



*Subway*, by Lily Furedi, c. 1934.

## URBAN SCRAWL

by Jamie James

Readers curious about conditions in New York City in 1867 won't do better for themselves than *Ragged Dick; or Street Life in New York with the Bootblacks*, Horatio Alger's enormously popular juvenile novel. The first hundred pages are virtually a guidebook to Manhattan, as Dick, an orphan boy living by his wits, takes Frank, a newcomer from the country, on a tour. You can easily plot their route on a map: the boys, in their early teens, set out from Spruce Street, where Dick lives

in a packing crate he jauntily calls the Box Hotel, and stroll past City Hall and Barnum's Museum; they stop for ice cream at Taylor's Saloon (365 Broadway) and admire the statue of George Washington in Union Square. At Twenty-ninth Street, they hop on a Third Avenue horse car (fare seven cents) and ride to Central Park, the city's northern frontier. "The time will undoubtedly come," Alger predicts, "when the park will be surrounded by elegant residences and compare favorably in

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this respect with the most attractive parts of any city in the world.”

In the course of the day, the boys are preyed upon by grifters and swindlers, but savvy Dick fends them off. The second part of the novel charts Dick's inexorable rise to middle-class respectability by dint of thrift and hard work. *Ragged Dick* enjoyed a sensational commercial success, launching a line of more than a hundred boys' books about poor, plucky lads who work hard and prosper, usually through the patronage of a kindly older man. Alger, a graduate of Harvard Divinity School who resigned from the Unitarian clergy in disgrace after a sex scandal involving underage boys, was one of the best-selling authors in American history, with estimates ranging as high as 400 million copies of his works published.

What makes the success of Alger's novels so remarkable is their near-total lack of literary merit. Typically there is only a shadow of a story—boy wants to succeed, after setbacks boy succeeds—and the dialogue is mostly naked exposition, relieved by stale adages and lame music-hall humor. Alger never makes even a tentative feint in the direction of psychology. None is needed: the characters don't develop, they just get rich.

The *Ragged Dick* books were the first influential expression in America of the myth of the city, the potent quest narrative established in Europe in medieval times and embraced in the first half of the nineteenth century by the novel, which was still emerging in its modern form. The classic pattern was articulated by Balzac's *Lost Illusions* [*Paris*, page 124], published in three parts beginning in 1837. The theme is distilled in the title of part two, “A Great Man of the Provinces in Paris” (given that the epithet “great” is heavily ironic). Lucien Chardon is an ambitious young dreamer, a handsome poet stifled in the provinces, who is taken up as a lover and protégé by a married noblewoman, Mme de Bargeton. He follows her to Paris to make his name—literally, as he adopts his mother's aristocratic patronymic and styles himself Lucien de Rubempré. Mme de

Bargeton soon drops him, and Lucien abandons his idealistic pursuit of literature for the specious fame of journalism. Toward the end of the novel, he stands on a bridge ready to end it all, ruined as much in soul as in worldly circumstances.

Lionel Trilling defined the parameters of the city novel in *The Liberal Imagination*, published in 1950. Trilling traces “a great line of novels which runs through the nineteenth century as, one might say, the very backbone of its fiction.” Amending Balzac's characterization, he calls the hero of these novels the Young Man from the Provinces. The protagonist's “provincial birth and rearing suggest the simplicity and the high hopes he begins with—he starts with a great demand upon life and a great wonder about its complexity and promise.” The Young Man, “equipped with poverty, pride, and intelligence,” is propelled on his upward progress by a stroke of luck: Mme de Bargeton's fancy for Lucien's verse, Pip's chance encounter in *Great Expectations* with the fugitive convict Magwitch in the marsh.

The city novel reached maturity in the romantic era, with its singular fascination with the Great Man, but like every literary genre, it was long in gestating. The narrative template has three stages, beginning with the dream of the city. The myth first appears in print in 1605 with the legend of Dick Whittington, the poor lad from Gloucestershire who walked to London because he heard that the streets were paved with gold, and there made his fortune and became Lord Mayor. In Tobias Smollett's picaresque novels, London is seen through rural eyes as a wicked place that joins the lure of wealth and power with the peril of moral decay. Mme de Bargeton paints the dream of Paris for Lucien with vivid radiance, emphasizing what he will escape by his urban immigration as much as the promise of the city: “It is there, my dear, that worthwhile people live. One can feel at ease only with one's equals; everywhere else one suffers. Besides, Paris, the capital of the intellectual world, is the stage on which you will find

success! You must leap quickly over the gap which separates you from it! Don't let your ideas grow rancid in the provinces; get swiftly into contact with the men who will represent the nineteenth century."

Then the Young Man sets out, his journey to the city imbued with the ritual solemnity of a knight's quest in Arthurian legend, complete with talismans. In the first chapter of *The Three Musketeers*, D'Artagnan sets off for Paris from Gascony with his father's three parting gifts: fifteen *écus*, a clapped-out yellow horse, and a letter of introduction to the captain of the king's musketeers. (His mother, a figure often absent from this narrative tradition, gives him a recipe for a miraculous medicinal balm.) When Smollett's hero Roderick Random sets off for London, his whole fortune consists of one suit, a dozen shirts, four pair of stockings, "a case of pocket instruments, a small edition of Horace, Wiseman's *Surgery*, and ten guineas in cash." The protagonist's arrival in the city is a moment of eye-opening wonderment. David Copperfield recalls his arrival in the capital, "What an amazing place London was to me when I saw it in the distance, and how I believed all the adventures of all my favorite heroes to be constantly enacting and reenacting there, and how I vaguely made it out in my own mind to be fuller of wonders and wickedness than all the cities of the earth, I need not stop here to relate."

Disillusionment, the final stage, ensues. In eighteenth-century picaresque narratives, it usually comes soon after arrival, when the Young Man is fleeced by sharps and swindlers. In the romantic iteration, protagonists such as Lucien Chardon do achieve worldly success and then rot from the inside out. (This third act is, of course, incongruous with Alger's optimism.) Charles Dickens [*London*, page 160], a steadfast believer in the power of love, often gives his young men a measure of redemption in the end, as in Pip's acceptance of Magwitch as his benefactor. The French city novel usually ends with no sentimental flinching in its dispensation of moral justice.

The city novel in its classic form never took hold as a serious art form in the United States. The country from its start was overwhelmingly rural. By 1790, just one in twenty Americans lived in a city; New York, the nation's first capital and soon to become its largest city, had a population of 33,000, while London was around a million inhabitants. By the time of Balzac and Dickens, Europe was convulsed by periodic social upheavals that provided glorious urban revolts in which young men from the provinces could participate. In *The Red and the Black*, Julian Sorel gets swept up in the intrigues that preceded the July Revolution of 1830; Frédéric Moreau, the

*I am a patriot—of the Fourteenth Ward,  
Brooklyn, where I was raised. The rest of the  
United States doesn't exist for me, except as  
idea, or history, or literature.*

—Henry Miller, 1963

amorous protagonist of *Sentimental Education*, is initially disdainful of the Revolution of 1848, but when Paris erupts in violence, the "excitement of the big city raised his spirits," and he joins the mob.

The United States, meanwhile, was busy being born. The cities of the eastern seaboard functioned as way stations for the immigrants from the Old World who were pouring into the Western wilderness. The first American novelist to find a mass readership was James Fenimore Cooper, who celebrated the young nation's backwoods origins in the Leatherstocking tales. Published beginning in 1823, the novels chronicle the adventures of Natty Bumppo, a white boy raised by Indians to be a frontiersman, who could navigate the paths of the forest with the canny resourcefulness of a Dickens street urchin in the slums of London. By 1865 Horace Greeley, the most influential newspaperman of the day, popularized what would become a national motto in an editorial that urged, "Go west, young man, go west and grow up with the country."

Mythopoesis was never an urban pursuit. From the beginning, Americans cherished the open road, an enduring theme that arcs from Whitman's song of 1856 ("Afoot and light-hearted I take to the open road, /Healthy, free, the world before me") to the strung-out wanderings of the Beats a century later. The archetypal rolling stone was Huckleberry Finn, protagonist of the century's most influential work of fiction, who found it "rough living in the house all the time" and took to the woods to avoid being "civilized." America was nostalgic about its Arcadian past before it was past. *The Last of the Mohicans*, Cooper's most famous novel, takes place in a legendary, pre-Revolutionary era that was actually just seventy years distant. Hawthorne's best novels inhabit the enchanted realm of the Puritan past with no awareness of the world beyond Massachusetts, setting the pattern for Faulkner, who wrote about his "little postage stamp of native soil" in Mississippi, and other twentieth-century regional novelists, such as Willa Cather and Flannery O'Connor.

*Moby-Dick* is often regarded as the principal rival of *Huckleberry Finn* for the title of Great American Novel, a bookish equivalent of the great white whale. Melville's protagonists shunned not just civilization but humanity, following the open road of the sea. In *Redburn*, published two years before *Moby-Dick*, Melville's hero grew up in New York City, but it was only his first port of call. "By the well-remembered sea-coal fire in old Greenwich Street," his father told him tales "of the monstrous waves at sea, mountain high; of the masts bending like twigs." Redburn dreamed of European cities "full of mossy cathedrals and churches, and long, narrow, crooked streets without sidewalks." America had no Westminster, no Notre-Dame de Paris. Lacking a rich, legendary history that could be read in the cracks of ancient stone, America itself, the idea of America as a land of freedom and opportunity, was the national icon.

Geography was more complex in the United States. The country never had a single gravitational center in the sense that London and Paris were unquestioned seats of power

and culture. Despite its grandly symmetrical plan and centuries of wishful thinking, Washington has never been a great city; while New York was the largest, richest metropolis almost from the nation's start, Philadelphia and Boston were equally or more influential in the country's formation. By the end of the nineteenth century, Chicago, St. Louis, and San Francisco were magnetic poles in the American heartland and West, as powerfully attractive in their regions as New York was back East.

As the major metropolises grew, there were of course novels of the city. Henry James, a native New Yorker, located his early novels of manners in Boston and New York, a tradition that continued in the pitiless social satires of Edith Wharton. Yet these were narratives of class, not place. By 1880, the year *Washington Square* was published, Manhattan was flooded with poor European immigrants waging bloody turf wars, a grim reality far removed from the drawing rooms of James' short novel—much as Edith Wharton's social climbers in *The Custom of the Country*, published in 1913, plot and scheme heedless of the messy world beyond balls and bridge parties. The novel of the upper crust proved to be a robust genre, carried on in John O'Hara's postwar pot-boilers about privileged preppies and to century's end with Louis Auchincloss' novels about Manhattan financiers and lawyers.

The city novel was reinvented in America in 1900 with the publication of *Sister Carrie* [*Chicago*, page 110]. Theodore Dreiser's big first novel was an innovative exploitation of the genre from its opening sentence, which precisely mimics the talismanic motif of its European models. "When Caroline Meeber boarded the afternoon train for Chicago, her total outfit consisted of a small trunk, a cheap imitation alligator-skin satchel, a small lunch in a paper box, and a yellow-leather snap purse, containing her ticket, a scrap of paper with her sister's address in Van Buren Street, and four dollars in money." By hewing close to the formula, Dreiser underscored his modernity: his was a novel of the Young Woman from the Provinces.

When he was a young reporter in Pittsburgh, Dreiser devoured Balzac at the public library and deliberately set out to imitate him in *Sister Carrie*, reproducing Chicago with the meticulous detail the master had used to animate his fictional Paris. Dreiser acknowledges this debt in the last chapter of the novel, when Carrie is glimpsed in her room at the Waldorf Hotel in New York reading *Père Goriot*. In the original manuscript, reconstructed by literary scholars and published in 1981, Dreiser had made his inspiration even more explicit. Toward the end of the book, Robert Ames, an idealistic electrical engineer, seeks to improve Carrie's mind with a reading program. "Read all of Balzac's," he tells her, "they will do you good." Carrie replies that Balzac is "delightful" but goes on to say "something about the sadness of the failure of Lucien de Rubempré in 'The Great Man from the Provinces.'" It is a pointed irony, perfectly aimed. Carrie's failure to perceive that the pathos of Balzac's novel lies not in Lucien's failure but in his misguided ambition reflects her own parallel failure of character.

There were other notable attempts to create a city novel in the early twentieth century, among them John Dos Passos' jazzy, modernist collage *Manhattan Transfer*, which opens with a classic scene of arrival. When the ferry docks in Manhattan, the hayseed protagonist asks another passenger, "How do I get to Broadway? I want to get to the center of things." The man replies, "Walk east a block and turn down Broadway and you'll find the center of things if you walk far enough." The posthumous novels of Thomas Wolfe, *The Web and the Rock* and *You Can't Go Home Again*, evoke the dream of the city, but it is a retrograde, painfully self-conscious literary reference, which lacks the intense sense of place of Balzac's Paris and Dickens' London, one of the distinguishing marks of the classic city novel. With no authentic native identity of their own, emergent American cities became increasingly pervaded by a sense of menace, decadence following maturity as close as a shadow.

In *The Day of the Locust*, published in 1939, Nathanael West pushed urban realism to surrealist limits. He set his novel in the youngest of

## When In Rome

*Statutes still on the books*

No man may buy drinks for more than three people in any single round.

**Nyala, NV**

No man may marry until he proves himself worthy by hunting and killing either six blackbirds or three crows.

**Truro, MS**

No fireman may rescue a woman who is wearing a nightgown. If a woman wants to be rescued, she must be fully clothed.

**St. Louis, MO**

No child may burp during a church service. Failure to comply may result in a parent's arrest.

**Omaha, NE**

No driver may run out of gas.

**Youngstown, OH**

No man may simultaneously eat peanuts and walk backward while a concert is being performed.

**Greene, NY**

No child under the age of seven may attend college.

**Winston-Salem, NC**

No one except a baby may ride in a baby carriage.

**Roderfield, WV**

No one may tickle a girl under the chin with a feather duster.

**Portland, ME**

No woman may hang her lingerie in public view.

**Los Angeles, CA**

the great American cities, Los Angeles, where he himself had moved to write for the movies. Born Nathan Weinstein, he half-facetiously told William Carlos Williams that he took his new name from Horace Greeley's directional advice. West's Los Angeles is a diffuse metropolis built on make-believe, a mechanical mockingbird of a place that superficially imitates other "real" places, yet has no rooted identity of its own. As Gertrude Stein

had written of another California city, her childhood home of Oakland, two years before, “There’s no there there.” Yet the fascination of Los Angeles always lay in its very un-thereness, its glossy changeability. California’s golden promise—for West, merely gilt brass—was a local restatement of the nation’s own founding myth: it was a new place, unrestricted by tradition, where you could reinvent yourself with the imaginative ease of a Hollywood scenario.

West’s alienated protagonist, a painter and set designer named Tod Hackett, lives near the headquarters of the dream industry. “Only dynamite,” West writes with wonted savage nihilism,

*In the New York days of my twenties, the streets were wide and open and always sunny, not narrow and closed and dark, the way they are now when I walk down the same streets.*

—Jamaica Kincaid, 1995

“would be of any use against the Mexican ranch houses, Samoan huts, Mediterranean villas, Egyptian and Japanese temples, Swiss chalets, Tudor cottages, and every possible combination of these styles that lined the slopes of the canyon.” These sham houses are populated not by dreamers but by people who “had come to California to die.” Throughout the short novel, Tod collects images of cruelty and suffering for his projected masterpiece, *The Burning of Los Angeles*.

Back East, meanwhile, the cosmopolitan diversity of the cities was anything but factitious; the established notion of a unitary ruling class that was white, Anglo, and Protestant was cracking. The expanding wealth and power of the cities’ ethnic enclaves—essentially cellular “provinces” located within the urban compass—created many theres there, giving rise to an intensely focused variation of the city novel, what might be called the neighborhood novel. Henry Roth’s *Call It Sleep* found a world entire in the Jewish ghetto on the Lower East Side. There were internal refugees, too: when the anonymous protagonist of *Invisible Man* [*New York City*, page 84] flees

the Jim Crow South and heads for the big city in the North, his destination is Harlem, not New York per se. When he emerges from the subway, Ellison’s narrator is shocked to see black women working at the counter of a five-and-dime, a black policeman directing traffic. “Sure I had heard of it, but this was *real*. My courage returned. This really was Harlem, and now all the stories which I had heard of the city within a city leaped alive in my mind.”

These culturally homogenous urban villages were comforting to their residents but disquieting to the ancien régime, intensifying and specifying the sense of menace. The city itself was the wilderness, an asphalt jungle with none of the hopeful possibilities of Cooper’s prelapsarian forest. Now the city’s chieftains were gangsters and larcenous political bosses, not noble red Indians. In the grim Chicago novels of Nelson Algren, Hubert Selby’s *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, and the hard-boiled detective novels by James M. Cain, Dashiell Hammett, and Mickey Spillane (among many others), in a codependent relationship with film noir, the city is a cruel, dangerous place that must be escaped. Only forty years after *Sister Carrie*, the city again became repellent.

The direction of migration reversed with America’s principal innovation in urban planning, the bedroom suburb. The novel followed its readers as they sought safety and modern comfort in a semi-urbanized countryside that lacked thereness—and racial diversity—by design. The only dream that motivated the building of most American suburbs was a developer’s Algeresque aspiration to wealth. It wasn’t simply that storytellers were following the trite advice to write about what they knew; as from the beginning, the American place was shaping national thought. The open road had promised freedom, yet the suburban cul-de-sac was an inadvertent prison.

Frank and April Wheeler, in Richard Yates’ *Revolutionary Road*, begin their married life in Greenwich Village, on Bethune Street, where, in a direct echo of Melville, “The salt breeze of evening and the deep river horns of night enrich the air with a promise of voyages.” But when Frank gets a good job making good money, he

moves April to the suburbs in an unexamined search for the good life. Soon they are disillusioned and daydream of “a way of life beyond the commuting train and the Republican Party and the barbecue pit.” They plan yet another reverse migration, to Europe, to a Paris that Frank knows primarily from having read *The Sun Also Rises* in high school. The Wheelers plunge into a hell of their own making, their shared dream of Frank’s destined greatness based entirely on his vanity and her desperation. Yates’ novel has sometimes been mischaracterized as the first of a long and progressively dreary line of exposés of the suburb as a soulless wasteland. (John Updike is usually dragooned into their number, but the Rabbit Angstrom novels are descended from a collateral line, the novel of small-town rot epitomized by Sinclair Lewis; Updike himself once proclaimed, “My subject is the American Protestant small-town middle class.”)

John Cheever’s short stories in *The New Yorker*, themselves perfect reading for commuters on the 5:48, achieved a pallid universality by draining away the last fugitive vestiges of sense of place from the suburbs. “The Swimmer,” one of Cheever’s most famous stories, began as a novel and was then radically condensed to a standard five thousand words. The protagonist, Neddy Merrill, is the beau ideal of a suburban prince, who impulsively undertakes an odyssey by water across his suburban realm: he will swim from one end of the county to the other following a chain of swimming pools. At first Neddy’s neighbors give him a warm hero’s welcome, but he soon finds himself received with indifference and, ultimately, hostility; by the end of the story he is an old, broken man. In a fantastical ending that reaches back to Hawthorne and Poe, he returns to his home to find it a deserted ruin. Even in the suburbs, the last American wilderness, we once again have the tale of a man on a journey, his purpose now absurd, the land through which he travels a characterless void. The *genius loci* has vanished: Neddy’s fall is enacted in a place identified only as “the county,” as disturbingly vague as “the village” that entraps K., Kafka’s land surveyor in *The Castle*.

By the end of the twentieth century, most American novels were set in cities and suburbs because most Americans lived in cities and suburbs (80 percent, according to the 2000 Census). This demographic shift has been the mortal blow to the myth of the city: it’s impossible to maintain a mystique about your home turf. A century of cinema has made the reality of the city, however scrubbed and glamorized, familiar to the those who remain in rural places, obviating the need for detailed, Dickensian descriptions. The vivid portraits of Paris that Balzac painted in pages of exquisite observation can be accomplished by a

*My ideas are clear. My orders are precise. Within five years, Rome must appear marvelous to all the people of the world—vast, orderly, powerful, as in the time of the empire of Augustus.*

—Benito Mussolini, 1929

slow pan. Tourists from the “provinces” still visit Times Square to gawk at skyscrapers and take in a Broadway show, but their innocence has been undeceived by a lifetime of watching television cop shows set in New York.

Today the American open road is the information highway. The vast access of raw, random intelligence delivered by the Internet has had a radical homogenizing effect on society, spanning the gap that Mme de Bargeton described to Lucien in *Lost Illusions*. The dichotomy between town and country, blurred for half a century by the suburban borderlands, has finally been leveled; now an ambitious young man can “get swiftly into contact” with his intellectual equals, the men and women who will represent the twenty-first century, on social networks. A first-time visitor to the big city can take a detailed, block-by-block preview tour online, using satellite photography. If there is an American wilderness now, it is defined by the dwindling few who lack a high-speed wireless connection to the Internet, an everywhere that negates even the possibility of a there.