

an essential art for the discerning bar loner who doesn't necessarily wish to be alone all night. One evening, confronted by a bore who asked, "How are you?" Britchky replied, "Exactly the same." The bore carried on, "But how *are* you?" "Funny you should ask," said Britchky. "Why's that?" "That's all," Britchky replied. "Just funny you should ask."

Christopher Hitchens, in an appreciative piece about the restaurant, wrote Britchky into the fabric of the Loup. Martin Amis considered Britchky a fine writer; many did. Yet Britchky found writing impossibly difficult, perfectionist that he was. In later life, he wanted to talk and to eat, not to write about eating and talking. Still, Britchky wasn't another Joe Gould, the Greenwich Village bohemian in Joseph Mitchell's immortal story about a man who said he was a writer but never wrote a damned word and who inspired the worst case of writer's block known in New York: in Mitchell himself, who wrote nothing after "Joe Gould's Secret." (The story appears in *Up in the Old Hotel*, a collection of Mitchell's pieces for *The New Yorker*.)

Britchky lived alone in a rent-controlled apartment in the Village. In the 1990s he made a living gambling on the horses. He could be abrasive and had fallen out, at some point, with almost everyone he knew. The last time I saw Britchky, I went up to say hello. "Just fuck off," he said. I retreated to the opposite end of the bar.

Some weeks ago, I was at the bar at the Loup and heard some Britchky news. After his death, the city authorities were informed, as you'd expect, and some time later a letter arrived from the Town Hall. The authorities, so this letter said, had combed their files, yet had found no record indicating the existence in New York of anyone by the name of Seymour Britchky.

On the subway journey north later that that night, I thought about the phantom known as Britchky and how had he survived in New York for as long as he did; and I wondered, also, how many other phantoms live in this city, invisible to authority, yet always a presence, even after death, at a favorite bar.

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**From:** Inigo Thomas

**Subject:** Walking

Posted Wednesday, Feb. 2, 2005, at 3:38 AM PT

Willem de Kooning, the Abstract Expressionist painter and Dutch-born New Yorker, whose *Woman I* at the Museum of Modern Art is the most disturbing depiction of the female form ever painted, was a night walker. Prone to depressions, as Mark Stevens and Annalyn Swan's recent biography *De Kooning: An American Master* relays, the painter would attempt to walk off his gloom, heading south to Battery Park from his studio in Chelsea, sometimes in the company of his friend the painter Arshile Gorky, often alone.

Depression is hardly an exclusively bohemian phenomenon, though many bohemians were, and are, depressed. Nor is walking, by day or at night, a bohemian trait, though many bohemian-minded people have been great walkers, and New York, like all great cities, lends itself to walking. You could spend a week walking in New York, a city where some never cease to walk, and never believe you'd walked enough. What drew Joseph Mitchell to Joe Gould in 1942 wasn't his bohemianism: Gould, as Mitchell wrote, was "an example of a type of eccentric widespread in New York City, the solitary nocturnal wanderer." These wandering types are now hard to spy—possibly because the boundaries and differences between districts are now more blurred, and as neighborhood become less distinct so, too, do

their inhabitants. Yet the nocturnal walkers are no less present, if also less visible. I know more than one person who walks through New York by night, never aimlessly and yet without what you could say was a destination.

I've never walked round the island of Manhattan, but I've walked from its northern tip, down the Hudson to Battery Park at its southern end, and then, after walking through that park's many memorials to the sailors of the city drowned in the Atlantic, past the ferry terminals for Ellis, Staten, and Governor's islands, I walked back to where I had begun the day, at Fort Tryon Park, timing my arrival, by chance, with sunset.

It wasn't exactly planned, this walk; the best walks rarely are. It was a good day. Why not, I said soon after waking. Without thinking more, I set off, dressed in a suit, the most practical of walking garments, for the pockets, for the camouflage—for not appearing to be a walker. I've never understood why people think they can only go walking if they're dressed as walkers.

You needn't make a circuit of it, the four-hour walk from north to south is fine enough. Take the 1 subway train to 215<sup>th</sup>, walk past Columbia University's playing fields, into Inwood Park, and make your way to the entrance of magnificent Fort Tryon Park, laid out by Frederick Law Olmsted Jr., son of the Olmsted who designed Central, Riverside, and Prospect parks. It's a wonderful irony that the work of a family of park designers is a greater presence in this city, the most intensely urban expanse on the planet, than any single architect, and how, after you've got your eye for the city, the parks are greater edifices than any skyscraper.

There is on this long walk much time to lose yourself, though not geographically, because the riverside path now extends almost the length of Manhattan. You could, *en route*, visit The Cloisters (in Fort Tryon Park), a museum the New Yorkers I know have visited once but never return to—like Staten Island, in this respect. The Cloisters is inherently lonely; there's a bleakness about an old monastery, an asylum, recreated in a modern city and utterly remote from it, a place of contemplation that evokes all the unpleasantness of spirituality. Beautiful tapestries, interesting Medieval European sculpture and architecture, but all lost in New York. I've made my one visit to The Cloisters.

At 157<sup>th</sup> St and Broadway, a block in from Riverside Drive, past the gothic Trinity cemetery, there's the Hispanic Society of New York, one of the least-visited galleries in New York, with its several Velázquezes and El Grecos, including a St. Jerome by the latter. El Greco's elongated figures, tall and skeletal, set against land and sky, resemble skyscrapers, heads in the clouds, feet on the ground. The facial expressions are always of existential pain. Before New York artists discovered the Parisian avant garde 100 years ago, Spain, and especially Velázquez, was the great inspiration for American painters: for James McNeill Whistler, John Singer Sargent, Thomas Eakins, and William Merritt Chase, as well as for the bohemian-minded of the era, some of whom who took to dressing up for parties as matadors. Yet it's El Greco, the Greek who moved to Spain, the painter of distressed saints, who today resonates more powerfully. His paintings are considered hugely religious. They are. Yet part of the agony expressed in El Greco's portraits, I've always thought, is a question: What if there is no God?

On the western portal of Riverside Church at 120<sup>th</sup> and Riverside Drive, are the figures of Christ, Confucius, Euclid, Pythagoras, Archimedes, Galileo, Kepler, Newton, Faraday, Darwin, Pasteur, and Einstein. I'm attracted to the idea of Christ as just one face in a crowd.

In the summer months there's an open-air bar in Riverside Park, near West 105<sup>th</sup> Street, where you can watch, down on the sandpits between the park and the West Side Highway, muscular types preening themselves on gymnast hoops in what's quaintly, if not inaccurately, known as Hudson Beach. But why

pause at all on this walk if the object is to reach land's end, and lunch in Chinatown, at, say, [Great New York Noodle Town](#) on Bayard and the Bowery, which is not just cheap but has some of the best grilled meat in town (the cold baby pork, especially) and finest soft-shell crab.

On my walk down the Hudson, I passed two women at about 38<sup>th</sup> Street. One was talking on her cell phone. "I'm with Doris. We're walking Manhattan," she said. I was glad I wasn't the only person heading in the same direction, and I had the sense that many others had chosen to walk the length of the island that day.

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**From:** Inigo Thomas  
**Subject:** Reading New York  
Posted Thursday, Feb. 3, 2005, at 5:27 AM PT

When I was 19, I traveled through India on trains and buses, but I found it impossible to read the books about the country that I had taken with me. Not from lack of curiosity, mind you—quite the opposite. Books about India were, in India, a distraction from what I wanted to see for myself. Ever since then, I've had a rule never to read about the place I'm visiting, or traveling through, while I'm there.

That's not to say you shouldn't read in New York; its bars and cafes are fabulous places for books. You can read all day without interruption at the [Hungarian Pastry Shop](#) on Amsterdam and West 111<sup>th</sup> Street, at Pick Me Up on the west side of Tompkins Square Park, at Spain on West 13<sup>th</sup> St, one of the quietest bars in Manhattan, and in many, many other places. Even on the subway, but not during rush hours. On some days, you can cast your eye down a subway carriage and all around are readers. You can believe for a moment that you've fallen into a land where reading is an underground pursuit, and you can wonder why New York hasn't found its John Betjeman, the poet who goes to the end of every subway line, reading all the way to Pelham, Jamaica, and Far Rockaway.

There are parks and countless benches. Come to New York and do nothing but read, and, when you can't find a book in a store, go to the [New York Public Library](#). Its reading rooms are melancholy—I don't know why they're so gloomy, but they are—but it's the greatest of public libraries. New York is deceptive: By reputation, everything is for sale, including your soul, but dotted here and there, in this capital of capital, are backwaters—at a library, in the open air, by the river.

Read about New York before you arrive; read about New York after you've gone; but don't read about New York when you're in the city. See it for yourself, without comparing it to how others have seen it. If you are going to break this rule, the one book to acquire is the *American Institute of Architecture's Guide to New York City* (which you can usually buy at a discount at the maddeningly crowded Strand on Broadway and East 11<sup>th</sup> Street). With its short entries on buildings and monuments throughout the five boroughs, the *AIA Guide*, now in its fourth edition, is the only printed commentary you need for the streets of New York.

And if you are going to read in New York, read about France and Paris, where bohemia first bloomed—in the fiction of Alexander Dumas, Henri Murger, and Gustave Flaubert. Bohemia was to begin with, and always has been, an invention, a fiction. And there's no place better to begin an examination of the relationship between the United States and France than in New York now that [Museum of Modern Art](#) has reopened. The allure of France is everywhere in this city; visit MoMA on an ordinary day and see how much more crowded the fifth floor, devoted to the Paris school, is than the fourth, given over to the