

Literature of the City 101

By William Alatryste I am a collector of faces. I collect them obsessively the way some people collect old books, or postcards of places they've visited. They populate my life and help satisfy a desire to know as much as I can about the world. At times the process is archeological: When I look at a face, I feel the impulse to dig, to discover the truth buried beneath the crust of appearance. And so I photograph. It is that simple.

Look at these faces for instance. What do you see? Something in you might stubbornly refuse to see anything beyond each gaze. For we are, in the end, victims of our own blindness, content to stare at a distance (the distance, for example, between the magazine you now hold in your hand and the men, the real men in these photos) without ever getting close enough to see or understand what's in front of us.

But these faces are special--they are the faces of great literature. Not of characters in the novels of Tolstoy, Mann or Dickens, though their lives are as psychologically complex as any in fiction. These men are all involved in selling books on the streets of New York City. Many are homeless, or have been at one time in their lives. And because of what they represent--the uneducated, the rootless, the marginal--

ized and dispossessed—each has endured more hardship and intolerance than you or I could ever imagine.

All these men live on the margin of the wound--the wound being the wealth and prosperity that surrounds them yet is painfully beyond their reach. They are haunted by it; at times they feel forsaken, bitter, displaced to the point of madness. As a result some have turned to alcohol, others to drugs. Most have done time (not necessarily in prison--although for some this too is a fact), but time on the streets, hard time, searching out ways to trump the often brutal and demoralizing forces that are constantly at odds with them, forces that threaten to consume them the way disease consumes the body. Everyone, it seems, wants to make them disappear: the police, who see them as a bunch of derelicts and hustlers; residents who feel that they make a mess of the neighborhood; and store owners, who believe they're not only bad for business, but that they should also be paying rent for the space they occupy freely on the streets. It is no small miracle that they have survived at all, since most people in this city look upon their suffering with a cold, theological indifference.

Over the years I have come to know these faces and the names attached to them: Slim, Shorty, Doc, Dollar Bill, Butter Roll, Bicycle Joe, Rock, Wheelchair Keith. They are bound to each other in want, and it has made them utterly resourceful. They have discovered and fully exploited a loophole in the law that allows them to sell books on the streets (under the First Amendment Right to Freedom of Speech). Per-

manently moored along Sixth Avenue in Manhattan's Greenwich Village, they've set up sidewalk tables and offer the public great literature twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, all year long, rain or shine. But this is only part of their story. By creating a well-organized network of manpower, they've also managed to thrive within (and despite) the confusion and turmoil of life on the streets. First there are the book scouts: those who prowl the streets late night and early morning, ripping open bags of garbage hoping to find books and magazines that others have discarded. Then come the spotters: men whose job it is to watch over tables so that others can sleep (spotters are essential to business since the city is constantly looking for ways to confiscate their books and tables, and leaving them unattended is the easiest). And finally there are the sellers themselves, men who profit the most from the collective labor of all the others. I have built a fine library on the sweat and energies of all these men. They are the greatest public benefactors I know.

Ultimately, these photographs try to document and index a specific world, a world I find fascinating and troubling and even inspirational. But beyond my need to explain and describe them--beyond language--there is the image, and in this respect I hope these faces reveal something about who we are, something about our own biases and limitations. Perhaps, as James Agee once wrote, they can even be a measure of the "normal predicaments of human divinity."

William Alatryste is a Photographer and Writer who lives in New York City



Doc - Book Scout



Grady - - Bookseller



Bicycle Joe--Book Scout



JR--Bookseller



Steve--Spotter