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Boston and New York

The City Upon a Hill and Gotham

Shaun O'Connell

Each time I leave Boston to visit New York City I am grateful that it is still there. Since the World Trade Center was destroyed — on that beautiful, late-summer morning when we were stunned by endless television replays of planes exploding into tower after tower, then the agonizing, slow-motion crumbling of each massive structure as it dissolved into dust — we know every person, place, and thing is vulnerable, transient. Months after the attack, on a bone-chilling winter morning, I visited the site, aptly called ground-zero, to witness its haunting presence of absence. The resonant space where those massive, looming blocks once stood seemed filled with loss in the weak winter light. As Shelley's Ozymandius says, "nothing beside remains" but "trunkless legs of stone." But I could only get as close as the police barriers and the plywood fences, adorned with heartbreaking messages of remembrance, flowers, cards, and smiling pictures of the missing, the lost. For a few weeks, maybe months, New York City *was* America, perhaps as it never had been before. For a while, as was said at the time, we were all New Yorkers.

So when I visit, I am happy to see anew that Manahatta, as Walt Whitman called his city, still stands tall and proud. It remains *the* city: ever its wondrous, various, exalted self. New York still shimmers with what F. Scott Fitzgerald called: "all the iridescence of the beginning of the world." Not a city of apocalypse, but of infinite possibilities.

I am delighted to see that streets and sidewalks along Central Park are still filled with squawking vehicles and bustling people of all shapes and sizes, colors and nationalities. Groups of kids, hovered over by moms and nannies, still cross the wide avenues, along with sniffy, leashed dogs. A crazed but apparently harmless rapper still spouts his doggerel in the depths of the Central Park West/86th Street Subway Station. The warm smell of the best bagels in the world still leaks outside H&H, onto clamorous Broadway, while I scan the discounted books on tables outside Zabar's. Isaac Bashevis Singer lived across the street, on West Eighty-sixth Street, mapping

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the landscape in language, and Saul Bellow described these Upper Broadway blocks in *Seize the Day* as “throbbing through the dust and fumes, a false air of gas visible at eye level as it spurted from the bursting buses.” So we see the city through the eyes of its beholders, and we recreate it anew in our imaginations.

The Reservoir in Central Park still shines in the morning light; it has shed its chain-link barrier and now sports a wrought-iron fence, but joggers still trot around, mostly counterclockwise. On a chill Sunday morning in January a herd of joggers — running in support of who knows what cause? — pounds along the Park’s roads, while dogs scamper, socialize, and fetch. On an early spring afternoon forsythia and early leaves soften our view of the austere buildings that surround the Park. It’s still “lovely going through the Zoo,” as Lorenz Hart put it: The Central Park Zoo, where Gus, a white bear, swims his endless laps. The steaks at Frankie and Johnny’s were still thick and succulent on one trip, but months later the popular Eight Avenue restaurant with its Mafia-motif was, mysteriously, closed. But Lincoln Center still glitters with artful sights and sounds of jazz, dance, and theater, while City Center gives *The Pirates of Penzance* a New York twist of ironic camp and Broadway bursts with savage wit and talent in a *Sweeney Todd* revival. Plays come and go, but Broadway still shines and George M. Cohan’s statue still presides over Times Square. After each visit, I return to Greater Boston, my home, reassured that New York City, the greatest show on earth, is emphatically and beautifully *there*. “I happen to like New York,” as Cole Porter put it:

The more I know New York, the more I think of it,
I like the sight and the sound and even the stink of it.

Whenever I visit Manhattan, I catch passing glimpses of my alternate self, an adventurous young man from the provinces who took the road not taken by my actual, more circumspect self. I almost see him turning a corner, or glancing out of the back seat of a speeding cab or — vaguely, at a distance — disappearing into a mid-town crowd: that hypothetical version of myself who left the parochial safety of Greater Boston just after college in the late 1950s to try his luck in Manhattan. Where, I wonder, is he headed in such a rush? Where has he been? I view him now with more than curiosity, drawn to the mysterious attraction of what might have been. New York has long been “the city of ambition,” as Tom Wolfe calls it, the city of transcendence from the ordinary. “If you can make it there, you can make it anywhere,” sang Sinatra, who made it there.

But Gotham has been the city of destruction, as well, so going to Manhattan in my early twenties might have turned out badly, for New York offers not only seemingly limitless possibilities of self-realization but also every

temptation toward self-destruction imaginable, and I once had a strong taste for the vices of my generation: smoking, drinking, gabbing and “dating,” as we delicately called it. (“Smoking, drinking, never thinking of tomorrow, . . . dining with some girl in a restaurant. Is that what you really want?” — the rhetorical question with the obvious answer that Duke Ellington posed in “Sophisticated Lady.”) On the other hand, the world of print journalism and magazine writing — the alternative career to my chosen life as a Boston-based English professor — was far more open to fledgling writers in the 1950s than it is now. Consider the amazing career of Willie Morris, the Yazoo, Mississippi boy who went *North Toward Home*, as he put it in an autobiography, and became the legendary editor of *Harper’s*. So, on a lesser scale, I might have got by, at least for a while, in the city that never sleeps.

Who knows, I muse, I might even have become a Yankees fan, though that is hard to imagine, after a childhood of suffering Red Sox season-ending collapses at the hands of the mighty Yankees and arguing the superiority of Ted Williams, the Red Sox “Splendid Splinter,” against fans of Joe DiMaggio, “the Yankee Clipper.” No, even if I had become a New Yorker, Boston and The Red Sox would have held their place in my heart, for both represent *home*. Had I gone to Manhattan then, I imagine that when I traveled two hundred miles north to my former home I would have caught passing glimpses of my alternate self in and around the streets of Boston. As Robert Frost makes clear in “The Road Not Taken,” *any* choice you make can be seen, “ages and ages hence,” to have “made all the difference.” The trick is to honor both what was and what might have been, for, as Fitzgerald memorably put it, the test of intelligence “is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function.”

So, Boston and New York City have long occupied alternate and complementary sides of my being and divided my mind. Though I have been drawn to other cities, particularly to James Joyce’s “dear, dirty Dublin,” and I have imagined that I would have loved growing up in James T. Farrell’s and Saul Bellow’s raffish Chicago, that somber city, it is Boston and New York City that have most obsessed me, for those cities, so close and yet so different, embody fact and fancy, actuality and imagination, reality and dream, conflicting but also complementary world views. If Boston is my thesis, a given proposition, and New York City is my antithesis, Boston’s established opposite, what is the synthesis?

■ I have published two books: one on the literary imaginations of each city: *Imagining Boston* (1990) and *Remarkable, Unspeakable New York* (1995). In them I tried to track, through reading the literature of Boston and New York City, the ways each city imagined itself into being. The titles suggest the theme of each book. *Imagining Boston* was largely a celebration of

Boston — “the hub of the universe,” as Oliver Wendell Holmes, “The Autocrat of the Breakfast Table,” playfully put it — as the nation’s center of moral and cultural consciousness, at least before it let its grip slip on the nation’s heart and mind late in the nineteenth century. *Remarkable, Unspeakable New York*, an ironic phrase taken from Henry James’s *The American Scene*, on the other hand, was a more mixed reading, for much of that city’s literature — think of Stephen Crane’s *Maggie*, *A Girl of the Streets*, Theodore Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie*, Edith Wharton’s *The House of Mirth* or F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*, all works that end in tragic deaths — showed New York as a place of both bright promise and inevitable disillusionment. As the old saying goes, there’s a broken heart for every light on Broadway.

Of course there is a literature of disillusionment, particularly of regret, in Boston — think of William Dean Howells’s *The Rise of Silas Lapham* or George V. Higgins’s *The Friends of Eddie Coyle* — and the literature of New York is full of examples of triumph, from Walt Whitman’s buoyant “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” to the wonderfully corny movie and Broadway musical *42nd Street*, so the urban cultural alternatives do not fall into stark or simple moral parables. Neither city is easily containable — each of us constructs fitting emblems of place — but my Boston book came together better than my New York City book, in part because Boston, for all of its cultural tensions — the “city of neighborhoods” is also famously the city of divided ethnic and economic turfs — does possess what one Boston chronicler called “common ground,” while New York City is unified only in its diversity.

As more than a decade passed since I published these books, I have continued to reflect upon these intriguing cities, while I still live just outside Boston and still visit New York City when I can. Both cities have changed dramatically in the last decade. They have grown richer and glitzier, more expensive and expansive. Indeed, Boston has become more New Yorkerish, at once ritzier, more tolerant of diversity, and suddenly avid for reconstruction, while Manhattan has grown more Bostonian, more closed-in, moralistic, and nostalgic.

Ironically, as Boston gained symbolic equity with New York in the baseball world by winning the World Series in 2004, the city grew more subordinate to New York in the business and cultural worlds. The *Atlantic Monthly*, emblem of Boston’s cultural primacy since 1857, moved to Washington, D.C. Houghton Mifflin, whose ancestry traces back to James T. Fields, publisher of *The Scarlet Letter*, cut its ties with Boston and moved to New York City. The *Boston Globe* was absorbed by the *New York Times*, which also owns a percentage of the Red Sox, confusing the home-town sports coverage in both newspapers. In these and other ways, Boston and New York City made evident their long-standing interdependency and complex interrelationship. Each city, it seems, needs the other to define itself.

New York City's sense of itself as a mighty metropolis was, of course, challenged mightily by the destruction of the World Trade Center. On a far lesser scale and on an entirely different note, Boston's sense of itself as a perennial runner-up city was challenged by the surprising success of the Red Sox in 2004, after decades as losers. (Before 2004, desperate Red Sox fans chanted "Yankees Suck," while smug Yankees fans replied "1918," the year of the Red Sox last championship. Boston, it was believed, suffered from "the curse of the Bambino," that is, from the sale of Babe Ruth to the Yankees in 1920, leading to eighty-six years of runner-up finishes for the Red Sox and twenty-six World Series titles for the Yankees.) More important than winning in 2004, perhaps, was Bostonians' satisfaction that the Red Sox beat the Yankees in the American League Playoffs on their way to best the St. Louis Cardinals, who had defeated Boston in the 1946 World Series, thus enacting a satisfying double retribution. Indeed, the Red Sox humiliated the Yankees in 2004. After losing the first three games of the American League Playoff series, the Red Sox, with storybook late-game heroics, came back to do what has never been done in Major League Baseball post-season play before: they beat the Yankees in four straight games! What, then, did disaster do to the mind and heart of New York? What does success mean to Bostonians, long accustomed to waiting until next year? In both cities residents now live beyond their traditional myths and identities. In turn, each city has to revise its sense of the other.

Boston has long stood for probity and piety, while New York City has meant commerce and cultural diversity. Yet today, Boston seems as committed to the bottom line and the top dollar as New York ever has been. Renewed by The Big Dig, a vast public works project that dramatically overran its budget but linked the previously divided sections of the city with elegant tunnels, roads, and a spectacular new bridge over the Charles River, Boston's new buildings and businesses soar. Since 1980 the city's population has risen and it has become the richest region in the United States outside New York and San Francisco. Boston, long an educational center, has reinvented itself as a technology and information age capital. Writing in 2003, Harvard economist Edward L. Glaeser saw Boston as "a high-tech, culture-rich beacon of the future."

At the same time, New York City, while even more expensive and still famous for its tear-down, build-up character, seems more reflective, even more spiritual, not only to this visitor. New Yorkers share traits of greed and anger, but, above all, nostalgia, suggests Pete Hamill, in *Downtown: My Manhattan*. "The city is, in a strange way, the capital of nostalgia" for the city, particularly Manhattan, "absolutely refuses to remain as it was." The Third Avenue El, the Dodgers, and the Giants — all gone. After the World Trade Center was destroyed, New Yorkers' "tough nostalgia," a memory of all that has slipped away, became evident. Immigrants long

came to New York with a sense of the Old Country, at once lost and remembered; this “double consciousness — the existence of the irretrievable past buried in shallow graves within the present — was passed on to the children of the immigrants and, with diminishing power, to many of the grandchildren.” Of course, both cities were transformed by the massive influx of immigrants from mid-nineteenth-century to the 1920s, and both offered the promise of American life to newcomers. Boston offered them personal sacrifice and spiritual ascent, while New York City offered them material, even sensual opportunities — “the fresh green breast of the new world,” as Fitzgerald put it.

Boston and New York City: both Europe-facing, Eastern-seaboard cities built around large harbors, located along converging rivers, were founded in the early seventeenth century to expand the range and opportunities of European religious communities, business opportunists, and settlers. Boston defined itself, in John Winthrop’s famous phrase, as a Puritan “city upon a hill,” an outpost of God’s new model army pursuing its errand into the wilderness, while New Amsterdam, as the Dutch called it, became a commercial outpost, a site with a secular mission that was not radically altered when it became New York under English rule in the 1660s. In Boston, where English Puritans dominated, Congregationalism lasted some two hundred years; in New York, where the Dutch and the English vied and intermarried, pluralism soon won over orthodoxy.

Boston took the lead in the American Revolution, while New York City, occupied by British forces, became the Tory capital. After the Revolutionary War, Boston sought to establish itself as the center of political and cultural power, while New York City became a political force. John Adams (principled, judgmental, provincial) spoke for Boston, while Alexander Hamilton (pragmatic, cosmopolitan, commercial) spoke for New York. In 1774 Adams noted that “with all the Opulence and Splendor of [New York] City, there is very little good Breeding to be found.” He might have had Hamilton, whose “breeding” was ambiguous, in mind. But despite the contributions of Adams and Boston, on April 30, 1789, George Washington was inaugurated as first president on the balcony of Federal Hall (old City Hall) on Wall Street. New York City was the new nation’s capital for fifteen months, until Hamilton and Jefferson worked out “the deal” which, after ten years in Philadelphia, sent the capital to the Potomac in exchange for support of Southern states in assuming the national debt. Boston meant principle, while New York meant pragmatism.

Between the Revolution and the Civil War, Boston asserted its moral and militant primacy. “As the ‘Athens of America’ — a city of statesmen and philosophers, artists and writers — Boston [sought] to control the destiny of

the American Republic through the influence of its cultural institutions and the high-minded virtue of its citizenry,” notes Thomas H. O’Connor, in *The Athens of America: Boston 1825–1845*.

Boston’s high point of cultural and moral ascendancy was gained before and during the Civil War. Greater Boston stood at the center of what F.O. Matthiessen called *The American Renaissance*. In Concord, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Margaret Fuller, Bronson Alcott, and others articulated a transcendentalist vision, affirming Puritan idealism in a new, more spiritual and benign but still moralistic way. In western Massachusetts, Nathaniel Hawthorne, having just published *The Scarlet Letter*, befriended Herman Melville and inspired his metaphysical reach in composing *Moby-Dick*, a novel dedicated to Hawthorne. (After Melville, a relocated New Yorker and a “Young American” advocate of national literature, encountered Hawthorne in the Berkshires, he wrote that Hawthorne was a kindred American, but Melville remained wary of “Bostonian literary flunkeyism toward England.”) In Boston, the *North American Review*, and *Atlantic Monthly* were founded to confirm the city’s cultural primacy. Theodore Parker, Charles Sumner, William Lloyd Garrison, Lydia Maria Child, and others led the Abolitionist crusade against slavery with neo-Puritan passions. As O’Connor points out, Boston’s prosperous business leaders were at the center of cultural renewal and political idealism. The Thursday Evening Club, for example, included business leaders (Abbott Lawrence) and scientists (O. W. Holmes, Louis Agassiz).

Robert Gould Shaw, reared on Beacon Hill and educated at Harvard, came to embody the Boston ideal when he formed the Fifty-fourth Massachusetts Regiment, marched through Boston, and led his African American troops to a brave, doomed assault on Fort Wagner, South Carolina, in July, 1863, where Shaw was buried in a ditch with most of his troops. John Greenleaf Whittier commemorated Shaw as “the very flower of grace and chivalry . . . he seemed to me beautiful and awful, as an angel of God come down to lead the host of freedom to victory.” Boston then was truly a symbolic city upon a hill, a time and a place when, in the words of William James, idealistic Bostonians were “touched with fire.”

At the same time, Walt Whitman spoke to New York City’s spirit — less fiery, perhaps, but more inclusive, democratic, improvisatory — better than anyone before or after him. Born in rural Long Island in 1819, the same year Melville was born in lower Manhattan, Whitman came of age in Brooklyn and Manhattan. On the composition of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman urged his readers to “remember, the book arose out of my life in Brooklyn and New York . . . absorbing a million people . . . with an intimacy, an eagerness, an abandon, probably never equaled.” Whitman’s

faith in the city was tested by gang warfare and Tammany Hall's political corruption. His belief in America as a diverse yet unified New York City writ large was tested by the Civil War, yet at the end of his life he reaffirmed his vision in "Manahatta," a poem which celebrates the city's ships, streets, immigrants ("fifteen or twenty thousand a week"), airs, and people — "City of hurried and sparkling water! City of spires and masts!/ City nested in bays! My city!" Whitman was, as he proudly claimed in "Song of Myself," "a kosmos, of Manhattan the son."

The important relationship between Whitman and Emerson reveals a great deal not only about the character of the two men but also about the values of the two cities they represented. Emerson, a Boston Latin boy and minister of the Second Church of Boston, removed himself from the city to write *Nature* in Concord, but he kept his ties to Boston culture through lectures, clubs, and the *Atlantic*. In "Boston Hymn," a poem he read at the Boston Music Hall on January 1, 1863, Emerson rallied Boston's Puritan idealism in the cause of Union victory over the slave-holding Confederacy. God's missionaries into the wilderness must struggle to "unbind the captive,/ So only ye are unbound." Emerson, who had decried the city's increasing commercialism, here reaffirmed the image of Boston as America's city upon a hill. "Boston commands attention as the town which was appointed in the destiny of nations to lead the civilization in North America."

A few years earlier, Emerson had welcomed Whitman to the realm of the cultural elect. In 1855 Emerson, America's most respected man of letters, wrote to Whitman, the obscure, Brooklyn-based journalist-poet, after Whitman had sent Emerson a copy of the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*. Whitman followed Emerson's 1840s lectures in New York and granted that "I was simmering, simmering, simmering; Emerson brought me to a boil!" but Emerson had been unaware of Whitman when he received *Leaves of Grass*: twelve loosely-punctuated and prose-like poems, with an engraving of the casual, lounging author, published on July 4. Emerson's amazing reply illustrated his taste, his cultural sensitivities, and his regional values.

I find it the most extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom that America has yet contributed. I am happy in reading it, as great power makes us happy . . . I greet you at the beginning of a great career, which yet must have had a long foreground somewhere, for a start.

The enterprising Whitman passed along Emerson's endorsement, without permission, to the *New York Tribune*, where it was printed to promote

Leaves. But Emerson soon became disturbed by the book, describing it as “a nondescript monster, which yet had terrible eyes and buffalo strength, and was indisputably American” in a letter to Carlyle. Emerson also worried that passages on sex in *Leaves* might be seen as endorsing the free-love movement, notes David Reynolds in *Walt Whitman’s America*. Whitman, undeterred, wrote anonymous, enthusiastic reviews of his own book in *United States and Democratic Review*, *Brooklyn Daily Times & American Phrenological Journal*, stressing its theme of American cultural cohesiveness. This self-promoting New Yorker had none of the qualms of the Sage of Concord.

In 1860, while Whitman was in Boston preparing the third edition of *Leaves*, he walked Boston Common with Emerson, who again complained of the erotic element in Whitman’s poetry, but Emerson still could not temper him. That is, Whitman remained, magnificently and incorrigibly, a free-wheeling and free-verse New Yorker, while Emerson, at the end of the day, was a proper Bostonian, in poetic form and moral purpose.

James Russell Lowell, Boston Brahmin poet and Harvard professor, spoke more sharply to these conflicting personal and urban values when he warned a foreign visitor away from Whitman: “Whitman is a rowdy, a New York tough, a loafer, a frequenter of low places, a friend of cab drivers!” But Charles Eliot Norton, Boston Brahmin and cultural arbiter, saw not only the elements that divided Whitman and Emerson, but also all that united them. Whitman, wrote Norton, was “a compound of New England Transcendentalist and New York rowdy” who combined the traits of “a Concord philosopher with those of a New York fireman.” Whitman, with P. T. Barnum-like promotional skills that were characterizing mid-century Manhattan, needed Emerson to launch his “great career,” but so, too, did Emerson need Whitman, the spiritual and poetic son who surpassed his literary father in boldness of thought and expression. Each writer completed the other, as has Boston and New York City.

While Boston during the Civil War represented moral idealism and self-sacrifice, New York City was riven by draft riots. In June 1863, after Lincoln issued the Enrollment Act of Conscription, mobs, largely composed of Irish immigrants, rampaged for three days until Lincoln ordered troops from Gettysburg to restore order. George Templeton Strong — lawyer, preservationist, and diarist — viewed the gangs and mobs of New York with horror, but he fought to retain civility in the City by founding the New York Historical Society, by serving on the Sanitary Commission during the Civil War, and by supporting the Olmstead-Vaux plan for Central Park. Strong was wary of his city’s future: “Celts, caravans of dirt, derricks, steam engines, are the elements out of which our future Pleasuranc is rapidly developing.” But Strong believed the Park would redeem the city, make it “a lovely place in A.D. 1900.” Indeed, Central

Park would, in time, become, in the words of Alan Trachtenberg, “a city upon a hill within the city of destruction.”

Winthrop’s city upon a hill was, then, transferable. By century’s end, Boston’s influence had declined, since, as O’Connor shows, “the rest of the country did not want Boston as their model, did not those citizens want their own life and culture to reflect the society they saw in the New England region?” Van Wyck Brooks nicely encapsulated this cultural cycle in the two titles from his Spenglerian study of American culture: from *The Flowering of New England* to *New England: Indian Summer*. Brooks quotes Barrett Wendell, Harvard professor and cultural arbiter, saying farewell to all lovely things, as he saw Boston Brahmin culture, in 1893. “We are vanishing into provincial obscurity. America has swept from our grasp. The future is beyond us.”

That future, that revised and renewed version of America, could be found two hundred miles south, in Manhattan. Alfred Kazin claims in *On Native Grounds* that when William Dean Howells left his editorship of Boston’s *Atlantic Monthly* in 1881 and moved to New York City, he took “the literary center of the country with him.” Kazin, a passionate partisan of New York City, states this too sharply, for Boston shared literary centrality with Manhattan for the next century, but he is right to fix on Howells’s choices, literary and geographic, for he was the most influential man of letters in America in his era. When Howells, a young man from provincial Ohio, first arrived in 1860 he saw Boston-Cambridge-Concord as the heart of American culture. Boston then had “a literary coloring, and when the greatest talents were literary.” Howells met Hawthorne, his idol, and was tapped as a literary successor by Holmes. After the Civil War, Howells set out “to become a Boston Brahmin,” as Leon Edel put it. Through his editorship of the *Atlantic* — where he enlisted the talents of such diverse American voices as Henry James and Mark Twain — and his achieved fiction, particularly *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, Howells did just that, even building a manse in Boston’s Back Bay. Howells did not burn down his house, as had Silas Lapham, who overreached his social station in class-stratified Boston.

Still, though prosperous and socially-accepted, Howells eventually became restless and confined by Boston’s propriety, so he moved on, deciding he was unable to breathe freely in Boston’s proper “literary atmosphere.” Bostonians, he came to see, sometimes “sacrificed the song to the sermon.” The Boston literary form, he wrote, was the romance, perfected by Hawthorne, who placed his works, as the romancer put it, in “a neutral territory, somewhere between the real world and fairy-land, where the Actual and the Imaginary may meet, and each imbue itself with the nature of the other.” The romance was “true to the ideal of life rather than to life itself,” decided Howells, who had taken up the cause of literary realism

(“Let fiction cease to lie about life.”), an approach to literature that fit the temper of Manhattan, as he brilliantly showed in *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, his great novel of urban class warfare. “New York was the place” for ambitious, young writers, he declared. “Once land him in New York and all would be gas and gaiter.” For Howells, at age fifty-one, New York provided a national perspective that provincial Boston never could offer. In his first “Editor’s Study” column for *Harper’s Monthly*, the Manhattan-based cultural competitor with the *Atlantic*, Howells imagined his “vast windows of flawless plate look out upon the countless waters of the Hudson and the Charles, with expanses in the middle distance of the Mississippi, the Great Lakes” and beyond. Howells, who supported regionalist writers and believed in a decentralized American literary community, left Boston, then, for a wider world, whose entry-point was Manhattan, the center, as he saw it, of “life itself.”

Nearly a century after Howells fled Boston, Robert Lowell, a descendant of one of Boston’s first families — born on Beacon Hill, like Henry Adams before him, “under the shadow of the Boston State House” — also took his leave, moving to New York with his wife, Elizabeth Hardwick. She was ready to say goodbye to all that Boston meant, insisting in “Boston: The Lost Ideal,” that “Boston is defective, out-of-date, vain, and lazy,” only conceding that “if you’re not in a hurry it has a deep secret appeal.” Robert Lowell knew all about Boston’s deep appeal and its deeper defects, but he no more could free himself from the city that shaped him than James Joyce could leave behind Dublin by moving to Zurich. As Joseph Brodsky put it, Lowell remained the porcupine who “sharpens his needles against Boston’s bricks.”

Lowell’s sharpest needle into Boston’s inflated sense of self-importance and commercial preoccupations came in “For the Union Dead,” a poem he first read on the Boston Garden at the Boston Arts Festival in 1960. Lowell invoked the image of Robert Gould Shaw — the model of Boston valor and value, the personification of the Boston ideal of noble self-sacrifice — enshrined in Augustus Saint-Gaudens’s magnificent monument of Shaw leading the Fifty-fourth Massachusetts Regiment, a bas relief that stands at the crest of Boston Common and faces the State House. Shaw had been long commemorated by Boston writers — James Russell Lowell, Emerson, William James, John Berryman, and many more — who saw him as a personification of the city’s values, so Lowell was extending the genre, but he was also turning praise of Shaw into criticism of Boston.

Lowell imagined that Shaw and the monument in his memory were threatened by a vast construction project which had torn up Boston Common for an underground parking garage. “A girdle of orange, Puritan-pumpkin colored girders/ braces the tingling Statehouse” and Shaw is “out of bounds now” because he stood and died for values symbolized by his

erect statue. Shaw “cannot bend his back,” but in modern Boston “a savage servility/ slides by on grease.” In “For the Union Dead” Robert Lowell, with all the righteous indignation of one who speaks from and for a set of uncompromising family and regional values, reminded Boston of its abandoned faith in self-sacrifice and transcendent idealism. “The old Faith was something of the mind. Intensely of the mind, the naked ideal hidden in vestments of a life-denying drabness, opposed to display and yet expensive, sensual, baroque disclosures of the flesh. Such the fable.” Before he left for New York City, like Howells before him, Lowell, in the form of the poetic jeremiad, called for a renewal of Boston’s original covenant as the city upon a hill.

New York City’s old faith in itself was evident to me on a sparkling day in April when I made my first visit to Ellis Island. The Battery, from which you can see across the harbor the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island, marks the beginning of Manhattan, as Hamill reminds us in *Downtown*. There, amid other memorials to the dead from many wars, stands the large sphere, made by Fritz Koenig, that stood for thirty years in the plaza of the World Trade Center. Though twisted out of its original shape, it has been reassembled and relocated as a memorial to all that happened on September 11, 2001. Somber thoughts settled as I looked *through* Koenig’s sphere at new skyscrapers that look down on the Battery.

But the large crowd that gathered around Fort Clinton before embarking on a ferry to the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island did not seem gathered to mourn loss but, instead, was there to celebrate the promise of American life. Long lines of chatting, snacking tourists, speaking many languages, milled around and wound this way and that, puzzling me and my wife. As we stood still, trying to figure out which way to go, a young man from India came over to us to help, telling us to split up: I should get into the ticket line at Fort Clinton and my wife should get into the long boat line to speed things up; I could then join her there with the tickets. “I have been here many times, with different members of my family, so this is the best way.” We thanked him, did as he suggested, and found our way with the guidance of this young foreigner who clearly knew his way around and had much to teach us about American matters and manners.

Castle Clinton was built on a lower Manhattan island in 1811 to defend against a threatened British invasion; now, after land fill, it is part of the mainland. As Castle Garden it hosted Jenny Lind, the “Swedish Nightingale” in 1850, and Walt Whitman was there to hear her sing. Between 1855 and 1890 it served as the principal immigration site, processing the huddled masses from Famine Ireland, some of them my own ancestors, and many other nations. Walt Whitman came to welcome many of them to America.

In 1896, Castle Garden became the New York City Aquarium until 1941. Today it is an open-air, circular structure, hardly larger than Shakespeare's Globe Theater, where, as we had been correctly told, you line up to buy boat tickets. Castle Clinton thus stands as another emblem of New York City's adaptability.

Ellis Island opened in 1892 and processed new arrivals, some days over 6,000, until 1954. The magnificent building that greets today's festive tourists, arriving from the Battery and the Statue of Liberty, was built in 1900, on the style of a great train station. Indeed, it was referred to as a "station." "Situated on one of the most prominent locations in the harbor, the new station is an imposing as well as pleasing addition to the picturesque waterfront of the metropolis," said the *New York Times* on its opening. Imagine immigrants' awe on arriving at this version of Grand Central Station, which opened in 1913, ready for their journey into the America mainland. In Ellis Island's Great Hall immigrants were questioned, examined and sent on. Today, restored from near-ruin, the registry room is a vast, open space, filled with light streaming through high windows, American flags hanging from its balcony, the vaulted ceiling of terra cotta tiles erected by Rafael Guastavino giving the interior the feel of a cathedral. Tourists wander, stare, take pictures, trying to imagine what it must have been like when the hall was crowded by barriers, chairs, officials, and frightened immigrants. A visit to Ellis Island is humbling, inspiring, and, without irony or qualification, makes one proud to be an American.

The boat trip back, past the Statue of Liberty, to the Battery repeats the journey of America's ancestors, the tired and poor, yearning to be free, and it provides an informing context for the debate over illegal immigration that divides citizens today. The skyline of Lower Manhattan, with its tall and colorful towers looming over a few eighteenth century buildings and the waterfront, is thrilling to behold — it seems to grow in size and grandeur as the boat approaches, though its tallest structures, the twin towers of The World Trade Center, are no longer there to be seen.

Reassured, I return to Boston, where I keep track of the Red Sox-Yankees perpetual passion play. I read the *New York Times* and the *Boston Globe* each morning, retaining my dual citizenship in these two great American cities. Boston, the Hub of the Solar System, and New York City, Gotham: long-time rivals, yet parallel and mutually supporting universes of culture, immigration, and education. (James Levine conducts both New York's City's Metropolitan Opera and The Boston Symphony Orchestra.) America's Athens and Sparta sometimes war, but each needs the other to define itself against; taken together the two cities represent a synthesis of values and virtues that define the American experience — Boston's idealism and moral values; New York City's pragmatism and passion — as well as many of the nation's failings, from Boston exclusiveness to New York's tolerance for

corruption. Today they have merged, in a sense, into America's mega-city, battling it out in the American League East, but united in their difference from most of the rest of the nation in the rich sense of the past and deep sense of place that their residents share.