he sings a song in English, an amulet on his tanned neck sways to the beat of the slow movements of this singer—a descendant of those Iroquois horsemen who left their breath, the sounds of rain and wind, the names of birds and animals in the names of mountains and rivers, forests and prairies, as Whitman himself more than once affectionately repeated in his poems the Indian word Manhattan—"hilly island", which became the cradle of his endless songs.

And where now are your hills, your wigwams, Manhattan? The Indians have gone forever, having left their name to the island, having sold it, they say, for thirty dollars to the ubiquitous pale-faced newcomer.

METAMORPHOSES

This island smoothed out by civilization became the springboard from which New York rose into history. Embraced by the waters of the Hudson and the East River, Manhattan, like a crazy frigate, outstripping time, sails along, having raised stone sails of skyscrapers and stringing lazy clouds along the masts of heavenly skies, in the otherwise cloudless blue like eagle feathers on Indian war bonnets.

Yes, Manhattan, it's nice to linger here for a moment in the shade of your broad-leaved elms, through which the skyscrapers are visible. And to recall to the accompaniment of an Indian's guitar how I once, dressed in a terlik—a deep blue Buryat robe—read my poems in Times Square, in the heart of New York, for my friends: Dan's brother Peter and his Japanese wife Susie, originally from Hawaii. It was in the early 90's of the last century, when the Iron Curtain had collapsed and the world had opened up again.

Looking straight into the lens of Peter's amateur video camera, I read my poems in three languages—Buryat, Russian and a little bit in English. And the passers-by, flowing around me on all sides, stared at my unusual outfit and the red tassel on the malgae—the headdress that fluttered over my head like a solar sign of my fire-worshipping ancestors.

I read my poems in Manhattan, looking at the sky, blue above the canyons of the streets, and frowning under the bright sun, and it seemed to me that this “son of Manhattan, daredevil, lover of the New York sidewalk,” smiled at me broadly through the thickness of time, and his smile could not be obscured by the feverish hustle and bustle of the urban ant-hill, nor by the exclusive boutiques, nor by the flash of neon signage, nor by the advertising screams of the billboards that flooded Times Square.

I read my poems, and the smile of Manhattan was reflected in the eyes of my friends—Dan's brother Peter and his Japanese wife Susie, clapping in appreciation with her hands delicate and tender like leaves of grass.

Whitman was like a nomad, riding along the boundless steppe and singing all that he sees in his path.

But unlike the naive song of the steppe, the American poet fills his poetic words with cosmism, a planetary feeling of love and empathy.

He has the gift of reincarnation, the gift to mold from everyday life a universe of the human soul.

Dan and I roam around over the city in the evening, just wandering, glancing at the glittering shop windows of supermarkets, and, like two grains of sand unknown to anyone, dissolve in the shimmering abyss

of Manhattan,

where endless Broadway with its magical theaters, gushing musicals, art galleries, a pouring out of enchanting spectacles, fireworks of neon advertising lights stretches like a stellar galaxy that has fallen to earth,

where bridges and tunnels, avenues and streets, submitting to the yoke of traffic, fill the metropolis with the hum of the twenty-first century,

where the skyscrapers rise—each one more ambitious than the next—The MetLife Tower—that patriarch of skyscrapers the Woolworth Building, once sung by Mayakovsky; the Chrysler Building, nicknamed “the beauty of Manhattan”; the Empire State Building—the 102-story deposed king of skyscrapers, its scepter of a television tower piercing the New York sky;

where, it seems, the twin towers of the World Trade Center ruled Manhattan until recently, to the top of which—almost half a kilometer high—Dan and I (this was at the end of the last century) rose in the elevator, and in the hall at the entrance to the observation deck lines of Whitman singing New York were spread before my eyes, the letters running along the wall, as if they did not have enough space, flew through the air toward the greenish Statue of Liberty, who raised her flaming torch above her head with a flaming torch to the south, and I never could have imagined that the inspired lines of the Poet would be buried under shrouded clouds of smoke and dust by the debris of the twin towers on that fateful September morning in 2001.

We roam Manhattan, which, like a fantastic giant snake opening its mouth from the ground to the sky, draws legions of people into its insatiable interior, opens its doors to its supermarkets, offices, banks, libraries, boutiques, bars and restaurants, into one of which, under the tempting name “Russian Samovar,” Dan and I strayed for the sake of curiosity,

where the affable blonde Masha, the barmaid, smiling sweetly, let herself be photographed with us for a souvenir, and the interior featured a white grand piano at which a brown-haired fellow born in Odessa played Gershwin blues, and in the corner of the restaurant, over a small table, Brodsky, looking sadly out from a black and white photograph at solitary visitors who paid no attention to him but occupied themselves with their problems far from poetry and literature, was sheltered, and only his majesty the Samovar, polished to a shine, beamed out from the bar, the very symbol of a Russian restaurant.

METAMORPHOSES

Only free verse can sing Manhattan, the spread of its wings over the whole world, and vers libre has found in Whitman its universal mouthpiece.

True, the long lines in his poems, like bouts of inexhaustible verbosity, sometimes grow tedious.

But strangely enough, this is the originality and power of Whitman's Word, pouring out in free verse.

It is like the biblical Samson, whose strength was proportional to the length of his hair.

We wander around Manhattan in the evening. The city is like a gigantic musical hall under the open sky, decorated in its own way by stone jungles and playing out its grandiose spectacle with a cast of thousands, thousands, and thousands of nameless actors—constantly hurrying somewhere or other, halfwits pushed along by cudgels, businessmen fixated on their stock-market gambles, women like living mannequins, street musicians caught in the sights of smart phones, immigrants thirsty for a taste of democracy, tourists speaking different languages and all carrying the same backpacks, thousands, thousands and thousands, not knowing one another, running on the endless leashes of their own constantly flaring desires, and overlapping here in the Manhattan anthill, here at the crossroads of the world, the citadel of the American dream, where, on the shards of rose-colored glasses of past epochs, the irresistible avalanche of the twenty-first century rushes on, spreading along the channels of avenues and streets, enchanted and colored by the dollar.

We wander through Manhattan. The pavement under the light of evening fires gives off a breath of summer warmth. On Lexington Avenue we looked into the bar-restaurant Orsay, here it's air-conditioned cool, not many people. We drank "Brooklyn" beer (on draft) made according to a British recipe. We sat at the bar, nibbling nuts. Across from us, the barman with a dark beard. Music and song sound muffled. Several television screens show baseball, golf, and women's championship soccer.

Dan, an Anglo-Saxon with Celtic mixed in, likes his beer slightly bitter, relishes every sip, somewhat tongue-tied with pleasure. We reminisce about our meetings on the shores of Lake Baikal and in Mongolia, when Dan, like a modern-day cowboy, galloped in the 1990s over the wreckage of the Iron Curtain from the Hudson to the Selenga and abducted the beautiful Tserma from the Mongolian steppes, making her his life's companion with the blessing of the Eternal Blue Sky. Unexpectedly, in a tide of sentiment, Dan quotes Whitman from the "Song of

Myself’:

*Immense have been the preparations for me,
Faithful and friendly the arms that have help’d me.*

These lines sounded like a toast we were drinking, each of us thinking about something of our own in the shimmering depth of Manhattan.

At that late hour, slightly buzzed by our Brooklyn beer, we race to the metro. On the street, pedestrians have noticeably diminished, and the cars seem to have taken a time-out until the next day. We passed an old woman of European appearance, who looked to me like a ghost brought back to life at nightfall. She was laying out empty cardboard boxes under a half-dark canopy against the wall of a high-rise building, almost on the sidewalk.

Was this really where she was spending the night?

Picking up my astonished look, Dan said: “Homeless.”

Before diving into the subway, I looked back at the city sparkling like the Milky Way.

Where, O Manhattan, are your avenues and streets leading today?

The skyscrapers, like a giant herd of reinforced-concrete mastodons with luminous trunks raised to the sky, move through space and time, spreading out throughout America and the whole planet.

The globe, bending under their incredible weight, rotates laboriously on its axis.

Waves of life in the eternal confrontation between good and evil are rolling from continent to continent.

The third millennium is gaining momentum, panting from the overflow of events.

O Whitman, son of Manhattan, father of free verse, herald of universal love, whose caravans of free verses have dispersed along the roads of the Old and New Worlds.

“Leaves of Grass” from time to time have withered, but the scent of poetry in them remains imperishable.

O Whitman, who will hear your voice today in the shimmering depths of Manhattan?