

44—Whitman's Multitudes and Union Square



The past and present wilt—I have fill'd them, emptied them.
And proceed to fill my next fold of the future.
Listener up there! what have you to confide to me?
Look in my face while I snuff the sidle of evening,
(Talk honestly, no one else hears you, and I stay only a minute longer.)
Do I contradict myself?
Very well then I contradict myself,
(I am large, I contain multitudes.)
I concentrate toward them that are nigh, I wait on the door-slab.
Who has done his day's work? who will soonest be through with his supper?
Who wishes to walk with me?
Will you speak before I am gone? will you prove already too late?
—Walt Whitman, *Song of Myself*, 51

When I first stumbled across Union Square in lower Manhattan, I mistook the place as a space dedicated to "saving the Union." There was a plethora of patriotic statues; New York city is filled with monuments to the Civil War. This could be a place to once more commemorate the Union that was preserved by the sacrifice of so many. But this is not the case at all.

Union Square is a mistake, an accident, an opportunity born of circumstance. The small park, the subway station, the menagerie of statuary art which mark Union Square find their relationship in a series of streets that all form an awkward junction at that point of the city's thoroughfares. A park was fashioned, and a rhombus shaped traffic circle was formed because streets came together cockeyed and could only be joined, united, by being diverted.

In this diversion is the most intrigued set of monuments. It is as if someone started to collect them and got a bit obsessed. The first and grandest was the equestrian statue of Washington. Although it has been moved from time to time to different places in the Square, today it stands beside the subway entrance in a kind of micro plaza where people play chess, and the Orthodox Jews seek converts. Just to the right of Washington is the last statue to be added: Gandhi stands alone in some bushes. To the left of Washington in a small enclosure is a bronze bulldog dedicating the space of what might be the smallest dog park in the country. Beyond the bulldog is a Bethsaida statue commemorating health; this statue is a nod to the drinking water in the city. On the other side of the square almost in line with health is Lafayette, replete with sword.

When Union Square was reorganized in the 1930s, a statue of Lincoln was placed, relocated, at the top of the park directly in line with Washington, much like Grant and Lincoln are situated in the mall in D.C. Between Lincoln and Washington is a fascinating low relief sculpture in the round which forms the pedestal for a massive flagpole. The sculpture depicts the evolution of freedom and has the Declaration of Independence as a feature amongst the circular emergence of America's people. Coming between Lincoln and Washington it mirrors the latter's obelisk in the mall almost as if the flag is the true focus of the ever slightly eschew square.

Of all the monuments, and plazas and memorials I have visited and walked, this is far and away my favorite. The artistic vision of Saint-Gaudens is far superior to the work of the artists in Union Square. The sense of vision in the plan of the mall is much more of a match to the ambitions and spirit of America than the postage stamp feel of Union Square. And the list could go on as well as significant critique about rhyme, reason, and rhythm of a public space and how off kilter this all is. But that is certainly part of its charm. Even in its redesign it managed to be jumbled.

One part of the square that was lost along the way was a to-scale battleship that was constructed for recruiting purposes. During the work to bring the subway into the square, a ship was constructed in the worksite. It was temporary and didn't find a part in the renovation, but just that such a thing could make sense in Union Square is a pleasant thought.

Perhaps the joy of Union Square for me is that it is a living testimony to the process of memorializing and monument building. Like Velazquez and his painting, where he paints himself painting, the statuary of Union Square is a kind of meditation on statuary. If I were title the meditation, it would be something like Whitman's line, "I contain multitudes." Again, one of the more than half-dozen pieces of art should be enough for such a small place. Other small

parks and plazas and squares dot Manhattan and they have a statue (Admiral Farragut does such a space as does Horace Greeley). Bryant Park has a Bryant statue, but then the rest of the space is left for fashion. In the confluence of the unaligned streets though is a collection where one stumbles through a multitude.

It is easy today in our genetic research to speak of each person as a kind of multitude. We contain the genetic material of generations; we are a multitude of ancestors. In Walt Whitman, the line concerning multitudes is more a reference to memory than it is to blood, although such a metaphor is not out of line with 19th century thinking. This was the time when the terrible consideration of "eugenics" was beginning to dominate anthropology. Yet, more than misguided science concealing racism, the multitudes of Whitman is a reference to how the memories he keeps and how he has filled his past and present. His poem, verse, here is closer to a prayer than it is a scientific theory, an invitation not an explanation.

If we consider our collective memory as moments of sublime beauty and sublime tragedy, if we consider the beauty as a light to illuminate the memories and the grotesque as rendering the darkness all too real, then if we are so inclined to consider the multitudes who come and go in us as fragments ever alluding to a fullness, we are in a sense much like Union Square. We are a confluence of unintended relations, contradictions, juxtapositions collected in an all too brief life.