

mythologizing manhattan

the *new yorker's*

new york

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From earliest times, according to cultural anthropologists, people scattered over the lands of the earth have thought of the earth as having a center.<sup>1</sup> For the ancient Babylonians, the exact center was the great ziggurat of Babylon; for the Greeks, the *omphalos* (the navel) at Delphi; for the legendary founders of Rome, the *mundus*, a pit at the center where the souls of the dead resided as a repository of power for successive generations. At such spots, divine powers are perceived to have entered human space, enclosing the community, giving it sanctuary from the surrounding chaos and, thus, creating a *cosmos*, a world that is both *whole* (complete, perfect) and *holy*.<sup>2</sup> The union of divine power and human aspiration became most vividly evident in cities, where, as Lewis Mumford has said, "belief in the eternal and the infinite, the omniscient and the omnipotent succeeded, over the milleniums, in exalting the very possibilities of human existence."<sup>3</sup> The advent of the city, Mumford adds, coincided with the discovery of language, "glyphs, ideograms and script, with the first abstractions of number and verbal signs."<sup>4</sup> The human will to transcend boundaries, and to incarnate such adventures in language, is most apparent in what Mircea Eliade has called "sky cultures," where "high places are impregnated with sacred forces. Everything nearer to the sky shares, with varying intensity, in its transcendence." At its center, sky and earth meet, through which "the *Axis Mundi* goes, a region impregnated with the sacred, a spot where one can pass from one cosmic zone to another."<sup>5</sup>

No contemporary city better evokes “Sky culture” than New York—an island city that is awesomely dense, incomprehensibly diverse and yet, paradoxically, ethereal: in essence, Whitman’s “mast-hemm’d Manahatta,” which has revelled in defying its geography and even gravity itself. Over the years countless writers have, of course, been dazzled or appalled (or both) by the city’s inexhaustible vitality; but the *New Yorker* magazine assumed the singular ambition of creating a unique and compelling mythology of New York as the new heavenly city of prosperous post-World War I America, with Manhattan as its “*axis mundi*”—and itself as the new sky culture’s chief hierophant. The magazine had the good fortune to grow up just when the premier American city was itself growing up in a new golden age—and upwards, flexing its skylines and asserting its national cultural dominance. Most contributors, and even most subscribers, were, like founder Harold Ross himself, starry-eyed outsiders, transplants from the provinces, who succumbed eagerly to the city whose very incomprehensibility inspired wit, goaded memory and challenged imagination. Collectively, they adopted a new and discriminating cosmopolitan sensibility and even acquired identifiable styles in which to express this new cosmos, “its number and verbal signs,” as Mumford might say, himself one of the magazine’s most influential celebrants of the new New York. Once the *New Yorker* created its fabulous metropolis, contributors ventured out into the other boroughs, into the world beyond and even into the darker reaches of New Jersey. But during its first half century, the magazine maintained a proprietary interest in its eponymous city, guarding its cosmic zones, checking on its boundaries and surveying new annexations from its obscure precinct—one might say the city’s *omphalos*—in mid-town. As Saul Steinberg’s famous *New Yorker* cartoon, “View of the World from Ninth Avenue,” reveals, the magazine, despite its cosmopolitan airs, was, and to some extent remains, unabashedly *provincial*. How did Ross’s carefully contrived cosmopolitan myth of New York take imaginative shape in his new magazine? How did complex physical and social changes in a city on the rise, both literally and figuratively, shape the magazine’s narrative modes and recurring themes? A brief sojourn, historically, through selective pages of the magazine should provide some answers to these questions.

“The *New Yorker* will be a reflection in word and picture of metropolitan life,” Ross began in his prospectus in 1925, of interest to “a metropolitan audience,” primarily located in New York.<sup>6</sup> According to Dale Kramer, Ross thought that New York had but three districts worth his attention: Broadway, Park Avenue and Wall Street.<sup>7</sup> He quickly jettisoned the last, a choice suggesting that making money, about which he professed to know little and cared less, had none of the mystique surrounding cafe-carousing and theater-hopping. Ross began by demarcating the boundaries of preferred districts, separating the glamorous from the mundane, the quotable from the forgettable in the “village,” as he always called New York. Influenced by the styles of *The Tatler* and *Punch*, which helped to create a magical London of their respective times, he introduced “town

tattle” features calculated to do the same for New York, capture the city’s shimmering surfaces and thereby appeal to the new chauvinism embraced by an ambitious, refined upward-scaling urban set, the audience he hoped to reach. Among these were “On and Off the Avenue,” “New York and Etc.” and filler quizzes like “Why I Love New York” and “Are You a New Yorker?”—two of Ross’s pet features that betray him as the most bedazzled of *arrivistes*. They also reveal Ross’s near-legendary passion for facts, which guided in part the magazine’s advertising: only the highest-class goods and services, found only in the most fashionable addresses, dominated in the early years by the best Manhattan hotels. The very *facticity* of Manhattan comprised a cosmos that held Ross in awe; but, more important, he also goaded staffers to devise features that would transcend factualities and envelope them in palpable myth. The making of myth was the subject of one of the magazine’s first series, a mock cosmogony of the *New Yorker*’s New York called “The Story of Manhattankind,” (February 28, 1925), loosely patterned after Washington Irving’s burlesque *History of New York*. It began, “The early history of New York is obscured in myth; and to separate the purely historical from the purely hysterical is no easy task.” On the pretense of freeing history from myth, this modern Knickerbocker weaves a fanciful myth of his own, beginning with Columbus’ arrival:

“They’re nothing but a lot of wild Indians,” Mr. Christopher Columbus remarked, the first time he attended one of their open-air meetings; and the conservative element has generally adopted this view. There are those who contend that Columbus never visited New York, but this is absurd. No one ever comes to America without visiting New York; and the stories Columbus carried back to Spain describe Manhattan perfectly. He was impressed particularly by the dancing craze, and by the utterly shocking styles in women’s clothes. Also, he noted, the inhabitants generally spoke with a foreign accent: and they made a big fuss whenever a distinguished foreigner arrived. (6)

In later installments, New York is imagined in the provinces as the proverbial den of iniquity, “not because it was Sodom, but because it was Modern” (March 21, 1925, 12). To the natives, New York was, in yet another installment, “the world Metropolis . . . and New Yorkers believed that they were in the middle of the world. In those days, the people thought the earth was flat. Flat was a sacred word with them. The people lived in flats, and one of their early temples was known as the Flatiron Building . . . They exchanged flats every year, on the first of October, at a great religious festival known as Moving Day” (March 14, 1925, 14).

Here began the *New Yorker*’s unique cultivation of its own mythological “middle city” and “sky culture,” with the modern skyscraper its temple—the new world’s ziggurat. Its city had no archeology, but Frank Sullivan, as if sensing its absence, set about creating one. He played the role of municipal archivist digging up the city’s “past” in such tall tales as “The Nice Cool Sewer” (June 5, 1926), in which he leads us deep into the city’s

mundus, “gloomy subterranean channels . . . reeking with the ghosts of fleeing, wild-eyed Apaches” (21). Washington defeated Burgoyne in New York, he insists, by draining the Hudson River into the freshly-dug Manhattan sewers.<sup>8</sup>

At the same time, the magazine also mocked its own myth-making—another stratagem calculated to strike wonder in center-seeking urbanites, not to mention hoped-for subscribers. In another mock-chronicle, “Down the Ages with the Social Center” (March 6, 1926), Sullivan announced his discovery that “we moderns” have at last found our pulsing heart: “the social center of the city has been finally located—at 68th Street between Fifth and Madison Avenues. One wonders if the officials of the Social Register, who are reported to have done the ‘discovering’ this time, realize that 68th Street is a one-way street. Certainly, these Ladies and Gentlemen must know that to be at all social one must be able to travel two ways” (14). He concludes, however, by confessing, with mock gravity, that any “social center” is really nowhere “but right here, deep in the heart of each and every one of us” (14).

While resident wits might tweak bluenoses, Ross knew that class boundaries were real and that they mattered—to hoped-for subscribers, advertisers, not to mention himself. He printed “Why We Go to Cabarets” (November 28, 1925) by “A Post-Debutante,” well-known Cafe-Society queen, Ellin Mackay, even though it was thought terrible, because such gossipy pieces would put the magazine into the hands of the people who counted.<sup>9</sup> More important, she advanced, perhaps unwittingly, the mythifying process by endowing mid-town clubs and preferred districts with a cosmic aura. The worst offenders among social climbers, she says, are born and bred far from the upper East Side, like the young man “who talks glibly of the Racquet Club, while he prays that you won’t suspect that he lives far up on the West Side” (7). Too many debutantes, she fears, come from the Bronx and other “dim corners of the town” (8). Regular staffers did their part to cordon off the magazine’s magical city from unenchanted environs, usually playing wittily on residents’ sensitivity to New York’s current social geography. In her first sketch for the *New Yorker*, “A Certain Lady,” (February 21, 1925) Dorothy Parker created a matron who languishes in social obscurity on upper Riverside Drive—an *arriviste* typical of the high-climbing times and, hence (perhaps), her name: “Mrs. Legion.” Although she lives, quips the narrator, “as far from Park Avenue as it is possible to do and still keep out of Jersey” (15), she spends all her time devouring the social columns and hopes one day to move to the fashionable upper East Side. “To reach the ‘center,’” writes Elaide of “sky cultures,” is to achieve a consecration, an initiation.<sup>10</sup>

By contrast, to be marooned far from the center, in the *New Yorker*’s cosmology, was to feel ostracized—and, hence, to cease to matter at all. Robert Benchley helped to define the city’s fabled center by venturing often into the provinces, only to discover what Gertrude Stein said of Oakland, that there’s no *there* there. In “Spying on the Vehicular Tunnel” (June 26, 1926), Benchley observes the construction of the Holland Tunnel

only to wonder why anyone would want to cross over to New Jersey (20)—that primeval chaos that has, since colonial times, been the butt of New York jokes.<sup>11</sup> But the *New Yorker* wits reserved their iciest scorn for Manhattan's most remote, and hence least sacred, provincial outpost—not “Jersey” but “Hollywood.” In several “Reporter at Large” pieces, Benchley imagined himself as a high-brow Eastern dude abandoned in the low-lying cultural desert of southern California. In “At the Corner of 42nd St. and Hollywood B’V’D’” (May 4, 1929), for example, he mocks movieland as a barren, backward village in which sophisticates like himself, would-be screenwriters, feel marooned: “You can’t be a man-about-town without a town to be about in, and Hollywood is not a town but a wayside camp of temporary shacks inhabited for the most part by people who are waiting to see if their options are going to be taken up at the end of six months” (32). The *New Yorker* probably didn’t invent the town everyone loves to hate, but it was instrumental in institutionalizing the Easterner’s, particularly the writer’s, obligatory contempt for all things Hollywood, which, however justifiable at one time, has since hardened into *cliché*.

New York chauvinists like Parker and Benchley adopted the solipsistic view of magazine mascot, Eustace Tilley, and cast a disdainful eye upon the world beyond the raised monocle, which acquired a fleeting existence mainly because the New York sophisticate chose to acknowledge it. Other early regulars, including Benchley himself at times, acknowledged the pose’s provinciality, its vulnerability to the facticity of New York, which itself helped to mythify the city, not as a seductive center but as an aggressive force. *New Yorker* humor has, of course, owed much to a bustling city perennially under construction. Street excavation, apartment and bridge construction and what was euphemistically called the “transit situation” have obliged humorists with ready-made incongruities for six decades. “The most common devise,” writes Gerald Weales, “was for the writer to take a recognizable current event as a place to begin and to build on it an intricate framework of fantasy or simple comment.”<sup>12</sup> Just crossing a street in midtown was (and still is) the perilous jungle safari Corey Ford imagined in “Across the Darkest Broadway with Eustace Tilley” (October 15, 1927). A typical mock-diary entry begins, “My departure from the West Curb was inconspicuous. The traffic halted in front of me; and picking a narrow opening between a taxi and a Gimbel’s truck, I quit the curb at 11:10 A.M. . . . and wedged my way between the radiator and rear bumper, smearing a little grease down the left leg of my trousers” (26).

Such urban humor typically dotes on the purportedly rational human agent who tries to maintain a studied calm amidst inanimate forces bent on assaulting him. This Kafkaesque comic mode is best cultivated in New York, a city laid out and developed according to rational designs—grid patterns and numbered streets—but criss-crossed by the irrational movements of an unusually assertive populace, which, combined, creates a massive gridlock calculated to force people into unexpected collisions. (The

“Talk of the Town” evolved out of just this incongruous condition, so rich a source of memorable quotables.) In a cityscape organized only to accommodate (and aggravate) apartment dwellers, the automobile is of course a liability, if not actually the city’s chief menace. Thus it quickly became a handy vehicle to convey many a mythic New York tale. In “How I Became a Subway Excavator” (January 23, 1926), Frank Sullivan, the *New Yorker’s* first urban fabulist, elevated the “transit situation” itself into a mock-hunt during “the taxicab mating season” where construction crews compete over what magnificently plumed species will tumble into their pits (14). Later wits rang comic changes upon the *New Yorker’s* foolish efforts to tame the automobile. In “My Car: A Global View” (February 28, 1983), for example, Mark Singer recounts, in a mock newsreel, his adventure driving west in a used car bought on a Hudson River pier—one of those shady environs like “Jersey” far from the city’s glittering center. It ends, as it must, out in the dim provinces:

1982

Yet another heir to British throne born

Interest rates move around . . .

Car gets steered through Lincoln Tunnel, across Jersey  
into Pennsylvania.

Car suffers apparent seizure, stops on highway  
shoulder.

I hitch ride with trucker to truck stop eight miles back the other way.

Guy behind service counter in truck stop tries/fails to muster  
look of concern/pity. Muzak version of “Mean to Me” plays on  
radio. Guy behind service center counter turns down radio,  
picks up telephone receiver, calls Earl.

Darkness falls. (35)

New York’s “transit situation” continues to inspire tall tales in which the real and the surreal are intermixed, as they are so inexplicably in the *New Yorker’s* New York. If the magazine’s now familiar “little man” ever achieves a moment of triumph over his mechanized environment, it usually reveals a calmness beyond madness, leading to a final quiescence. For example, in “Becker is Not Going Out” (October 15, 1985) by Calvin Trillin, Becker spends his waking hours in his Chevy, which he parks in the choice spaces around town when parking becomes legal (after 7 P.M.). When the suburbanites drive in to park, he savors those moments when he can tell the prowling, anxious drivers that he’s “not going out” (36). He is avenging the abandonment of his city by institutions like the Brooklyn Dodgers, so he hopes the people responsible are “looking for a spot.” According to a son-in-law, he is “trying to exert some meaningful control over [his] environment” (38).

While most *New Yorker* humorists depended on exaggerating whatever incongruities the city unfailingly provided, E. B. White found New York, the city as *given*, to be sufficiently implausible in itself, the discovery of which enchanted rather than unnerved him. He relished his special role as the *New Yorker’s* resident urban naturalist, and, like his hero Thoreau, he

explored the urban wilderness in search of hidden delights, often venturing outside Ross's imagined cosmos.<sup>13</sup> In his first *New Yorker* effort, "In Praise of the Bronx River" (May 9, 1925), he tried to awaken tired commuters to the glorious cityscape yet unspoken for (14). Elsewhere he played the solitary singer who, like Whitman, embraced multitudes. In "Hey Day Labor" (August 7, 1926), he sought out the company of obscure municipal workers, who repaid his celebration by giving him a ride on a coal truck as it careened through midtown, momentarily exempted from regulations, "taxi-cabs, once held invulnerable, bend double to honor your passage" (21).

While Keats gluttoned himself on a morning rose, White immersed himself in Grand Central. In "It's a 'ome" (January 5, 1929), "Baedeker Jones" descends to the terminal's "catacombs" when the commuters are asleep in distant suburbs. The cold, cavernous space, emptied of getting and spending crowds, inspires a wild human whim: "I would buy a toboggan and a decoy duck at Van Lengerke and Detmolds and coast, late at night, down the ramps and bannisters until apprehended. When apprehended, I would hand the officer the duck, so he would know I was fooling" (19). Benchley would have converted such nocturnal antics into farce with the "little man" tumbling down the stairs—and missing his train, while Sullivan would have plunged the tobogganer down a cool sewer, there to meet some lost tribe of Long Island commuters. White instead perfected the personal anecdote that began and ended with a fresh perception of New York's unique vitality. In order to experience what surprises the city offered, he adopted the point of view of a sparrow ("Interview with a Sparrow" [April 9, 1927], 31), who flits about at low-level, blends into the cityscape and is always well situated to savor the *real* spectacle, which was for him astounding enough. "A sparrow," says the narrator of "The Wings of Orville" (August 8, 1931), "will gape at anything queer" (13).

The New York of the 1920s and 30s then reaching toward the sky obliged a low-flying rambler like White perfectly since the *Beaux Arts* and Art Deco styles of Manhattan buildings offered countless nesting places. "What a pigeon needs," he wrote in a "Comment" note later published under the title, "The Rock Dove" (April 20, 1957), is "just what a city provides in abundance: a nook, a ledge, a recess, a niche, a capital. . . ." <sup>14</sup> However, the new Bauhaus influence in commercial and home building design that took hold in Manhattan in the late 30s reduced the number of nesting places, for bird or writer, and White concluded that such "progress" was one of many visible signs of "a decivilizing bug somewhere at work." <sup>15</sup> It was a voracious, hard-shelled climber called modernism which White perceived gnawing at the city's vital center. He expressed his fears in "The Door" (March 25, 1939), a well-known sketch prompted by a visit to a model home exhibit in Rockefeller Center. White imagines himself as the familiar jittery pedestrian lost like a rat in an experimental maze. Surfaces are hard and plastic, and even the names of things are reduced to colorless pseudo-scientific mutants: "The names were tex and frequently koid. Or

they were flex and oid or they were duroid (sani) or flexsan (duro), but everything was glass (but not quite glass . . .)” (17). The over-mechanized, super-efficient home, incongruously lodged inside one the city’s glittering art deco monuments, is the smooth, sleek beast of modernism about to slouch to the suburbs to be born. White’s underlying fear, here and in other New York pieces published elsewhere,<sup>16</sup> is that pure functionalism lobotomizes New York’s vibrant human community; as a consequence, the center cannot hold: “The doctors . . . know where the trouble is only they don’t like to tell you about the prefrontal lobe because that means making a hole in your skull and removing the work of centuries” (18). “Maybe it was the city,” the besieged and bewildered visitor keeps repeating as he struggles to escape the exhibit; “being in the city that made you feel how queer everything was” (17).

White left New York in the late 30s, in part because of unchecked commercial “progress,” but he later established a temporary “nest” near the United Nations headquarters.<sup>17</sup> He wrote about the necessity of keeping one’s sanity and found his emotional anchor in the remaining monuments and human spaces in his once magical metropolis threatened by relentless “development.” His need of roots became the theme of “The Second Tree from the Corner” (May 31, 1947), whose hero is, in a sense, the model home visitor in “The Door,” now certifiably neurotic, who has become, as his name suggests (“Trexler”), the son of the new glass and plastic age. Manhattan complexity has reduced Trexler to total indecisiveness, while the psychiatrist treating him seems healthily assertive. He wants only more leisure and a wing on his house in Westport. The suburban doctor’s disinvestment in the city prompts Trexler to reinvest himself, imaginatively, in the city, and he spontaneously identifies himself with its older, more permanent treasures: “It was an evening of clearing weather, the Park showing green and desirable, the last daylight applying a high lacquer to the brick and brownstone walls and giving the street scene a luminous and intoxicating splendor.” Trexler finds a genuine fraternity among “the unregenerate ranks” in dim-lit saloons on Third Avenue, far from the professional comforters on the fashionable upper East Side. There, he discovers another living thing, a centering object that alone will restore him. Trexler wants “the second tree from the corner, just as it stands.” He is “answering an imaginary question from an imaginary physician. And he felt a slow pride in realizing that what he wanted none could bestow, and that what he had none could take away” (24).

During this financially thriving period for the *New Yorker*, from the early 30s when the magazine established permanent headquarters on West 43rd Street through the 50s and into the present, other *New Yorker* contributors ventured among the unregenerate ranks of “Mahattankind,” in the outlying districts of the ever-expanding metropolis—centers of creative life hitherto unacknowledged in Ross’s imagined cosmos. The magazine had passed its self-promotional phase, created its mythic city and now, during the deepening depression, was disposed to discover borough neighborhoods. Jerome Weidman contributed a series about growing up poor

and tough on 4th Avenue between Avenue D and Lewis Street on the lower East Side, while Daniel Fuchs introduced the Brooklyn sidestreets around Owen D. Larkin Park. The immigrant memoir and the neighborhood “profile” opened up the darker corners of the city and captured what Henry James called “the note of vehemence in the local life.”<sup>18</sup> The magazine’s embrace of the ethnic richness of New York neighborhoods helped to democratize its cosmopolitan myth. Some lower-class districts even inspired legends of their own. The once-despised Bronx became a cosmic zone in a long-running feature about the misadventures of Bella Gross, irrepressible husband-hunter in a tight community of immigrant Jews, written by Arthur Kober. Immigrant Irish, enduring bravely in the shadow of Bellevue on the East Side, were similarly celebrated by John McNulty, who, in the next decade, created “Third Avenyuh,” where White’s Mr. Trexler found solace, which became the setting for many local color tales. These typically featured the racy bruitings of Runyonesque regulars—Cluney McFarrar, The Slugger, Grogan the Horseplayer, among other mildly eccentric prols—who held forth in the local bars, particularly Tim Costello’s at 3rd near 42nd Street, that cosmic zone’s “social center”—and, according to James Thurber and Brendan Gill, a legendary haunt of New York journalists for decades.<sup>19</sup>

While the *New Yorker* was in the early 30s laying claim to its city’s outer boroughs and recording their argots, two established magazine features, the character sketch and the personal anecdote were interbred, giving birth to the so-called *New Yorker* short story. Its precise lineage or identity cannot ever be determined; but when it was set in New York, the facticity of the city, as in the magazine’s humor, always penetrated the inner lives of the characters. Typically, they were educated, refined people with the largest emotional investment in what the magical city promised, frequently the well-bred WASP couple who find themselves dispossessed of their seemingly secure niche on the slopes of sky culture and forced to face the distressing consequences. Their stories were normally recounted—and still are—from an “outsider” third-person viewpoint, which, in addition to giving repertorial authenticity to the fiction, also heightened the characters’ estrangement both from one another and from the city itself. Even the story’s placement in the layout, wedged between sumptuous ads touting precisely what New Yorkers are supposed to cherish, reinforces for the reader the story’s own confined and confining boundaries. “A Story,” stated Hortense Calisher, a master of the *New Yorker* school, “is an apocalypse, served in a very small cup.”<sup>20</sup>

One of the first contributors who in the early 30s set the formula for the magazine’s “New York” story was Sally Benson. Typical is “Suite 2049” (March 14, 1936), in which the Bentleys take a mid-town hotel room to avoid searching for a permanent apartment before the summer season begins—only to find themselves moving from hotel to hotel and to ever higher floors as their income rises. Lois “liked walking through the lobby of their hotel, saying good night graciously to the clerk at the desk, riding up in the elevator and watching other guests get off at the sixth, or ninth, or

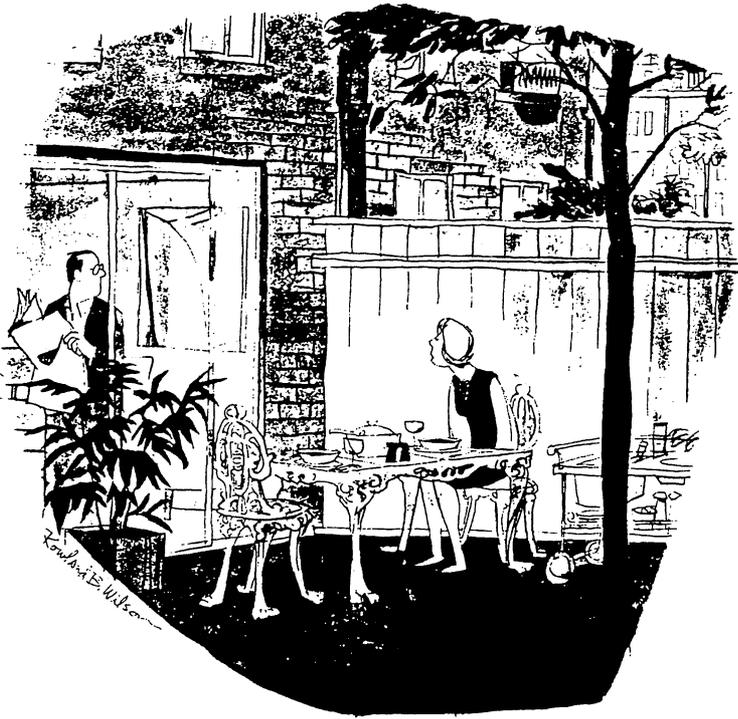
fifteenth floor, while she and Don rose to the heights of the twentieth” (19). “‘Height,’ ‘What is higher,’” writes Elaide of sky cultures, “becomes transcendent, superhuman. Every ascent is a breakthrough . . . , a passing to what is beyond, an escape from profane space and human status” (21). The furniture belongs to the hotel, and Don begins to loathe the *ersatz* fourposter, the hotel prints and the signs everywhere that begin, “Notice to Guests.” When he discovers what she refuses to see, that they possess nothing of their own, except a marvelous view of the Manhattan skyline, he makes a grand exit—but on a hackneyed line that mocks his material success: “I’ll send for my things.”<sup>21</sup>

Other contributors like Robert Coates and Robert McLaughlin also chronicled the lives of mid-town cliff-dwellers trapped in their high-rise “heaven,” while others like Irwin Shaw, in “Girls in Their Summer Dresses” (February 4, 1939, 15-17) and “Search Through the Streets of the City” (August 2, 1941, 15-18), followed them through the flow of a Village streetscene, the singles or younger marrieds poised and ready, like Fitzgeralds’s Nick Carroway, for that sudden encounter that might romantically alter their lives. Subtler writers, such as Calisher and William Maxwell, carry us deeper into the minds of “Manhattankind” who are already facing emotional isolation, worsened for them by the city’s oppressing and alienating environment. In Maxwell’s “Over by the River” (July 1, 1974), an archetypal *New Yorker* “New York” story, the Carringtons, upper middle-class professionals, live with their two children in a quiet, dignified high-rise on East End Avenue; yet they are shadowed on a lower floor, a “profane space” where “the sky seems so far away” (24). One of the children has a recurring nightmare in which a tiger is loose in her room, then disappears into the air conditioner. Her mother longs to retreat to a house in France where “the children could go to a French school and acquire a good French accent” (26). Her husband, the story’s focus, tries to shake his city-induced insomnia by walking the dog nightly in nearby John Finlay Walk, a mock pastoral pocket park where he sees only a fleeing mugger, a panhandler and then a corpse, while below him the traffic rumbles by on FDR Drive. The park signs, he imagines, read:

No Dogs  
No Bicycles  
No This  
No That (24)

He, too, longs to escape, not to the French countryside, but aboard one of the passing freighters outward bound, and he even thinks about swimming out and requesting passage. But he quickly realizes, here at the city’s edge, that he is imprisoned, suddenly marked for him by one of the city’s otherwise grandiose monuments: “the Hell Gate section of the Triborough Bridge was a necklace of sickly-green incandescent pearls” (30).

Carrington has come up against what other New Yorkers in *New Yorker* stories face—what Fitzgerald discovered in the early 30s, the hard reality that the city “*had limits*,” “the awful realization,” Fitzgerald goes on to



*"Please hurry, Hilary. Your soup's getting dirty."*

**Drawing by Rowland b. Wilson; © 1964  
The New Yorker Magazine, Inc.**

say, "that New York was a city after all and not a universe."<sup>22</sup> Car-  
rington's painful discovery reveals a dominant, perhaps central, theme,  
not only of the *New Yorker* "New York" story, but also of *New Yorker* humor,  
and even of the magazine itself: middle-aging, the fate of mortality, the  
suffering of change. Significantly, this theme, Chekhovian in origin, gained  
prominence in the magazine during the early 30s, just when it was itself  
undergoing its own middle-aging, as were many of its contributors—not to  
mention most of its once-young subscribers. John Cheever's New York  
stories comprise a vivid allegory about "Manhattankind" searching for  
the cosmic center, only to find themselves emotionally dislocated or  
abandoned, often forced to live down the cosmopolitan myth they allowed  
themselves in younger years to embrace. His innocents who first arrive in  
Manhattan seem to come with copies of Whitman, White (or the *New  
Yorker*) in hand, so ready are they to be taken up by the city's promised  
ecstasies. In "O City of Broken Dreams" (January 24, 1948), Everts and  
Alice Malloy arrive at Grand Central from Indiana and feel as if  
transformed to the land of Oz: "when the train plunged into the darkness  
beneath Park Avenue, Alice felt that she was surrounded by the inventions  
of giants. She noticed that the paving, deep in the station, had a frosty  
glitter, and she wondered if diamonds had been ground into the concrete"

(22). Marginally settled achievers like the Whittemores in "The Pot of Gold" (October 14, 1950) live in a walk-up off lower Madison and seem ever on "the threshold of fortune" (30). Like the Bentleys in Benson's "Suite 2049," their thoughts range beyond, to ever higher apartments in better neighborhoods. "All his desires," says the non-committal narrator, "seemed to be outside the small apartment she had arranged" (31). Such "Manhattankind" are the "Ceilings," Cheever's ironic term in "The Superintendent" (March 29, 1952) for marginally wealthy tenants that escalating rents can easily weed out, as opposed to the "Permanents," who reach high-ceilinged grandeur on the highest floors (28). Yet Cheever's "Permanents" are hardly emotionally solid; a few are utterly without human substance, like the Trenchers in "The Season of Divorce" (March 4, 1950), the sparse decor of whose house betrays them: "The Trenchers don't seem to generate enough human warmth to animate [their home], so that you sometimes take away from them, at the end of an evening, an impression of many empty rooms" (22).

Outdoors, at street level, Cheever's WASPs, like E. B. White, hear the insistent rhythms of the pulsing streetscape; but they find no solace, no nesting place, no second tree from the corner. In "The Five-Forty-Eight" (April 10, 1954), Blake—just "Blake," middle-aging, an urban cipher like "Trexler" or "Becker"—attempts to elude a secretary, who is trailing him after he has broken off their affair and fired her, by walking east briskly to Madison, toward the open air of the avenue. As he threads his way through the crowd, the narrow sidestreet, in the throes of upheaval, stage tableaux that portray forgotten hospitalities:

He noticed . . . a break in the wall of buildings. Something had been torn down; something was being put up, but the steel structure had only just risen above the sidewalk fence and daylight poured through the gap. Blake stopped opposite here and looked into a store window. It was a decorator's or an auctioneer's. The window was arranged like a room in which people live and entertain their friends. There were cups on the coffee table, magazines to read, and flowers in the vases, but the flowers were dead and the cups were empty and the guests had not come. (28)

"The city is full of accidental revelations," says the narrator of "The Season of Divorce," "half-heard cries for help, and strangers who will tell you everything at the first suspicion of sympathy" (24). Surely, the best illustration of this observation is Cheever's story, "The Enormous Radio" (May 17, 1947), about the Wescotts who live "near Sutton Place . . . , and they hope someday to live in Westchester" (28). The new radio Jim buys Irene, which is supposed to bring harmony into their failing marriage, brings discord instead. It picks up every sound from adjoining apartments, most clearly the apparent moral failings of their neighbors. The depressing revelations from the "hideous cabinet" (33) only postpone Jim's revelation of some hideous truths about Irene's past behavior, which she has heretofore managed to drown out with soothing classical music from the radio. Exposed and disgraced, she hopes the new radio "might speak to

her kindly,” but it remains non-committal, like the narrator, transmitting only news of a far-off train disaster and the day’s temperature (33). In New York, that most public of American cities, there are no sanctuaries; even the furniture can betray you.

Since the 1960s, the *New Yorker’s* New York has undergone another building boom, producing as one result a massive mid-town (and Battery) gridlock criss-crossed with high-rise glass boxes unfit for bird or human—as White, among many others, had prophesized. Ross himself died in 1951, and in slow degrees thereafter, so did his mythic city, a casualty of history and the imperatives of commerce. *New Yorker* humorists still dote on now-legendary Manhattan congestion, but a few, perhaps harder-shelled, wits have refused to take the advent of post-modernism lying down. In “Down!” (January 24, 1977), for example, Todd Strasser recounts in a mock-Mount Everest diary his feat of skateboarding down the concave surface of 9 West 57th Street, that anonymous slab that so visibly scars a once elegant avenue. A sample entry:

November 17. We have reached Base Camp. The people at Morgan Guaranty have been very kind. . . . A few of the Sherpas have joined the Christmas Club. But these mundane distinctions matter less now. Here on the sixth floor, the street level seems ages behind us. When I think of the summit a mere forty-six floors above us, I am invigorated. Up there, beyond central air-conditioning, my destiny awaits. (28)

Strasser’s feat, in effect, defiled the new religion of vulgar and misplaced post-modernism, a scaling-down that momentarily restored 57th Street to the strolling pedestrian.

The advent of post-modern New York has been chillingly portrayed in the *New Yorker* by Donald Barthelme. His “Middle City” is White’s nightmare dystopia grinding down to complete entropy. Anything natural, anything human has already been removed or stolen; what remains are the glass and steel grid coordinates stretched across a void. One social consequence of this new dehumanized cityscape, devoid of a cosmic center, is everyone’s heightened sense of boundaries, which alone remain determinable. In “Margins,” a black man totes a sandwich board proclaiming the injustices perpetrated against him, while a white pedestrian responds only by analyzing his handwriting: “Don’t bother improving your character. Just improve your handwriting. Make large capitals. . . . Watch your word-spacing so as not to display disorientation. Watch your margins.” The two agree they should “keep trying to penetrate [each other’s] inner reality,” but their “talk of the town” is superficial, disconnected—indeed, “marginal.”<sup>23</sup> Like several of Barthelme’s “City Life” fables, “Margins” is actually set on one of New York’s crucial margins—14th Street, that southernmost gridline of the *New Yorker’s* metropolis, which divides the glamorous cosmic zones above from the mean streets below.

(The northernmost boundary is as evident, as a character in one of Updike's Maples stories reveals: "If I was John Lindsay, I'd build a ten-foot wall across Ninety-Sixth Street and forget it."<sup>24</sup> In Barthelme's "The Palace," the familiar "little man" of a more civilized era waits in line at a Chase Manhattan Bank branch on 14th Street, behind a mixed group of the once invisible New York poor. In Benchley's or White's New York, the jittery urban bumbler might be gently assaulted; in Barthelme's more menacing city, he is liable to be killed—the penalty, so the bank customer seems to suggest, for overstepping one's margins:

All of a sudden I flashed on a scene in which all these ladies, white, black and Puerto Rican, were zipping into Abercrombie's or somewhere and lashing out their \$84.06's for brand-new tennis racquets. And what else was there to do with these racquets but beat me to death with them? What if the Revolution occurred to all these women . . . [and] . . . then armed with their death-dealing Bancrofts and Wilsons, and me armed only with a little card that says I'm a member of the A.C.L.U. came after me?<sup>25</sup>

To avoid this distressing thought, he daydreams about "the palace," a Bauhaus-style Xanadu furnished with Eames chairs, David Smith sculptures and "other high-class cultural grid coordinates" (74). His city has become a vast Platonic Idea completely detached from the lower orders trapped on an earth-bound island, and hence all the more desirable—to the privileged few able to wrap themselves up in it: "The palace exists; we have only to get there—that is, walk hard enough. That is a beautiful idea of which I have always been very fond. The truth is that the palace does not exist but the serfs do" (76). While Strasser's glass slab on 57th Street remained material and thus yielded to his mastery, Barthelme's Manhattan tower is elusive, even illusory, and thus incapable of housing meaning at all. In "The Glass Mountain," a mock quest story composed of 100 sentences ("stories"?), another urban mountaineer attempts to scale what only *may* be an office building at the corner of 13th Street and Eighth Avenue—about as immaterial a spot in the *New Yorker's* New York as one could find. The corpses of countless knights who have died attempting the climb litter its base; but Barthelme's modern quester perseveres, only to discover at the top an exhausted and hence meaningless symbol: "97. I approached the symbol, with its layers of meaning, but when I touched it, it changed into only a beautiful princess. 98. I threw the beautiful princess headfirst down the mountain to my acquaintances."<sup>26</sup> If the city has become perfectly transparent, and hence utterly meaningless, beneath the glass and steel grid coordinates, below ground, New York remains (for the serfs?) palpable and all too apprehensible. Barthelme imagines no place, nothing so quaintly fabulous as Sullivan's "nice cool sewer," but instead, as in "City Life," primeval earth roiling in subliminal aggressions that are contagious: "We are locked in the most exquisite mysterious muck. This muck heaves and palpitates. It is multi-directional and has a mayor. . . . our muck is only a part of a much greater muck—the nation-state—which is itself the creation of that muck of mucks, human consciousness."<sup>27</sup>

“New York is or can be regarded as a collage, as opposed to, say, a tribal village,” Barthelme has said in an interview. “The point of collage is that unlike things are stuck together to make, in the best case, a new reality.”<sup>28</sup> Out of the vast detritus of the modern metropolis, Barthelme, the son of an architect, has stuck together a new reality, a “dematerialized,” “defamiliarized” city that is the very opposite of the cosy tribal “village” Harold Ross thought New York to be and celebrated in his new magazine. He has even fashioned a new language, the “glyphs and ideograms” that Mumford said arise to articulate the new urban phenomenon, itself made up of refuse—cliches, *non-sequiturs*, fragments, jokes and recondite allusions. Yet his bizarre fables signify a terminal demolition, the city deconstructed permanently, leaving only the sky above and the “muck” below. If New York has indeed been shorn of myth and increasingly of history, becoming ever more a random collection of commercial monuments and “restored” antique facades, the city inevitably offers fewer mysteries—and, thus, less to imagine.<sup>29</sup> Despite these bleak prospects, for urban life or fantasy, the *New Yorker* has, like White’s Mr. Trexler, kept a steady gaze on a thriving (if fragile) object in the relentlessly modernizing city—not a tree near a corner, but itself as a root in a rootless and exasperating environment. Mere anarchy may be loosed upon the world, but as its own myth and history show, the *New Yorker* has proven a center that holds.

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## notes

1. Shirley Park Lowry, *Familiar Mysteries* (New York, 1982), 132.
2. Lowry, 130.
3. *The City in History: Its Origins, Its Transformations, and Its Prospects* (New York, 1961), 37.
4. Mumford, 97.
5. *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (London, 1958), 99-100.
6. Quoted in Dale Kramer, *Ross, and the New Yorker* (New York, 1951), 61. The story of the *New Yorker*’s success is an oft-told tale and need not be told again here. I have depended on Kramer’s account of the magazine’s history, supplemented by more recent memoirs, primarily: James Thurber, *The Years with Ross* (Boston, 1957); Jane Grant, *Ross, the New Yorker and Me* (New York, 1968); Brendan Gill, *Here at the New Yorker* (New York, 1975). About New York and New Yorkers I have found particularly useful Paul Golberger, *The City Observed: New York* (New York, 1978) and Andrew Hacker, *The New Yorkers: A People of an American Metropolis* (New York, 1975).
7. Kramer, 77.
8. Other early “New York” tall tales include Sullivan’s “The Costume Balls” (March 13, 1926), 13-14, and “Three Methods of Acquiring Loam” (May 26, 1928), 21-22; Aesop III, “Fable in the Modern Manner” (August 15, 1925), 11; Nunnally Johnson, “Metropolitan Nature Fakers” (July 23, 1927), 24-25. Corey Ford contributed a related piece touting the new magazine, “The Anniversary of a Great Magazine” (February 20, 1926), 28-29.
9. So said editor, Ralph Ingersoll, quoted in Kramer, 92. See Mackay’s equally “terrible” sequel that was also attention-getting, “The Declining Function” (December 12, 1925), 15-16.
10. *Patterns*, 382.
11. According to current New Jersey governor, Thomas Kean, Ben Franklin started it all, calling New Jersey “a barrel tapped at both ends.” Quoted in Randall Rothenberg, “Here Comes New Jersey!” *New York Times Magazine* (October 6, 1985), 40.
12. “Not for the Old Lady in Dubuque,” in Louis Rubin, ed., *The Comic Imagination in American Literature* (New Brunswick, 1973), 233. Other early examples include Corey Ford, “How D’You Get That Way” (January 9, 1926), 9-10, Benchley, “Life in the Ritz Tenement” (September 3, 1927), 23 and “Boost New York!” (August 24, 1929), 12.
13. For a detailed examination of White’s literary evocations of New York, see Thomas Grant, “The Sparrow on the Ledge: E. B. White in New York,” *Studies in American Humor*, Vol. 3, Number 1 (Spring, 1984), 24-33.
14. Reprinted in *The Points of My Compass* (New York, 1979), 130.

15. *Harper's Magazine* (October, 1939), 555.
16. "The World of Tomorrow" *Harper's Magazine* (May, 1939): *Here is New York* (New York, 1949). The beginning of White's evolving estrangement from modernistic New York perhaps began in "Quo Vadimus?" (May 24, 1930), 17-18, when the narrator discovers that he is no disinterested observer but one with the harassed urbanite he has stopped—and, thus, the plural title.
17. For biographical facts, I have relied on Scott Elledge, *E. B. White* (New York, 1984). See White's own account of his New York leave-taking, "The Departure of Eustace Tilley" (August 7, 1937). In his later letters, White named what repelled him about the new New York: "There's something about these immaculate stone and glass surfaces that destroys all the street-level detail that used to be so much fun. I feel like a spider in a bathtub—can't get my dragline anchored to anything" (*Letters*, ed. Dorothy Lobrano Guth [New York, 1976]), 508-509.
18. *The American Scene* (Bloomington, 1969), 74.
19. Thurber, "My Friend McNulty," *The World of John McNulty* (New York, 1957), 10; Gill, 329-333.
20. "Preface," *The Collected Stories* (New York, 1975), iii. Her own "New York" stories exhibit an extraordinary sensitivity to the interplay of character and city environment, most notably "The Watchers" (March 26, 1949), 27-31 and "In Greenwich There are Many Gravelled Walks" (August 12, 1950), 20-27. In "The 'New Yorker' Story," *Harper's Magazine* (July, 1984), 69-71, Martha Bayles deftly parodied the magazine's story formula, noting how the characters are drawn to the city's magnetic center: "To you, our town is just a cloverleaf on Route 80. But to us, it is the center of the universe. You may not know us, but we know each other" (70).
21. *Patterns*, 101.
22. "My Lost City," *The Crack-Up*, ed. Edmund Wilson (New York, 1956), 32.
23. Reprinted in *Come Back, Dr. Caligari* (New York, 1965), 111. See also Woody Allen, "No Kaddish for Weinstein" (March 3, 1975) and Ian Frazier, "Apartment 6-A: After the Fall" (October 11, 1976).
24. "I Will Not Let Thee Go, Except Thou Bless Me" (October 11, 1969), 52; see also Alfred Kreymborg, "Crossing the Color Line" (December 12, 1931), 19.
25. Reprinted in *Guilty Pleasures* (New York, 1974), 74. Citations hereafter in the text.
26. Reprinted in *City Life* (New York, 1968), 64. This story did not appear in the *New Yorker*.
27. *City Life*, 166.
28. Joe David Bellamy, ed., *The New Fiction: Interviews with Innovative American Writers* (Urbana, 1974), 51. An early example of the novel of anecdote and collage is Renata Adler's *Speedboat* (New York: Random House, 1971), parts of which originally appeared in the *New Yorker*. For the post-modernist view of the city, I have profited from the essays in *Literature and the Urban Experience*, eds., Michael C. Jaye and Ann Chalmers Watts (New Brunswick, 1981), especially Joyce Carol Oates, "Imaginary Cities" and Ihab Hassan, "Cities of Mind, Urban Words: The Dematerialization of Metropolis in Contemporary American Fiction."
29. The New York myth, or what remains of it, survives in *New York*, one of a new breed of cosmopolitan "city guide" magazines that tout the excitements of urban life; but unlike the *New Yorker*, it tends toward slick uncritical sensation, and, despite often brilliant reportage, lacks a distinct identity—a New York character.