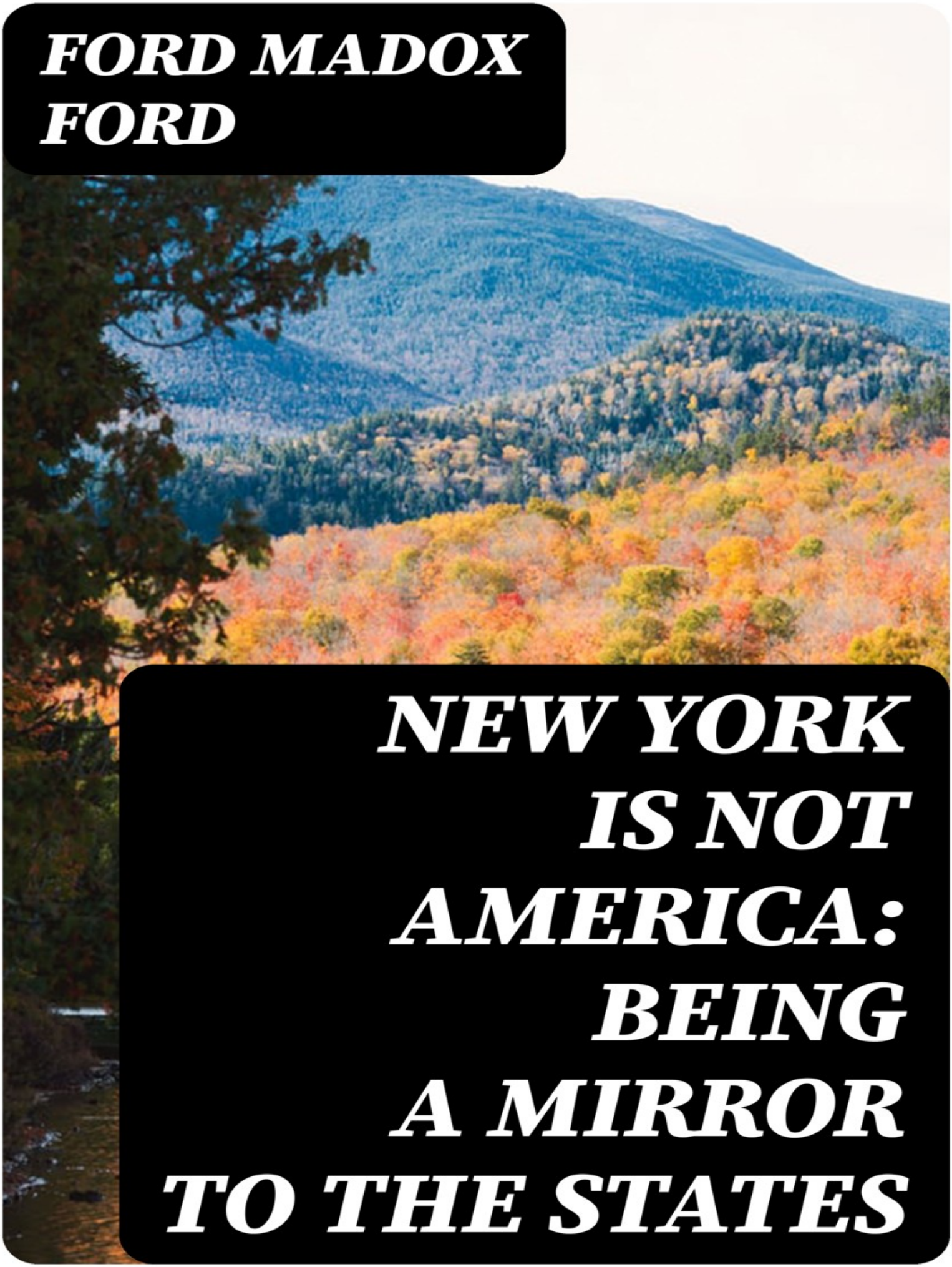
FORD MADOX FORD



NEW YORK IS NOT AMERICA: BEING A MIRROR TO THE STATES

Ford Madox Ford

New York is Not America: Being a Mirror to the States

EAN 8596547186625

DigiCat, 2022
Contact: DigiCat@okpublishing.info

Table of Contents

AUTHOR'S ADVERTISEMENT

Table of Contents

I BEG—I beg—I *beg*—the reader of the pages that follow not to imagine that their author is that ludicrous and offensive being, the superior European, or the superior Briton who patronizes American peoples and institutions as if they were children or the products of childish minds. He is, I assure you, this Author, so instinct with the sense of the equality of all human beings—that sense of their equality is to such an extent an instinct with him that he takes all humanity very seriously—and pleasantly. Humbly even, if he does not happen to know them well. For, if he knows them well or, still more, if he is fond of them, he is apt between loving speeches to make fun of them—but if he does not know them well he is apt to be afraid of them. Nay, more, he is dead certain to be afraid of them.

So, loving New York next to Provence, better than any other place, he lets himself go and writes of her as he would talk to his mother or his mistress, being very fond of them. (I am bound to say that at times he will singularly irritate those gentle creatures. But he does not mean to. His heart is in the right place be his tongue never so cheerful.) But knowing nothing at all of America (*What* is America; *who* is the true American?—the Westerner? the Easterner? the Middle Westerner? the Kansan? the Virginia Gentleman? the Harvard Graduate? . . . Answer somebody!) . . . Knowing, then, nothing at all of America except that the New Yorker whom he loves is no American this author is singularly

afraid of all America and all Americans. He ventures outside the charmed circle of Gotham with the timorous sensation of one inserting his toe into the sea in order to test its temperature. It is not that he fears the terrible gunmen—for he believes them to be the admirable fairy tales of a press splendidly equipped to entertain its patrons. He himself never saw a gunman nor any one who had ever seen a gunman; he himself has never come across a crime or a trace of crime in the whole United States, except for certain crimes committed, mostly in basements, by himself and confederates. No, it is not even the almost more terrible police, not even the acts of Volstead or Man, that make him afraid of America: it is just the dread of the unknown . . . of the unknown, that is, according to all Americans, the Unknowable. It is the feeling that overwhelms the small child when he stands with fingers on the door of a great drawing-room that is full, full, full of adult and ironic strangers. . . .

So this author, professing to know New York, professes no knowledge at all of America. And he professes to know New York only just as one knows London or Paris—or England or France: one's little patch of each. He knows, that is to say, how to live automatically and at ease, pretty well anywhere between the Battery and the further end of Central Park—without asking for directions or for information as to where to purchase postage stamps or socks or where to dine; he can live there without the remotest feeling of strangeness, perfectly himself. That is perhaps all that the phrase "knowing the city" can be stretched to imply.

You say “So and So knows his Paris” but it is only *his* Paris that he knows—for when it comes to knowledge he does not even know his own soul.

To this sort of ability of living within a city as easily as you can live within your own old clothes you must add affection—for to live in a city and hate it will never give you the right to say that you “know” it . . . or to call it “yours.”

That right this author claims—the right to write of “*my* Gotham”: he *has* his image of the great, easy, tolerant, glamorous place.

You may complain that that image is not yours: that cannot be helped. You did not pay your money—you were certainly not asked to—to read your own deductions from statistics and newspaper columns. You can make those for yourself. This author reads no statistics and very few newspapers—and no books on the subject written by other, informative writers. He moons about the places that he likes, writing usually stuff of some sort or other about subjects quite different. Then he writes the résumé of his mental adventures.

You will say that this is mere autobiography. Well, it is mere autobiography—of an angle of a human being. . . . But think how much richer the world would be for the autobiography of such an angle of Shakespeare’s being in, say, Denmark, when he was a strolling player; or of Dante at Oxford—or of Chateaubriand in America. So for such books there may be a place.

There is another side to it. This author has spent his life—such portions of it as he has devoted to the public service—in unceasingly pointing out the sameness of humanity in all

nations and down all the ages. Here he is at it again. That is the only sane Internationalism. If one-tenth of the sums spent on diplomacy or international leagues were spent on saying: “Here we are; we are just all merely poor humanity making our voyage upon a spinning planet that is whirling to its doom somewhere in space,” there would be no more international misunderstandings; for sure there would be no more war.

If a man from, say, Avignon could be got to say to all Chicago, and a man from Chicago to say to all Avignon: “We are exactly the same food for crows. If sudden death should strike down your or my little daughter should we not feel it alike? If smut should destroy our wheat, murrain our beasts, bankruptcy our trades shall we not feel it alike? Have we not the same joys; the same hopes; identical causes for despair? Then in the name of God, why should we bicker? . . . Let our ambassadors be our books. Could you kill a Jew just after reading the lament of Saul for Absalom or an American just after reading ”*When lilacs last in the doorway bloomed. . . .*“ I do not believe it. . . . If members of nations could be got so to speak to strange nations there would be no need for Geneva.%

It is in the hope that a few more souls can be got to share this belief that this author has written this book. If that is accomplished he will have done the state some service.

Just before writing the above I had watched the great black, light-pierced hill that towers above the Battery and the North River Piers withdraw little by little. Little roads on the slope were indicated by chains of lamps; high on the left

towered the lit windows of a cathedral, ablaze on the black background. . . . One is never certain that one will return . . . not *certain*.

It is not decent to describe for an Anglo-Saxon audience the emotions that one feels at such thoughts as that it is not certain that one will ever return. One day I will do it in French—and be sure that it will be a lament; if it is well done it will be a very soul-searching lament.

The ship, moved and moved, nuzzled and pulled at by tugs as bread on water is beset by small fish. In the river there was a mist of which we were insensible because of the blackness of the February night. The lights became astonishingly fewer; we looked ahead to see what there was where we were heading to. . . . When we looked back there was only blackness: not even the reflection of pier-lamps on the water, so little power have electric rays to pierce mist. There was no more Gotham.

Off Nantucket, 24th Feb., 1927.

To JEANNE M. FOSTER

Table of Contents

My Dear Jeanne:

Here I am back after all, just in time to dedicate this New York edition to the kindest of New Yorkers.

Yours gratefully and with affection,

F. M. F.

New York, Oct. 25th, 1927.

NEW YORK IS NOT AMERICA

NEW YORK IS NOT AMERICA

CHAPTER I

Table of Contents

TRAVELERS’ TALES

A year or so ago when I was coming over here on the *Paris* there was a great storm. There was so great a storm that only fifteen of us attended breakfast. In consequence, there seated herself beside me a lady of a certain age whom I had not before noticed. She remarked to me suddenly—this sort of thing happens only to travelers—she remarked to me, then, suddenly with an organ more singularly nasal than any I have hitherto had the good fortune to encounter:

“You kehn’t flirt with Amur’can gels as you ken with English ones. But if she falls in love with you . . . *look aout*.”

That was all she said, and it is all that I can remember of her, save that she was large, florid, and alarming. And the assault was so unprovoked—for there certainly wasn’t any she to whom the message could apply—it was all so singular in that reeling ship that she remains to me as something supernatural.

If there were here any female figure equivalent to that of our Britannia on the pennies, and if the voice had not been so singularly nasal that the suspicion would be insulting, I should have imagined that the Genius of the land which we were approaching had manifested itself, and that She—right or wrong—felt sufficiently interested in my unworthy self to afford me that warning.

Anyhow, it warned me. For the whole of that visit I walked the streets with my eyes glued to the pavement, for, had I chanced to have had handed to me, as we say, a glad eye, how mightn't I have had to look out!

I was going somewhat later on the train to somewhere near Danbury. There sat opposite me—I always like riding with my back to the engine—a young woman, masculine in most of the attributes of her attire; that is to say, she wore leather leggings and knee breeches. I looked no higher. Now, although I have been in this country quite often, I had never been in an American slow train before; and although I was quite aware that the *tempo* of New York is the slowest of any of the great cities of the world, I still harbored the superstition that once you were outside New York things might begin to rush.

Well, that train took hours. Hours and hours and hours. We have a very ancient story as regards our own Southeastern line that once a traveler asked a guard of a train why it had stopped. The guard said there was a cow on the line. An hour afterwards, the train stopping once more, the traveler asked the guard the same question. He received the same reply. On his remarking that there seemed to be a good many cows on the Southeastern, he was told that it was the same cow. Well, my progress to Danbury was like that. I grew so alarmed, so certain that we must have passed Danbury, that we must be approaching Portland, Maine, or even Halifax, Nova Scotia—I grew so alarmed that the one fear outweighed the other, and I asked the young woman—she was really quite plumply feminine

and agreeable—whether we hadn't passed Danbury. She said with animation:

"Oh, why *didn't* you speak to me before? It would have been so much more amusing."

She gave me all the information about railways that it is usual to give a stranger who is traveling for the first time in your country. She told me, I mean, that here trains run upon steel rails, being drawn by locomotives whose propelling-force is steam, that before entering a train you purchase a ticket, that iced water is supplied upon American trains, and that you can have paper cups for nothing—this showing a very high state of civilization. Then she told me that she was going to Kent County Reservation in Connecticut to catch rattlesnakes for the Bronx Park Zoo.

And what is more it was true. Now neither of those things would ever happen to you if you happened to be American and in your own country. But singular oddities have always presented themselves to me whenever I have traveled here. I don't mean to say that odd things ever happen so long as I bide put in New York, between, that is to say, the Battery and Eighty-fifth Street; nothing odd ever happens or presents itself to me, and I enjoy a relative immunity in Brooklyn or Hoboken; but let me once leave that, as it were home circle, to go into America . . . well, I will tell you how I went to Coney Island.

I wanted to take a Brooklyn rapid-transit line that had lately joined up with the Manhattan Beach Company. I paid the car fare, the statutory five cents. This was more than twenty years ago! At a given point in that journey a uniformed attendant remarked to me, "You hevn't paid your

fare.” I said, “I hev.” He said, “You hevn’t,” so I paid him another five cents. Shortly afterwards a uniformed policeman came along and remarked, “You hevn’t paid your fare.” I said, “I hev.” He said, “You hevn’t,” so he took me by the collar and threw me off the car. The train proceeded, and I observed that it charged into a crowd of mornamillion people. They, standing on the bridge over the river, were mostly precipitated into the stream.

By that time I was slightly discouraged as to my chances of getting to Coney Island by land. I went by water. On the boat I had nothing to smoke. I descended to the bar and asked a white-coated attendant for cigarettes. He said, “What sort of cigarettes?” I said, “What sort of cigarettes do you keep?” He said, “We don’t keep ’em. We sell ’em.” I said, “What sort of cigarettes have you got, anyhow?” He said, “We h’ain’t got no cigarettes, but we carry a fine juicy line of Colorado stogies.” I said, “Where do you carry them to?” and he said, “It’s up to me now.”

That would not have happened to you, neither would what followed. When I arrived at Coney Island I sought a dancing hall where, so I had been told, the entire population of the United States could dance in comfort, and with pleasure. (One does get told things like that when one is a traveler.) In the center of the otherwise completely empty ballroom a gentleman was slowly turning round, both his arms extended, and in each hand was a six-shooter, which he was discharging.

Now it is only to the traveler, by preference to the traveler who is not unlikely to write a book, that the gods

vouchsafe such terrible joys. I should have said to myself at that date that nothing could have been more unlikely than that I should write a book about this city. My former visits here have always been either for sheer pleasure or on business, quite unconnected with my own writing; and were that not the case I should hesitate now, however hard I might have been pressed, to record my impressions of the city where people work by the forty-three or more, one on top of the other. For I have always found that if I went to a place on purpose to look at it I could either not write about it at all or only write about it quite badly. My job in life as I have conceived it has always been to record as passionlessly as possible my impressions of my own times and the places in which I have worked. And to say that I have worked in a city is practically the same thing as to say that I have at least liked it, for I have seldom been under the necessity of staying in a place that I did not like and in which I did not feel at home.

So I have always felt that my impressions were happiest when I merely glanced aside from something I was doing. Thus, Carcassonne has for me an extraordinary life because I wrote practically the whole of a book there—and indeed I have written a great many books in the south of France, and that is perhaps why I so much love the *Midi*, whereas places like Rouen or Tours or even Salem, Massachusetts, which I have visited avowedly merely to look at them, have left on my mind either very little impression at all or else impressions of a disagreeable kind. This is perhaps because the mere job of getting to places is disturbing, or perhaps because I dislike being the stranger anywhere. Thus Salem,

to which I went on land and over water from Newport, R. I., comes back to me as a memory almost of detestation. It is possible that Gloucester, Massachusetts, which comes back to me as a memory relatively delightful, may be responsible for my dislike of Salem. That is to say that on the morning we went to Salem we were entertained by hospitable customs-house officers on board their launch—we were entertained with large quantities of raw salt fish which called for the consumption of almost larger quantities of their admirable champagne. Now if you consume large quantities of salt cod and champagne—I don't say there weren't also some crackers, but I don't remember them—if you consume large quantities of such comestibles on a steam launch between seven and ten in the morning, and if at half-past two of the same day after spending four and a half hours in the slowest, most dusty and dilapidated trains the world has ever seen—if after all this you arrive lunchless and with no prospect of lunch or even of a nice, hot cup of tea, at a beauty spot, the probability is that you will dislike that beauty spot almost more than you will dislike places which are called hells on earth. So it was with me and Salem. That journey comes back to me as a memory of intense depression and disgust. For the matter of that, it does not come back to me at all. I can only remember stopping off in atrociously hot weather at a place called Kingston-on-Thames, a railway junction, that was crammed with particularly nauseating French-Canadians. Kingston, as I remember it, consisted of one single shack, like an army hut, which proclaimed itself to be The Star and Garter Restaurant. The Thames was a trickle of yellow water

between thirty-foot mud-banks. On our pushing open the gauze doors of The Star and Garter a long table revealed itself as covered with what appeared to be coal-black linoleum. But it wasn’t. That linoleum rose and dissolved into millions of flies. So at half-past two we came to Salem.

Now all over such parts of the United States as I had already visited I had heard rapturous tales of the ancient beauties, of the marvelous old-fashioned hostelry, of the marvelous old-fashioned host of the inn at Salem. Alas, the most unpleasant place in England is called Ancoats, a soot-begrimed, coal-getting, cotton-spinning suburb of Manchester. Well, Salem intimately resembled Ancoats. It was black with soot and over it the skies wept sable tears. The entrance to the inn was a black staircase ascending between two shops selling things that I can’t remember. But they were nasty things. The anteroom of the hotel resembled the most unpleasing of provincial railway-station waiting rooms, nor was there in it any single thing upon which to sit. Behind a counter snored an enormous man, his face covered by an unpleasant-looking handkerchief. We had to wake him to ask if we could have any lunch. He said, “Nope.” We asked him if we could go to our rooms. He said, “Nope.” We asked him if there was anywhere where we could sit down. He said, “Nope.” He was the courtly old-fashioned host.

I may as well remark here that this is the most unpleasant thing I shall say about this country, where, generally, my lines have fallen in pleasant places. Moreover, I am writing about a time, nearly a quarter of a century ago, when American conditions, and particularly American rural

conditions, were undoubtedly much rougher than is to-day the case. And I am also attempting to indicate rather how a book written by a foreigner visiting a foreign land should not be written than attempting to make any generalized point out of the oddities that I have recorded. It is obvious, I mean, that if one is about to visit a national shrine for purposes of observation one should not first fill oneself up with raw salt cod and champagne. Nothing could withstand those depressants. Not even Stratford-on-Avon. Or Chartres.

For myself, the first natural gasp of emotion at the sight of the buildings behind the Battery or of the houses on the cliffs of Boulogne once over, I set myself to exhaust international similarities before beginning on the differences. That is perhaps partly a product of contrariety—of that spirit that the French call *ergoteur*—but it is at least self-consciously due to a profound feeling that those globe-trotters who are volubly outraged because it is difficult to find drinking water in Madrid or because hotels in the United States do not have your boots cleaned for you unless you ask for it—that such unthinking idiots do an immense amount of international harm. One must take into account that Madrid is situated in a country of great aridity and that labor in New York is relatively expensive before starting to cackle in the streets of either capital—and how much more before setting out to record one’s impressions.

It is a curious fact that although we all look for instances confirmatory of the saying that there is no new thing under the sun, we are almost pained if we discover that our neighbor across the nearest frontier has not the habits and

point of view of a Choctaw savage. We love it when we discover that the ancient Egyptians in their temples at Memphis had penny-in-the-slot machines that delivered perfume after the insertion of an obol, and enormous delight rewards us when we find in reading Bion or Moschus that the emotions of two women, one holding a baby, and both crushed in a crowd of sightseers watching a procession—that their emotions, gossip, and even their ejaculations are precisely the same as would be those of any two women with a baby watching a procession from the pavements of Broadway two thousand years later. But we are filled with disgust if the first Frenchman we see in a Paris restaurant does not eat his peas with a knife, or the first Englishman we see in Smithfield is not selling his wife with a halter around her neck. For why should we travel if we cannot discover our neighbors to be infinitely inferior to ourselves? Why, indeed?

For myself, having spent a great portion of my life in lands other than that of my birth and a great portion of my time in the study of historical documents, I am inclined to regard international or chronological differences as so slight as to be negligible or so changing as to cause an endless confusion. The inhabitants of the south of France in the thirteenth century spent the greater part of their days in baths or on other methods of perfuming and ablution. On the other hand, Brillat-Savarin, during the early decades of the last century, complained bitterly of the unpleasant smell of the inhabitants of New York, since in those days New Yorkers never bathed themselves and, indeed, the city did not then contain one fixed bath. So that how a traveler’s

book should be written I don’t really know; I should never myself think of writing one. The results of migratory observation are so bewildering. The other day at a party an English newspaper correspondent was bewailing the fact that the passengers in New York public conveyances were grossly rough and brutal. He said that, traveling frequently with his wife on subways or in omnibuses, he had been disgusted by finding that if two vacant seats were separated by a third which was already occupied, the occupant of the third seat would never take the trouble to move so that my friend and his wife could sit together. He said that in England, on the other hand, this would always be done. He was interrupted by an American newspaper correspondent who stated that, having spent ten years in London and traveling frequently, he, too, with his wife by bus or tram, he had never once known the occupant of a seat that was between two vacant seats to make room so that a couple could sit together. At the same time I was experiencing an uneasy sensation. In the lounge of an hotel the day before, I had been occupying the middle one of three armchairs when two attractive young ladies came in together and sat one on each side of me. My natural impulse was to offer my place to the one or the other, and had they been elderly or unattractive I should certainly have done so. But I have lived for so long in France, where to offer your seat in a public conveyance to a lady below the age of sixty is apt to be regarded as an attempt to scrape acquaintance, that I refrained from that small act of politeness. What, then, are we to make of these divergent constatations? And, if those two young ladies were English, what did they think of

American manners? There is no end to the way in which one is contradicted the moment one attempts any of these generalizations.

Last month I ventured into New England and, arrived at Boston, I delivered a harangue on the superior culture of the inhabitants of France. I said that if you talked to any French tram conductor you would find that he read books, took an interest in literature, and had very interesting views of life. That same afternoon I went by a slow train to a remote part of the state of Massachusetts. The conductor of the train was a benevolent individual, like a kindly, elderly English butler, except that I have never seen an English butler wearing silver-rimmed spectacles. He chatted in a fatherly manner with all the passengers, patted myself on the back, and appeared in every way like an English village patriarch upon an English village green. I almost saw a ghostly smock-frock draping his limbs.

Now one young man of that carload read sedulously in a magazine, and the conductor halted before him shortly after we had passed Fitchburg. The conductor asked the engrossed young man where he was getting off, and the engrossed young man answered that he was going to Fitchburg. The conductor said that he sure wasn’t; that just as bees made honey for other folk to eat, so that young man’s father had cooked his son’s Sunday goose and others would consume it; that the reading of love stories in magazines was an engrossing pursuit but should not be indulged in when one had urgent business on hand. The assistant conductor declared that he had six times