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Book Reviews: Divided Houses

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Shaun O'Connell

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Among the works discussed in this essay:

- Midair*, by Frank Conroy. 149 pages. E. P. Dutton. \$15.95.
The Inman Diary: A Public and Private Confession, edited by Daniel Aaron.
 2 vols. 1,661 pages. Harvard University Press. \$50.00.
The Nuclear Age, by Tim O'Brien. 312 pages. Alfred A. Knopf. \$16.95.
The Long Approach, by Maxine Kumin. 80 pages. Viking-Penguin. \$14.95.
Common Ground: A Turbulent Decade in the Lives of Three American Families,
 by J. Anthony Lukas. 659 pages. Alfred A. Knopf. \$19.95.
House, by Tracy Kidder. 341 pages. Houghton Mifflin Co. \$17.95.
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*The house of fiction has in short not one window, but a million—
 a number of possible windows not to be reckoned, rather; every
 one of which has been pierced, or is still pierceable, in its vast
 front, by the need of the individual vision and by the pressure of
 the individual will.*

—Henry James
 Preface to *The Portrait of a Lady*

One hundred and fifty years ago, Henry David Thoreau often walked from Concord to Sudbury, where I now live. On trips to Cambridge, driving through the twists and turns of New England back roads, through slanting winter light, I often pass Walden Pond, set like a bright eye, deep and glassy, amid the hills of Concord. Sometimes, zipping past in my Japanese car, I encounter the invisible image of Thoreau—a striding, solitary walker who casts a quick, cold eye over me. I suddenly recall that other Walden: hut, bean field, wood paths, his triumphantly minimalist dwelling (“ten feet wide by fifteen feet long”), set above the pond—the proper site for Thoreau’s epic of the near at hand. Though long gone, his resonant hut and domain still hold their value against the wildly escalating land and house prices of Boston’s western suburbs.

If it is asserted that civilization is a real advance in the condition of man—and I think that it is, though only the wise improve their advantages—it must be shown that it has produced better dwellings without making them more costly; and the cost of a thing is the amount of what I will call life which is required to be exchanged for it, immediately or in the long run.¹

Here, living in the long run—where every inch of land in Boston's western suburbs is zoned, owned, much of it fenced or posted—I know Thoreau would wither us with his contemptuous stare for what we call civilization; he would be appalled at all it has cost.

Thoreau haunted me not only as a former neighbor but as a voice in counterpoint to the books I read during the last months of 1985.² I was interested in those books by New England authors which, first, concentrated art and inquiry upon issues relevant to our particular sense of *place*. What Eudora Welty said about "place in fiction" explains what I was looking for in local fiction, poetry, autobiography, and social commentary:

Location pertains to feeling; feeling profoundly pertains to place; place in history partakes of feeling, as feeling about history partakes of place.³

Each book I read in those months connects feeling, place, history, even prophecy; some connect, as E. M. Forster urged, the prose, or the poetry, with the passion. Most of them are set on local grounds; all are written by those who have defined their own sense of New England place; therefore, these books tell us something about our parochial, regional selves, but they also reveal larger patterns. Their authors might say what, according to Patrick Kavanagh, Homer said: "I made the Iliad from such / A local row."

For all that, these books are an odd lot, landscapes and structures of eccentric designs: (1) a collection of stories by Frank Conroy, his first book since *Stop Time* (1967). Where *Stop Time* was a detailed, narrative autobiography that read like fiction, *Midair* is an often generalized, fragmented fiction with obvious autobiographical implications; (2) the weird diary of Arthur Crew Inman, over 1,600 pages of his often vile obsessions, handsomely edited and curiously published by Harvard University Press; (3) a study of nuclear anxiety over *five* decades, in the form of a polemical novel, by Tim O'Brien; (4) a collection of poems, also centered upon nuclear anxiety, by Maxine Kumin. And finally, two works that vivify social and aesthetic inquiry with the devices of fiction: (5) an intensely local epic on the Boston controversy over school integration, by J. Anthony Lukas; (6) a study, from the bare ground up, of a house built in Amherst, Massachusetts, written by Tracy Kidder. Each of these books sets out to embody and assess American civilization by evoking an appropriate emblem. Most of these writers bend their forms to fit the shapes of unique visions; however, read together, the works suggest strikingly similar concerns that update what Perry Miller called the New England Mind and that hint at the state of the nation. Perhaps it is true, as one critic has suggested, that "the books we read read us."⁴

These books, then, are structures of understanding—houses of fiction, poetry, autobiography—which might effectively be compared with differently shaped buildings into which the reader enters to transact his business with the authors; they are verbal structures out of whose windows we reimagine our worlds. No enemy of analogy, Thoreau might like the comparison; though, after looking over his eclectic selection of works that combine purposes and mix styles, he might register a reservation:

However, if one designs to construct a dwelling house, it behooves him to exercise a little Yankee shrewdness, lest after all he find himself in a workhouse, a labyrinth without a clue, a museum, an almshouse, a prison, or a splendid mausoleum instead.

Certainly dwellings figure centrally in these works. Yet, not all of these writers *root* their characters, as Yeats prayed his daughter might be “rooted in one dear perpetual place.”⁵ For example, the middle-aged hero of Frank Conroy’s story collection, *Midair*, is in constant motion, an American inner-emigré who hops between cities and between lives, calling no *place* his home—much like Conroy, who commuted between his teaching at M.I.T. in Cambridge and his duties as director of the literature program at the National Endowment for the Arts in Washington, D.C. This fictional hero finds, in the collection’s title story, his most telling moment of revelation, fittingly enough while he is trapped between floors in an elevator, confronting the terror of a young man who might have been his son, whom he has not seen for some time because of his divorce and other displacements characteristic of contemporary Americans. After a while, this substitute father settles down the terrified young man, his son-for-the-moment, by affecting calm confidence in a reassuringly American cliché: “It’s going to be O.K. . . . I know we are safe, and if you focus on me *you* will know we are safe.” Finally, magically, the elevator rises, its doors open; the ad hoc family ascends above danger. Here the elevator—temporary housing for those in transit—serves as a brief place of entrapment, a site for the forced renewal of lost family bonds, then a point of release into the wider world; the story is a comforting myth of redemption, buoyed by Conroy’s careful and lyrical language.

Much the opposite might be said of the perpetual place—Garrison Hall, the “somewhat seedy but respectable apartment hotel in Boston’s Back Bay”—in which Arthur Inman—recluse, invalid, compulsive and overreaching diarist, center of his own narrative and hero of his own imagining—lived from 1919 to 1963, when he committed suicide and, blessedly, stopped his diary at something over 17 million words. His rooms, too, could be said to serve as temporary housing for those in transit, for Inman bribed sad, marginal “talkers,” through newspaper ads (“Wanted: Persons who have had interesting experiences and who can tell them interestingly to talk to an invalid.”)⁶ to come to his rooms, to confess their often sordid secrets for the delectation of his diary, frequently satisfying his own contorted sexual desires on them as well. Inman also used his own neediness and wealth to persuade several people to stay for even longer periods in his darkened rooms; his groupings were something of an antifamily, his rooms a place of release only into the narrow world of his prejudices and obsessions. *The Inman Diary*, despite bold excisions and graceful editorial linkings by Daniel Aaron, stands as a misbegotten myth of one man’s pathological ego, in life and in what he would have us think is “art.” Some have compared *The Inman Diary* to *Notes from the Underground*, but Dostoevsky controlled and distanced himself from his “sick man,” while Inman, even in his own judgment, lacked artful detachment; the invocation of Proust for comparison seems equally farfetched, for Inman wrote in a style of sustained pretentiousness that would make Proust cringe. Putting the best construct on his writing, even Aaron has to admit that it is “clogged with extraneous and turgid sections,” though he goes on to say that the book “is nevertheless a work of literary and historical importance.”⁷

It is difficult for this reader to detect either literary or historical importance in *The Inman Diary*. Only as a case history—one of the categories in which Aaron offers to place this work—does Inman sustain interest, for he has a mind eaten alive with hatreds. Here, for example, are some of his reflections upon ethnicity in Germany and America, written in April 1933:

But Hitler may know what he is doing. The Jews may have a strangle hold on the finances of Germany. I feel (with a qualm as to the wisdom of my feelings) that I wish to God every Jew and every Irishman and every negro and every Mediterranean and every Mexican could by some means be forced to leave this fair broad land of ours to us Nordics.

Then Inman accounts for his "qualm" and lays claim to his own conceptual originality by noting that he is "fair enough" to credit Jews and Negroes with contributions to the arts. However:

The Irish and the Greek we owe nothing. I would rather an Irish pogrom than a Jewish one. Which is my viewpoint alone. The majority of Nordic Americans nurse a far greater antipathy toward the Jews than toward the Irish.

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This is typical of Inman's contribution to American "thought." Aaron is least convincing when he argues that Inman provides insights into Boston's social history or the social history of America for a half century, "a streetside view of the passing scene, of artifacts and mores and styles of living that to a large extent have disappeared." The truth is that Inman's view is far more rear window than streetside: "My days are passed, as it were, behind plate glass," Inman grants, in May 1945. America passes him from the distance of a detachment derived from his (probably psychosomatic) illness, wealth, pride and prejudice; an America seen from his hotel window, in a room which provides him with a Puckish view of mortal foolishness. It is his quirky *exception* from American "artifacts and mores and styles of living" that elicits contemporary interest from those readers who, as Louis Auchincloss said, "have an inexhaustible appetite for details, any details, and have the patience to try to piece together America from *all* of its parts."⁸

The best that can be said for *The Inman Diary* is that it provides a lengthy case history of the dark, sick side of the American imagination. Daniel Aaron no doubt saw this diary as a challenge for an American Studies approach, which seeks value in any documents as social indicators, however flawed they may be as literature. It is less clear why Harvard University Press chose to publish this work or, having decided to publish, chose to grant it such size and finish—in a boxed set, with heavy advertising—lending it a dignity it otherwise might not have earned. Inman himself wondered, in January 1929,

Am I a person of sufficient interest to justify such a self-portrait? It seems I must be the most egotistic man in the world to imagine that in these pages posterity will find any interest. Well, I have been honest and I have been profuse. If I take your fancy, you will enjoy this diary. Otherwise it will be veritable twaddle.

By accepting the offer of Inman, through his trustees, to have his estate lavishly support the diary's publication, Harvard University Press has granted an insignificant man an undeserved posthumous standing for composing profuse twaddle. They have given us, in Auchincloss's words, "the cork-lined chamber without Proust." *The Inman Diary*—an example of the literary dwelling as padded cell!

At first glance, Tim O'Brien's *The Nuclear Age* appears to be an updating of Inman's diary, for again we have a character, like the hero of Melville's *Bartelby the Scrivener*, who "prefers not" to be part of the common weal; instead he holes himself up, closes himself in, severs his chain of being with the rest of the world—allowing only limited contact, upon his own terms—and retires to his metaphoric hut in the woods. However, the hero of *The Nuclear Age*, William Cowling, finds neither a

Walden-like pastoral retreat nor the upper-story depths of Arthur Inman's regal eagle's nest at the center of the city. The time is 1995; after five decades of nuclear fear, "the *big angst*," Cowling has crossed new psychic boundary lines. Desperately attempting the reverse of what Arthur Inman tried, Cowling seeks to translate "the events of imagination" into "the much less pliant terms of the real world." With its future setting and its hero's insistence that we digest the implications of nuclear buildup—"So who's crazy? Me? Or is it you?"—in order to see through the world-as-it-is and face the world-as-it-might-be, *The Nuclear Age* can be seen as a romance, a mode which exists, Hawthorne told us in "The Custom House" preface to *The Scarlet Letter*, as "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."

Born at the beginning of the nuclear age, in 1945, in his fiftieth year Cowling tries to make his separate peace by literally holing up, by digging a bomb shelter to house him and his family, in a hole lined with concrete, roofed by steel, containing a water tank, a generator, wall-to-wall rugs, a pine-paneled den, a family room, two bedrooms, closet space, a Ping-Pong table and a piano, all the requisite appliances, track lighting, a word processor for his wife, Bobbi, and a game room for his daughter, Melinda. All the comforts of home—in a hole in the ground. Cowling, a modern Job, laments:

I would prefer the glory of God and peace everlasting, world without end, a normal household in an age of normalcy.

In the nuclear age this is no longer possible, so Cowling goes mad (goes sane?), locks his family inside his house until he prepares his shelter, even considers a preventive first strike: blowing himself and his family away with a stolen nuclear warhead to get the inevitable suffering over with. The events of his "interesting times" have driven him over the edge: the Cuban missile crisis of October 1962—"The path we have chosen for the present is full of hazards, as all paths are," said J.F.K.—Vietnam; the assassinations and demonstrations of 1968; his own fugitive, underground activities. As Bobbi puts it, in Yeats's words,

We had fed the heart on fantasies,
The heart's grown brutal from the fare.

But Bobbi does not cite the rest of that stanza, from part six of "Meditations in Time of Civil War":

More substance in our enmities
Than in our love; O honey-bees,
Come build in the empty house of the stare.

Yeats's refrain—"Come build in the empty house of the stare"—might apply to all the writers here discussed, for they all seek what Frost's Oven Bird sought:

The question that he frames in all but words
Is what to make of a diminished thing.

Yeats's "honey-bees" are enjoined to build where the birds have fled and, in so building, to shore up the loosening masonry of his tower's walls, diminished as those walls were by civil war. Arthur Inman imagines himself under siege—his fears come true, when urban renewal, promoted by those detested Irish-American politicians,

levels his neighborhood in the 1960s—but he is unconvincing when he tries to persuade us that the enemy he has met is anyone other than himself. Tim O'Brien, however, quite convincingly dramatizes an external danger of sufficient dimension—nuclear threat as an emblem of cosmic and psychic uncertainty—and we are persuaded that his hero has his reasons, though he may have lost his mind. In the end, Cowling finds more substance in his love than in his enmities. He cannot kill, even for love.

To live is to lose everything, which is crazy, but I choose it anyway, which is sane.
It's the force of passion. It's what we have.

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For all of its inventiveness, *The Nuclear Age* is not a successful novel. O'Brien crosses the border between the Actual and the Imaginary world so easily that the reader does not know quite where he is. What are we to think, for example, of the purchase of a mountain containing vast uranium deposits by Cowling and his group of dissidents, then its sale for \$25 million? What are we to think of dialogue assigned to the *hole*, which urges Cowling to "Do it!"? In these instances, Cowling has ceased to be a representative man in a recognizable world and has instead become a figure in a polemical cartoon—even he is not free from nuclear capitalism! More exactly, O'Brien has moved from the realm of literary realism to the distorted landscape of literary surrealism, where arbitrariness comes as no surprise. Finally, we don't know what to think about Cowling, who seems caught between the stone and hard place of paradox: "I'm a realist. Nothing's real," he says; he *knows* disaster will come, but he refuses to *believe* it. He chooses life with his family, though he knows it is a choice which dooms them to a terrifying nuclear death. This, then, is a novel which sets out to raise our consciousness about nuclear threat—"The bombs are real," insisted O'Brien in a televised interview, echoing words he had written for Cowling⁹—but which has the effect of making us, like Cowling, feel particularly helpless. What should he, or we, or the writer, *do*?

In the title story of *A Glimpse of Sion's Glory*¹⁰—a recent, elegant collection of stories by the English fiction writer Isabel Colegate—a character writes of Tolstoy's *What Then Must We Do?* which he thinks should be the subtitle of every novel published.

The novelist should write for his generation and his concern should be nothing less than How To Live, but I do not know my generation and I haven't the faintest idea how to live.

This note of salvific uncertainty also resounds in *The Nuclear Age* and other works of this period. Some of these writers would "search for images adequate to our predicament," in the words of Seamus Heaney,¹¹ but none could answer Luke's question to John the Baptist: "And the people asked him saying, What shall we do then?" Perhaps writers and readers alike, as one reviewer of *The Nuclear Age* suggested, would do well to *make do*, to go with what they have rather than look for lasting solutions or resolutions.¹²

Maxine Kumin's poetry embeds itself in the pastoral. She sets her poems deep in the soil of what Flannery O'Connor described as the "country" of moral implications.¹³ Kumin's imaginative landscape derives from southern New Hampshire. In "My Elusive Guest," for example, a poem that appears near the end of *The Long*

Approach, Kumin recalls a moose who once came into the kitchen of her house, forty years earlier, when another woman “broomed” him out. Kumin, like Thoreau, “loved the grayness of them, homespun / with leafy horns like lichens made of bones.” Now she dreams of such a moose, such a visit, invites it: “My wild thing, my moose.” Perhaps the moose poses no threat in her imagination because, as *The Long Approach* indicates, she has more looming fears. For Kumin, as for O’Brien, nuclear anxiety is where the truly wild things are!

The Long Approach is fraught by what Henry James called “the imagination of disaster.”¹⁴ Its midsection, placed between sections on family and place, ranges from the Nazi holocaust to Middle East turmoil to nuclear dread, giving her the vision of an Isaiah to see *through* earthly images of felicity. When M.I.T. students loll about the Cambridge grass on a spring afternoon, the poet sees “the dead of Beirut in the sun” and fears that time when a “Poseidon sub sticks up its snub nose”—a blunt line of spondees that explodes the scene’s apparent pastoral bliss.

The third section of *The Long Approach*, titled “On the Farm,” is composed of poems with an acute, even poignant sense of place in the face of its disintegration. In “Out in It”:

Crouched under my desk, at a bad clap
eighty pounds of spotted dog quakes.
I too lose my head in a storm like this
or would like at least to bury it.

But there is no place to hide from a menace her dog could not imagine.

Where do we want
to be when the first strike comes?
Out in it with all our kith and kin
crisping in one another’s arms.

Thinking about this unthinkable, there is, in the words of the poem by Matthew Arnold which Kumin here echoes, neither “certitude nor peace, nor help for pain”; but there is an *idea of home* to which she inevitably gravitates, however fragile its defenses, just as there is a desk under which her dog hides from the thunder. In the volume’s title poem, Kumin prays for a safe journey *home*, north of Boston:

I’m going home the old way with a light hand on the reins
making the long approach.

The epigraph for *The Long Approach* comes from *The Maine Woods*, where Thoreau celebrated

the planet Earth, as it was made for ever and ever—to be the dwelling of man, we say—so Nature made it, and man may use it if he can.

It is just that use and abuse, posed by nuclear weapons, that makes Kumin, like O’Brien, so conscious of impermanence, so charged with the imagination of disaster, so conscious of *home as haven*.

J. Anthony Lukas’s *Common Ground* can be read as a tale of several houses and the Boston citizens who lived in them, emerged from them to do battle on common ground, then retreated into them to seek haven. Because *class* was a determining element in the lives of those Bostonians who were affected by the “Boston busing

crisis”—as the court-ordered plan for school integration in 1974–75 was called—Lukas examines those who lived in both public and private housing. Two of the “three American families” who are dramatized in *Common Ground* lived in publicly assisted housing: Alice McGoff and her seven children, representing Boston’s Irish-American community, lived in the Bunker Hill project, in Charlestown; Rachel Twymon and some of her six children, representing Boston’s black community, lived in Methunion Manor, a privately initiated housing project in Roxbury which received major subsidies from federal and city agencies. Still another example of symbolic public housing, at the other end of the class spectrum, was the Parkman House, once the Beacon Hill home of Francis Parkman, willed to the city of Boston; however, during the 1970s the Parkman House became the second home of Boston Mayor Kevin White, who often retreated from the tensions of the busing crisis into his haven, to look again on things lovely. White was house proud: “It’s got to be the loveliest staircase in America!” he said, looking up into its inner heights. Colin and Joan Diver and their two children, the third of Lukas’s three families, representing Boston’s Yankee community (though Colin Diver’s father was Protestant-Irish), were also house proud. They moved to Boston’s South End in 1970, into a town house built in 1865, a stately dwelling with a bow front, a high stoop, and a mansard roof; though when the Divers moved in, the house had fallen into disrepair, with its floors and sashes rotting, its plaster falling, and its wires exposed. It was, in short, the perfect symbol for the Divers’ commitment, inspired by Jane Jacobs’s *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, to a project of personal urban renewal.

As things turned out, each of these dwellings can be seen as a failed vision of community revitalization. The Divers were determined to leave behind the homogeneous, sterile suburbs for a home amid the mixed racial and ethnic variety of the inner city. The McGoffs, the Twymons, and even Kevin White saw themselves as moving *up* when they moved into their public housings. The Bunker Hill project opened on Thanksgiving in 1940, symbolizing New Deal determination that citizens no longer be “ill housed.” Plans for Methunion Manor were begun by members of the Union Methodist Church who wanted to establish a new relationship with the wider community of poor and blacks; then it was underwritten by government agencies seeking increased public housing. The Parkman House was willed to Boston’s citizens in a gesture of Boston Brahmin noblesse oblige. Yet, in all cases, practice compromised civic vision. The Parkman House was sometimes used by Kevin White—the Irish-American politician with *two* houses, one public and the other private (on Beacon Hill, former Brahmin preserve)—as a site for planning sessions on ways to cope with the controversy surrounding “forced busing” and other political matters, a use which Parkman certainly did not have in mind for his home. Similarly, the ideal vision of public housing for the poor had deteriorated: prejudice and violence surrounded and inhabited both the Bunker Hill project and Methunion Manor. Finally, even the Divers gave up. After Colin Diver attacked a mugger with a baseball bat and Joan Diver realized that the very people they wished to live near were hostile to the gentrification they brought to the neighborhood, they decided to move to Newton Corner, into a large, Greek revival house with a white picket fence. Colin Diver then worked to restore this house with the same dedication he had put into restoring his South End house, though his vision of the possibilities of community in Boston were shaken. Good fences make good neighbors. *Common Ground* maps the territory between representative families and the wider community

into which they entered when they left their separate, often internally divided, houses.

Throughout the fall of 1985, *Common Ground* had an impact on Boston's cultural community which echoed the impact of court-ordered busing a decade earlier. In the press, on television, and in the lecture halls, the book was debated. It seemed that no one who read it remained unaffected, for *Common Ground* draws the reader into a powerful narrative in which public events intersect with the lives of private citizens in the most revealing fashion; however, it was less clear what the book *meant*. Lukas's title suggests a common ground of experience, a place to build a coherent community future, but his narrative dramatizes the sometimes killing grounds of racial, class, and political hatreds.

Take the case of Judge W. Arthur Garrity, who determined, on June 21, 1974, that the Boston School Committee had "segregative intent," and who was responsible for adopting the state implementation plan of school integration which addressed this issue. Lukas's chapter on W. Arthur Garrity, "The Judge," concludes with a sharply drawn contrast between Judge Garrity himself and Ed McCormack, an adviser (or master) on the implementation of Phase II of Boston's public school integration plan, in 1975—a plan which placed South Boston's largely Irish-American neighborhoods and Roxbury's largely black neighborhoods in the same district and on a collision course. As Lukas examines Judge Garrity "pondering a legal problem," he cites Yeats's condemnation of those who "think in the mind alone" and not in the "marrow bone." Ed McCormack, practicing the Irish-American art of political compromise, "prayed that Arthur Garrity's marrow bone would prevail." But Judge Garrity kept the South Boston–Roxbury pairing in his May 10, 1975, decision. This infuriated McCormack; in Judge Garrity's view, there was no alternative. Lukas concludes:

The jurist in Arthur Garrity had prevailed over the pragmatist; John Marshall over Oliver Wendell Holmes; Thomas Aquinas over Jack Kennedy; the mind over the marrow bone.

Here we see a fine example of Lukas's narrative method. The legal and social issues are seen from *personal* points of view: those who *decide* here *debate* the issues within their own minds and between each other. Lukas explores the implications of the debate while respecting the integrity of everyone's position. Both Judge Garrity and Master Ed McCormack are honorable men. (Although at times during the mid 1970s it appeared that many of the characters in the Boston busing crisis were acting out of the lowest, most self-seeking motives, in *Common Ground* nearly everyone acts out of the highest motives; battle over *turf* and *rights* becomes, in Lukas's view, struggle over questions of *community* and *equity*. "Almost everyone in my book had good intentions, yet nothing quite worked out for them," Lukas later told *People* magazine.¹⁵ Legal and political issues are matters of character and vision. Yet Lukas's presentation is hardly neutral, for implications surround his interpretation of Yeats's lines on mind and marrow bone. Arthur Garrity (jurist, Marshall, Aquinas, mind) prevails against Ed McCormack (pragmatist, Holmes, Kennedy, marrow bone) in something of an ambiguous morality drama. Since we know the disastrous effects of pairing South Boston and Roxbury in the Phase II plan, we can only conclude that Lukas agrees with Yeats; he seems to say that Judge Garrity should have obeyed the dictates of his marrow bone—the capacity to make deals in the Irish-American political tradition—rather than the dictates of his mind alone.

In his review of *Common Ground* in the *Atlantic*, Jack Beatty agrees, suggesting

that Judge Garrity moved too relentlessly: "In this case," writes Beatty, "justice delayed might have been justice fulfilled."¹⁶ Others disagreed with this reading. In his review of Lukas's book, novelist James Carroll celebrates Judge Garrity.

My own long-held conviction that Judge Garrity did this city a great service by attacking segregation at its root remains firm, despite a new appreciation for what the implementation of his order cost. Like many Boston Irish, I am proud that Garrity is one of us.¹⁷

Here the debate *within* the Boston Irish community—one of the central concerns of *Common Ground*—persists, with Beatty affirming the "marrow bone" of compromise and Carroll speaking for the "mind alone" of principle. However, Yeats's metaphorical alternative—Lukas's literary way of registering thematic points through the implications of imagery in *Common Ground*—became an unsatisfying means to gloss the issue to none other than J. Anthony Lukas, who sought to alter the terms of the discussion of Judge Garrity. Perhaps unhappy at the ways in which reviewers were interpreting Judge Garrity as they found him portrayed in *Common Ground*, Lukas took to the Op-Ed page of the *Boston Globe* to insist that

it is time we stopped making the judge a scapegoat for our own faint-heartedness. It is we as a society who shy away from the full implications of social justice; it is we, the comfortable, the decent, the well-meaning, who go on putting the burden of integration on those least able to bear it, the poor and the young.¹⁸

Here Lukas makes his charges directly, at a constituency unidentified in *Common Ground*, not obliquely through another's poetry. Further, he presents Judge Garrity with a quite different emphasis, as a hero, not as the high-minded, inflexible figure of *Common Ground*. This book, then, stirred its own tensions and inspired a range of discussion which, at the least, suggested that *Common Ground* is ambiguous.

Common Ground is ambiguous for the same reason it is a fascinating narrative: it has "the novelistic qualities of a thriller," as was suggested by Martin F. Nolan, editorial page editor of the *Boston Globe*, when he served as moderator to a panel discussion titled "In Search of *Common Ground*: A Town Meeting on Race and Class in Boston," held at the John F. Kennedy Library on September 28, 1985. This panel brought together some of the principal actors in Boston's school integration drama, on neutral territory, to respond to Lukas's book. Many found what they sought, as is clear from Nolan's later report in a *Globe* editorial of a particularly enlightening moment that evening.

Elvira Pixie Palladino, a member of the Boston School Committee during its fiery days of national attention, dismissed talk of love, saying that no blacks in the audience loved her. Wayne Twymon, a black graduate of the Boston public schools during that time, stood up and said, "I love you, Pixie."¹⁹

Though this report misses some of the irony in Wayne Twymon's response to Mrs. Palladino, it does accurately suggest the possibilities of dialogue brought about by time, by this occasion and, of course, by *Common Ground*. Yet, according to my transcript, Wayne Twymon's exact words were, "Before I just get into this with Pixie Palladino, which I do love you. . . ." At which point he was interrupted by laughter and applause. Perhaps the *Globe* and Lukas were hearing what they wanted to hear from Wayne Twymon, not what he said. Later in the evening, Wayne's mother, Rachel Twymon, eloquently spoke to her sense of Boston's persistent divisions:

My regret is that unsaid things are still here to plague us. . . . When adults are unable to sit around a square table or a round table and discuss issues, why would we expect our children to be able to go to school together?

Common Ground sought to say some of these “unsaid things,” but sought too desperately to resolve all in the name of love.

The *Globe* editorial may put too optimistic a cast on the evening’s discussion, for not all of the town came to the Town Meeting. Only two of the three families focused upon in *Common Ground* appeared, which resulted in a painful moment of epiphany that qualified the “love” expressed by Wayne Twymon. After Nolan had eloquently praised Lukas by saying he has “never seen a better book about the moved and the shaken,” Boston Mayor Raymond L. Flynn—who had, a decade before, contested Judge Garrity’s order in court—called *Common Ground* “one of the greatest stories never told.” Then Lukas spoke, to make “special mention” of the three families in *Common Ground*. He asked the three families to stand, but was visibly disturbed when he was told that none of the McGoffs had chosen to attend. Lukas expressed his “sadness,” then tried to make the best of a difficult situation, saying, “I think they are here in spirit.”²⁰ That, however, like the overvaluation of Wayne Twymon’s love for Mrs. Palladino, seemed wishful thinking, for little either in *Common Ground* or at the Town Meeting suggested that the parties which the three families represent—black, Irish American, Yankee—have resolved their differences, though some members of the actual families have arrived at better understandings of each other’s point of view. At the Kennedy Library, Joan Diver said she was amazed at Lukas’s ability to make her reexperience events through the eyes of Alice McGoff, particularly when Alice McGoff bravely and fearfully climbed Bunker Hill toward confrontation with the Boston Tactical Police Force. Yet, it became clear during the evening that many citizens of Charlestown were still affected by one of Lukas’s shrewdest points in *Common Ground*—his claim that the Boston Irish Americans whose children were integrated by court order felt a class resentment, particularly for those Irish Americans who, like Judge Garrity, Senator Ted Kennedy, and certain representatives of the Catholic Church, acted against those of their own kind; a resentment against those who had “made it” and turned their backs, as working-class Irish Americans saw it, on their community. Perhaps the eloquently absent McGoffs were among the many Charlestown citizens who felt betrayed by *Common Ground*. Perhaps the notion of “common ground” was less a fact and more a consummation devoutly to be wished.

The “novelistic qualities” noted by Nolan are evident throughout *Common Ground*, which has greater claim on the descriptive designation “nonfiction novel”²¹ than that assigned by Aaron to *The Inman Diary*. *Common Ground* tells a story that is shaped by the vision of the teller; like other works of literary modernism—see Dos Passos’s *U.S.A.*, for example—it is designed on the psychological principle of narrative interrupted by flashback and on the cinematic principle of scenic juxtaposition. Like *U.S.A.*, it has no hero but presents a range of characters whose backgrounds are evoked in confrontations over issues great and small. Its narrative voice hovers above the drama, then slides in and out of characters’ minds in elegantly contrived mimes. *Common Ground* is an exercise in juxtaposed, controlled point of view.

Consider the following sentences from Lukas’s Author’s Note, the brief methodological reflection that precedes *Common Ground*.

This is a work of non-fiction. All its characters are real, as are their names, the places where they live, the details of their personal lives. Nothing has been disguised or embellished.

Behind the boldness of this claim lies a revealing defensiveness, for reportorial accuracy of detail does not preclude our impression that the journalist has relied upon traditional devices of the novelist to shape his material, as Truman Capote shaped *In Cold Blood*. The imposing imagination and the interpretive vision of the writer who has conducted years of research allow him a range of choice of inclusion or exclusion that approaches the novelist's choice of options, a range unavailable to the journalists who reported the Boston busing crisis as it happened. Why, for example, were *these* three families chosen? Not, Lukas grants, because they were representative of "statistical averages or norms":

On the contrary, I was drawn to them by a special intensity, an engagement with life, which made them stand out from their social context.

These vague criteria allow him to be the sole judge of their importance. His families are and are not representative, as he sees fit. Yet clearly some consideration of representativeness went into their selection on the basis of ethnicity and race, though "special intensity" adds a mysterious dimension to the selection process, a *novelistic* dimension. The sites he chose—largely Charlestown and the South End—were also places of special intensity, though not the only free-fire zones in the city; Lukas does far less with South Boston, surely the center of the controversy. He hardly touches upon Beacon Hill, whose schools were curiously less affected by the court order, or Jamaica Plain, whose already integrated schools were disrupted by Judge Garrity's order. Of course, Lukas could not do everything, particularly when he had decided to focus in on certain families, dwellings, neighborhoods. Still, it is clear that *selection is everything* in *Common Ground*, as it would be in any novel that purports to represent a social issue. The people, places, and things that lend themselves to a coherent vision are included; all else is dropped. *Common Ground* is a highly wrought literary creation with an especial purpose. In his Author's Note, Lukas hints at this purpose when he insists that his investigation yielded no "clear moral imperatives":

The realities of urban America, when seen through the lives of actual city dwellers, proved far more complicated than I had imagined.

This, then, is a work of not necessarily "average" citizens from somewhat randomly selected areas of the city, whose "intersecting lives" teach us complexity. Lukas deconstructs long-standing moral judgments, asks us to reimagine this troubled era through multiple perspectives—Charlestown's first day of court-ordered busing is seen by the frightened Alice McGoff, in her home, listening to the ominous noises outside; the same day is reseen by angry Charlestown residents, watching the buses arrive; and again, the day is rerun, this time from inside one of the buses, where terrified Cassandra Twymon is headed toward she knows not what on her first day of classes—to see, between the lines, that everyone was affected, everyone had some decent motives, everyone has a common ground of experience on which to build a future.

Common Ground is a myth of redemption for Bostonians, who emerge chastened but wiser, surviving what Lukas calls in his subtitle "a turbulent decade in the lives of

three American families,” surviving as well their private and public visions and interactions with conflicting concepts of community. His book demonstrates that the three families acted as they did out of their groups’ histories, memories of past victimizations, and glories that shaped their senses of the present. These families, pointedly representing the John F. Kennedy coalition of voters in 1960—a coalition so shattered by class and racial turmoil in Boston that Ted Kennedy could be chased off the City Hall Plaza in 1974 by a group of Irish-American antibusing demonstrators—have roots that Lukas traced: the Twymons in Virginia and Nova Scotia; the McGoffs-Kirks from Ireland’s Drogheda; the Divers-McKechnies from Ireland and Scotland. Lukas, through artful manipulation of contrasting perspectives, shows us the conditioning factors that made conflict inevitable for these groups. To understand is to forgive; or, at least, understanding makes it more difficult to blame. Events are selected, arranged, emphasized to illustrate the common pattern of experience that shaped the people who came into conflict during the 1970s in Boston. *Common Ground*, then, is a model of consciousness-raising, a parable, in its own way a poem, a nonfiction novel, a myth.

“Tony’s book is itself common ground,” said historian Thomas N. Brown at the Town Meeting:

It is a book immensely rich in its character. It approximates life itself and therefore has been very difficult for reviewers to deal with. But what marks the book especially . . . is that it is a loving book . . . that can move one repeatedly to tears as one proceeds through it. There *Common Ground* provides us in fact with common ground. If we are attentive to it, if we are attentive to what Tony has done, if we draw from it the love that he put into it, we surely will share together common ground.

Here Brown underlines the salvific side of *Common Ground*, which heartened panelists at the Kennedy Library conference and most readers who wished to find a way to get past the deep divisions of the busing crisis. Nonetheless, this will to believe in the reality of common ground is as much the product of a literary construction—the *book itself as common ground*, a self-referential artifact—as it is a reading of history. In a later article, calling for a reexamination of Boston’s history, Brown himself demonstrates this:

Boston is in need of a new history. The old one—handed down from the 19th century—is more trouble than it is worth. Such are the reflections that come to this reader upon completing J. Anthony Lukas’s masterful book, *Common Ground* (1985). As every literate Bostonian by now knows, the book presents to us in rich and complex detail the travail of three Boston families during the bad days of the school busing crisis. It is a story for moralists of the city convulsed by the ravages of righteous pride, of anger and fear, of cowardice and cupidity. Civility and its restraints are all but banished as the citizenry confront one another with the cruel faces of a Szep cartoon. Only the heroism of the women of these families redeems.²²

Brown’s seemingly contradictory readings in fact underline the irreconcilable sides of *Common Ground*, a book which brings love to Boston families yet is stuck with the intractable facts of Boston’s persistent racial and class crises. “I do not believe busing in Boston worked as well as it might have,” Lukas told *People*. Still, the stark evidence that Lukas so effectively presents in *Common Ground* is always qualified by his sympathy and idealism, qualities that shape his book: despite Boston’s failures, he adds, “I do not believe we should give up our quest for social justice.” *Common*

Ground does what Lukas himself attempted to do at the Kennedy Library meeting: it asks us to hold our applause until all of his families, his "collaborators," have been introduced (it was never clear *why* we should applaud these families), but then it reveals that old angers are such that not all of these families want to take part in a ritual of redemption.

For all that, myths are true, too, and *Common Ground* has, in its own limited terms, created a compelling, moving myth on the dissolution and need for new resolution of community. It may be the only *place* where such divergent elements can stand together.

Characteristically, Thoreau carefully totted up the separate costs that went into his "tight shingled and plastered house" at Walden Pond, far from the madding demands of community. Apparently a minimal revisionist when he built in wood rather than words, Thoreau noted the one cent he spent for chalk:

I give the details because very few are able to tell exactly what their houses cost, and fewer still, if any, the separate cost of the various materials which compose them.

Total cost: \$28.12½. Labor (his own); land (Emerson's); borrowed tools and contributed supplies: not counted. Perhaps there is justice to the charge by James Russell Lowell that Thoreau's experiment "actually presupposed all the complicated civilization which it theoretically abjured."²³ Of course, Thoreau, as we have seen, was counting costs on still another, far less exact scale: "the amount of what I will call life which is required to be exchanged for it, immediately or in the long run." In *House* — a study of the building of a house in Amherst, Massachusetts, during the spring and summer of 1983; a study, as well, of the people who committed part of their lives to its building—Tracy Kidder also uses Thoreau's double-entry bookkeeping, measuring costs in a variety of ways. At one level the Amherst house cost its owners \$146,660, just for Apple Corps, the builders, but at another level, the house was built at the cost of disillusionment for all concerned. The house stands as a symbol of conflict and compromise, the partially satisfactory resolution of contending wills and values, an artifact of civilization.

For those involved, the house began as a vision of renewal, bits of which survived the expense of spirit it took to bring the house into being. Owners Judith and Jonathan Souweine—who, like Thoreau, had land contributed for their building site—sought more space and felicity. They had been deeply engaged in their community: Jonathan had worked in the office of the state attorney general; headed a consumer protection group (MassPIRG); even ran for and lost an election for district attorney for Hampshire and Franklin counties. Judith was doing postdoctoral work on childhood learning disabilities and was involved in many community affairs. Yet the house represented an ideal vision of the single, separate family for both: "It's us against the world," explained Judith Souweine.

Architect Bill Rawn had been the campus representative who had reviewed the building of the Boston campus of the University of Massachusetts in the mid 1960s—"architecture at its most mundane, but it put me in deeper touch with it, and my art was going well." Though Kidder does not mention it, Rawn must have been disappointed by the compromises required in such public architecture and the corruptions involved in its building, later revealed by an investigatory commission headed by John William Ward, the former president of Amherst College who

reentered the public sector with a passionate idealism in his inquiry into corruptions related to the awarding of building contracts in Massachusetts. Rawn went the other way, from Boston's public sector to another Amherst private sphere of excellence, to design a beautiful house for his friends the Souweines. He was impelled by an intriguing aesthetic vision. Aware of a special "sense of place, and then how to fit a building into it," he had been concerned since his days as an architecture student at M.I.T. with "balance" and "a sense of edges." "Where meadow meets woods, that's where you want to put a house," he said. Despite all of the compromises, this, finally, is just what he did. Rawn *placed* the Souweine house at the edge of the woods, where there was, in LeCorbusier's words, "protection against the arbitrary." This became Rawn's haven against the compromises of the public sector.

Jim Locke was the spokesman for Apple Corps, the builders, and he shared Rawn's aesthetic interests:

The interesting parts are the edges. Where things come together. The middle parts that are all the same are not so interesting to me.

Yet his interests were more functional than Rawn's:

What quality means to me is how tightly things fit together. Joints are the essence of it to me.

Apple Corps itself was a loosely joined group of young men, along with their wives and lovers, who sought what used to be called an alternative lifestyle. They came from Apple Valley, a dozen miles west and north of Amherst, where they lived in semicomunal fashion, seeking—as Thoreau, alone, sought at Walden—to confront life more directly, to make their separate peace with urban terrors. (One of the workers, Alex Ghiselin—he had attended Dartmouth, had worked for Gene McCarthy in 1968, and had been a *Boston Globe* reporter; then he gave all that up—enjoyed bringing the *New York Times* to work so he could read aloud items of what he called "murders and mayhem" from the paper's "Metropolitan Reports," taking comfort from how he and his friends had said goodbye to all that.) They had been drawn to Apple Valley for its clean air, its woods, its feel of renewal; it was their fresh, green breast of a new world. But all had not gone smoothly in Apple Valley, for Jim Locke left his wife for the wife of another resident and moved out with her, leaving behind injured parties and lost illusions of community. Other workers on the Souweine house were also thinking about moving, so the idea of *place* was yielding to the concept of *work* as haven for these young men. The Souweine house, their largest undertaking, represented a certification for Apple Corps and each of its members.

For Jim Locke, the Souweine house was, as Kidder put it, an attempt at "reconciliation of his vision of what he might have been and what he is and what he could become." However, Locke's efforts partially failed; he concluded the job with headaches, less money than he had hoped, and a sense that he had been exploited. For Bill Rawn, too, the clean lines of his original conception of the house had been blurred in the building of it, just as the actual lines of his blueprint were reconceived by the Souweines and blunted by Locke. Jonathan Souweine, exasperated at one point, said, "Architects and builders, Arabs and Jews. They don't get along." *House* suggests that things were worse than that, for misunderstanding and conflict were triangular, between architects, builders, and owners. Feeling that Apple Corps had had their original bid unfairly knocked down by \$660, Locke uses #2 pine on the

house's frieze board, though he knows the knots will later bleed through white paint. "There, Jonathan, there's your six hundred and sixty dollars." The most painful moment of *House* occurs when Rawn sees that the Souweines, at Locke's suggestion, have approved the use of mismatched second-quality bricks in the fireplace around which Rawn has designed the house. Rawn is stunned, his ideal vision of the house smudged.

Kidder senses that often the builders wished the house to become their version of the pastoral, a retreat, a haven:

First thing in the mornings, the house has a sylvan stillness, while the carpenters settle into their work.

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However, more often than not the building site became a battle ground, not a common ground. Still, the house got built, though it was a product of disputation and compromise, not, as the Puritan settlers would have a house, an imitation of divine handiwork, a protection against what William Bradford called (as Kidder reminds us) "a hideous and desolate wilderness, full of wild beasts and wild men."

The New England wilderness, of course, has long since been transformed by development; its lost wildness is best recollected in civilized tranquillity, like Maxine Kumin's moose, though tranquillity leaks away when we think of the threats embedded in the bone of what we call civilization. "The art of civilization is the art of drawing lines," wrote Oliver Wendell Holmes in a sentence cited by Kidder. These writers draw fine lines, shape fitting emblems, build structures of understanding on the edges, not between community and a hideous and desolate wilderness, but between civilization and its discontented.

In a way, Thoreau had it easier. He "went to the woods"—though Walden could, even then, be seen as more of a park preserve—"to front only the essential facts of life." He was never shaken from his belief that nature, represented by his mini-frontier, was essential and civilization peripheral. Whenever he wished, he decided—on "a majority of one" vote—to dissolve his bond with trivial civilization and turn again to the profound woods. In *Civil Disobedience* he demonstrated that even arrest—with the impingements posed to his freedom by enforcers of community values—did not impress him.

I was put into jail as I was going to the shoemaker's to get a shoe which was mended. When I was let out the next morning, I proceeded to finish my errand, and, having put on my mended shoe, joined a huckleberry party, who were impatient to put themselves under my conduct; and in half an hour—for the horse was soon tackled—was in the midst of a huckleberry field, on one of our highest hills, two miles off, and then the State was nowhere to be seen.²⁴

The books under consideration in this essay suggest an answer to Thoreau's easy assertion of a separate peace between himself and the state: "Isn't it pretty to think so?" as Hemingway's Jake Barnes said to Lady Brett Ashley. That is, it is no longer so easy to go to the woods either to confront the essential or to escape the encroachments of civilization. Even in Thoreau's examples—his parables—his hut at Walden is subsidized and his trek after arrest is for huckleberry picking with a group "under my conduct," an assertion of communal control which recalls the imprisoning heroes of *The Nuclear Age* and *The Inman Diary*.

Today Thoreau would find no place to build his hut; if he did, he would be unable to build on his meager resources; if he were able to build, he would have to be

certified and taxed by several state agencies; if he did all that, he would still be vulnerable to nuclear and other assaults posed by “civilized” societies: nuclear annihilation; class and racial turmoil; public policies that seek to remedy injustices, do so, yet have the effect of creating further inequities. No haven. In short, he would be in exactly the condition of those writers here examined.

What then must we do? asked Tolstoy. These writers have chosen to develop appropriate metaphors for the modern condition, as they see it, images placed in a local context, fitting emblems of adversity; they have created figures of sufficient interest who suffer various states of siege, figures who redefine their relationships with community, figures who seek refuge from threat inside houses that serve as momentary stays against confusion. These writers have built, as did Yeats’s honeybees, in the empty houses of the stare; most have shored up the mortar of the larger house of American civilization, in which we all live. They have added to our sense of who we are and where we live by creating landscapes of imagination and houses of fiction, fact, and poetry.

Notes

1. Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* (1854); Carl Bode, ed., *The Portable Thoreau*, rev. (New York: Penguin Books, 1977), 286.
2. Daniel Aaron, ed., *The Inman Diary: A Public and Private Confession*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985); Frank Conroy, *Midair* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1985); Tracy Kidder, *House* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1985); Maxine Kumin, *The Long Approach* (New York: Viking-Penguin, 1985); J. Anthony Lukas, *Common Ground: A Turbulent Decade in the Lives of Three American Families* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985); Tim O’Brien, *The Nuclear Age* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985).
3. Eudora Welty, “Place in Fiction,” *The Eye of the Storm* (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), 122.
4. Josephine Hendin, *Vulnerable People: A View of American Fiction Since 1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 11.
5. William Butler Yeats, “A Prayer for My Daughter,” in *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1964), 185–87.
6. Inman began advertising for “talkers” in the *Boston Evening Transcript* in December 1924.
7. Aaron, in a letter to Edna Coffin Mercer Kim, a former resident of Garrison Hall, in *The Inman Diary*, 1532.
8. Louis Auchincloss, “Telling All,” *New York Review of Books* 32, no. 15 (10 October 1985): 4.
9. Tim O’Brien in an interview with the author on “The Ten O’Clock News,” WGBH-TV, 17 October 1985.
10. Isabel Colegate, *A Glimpse of Sion’s Glory and Other Stories* (New York: Viking-Penguin, 1985), 134.
11. Seamus Heaney, “Feeling into Words,” in *Preoccupations* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1980), 56.
12. Gail Caldwell, Review of *The Nuclear Age*, *Boston Globe* (“Books”), 22 September 1985, A-11.
13. “[Country] suggests everything from the actual countryside that the novelist describes, on to and through the peculiar characteristics of his region and his nation, and on, through, and under all of these to his true country, which the writer with Christian convictions will consider to be what is eternal and absolute.” Flannery O’Connor, “The Fiction Writer and His Country,” in *Mystery and Manners*, ed. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1961), 27.
14. “But I have the imagination of disaster—and see life as ferocious and sinister.” From a letter to

A. C. Benson, 1896. Cited in F. W. Dupee, *Henry James* (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1951), 192.

15. Deirdre Donahue, "Pages," *People* (13 January 1986): 63.
16. Jack Beatty, "Race, Class, and the City," *Atlantic* (September 1985): 110.
17. James Carroll, Review of *Common Ground*, *Boston Globe* ("Books"), 8 September 1985, B-16.
18. J. Anthony Lukas, "Garrity as Scapegoat," *Boston Globe*, 18 September 1985, 14.
19. "In Search of Common Ground," *Boston Globe*, 1 October 1985, 12.
20. Remarks excerpted from author's recording of "In Search of *Common Ground*: A Town Meeting on Race and Class in Boston," held at the John F. Kennedy Library, 28 September 1985.
21. The term *nonfiction novel* has been credited to Truman Capote, who used it to describe *In Cold Blood* (1965). For a discussion, see Frederick R. Karl, *American Fictions 1940-1980* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983), 560-90.
22. Thomas N. Brown, "Boston's Past: History as Common Ground," *Boston Sunday Globe*, 29 December 1985, A-13.
23. Cited in Edward Wagenknecht, *Henry David Thoreau* (Amherst, Mass.: University of Massachusetts Press, 1981), 99.
24. Carl Bode, ed., *The Portable Thoreau, Civil Disobedience*, 130.