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## New York Revisited (1992)

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## New York Revisited

What is a city? Well we might ask, for today the city as we have known it—particularly New York City, which has long reflected the state of the nation at its best and its worst—is a disintegrating entity, a depleted idea, a diminished thing. The decline of the city, as emblem and actuality, is eroding the nation's stated commitment to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. For it is the gritty city, particularly New York City, rather than the fabled New England village that has stood as the last hope for American democracy. the place where “aliens”—the huddled masses from across the Atlantic and the internal emigrés from the heart of the country—have arrived with great expectations, and it is the city that has transformed them into committed members of the body politic. As America abandons its cities, while protecting its urban and suburban enclaves of wealth, commerce, and high-income residences, its poor citizens are sentenced to a life of diminished expectations, danger, disease, and despair that flares into occasional violence and self-destructiveness.

Lewis Mumford, distinguished urban analyst, articulated his urban ideal in *The Culture of Cities* (1938).

The city, as one finds it in history, is the point of maximum concentration for the power and culture of a community. It is the place where the diffused rays of many separate beams of life fall into focus, with gains in both social effectiveness and significance. The city is the form and symbol of an integrated social relationship: it is the seat of the temple, the market, the hall of justice, the academy of learning. Here is where human experience is transformed into viable signs, symbols, patterns of conduct, systems of order. Here is where the issues of civilization are focused: here, too, ritual passes on occasion into the active drama of a fully differentiated and self-conscious society.<sup>1</sup>

Mumford stressed the goals of unity, cohesion, and coherence: for him the city should compose, out of its diverse residents and elements, one living and nurturing organism. However, he lived long enough to see his ideal vision crumble and his beloved Manhattan, the personification of that ideal, decline and fall from grace.

Born in Flushing, Queens, in 1895, Mumford, who called himself “a child of the city,” grew up on Manhattan's Upper West Side in a “typical New York brownstone,” though all of the city became his landscape of discovery: the streets were the leaves of grass through which he walked, and

the port of New York stood as his frontier, his Walden Pond. "Not merely was I a city boy but a New Yorker, indeed a son of Manhattan, who looked upon specimens from all other cities as provincial—especially Brooklynites," he confessed in *Sketches from Life* (1982). Despite its problems, deriving from vast inequities of wealth, the New York of Mumford's youth offered "a moral stability and security" which, by the 1970s, when New York City nearly went bankrupt, was long gone. As a distinguished elderly man, Mumford looked back on his old New York with wonder and ahead to an increasingly horrific New York with despair. "More than once lately in New York I have felt as Petrarch reports himself feeling in the fourteenth century, when he compared the desolate, wolfish, robber-infested Provence of his maturity, in the wake of the Black Plague, with the safe, prosperous region of his youth."<sup>2</sup>

Mumford's memoir, so full of resonant remembrances of things past, traces his development from youth, before World War I, to coming of age as one of America's most influential cultural critics, between the wars, then to the alienated sense of a "displaced person" in modern, plague-ridden Manhattan. He is blunt, explicit, and denunciatory, like an Old Testament prophet, in his assessment of contemporary New York. "The city I once knew so intimately has been wrecked; most of what remains will soon vanish; and therewith scattered fragments of my own life will disappear in the rubble that is carried away."<sup>3</sup> Sunk also, like the fabled Atlantis, was Mumford's ideal vision of the city, "where human experience is transformed into viable signs, symbols, patterns of conduct, systems of order."

We now know that our cities—particularly New York City, America's Gotham or Metropolis, a city in desperate and perpetual need of rescue, as represented in popular culture by *Batman*, *Superman*, or even *Ghostbusters!*—have arrived at the point of the maximum diffusion of power and fragmentation of culture, a dissolving center of centrifugal forces that results in chaos and entropy. There, indeed, is where the issues and seemingly irresolvable problems of civilization are focused; there, too, are acted out the dramas of a fully differentiated and self-conscious society now in disarray and decay.

In the cities the economic gap between rich and poor is dramatized. Since World War II, small manufacturing plants and sweatshops, which for more than a century have exploited but also sustained immigrants and other members of the underclass, have disappeared, like a receding tide (often to foreign shores), and these groups, composed largely of minorities, have been left behind, stranded on the beach, to fight one another over what little remains—as blacks attacked Koreans in south central Los Angeles during the riots of spring 1992. There, in the republic's center cities, things have fallen apart; the center has not held. (New York did not bum after the LA riots, to

the relief of Mayor David Dinkins and other city leaders, though their euphoria, predicted Eric Pooley in *New York* magazine, might well be short-lived—"a pleasant diversion, really, from the numb deathwatch that municipal governance has become: the sad wait for the next round of service cuts, the costly posturing of union settlements, the brave reforms proposed but never enacted."<sup>4</sup> Indeed cities, particularly New York City, no longer constitute centers of culture or commerce in the American consciousness. There, in New York City in particular, the resonant and oft-repeated but increasingly relevant words of W. B. Yeats haunt: "The best lack all conviction, while the worst I are full of passionate intensity."<sup>5</sup>

Things may seem even worse than they are in contemporary New York. The city, long represented in hyperbolic terms—in images of exaltation or degradation, with no middle ground—has recently most frequently been represented as a grim wasteland by the local media outlets, which compete to outdo one another in reports of savagery and mayhem. In a city of some eighteen million people, some forty-five hundred reporters cover news; more than a thousand among them are foreign journalists who convey images of a diseased city to the world. Three tabloid newspapers and six television stations compete to report fires, drug crimes, murders, and all the other sensational stories that have come to be associated with urban life, particularly with New York life, such as it is.

As a result, says Jay Rosen, media critic and New York University teacher, the "image of the city as a hellhole [is] an image the rest of the country is only too happy to accept." Tabloids offer lurid headlines to attract attention—TORTURE IN THE SUBWAY; BODEGA TERROR; PAID ME IN SEX—and television stations run and rerun footage of urban horrors, a continuous loop of deranged urban images. In an era of declining readership of newspapers and increased competition for television ratings, New York journalism has, in the opinion of many, reached a new low. "New York is the trash journalism center of America right now," says media critic Richard M. Clurman. Though, reassuringly, ordinary life continues on the streets of New York, it has become difficult to be the bearer of good tidings about the city in the face of this media-driven, dystopian vision.<sup>6</sup>

New York certainly offers vivid examples for those who would exploit the city's horrors for political, publicity, and other purposes. The visitor entering New York City from its airport terminals confronts a museum of graffiti, refuse, and burned and cannibalized vehicles en route—along Grand Central Parkway, FDR Drive, both entrances to the Lincoln Tunnel, the access avenues to the Queens-Midtown Tunnel, and portions of the Long Island Expressway.<sup>7</sup> Intimidating window washers, coercing tips, pounce on stopped cars at tunnel and bridge entrances. The first impressions of the city confirm visitors' worst fears.

In the 1992 presidential campaign, Republican strategists seized on New York City as an emblem of America's problems. Vice President Dan Quayle, speaking at a luncheon gathering at the Manhattan Institute in June 1992, warned that the election of a Democrat to the presidency would make the country like New York City, "filthy . . . dangerous . . . dying." Obviously the Republican campaign strategists believed that the image of New York as Sodom was sufficiently fixed in the American mind for the vice president to speak of it as another country, separate from the rest of the nation, as he did when he suggested that Democratic Party-dominated New York City was as inefficient as any Eastern European socialist nation.<sup>8</sup>

Indeed, Quayle made clear his belief that he spoke for most Americans when he equated New York City with criminals and with the Democrats who scheduled their presidential convention for New York, driven by what Quayle, who described Democrats as criminal, saw as "a strange compulsion to return to the scene of the crime"—New York City! "And as we watch this spectacle on our televisions, I suspect many Americans from around the country will be left with the conviction: We must not let them do to the rest of America what they have done to the people of New York City."<sup>9</sup> For the vice president of the United States, the nation was divided into two geographic and moral realms: New York City and "the rest of America." When the Democratic convention was a success and the city did not explode in July, no apology or retraction was issued from the vice president's office.

The hit film of the summer of 1992, *Batman Returns*, played up the dystopian horrors of New York City. Film critic David Ansen so described the film's urban landscape: "Gotham City is certainly a nightmare town: New York reimagined . . . as a half-Gothic, half-Bauhaus three-ring circus of corruption."<sup>10</sup> In the film, corruption seizes the city from all angles: a power-hungry businessman plans to suck power from the city; Penguin and his mob terrorize the city; Catwoman seduces and annihilates the city's men. All of the city's citizens, including its rescuer, are two-sided and divided characters. Of course Gotham, unlike New York City, *has* a rescuer, a caped crusader who will come to save its citizenry.

Writing in the *New Yorker*, reporter Andy Logan notes that "the film's message is that Gotham City is not a town [outsiders] would care to seek temporary houseroom in." In the minds of most Americans, Gotham *is* New York City. "A seat in a movie theater may be as close as some out-of-towners feel they want to come to Batmanland, with its menacing, dark, often decrepit buildings and its overwrought residents—grotesque, violent, or just conveying the impression that they have fallen on hard times, with harder times ahead."<sup>11</sup> Logan does not accept this vision of New York, but the film does embody a pervasive American attitude toward the city.

Some of the most eloquent contemporary commentators on the city are seized by exalted visions of great days gone, as Dan Wakefield is in *New York in the Fifties*.<sup>12</sup> The New York of the Eisenhower era—particularly the exciting life of writing and romance—centered in Greenwich Village: “La Vie Litteraire,” as John Dos Passos called it in his recollection of Village life and love in the 1920s—becomes Wakefield’s moveable feast, though he and his contemporaries now also view their New York as another Troy, a lost city available only through the excavations of memory and desire.<sup>13</sup> The contemporary city, however, still has its celebrators. In *The Heart of the World*, journalist Nik Cohn reports on his dangerous and colorful odyssey: a tour along Broadway, the fabled Great White Way, from the tip of Manhattan to mid-town.<sup>14</sup> The colorful eccentrics he meets along the way—from pickpockets to transvestites, from faded crooners to starving actresses—speak to the openness and vitality of the city, but beneath the surface of his tribute a hint of chaos looms, as when he evokes a shimmering but fragmenting downtown skyline from the perspective of a boat in the harbor.

At first it looked no different from its movies. Then the stone wall began to separate, resolve itself into planes and curves and spirals, rank after rank rising up like a city of cards. Sunlight caught on glass and steel, squares melted into oblongs, bowbends into angles until, as we moved beneath it, the whole prodigious construct seemed to sweep up and shatter, kaleidoscopic, into myriad shards and flints, refractions, highlights, voids. At its heart, a bottomless gorge appeared: “Broadway.”<sup>15</sup>

A great emptiness appears at the heart of the world: in Manhattan, center city, U.S.A.

Of course, the white middle class has fled the cities for the rings of surrounding suburban towns; there an affluent population increasingly defines the national political agenda, evident in the candidates’ rush to appeal to the middle class, largely suburban, in the 1992 presidential election. “The United States is a nation of suburbs,” declared William Schneider in the *Atlantic Monthly*. “Most of the twentieth century has been dominated by the urban myth: the melting pot; New York, New York; the cities as the nation’s great engines of prosperity and culture. All the while, however, Americans have been getting out of the cities as soon as they can afford to buy a house and a car.”

As inner cities increasingly came to represent danger, the suburbs, or what Joel Garreau calls “edge cities,” came to stand for safety: they are walled villages enclosing a largely white, affluent population.<sup>16</sup> If the

suburbs, which hold the majority of voters, have come to represent the center of what it means to be an American, then the cities, along with their poor and minority citizens who vote in decreasing numbers, have become marginalized and minimalized in the American mind.

The fate of our cities only briefly became a national concern after the Los Angeles riots. Anna Quindlen, columnist for the *New York Times*, then returned to the section of Philadelphia in which she grew up to find that what once had been a coherent Irish-Catholic neighborhood had become a burned-out place: a poor black neighborhood marked by drugs, crime, and hopelessness. Do not ask who abandoned American cities, she admonishes. “We abandoned American cities.”<sup>17</sup>

In *City of the World*, Bernie Bookbinder, a celebrator of the contemporary city, reminds us of the crucial contributions to New York and the nation made by immigrants. His optimistic title derives, of course, from Walt Whitman: “City of the World! / (for all races are here, / All the lands of the earth / make contributions here).”<sup>18</sup> Yet Bookbinder, too, concludes his tribute on a note of anxiety for a city of increasing numbers of newcomers—in the 1980s nearly a million immigrants (nearly one in seven New Yorkers) came to New York City, particularly to Queens, seeking work; however, by 1991 the poverty rate in the city had risen to 25 percent—and job opportunities had declined.<sup>19</sup> “The prognosis, therefore, appears all too clear,” predicts Bookbinder. “While the city prospers, the well-being of most of its people will decline.”<sup>20</sup>

In his “State of the City Address” for 1992, New York City Mayor David Dinkins granted the sense of helplessness that many New Yorkers feel during a time of recession, but the mayor called for a renewed commitment to the *idea* of the city. “We must hold firm to our vision of this city. A city that stands for openness and compassion, for fiscal integrity and prudence, and most of all, a city that stands for opportunity—the opportunity that generations of immigrants understood when they saw Ellis Island for the first time.”<sup>21</sup>

However, that promise of opportunity quickly fades before the cold facts laid out in Jason Epstein’s stark assessment, “The Tragical History of New York,” published in the *New York Review of Books* in early 1992. New York City, he argues, includes an increasing number of devastated neighborhoods, like once-genteel Bushwick in Brooklyn. During the citywide power failure of July 1977, Bushwick was ravaged by rioters, looters, and arsonists. Perhaps the memory of that devastation kept Bushwick quiet while sections of LA burned, on May 1, 1992.<sup>22</sup>

Still, this drug-and-poverty-ridden region of Brooklyn, symbolic of so many similar sites in the city, has become a hopeless case, a disease from which its defeated citizenry can discover no cure; Bushwick is a closed

world from which they can find no exit. The city, facing an operating deficit of \$333 million for fiscal year 1992, has neither the money nor the will to respond to its residents' dire needs; job opportunities for these increasingly desperate and angry citizens have evaporated.

Since the 1950s the city's industrial base, largely located in its neighborhoods, has been declining at an accelerating rate. According to the federal Bureau of Labor Statistics, Manhattan has lost 189,000 jobs since 1989. As a result, "the mechanism by which New York has converted previous immigrant generations into tax-paying citizens no longer existed." Small manufacturing plants in the boroughs have been sacrificed for the expansion of white-collar jobs in the skyscrapers of Manhattan.

In Tom Wolfe's *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, a novel that satirizes Reagan-era greed, Sherman McCoy, a successful investment banker, is asked by his daughter just what he *does!* Sherman's wife, who hates him, explains to their daughter: "Daddy doesn't build roads or hospitals, and he doesn't help build them, but he does handle the *bonds* for people who raise the money."<sup>23</sup> That is, Wolfe's representative American of the 1980s helped to "build" a flimsy and flammable paper empire in downtown Manhattan, "a city boiling over with racial and ethnic hostilities and burning with the itch to Grab It Now."<sup>24</sup>

Jay McInerney's take on New York in the 1980s as a latter-day Great Barbecue was first articulated in *Bright Lights, Big City* (1984), a novel that showed his representative young American on the make and going bust in money-mad, drug-buoyed Manhattan. In *Story of My Life* (1988), McInerney continued his catalogue of urban lives of quiet desperation through the testimony, in bummed-out lingo, by an affluent, drug-and-sex-numbed, directionless young woman. In *Brightness Falls* (1992), McInerney creates an even more convincing parable of Big City corruption, with exemplary young men and women who are caught up in the city's deterministic forces and gold fevers. "After nearly collapsing in bankruptcy during the seventies, their adoptive city had experienced a gold rush of sorts; prospecting with computers and telephones, financial miners had discovered fat veins of money coursing beneath the cliffs and canyons of the southern tip of Manhattan."<sup>25</sup>

By the early 1990s the paper city still stood, though precariously and at the cost of the city's former neighborhoods. For Jason Epstein, "New York City is at risk of becoming the fortified island of opulence within a sea of misery and violence that many of its patricians now fear as they, along with the majority of New Yorkers polled by the *Times*, contemplate their escape."<sup>26</sup> New York City: America's revolving door.

Immigration and much more are celebrated in *Our New York*, text by Alfred Kazin and photographs by David Finn. They also open their book by



citing from Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*: "One's self I sing, a simple separate person. Yet utter the word Democratic, the word En-Masse." That is, these authors, too, affirm, in the face of the contrary evidence that they acknowledge, an ideal of the city as the center of individual opportunities and the site of democratic coherence. Kazin and Finn, too, are proud "children of the city."<sup>27</sup> For Kazin New York is nothing short of "'fabulous.' The fable signifies extraordinary power and will—'the city of ambition,' Tom Wolfe calls it—and includes beggary, destitution, homelessness and crime on a scale that astonishes everyone but New Yorkers."<sup>28</sup> The "fabulous," then, is confirmed for Kazin by evidence of excess and includes the horrific. Finn's stark photographs support this double vision of the fabled city by juxtaposing images of opulence and degradation. Wary women walk the streets clutching their handbags in a grainy world of black and white. Citizens look suspicious, angry, or aggressive, shot against the backdrops of blasted neighborhoods or stark towers of commerce. Kazin and Finn thus celebrate New York City by incorporating its astonishing miseries into a forced affirmation.

Other writers recover and redefine New York by paying tribute to the greatest "child of the city," Walt Whitman, who boldly claimed, "This is the city and I am one of the citizens."<sup>29</sup> Yet who now, as did he, can affirm an adhesive union with *all* the citizens of "Manahattoes," as Whitman called his New York, much less identify with the disconsolate residents of the outer boroughs, including Whitman's beloved Brooklyn? A *New York Times* poll in November 1991 revealed that 58 percent of the residents interviewed predicted the city would be a worse place to live in ten to fifteen years, and 60 percent said they would prefer to live elsewhere if they had a choice. Pessimism permeated all groups, measured by income level, age, and boroughs.<sup>30</sup>

Still, in the spring of 1992, several of the city's and the nation's best poets gathered in the Cathedral of Saint John the Divine to read sections from Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* to pay tribute to Whitman on the hundredth anniversary of his death. Lucille Clifton, Michael Harper, Galway Kinnell, Sharon Olds, Gerald Stem, C. K. Williams, and, of course, Allen Ginsberg, read from Whitman and the Cathedral Singers sang choral works based on Whitman's texts. In "I Love Old Whitman So," Ginsberg, that most Whitmanian of contemporary poets, had already tipped "the hat on my skull / to the old soldier, old sailor, old writer, old homosexual, old Christ poet journeyman, / inspired in middle age to chaunt Eternity in Manhattan."<sup>31</sup> Now, once again, Walt Whitman, through these poets' voices, celebrated himself, loafed, and invited his soul to observe "a spear of summer grass" in this cavernous cathedral.

Some contemporary poets even thought Whitman's spirit mysteriously joined them. While Ginsberg was reading a passage in which Whitman "clarified and transfigured . . . forbidden voices, voices of sexes and lusts," a bat appeared from the darkness and circled the chancel, flying over a distracted Ginsberg. Kinnell alertly finished the poem, registering Whitman's instruction: "Missing me in one place search another, / I stop somewhere waiting for you."<sup>32</sup> The crowd of some thousand people applauded this seeming revival of Whitman's presence and voice; indeed the program climaxed with a recording, on a wax cylinder, of what is believed to be Whitman reading from his poem "America" just before he died.

Whitman's "America" was an extension of a vision of inclusiveness that began on the streets of New York: "center of equal daughters, equal sons."<sup>33</sup> While some of the poets who read in the cathedral seemed bent on capturing Whitman as a model for their own purposes—particularly as a homosexual, urban poet—others took the more inclusive Whitmanian tack and celebrated him as a poet who transcended sexuality, gender, region, and time, just as Whitman said he wished to do in "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry." In Sharon Olds's eyes Whitman "didn't sing only as a white man or a gay man. He didn't even sing as a living man, as opposed to a dead man. He makes the human race look like a better idea." Olds even put the best interpretation on the bat that flew into their midst—a symbol, teasing these poets' imaginations for interpretation. "Did you see that bat?" she asked. "It was a sort of pale beigish bat. For me, it was both a bat and him."<sup>34</sup>

However, seen from a less optimistic perspective, in 1896 not only bats but vultures were circling Greater New York, symbolically uniting the boroughs—an event that had been one of Whitman's fondest dreams of inclusion—while rats were invading its understaffed parks and its citizens were losing faith in the future of the city.

New York City, just as it is ever available for reconstruction, is now available for reconsideration. Though clearly in decline as a center of civilization and culture, the city remains vibrant, open anew for the inscription of significations, as an emblem for the state of the nation. Take the case of Elizabeth Hardwick's considerations and reconsiderations of the city, for example. More than a generation ago, Hardwick, then married to Robert Lowell, gave up on Boston, where they lived, and they returned to New York, memorializing their two-hundred-mile sea change in "Boston: The Lost Ideal" (1959). "In Boston there is an utter absence of that wild electric beauty of New York, of the marvelous, excited rush of people in taxicabs at twilight, of the great Avenues and Streets, the restaurants, theaters, bars, hotels, delicatessens, shops."<sup>35</sup>

Now, one third of a century later, her assessment is under radical revision. In “New York City: Crash Course” (1991), Hardwick wonders why people still come to New York. “Once here, a lingering infection seems to set in and the streets are filled with complaints and whines of the hypochondriac who will not budge, will not face a fertile pasture.” Images of disease (plague and infection) again serve as adequate tropes for postmodern New York. At best, the city just *is*, a place that has lost its once powerful magic. “Here it is, that’s all, the place itself, shadowy, ever promising and ever withholding, a bad mother, queen of the double bind. . . . Nevertheless.” Nevertheless, there is always Whitman to cite as a means of renewing one’s covenant with the troubled contemporary city: “Give me faces and streets—give me these phantoms incessant and endless along the trottoirs!”<sup>36</sup> Whitman’s lyrical lines serve as her incantation to protect the contemporary walker in the city from muggers, addicts, derelicts, beggars, and others—those incessant and endless phantoms who patrol the city’s trottoirs! At the end of the day, Elizabeth Hardwick’s “crash course” on the city sounds suspiciously like a minicourse on a city that has crashed!

**I**n her foreword to Mary McCarthy’s *Intellectual Memoirs: New York 1936–1938*, Elizabeth Hardwick looks back in wonder at all that time has wrought since McCarthy first came to New York—a place that can “excite intensely or suddenly as if by electrical shock,” in McCarthy’s words—from Vassar, at age twenty-two, in 1934.<sup>37</sup> This “very heaven” sense of discovery in the city was hard to recall and recreate for McCarthy—she died in 1989, at age seventy-seven—when she wrote this brief memoir during her final illness. For that we have to return to the élan of the opening pages of McCarthy’s *The Group* (1963), a novel in which eight recent Vassar graduates gather, in June of 1933, in the Chapel of Saint George’s Church, on Stuyvesant Square, to attend a wedding of one of their own. “They were in the throes of discovering New York, imagine it, when some of them had actually lived here all their lives.”<sup>38</sup> That novel ends in a funeral of one of their own, all élan and sense of discovery of the wonders of New York having long since fled. When Mary McCarthy set out to “imagine it,” her own New York saga tracked a similar arc. (As do the stories in her 1942 collection, *The Company She Keeps*, which cover the same period.)

*Intellectual Memoirs* begins by establishing McCarthy’s marital, literary, and political innocence. She walked proudly down lower Broadway beside her first husband in a May Day 1936 parade, affirming Stalinist communism. Soon this Pippa passed into complex perceptions and compromising positions; she learned, under Malcolm Cowley’s supervision, to write slashing reviews at *The New Republic* but also to write the right things about favored authors. At “Jim” Farrell’s apartment on Lexington Avenue she

became aware of the Stalin–Trotsky split in the ranks of American leftists and joined the staff of the Trotskyite *Partisan Review* while becoming the mistress of editor Philip Rahv. She moved to the Village and practiced “free” love. “I realized one day that in twenty-four hours I had slept with three different men.” Yet she did not “*feel* promiscuous” and assures us she never contracted venereal disease.<sup>39</sup> For all that, her “innocent abroad” persona became shopworn on the streets of New York.

As Hardwick suggests, McCarthy constructed a retrospective myth upon her New York experiences, particularly when she personified Rahv, her lover, as Good, and Edmund Wilson, whom she married, as Evil. Why, then, did she betray Rahv by first having an affair with and then by marrying Wilson? The elderly, ill McCarthy could not imagine why, unless it was to sustain a foolish, logical consistency in ideologically obsessed New York of the 1930s. “So finally I agreed to marry him as my punishment for having gone to bed with him. . . . The logic of having slept with Wilson compelled the sequence of marriage if that was what he wanted. Otherwise my action would have no consistency; in other words, no meaning.”<sup>40</sup>

Indeed, she decided that her actions resulted in little meaning, for though that marriage lasted seven years, *Intellectual Memoirs* concludes with Mary’s disillusionment during her honeymoon, when a drunken Wilson accused her brothers of being Stalinist agents who were out to get him! Her marriage, the memoir concludes, “never recovered.”<sup>41</sup> However, more than her marriage was damaged; the bright, electric promise of New York was tainted, although it was also made available for satiric or idyllic recreation in McCarthy’s fiction, the form Wilson urged her to pursue. Finally, the city served Mary McCarthy as material for this ambiguous, reconstructive memoir.

**I**t is time to reexamine the stories through which we know the city, to reevaluate the myths that embody the city, to revise the parables that hold the city’s meanings. In “New York: Sentimental Journeys,” Joan Didion attempts just that by reflecting on the story of the unnamed woman jogger who was brutally assaulted by “wilding” teens in Central Park at 1:30 in the morning of April 20, 1989. That woman became, in the press and in the eyes of many public figures and city officials, a personification of the New Yorker as “Lady Courage,” a woman who embodies the best of the city’s character.

For Didion “it was precisely in this confrontation of victim and city, this confusion of personal woe with public distress, that the crime’s ‘story’ would be found, its lessons, its encouraging promise of narrative resolution.” Didion, however, does not accept the Central Park mugging story as a sufficiently encompassing narrative to represent the city, and she finds those

who gloss this story as a parable of individual courage in the face of urban terror to be perpetrators of a tradition of sentimental tales.

The insistent sentimentalization of experience, which is to say the encouragement of such reliance, is not new in New York. A preference for broad strokes, for the distortion and flattening of character, and for the reduction of event to narrative, has been for well over a hundred years the heart of the way the city presents itself: Lady Liberty, huddled masses, ticker-tape parades, heroes, gutters, bright lights, broken hearts, eight million stories and all the same story, each devised to obscure not only the city's actual tensions of race and class but also, more significantly, the civic and commercial arrangements that render those tensions irreconcilable.

As the stories of William Sidney Porter, or "O. Henry," focused on "individual plights" and ignored, according to William R. Taylor, "social and political implications," so, too, for Didion, did the story of the Central Park jogger deflect attention from recognition that the city is a fixed system of class and racial oppression. "In this city rapidly vanishing into the chasm between its actual life and its preferred narratives, what people said when they talked about the case of the Central Park jogger came to seem a kind of poetry, a way of expressing, without directly stating, different but equally volatile and similarly occult visions of the same disaster."

While many white New Yorkers saw the unnamed (and therefore all the more emblematic) woman as a victim of racial violence, many black New Yorkers saw the trial of the teens accused of her assault as the latest example of white victimization of blacks, who unfairly bore the blame for the city's problems. Thus,

Among the citizens of a New York come to grief on the sentimental stories told in defense of its own lazy criminality, the city's inevitability remained the given, the heart, the first and last word on which all the stories rested. We love New York, the narrative promises, because it matches our energy level.<sup>42</sup>

The world-weariness reflected in Didion's essay testifies to her own disenchantment with New York City.

Didion's somewhat elliptical assessment of New York stories—they are at once sentimental in their reductiveness, available for glosses of opposed political implications, yet irresistible both in their drama and in their promises of revelation—brings to mind her contribution to the genre and her own evolving sense of the city. In "Goodbye to All That" (1967), Didion

offered a narrative and gloss of her initial encounters with New York City: her own sentimental education in the city of broken dreams. She first came to New York, from California, as a guest editor at *Mademoiselle* during the summer of her junior year, in 1955; later she entered a *Vogue* contest, won it, and returned to the city. She was then guided by the same kind of reductive New York stories that she decried nearly forty years later.

As a young woman of twenty, Didion was “programmed by all the movies I had ever seen and all the songs I had ever heard sung and all the stories I had ever read about New York,” which “informed me that it would never be quite the same again. In fact it never was.” During her first days in Manhattan, all she could do “was talk long-distance to the boy I already knew I would never marry in the spring. I would stay in New York, I told him, just six months, and I could see the Brooklyn Bridge from my window. As it turned out the bridge was the Triborough, and I stayed eight years.” New York, then, existed as a myth of expectation and intimidation before it became an educative experience for this “native daughter” from California; the city moved her from epiphany to revelation, from innocence to jaded awareness. Indeed, well into her eight-year stay, Didion retained a romantic attachment to the city, refusing to accept it as “real,” still seeing it through the romantic, faraway haze of myth.

“New York is just a city, albeit *the* city, a plausible place for people to live.” But for those from far away, “New York was no mere city. It was instead a romantic notion, the mysterious nexus of all love and money and power, the shining and perishable dream itself. To think of ‘living’ there was to reduce the miraculous to the mundane; one does not ‘live’ at Xanadu.” It was not until she was twenty-eight that she began to become disillusioned, began to realize that “it is distinctly possible to stay too long at the Fair.” New York, for Didion, was a proper place in which to be young and naive; when she grew up, her education completed, she got married and left for Los Angeles, where she and her husband wrote films in what most Americans believe to be the real Xanadu, Hollywood.<sup>43</sup>

In “Goodbye to All That,” Joan Didion treats her own story as exactly the same kind of informing parable of character in relation to place that she objected to in the popular responses to the Central Park jogger incident. New York City, it seems, encourages sagas of realization. For Joan Didion, as for the Central Park jogger, New York City became a stage set on which a lone woman played out her high drama; either she sang her own aria or she heard a chorus of commentators lift their voices to account for her significance. Though she resents the incorporation of the Central Park jogger assault into a sentimental narrative, Didion exploits her own past for just such an informing parable of the city. Calvin Trillin said. “The immigrant saga of the fifties was *My Sister Eileen*—which became the Broadway musical



*Wonderful Town*—rather than the *Daily Forward*. It was people coming in from the Midwest instead of from Europe.”<sup>44</sup>

Didion and the Central Park jogger were both bright young women who came to New York City from Elsewhere seeking “wonderful town” and all the opportunities it offered; both, however, found the city, to varying degrees, a shocking revelation, and finally both left. In the Central Park jogger story, Joan Didion seems to have discovered a variant of her own coming-of-age-and-disillusionment-in-the-big-city tale.

By the time Didion wrote her bitter assessment of sentimental New York stories, she and her husband, the writer John Gregory Dunne, were again living in Manhattan, on the Upper East Side, where they found they were not protected from assaults and muggings. New York as they had known it, she told Dan Wakefield for his recollection of New York in the 1950s, was gone—a transient place, a passing state of mind. Therefore, “I didn’t really think of it as coming back. I thought of it as leaving Los Angeles and making a change. It’s not ‘coming back’ to New York, though, because it’s nothing like it was.”<sup>45</sup> Old New York was gone, like a song that keeps saying “remember.” However, what does remain constant is her fascination for the vibrancy if not the accuracy of New York stories.

As a literary invention, New York City, it might be said, is an old story, though not so old as the myth of Boston, which goes back to John Winthrop’s “city upon a hill” trope, uttered *before* the passengers of the *Arbella* arrived in the New World, indeed before Boston itself was founded. Boston, then, was an image before it was a fact.<sup>46</sup> (The two cities, like Athens and Sparta, occupy different ends of an American symbolic spectrum. Boston is idealistic, paternalistic, judgmental, constricting, and obsessed with posterity; New York is pragmatic, adolescent, tolerant in its indifference, free, and more concerned with seizing the day than planning a future.)<sup>47</sup>

New York, unlike Boston, existed in fact for more than a century before a network of literary associations and implications began to accumulate: a *voice* through which it would be known and understood; a dominant set of *characters* serving as the city’s representative men and women; a set of *images* that gave the growing city visual and psychic identity; and a *story*, or collection of informing parables, through which the city could be comprehended.

Washington Irving invented the literary idea of New York in his mock epic, *A History of New York from the Beginning of the World to the End of the Dutch Dynasty* by Diedrich Knickerbocker (1809). In the manner of Jonathan Swift’s “A Modest Proposal,” though with far more frivolous intent (setting out to amuse rather than reform), Irving perfected a persona whose

style of narration undercut his apparent point. Diedrich Knickerbocker, confused and pompous, tried to make out of the history of New York an epic of national origins, an American Aeneid, but Irving made it clear, through his narrator's bombast, that the history of New York amounted only to a farce.

Walt Whitman did incorporate the city into a national epic, *Leaves of Grass*. "Walt Whitman, a kosmos, of Manhattan the son"—so he celebrated himself in "Song of Myself"—a poet who presumed to speak for all of the city's citizens, indeed to chant for all Americans.<sup>48</sup> On the other hand, Whitman's contemporary, Herman Melville—though they probably never met, Whitman and Melville were born on the same day, March 31, 1819, within what is now Greater New York City—portrayed New York as a city of disillusionment (*Moby-Dick*), deprivation ("Bartleby the Scrivener"), and destruction (*Pierre*).

After the riots against the Draft Act in July 1863, which Melville watched from his rooftop on East Twenty-Sixth Street, he wrote the bitter poem "The House-top," in which the city is portrayed as a landscape that literally lacks humanity. "The Town is taken by its rats . . . and man rebounds whole aeons back in nature."<sup>49</sup> So the debate has been engaged by New York's writers, who have contrived competing myths of the city, narratives which have ranged from mock epic denunciations to true epic tributes to parables and poems of denunciations. From Henry James's nostalgia for New York as a lost village centered at Washington Square, in *The American Scene* and *Notes of a Son and Brother*, to Tom Wolfe's *Bonfire of the Vanities*, New York has provided a stage set for writers who contrive passion plays on the American character.

In his introduction to the reissue of *Literary New York*, Robert Phillips recalls that when he came to New York in the early 1960s to become a writer, he and his wife walked the city's streets in search of literary landmarks. "It felt safe then, even late at night." Though New York feels distinctly less safe now, even at midday, Phillips finds an extraordinary range of evidence to support his claim that "New York has continued to inspire writers to create characters and plots set in and around Gotham, from Truman Capote's *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (1958) to Jay McInerney's *Bright Lights, Big City* (1984)," suggesting that "literary New York constantly replenishes itself."<sup>50</sup>

Whatever happens to the actual city, the contending myths of it continue to grow, fed by the imaginations of yet another generation of writers seeking significance and recognition in Manhattan. For all that, New York literature has changed, along with the city, as the contrast between the fiction of Capote, which celebrates the charms of a spontaneous young woman dancing through a safe city, and the fiction of McInerney, published thirty-four years



later, which examines the crisis of a talented young man who was too easily seduced by the temptations of the Destructive City.

Jay McInerney's *Brightness Falls* (1992) is a novel framed as an elegy for the loss of innocence—the once-bright hopes of those who came to maturity during the 1980s and the failed promise of American life as it is embodied in its greatest city, New York. McInerney's young Americans, born in Eisenhower's 1950s, came of age in the sinister years of Nixon-Watergate and were buoyed by the Reagan-era delusions of grandeur; they participated in its compromises, and they suffered its consequences.

The novel, centering on three gifted, witty, and intelligent young men and women (a writer, a publisher, and a broker), is a parable on the death of the heart in public and private life. More than interlocking narratives of private failures, it is also a novel about the collapse of the American dream—the attainment of money, success, power, beauty, or other examples of grace—in the late 1980s. The Iran–Contra hearings hum in the novel's background during the summer of 1987. More specifically, the novel analyzes that period leading up to and coming down from the stock market collapse (a 508-point plunge in one day) on October 19, 1987. America's best and brightest young men and women, McInerney's representative characters, get caught up in the decade's roller-coaster ride of bright promises and dark disillusionments. The novel, fittingly, is set in the vital center of this economic “action”: New York City.

McInerney's title comes from a poem by Thomas Nashe, “A Litany in Time of Plague.” In *The Bonfire of the Vanities* (1987), set in the New York social and financial community of the early 1980s, Tom Wolfe invoked plague imagery through allusion to Poe's “The Masque of the Red Death.” Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* (1991), a novel about a young broker who becomes a serial murderer, invoked Dostoyevsky's *Notes from Underground* for his contribution to the genre of cautionary tales about the immoral selfishness and violence of our times; *American Psycho* is also set, fittingly, in New York City. In *Brightness Falls*, the Nashe poem is read during a memorial service at Saint Mark's in the Bowery for a gifted and successful young fiction writer, Jeff Pierce, who died of AIDS-related pneumonia.

In this novel, as in Nashe's poem, “the plague full swift goes by” and “brightness falls from the air.” Corrine Calloway, who serves as the conscience of the novel, at first does not understand Nashe's trope, but then she suddenly gets it—“She could picture it clearly: brightness and beauty and youth falling like snow out of the sky all around them, gold dust falling to the streets and washing away in the rain outside the church, down the gutters into the sea.”<sup>51</sup> After brightness falls, darkness covers all.

In *Brightness Falls*, Jay McInerney recreates in the early 1990s the same sense of plangent loss and pique that F. Scott Fitzgerald articulated in his telling, mid-1920s myth of the city, *The Great Gatsby*. Fitzgerald, more than half a century after his death, remains the principal source of inspiration for novelists of New York who wish to combine social satire with parables of revelation for their central characters, those innocents abroad in the mean streets of the city. In *Bonfire*, Wolfe went back to *Gatsby* for a central plot device (in both books a naive, philandering man takes the blame for a car accident for which his mistress was responsible) and for Fitzgerald's broad satire of the very rich.

In *Brightness Falls*, McInerney evokes *The Beautiful and Damned* (1922), a novel in which Fitzgerald portrayed a bright young couple, Anthony and Gloria Patch, partying to destruction in the boom years of the 1920s, thus anticipating the *danse macabre* of Corrine and Russell Calloway in the 1980s. (Their name, of course, recalls Nick Carraway, narrator of *Gatsby*.) Fitzgerald intended *The Beautiful and Damned* as social satire, according to the novel's dust jacket description (which he probably wrote): "It reveals with devastating satire a section of American society which has been recognized as an entity—that wealthy, floating population which throngs the restaurants, cabarets and hotels of our great city."<sup>52</sup>

However, Fitzgerald's novel is more personal than public; Wolfe and McInerney use private dislocations (infidelity in particular) as corollaries to public corruptions. Though both Wolfe and McInerney show their characters convincingly inhabiting the restaurants, clubs, and hotels of go-go Manhattan, Wolfe tells us more about private dinner parties of the very rich and the city's Dickensian court system, which enmeshes his rich fool, Sherman McCoy. McInerney adequately covers the high-roller social set, but tells us more about insider trading, leveraged buyouts, and publishing empires. Either way, Scott Fitzgerald remains the inspirational model for contemporary chroniclers of the city.

Perhaps the most telling allusion to Fitzgerald appears in the opening page of *Brightness Falls*, when Jeff Pierce, then a patient in a Connecticut retreat for addicts, watches Russell and Corrine, the friends who forced him into rehabilitation, arrive for a visit—like a couple in a magazine ad, so patently members of their generation and class. Corrine's yellow hair and Russell's yellow tie flying like pennons of bright promise. "Begin with an individual and you'll find you've got nothing but ambiguity and compassion; if you intend violence, stick with the type."<sup>53</sup>

Jeff feels violence, for he is angry at Russell, his best friend, and Corrine, the woman both men love. By "violence" McInerney suggests his satirical intention to mock such types as the Calloways, yet his considerations of their individual stories yields ambiguity and compassion. Such alternatives frame

the rhetorical and sensibility extremes of this novel. The opening line of a Fitzgerald story, "The Rich Boy," establishes McInerney's source: "Begin with an individual, and before you know it you find that you have created a type; begin with a type, and you find that you have created—nothing."<sup>54</sup> Fitzgerald here suggests the "something"—compassion beneath satire—that is crucial for the best New York City fiction.

Russell and Corrine Calloway, both age thirty-one, were five years married in 1987. Their marriage seemed blessed, "a safe haven in a city that murdered marriages." Russell Calloway first met Corrine Makepeace at Brown. Now they live in a one-bedroom rental on the East Side with a view from their terrace of the city to the south. He works in publishing and she is a stockbroker. Both were caught up in the giddy updraft of expectations in New York in the early 1980s, a mood well captured in McInerney's Fitzgeraldian prose, which combines evocation and irony.

The electronic buzz of fast money hummed beneath the wired streets, affecting all the inhabitants, making some of them crazy with lust and ambition, others angrily impoverished, and making the comfortable majority feel poorer. Late at night, Russell or Corrine would sometimes hear that buzz—in between the sirens and the alarms and the car horns—worrying vaguely, clinging to the very edge of the credit limits on their charge cards.<sup>55</sup>

McInerney sets his exemplary tale in the larger context of the city's history. Wall Street, he notes, marked the northern boundary of New Amsterdam, where a log wall stood in the seventeenth century, a wall over which settlers threw their garbage. Corrine goes to work each morning oblivious to all this, "not really seeing the towering temples to Mammon as she walked toward the one in which she toiled, reading her paper in the available light that found its way to the canyon floor." She thinks the rising Dow Jones crazy. "Castles in the air."<sup>56</sup> However, Russell, her impetuous and ambitious husband, wants to storm the turrets.

McInerney's plot closes on his characters like an engine of destruction when Russell is inspired to attempt a hostile takeover of Corbin, Dean and Company, the old publishing house for which he works. (Whitney Corbin, Sr., founded Corbin, Dean and Company, modeling the firm after Harry Crosby's Black Sun Press, and Corbin made it, like Crosby's, into a house dedicated to literary modernists. What was built in the commercial and literary idealism of 1920s New York is fittingly shattered in the speculative madness of 1980s New York.) Russell is encouraged in his scheme by Victor Propp, a novelist who exploited the system for ever larger bids for his long-un-produced novel.

I feel that we in this insane city are living in an era in which anything can happen. Do you remember what Nick Carraway said as he was driving into Manhattan in Gatsby's big car and the skyline of the city came into view over the Queensboro Bridge? As they cross into the city, Nick says, "Anything can happen now that we've slid over this bridge . . . anything at all."<sup>57</sup>

This, then, is the theme of *Brightness Falls*: "anything can happen." Shocking and surprising New York is even a city in which, it is reported, a rogue leopard, panther, or tiger wanders the streets, attacking citizens. A Post headline screams: "Wild Cat Terrorizes City."<sup>58</sup> Near the end of the novel, Corrine, who volunteers at a soup kitchen on the Lower East Side, gets caught up in a police raid on a shantytown ("Reagantown"). "Corrine envisioned the violence spreading and consuming the entire city."<sup>59</sup> Then she sees the source of the myth—a terrified escaped ocelot stands in an empty lot. In New York City the ocelot is not the only creature under attack.

Trina Cox, a shark in "M & A" (not kinky sex, but mergers and acquisitions), gets involved in Russell's takeover scheme—"Maybe we can rock [and] roll," she tells Russell.<sup>60</sup> In turn she brings in Bernard Melman, takeover king, a latter-day, vulgarized Gatsby (Melman, too, delights in his leather-bound books, props to his pretensions) who rules businesses and attracts what is left of New York society to his garish parties.

If it had taken a generation for the Rockefellers to gain admittance to the parlors of the Astors, it took only a hundred million or so 1987 dollars for the current crop of financial wizards to purchase a guest list of sterling old names and high-voltage celebrities.<sup>61</sup>

The rest of the story is an artfully told inevitability. Corrine has a premonition of disaster: "Lately it seemed to her that the horsemen of the apocalypse were saddling up, that something was coming to rip huge holes in the gaudy stage sets of Ronald McDonald Reaganland."<sup>62</sup> Russell, however, thinks that the music will never stop. "Partying is such sweet sorrow," Jeff tells Corrine, not realizing the full implications of what he says.<sup>63</sup> Inevitably, Jeff overreaches, then the market crashes. His takeover effort is taken out of his hands by Trina Cox and Melman; after Corrine learns of his brief affair with Trina, the Calloway marriage goes bust. All falls down. The center has not held, Jeff realizes, in exile in Los Angeles.

Years before, he'd moved to New York believing himself to be penetrating to the center of the world, and all of the time he lived

there the illusion of a center had held: the sense of there always being a door behind which further mysteries were available, a ballroom at the top of the sky from which the irresistible music wafted, a secret power source from which the mad energy of the metropolis emanated. But Los Angeles had no discernible center and was also without edges and corners.<sup>64</sup>

The New York City of *Brightness Falls* is hollow at the center. At one point Jeff and Russell walk along Great Jones Street—they pass an ominous sign reading DANGER HOLLOW SIDEWALK—looking for the bathhouse that they hope is still there. “Buildings disappeared overnight in the city, like black rhinos from the African savanna. In the morning only a smoking pile of brick and mortar would be left, the skin and bones; the next day a Pasta Fasta or a Younique Botique.”<sup>65</sup> Indeed, by the end of the novel the bathhouse is gone, its site converted to another club. Old, established businesses fail, replaced by trendy fly-by-night sex shops; New York is strip-mined for quick profits at every level. Much more is lost. Jeff, the writer who was convinced, like Fitzgerald before him, of life’s insupportable sadness, dies; the Calloways learn much about loss and feel “alone in the world, shivering at the dark threshold”—the final words of the novel.<sup>66</sup> In New York of the 1980s the lights were dimming. Novelists and commentators had to go back to the 1950s, like Dan Wakefield, or to the 1920s, like Toni Morrison, to discover what President George Bush liked to call “points of light.”

Toni Morrison’s *Jazz* is set in January 1926 and centered on Lenox Avenue—seven years after the Armistice, when black soldiers, returning from the Great War, proudly marched up Fifth Avenue with great expectations of opportunities in America. Morrison’s cautionary plot shows that even at the height of the Harlem Renaissance, disillusionment and black misery were pervasive. The novel’s narrative is another engine of urban destruction: Joe Trace—husband, salesman of Cleopatra beauty products—shoots to death Dorcas, his eighteen-year-old lover. Violet, Joe’s wife, a hairdresser, attacks Dorcas’s corpse at the funeral with a knife. That single act of murder, its causes and its consequences (foreshadowing further violence), consumes the novel.

Alice, Dorcas’s aunt, detests “lowdown music” and decides that jazz was the cause both of her family’s and of Harlem’s miseries. “Alice Manfred had worked hard to privatize her niece, but she was no match for a city seeping music that begged and challenged each and every day. ‘Come,’ it said. ‘Come and do wrong.’”<sup>67</sup> (Does “privatize,” a word drawn from contemporary public policy jargon, not strike a false note when ascribed to a

down-home, black woman in the 1920s?) Jazz and the city are one during New York's "jazz age" in *Jazz*—both entice, destroy, inform. This, then, is a novel of verbal improvisation, told by an unnamed voice—seemingly omniscient, but actually limited in awareness, suggesting the tone and qualities of a member of the Harlem community, but with the detachment of an outsider: that is, the voice of a writer, like Morrison—as the narrative moves around in time and the style elaborates figurative language.

"Sth, I know that woman" is the sentence that opens *Jazz*, though the narrator will come to admit all she does not know or understand about the characters whose stories she tells.<sup>68</sup> (Once again, as in Morrison's *Beloved*, characters are haunted by the presence of a dead girl.) Indeed, the novel is something of a self-consuming, self-referential act, at once evoking the exotic life of postwar Harlem and undermining the authority of its narrator. Certainly the novel constitutes a deconstruction of myths about Harlem and the city, showing the deep human anguishes that lie beneath its surface, pains reflected in the blues and in the violent and passionate acts of its citizens.

This is a novel about the black heart of New York City. The narrator adores but does not fully understand it. "I'm crazy about this city. Daylight slants like a razor cutting the building in half. . . . A city like this one makes me dream tall and feel in on things. Hep." (Thinking she is "hep," the narrator sees black life in the racial cliché imagery of razor cuts.) The narrator mistakenly thinks that in 1926 Harlem residents are happy, that the "sad stuff" is behind them, that "at last, everything's ahead."<sup>69</sup>

The narrator, then, is naive, never more so than when she assures readers that the city can be understood, that it is what it appears to be. "Nobody says it's pretty here; nobody says it's easy either. What is decisive, and if you pay attention to the street plans, all laid out, the city can't hurt you." Of course she is quite wrong about that; the devious twists and turns of the city, embodied in its jazz—Oliver, Armstrong, Ellington—belie the regularity and reassurances of its street design.

Do what you please in the city, it is there to back and frame you no matter what you do. And what happens on its blocks and lots and side streets is anything the strong can think of and the weak will admire. All you have to do is heed the design—the way it's laid out for you, considerate, mindful of where you want to go and what you might need tomorrow.<sup>70</sup>

Speaking around the back of her unreliable narrator, Morrison wants us to heed another design, more devious and off-rhythmic, the pattern of jazz, which reveals the elusiveness of Harlem's stories. *Jazz*, then, is a parable through which we can better learn our ways around New York, find our way

into the lives of American blacks (so often misrepresented, according to Morrison), and discover the truths and distortions of fictional narratives.<sup>71</sup>

Violet and Joe first met in Vesper County, Virginia, in 1906. They came to New York, dancing on the train that brought them, seeking a return of the love they felt for the city. “Like a million more they could hardly wait to get there and love it back.” The city held the promise of escape from the “specter” of racism, violence, and injustice they left behind. This wave of “country people” came in great numbers and fell in love with the city. “There, in a city, they are not so much new as themselves: their stronger, riskier selves.”<sup>72</sup>

But the city proved no haven from racism, victimization, and disillusionment. In compensation, these characters tried to recapture their youthful élan—most markedly in Joe’s affair with Dorcas. When *that* failed, they turned murderous, killing the things they loved. However, the intersecting lives portrayed in *Jazz* do not, as its narrator expects they will, tum into a Porgy and Bess-like melodrama of black self-destructiveness through jazz, jealousy, and reprisal.

Instead, Joe, who was never arrested for the murder of Dorcas, and Violet renew their marriage. The narrator shrugs in wonder. “It was loving the city that distracted me and gave me ideas. Made me think I could speak its loud voice and make that sound human. I missed the people altogether.” As she did not really understand the circuitous ways of the city and its music, so too did she misjudge Harlem’s representative citizens. “So I missed it altogether.”<sup>73</sup>

The novel does not end in the violence that the plot had long been foreshadowing, but it does end in sentimental reassurances. Morrison may underestimate the city’s capacity to impose consequences on its citizens’ actions, and she may also overestimate the city’s capacity for romance!<sup>74</sup> Or is it only Morrison’s narrator who is mystified by New York City? In any case, in *Jazz* the city, like the music, resists quick or easy interpretation.

Contemporary commentators conceive of New York as a city of central importance and epic proportions. For Oliver E. Allen, in *New York, New York*, it was Manhattan—heterogeneous, tolerant, brash, cosmopolitan, materialistic—rather than insular and pietistic Boston, that was the true site in which the nation was conceived in liberty.<sup>75</sup> Thomas Bender, in *New York Intellect*, agrees, citing Edmund Wilson to support the point that New York is indeed a city of the world: “The New Yorkers . . . are all men or women of the world in a way that no New Englander is, and they have, most of them, a sense of the country as a whole such as few New Englanders have had.” Bender goes on to add his own claims to New York’s distinctions:



What is so impressive about New York City—from either a general American or a European perspective—is the battleground quality of its intellectual life. The uncentered but not utterly formless character of intellectual culture in New York is its special, though not always welcome, gift to the life of the mind.<sup>76</sup>

In *The Art of the City*, Peter Conrad calls New York, quite simply, “The Epic City,” finding in its literature evidence of the mock epic (Irving’s *History of New York*) and true epic (Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*).<sup>77</sup> More modestly, William R. Taylor, in *Pursuit of Gotham*, searches out “Gotham,” a city of entwined commerce and culture within New York City.<sup>78</sup> Thus, in the midst of the deterioration of the city, celebrations of its wonders continue.

In *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, Tom Wolfe fittingly satirizes New York in a chapter titled “The Masque of the Red Death,” making Poe, that lonely man in the crowd, Manhattan’s true prophet of doom. The chapter portrays a posh Upper West Side dinner party composed of old moneyed men who were accompanied by mature women, “starved to perfection,” and “so-called Lemon Tarts,” or younger women “who were the second, third, and fourth wives or live-in girlfriends . . . men refer to, quite without thinking, as *girls*.”<sup>79</sup> In the midst of this gathering, Lord Buffing, a British poet who is dying of AIDS, tells the assembled guests, the reputed “beautiful people” of Manhattan, of the Poe story about similar partygoers who ended up dancing with Death. “They are bound together, and they whirl about one another, endlessly, particles in a doomed atom—and what else could the Red Death be but some final stimulation, the ne plus ultra. So Poe was kind enough to write the ending for us more than a hundred years ago.”<sup>80</sup> For Tom Wolfe, New York City is the site of a terminal epic, “a doomed atom” in the world’s destruction.

What Tom Wolfe does for midtown, Richard Price does for New York’s boroughs and outlying satellite cities. In novels (*The Wanderers*, *Bloodbrothers*) and a film (*Sea of Love*) Price has shown the dark side of the half lives of those confined to the Bronx—a violent world baptized in blood loyalties and confirmed in bloodletting. In *Bloodbrothers*, young Stony DeCoco, who lives with his family in Co-op City, a horrific high-rise housing project, is in conflict. Will he be able to fly past the nets of family ties by doing what he wants to do (working with hospitalized children) or will he drown in the blood of family expectations (construction work)? As though he were in a gutter morality play, Stony vacillates between conflicting claims: his father and his battered brother draw Stony back to the



family while the hospital children and even Three-Fingered Annette, a prostitute, show him a wider world.<sup>81</sup>

In *Clockers*, Price's latest fiction, another young man, a black drug dealer named Strike, seeks escape. At the end of the novel he is on a bus, leaving the Port Authority terminal, going he knows not where, saved from early death by the grace of Rocco Klein, a concerned cop. Strike leaves behind a wasteland of burned-out lives vividly described by Price. In this novel Price leaves the Bronx and invents an imaginary city of unquiet desperation: Dempsy, at the New Jersey end of the Holland Tunnel. Perhaps Price wants to present a concentrated model of the drug-and-police world, a New York City with all cultural amenities removed.

In any case, his characters are drawn from confining Dempsy (a larger Co-op City), through the tunnel, to New York City's fatal attractions and promises of release. One unlucky dealer, shot in Dempsy, dies on the New York/New Jersey line, in the tunnel! One day Strike and a boy he is recruiting into the drug business drive into New York. "The trip to New York took only thirty minutes, and as they flew around the glazed fluorescent curves of the Holland Tunnel, a false promise of daylight around each bend" drew them on. On the New York side, Strike takes out his .25 caliber pistol and says, "New York, New York, city of dreams, sometimes it ain't *all* what it seems."<sup>82</sup>

In another New York scene, Buddha Hat, an assassin, takes Strike to Times Square to show him the pornographic film in which Buddha Hat appeared and lost his virginity. On their way back to Dempsy, after being harassed by Port Authority police outside the tunnel, the two young men pause, on the New Jersey side of the Hudson, "staring out at the shut-down New York skyline," talking about how many years they had left to live and wondering what would be the best spot on their bodies in which to receive a quick fatal shot.<sup>83</sup>

**R**occo, who lives in Manhattan, understands Strike, for the policeman and the drug dealer share the same constricting vision of the city. "Rocco looked out the bedroom window at their nighttime view of the bridges leading into the southern tip of Manhattan. Underlit by the city, the sky was an eerie muddy purple."<sup>84</sup> When Strike does escape Dempsy and takes the bus out of New York, the reader is surprised, for Price had convincingly portrayed a no-exit world, a New York City with a shut-down, muddy purple skyline that spreads its infections well beyond its borders.

**F**or Dan Wakefield, New York remains a city of wonder—a city of words, romance, transformation—worth re-creating in a felicitous meditation of *temps perdu*, *New York in the Fifties*.

It was a bright, cool evening in Manhattan in late May 1992 when a publication party was held for Wakefield's *New York in the Fifties*. Though it was a Monday evening, Greenwich Village looked relaxed, festive. The young, as ever, strolled in each other's arms. Outdoor cafes along Bleeker Street were populated by colorfully dressed people drinking cappuccinos, reading the *Times*, ogling passersby or practicing various combinations of these passive arts and crafts. To a visitor strolling along crowded sidewalks in the setting sun, Bleeker Street seemed a territory removed from New York's economic, crime, AIDS, and drug crises. That is, the Village, amazingly, looked and felt much as it had in the 1950s.

It seemed to this visitor, back in the Village after decades away, a field of dreams, called up by Wakefield's imagination, a true village far from the dark and dangerous Gotham of popular imagination, though I knew that all that lurked around any corner. Walking past the Village shops and dining in an open-air Italian restaurant, I could understand the full feel of Frederick Jameson's claim that "for Americans at least, the 1950's, so we now sometimes imagine, remain the privileged lost object of desire."<sup>85</sup> New York in the 1950s, we retrospectively imagine, was safe, open, welcoming, the center of America's expanding postwar economy, media, and arts.<sup>86</sup>

The Wakefield publication party was cohosted by Seymour Lawrence of Houghton Mifflin, the book's publisher, and Art Cooper, editor in chief of *GQ*, who commissioned an essay from Wakefield that grew into the book; Cooper also published two sections of Wakefield's book in his men's fashion magazine. Fittingly, the party was held at the Village Gate. When he opened the Village club in 1958, owner Art Lugoff could not afford the then-fashionable folk musicians, so he made it into a jazz (John Coltrane, Charlie Mingus) and comedy (Woody Allen, Mort Sahl) spot, which Wakefield and his peers frequented, coming over from the White Horse Tavern, their center.

Many of them came back again, some thirty years later—one literary critic and novelist struggled with a cane, another critic arrived in a wheelchair, but on the whole the guests made up a surprisingly agile and prosperous-looking group of smiling, public men and women—to celebrate a book that praised their generation, the so-called Silent Generation of the 1950s. This much-resented designation was refuted by the boisterous talk which ensued that May evening, upstairs at the Gate, while "Fifties jazz," as the invitation put it, was supplied by the David Amram Quintet. (Wakefield, who would turn sixty within days of the party, was presented with a cake and was serenaded with a clarinet solo of "Danny Boy." He in turn presented

Cooper and Lawrence with framed collages: images from the 1950s surrounding the cover of his book.)

If the privileged lost object of desire was not recaptured that evening, a good time was had by all. Celebrities—Mia Farrow, Calvin Trillin, Frank Derford, several television personalities—mixed with less-recognizable but clearly well-off veterans of the 1950s. An anachronistic note was supplied by the presence of several tall, stunningly gorgeous young women—figures usually encountered only in magazine fashion layouts—and two even taller, elegantly dressed young men. The young men turned out to be Christian Laettner, the seven-foot star center of the Duke University basketball team, which had beaten Michigan for the NCAA championship in April, and Grant Hill, Duke forward. *GQ*, it was rumored, was using Laettner on its cover; where Laettner went, it seems, came also an assortment of truly “beautiful people,” les girls, whose only connection with the 1950s was through their parents! *GQ* (Manhattan fashion) and Houghton Mifflin (Boston publishing) combined forces for a truly New York City event: wildly dissimilar people were here brought together in the name of celebration and promotion, a language that everyone attending understood and spoke fluently.

Wakefield’s *New York in the Fifties*, published forty years after his initial, solitary encounter with the city in 1952—fittingly enough, he had also, as a boy, visited the 1939 World’s Fair with his parents—is a marvelous rendering of the city, which retains its power to stir imaginations and elicit revelations. Wakefield’s remembrance of things past pays tribute to an era—framed by the end of the postwar recovery period and the time of the takeover of American culture by the baby-boom generation—which may well have been the best of times for the city; certainly Wakefield shows it as a time and a place when it was a very heaven to be young. Further, Wakefield articulates many of the central experiences and myths that have given New York its power, for better or worse, as a symbol of national representation and personal transformation. Wakefield’s *New York in the Fifties*, then, is the latest, and one of the most eloquent, of a vast number of books, a veritable “great tradition” of letters, on the symbolic implications of the city.

Wakefield’s personal map of New York carried him from Columbia University (where he graduated in 1955) to apartments on the Upper West Side, “on to what would be home in Greenwich Village (appropriate antithesis of what the Midwest means by ‘home’), until I said goodbye to New York in 1963.”<sup>87</sup> More than a personal memoir, this is a generational biography after the fashion of those written about the 1920s emigres to Paris and New York by Malcolm Cowley.

As Cowley called his touchstone book *Exile’s Return*, Wakefield might well have called his *Internal Emigres*, for he, too, describes a generation

made up of those who left home—many, like him, from the Midwest, but others from other parts of the nation, or even New York City boroughs beyond Manhattan—in order to “‘find themselves’ in the pulsing heart of the hip new world’s hot center, with the ghosts of the recent past as a guide.”<sup>88</sup>

A new “family” heritage was shaped from an early generation of writers: Fitzgerald, Hemingway, Millay, Cummings—a lineage bonded in booze, developed in a commitment to literature, and driven by ambition: to *Making It*, as Norman Podhoretz, who left Brooklyn for Manhattan in the 1950s, put it in his memoir. For Wakefield’s generation of young men and women from the provinces, psychoanalysis replaced politics—the dream of the golden mountain that enticed Cowley and others—as a means for salvation.

All of this was marked, for Wakefield and his peers, by a feeling of excitement and nervous self-congratulation at making the break from the other America (where lives were boringly “typical” and fatally “average”), the Elsewhere that was not New York in the 1950s.

Our own chosen place of exile from middle America was not Europe but New York, where, like Paris in the twenties, you found your contemporary counterparts—allies, mentors, friends. Our fifties were far more exciting than the typical American experience because we were in New York, where people came to flee the average and find a group of like-minded souls.<sup>89</sup>

Wakefield, self-elected New Yorker, not only can’t, but won’t go home again—back to Indiana.

Wakefield chronicles another pilgrim’s progress to the center of culture, New York City, “the place where everything important happened first, before the rest of the country was ready for it. The books, the plays, and painting, the very ideas that would inform, entertain, and inspire the nation and the world, were created in that single power-packed place. . . . In the fifties . . . New York had no real rival for youth who wanted to be at the creative—and creating—center of the American dream.”<sup>90</sup>

New York is something of a dream—memory, evocation, inspiration, invention—in Wakefield’s book. Wakefield sees all the past in the most romantic and honorific terms possible, glazing memory with desire, in charged prose.

My friends and I who went to the village in the fifties felt the creative tradition of the place as an inspiration. We wanted to tap the power of it, absorb the literary heritage reflected by those dust jackets around the walls of Chumley’s, from books written by people who had talked and drunk at the very tables where we now sat. Supposedly Fitzgerald

and Hemingway had drunk—or had been drunk,—there and James Joyce was said to have spent several months at a corner table, writing part of *Ulysses*.<sup>91</sup>

Such are the myths of New York, merging fact with fancy—Joyce never visited America—into a consummation devoutly to be wished.

Wakefield's evocation of *temps perdu* brings to my mind a very different journey of rediscovery of the city in the anguished passages on New York in Henry James's luminous memoir, based on his 1904 visit to "the terrible town," in *The American Scene*. James had grown up in New York City, near Washington Square, before the Civil War, so the New York he encountered after the turn of the century shocked him, but it also stirred him into passages of powerful description. What once had been a village, with open fields and farm animals, had become, by the time he returned from twenty years in Europe, a metropolis, a "monstrous organism" of power, symbolized by overarching and overbearing towers dedicated to commerce.

Crowned not only with no history, but with no credible possibility of time for history, and consecrated by no uses save the commercial at any cost, they are simply the most piercing notes in that concert of the expensively provisional into which your supreme sense of New York resolves itself.<sup>92</sup>

In recoil from a New York that had turned horrific, James sought refuge in the old New York of his childhood, "the space between Fourteenth Street and Washington Square," which "*should* count for 'tone.'" The region is characterized in James's mind by "the lamentable little Arch of Triumph which bestrides these beginnings of Washington Square—lamentable because of its poor and lonely and unsupported and unaffiliated state."<sup>93</sup>

When the mature James arrived from Europe, he saw New York as monstrous and the Washington Square Arch as pretentious; a half century later the young Wakefield, arriving from the Middle West, saw New York as romantic and the Washington Square Arch as awesome. Wakefield uses George Washington's address to his troops, words carved into the arch, as an epigraph for *New York in the Fifties*: "Let us raise a standard to which the wise and the honest can repair. The event is in the hands of God."<sup>94</sup>

For Wakefield the young men and women who came to Greenwich Village were a new model army, not advancing the cause of Christ or country, but affirming a standard of art and culture. Back where they had come from no one was "really interested in trying to find out the answer to questions like 'What is the sound of one hand clapping?'" If asked, they'd probably tell you nothing at all. To us, it was everything."<sup>95</sup> Of course, there

is *no* sound to one hand clapping, for it is a contradiction in terms, so any “sound” has to be heard, so to speak, in the mind’s ear or the heart’s desire. Pilgrims, it seems, quest to New York as though it were Canterbury, and affirm a world of mind over matter, faith over fact. New York, city of steel and concrete, is also a fantasmagoric city of dreams.

For Wakefield, New York was and still remains just such a holy city, though much of his experience, centering on sex (much talk, sporadic action) and alcohol (particularly at the White Horse Tavern), had a distinctly profane side. Decades after he left New York, Wakefield wrote a book that testified to his own religious search, *Returning: A Spiritual Journey*, but even in the 1950s he showed signs of looking for more than instant gratifications and career advantages. The *Catholic Worker*, a newspaper begun by Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin in 1933, which sold for a penny, drew Wakefield into becoming “a sort of idealistic fellow traveler,” because it offered “a spirit, a purpose, a way of transcending self—through service that those who came [to New York in the 1950s] still vividly remember.”<sup>96</sup> One way or another, New York drew new life out of these young men and women from the provinces.

For Henry James, New York was a grasping and greedy hand, symbolized by a massive new building which, he discovered, loomed over the house in which he was born in Washington Place. The building “blocks, at the right moment of its own success, the view of the past,” so that “the effect for me, in Washington Place, was of having been amputated of half of my history.”<sup>97</sup> The region symbolized a lost ideal (familial, pastoral) for James; for Wakefield, the same region would stand for a discovered idealism and a missionary faith in the future. New York, truly a city of wonder, is, then, a protean, multifaceted emblem that gives the impressionable viewers back just what they bring to it, whatever their points of origin or routes of entry.

One man’s Eden is another man’s Hades in New York. James’s felicitous “old New York” existed in the 1840s and was centered around “the good easy Square, known in childhood, and as if the light were yellower there for the small accident, bristled with reminders as vague as they were sweet,” but was discoverable in 1904 only in a determined act of memory.<sup>98</sup>

For Edith Wharton, the “age of innocence,” a world of “faint implications and pale delicacies,” occurred during the 1870s and was recalled with some regret at its passing after the Great War in *The Age of Innocence*.<sup>99</sup>

For Jan Morris, New York reached its apogee in the spring of 1945, when soldiers who had fought in Europe began to return. Looking back more than forty years later, in *Manhattan ’45*, Morris saw in the postwar city “a late epitome of a more youthful America,” a city which “still worshiped gods

... a good and merry place.” Then, inevitably, all changed utterly. “Out of the delights of 1945 another city had emerged.” The United Nations building replaced the slaughterhouses along the East River and New York became something of “a world capital,” ceasing to be a “Wonder City,” thus losing some of its pride. “New Yorkers no longer claimed that in Manhattan anything was possible, boasted about feeding Europe’s poor with civic garbage, or even walked down Fifth Avenue with quite the boxer’s truculence of Tom Buchanan.”<sup>100</sup> Perhaps not, but just then, just when Jan Morris declared “old New York” to be dead and gone, there walked onto the city’s street scene the wide-eyed pilgrims of the 1950s so-called Silent Generation, ready to re-create their own sense of Manhattan as a moveable feast.

New York, then, is a constantly re-created image of felicity which, in time, inevitably turns sour until it is converted into a dreamscape—a pleasing remembrance of things past. Young men and women from the heartland come in wonder, remain in jaded awareness, and leave in disillusionment, only to be replaced by new now—voyagers who are ready to embark on the great adventure of the city—only to return in memory and desire forty years later to celebrate *temps perdu*, as Wakefield so convincingly does in *New York in the Fifties*.

**I**t is difficult these days to find occasions to praise the city—to come up with more than two cheers for New York City—even when it burnishes a jewel in its cultural crown. Take Bryant Park as an example. Bryant Park, located behind the Public Library, on Forty-Second Street, was designed under the direction of Robert Moses in 1934; it was built on a podium, several steps above the street, and it was cut off from the city by hedges and walls. As a result, in recent years its isolation made it a central site for drug exchanges: it became “Needle Park.” Bryant Park’s extraordinary restoration in 1992 was the result of a five-year effort of businessmen, foundations, artists, neighborhood companies, and city officials, supported by city and private money, to take back the park from the citizens of the night and return it to all the citizens of the city. “Bryant Park is good for New York. What’s good for New York is good for America!” declared the *New York Times* columnist A. M. Rosenthal.<sup>101</sup>

The Bryant Park restoration was inspired by the urban theories of William H. Whyte. In *City: Rediscovering the Center*, Whyte argues that cities have been abandoning their streets—“the river of the life of the city, the place where we come together, the pathway to the center”—in a process of decentralization and suburbanization. Whyte affirms his faith in center city life. “I think the center is going to hold.”<sup>102</sup>

As Paul Goldenberger notes, Whyte’s commitment to the revitalization of center cities and his belief that access was preferable to separation, served

as the basis for the redesigned Bryant Park, which is now open to the street in more places and is no longer separated by hedges and walls. Whyte, says Goldenberger, understood that the problem of Bryant Park was its perception as an enclosure cut off from the city; he knew that, paradoxically, people feel safer when not cut off from the city, and that they feel safer in the kind of public space they think they have some control over. For all that, Goldenberger senses in his response to the new Bryant Park a distance from his usual set of associations surrounding New York.

Why is it that whenever a moment of genuine joy appears in the physical fabric of New York, the first impulse is to think you must be somewhere else? Are we so used to the notion of New York as harsh, dirty and dangerous—which it so often is—that when we encounter something pleasant, we think not of how good this part of New York is but of how it makes us feel transported to a different place? It says much about our sensibilities toward the city in the gloomy 90s that Bryant Park, in many ways the quintessential New York urban park, now feels like part of another city altogether.<sup>103</sup>

For Goldenberger, New York called up such bleak associations that the manifest evidence of excellence embodied in Bryant Park made it seem to exist in a world elsewhere, not on Forty-Second Street, at the heart of the actual city. For the architectural critic of the *New York Times*, the center has not held.

Americans have come to fear their cities. In the fall of 1990 *Time* magazine ran a headline, “The Rotting of the Big Apple,” and displayed on its cover lurid images of sex and violence—the city as film noir. What once had been, in Lewis Mumford’s words, “a symbol of the possible” had become in the American mind a center of destruction. “Reason: a surge of drugs and violent crime that government officials seem utterly unable to combat.”<sup>104</sup> Evidence overwhelms: the Central Park rape, the Utah tennis fan shot to death on a midtown subway platform, the murder of a young black man in Bensonhurst, and the daily carnage of violence and death throughout the city. “To really get the full flavor of the city’s daily allotment of burglary, robbery, assault, rape, arson, murder, you have to peruse with patience section B of the *New York Times*,” suggests Alfred Kazin.<sup>105</sup> There, reports of bias attacks proliferate. Children on their way to school are abducted and raped—in at least one instance by a man with the AIDS virus. Students are even shot in school!

February 27, 1992: “Two teen-agers were shot dead at point-blank range in the hallway of a Brooklyn high school yesterday morning, little more than



an hour before Mayor David N. Dinkins was to visit the troubled school to tell students they had the power to break free of the world of violence and drugs.” The killings took place at Thomas Jefferson High School. Apparently a fifteen-year-old shot and killed a seventeen-year-old and a sixteen-year-old with a .38 caliber pistol, as the result of a feud that reached back to arrests after a 1990 robbery. “The killings came just three months after another student was cut down by gunfire and a teacher critically wounded in the same East New York high school, a brick structure whose immaculate pink halls contrast with the near-desolate landscape of project housing and empty, litter-strewn lots.”<sup>106</sup> In addition, it goes without saying, drug shootings are ordinary, barely news.

In an October 1991 editorial, the *New York Times* identified “defeatism” as one of New York City’s major problems. “New Yorkers are losing heart,” it granted, ridden by poverty, dirt, crime, drugs, and bleak prospects. The Times called for renewed commitment and faith in the city. “New York’s ills are common to many American cities but its strengths are unrivaled. New York will come back.”<sup>107</sup> Thus the problem is identified as a crisis of faith on the possibilities of American life. As New York goes, so goes the nation.

What is in danger of being lost is not only our collective faith in the city, which once held out such promise to so many of the world’s “wretched refuse,” in Emma Lazarus’s lines inscribed on the Statue of Liberty, but a capacity to believe in a redemptive future. “The hatred of cities is the fear of freedom,” writes Lewis H. Lapham, editor of *Harper’s Magazine*. “The fear is contagious, and as larger numbers of people come to perceive the city as a barren waste, the more profitable their disillusion becomes to dealers in guns and to political factions that would destroy not only New York and Chicago but also the idea of the city.”<sup>108</sup>

It is just *that*, the diminishing idea of the city as a place of promise and freedom, which lies between the lines of the various works that describe contemporary New York City.

## Notes

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1. Lewis Mumford, “What Is a City?” in *The Lewis Mumford Reader*, ed. Donald L. Miller (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986), 104; Lewis Mumford, *The Culture of Cities* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1938), 3–10.
2. Lewis Mumford, “East Side, West Side,” in *Mumford Reader*, 18–23; Lewis Mumford, *Sketches from Life: The Autobiography of Lewis Mumford: The Early Years* (New York: Dial Press, 1982), 3–10.
3. Lewis Mumford, “All Around the Town,” *Mumford Reader*, 20; *Sketches*, 13–24.

4. Eric Pooley, "Air Dinkins: Avoiding an L.A. Meltdown, the Mayor Catches a Break," *New York*, May 25, 1992, 32–35. Up to April 1992, Dinkins, writes Pooley, had had an extraordinary run of bad luck—a summer 1990 street-crime wave culminating in the subway murder of Utah tourist Brian Watkins; an endless recession robbing the city of 357,000 private-sector jobs in three years and spiraling social-service costs; the federal government's departure from urban America. It was a climate that called for allocating losses—not an easy task for a mayor who came into office promising to allocate services to the poor. Fiorello La Guardia might have had trouble looking good.
5. William Butler Yeats, "The Second Coming," in *W B. Yeats Selected Poetry*, ed. A. Norman Jeffares (London: Macmillan London, 1974), 99–100.
6. Catherine S. Manegold, "A Grim Wasteland: New York by TV: Crime and More Crime," *The New York Times*, June 14, 1992, 41.
7. So notes Steven J. Kumble, in a letter to *The New York Times* dated May 26, 1992. A summer visitor to our city, a first-time tourist, a delegate to the Democratic National Convention or someone considering opening an office in New York all have as a first impression a series of conditions characteristic of a city overwhelmed by the problems of urban decay—a city out of control.
8. Jolie Solomon, "Quayle on New York: 'Dangerous . . . Dying,'" *The Boston Globe*, June 16, 1992, 1, 22.
9. Todd S. Purdum, "Quayle Attacks New York as Home of Liberal Failure," *The New York Times*, June 16, 1992, A-22.
10. David Ansen, "A Gotham Gothic," *Newsweek*, June 22, 1992.
11. Andy Logan, "Around City Hall: The Perfect Place," *The New Yorker*, July 20, 1992, 77.
12. Dan Wakefield, *New York in the Fifties* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1992).
13. John Dos Passos, *The Best Times: An Informal Memoir* (New York: New American Library, 1966), 127–160.
14. A model of the New York book is the tour. In *Subway Lives: 24 Hours in the Life of the New York City Subway* (New York: Crown, 1992), Jim Dwyer, a *New York Newsday* reporter, notes that every day more than three million people travel on the New York subway's seven hundred miles of track in some six thousand cars. His series of sketches of subway riders ranges from the violent (the teens who burned alive two clerks in a token booth in 1979) to the bizarre (the rider who announced he was from Mars and would play his trumpet until he collected enough money to return). Calvin Sims, "In Short," *The New York Times Book Review*, January 5, 1992, 18.
15. Nik Cohn, *The Heart of the World* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992), 12.
16. William Schneider, "The Suburban Century Begins," *The Atlantic Monthly*, July 1992, 33–39, 42–44.
17. Anna Quindlen, "Public and Private: The Old Block," *The New York Times*, May 17, 1992, sec. 4, 17.
18. Bernie Bookbinder, *City of the World* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1989), epigraph.
19. The 1990 census shows a boom-and-bust cycle in New York City in the 1980s. "By almost every measure, from falling dropout and poverty rates to increases in income, life in New York City and its environs improved during the last, heady decade, marked by conspicuous consumption and economic growth." However, what was gained has now been lost. Since the census was taken, "economists and planners say, virtually all of the 80's job growth in New York City and in the

- state has been wiped out.” Josh Barbanel, “Census Data Shows Boom Before Bust,” *The New York Times*, April 16, 1991, B-4. A study, based on data from a house-to-house survey by the Bureau of the Census, conducted by the Community Service Society, an advocacy group for the poor, “concludes that one in four of the city’s residents had incomes in 1990 that fell below the Federal Government’s poverty threshold, more than at any time during the previous decade.” Poverty rates, predictably, were highest among Hispanics and blacks; however, surprisingly, poverty rates nearly doubled for whites between 1979 and 1990. Forty percent of the city’s children, the report shows, lived in poverty—double the national average. Thomas J. Lueck, “25% of New Yorkers Living in Poverty, Report Asserts,” *The New York Times*, June 10, 1992, B-3.
20. Bookbinder, *City of the World*, 176.
  21. “Excerpts from State of City: ‘Voices of Our People,’” *The New York Times*, January 3, 1992, B-2.
  22. Martin Gottlieb, “Bushwick, Recalling ’77, Kept Its Cool This Time,” *The New York Times*, May 10, 1992, Metro section, 36.
  23. Tom Wolfe, *The Bonfire of the Vanities* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1987), 229.
  24. Ibid., dust jacket copy.
  25. Jay McInerney, *Brightness Falls* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992), 8.
  26. Jason Epstein, “The Tragical History of New York,” *The New York Review of Books*, April 9, 1992, 45–52.
  27. Alfred Kazin, text, and David Finn, photographs, *Our New York: A Personal Vision in Words and Photographs* (New York: Harper & Row, 1989), 15.
  28. Ibid., 19.
  29. *Mumford Reader*, 13.
  30. Sarah Bartlett, “Beyond Just Complaining: Self-fulfilling Pessimism Is Said to Infect New York,” *The New York Times*, December 27, 1991, B-1–B-2.
  31. Allen Ginsberg, “I Love Old Whitman So,” *The Massachusetts Review* 33, no. 1 (Spring 1992): 77.
  32. “Walt,” in “The Talk of the Town,” *New Yorker*, April 13, 1992, 28–30.
  33. Walt Whitman, “America,” in *Walt Whitman: Complete Poetry and Collected Prose* (New York: Library of America, 1982), 616.
  34. “Walt,” 30.
  35. Elizabeth Hardwick, “Boston: The Lost Ideal,” in *Contemporary American Essays*, ed. Maureen Howard (New York: Penguin Books, 1985), 253.
  36. Elizabeth Hardwick, “New York City: Crash Course,” in *The Best American Essays 1991*, ed. Joyce Carol Oates (New York: Ticknor & Fields, 1991), 96.
  37. Elizabeth Hardwick, Foreword to Mary McCarthy, *Intellectual Memoirs: New York 1936–1938* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992).
  38. Mary McCarthy, *The Group* (New York: New American Library, 1964), 7.
  39. McCarthy, *Intellectual Memoirs*, 62.
  40. Ibid., 101.
  41. Ibid., 114.
  42. Joan Didion, “New York: Sentimental Journeys,” *The New York Review of Books*, January 17, 1991, 45–58. This essay is in Joan Didion, *After Henry* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), 253–319.
  43. Joan Didion, “Goodbye to All That,” in *Slouching Toward Bethlehem* (New York: Dell, 1968), 225–238.
  44. Wakefield, *New York in the Fifties*, 21.

45. Ibid., 339.
46. From John Winthrop's "A Model of Christian Charity" to Robert Lowell's "For the Union Dead," Boston writers have judged Boston by its abilities to live up to its own high standards. Shaun O'Connell, *Imagining Boston: A Literary Landscape* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1990).
47. In such a country, to talk of posterity is a little like a wet blanket—heavy, boring and cold.  
Which is how Boston seems, many days, from New York. But it can also seem quite otherwise, a bracing vision of a city that knows what it's about—the well-being of our collective posterity. In such a city, a sense of place disciplines the sense of property, the past and the future are privileged on a par with the present; and, a bit too bracing for comfort, conversation turns on less voluptuous issues than appetite, envy and the rights of consumers. The latter are the more worldly concerns of New York City, in the eyes of Nelson W. Aldrich, Jr., who moved from Boston to New York City. Nelson W. Aldrich, Jr., "Notes of a Native Son: Alas, Cold Roast Boston Has Little Wriggle Room," *The Boston Sunday Globe*, March 22, 1992, 68–69.
48. Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, 1891–1892 ed., in *Walt Whitman: Complete Poetry and Collected Prose* (New York: Library of America, 1982), 210.
49. Herman Melville, "The House-top," in *Herman Melville*, ed. R. W. B. Lewis (New York: Dell, 1962), 324–325.
50. Robert Phillips, Introduction to Susan Edminston and Linda D. Cirino, *Literary New York: A History and Guide* (U.S.A.: Peregrine Smith Books, 1991), i–xxxi.
51. McInerney, *Brightness Falls*, 412–413.
52. Arthur Mizener, *The Far Side of Paradise: A Biography of F. Scott Fitzgerald* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965), 152.
53. McInerney, *Brightness Falls*, 3.
54. F. Scott Fitzgerald, "The Rich Boy," in Malcolm Cowley, ed., *The Stories of F. Scott Fitzgerald* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1951), 77.
55. McInerney, *Brightness Falls*, 8.
56. Ibid., 41–42.
57. Ibid., 79.
58. Ibid., 104.
59. Ibid., 398.
60. Ibid., 150.
61. Ibid., 163.
62. Ibid., 66.
63. Ibid., 36.
64. Ibid., 389.
65. Ibid., 225.
66. Ibid., 416.
67. Toni Morrison, *Jazz* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992), 67.
68. Ibid., 3.
69. Ibid., 7.
70. Ibid., 8–9.
71. In *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), Morrison attacks the racist literary establishment and its canon. She indicts other American novelists for their failures of imagination in portraying black experience—though *Jazz* contains apologies for her own failures.

72. Morrison, *Jazz*, 32–33.
73. *Ibid.*, 220.
74. Ann Hurlbert argues that Morrison in *Jazz* is engaged in “what looks like the ultimate mission of self-sabotage: she is questioning a black writer’s efforts to penetrate the heart of a black world.” “Romance and Race,” *The New Republic*, May 18, 1992, 44.
75. Oliver E. Allen, *New York, New York* (New York: Atheneum, 1990), 2.
76. Thomas Bender, *New York Intellect: A History of Intellectual Life in New York City, from 1750 to the Beginnings of Our Own Time* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987), epigraph, xvi.
77. Peter Conrad, *The Art of the City: Views and Versions of New York* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 3–21.
78. William R. Taylor, *In Pursuit of Gotham: Culture and Commerce in New York* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982).
79. Wolfe, *Bonfire*, 333.
80. *Ibid.*, 356.
81. Richard Price, *Bloodbrothers* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1976).
82. Richard Price, *Clockers* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1992), 198–199.
83. *Ibid.*, 369.
84. *Ibid.*, 456.
85. Daphne Merkin, “Name That Decade,” *The New York Times*, May 24, 1992, Styles section, 4.
86. The best novelists of the 1950s reflect little serenity and security in the lives of young Americans. See John Updike’s *Rabbit, Run* (1960), Philip Roth’s *Goodbye Columbus* (1959) and *Letting Go* (1962); Joyce Carol Oates redefined the 1950s as an era of anxiety over the Bomb, sex, and personal freedom, particularly for women, in *You Must Remember This* (1987).
87. Wakefield, *New York in the Fifties*, 4–5.
88. *Ibid.*, 6.
89. *Ibid.*, 7.
90. *Ibid.*, 20.
91. *Ibid.*, 122.
92. Henry James, *The American Scene* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1968 [1907]), 72–77.
93. *Ibid.*, 88–91.
94. Wakefield, *New York in the Fifties*, epigraph.
95. *Ibid.*, 126.
96. *Ibid.*, 77.
97. James, *The American Scene*, 91.
98. *Ibid.*, 4.
99. Edith Wharton, *The Age of Innocence* (New York: Macmillan, 1968 [1920]), 19.
100. Jan Morris, *Manhattan ‘45* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 269–271.
101. A. M. Rosenthal, “Tale of One City,” *The New York Times*, April 24, 1992, A-35.
102. William H. Whyte, *City: Rediscovering the Center* (New York: Doubleday, 1988), 7.
103. Paul Goldenberger, “Bryant Park, An Out-of-Town Experience,” *The New York Times*, May 3, 1992, 34.
104. Joelle Attinger, “The Decline of New York,” *Time*, September 17, 1990, 36–38.
105. Kazin and Finn, *Our New York*, 200.

106. Allison Mitchell, "2 Teen-Agers Shot to Death in a Brooklyn School," *The New York Times*, February 27, 1992, A-1–A-2.
107. "Climbing Back: New York City's First Hurdle: Defeatism," editorial, *The New York Times*, October 13, 1991, 14.
108. Lewis H. Lapham, "Fear of Freedom," *The New York Times*, June 6, 1992, 23.