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11th Street *A Divine Comedy, or 1 3/3 Gods*

“I had once lost my road in the desert and consumed all my provisions. I considered that I must perish when I suddenly caught sight of a bag and I shall never forget the joy and ecstasy I felt on thinking they might be parched grain nor the bitterness and despair when I discovered them to be pearls.”

Sa’adi, *Golestan (The Rose Garden)*

“Cities have the capability of providing something for everybody, only because, and only when, they are created by everybody.”

Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*

Mankind's Fall looms large on 11th Street – this most pious and god-fearing of thoroughfares, extending not straight-forwardly but crooking and breaking off with little warning through the mediaeval quarter of South-of-14th, a collection of Villages East, Greenwich and West within a forest dark, where New York retains stubborn traces of New Amsterdam.

There are four Gods jostling for space and competing for souls here. Or if one wants to be specific, one and three-third Gods: {Yahweh, GOD, Allah} – YGA (pronounced “jaeger”) for short – and Jane Jacobs.



The former's claim on the street is secure – not a block goes by without one of YGA's Houses of Worship, representing all three religions of the Book, and manifested in a multitude of denominations. Some of the oldest and grandest of these Houses occur here, erected by the Puritan founding fathers of the City, eager to prevent an entire citizenry from descending into fornication and incest. The other Houses followed later, as the City's denizens became more varied and worshipped permutations of YGA in accordance with the rituals of their respective home geographies.

The same cannot be said for the latter God(dess)'s claim on the street. Hers is a far more tenuous affair; essentially consisting of a small hamlet, secreted amongst gleaming high-rises and brand-name boutiques that constantly threaten to encroach upon Her sacred sidewalks thronged with flaneurs, booksellers, teakers, street-vendors, roller-bladers, rubber-neckers and other tribes of the Faithful. The Goddess herself has long since departed, to Toronto in the late '60s, and to the Sweet Hereafter, in the '00s.



Our pilgrim's progress begins on the East Bank, where a proliferation of community gardens and places of worship – these scattered Edens – nostalgically recall a Paradise that though lost to the City's denizens, still beckons from across the water with its seductive mirages of bohemianism and free love. Hell is never far from Eden; a mere step and one transgresses, falls hard. Past the East Bank, a landscape of total Jihad dominates. Here, YGA's grandest Houses of Worship – stupefying confections of soaring steeples and Gothic statuary wage Holy War against neon icons espousing ungodly delights and brazenly soliciting mindshare from unsuspecting pilgrims.

West of Hell sprawls Purgatory: four circles of it. The first, Purgatorio Grandissimo (Grand Purgatory) is where the wealthiest of cast-outs from Eden have re-created their own paradise-on-earth, riddled with proud and opulent palazzis: symbols of their race's flagrant contempt for the notion of Original Sin. The second, Limbo, is where the souls of the dead linger on unappeased, haunting the shells of buildings that have become twisted and corrupt shades of their former selves. The outlook is bleak here. The less spiritually constituted risk faltering and falling behind.

But if one perseveres, one then enters the third circle of Purgatory, which the Goddess has claimed as her own. Here lies a Jacobean Fantasy – a delightful garden-world adorned with fragrant, multi-coloured blossoms, meandering tree branches, shaded bowers, quaint cottages and most notably, pleasant sidewalks bustling with the most aesthetically pleasing of earthly life. Here the pilgrim would stop and sleep, perchance to dream.

But Purgatory itself may not sanction it: one is propelled into the fourth and final circle – Sodom and Gomorrah, those biblical capitals of sodomy and sanctimoniousness, simulated here as a final temptation; a final barrier to be breached before one attains the West Bank – the fabled Judaea, claimed by Muslim, Christian and Jew alike. Here, one looks across the water to Paradise, gleaming under the fragile light, only to find that the Paradise one has regained... well... it appears to be New Jersey.



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