

Medicine and Taxes

Josephine Montrose, a resident of Brooklyn interested in Walt Whitman's background and in preservation of the building where he helped set and print the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* in 1855, has been reading editorials from the Brooklyn Eagle during the period when he was its editor. Mrs. Montrose calls attention to the interesting parallel that *Leaves of Grass* and *Progress and Poverty*, "two books which gained world wide influence in a thirty-year period, were written by independent newspaper men, editors of note, both leaving school early (Whitman at 14) but pursuing an education on their own through reading and penetrating observation of the world around them."

Both knew how to set type and both had to publish their own books because they were turned down by publishers of the day.

The Eagle was said to have had the largest circulation of any evening newspaper in the United States in the 1860's. The following editorial dated January 14, 1947, is reproduced as it appeared, and it is assumed to be by Walt Whitman, since it is his style:

AMONG the subjects on which people have been privileged to go mad, and to take silly action, from time immemorial, are taxes and medicine. When a man grows ever so little unwell—instead of returning to nature, which would so often remedy the result of non-compliance with sanitary law—the cry is

"Go call the doctor! ride with speed!"

And when that gentleman comes, "he ne'er forgets his Cal-omel" . . . When a legislative corps wants to try its hand at enacting especially foolish laws—laws that will annoy every body in some way, and do no body any real good in any way—it develops its

folly by attempting some of the phases of *taxation*. Thus in old times almost everything has been taxed, directly or indirectly—not only tangible things, but immaterialities. And it is the hardest task in the world to *un-tax* any thing again, after the taste of the stimulant has once been thoroughly obtained: because a thousand selfish interests grow up from prolific taxation, which will fight to the death, before they give up the blood-sucked fountains of their life! This it is, more than any thing else, that makes all kinds of officious taxation so full of danger. The mere paying of a few thousand dollars for two or three seasons is not important. Having a tickled-throat and a slight cough for a while, is not very important, either; but where those trivial ailments evidence the sure verging, unless quelled, into an irremediable decay of the lungs, the matter assumes a somewhat different aspect.

As money must be raised, however, for the expenses of the government, the question is resolved into that mode of taxation which is simplest, least liable to litigation, and the fairest to all parties. This is effected by taxation on real property, or *real estate*. All other objects of taxation are liable to so many escapes and so many injustices, that they cannot for a moment compare with real estate. —Besides, whatever expense falls upon real estate is filtered through upon all business, upon operatives, upon work, upon consumption, upon capital, upon the strength of the poor man's sinews, and the industry of the farmer in the fields . . . These Aldermen of New York who would tax non-residents' personal values, thrown in to N. Y. by their owners in such channels of business as to *increase the wealth and resources of*

that metropolis, are the greatest Fools the Nineteenth Century has yet produced! The *injustice* of the move is evident though; but this might be pardoned, if it were not at the same time so silly. Besides being silly, it may likewise prove impracticable. The N. Y. *Express* of this morning, which is generally ready to grab all it can in the way of high duties, says:

"The tax on merchants residing in Brooklyn, Jersey City, Staten Island and other places, will be difficult to collect. These people pay taxes in the counties where they reside. How far it may be possible to collect a double tax, remains to be seen."

We remarked the other day that impositions on personal property, by an old and wise rule of law, *Always follows the person*. There is no other way of managing it. A truer way still would be to *stop the practice of taxing personals altogether*. This will no doubt strike certain thick-headed gentlemen as quite a wild heresy: wilder heresies, though, have been put in shape and operation in time . . . The bother of collecting the proposed tax is also thus alluded to in the N. Y. *Mirror* of last evening:

"The city must pay its own expenses,

and if personal property is not to be taxed, an additional tax must be laid upon real estate, so that what is gained in one way is lost in another." . . . "The subject will be full of difficulties, and if the bill should become a law, we foresee a vast amount of litigation and trouble in determining who are proper subjects of taxation."

— New York ought to be really too great, rich, and noble a city, to think of adopting these petty means of increasing her revenues—nominally increasing them, but in fact taking away the nesteggs of her prosperity. Let her rise above such narrow views, and realize the widest scope of what such a metropolis should be and do! The compulsory inspections—one form of taxes—are already abolished: let her chase off her island all the kindred—a most wicked stock—of that unprofitable family! As to the proposed warf tax, surely its own absurdity must prevent its sober consideration by the Legislature. It is as though there were two inns, with two owners, and one should be senseless enough to put a raised drawbridge across the lane that leads to his very door! . . . The immigrant tax we shall take occasion to treat of in another article.

Seats in the same section of a theater cost the same whether they are occupied by fat men, small children, average people, appreciative people, sleeping, deaf or blind people—or left vacant by the ticket holders. The same show goes on for all of them, just as the same general services and neighborhood advantages are available to all holders of land in similar locations. Among the "neighborhood advantages" are of course those of nearby buildings—which may be skyscrapers next to parking lots or slums half a mile from prosperous centers. The slum dwellings lower the land value for each other, until there is a hint that the prosperous area may soon expand. It is not merely government but the whole community which creates or lowers these values, but government as the community's agent should collect the market rent . . .

Unless the prevailing mood of heavy lending is utilized to "anaesthetize the surgery" involved in setting up a new pattern of self-reliant enterprise, untaxed on its productivity but paying its own way for benefits received from the community, the future will offer nothing but recurrent chaos or disease in one blighted spot after another, to be remedied by constant spot therapy, or in the long run by an all-powerful government.

—John C. Weaver

Founder of "Allegheny Roundtable" radio and television programs.