

**ALL THAT IS SOLID
MELTS INTO AIR**

MARSHALL BERMAN

In this dazzling book, already widely praised in the USA, Marshall Berman undertakes an affirmative exploration of modern consciousness. The experiences of **modernization** — the dizzying social changes that swept millions of people into the capitalist world — and **modernism** in art, literature and architecture, have never been so well integrated in a single account. Berman's assertion is that certain kinds of response are most appropriate to the permanent revolution of modern life. These are expressed most powerfully in the work of artists engaged with the instability and danger of a world where — in Marx's famous phrase — 'all that is solid melts into air.' Goethe, Marx, Baudelaire, Dostoevsky and Mandelstam are among a myriad of writers invoked here. The centrality of urban experience in these twin processes of modernity ensures that cities themselves, their architects and destroyers, are major actors in the drama. The Paris of Baudelaire and Haussmann, the Petersburg of the Tsarist builders and Pushkin, the New York of devastated wastelands and creative artists — and of Berman himself: the streets themselves are registered, in all their variety and chaos.

Marshall Berman has made a fine contribution to the struggle 'to make ourselves at home in this world, even as the homes we have made, the modern street, the modern spirit, go on melting into air'.

'A visionary work.' *The Village Voice*

'This brilliant and exasperating book invents the last 200 years of Western intellectual history.' *New York Times*

'He writes with a frankness and honesty that I find deeply moving.'
The Nation

'In an extraordinary book . . . Berman attempts to recapture modernity for Marxism. His point is that Marxism has never been about recapturing some mythic golden age of primitive community; it is about the seizure of the immense capacities of technology by and for the masses of people.' *David Edgar*

'This is the sort of book which should be reviewed at a length approximating to a complete issue of the *New Statesman*. It is a bubbling cauldron of ideas.' *The New Statesman*

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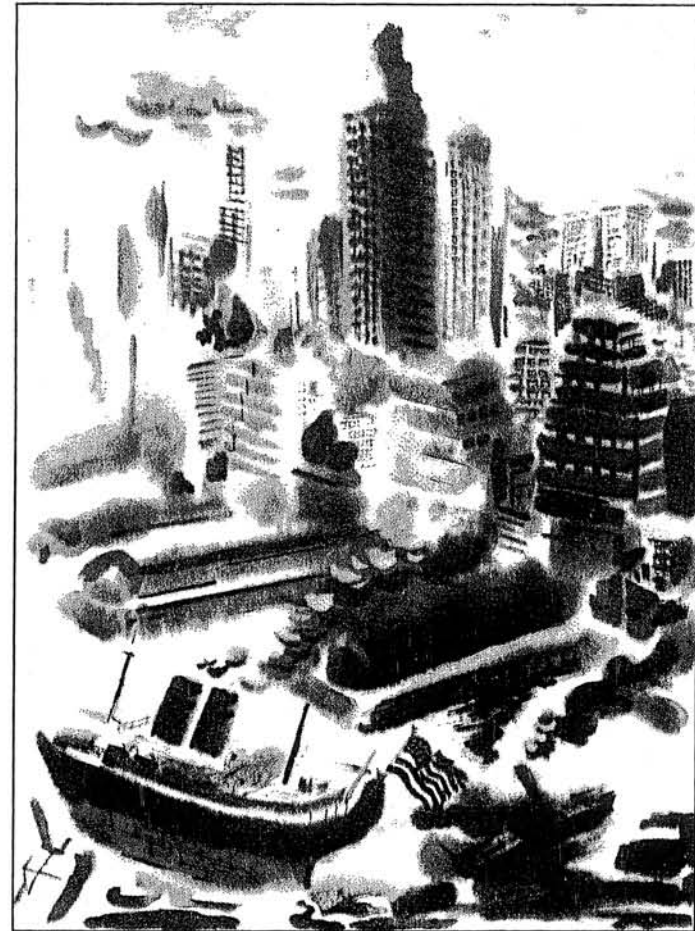
Marshall Berman All That Is Solid Melts Into Air

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An extraordinary book — David Edgar

All That Is Solid Melts Into Air

The Experience Of Modernity



Marshall Berman

moral imagination and courage of these little men surge up suddenly, like the Admiralty's golden needle piercing through the Petersburg fog. In a moment it is gone, swallowed up by dark and murky history; but its vividness and radiance remain to haunt the bleak air.

This trip through the mysteries of St. Petersburg, through its clash and interplay of experiments in modernization from above and below, may provide clues to some of the mysteries of political and spiritual life in the cities of the Third World—in Lagos, Brasilia, New Delhi, Mexico City—today. But the clash and fusion of modernities goes on even in the most fully modernized sectors of today's world; the Petersburg influenza infuses the air of New York, of Milan, of Stockholm, of Tokyo, of Tel Aviv, and it blows on and on. Petersburg's little men, its "state nomads without home," find themselves at home everywhere in the contemporary world.⁶⁹ The Petersburg tradition, as I have presented it, can be uniquely valuable to them. It can provide them with shadow passports into the unreal reality of the modern city. And it can inspire them with visions of symbolic action and interaction that can help them to act as men and citizens there: modes of passionately intense encounter and conflict and dialogue through which they can at once assert themselves and confront each other and challenge the powers that control them all. It can help them to become, as Dostoevsky's Underground Man claimed (and desperately hoped) to be, both personally and politically "more alive" in the elusively shifting light and shadow of the city streets. It is this prospect above all that Petersburg has opened up in modern life.

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In the Forest of Symbols: Some Notes on Modernism in New York

The City of the Captive Globe . . . is the capital of Ego, where science, art, poetry and forms of madness compete under ideal conditions to invent, destroy and restore the world of phenomenal reality.

. . . Manhattan is the product of an unformulated theory, Manhattanism, whose program [is] to exist in a world totally fabricated by man, to live inside fantasy. . . . The entire city became a factory of manmade experience, where the real and natural ceased to exist.

. . . The Grid's two-dimensional discipline creates undreamt-of freedom for three-dimensional anarchy . . . the city can be at the same time ordered and fluid, a metropolis of rigid chaos.

. . . a mythical island where the invention and testing of a metropolitan life-style, and its attendant architecture, could be pursued as a collective experiment . . . a Galapagos Island of new technologies, a new chapter in the survival of the fittest, this time a battle among species of machines. . . .

—Rem Koolhaas, *Delirious New York*

*Out for a walk, after a week in bed,
I find them tearing up part of my block
And, chilled through, dazed and lonely, join the dozen
In meek attitudes, watching the huge crane
Fumble luxuriously in the filth of years. . . .*

*As usual in New York, everything is torn down
Before you have had time to care for it. . . .*

*You would think the simple fact of having lasted
Threatened our cities like mysterious fires.*

—James Merrill, "An Urban Convalescence"

*"You trace out straight lines, fill up the holes and level up the
ground, and the result is nihilism!" (From an angry speech of a great
authority who was presiding on a Commission to report on plans for
extension.)*

*I replied: "Excuse me, but that, properly speaking, is just what our
work should be."*

—Le Corbusier, *The City of Tomorrow*

ONE OF the central themes of this book has been the fate of "all that is solid" in modern life to "melt into air." The innate dynamism of the modern economy, and of the culture that grows from this economy, annihilates everything that it creates—physical environments, social institutions, metaphysical ideas, artistic visions, moral values—in order to create more, to go on endlessly creating the world anew. This drive draws all modern men and women into its orbit, and forces us all to grapple with the question of what is essential, what is meaningful, what is real in the maelstrom in which we move and live. In this final chapter, I want to put myself in the picture, to explore and chart some of the currents that have flowed through my own modern environment, New York City, and given form and energy to my life.

For more than a century, New York has served as a center for international communications. The city has become not merely a theater but itself a production, a multimedia presentation whose audience is the whole world. This has given a special resonance and depth to much of what is done and made here. A great deal of New York's construction and development over the past century needs to be seen as symbolic action and communication: it has

been conceived and executed not merely to serve immediate economic and political needs but, at least equally important, to demonstrate to the whole world what modern men can build and how modern life can be imagined and lived.

Many of the city's most impressive structures were planned specifically as symbolic expressions of modernity: Central Park, the Brooklyn Bridge, the Statue of Liberty, Coney Island, Manhattan's many skyscrapers, Rockefeller Center and much else. Other areas of the city—the harbor, Wall Street, Broadway, the Bowery, the Lower East Side, Greenwich Village, Harlem, Times Square, Madison Avenue—have taken on symbolic weight and force as time went by. The cumulative impact of all this is that the New Yorker finds himself in the midst of a Baudelairean forest of symbols. The presence and profusion of these giant forms make New York a rich and strange place to live in. But they also make it a dangerous place, because its symbols and symbolisms are endlessly fighting each other for sun and light, working to kill each other off, melting each other along with themselves into air. Thus, if New York is a forest of symbols, it is a forest where axes and bulldozers are always at work, and great works constantly crashing down; where pastoral dropouts encounter phantom armies, and *Love's Labour's Lost* interplays with *Macbeth*; where new meanings are forever springing up with, and falling down from, the constructed trees.

I will begin this section with a discussion of Robert Moses, whose career in public life stretched from the early 1910s to the late 1960s, who is probably the greatest creator of symbolic forms in twentieth-century New York, whose constructions had a destructive and disastrous impact on my early life, and whose specter still haunts my city today. Next, I will explore the work of Jane Jacobs and some of her contemporaries, who, locked in combat with Moses, created a radically different order of urban symbolism in the 1960s. Finally, I will delineate some of the symbolic forms and environments that have sprung up in the cities of the 1970s. As I develop a perspective on the urban metamorphoses of the past four decades, I will be painting a picture in which I can locate myself, trying to grasp the modernizations and modernisms that have made me and many of the people around me what we are.

I. Robert Moses: The Expressway World

When you operate in an overbuilt metropolis, you have to hack your way with a meat ax.

I'm just going to keep right on building. You do the best you can to stop it.

—Maxims of Robert Moses

*. . . She it was put me straight
about the city when I said, it
makes me ill to see them run up
a new bridge like that in a few months
and I can't find time even to get
a book written. They have the power,
that's all, she replied. That's what you all
want. If you can't get it, acknowledge
at least what it is. And they're not
going to give it to you.*

—William Carlos Williams, "The Flower"

*What sphinx of cement and aluminum hacked open their skulls
and ate up their brains and imagination? . . .
Moloch whose buildings are judgment!*

—Allen Ginsberg, "Howl"

AMONG THE many images and symbols that New York has contributed to modern culture, one of the most striking in recent years has been an image of modern ruin and devastation. The Bronx, where I grew up, has even become an international code word for our epoch's accumulated urban nightmares: drugs, gangs, arson, murder, terror, thousands of buildings abandoned, neighborhoods transformed into garbage- and brick-strewn wilderness.

The Bronx's dreadful fate is experienced, though probably not understood, by hundreds of thousands of motorists every day, as they negotiate the Cross-Bronx Expressway, which cuts through the borough's center. This road, although jammed with heavy traffic day and night, is fast, deadly fast; speed limits are routinely transgressed, even at the dangerously curved and graded entrance and exit ramps; constant convoys of huge trucks, with grimly aggressive drivers, dominate the sight lines; cars weave wildly in and out among the trucks: it is as if everyone on this road is seized with a desperate, uncontrollable urge to get out of the Bronx as fast as wheels can take him. A glance at the cityscape to the north and south—it is hard to get more than quick glances, because much of the road is below ground level and bounded by brick walls ten feet high—will suggest why: hundreds of boarded-up abandoned buildings and charred and burnt-out hulks of buildings; dozens of blocks covered with nothing at all but shattered bricks and waste.

Ten minutes on this road, an ordeal for anyone, is especially dreadful for people who remember the Bronx as it used to be: who remember these neighborhoods as they once lived and thrived, until this road itself cut through their heart and made the Bronx, above all, a place to get out of. For children of the Bronx like myself, this road bears a load of special irony: as we race through our childhood world, rushing to get out, relieved to see the end in sight, we are not merely spectators but active participants in the process of destruction that tears our hearts. We fight back the tears, and step on the gas.

Robert Moses is the man who made all this possible. When I heard Allen Ginsberg ask at the end of the 1950s, "Who was that sphinx of cement and aluminum," I felt sure at once that, even if the poet didn't know it, Moses was his man. Like Ginsberg's "Moloch, who entered my soul early," Robert Moses and his public works had come into my life just before my Bar Mitzvah, and helped bring my childhood to an end. He had been present all along, in a vague subliminal way. Everything big that got built in or around New York seemed somehow to be his work: the Triborough Bridge, the West Side Highway, dozens of parkways in Westchester and Long Island, Jones and Orchard beaches, innumerable parks, housing developments, Idlewild (now Kennedy) Airport, a network of enormous dams and power plants near Niagara Falls; the list seemed to go on forever. He had gen-

erated an event that had special magic for me: the 1939–40 World's Fair, which I had attended in my mother's womb, and whose elegant logo, the trylon and perisphere, adorned our apartment in many forms—programs, banners, postcards, ashtrays—and symbolized human adventure, progress, faith in the future, all the heroic ideals of the age into which I was born.

But then, in the spring and fall of 1953, Moses began to loom over my life in a new way: he proclaimed that he was about to ram an immense expressway, unprecedented in scale, expense and difficulty of construction, through our neighborhood's heart. At first we couldn't believe it; it seemed to come from another world. First of all, hardly any of us owned cars: the neighborhood itself, and the subways leading downtown, defined the flow of our lives. Besides, even if the city needed the road—or was it the state that needed the road? (in Moses' operations, the location of power and authority was never clear, except for Moses himself)—they surely couldn't mean what the stories seemed to say: that the road would be blasted directly through a dozen solid, settled, densely populated neighborhoods like our own; that something like 60,000 working- and lower-middle-class people, mostly Jews, but with many Italians, Irish and Blacks thrown in, would be thrown out of their homes. The Jews of the Bronx were nonplussed: could a fellow-Jew really want to do this to us? (We had little idea of what kind of Jew he was, or of how much we were all an obstruction in his path.) And even if he did want to do it, we were sure it couldn't happen here, not in America. We were still basking in the afterglow of the New Deal: the government was *our* government, and it would come through to protect us in the end. And yet, before we knew it, steam shovels and bulldozers were there, and people were getting notice that they had better clear out fast. They looked numbly at the wreckers, at the disappearing streets, at each other, and they went. Moses was coming through, and no temporal or spiritual power could block his way.

For ten years, through the late 1950s and early 1960s, the center of the Bronx was pounded and blasted and smashed. My friends and I would stand on the parapet of the Grand Concourse, where 174th Street had been, and survey the work's progress—the immense steam shovels and bulldozers and timber and steel beams, the hundreds of workers in their variously colored hard hats, the giant cranes reaching far above the Bronx's tallest roofs, the dy-

namite blasts and tremors, the wild, jagged crags of rock newly torn, the vistas of devastation stretching for miles to the east and west as far as the eye could see—and marvel to see our ordinary nice neighborhood transformed into sublime, spectacular ruins.

In college, when I discovered Piranesi, I felt instantly at home. Or I would return from the Columbia library to the construction site and feel myself in the midst of the last act of Goethe's *Faust*. (You had to hand it to Moses: his works gave you ideas.) Only there was no humanistic triumph here to offset the destruction. Indeed, when the construction was done, the real ruin of the Bronx had just begun. Miles of streets alongside the road were choked with dust and fumes and deafening noise—most strikingly, the roar of trucks of a size and power that the Bronx had never seen, hauling heavy cargoes through the city, bound for Long Island or New England, for New Jersey and all points south, all through the day and night. Apartment houses that had been settled and stable for twenty years emptied out, often virtually overnight; large and impoverished black and Hispanic families, fleeing even worse slums, were moved in wholesale, often under the auspices of the Welfare Department, which even paid inflated rents, spreading panic and accelerating flight. At the same time, the construction had destroyed many commercial blocks, cut others off from most of their customers and left the storekeepers not only close to bankruptcy but, in their enforced isolation, increasingly vulnerable to crime. The borough's great open market, along Bathgate Avenue, still flourishing in the late 1950s, was decimated; a year after the road came through, what was left went up in smoke. Thus depopulated, economically depleted, emotionally shattered—as bad as the physical damage had been the inner wounds were worse—the Bronx was ripe for all the dreaded spirals of urban blight.

Moses seemed to glory in the devastation. When he was asked, shortly after the Cross-Bronx road's completion, if urban expressways like this didn't pose special human problems, he replied impatiently that "there's very little hardship in the thing. There's a little discomfort and even that is exaggerated." Compared with his earlier, rural and suburban highways, the only difference here was that "There are more houses in the way . . . more people in the way—that's all." He boasted that "When you operate in an over-

built metropolis, you have to hack your way with a meat ax."¹ The subconscious equation here—animals' corpses to be chopped up and eaten, and "people in the way"—is enough to take one's breath away. Had Allen Ginsberg put such metaphors into his Moloch's mouth, he would have never been allowed to get away with it: it would have seemed, simply, too much. Moses' flair for extravagant cruelty, along with his visionary brilliance, obsessive energy and megalomaniac ambition, enabled him to build, over the years, a quasi-mythological reputation. He appeared as the latest in a long line of titanic builders and destroyers, in history and in cultural mythology: Louis XIV, Peter the Great, Baron Haussmann, Joseph Stalin (although fanatically anti-communist, Moses loved to quote the Stalinist maxim "You can't make an omelette without breaking eggs"), Bugsy Siegel (master builder of the mob, creator of Las Vegas), "Kingfish" Huey Long; Marlowe's Tamburlaine, Goethe's Faust, Captain Ahab, Mr. Kurtz, Citizen Kane. Moses did his best to raise himself to gigantic stature, and even came to enjoy his increasing reputation as a monster, which he believed would intimidate the public and keep potential opponents out of the way.

In the end, however—after forty years—the legend he cultivated helped to do him in: it brought him thousands of personal enemies, some eventually as resolute and resourceful as Moses himself, obsessed with him, passionately dedicated to bringing the man and his machines to a stop. In the late 1960s they finally succeeded, and he was stopped and deprived of his power to build. But his works still surround us, and his spirit continues to haunt our public and private lives.

It is easy to dwell endlessly on Moses' personal power and style. But this emphasis tends to obscure one of the primary sources of his vast authority: his ability to convince a mass public that he was the vehicle of impersonal world-historical forces, the moving spirit of modernity. For forty years, he was able to pre-empt the vision of the modern. To oppose his bridges, tunnels, expressways, housing developments, power dams, stadia, cultural centers, was—or so it seemed—to oppose history, progress, modernity itself. And few people, especially in New York, were prepared to do that. "There are people who like things as they are. I can't hold out any hope to them. They have to keep moving further away. This is a great big state, and there are other states. Let them go to the

Rockies."² Moses struck a chord that for more than a century has been vital to the sensibility of New Yorkers: our identification with progress, with renewal and reform, with the perpetual transformation of our world and ourselves—Harold Rosenberg called it "the tradition of the New." How many of the Jews of the Bronx, hotbed of every form of radicalism, were willing to fight for the sanctity of "things as they are"? Moses was destroying our world, yet he seemed to be working in the name of values that we ourselves embraced.

I can remember standing above the construction site for the Cross-Bronx Expressway, weeping for my neighborhood (whose fate I foresaw with nightmarish precision), vowing remembrance and revenge, but also wrestling with some of the troubling ambiguities and contradictions that Moses' work expressed. The Grand Concourse, from whose heights I watched and thought, was our borough's closest thing to a Parisian boulevard. Among its most striking features were rows of large, splendid 1930s apartment houses: simple and clear in their architectural forms, whether geometrically sharp or biomorphically curved; brightly colored in contrasting brick, offset with chrome, beautifully interplayed with large areas of glass; open to light and air, as if to proclaim a good life that was open not just to the elite residents but to us all. The style of these buildings, known as Art Deco today, was called "modern" in their prime. For my parents, who described our family proudly as a "modern" family, the Concourse buildings represented a pinnacle of modernity. We couldn't afford to live in them—though we did live in a small, modest, but still proudly "modern" building, far down the hill—but they could be admired for free, like the rows of glamorous ocean liners in port downtown. (The buildings look like shell-shocked battleships in drydock today, while the ocean liners themselves are all but extinct.)

As I saw one of the loveliest of these buildings being wrecked for the road, I felt a grief that, I can see now, is endemic to modern life. So often the price of ongoing and expanding modernity is the destruction not merely of "traditional" and "pre-modern" institutions and environments but—and here is the real tragedy—of everything most vital and beautiful in the modern world itself. Here in the Bronx, thanks to Robert Moses, the modernity of the urban boulevard was being condemned as obsolete, and blown to pieces, by the modernity of the interstate highway. *Sic transit!* To

be modern turned out to be far more problematical, and more perilous, than I had been taught.

What were the roads that led to the Cross-Bronx Expressway? The public works that Moses organized from the 1920s onward expressed a vision—or rather a series of visions—of what modern life could and should be. I want to articulate the distinctive forms of modernism that Moses defined and realized, to suggest their inner contradictions, their ominous undercurrents—which burst to the surface in the Bronx—and their lasting meaning and value for modern mankind.

Moses' first great achievement, at the end of the 1920s, was the creation of a public space radically different from anything that had existed anywhere before: Jones Beach State Park on Long Island, just beyond the bounds of New York City along the Atlantic. This beach, which opened in the summer of 1929, and recently celebrated its fiftieth anniversary, is so immense that it can easily hold a half million people on a hot Sunday in July without any sense of congestion. Its most striking feature as a landscape is its amazing clarity of space and form: absolutely flat, blindingly white expanses of sand, stretching forth to the horizon in a straight wide band, cut on one side by the clear, pure, endless blue of the sea, and on the other by the boardwalk's sharp unbroken line of brown. The great horizontal sweep of the whole is punctuated by two elegant Art Deco bathhouses of wood, brick and stone, and halfway between them at the park's dead center by a monumental columnar water tower, visible from everywhere, rising up like a skyscraper, evoking the grandeur of the twentieth-century urban forms that this park at once complements and denies. Jones Beach offers a spectacular display of the primary forms of nature—earth, sun, water, sky—but nature here appears with an abstract horizontal purity and a luminous clarity that only culture can create.

We can appreciate Moses' creation even more when we realize (as Caro explains vividly) how much of this space had been swamp and wasteland, inaccessible and unmapped, until Moses got there, and what a spectacular metamorphosis he brought about in barely two years. There is another kind of purity that is crucial to Jones Beach. There is no intrusion of modern business or commerce here: no hotels, casinos, ferris wheels, roller coasters, parachute

jumps, pinball machines, honky-tonks, loudspeakers, hot-dog stands, neon signs; no dirt, random noise or disarray.* Hence, even when Jones Beach is filled with a crowd the size of Pittsburgh, its ambience manages to be remarkably serene. It contrasts radically with Coney Island, only a few miles to the west, whose middle-class constituency it immediately captured on its opening. All the density and intensity, the anarchic noise and motion, the seedy vitality that is expressed in Weegee's photographs and Reginald Marsh's etchings, and celebrated symbolically in Lawrence Ferlinghetti's "A Coney Island of the Mind," is wiped off the map in the visionary landscape of Jones Beach.†

What would a Jones Beach of the mind be like? It would be hard to convey in poetry, or in any sort of symbolic language that depended on dramatic movement and contrast for its impact. But we can see its forms in the diagrammatic paintings of Mondrian, and later in the minimalism of the 1960s, while its color tonalities belong in the great tradition of neoclassical landscape, from Poussin to the young Matisse to Milton Avery. On a sunny day, Jones Beach transports us into the great romance of the Mediterranean, of Apollonian clarity, of perfect light without shadows, cosmic geometry, unbroken perspectives stretching onward toward an infinite horizon. This romance is at least as old as Plato. Its most passionate and influential modern devotee is Le Corbusier. Here, in the same year that Jones Beach opened, just before the Great Crash, he delineates his classic modern dream:

If we compare New York with Istanbul, we may say that the one is a cataclysm, and the other a terrestrial paradise.

New York is exciting and upsetting. So are the Alps; so is a tempest; so is a battle. New York is not beautiful, and if it stimulates our practical activities, it wounds our sense of happiness. . . .

* But American enterprise never gives up. On weekends a continuous procession of small planes cruise just above the shoreline, skywriting or bearing banners to proclaim the glories of various brands of soda or vodka, or roller discos and sex clubs, of local politicians and propositions. Not even Moses has devised ways to zone business and politics out of the sky.

† Coney Island epitomizes what the Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas calls "the culture of congestion." *Delirious New York: A Retrospective Manifesto for Manhattan*, especially 21–65. Koolhaas sees Coney Island as a prototype, a kind of rehearsal, for Manhattan's intensely vertical "city of towers"; compare the radically horizontal sweep of Jones Beach, which is only accentuated by the water tower, the one vertical structure allowed.

A city can overwhelm us with its broken lines; the sky is torn by its ragged outline. Where shall we find repose? . . .

As you go North, the crocketed spires of the cathedrals reflect the agony of the flesh, the poignant dreams of the spirit, hell and purgatory, and forests of pines seen through pale light and cold mist.

Our bodies demand sunshine.

There are certain shapes that cast shadows.³

Le Corbusier wants structures that will bring the fantasy of a serene, horizontal South against the shadowed, turbulent realities of the North. Jones Beach, just beyond the horizon of New York's skyscrapers, is an ideal realization of this romance. It is ironic that, although Moses thrived on perpetual conflict, struggle, *Sturm und Drang*, his first triumph, and the one of which he seems to be proudest half a century later, was a triumph of *luxe, calme et volupté*. Jones Beach is the giant Rosebud of this Citizen Cohen.

Moses' Northern and Southern State parkways, leading from Queens out to Jones Beach and beyond, opened up another dimension of modern pastoral. These gently flowing, artfully landscaped roads, although a little frayed after half a century, are still among the world's most beautiful. But their beauty does not (like that of, say, California's Coast Highway or the Appalachian Trail) emanate from the natural environment around the roads: it springs from the artificially created environment of the roads themselves. Even if these parkways adjoined nothing and led nowhere, they would still constitute an adventure in their own right. This is especially true of the Northern State Parkway, which ran through the country of palatial estates that Scott Fitzgerald had just immortalized in *The Great Gatsby** (1925). Moses' first Long Island roadscapes represent a modern attempt to recreate what Fitzgerald's narrator, on the novel's last page, described as "the old island here that flowered once for Dutch sailors' eyes—a fresh, green breast of the new world." But Moses made this breast avail-

* This generated bitter conflict with the estate owners, and enabled Moses to win a reputation as a champion of the people's right to fresh air, open space and the freedom to move. "It was exciting working for Moses," one of his engineers reminisced half a century later. "He made you feel you were a part of something big. It was you fighting for the people against these rich estate owners and reactionary legislators. . . . It was almost like a war." (Caro, 228, 273) In fact, however, as Caro shows, virtually all the land Moses appropriated consisted of small homes and family farms.

able only through the mediation of that other symbol so dear to Gatsby: the green light. His parkways could be experienced only in cars: their underpasses were purposely built too low for buses to clear them, so that public transit could not bring masses of people out from the city to the beach. This was a distinctively techno-pastoral garden, open only to those who possessed the latest modern machines—this was, remember, the age of the Model T—and a uniquely privatized form of public space. Moses used physical design as a means of social screening, screening out all those without wheels of their own. Moses, who never learned to drive, was becoming Detroit's man in New York. For the great majority of New Yorkers, however, his green new world offered only a red light.

Jones Beach and Moses' first Long Island parkways should be seen in the context of the spectacular growth of leisure activities and industries during the economic boom of the 1920s. These Long Island projects were meant to open up a pastoral world just beyond the city limits, a world made for holidays and play and fun—for those who had the time and the means to step out. The metamorphoses of Moses in the 1930s need to be seen in the light of a great transformation in the meaning of construction itself. During the Great Depression, as private business and industry collapsed, and mass unemployment and desperation increased, construction was transformed from a private into a public enterprise, and into a serious and urgent public imperative. Virtually everything serious that was built in the 1930s—bridges, parks, roads, tunnels, dams—was built with federal money, under the auspices of the great New Deal agencies, the CWA, PWA, CCC, FSA, TVA. These projects were planned around complex and well-articulated social goals. First, they were meant to create business, increase consumption and stimulate the private sector. Second, they would put millions of unemployed people back to work, and help to purchase social peace. Third, they would speed up, concentrate and modernize the economies of the regions in which they were built, from Long Island to Oklahoma. Fourth, they would enlarge the meaning of "the public," and give symbolic demonstrations of how American life could be enriched both materially and spiritually through the medium of public works. Finally, in their use of exciting new technologies, the great New Deal

projects dramatized the promise of a glorious future just emerging over the horizon, a new day not merely for a privileged few but for the people as a whole.

Moses was perhaps the first person in America to grasp the immense possibilities of the Roosevelt administration's commitment to public works; he grasped, too, the extent to which the destiny of American cities was going to be worked out in Washington from this point on. Now holding a joint appointment as City and State Parks Commissioner, he established close and lasting ties with the most energetic and innovative planners of the New Deal bureaucracy. He learned how to free millions of dollars in federal funds in a remarkably short time. Then, hiring a staff of first-rate planners and engineers (mostly from off the unemployment lines), he mobilized a labor army of 80,000 men and went to work with a great crash program to regenerate the city's 1700 parks (even more rundown at the nadir of the Depression than they are today) and create hundreds of new ones, plus hundreds of playgrounds and several zoos. Moses got the job done by the end of 1934. Not only did he display a gift for brilliant administration and execution, he also understood the value of ongoing public work as public spectacle. He carried on the overhauling of Central Park, and the construction of its reservoir and zoo, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week: floodlights shined and jackhammers reverberated all through the night, not only speeding up the work but creating a new showplace that kept the public enthralled.

The workers themselves seem to have been caught up in the enthusiasm: they not only kept up with the relentless pace that Moses and his straw bosses imposed but actually outpaced the bosses, and took initiative, and came up with new ideas, and worked ahead of plans, so that the engineers were repeatedly forced to run back to their desks and redesign the plans to take account of the progress the workers had made on their own.⁴ This is the modern romance of construction at its best—the romance celebrated by Goethe's *Faust*, by Carlyle and Marx, by the constructivists of the 1920s, by the Soviet construction films of the Five-Year Plan period, and the TVA and FSA documentaries and WPA murals of the later 1930s. What gave the romance a special reality and authenticity here is the fact that it inspired the men who were actually doing the work. They seem to have been able to find meaning and excitement in work that was physically grueling

and ill-paying, because they had some vision of the work as a whole, and believed in its value to the community of which they were a part.

The tremendous public acclaim that Moses received for his work on the city's parks served him as a springboard for something that meant far more to him than parks. This was a system of highways, parkways and bridges that would weave the whole metropolitan area together: the elevated West Side Highway, extending the length of Manhattan, and across Moses' new Henry Hudson Bridge, into and through the Bronx, and into Westchester; the Belt Parkway, sweeping around the periphery of Brooklyn, from the East River to the Atlantic, connected to Manhattan through the Brooklyn-Battery Tunnel (Moses would have preferred a bridge), and to the Southern State; and—here was the heart of the system—the Triborough Project, an enormously complex network of bridges and approaches and parkways that would link Manhattan, the Bronx and Westchester with Queens and Long Island.

These projects were incredibly expensive, yet Moses managed to talk Washington into paying for most of them. They were technically brilliant: the Triborough engineering is still a classic text today. They helped, as Moses said, to "weave together the loose strands and frayed edges of the New York metropolitan arterial tapestry," and to give this enormously complex region a unity and coherence it had never had. They created a series of spectacular new visual approaches to the city, displaying the grandeur of Manhattan from many new angles—from the Belt Parkway, the Grand Central, the upper West Side—and nourishing a whole new generation of urban fantasies.* The uptown Hudson riverfront, one of Moses' finest urban landscapes, is especially striking when we realize that (as Caro shows, in pictures) it was a wasteland of hoboes' shacks and garbage dumps before he got there. You cross the George Washington Bridge and dip down and around and

* On the other hand, these projects made a series of drastic and near-fatal incursions into Manhattan's grid. Koolhaas, *Delirious New York*, 15, explains incisively the importance of this system to the New York environment: "The Grid's two-dimensional discipline creates undreamt-of freedom for three-dimensional anarchy. The Grid defines a new balance between control and decontrol. . . . With its imposition, Manhattan is forever immunized against any [further] totalitarian intervention. In the single block—the largest possible area that can fall under architectural control—it develops a maximum unit of urbanistic Ego." It is precisely these urban ego-boundaries that Moses' own ego sought to sweep away.

slide into the gentle curve of the West Side Highway, and the lights and towers of Manhattan flash and glow before you, rising above the lush greenness of Riverside Park, and even the most embittered enemy of Robert Moses—or, for that matter, of New York—will be touched: you know you have come home again, and the city is there for you, and you can thank Moses for that.

At the very end of the 1930s, when Moses was at the height of his creativity, he was canonized in the book that, more than any other, established the canon of the modern movement in architecture, planning and design: Siegfried Giedion's *Space, Time and Architecture*. Giedion's work, first delivered in lecture form at Harvard in 1938–39, unfolded the history of three centuries of modern design and planning—and presented Moses' work as its climax. Giedion presented large photos of the recently completed West Side Highway, the Randall's Island cloverleaf, and the "pretzel" interchange of the Grand Central Parkway. These works, he said, "proved that possibilities of a great scale are inherent in our period." Giedion compared Moses' parkways to cubist paintings, to abstract sculptures and mobiles, and to the movies. "As with many of the creations born out of the spirit of this age, the meaning and beauty of the parkway cannot be grasped from a single point of observation, as was possible from a window of the chateau at Versailles. It can be revealed only by movement, by going along in a steady flow, as the rules of traffic prescribe. The space-time feeling of our period can seldom be felt so keenly as when driving."⁵

Thus Moses' projects marked not only a new phase in the modernization of urban space but a new breakthrough in modernist vision and thought. For Giedion, and for the whole generation of the 1930s—Corbusierian or Bauhaus formalists and technocrats, Marxists, even agrarian neopopulists—these parkways opened up a magical realm, a kind of romantic bower in which modernism and pastoralism could intertwine. Moses seemed to be the one public figure in the world who understood "the space-time conception of our period"; in addition, he had "the energy and enthusiasm of a Haussmann." This made him "uniquely equal, as Haussmann himself had been equal, to the opportunities and needs of the period," and uniquely qualified to build "the city of the future" in our time. Hegel in 1806 had conceived of Napoleon as "the *Weltseele* on horse"; for Giedion in 1939, Moses looked like the *Weltgeist* on wheels.

Moses received a further apotheosis at the 1939–40 New York World's Fair, an immense celebration of modern technology and industry: "Building the World of Tomorrow." Two of the fair's most popular exhibits—the commercially oriented General Motors Futurama and the utopian Democracy—both envisioned elevated urban expressways and arterial parkways connecting city and country, in precisely the forms that Moses had just built. Spectators on their way to and from the fair, as they flowed along Moses' roads and across his bridges, could directly experience something of this visionary future, and see that it seemed to work.*

Moses, in his capacity as Parks Commissioner, had put together the parcel of land on which the fair was being held. With lightning speed, at minimal cost, with his typical fusion of menace and finesse, he had seized from hundreds of owners a piece of land the size of downtown Manhattan. His proudest accomplishment in this affair was to have destroyed the notorious Flushing ash heaps and mounds of garbage that Scott Fitzgerald had immortalized as one of the great modern symbols of industrial and human waste:

a valley of ashes—a fantastic farm where ashes grow like wheat into ridges and hills and grotesque gardens; where ashes take the forms of houses and chimneys and rising smoke and, finally, with a transcendent effort, of men who move dimly and already crumbling through the powdery air. Occasionally a line of gray cars crawls along an invisible track, gives out a ghastly creak, and comes to rest, and immediately the ash-gray men swarm up with leaden spades and stir up an impenetrable cloud, which screens their obscure operations from your sight. [*The Great Gatsby*, Chapter 2]

Moses obliterated this dreadful scene and transformed the site into the nucleus of the fairgrounds, and later of Flushing Meadow Park. This action moved him to a rare effusion of Biblical lyricism:

* Walter Lippmann seems to have been one of the few who saw the long-range implications and hidden costs of this future. "General Motors has spent a small fortune to convince the American public," he wrote, "that if it wishes to enjoy the full benefit of private enterprise in motor manufacturing, it will have to rebuild its cities and its highways by public enterprise." This apt prophecy is quoted by Warren Susman in his fine essay "The People's Fair: Cultural Contradictions of a Consumer Society," included in the Queens Museum's catalogue volume, *Dawn of a New Day: The New York World's Fair, 1939/40* (NYU, 1980), 25. This volume, which includes interesting essays by several hands, and splendid photographs, is the best book on the fair.

he invoked the beautiful passage from Isaiah (61:1–4) in which “the Lord has anointed me to bring good tidings to the afflicted; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those that are bound; . . . to give unto them beauty for ashes . . . [so that] they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations.” Forty years later, in his last interviews, he still pointed to this with special pride: I am the man who destroyed the Valley of Ashes and put beauty in its place. It is on this note—with the fervent faith that modern technology and social organization could create a world without ashes—that the modernism of the 1930s came to an end.

Where did it all go wrong? How did the modern visions of the 1930s turn sour in the process of their realization? The whole story would require far more time to unravel, and far more space to tell, than I have here and now. But we can rephrase these questions in a more limited way that will fit into the orbit of this book: How did Moses—and New York and America—move from the destruction of a Valley of Ashes in 1939 to the development of far more dreadful and intractable modern wastelands a generation later only a few miles away? We need to seek out the shadows within the luminous visions of the 1930s themselves.

The dark side was always there in Moses himself. Here is the testimony of Frances Perkins, America’s first Secretary of Labor under FDR, who worked closely with Moses for many years and admired him all her life. She recalls the people’s heartfelt love for Moses in the early years of the New Deal, when he was building playgrounds in Harlem and on the Lower East Side; however, she was disturbed to discover, “he doesn’t love the people” in return:

It used to shock me because he was doing all these things for the welfare of the people. . . . To him, they were lousy, dirty people, throwing bottles all over Jones Beach. “I’ll get them! I’ll teach them!” He loves the public, but not as people. The public is . . . a great amorphous mass to him; it needs to be bathed, it needs to be aired, it needs recreation, but not for personal reasons—just to make it a better public.⁶

“He loves the public, but not as people”: Dostoevsky warned us repeatedly that the combination of love for “humanity” with

hatred for actual people was one of the fatal hazards of modern politics. During the New Deal period, Moses managed to maintain a precarious balance between the poles and to bring real happiness not only to “the public” he loved but also to the people he loathed. But no one could keep up this balancing act forever. “I’ll get them! I’ll teach them!” The voice here is unmistakably that of Mr. Kurtz: “It was very simple,” Conrad’s narrator says, “and at the end of every idealistic sentiment it blazed at you, luminous and terrifying, like a flash of lightning in a serene sky: ‘Exterminate all the brutes!’” We need to know what was Moses’ equivalent for Mr. Kurtz’s African ivory trade, what historical chances and institutional forces opened up the floodgates of his most dangerous drives: What was the road that led him from the radiance of “give unto them beauty for ashes” to “you have to hack your way with a meat ax” and the darkness that cleft the Bronx?

Part of Moses’ tragedy is that he was not only corrupted but in the end undermined by one of his greatest achievements. This was a triumph that, unlike Moses’ public works, was for the most part invisible: it was only in the late 1950s that investigative reporters began to perceive it. It was the creation of a network of enormous, interlocking “public authorities,” capable of raising virtually unlimited sums of money to build with, and accountable to no executive, legislative or judicial power.⁷

The English institution of a “public authority” had been grafted onto American public administration early in the twentieth century. It was empowered to sell bonds to construct particular public works—e.g., bridges, harbors, railroads. When its project was completed, it would charge tolls for use until its bonds were paid off; at that point it would ordinarily go out of existence and turn its public work over to the state. Moses, however, saw that there was no reason for an authority to limit itself in time or space: so long as money was coming in—say, from tolls on the Triborough Bridge—and so long as the bond market was encouraging, an authority could trade in its old bonds for new ones, to raise more money, to build more works; so long as money (all of it tax-exempt) kept coming in, the banks and institutional investors would be only too glad to underwrite new bond issues, and the authority could go on building forever. Once the initial bonds were paid off, there would be no need to go to the city, state or federal governments, or to the people, for money to build. Moses proved in court

that no government had any legal right even to look into an authority's books. Between the late 1930s and the late 1950s, Moses created or took over a dozen of these authorities—for parks, bridges, highways, tunnels, electric power, urban renewal and more—and integrated them into an immensely powerful machine, a machine with innumerable wheels within wheels, transforming its cogs into millionaires, incorporating thousands of businessmen and politicians into its production line, drawing millions of New Yorkers inexorably into its widening gyre.

Kenneth Burke suggested in the 1930s that whatever we might think of the social value of Standard Oil and U.S. Steel, Rockefeller's and Carnegie's work in creating these giant complexes had to be rated as triumphs of modern art. Moses' network of public authorities clearly belongs in this company. It fulfills one of the earliest dreams of modern science, a dream renewed in many forms of twentieth-century art: to create a system in perpetual motion. But Moses' system, even as it constitutes a triumph of modern art, shares in some of that art's deepest ambiguities. It carries the contradiction between "the public" and the people so far that in the end not even the people at the system's center—not even Moses himself—had the authority to shape the system and control its ever-expanding moves.

If we go back to Giedion's "bible," we will see some of the deeper meanings of Moses' work which Moses himself never really grasped. Giedion saw the Triborough Bridge, the Grand Central Parkway, the West Side Highway, as expressions of "the new form of the city." This form demanded "a different scale from that of the existing city, with its *rues corridors* and rigid divisions into small blocks." The new urban forms could not function freely within the framework of the nineteenth-century city: hence, "It is the actual structure of the city that must be changed." The first imperative was this: "There is no longer any place for the city street; it cannot be permitted to persist." Giedion took on an imperial voice here that was strongly reminiscent of Moses' own. But the destruction of the city streets was, for Giedion, only a beginning: Moses' highways "look ahead to the time when, after the necessary surgery has been performed, the artificially swollen city will be reduced to its natural size."

Leaving aside the quirks in Giedion's own vision (What makes any urban size more "natural" than any other?), we see here how

modernism makes a dramatic new departure: the development of modernity has made the modern city itself old-fashioned, obsolete. True, the people, visions and institutions of the city have created the highway—"To New York . . . must go the credit for the creation of the parkway."⁸ Now, however, by a fateful dialectic, because the city and the highway don't go together, the city must go. Ebenezer Howard and his "Garden City" disciples had been suggesting something like this since the turn of the century (see above, Chapter IV). Moses' historical mission, from the standpoint of this vision, is to have created a new superurban reality that makes the city's obsolescence clear. To cross the Triborough Bridge, for Giedion, is to enter a new "space-time continuum," one that leaves the modern metropolis forever behind. Moses has shown that it is unnecessary to wait for some distant future: we have the technology and the organizational tools to bury the city here and now.

Moses never meant to do this: unlike the "Garden City" thinkers, he genuinely loved New York—in his blind way—and never meant it any harm. His public works, whatever we may think of them, were meant to add something to city life, not to subtract the city itself. He would surely have recoiled at the thought that his 1939 World's Fair, one of the great moments in New York's history, would be the vehicle of a vision which, taken at face value, would spell the city's ruin. But when have world-historical figures ever understood the long-range meaning of their acts and works? In fact, however, Moses' great construction in and around New York in the 1920s and 30s served as a rehearsal for the infinitely greater reconstruction of the whole fabric of America after World War Two. The motive forces in this reconstruction were the multibillion-dollar Federal Highway Program and the vast suburban housing initiatives of the Federal Housing Administration. This new order integrated the whole nation into a unified flow whose lifeblood was the automobile. It conceived of cities principally as obstructions to the flow of traffic, and as junkyards of substandard housing and decaying neighborhoods from which Americans should be given every chance to escape. Thousands of urban neighborhoods were obliterated by this new order; what happened to my Bronx was only the largest and most dramatic instance of something that was happening all over. Three decades of massively capitalized highway construction and FHA suburbanization would serve to draw millions of people and jobs, and billions of

dollars in investment capital, out of America's cities, and plunge these cities into the chronic crisis and chaos that plague their inhabitants today. This wasn't what Moses meant at all; but it was what he inadvertently helped to bring about.*

Moses' projects of the 1950s and 60s had virtually none of the beauty of design and human sensitivity that had distinguished his early works. Drive twenty miles or so on the Northern State Parkway (1920s), then turn around and cover those same twenty miles on the parallel Long Island Expressway (1950s/60s), and wonder and weep. Nearly all he built after the war was built in an indifferently brutal style, made to overawe and overwhelm: monoliths of steel and cement, devoid of vision or nuance or play, sealed off from the surrounding city by great moats of stark empty space, stamped on the landscape with a ferocious contempt for all natural and human life. Now Moses seemed scornfully indifferent to the human quality of what he did: sheer quantity—of moving vehicles, tons of cement, dollars received and spent—seemed to be all that drove him now. There are sad ironies in this, Moses' last, worst phase.

The cruel works that cracked open the Bronx ("more people in the way—that's all") were part of a social process whose dimensions dwarfed even Moses' own megalomaniac will to power. By the 1950s he was no longer building in accord with his own visions; rather, he was fitting enormous blocks into a pre-existing pattern of national reconstruction and social integration that he had not made and could not have substantially changed. Moses at his best had been a true creator of new material and social possibilities. At his worst, he would become not so much a destroyer—though he destroyed plenty—as an executioner of directives and imperatives not his own. He had gained power and glory by opening up new forms and media in which modernity could be experienced as an adventure; he used that power and glory to institutionalize modernity into a system of grim, inexorable necessities and crushing routines. Ironically, he became a focus for mass personal obsession and hatred, including my own, just when he had lost personal

* Moses at least was honest enough to call a meat ax by its real name, to recognize the violence and devastation at the heart of his works. Far more typical of postwar planning is a sensibility like Giedion's, for whom, "after the necessary surgery has been performed, the artificially swollen city will be reduced to its natural size." This genial self-delusion, which assumes that cities can be hacked to pieces without blood or wounds or shrieks of pain, points the way forward to the "surgical precision" bombing of Germany, Japan, and, later, Vietnam.

vision and initiative and become an Organization Man; we came to know him as New York's Captain Ahab at a point when, although still at the wheel, he had lost control of the ship.

The evolution of Moses and his works in the 1950s underscores another important fact about the postwar evolution of culture and society: the radical splitting-off of modernism from modernization. Throughout this book I have tried to show a dialectical interplay between unfolding modernization of the environment—particularly the urban environment—and the development of modernist art and thought. This dialectic, crucial all through the nineteenth century, remained vital to the modernism of the 1920s and 1930s: it is central in Joyce's *Ulysses* and Eliot's *Waste Land* and Doblin's *Berlin, Alexanderplatz* and Mandelstam's *Egyptian Stamp*, in Léger and Tatlin and Eisenstein, in William Carlos Williams and Hart Crane, in the art of John Marin and Joseph Stella and Stuart Davis and Edward Hopper, in the fiction of Henry Roth and Nathanael West. By the 1950s, however, in the wake of Auschwitz and Hiroshima, this process of dialogue had stopped dead.

It is not that culture itself stagnated or regressed: there were plenty of brilliant artists and writers around, working at or near the peak of their powers. The difference is that the modernists of the 1950s drew no energy or inspiration from the modern environment around them. From the triumphs of the abstract expressionists to the radical initiatives of Davis, Mingus and Monk in jazz, to Camus' *The Fall*, Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, Malamud's *The Magic Barrel*, Laing's *The Divided Self*, the most exciting work of this era is marked by radical distance from any shared environment. The environment is not attacked, as it was in so many previous modernisms: it is simply not there.

This absence is dramatized obliquely in what are probably the two richest and deepest novels of the 1950s, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) and Günter Grass's *The Tin Drum* (1959): both these books contained brilliant realizations of spiritual and political life as it had been lived in the cities of the recent past—Harlem and Danzig in the 1930s—but although both writers moved chronologically forward, neither one was able to imagine or engage the present, the life of the postwar cities and societies in which their books came out. This absence itself may be the most striking proof of the spiritual poverty of the new postwar environment. Ironically, that poverty may have actually nourished the development of modern-

ism by forcing artists and thinkers to fall back on their own resources and open up new depths of inner space. At the same time, it subtly ate away at the roots of modernism by sealing off its imaginative life from the everyday modern world in which actual men and women had to move and live.⁹

The split between the modern spirit and the modernized environment was a primary source of anguish and reflection in the later 1950s. As the decade dragged on, imaginative people became increasingly determined not only to understand this great gulf but also, through art and thought and action, to leap across it. This was the desire that animated books as diverse as Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition*, Norman Mailer's *Advertisements for Myself*, Norman O. Brown's *Life Against Death*, and Paul Goodman's *Growing Up Absurd*. It was a consuming but unconsummated obsession shared by two of the most vivid protagonists in the fiction of the late 1950s: Doris Lessing's Anna Wolf, whose notebooks overflowed with unfinished confessions and unpublished manifestos for liberation, and Saul Bellow's Moses Herzog, whose medium was unfinished, unmailed letters to all the great powers of this world.

Eventually, however, the letters did get finished, signed and delivered; new modes of modernist language gradually emerged, at once more personal and more political than the language of the 1950s, in which modern men and women could confront the new physical and social structures that had grown up around them. In this new modernism, the gigantic engines and systems of postwar construction played a central symbolic role. Thus, in Allen Ginsberg's "Howl":

What sphinx of cement and aluminum hacked open their skulls
and ate up their brains and imagination? . . .
Moloch the incomprehensible prison! Moloch the crossbone soul-
less jailhouse and Congress of sorrows! Moloch whose build-
ings are judgment! . . .
Moloch whose eyes are a thousand blind windows! Moloch whose
skyscrapers stand in the long streets like endless Jehovahs!
Moloch whose factories dream and croak in the fog! Moloch
whose smokestacks and antennae crown the cities!
Moloch! Moloch! Robot apartments! invisible suburbs! skeleton
treasuries! blind capitals! demonic industries! spectral nations!
invincible madhouses! granite cocks!
They broke their backs lifting Moloch to Heaven! Pavements,

trees, radios, tons! lifting the city to Heaven which exists and is
everywhere about us! . . .

Moloch who entered my soul early! Moloch in whom I am a
consciousness without a body! Moloch who frightened me out
of my natural ecstasy! Moloch whom I abandon! Wake up in
Moloch! Light streaming out of the sky!

There are many remarkable things happening here. Ginsberg is urging us to experience modern life not as a hollow wasteland but as an epic and tragic battle of giants. This vision endows the modern environment and its makers with a demonic energy and a world-historical stature that probably exceed even what the Robert Moseses of this world would claim for themselves. At the same time, the vision is meant to arouse us, the readers, to make ourselves equally great, to enlarge our desire and moral imagination to the point where we will dare to take on the giants. But we cannot do this until we recognize their desires and powers in ourselves—"Moloch who entered my soul early." Hence Ginsberg develops structures and processes of poetic language—an interplay between luminous flashes and bursts of desperate imagery and a solemn, repetitive, incantatory piling up of line upon line—that recall and rival the skyscrapers, factories and expressways he hates. Ironically, although the poet portrays the expressway world as the death of brains and imagination, his poetic vision brings its underlying intelligence and imaginative force to life—indeed, brings it more fully to life than the builders were ever able to do on their own.

When my friends and I discovered Ginsberg's Moloch, and thought at once of Moses, we were not only crystallizing and mobilizing our hate; we were also giving our enemy the world-historical stature, the dreadful grandeur, that he had always deserved but never received from those who loved him most. They could not bear to look into the nihilistic abyss that his steam shovels and pile drivers opened up; hence they missed his depths. Thus it was only when modernists began to confront the shapes and shadows of the expressway world that it became possible to see that world for all it was.*

Did Moses understand any of this symbolism? It is hard to know.

* For a slightly later version of this confrontation, very different in sensibility but equal in intellectual and visionary power, compare Robert Lowell's "For the Union Dead," published in 1964.

In the rare interviews he gave during the years between his enforced retirement¹⁰ and his death at ninety-two, he could still explode with fury at his detractors, overflow with wit and energy and tremendous schemes, refuse, like Mr. Kurtz, to be counted out ("I'll carry out my ideas yet. . . . I'll show you what can be done. . . . I will return . . . I . . ."). Driven restlessly up and down his Long Island roads in his limousine (one of the few perquisites he has kept from his years of power), he dreamt of a glorious hundred-mile ocean drive to whip the waves, or of the world's longest bridge connecting Long Island with Rhode Island across the Sound.

This old man possessed an undeniable tragic grandeur; but it is not so clear that he ever achieved the self-awareness that is supposed to go with that grandeur. Replying to *The Power Broker*, Moses appealed plaintively to us all: Am I not the man who blotted out the Valley of Ashes and gave mankind beauty in its place? It is true, and we owe him homage for it. And yet, he did not really wipe out the ashes, only moved them to another site. For the ashes are part of us, no matter how straight and smooth we make our beaches and freeways, no matter how fast we drive—or are driven—no matter how far out on Long Island we go.

2.

The 1960s: A Shout in the Street

—History, Stephen said, is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake.

From the playfield the boys raised a shout. A whirring whistle: goal. What if that nightmare gave you a back kick?

—The ways of the Creator are not our ways, Mr. Deasy said. All history moves toward one goal, the manifestation of God.

Stephen jerked his thumb toward the window, saying:

—That is God.

Hooray! Ay! Whrrwhee!

—What? Mr. Deasy asked.

—A shout in the street, Stephen answered.

—James Joyce, *Ulysses*

I am for an art that tells you the time of day, or where such and such a street is. I am for an art that helps old ladies across the street.

—Claes Oldenburg

THE EXPRESSWAY world, the modern environment that emerged after World War Two, would reach a pinnacle of power and self-confidence in the 1960s, in the America of the New Frontier, the Great Society, Apollo on the moon. I have been focusing on Robert Moses as the New York agent and incarnation of that world, but Secretary of Defense McNamara, Admiral Rickover, NASA Director Gilruth, and many others, were fighting similar battles with equal energy and ruthlessness, far beyond the Hudson, and indeed beyond the planet Earth. The developers and devotees of the expressway world presented it as the only possible modern world: to oppose them and their works was to oppose modernity itself, to fight history and progress, to be a Luddite, an escapist, afraid of life and adventure and change and growth. This strategy was effective because, in fact, the vast majority of modern men and women do not want to resist modernity: they feel its excitement and believe in its promise, even when they find themselves in its way.

Before the Molochs of the modern world could be effectively fought, it would be necessary to develop a modernist vocabulary of opposition. This is what Stendhal, Buechner, Marx and Engels, Kierkegaard, Baudelaire, Dostoevsky, Nietzsche, were doing a century ago; it is what Joyce and Eliot, the dadaists and surrealists, Kafka, Zamyatin, Babel and Mandelstam, were doing earlier in our century. However, because the modern economy has an infinite capacity for redevelopment and self-transformation, the modernist imagination, too, must reorient and renew itself again and again. One of the crucial tasks for modernists in the 1960s was to confront the expressway world; another was to show that this was not the only possible modern world, that there were other, better directions in which the modern spirit could move.

I invoked Allen Ginsberg's "Howl" at the end of the last chapter

Jewish soldier, whose great-grandchildren might well have followed that specter to haunt Karlinsky in his class.)

V. IN THE FOREST OF SYMBOLS

1. These statements are quoted by Robert Caro in his monumental study, *The Power Broker: Robert Moses and the Fall of New York* (Knopf, 1974), 849, 876. The "meat ax" passage is from Moses' memoir, *Public Works: A Dangerous Trade* (McGraw-Hill, 1970). Moses' appraisal of the Cross-Bronx Expressway occurs in an interview with Caro. *The Power Broker* is the main source for my narrative of Moses' career. See also my article on Caro and Moses, "Buildings Are Judgment: Robert Moses and the Romance of Construction," *Ramparts*, March 1975, and a further symposium in the June issue.
2. Speech to the Long Island Real Estate Board, 1927, quoted in Caro, 275.
3. *The City of Tomorrow*, 64–66. See Koolhaas, 199–223, on Le Corbusier and New York.
4. For details of this episode, Caro, 368–72.
5. *Space, Time and Architecture*, 823–32.
6. Frances Perkins, Oral History Reminiscences (Columbia University Collection), quoted in Caro, 318.
7. A definitive analysis of public authorities in America can be found in Annemarie Walsh, *The Public's Business: The Politics and Practices of Government Corporations* (MIT, 1978), especially Chapters 1, 2, 8, 11, 12. Walsh's book contains much fascinating material on Moses, but she places his work in a broad institutional and social context that Caro tends to leave out. Robert Fitch, in a perceptive 1976 essay, "Planning New York," tries to deduce all Moses' activities from the fifty-year agenda that was established by the financiers and officials of the Regional Plan Association; it appears in Roger Alcaly and David Mermelstein, editors, *The Fiscal Crisis of American Cities* (Random House, 1977), 247–84.
8. *Space, Time and Architecture*, 831–32.
9. On the problems and paradoxes of that period, the best recent discussion is Morris Dickstein's essay "The Cold War Blues," which appears as Chapter 2 in his *Gates of Eden*. For interesting polemic on the 1950s, see Hilton Kramer's attack on Dickstein, "Trashing the Fifties," in the *New York Times Book Review*, 10 April 1977, and Dickstein's reply in the issue of 12 June.
10. A detailed account of this affair can be found in Caro, 1132–44.
11. *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (Random House and Vintage, 1961). The passages that follow are from pages 50–54. For interesting critical discussion of Jacobs' vision, see, for instance, Herbert Gans, "City Planning and Urban Realities," *Commentary*, February 1962; Lewis Mumford, "Mother Jacobs' Home Remedies for Urban Cancer," *The New Yorker*, 1 December 1962, reprinted in *The Urban Prospect* (Harcourt, 1966); and Roger Starr, *The Living End: The City and Its Critics* (Coward-McCann, 1966).
12. Quoted in Barbara Rose, *Claes Oldenburg* (MOMA/New York Graphic Society, 1970), 25, 33.
13. Note to *The Street* exhibition, quoted in Rose, 46.
14. Statement for the catalogue of his "Environments, Situations, Spaces" exhibition, 1961, quoted in Rose, 190–91. This statement, a marvelous fusion of Whitman with dada, is also reprinted in Russell and Gablik, *Pop Art Redefined*, 97–99.
15. Quoted in Caro, 876.
16. In *Blindness and Insight*, 147–48.

17. *Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* (Knopf, 1976; Vintage, 1977). The themes of this book are further developed, with more historical sweep but less personal intensity, in a sort of sequel, *China Men* (Knopf, 1980).
18. A script of *Rumstick Road* is reprinted, along with directorial notes by Elizabeth LeCompte and a few dim photographs, in *Performing Arts Journal*, 111, 2 (Fall 1978). *The Drama Review* #81 (March 1979) offers notes on all three plays by Gray and James Bierman, along with excellent photographs.
19. Untitled Proposals, 1971–72, in *The Writings of Robert Smithson: Essays and Illustrations*, edited by Nancy Holt (NYU, 1979), 220–21. For Smithson's urban visions, see his essays "Ultra-Moderne," "A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey," and "Frederick Law Olmsted and the Dialectical Landscape," all in this volume.
20. See the volume *Devastation/Resurrection: The South Bronx*, prepared by the Bronx Museum of the Arts in the winter of 1979–80. This volume gives an excellent account both of the dynamics of urbicide and of the beginnings of reconstruction.
21. See Carter Ratcliff, "Ferrer's Sun and Shade," in *Art in America* (March 1980), 80–86, for a perceptive discussion of this piece. But Ratcliff does not notice that, intertwined with the dialectics of Ferrer's work, this work's site—Fox Street in the South Bronx—has an inner dialectic of its own.
22. For a brief discussion, see Introduction, note 24.
23. *Growing Up Absurd: Problems of Youth in Organized Society* (Random House, 1960), 230.
24. *Paracriticisms: Seven Speculations of the Times*, 40.