



*chapter one*

the power of the word along  
the Great Road

*Boston : in the beginning*

◆ William Bradford's *Of Plymouth Plantation* was written near the Great Road long before there was such a road, and published in 1630. It's still a fascinating read. The first American to publish a book of poems was Ann Bradstreet, in 1650. Born in Northamptonshire, England, she emigrated to Boston in 1630, as a founder of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Phyllis Wheatley was born in Africa and brought to America as a slave. Freed and living in Boston, she published a book of poems in 1773; she was the first African American to do so. The Word—the American English written word, in poems, sermons, memoirs, histories—began in and near Boston, and swept west.

Today, US 20 begins three miles west of Massachusetts Bay, in Kenmore Square, under the shadow of Fenway Park's fabled left field wall, the "Green Monster." In the 1950s, US 20 began two miles farther east, almost at the sea; at the west end of Boston's Public Garden, next to Boston Common, the heart of the old city. It is tempting to deal with these historic places and their associations, but Boston is too big a subject for a book about a highway that simply starts west from there. Dozens of major American writers have significant connections to Boston or Cambridge, often through Harvard University: Cotton Mather, Edgar Allan Poe, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, T. S. Eliot, e. e. cummings, Elizabeth Bishop, Robert Lowell, Charles Olson, John Berryman (whose poem pays "Homage to Mistress Bradstreet"), Robert Creeley, John Ashberry, Frank O'Hara, Robert Bly, Kenneth Koch, George Plimpton, Donald Hall, Adrienne Rich, and so

on and on. I must leave most of Boston's literary and political history for others, and pick up the Great Road west of Boston, selecting a few writers to represent its creativity.

*"I have traveled a good deal in Concord"*

No one can write the history of any great American road without quoting Henry David Thoreau. His rich Concord world was on a parallel great westering road, Massachusetts 2, nine miles north of US 20; it is the main northern road from the coast to Berkshire county and the New York state boundary. It is geographically defensible to claim it as a northern branch of the Great Road. Soon after it enters New York state in the Albany area, it disappears into US 20 in the Mohawk Valley.

Thoreau enunciated, in a short life, ideas about nature and travel that we're still assimilating. In the essay "Walking," he anticipates the western impulse of the American spirit, and the plan of this book. If we would go west, we need to travel roads to the West, which, to Thoreau, was more than a region or a destination—it was healing, it was salvation, it was Eden, Zion, Jerusalem: "The West of which I speak is but another name for the Wild, and what I have been preparing to say is, that in Wildness is the preservation of the world. . . . I wish to speak a word for Nature, for absolute freedom and wildness . . . to regard man as an inhabitant, or a part and parcel of nature."

"Walking" ends thus: "So we saunter toward the Holy Land, till one day the sun shall shine more brightly than ever he has done, shall perchance shine into our minds and hearts, and light up our whole lives with a great awakening light, as warm and serene and golden as on a bank side in autumn" ("Walking," *The Heath Anthology of American Literature*, Second Edition, Volume One, Lexington MA: Heath, 1994, 2089, 2100). Such loopy, inspired flights of language and thought have made "Walking" a basic text for modern environmentalists like me.

*west of Boston*

US 20 leaves Boston through the inner suburbs, Brookline to Watertown to Weston and out. Brookline is the site of the home and, from 1884, the working space, of America's premier landscape architect, Frederick Law Olmsted. The Arnold Arboretum, all of Boston's "green necklace"

of urban parks, Buffalo's 1,200 acres of Olmsted parks, Brooklyn's grand parks, all are the work of this remarkable, visionary man, of his partner, Calvert Vaux, and their studio. Indeed, he created the specialty he came to dominate, and also created much of the American taste for the pastoral and the picturesque in artificial landscapes. His work is striking and important in Manhattan's Central Park, in Yosemite Valley, in Riverside, Illinois, and many other beautiful green American places.

The Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site is two miles south of US 20. The landscape architecture firm that Olmsted and Vaux had founded dwindled and failed during the Great Depression. By the 1940s, the grand old house and grounds, which he punningly named "Fairsted," was no longer the thriving center of American landscape design. The Olmsted family arranged for it to be purchased by the federal government, and today the National Park Service runs excellent tours there. The house is sited on only two acres, but the site feels large, picturesque, almost rural. (Making much of little space is a characteristic Olmsted skill.) The little tour includes what the Rangers wryly call "the shortest hike in the National Park system"—a walk of thirty or forty yards among shrubs and trees on the south lawn. A million documents are preserved and stored here, a treasure trove for historians of landscape architecture.

Brookline is the birthplace of two distinguished Americans. John Fitzgerald Kennedy was born in Brookline in 1917 and lived there for four childhood years, though he's more closely associated with Boston, Cambridge, and Hyannis. The John F. Kennedy Birthplace National Historic Site is a handsome, modest house at 83 Beals Street, owned and occupied by the senior Kennedys until 1921, when they moved to a larger home nearby. It is a few blocks north of US 20. John Kennedy and three of his siblings were born here, reminding us how very recent is the practice of birthing babies in hospitals. The National Park Service gives excellent tours of the house, and of other Kennedy sites in the neighborhood.

The poet Amy Lowell (1874–1925) was born in Brookline into the New England aristocracy, not, like JFK, into a rising Irish political family. She was, with H.D. (Hilda Doolittle) and Ezra Pound, a founder of a major movement in American poetry called "imagism." It emphasized brief, sharp, disconnected images in poetry, of the sort that eventually made William Carlos Williams's "red wheelbarrow" ubiquitous. Lowell's best poem is "Patterns," a powerful dramatic monologue spoken by a woman whose lover has been killed "in a pattern called war," and it's not especially imagistic. She lives on that, and on her priority among modern

New England authors—one of the best female poets in a region justly famed for them. Her distant cousin, Robert Lowell (1917–1977) was a major midcentury poet and a founder of another important poetic school, called the “confessional.”

Brookline is an older, inner suburb. Newton and Weston are younger, farther out. They are associated with another remarkable so-called confessional poet. Newton is the birthplace of Anne Sexton, and it is where Sexton often met and workshopped and talked poetry and people with her best friend, the estimable poet Maxine Kumin. (Kumin, who lives in New Hampshire, also lived near US 20 while she did teaching stints at Boston area universities.) Weston, on US 20, is very posh: it has the priciest housing of any city in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts (based on tax figures for houses, *Boston Globe*, June 2002). It is where Anne Sexton lived and worked until her suicide in 1974.

Sylvia Plath is the most flamboyantly famous of the confessional poets, for her short life as well as for her poems. She was born in Boston, in Jamaica Plain, the site of Olmsted’s Arnold Arboretum. After her father’s untimely and portentous death when Sylvia was eight, the family made its home in west suburban Winthrop. Though Plath’s home at the time of her suicide in 1963 was a flat in Primrose Hill in London, suburban Boston was in her bones, as was Smith College, just north of US 20 in Northampton, Massachusetts.

*twenty west :*  
*an artistic overview of US 20 in Massachusetts*

Smith is just one educational jewel of several in a region once known to geologists as “The Educational Lowlands,” north along the Connecticut River. This region, a valley settled early, closely connected to the Great Road, is rich in associations with poets. Born in San Francisco, Robert Frost became farmer, poet, and sage in New Hampshire and Vermont, and was for a time poet-in-residence at Amherst College, in Massachusetts. Emily Dickinson lived almost her entire life in the pretty college town of Amherst, and is buried there.

Farther west in Massachusetts is Berkshire County, where William Cullen Bryant went to college. It has become a summer paradise for the arts—dance, music, art, and theatre. Just off US 20, in Lenox, is The Mount, the home of one of America’s greatest novelists, Edith Wharton. Just off of US 20, in Pittsfield, is Arrowhead, the farm where Herman

Melville completed *Moby Dick*. His friend, Nathaniel Hawthorne, wrote *The House of the Seven Gables* (with a Boston area setting) in nearby Stockbridge.

Bradford, Mather, Bradstreet, Wheatley, Bryant, Thoreau, Dickinson, Longfellow, Melville, Hawthorne, Lowell, and Wharton. What a list! The Great Road can't claim Walt Whitman, but most of the other pillars of early Anglo-American religion, history, poetry, and fiction are here. If we curve just a bit north, to Route 2 and Concord, we can include Emerson, Margaret Fuller, and the Alcotts, too. In our own time, Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton come from the Great Road.

*“this is my letter to the world”*

Modern American poetry is sometimes seen as a dialogue, or a tussle, between two utterly different poetic styles, those of Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman. The prim New England spinster takes off the tops of her readers' heads very quietly, and the boisterous Brooklynite does similar creative damage at a higher, more explosive level. Since this is not a book about the history of American poetry, I will discuss only Dickinson, the one who lived and worked near the Great Road.

Emily Dickinson was born in 1830 to a prosperous family in a pretty college town. Amherst College had been founded just nine years before. Emily Dickinson's Amherst was a small but prosperous village in the Connecticut Valley, fifteen miles north of US 20. Noah Webster spent ten productive, impecunious years there (1812–1822), reading and defining for what would become his great *American Dictionary of the English Language* (1828).<sup>1</sup> Amherst's connections to the great world of Massachusetts and the nation went along the corridor of what is now US 20. When Emily made her rare visits to the capital of her state, it was along the route of the Great Road, the “Boston Post Road,” from Springfield to Worcester to Boston. This was the road on which she sent her “letter[s] to the world.” Most of the nine Dickinson poems that were published in her lifetime appeared in *The Springfield Republican*.

Though Emily Dickinson's family endured sorrows, deaths, losses, and one juicy sex scandal, her public life was fairly unruffled. Her youth was marred by her mother's mental problems. She spent most of a year nearby at Miss Lyons' Female Seminary, which would become Mount Holyoke College. Except for that year, and brief visits to Washington, Philadelphia (for medical treatment), and Boston, she spent her life

entirely in Amherst. In this, she was like Henry David Thoreau, who mostly stayed home, yet famously “travelled a good deal in Concord.” As the years went by, she went out less and less. Unmoved by the Second Great Awakening, she resisted accepting Jesus as her savior, and soon stopped going to church. After 1860, she spent her life entirely on the grounds of her family’s houses, and then entirely in her house, the house her dominating father had built. That house is a shrine to her today.

Though she eventually became a social recluse, she maintained sprightly contact with friends and family, often through the notes and poems she scattered freely among them. She once described herself in a letter to an important editor as “small, like the wren,” with “eyes, like the sherry in the glass that the guest leaves.” Imaginative, self-deprecating, elusive, daring, cryptic, funny, passionate, dazzling: that’s Emily Dickinson. She did *not* scatter her poems freely to the world, that world that “never wrote to [her].” She had contact with the big literary world largely through correspondence and reading, and the occasional visitor from the Great Road.

I don’t much like the term *confessional* as it is applied to poets and poems. It has a negative, regurgitative, artless connotation: spill your guts and call it a poem. Despite the term’s use to describe eminent male poets such as W. D. Snodgrass and Robert Lowell, it also often seems somewhat sexist. It implies that there is something unseemly about menstruation (Sexton) or a sliced thumb (Plath) or “my uterus” (Sexton again) as a poetic subject. In a sense, all lyric poetry is confessional, in that it is based on deep feelings from the author’s experience, mediated into artful language. Emily Dickinson’s poems are often about the most private and intensely moving things—erotic passion, agony, death, God, faith, and loss of faith. She begins a prim little stanza with the eye-popping lines “I like a look of agony / Because I know it’s true.” Is that “confessional”? It certainly sounds real and personal. Or is it just astonishingly powerful poetry about strong feelings?

*belle of Amherst or Marquise de Sade?*

Emily Dickinson’s poems were in print for sixty-five years before they were published in an edition (Thomas Johnson’s, in 1955) that did them justice. Her first editors censored and eliminated some, and regularized and diminished most, when her work was first published. It was thus just possible to see her as sweet and quaint and adorable and maid-

enly and harmless, writing of railroad trains and buggy rides, delight in birds, awe of snakes, sorrow at family deaths. This “Belle of Amherst,” “I’m nobody—who are you?” Emily is undeniably part of her truth, but only part. She can be coy and cute, but she is much more.

Postmodern critics have corrected this patronizing distortion, though often excessively, e.g., that she was an intellectual kin of the Marquis de Sade. Nonsense. What she was was a great poet, the diversity and daring of her thought somewhat obscured by her elliptical language, and by the tight little verse form she used for almost all her poems. It is “common meter,” or “ballad measure,” usually alternating four beat and three beat iambic lines. She probably learned the form from the Protestant hymns of her childhood. Their authors in their turn had learned it from the old English ballads, where John Keats had found it (see “La Belle Dame Sans Merci”). She stretches and teases this simple form into stanzas of great subtlety and power. See especially “The Soul selects her own society,” in which the soul shuts out unwanted visitors as a bivalve shuts its hard shell: “Like stone.” Clang. Thud. So o-ver.

*“tell all the truth but tell it slant”*

She knew how unusual and perceptive she was, and knew it behooved her not to make that too plain, not to be too free with dangerous truths:

Tell all the truth but tell it slant,  
Success in circuit lies . . .

Otherwise, one might be avoided, discounted, or even put in a madhouse:

Much madness is divinest sense,  
To the discerning eye;  
Much sense the starkest madness,  
Tis the majority

In this, as all, prevails,  
Assent, and you are sane.  
Demur, you’re straightway dangerous,  
And handled with a chain.

That is, treated as a lunatic in an asylum.

She wrote much of nature, clearly enjoying the little world around her family's houses. In one poem, a male speaker tells of feeling "a tighter breathing, / And zero at the bone" upon encountering a snake. She described another visitor thus:

A route of evanescence,  
     With a revolving wheel,  
 A resonance of emerald,  
     A rush of cochineal,  
  
 And every blossom on the bush  
     Adjusts its tumbled head,  
 The mail from Tunis, probably,  
     An easy morning's ride.

Fortunately for an otherwise hopelessly puzzled posterity, she appended a note to this when she sent it to a friend: "The Humming Bird." The ruby-throated hummingbird lives in eastern North America.



*Emily Dickinson's house, Amherst, Massachusetts*  
 Courtesy of the Emily Dickinson Museum ©2008



With this note, the red and green flashing light of the poem come clear, as does the joke in the last two lines—it wouldn't be a long ride from North Africa for such a swift and busy creature.

*“he kindly stopped for me”*

She wrote much of Death, of course. Death was a regular guest at the banquet of New England life, and the women of the house were expected to perform those final sacred cleansing duties that we now leave to undertakers. “I heard a fly buzz when I died” is written from the point of view of the dying person. (Many of her other speakers are already dead.) When her eyes grow dim, she sees the failure as outside her:

And then the windows failed and then  
I could not see to see.

Her description of a house on the morning after death says that it “oppresses like the heft / Of cathedral tunes.”

Her most famous poem about death is “Because I could not stop for Death.” It presents the female speaker as too busy to go with Death, until that Gentleman Caller civilly comes to ask her out for a carriage ride on quite another Great Road. A proper New England spinster might be unwilling to go with him if they were to be alone, but there is a chaperone—“Immortality.” She agrees to the ride, passing the earlier aspects of her life as they head toward what the reader comes to know is her grave, though the woman calls it “a house” that was but “a swelling in the ground.”

Since then, 'tis centuries, but each  
Feels shorter than the day  
I first surmised the horses' heads  
Were towards eternity.

Quietly terrifying, this wonderful poet: “zero at the bone.”

There are many other rich aspects of Dickinson's poetry. She contained multitudes, like Walt Whitman, though in smaller, tidier packages. Her few erotic poems—“Wild nights, wild nights!!”—are dazzling, though there is no solid evidence of her having had sexual experiences with either men or women. I will leave her in Amherst, her

physical and spiritual home, at her own grave. The day before she died, Emily Dickinson wrote her last letter to two relatives, the Norcross sisters. Here it is in full:

Little Cousins,  
—Called back.  
—Emily.

Her tall marble gravestone in the iron-fenced family plot in Amherst reads:

Emily Dickinson  
1830–1886  
Called back

### *Sturbridge*

For a good look at Emily Dickinson’s immediate world, visit her house in Amherst. For a broader physical sense of how her age lived, a visit to Old Sturbridge Village, on US 20 between Springfield<sup>2</sup> and Worcester, is a must. It is an assemblage of authentic eighteenth and nineteenth-century buildings moved here from other sites. It aims to portray New England village life in the 1830s, when Emily Dickinson was a child nearby. It has no historic authenticity as a whole, but its mill and its chapel, its school, bank, and stores, are real enough. There’s even a bogus graveyard with real old gravestones. (You can’t help but think of Marianne Moore’s wonderful description of poems as “imaginary gardens with real toads in them.”) Staffed by docents in period dress, Old Sturbridge Village is instructive and compelling. “Living history” can be unbearably cutesy, but here it is well done, understated, and appealing.

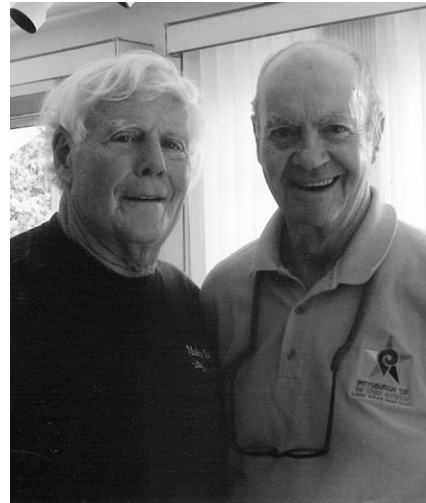
### *“and I eat men like air”*

Emily Dickinson’s poetry would be a supreme landmark on the Great Road even if it did not lead to the work of two other Massachusetts poets whose great subject and grand passion was Death: Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton. Though she was the younger of the two by six years, Sylvia Plath (1932–1963) gained fame and died before Sexton. A

golden girl, beautiful and smart, she blazed her way from genteel poverty to a scholarship at Smith College in 1950 and a heady, prestigious summer stint in New York in 1953 as a student editor at the magazine *Mademoiselle*. In 1951–1952, my friend John Hall earned himself a feminist sainthood by becoming Plath’s first serious boyfriend, someone who made that troubled soul feel good about herself. He tells me he saw her playing tennis in their Boston suburb, Wellesley, and asked a mutual friend for an introduction. “Who’s that?” he asked. “That’s Sylvia Plath,” their friend said. “She doesn’t get a lot of dates—she’s so smart the boys are afraid of her.” “Doesn’t scare me,” said John, and it didn’t. He tells me that I partied with them during their time together. (John and I were at Williams, she at Smith, fifty-five miles away. Sadly, I didn’t know her by name then.) John tells me that his granddaughter, doing a book report on Plath, came upon his name and called him to ask “Grandpa—is that you!?” It was and is.

Plath was excelling academically at Smith and writing poems of increasing power and distinction. In the midst of all this pressured achievement, her depression made her attempt suicide in 1953. Recovering after hospitalization and shock treatment, overachieving again, she graduated from Smith and won a Fulbright scholarship to attend Cambridge University in 1955. There she met another gorgeous and dazzling young poet, Yorkshireman Ted Hughes. At their first meeting at a party, she spoke one of his poems to him; she had memorized it for this moment. When he grabbed and kissed her, she bit him on the cheek, drawing blood. They were married four months later. Their relationship continued to be explosive and creative.

They became the young uber-couple of Anglo-American letters, spending time in both countries. Two children followed quickly, as did Hughes’s adultery and their breakup. Abandoned in a remote Devonshire cottage, Plath moved her very young children to London and rented



*Mac with friend John Hall*

a flat in Primrose Hill. There, in the coldest winter in a century, she wrote, at white heat, in a few months, most of the poems in the book that posthumously made her famous: *Ariel*.

It is full of stark statements about fathers (“Daddy, daddy, you bastard”), children (“Love set you going like a fat gold watch”), husbands (“A man in black with a *Mein Kampf* look”), and rage and revenge (“Beware, beware, / And I eat men like air”). She had taken the London flat on impulse because it had a blue London City Council plaque stating that William Butler Yeats had once lived in the building. I happened onto the place during a 1982 London walk after a visit to the nearby Regents’ Park Zoo, and I noticed and recognized the same blue Yeats plaque. I took a brief, bizarre tour of the flat, courtesy of the very obliging student occupant who happened to come out while I was staring. It was the locus of her greatest work. She asphyxiated herself there in January 1963. Her two children survived. One, Frieda Hughes, has become a noteworthy poet.

Ironically, her husband became her literary executor. Hughes’s judicious handling of the posthumous publication of her poems helped to make her famous, just as their story helped to make him a monster to some. He never responded to the criticism, and published in 1998, at the time of his death, some very tender early poems—*Birthday Letters*—about her and about their relationship (see chapter 6). Ted Hughes had by then become England’s poet laureate, a sinecure held over the centuries by poets both great and piddling, from Dryden, Wordsworth, and Tennyson down to Colley Cibber. Its chief modern duties had been to write congratulatory poems on royal birthdays. The appointment of such a hard, dour writer to this piffling post seemed very strange, but it did signal Britain’s acceptance of him and its admiration of his work, which had indeed been exemplary.

Sylvia Plath’s late work was searing and uncompromising, lashing out at the men she thought had failed her, chiefly “Daddy” and the “model of you,” to whom she said “I do”—Ted Hughes. Her poems are also often darkly funny. There is a story that, when Plath read “Daddy” to a woman friend, they rolled around on the floor laughing hysterically. The poem is indeed full of gloriously improbable comic words and sounds like “achoo” and “gobbledy-goo.” Her whole oeuvre is broader than her late output would suggest, including a good series of poems on keeping bees, which she had done in Devonshire. It should be no surprise that her father had been an entomologist, specializing in bees.

Plath’s work is not just intense and confessional; it is highly crafted. The insistently repeated “oo” sounds in “Daddy” make this angry poem

ring with the sounds of a hurt child, afraid to “achoo.” “Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I’m through” seems to me both angry rejection and plaintive call. But of course she wasn’t really “through” with her problems. Death came to call for her when she was thirty.

*her kind : the middle-aged witch*

Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton (1926–1974) met and studied together in Robert Lowell’s poetry workshop at Boston University. They hit it off, these two smart, beautiful, wounded women. They and other workshopers would often unwind and share confidences and “3 or 4 or 2 martinis” (“clear as tears”) at the Ritz in Boston. “[O]ften, very often, Sylvia and I would talk at length / about our first suicides. . . . Suicide is, after all, the opposite of the poem.” “Intense, perceptive—strange, blonde, lovely Sylvia.” (*Anne Sexton: A Self-Portrait in Letters*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977, 245–46). When Plath died, Sexton seemed to begrudge her having been the first to take “that ride home / with our boy” [Death]. Thus did Sexton acknowledge another influence, another priority—Emily Dickinson had got there before either of them, though not by suicide.

Sexton may have been the most wounded of the three. Her childhood was spent in uneasy luxury. Her parents had all the right friends and plenty of money, but there were family problems with alcohol and mental illness. Her idyllic summers at posh Squirrel Island, Maine, in one or another of the family’s five “arking houses,” were tainted by unhappiness or worse. Her mother, a poet herself, was jealous of Anne’s early success. She accused her daughter of plagiarizing her stunningly original early poems. I met some older Squirrel Islanders on a boat to the island in the 1980s. When questioned, they remembered Sexton’s mother, Mary Harvey, dancing gaily, indefatigably, at Squirrel Island parties in the ’30s.

Skipping college, Anne Harvey eloped with Alfred (“Kayo”) Sexton and soon gave birth to two daughters. After each birth, she went into deep postpartum depression, and spent long periods in a mental institution, where she began to write poetry as therapy. A therapist priest told her, “God is in your typewriter,” and there was truth in that. Poetry seemed to have saved her for a time. (“My fans think I got well, but I didn’t; I just became a poet.”) She tried to believe, but God eluded her. As she wrote, “Need is not quite belief.” She spoke of herself as

magic, dangerous, other, a “middle-aged witch.” A posthumous volume of her poems is entitled *The Awful Rowing Toward God*. In it, God plays cards with her, but He cheats.

She did a very successful series of books and poetry readings, including performances with a jazz group, “Her Kind,” a reference to one of her poems. She was a powerful, gorgeous, theatrical presence, though she was often terrified in public situations. When I heard her, once she had got past nervously fluffing some lines, she was a compelling reader. She separated from Kayo, had affairs, drank too much, and took too many pills. She had lunch in October 1974 with her spiritual sister, her best friend, the poet Maxine Kumin,<sup>3</sup> revealing no dark plans. Anne Sexton then went home to Weston to take her last ride, almost literally, with “our boy,” Death. She died of carbon monoxide poisoning in her car in her garage. Maxine Kumin was still publishing poems about this in 2006, trying to understand and accept it, trying, I think, to forgive her dear friend Anne.

Sexton’s poetic legacy will outlive her sad biography. Like that of her poetic forebear, Emily Dickinson, her work is witty and often very funny. Her *Transformations* retells folk tales in strange, sharp, insightful modern ways. Her poems about suicide are tough and instructive. In “Wanting to Die,” she says that suicides are different from the rest of us. Like carpenters, suicides never ask “Why build?,” only “Which tools?” That is, what’s the best way to do the inevitable? Like Sylvia Plath a former model, she was tall, beautiful and dazzling, and a fine and artful poet. “We must all eat beautiful women,” she wrote. She wanted to die and she did. She loved language and fun and wordplay. Her poems are not simply emotional outcries; like Plath’s, they are highly crafted. She loved palindromes, reversible aphorisms such as “Madam, I’m Adam.” Her favorite was “Rats live on no evil star,” which she had seen on the side of an Irish barn. She said she wanted that to be inscribed on her gravestone, as it “gave her a peculiar kind of hope” (*Anne Sexton*, 379). When I visited her grave in Jamaica Plain, Boston, I saw that an admirer had chalked that palindrome on her stone. It seemed wonderfully appropriate. Rest in peace.

### *the early Berkshires: Melville and Moby Dick*

The Great Road takes us past the Connecticut Valley to the Berkshire Hills of Western Massachusetts. There three great American novelists lived and did some of their best work. Herman Melville bought a

farm just east of US 20 in Pittsfield, in 1850. (When the 1956 film of *Moby Dick* played Pittsfield, it was billed on the theatre marquee as “By Pittsfield’s own Herman Melville.” If ya got it, flaunt it.) Melville named the farm “Arrowhead” for the neolithic points he found there while plowing. He farmed and wrote for thirteen years in this beautiful place. He is said to have loved the view of the Berkshires, of Mount Greylock, the state’s highest peak, from his window. According to the Berkshire Historical Society, which now occupies the house, Melville wrote in 1851: “A great neighborhood for authors, you see, is Pittsfield.”

Melville’s family had long and deep connections to the Great Road. At its eastern terminus, his paternal grandfather, James Melvill [*sic*] dressed up as a Mohawk Indian and took part in the Boston Tea Party in 1773. His maternal grandfather, Philip Gansevoort, commanded the successful defense of Fort Stanwix against the British, near the Great Road in central New York, in 1777. (There’s an impressive reconstruction of that fort in Rome, New York.) The young Melville was schooled for two years at the Albany Academy while he lived in Albany, New York, on the Great Road.

Melville sometimes eased his mental and financial troubles, treated his “hypos,” by attending what he called his “Harvard and Yale”: long voyages as a seaman on whaling ships. His early books—*Omoo* and *Typee*, romances of the sea and the South Pacific—had been popular and lucrative. His career slumped with the publication of *Mardi* and other increasingly difficult books. His work was very good, but he could not make a living from it.

He’d show them. He’d do fine work at Arrowhead, and he certainly did. There he completed *Moby Dick, or The Whale*, one of the two books most often put up for the honorific title of “The Great American Novel.”<sup>4</sup> (*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is the other. Both are.) *Moby Dick* is a long and difficult book, almost proverbially, even comically so, but it is rich, diverse, and funny as well as brooding, satanic, Shakespearean, and mythic. *Moby Dick* failed to make the great splash (pun intended) and the money its author hoped for. Defeated, he left Arrowhead in 1862 to move to New York City to work in obscurity as a customs officer. This would ironically echo another of his supreme Great Road fictions, “Bartleby The Scrivener” (1853), with Bartleby’s portentous refrain, “I would prefer not to.” Melville, like his creation Bartleby, would have preferred not to, but he had little choice, and he left. Here on the Great Road much of Melville’s best work was done, including *Pierre, or The Ambiguities* and *Billy Budd*, which was not published until 1924, thirty-three years after

his death in obscurity. Arrowhead is open to visitors. It is a large, pleasant nineteenth-century farmhouse with the glorious Berkshire mountain views that Melville loved.

### *Hawthorne and The House of the Seven Gables*

After his early success with *The Scarlet Letter*, Nathaniel Hawthorne left Salem, Massachusetts, and went west on the Great Road to Berkshire County. He met Melville there in 1850, and they formed an important personal and professional relationship. Hawthorne did not stay in the Berkshires as long as Melville; but he stayed long enough to write another major book there, his second masterpiece, *The House of the Seven Gables*. Here he also wrote most of another important book, *The Blithedale Romance*, based on his experience of the Utopian experiment called Brook Farm. Using his political connections—better than Melville’s—Hawthorne soon left for an ambassadorship in England. He left the Berkshires to Melville, who soldiered on alone. Hawthorne’s Great Road experience was brief but important.

### *chronicler and critic of the Gilded Age : Edith Wharton and the Mount*

Edith Wharton’s story was the reverse of Herman Melville’s. Melville came to the Great Road to live and and earn a living by his writing, and did not succeed. Wharton came as a wealthy woman and became a hugely successful writer, though she did not need the considerable sums her books earned. Melville was writing and working on a real farm. Wharton was born rich, had made a very bad “good marriage,” and had all the money she needed. She built a grand showplace home called The Mount just off the Great Road, and lived and worked there for much of the period from 1902 to 1911. “The Mount was my first real home,” she said. There she once entertained another author with Great Road connections, her friend and mentor, Henry James. He is said to have been surprised and delighted when she introduced him to the pleasures of motoring—on the Great Road, of course.

Edith Wharton’s main subject was the haughty, cruel, elegant world of the super-rich of New York City. Like most of her female forebears, she had had to struggle for personal and literary independence. Her first



book was about the design of houses and gardens, a proper subject (if she must write at all) for a wealthy society matron. The gardens at The Mount are indeed gorgeous. When her husband began to show signs of madness, she took up with a journalist, the love of her life.

Wharton divorced her husband in 1913, and thereafter spent most of her life in Paris; The Mount was her home for only ten years. Yet it was there that she wrote her two greatest works—*The House of Mirth* (1905), and *Ethan Frome* (1911). Emily Dickinson had had to break through the restrictions of mid-nineteenth-century gender roles to become a great poet. She did it by staying well under the radar and avoiding celebrity. A century later, Plath and Sexton rebelled against gender role conformity and limitation. Edith Wharton was a rebel and pioneer as well. If we except Harriet Beecher Stowe and Louisa May Alcott, and I might, she was the first great female American novelist. She had the toughness and independence to criticize her privileged world and find it crass and cruel and greedy. Her opinion of that world (and its response to that critique) partly explains her removal to Paris.



*The Mount, Edith Wharton's home in Lenox, Massachusetts*

*Photo by Julia Schuyler*

She also looked unflinchingly at another world that was neither Gilded Age nor wealthy, the hard world of the chilly New England hills she found around The Mount in Berkshire County. She says in her Introduction to *Ethan Frome*: “I had known something of New England village life long before I made my home in the same county as my imaginary Starkfield.” She noted the “harsh and beautiful land” and said that she felt that “the outcropping granite . . . had been overlooked.” She worked that stern outcropping for *Ethan Frome*, of all her works the one that is most often read today. Based on a tragic Berkshire County incident, the book is as flinty and unflinching as William Faulkner’s best, in a stark New England setting on the Great Road. The Mount declined after Wharton sold it in 1911. It became a girls’ school for a time, then served as a temporary home for a theatrical company. It is now being renovated and restored to recall her career and express her taste and personality. It is an elegant representation of The Gilded Age she meticulously and ironically chronicled.

*muses in Arcadia : the Berkshires*

Berkshire County was settled later than the rest of Massachusetts—the mountains were a natural barrier to settlement from the east. Berkshire County is roughly equidistant from Boston and New York City: close enough to be enriched and influenced by both, but distant enough to have maintained an independent character. Edith Wharton went there and took something of New York City and Paris with her. Oliver Wendell Holmes, from Boston, summered there. Hawthorne brought with him a whiff of Calvinist Salem. Melville came to it, then left it for New York City.

US 20 bisects Berkshire County. Within a few miles of its current route are all the literary sites mentioned above, and the rich artistic feast below. Nowadays, some of Boston’s and New York City’s best artistic endeavors take place in the Berkshires. The Berkshire County Travel Bureau calls the area “America’s Premier Cultural Resort.” That’s local puffery, but it’s not absurd. “The Muses in Arcadia” and “Culture in the Country” are other local slogans. Dance spends the summer at Jacob’s Pillow, on US 20 near Becket. “The Pillow” was founded in the 1920s by famous dancers and teachers Ted Shawn and Ruth St. Denis. It takes its name from a rock that is thought to look a bit like a pillow, and from the conceit that US 20’s switchbacks looked like the rungs of Jacob’s Ladder. The Jacob’s Ladder Trail, a National Scenic Byway, covers thirty-three beautiful miles of Twenty, from Russell to Lee.

Music is everywhere in a Berkshire summer, preeminently at Tanglewood, in Lenox. Music history was made there by musicians such as Serge Koussevitsky, Leonard Bernstein, Aaron Copland, Seiji Ozawa, John Williams, and James Levine. It is the summer home of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, and a nurturing ground for brilliant young musicians. Lennie Bernstein first went there from exurban Boston in 1940, aged twenty-one, and returned almost every summer of his life thereafter. The music is first-rate, and it is a glorious place to spend a summer evening, in the Koussevitsky Music Shed or on the lawn. Tanglewood's main entrance is just west of US 20, on the Lenox-Stockbridge border.

*“lions, eagles, and quails”*

Summer theatre is often trivial fun, and why not? Theatre should be fun. Summer theatres thrive in the Berkshires. For fun and much more than fun, there is Williamstown, Massachusetts, and the Adams Memorial Theatre and the Williamstown Theatre Festival. The local chamber of commerce calls Williamstown “The Village Beautiful,” and it is. In the interest of full disclosure, I plead guilty to being a Williams alumnus, and to having sung and played on its concert and theatre stages. I heard Randall Jarrell, W. H. Auden, and the doomed, spellbinding Dylan Thomas there. A dear friend and I were inspired to do our honors theses on him—Anil on the prose, me on the poetry. After his superb reading, I checked his water glass, thinking it might be gin. It was water.

Williamstown is a lively college town during the academic year, and a center of art, theatre, and music in the summer. It is twenty miles north of Twenty, but it feeds off and contributes to the intellectual ferment of the Great Road. It is at the western end of the Mohawk Trail, the splendid old mountain road—Route 2—from Greenfield to North Adams. Poet and editor William Cullen Bryant went to Williams College. His astonishing Wordsworthian poem “Thanatopsis,” written in the Berkshires when he was eighteen, amazed its readers, who could scarcely believe it was written on this side of the Atlantic.

In 1955, the Williamstown Theatre Festival took over the college's Adams Memorial Theatre, then largely unused in the summer, and made a humble start. Its charismatic director, the late Nikos Psacharopoulos, had a great vision which has since been amply fulfilled. Williamstown has become a venue where fine actors, major theatre people—Joanne Woodward, Edward Hermann, F. Murray Abraham, Blythe Danner, Christopher Reeve, Frank Langella, Roger Rees, Kathleen Turner—and

newer stars such as Kate Burton, Ethan Hawke, and Gwyneth Paltrow—take minimal pay to do serious work. Nick Psacharopoulos directed a superb version of Chekhov's *The Seagull* there in the 1970s. It was later filmed at the Berkshire cedar log summer house of my Williams mentor and adviser, Clay Hunt, a legendary force in the Williams English Department. Gwyneth Paltrow was a toddler then; she grew up with the Festival. Her mother, Blythe Danner, beautifully played the young, doomed Nina. Toddler Gwyneth is said to have made a big hit at rehearsals by lisping lines from her mother's first act soliloquy while crawling nearly naked across the stage: "All men and beasts, lions, eagles, and quails, horned stags, geese, spiders . . . all life . . . has died out at last." In her turn, Gwyneth has played Nina there too. They do this every summer, and it's wonderful.

*art new and old: Mass MoCA and the Clark*

Five miles east is the huge new Mass MoCA—"Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art"—in the old mill town of North Adams. Handsome old brick mill buildings still stand on rivers throughout Massachusetts, though they no longer enclose poorly paid female operatives, or use water power to turn spinning machines to make cloth. Here, several mill buildings have been refitted to make enormous exhibit spaces—a total of *thirteen acres* (*New York Times*, October 27, 2006)—for important contemporary art. This museum-cum-rock concert venue in a once obscure corner of the state is a must see.

Actually, this once obscure corner of the state has been a required stop for art lovers since 1955, the year I graduated from Williams. With a family fortune made in manufacturing sewing machines, Robert Sterling Clark built, endowed, and filled this large private museum with his and his wife's vast personal collection. He is said to have chosen to build it in Williamstown because he thought New York City was too likely to be the target of atomic attack—this was the "Duck and Cover" era of the cold war—and he wanted to preserve his treasures. The excellence of the mid-century Williams College Art Department was another major reason.

Loosely connected to Williams College, the Robert Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute is much more than just a splendid small museum. It has become a major center for the study of display and conservation and art history. Indeed, American museum directors sometimes refer darkly, if comically, to "The Williams Mafia," an alleged cabal

whose tentacles (pardon my mixed metaphor) have come to control major museums across the country. Well, maybe it's more than "alleged." "The college is famous for incubating future museum directors; the list includes Earl A. Powell III (the National Gallery), Thomas Krens (the Guggenheim), and Michael Gowan (the Los Angeles Museum of Art)," as well as Glenn Lowry of New York's Museum of Modern Art (*The New Yorker*, September 25, 2006, 130). In addition, Williams/Clark graduates have headed the Brooklyn Museum of Art (Robert Burk '61), the Art Institute of Chicago (James Wood '63), and the Dallas Museum of Art (John Lane '66). The troubled J. Paul Getty Trust has lured James Wood out of retirement to serve as its president and chief executive, and to use its five *billion* dollar endowment more judiciously and creatively ("At Getty Trust, a New Chief With Solid Art Credentials," *New York Times*, December 5, 2006).

The "Art Clark" is midsized, user-friendly, and gorgeous, and its stunning collection of Renoirs (thirty-eight!) is remarkable outside France. Eighteen Renoirs and a backup band of Pissaros, Monets, and Degas ballerina bronzes are exhibited in one grand room. About fifty by seventy-five feet, it is my favorite room in any museum in the world. Well, maybe it's a tie with the unicorn tapestry room at The Cloisters in New York City. The Clark's main emphases are turn-of-the-century French impressionist and nineteenth-century American, especially Winslow Homer and John Singer Sargent, but its collections are wide-ranging. Its traveling exhibits are strong—there was a wonderful late Turner show there in 2005, and a superb Alexandre Calame/romantic Swiss landscape show in 2006. It's my favorite Berkshire institution, after Williams College. And it's free from November to May! Can't beat the price.

The Williams College Museum of Art, on the campus in Williamstown, is also very important. Its permanent collection—about twelve thousand items—is remarkable, from Assyrian and Egyptian antiquities to many moderns: Hopper, O'Keefe, Barlach, Picasso, Nevelson, Grant Wood, David Smith, and Andy Warhol. It is growing exponentially as successful alumni bequeath masterpieces to it. Both it and the Clark are a testimony to the lives and talents of outstanding Williams College art professors. I visited WCMA in November 2006, as Williams was gearing up to celebrate the ninety-ninth birthday of S. Lane Faison '29, known as "The Godfather" of the Williams Mafia, one of the "Holy Trinity" that included Whit Stoddard '35 and Bill Pierson.<sup>5</sup> Sad to say, Lane Faison died five days short of this milestone (*New York Times*, November 14, 2006), after a life of great accomplishments. He had been

instrumental in helping the OSS, the predecessor of the CIA, recover art works looted by Nazis in World War II (*New York Times*, December 19, 2006). There is also an excellent collection of rare books in the Chapin Library at Williams College. As an undergraduate, I sang “The Angler’s Catch” there with my friend Stran Stranahan from the first edition of *The Compleat Angler* (1653). The Chapin owns a Shakespeare First Folio (1623) that was famously stolen and surreptitiously recovered in 1940.

### *American visual icons*

In Stockbridge is the imposing Norman Rockwell Museum. Is it finally time to accept this “illustrator” as a significant realist painter? The Norman Rockwell Museum thinks so, and so do I. So, apparently, does the art-biz world. His painting “Breaking Home Ties,” bought for \$900 in 1960, hidden for thirty years in a secret wall compartment, was sold recently for fifteen million dollars (*New York Times*, November 30, 2006). His many covers for *The Saturday Evening Post* were iconic and enormously popular, delineating and enshrining American life from the 1920s to the 1960s. They are often cute and sugary, and there is nothing progressive or modernist about them. Some have bite and social conscience, such as his late works on the subject of civil rights. It is as a supreme draftsman that Rockwell lives. His paintings are charming, sometimes powerful, and often very funny evocations of the human experience, and they’re on display, as is his studio, in the town Rockwell came to live in and love for twenty-five years. I remember being impressed that a Williams classmate of mine had modeled for him in the early 1950s. “I showed the America I knew and observed to others who might not have noticed.” Norman Rockwell made this modest claim, and it is true.

Less than a mile away in the same town are art works that are even more iconic. The place is Chesterwood, the former home and studio of the sculptor Daniel Chester French. He is known especially for two statues: One is “The Minute Man of 1775,” “the embattled farmer” of the American Revolution and “the shot heard round the world,” in Emerson’s phrasing. In French’s studio are three maquettes, different sized models, of the other, more famous icon: the somber seated Abraham Lincoln of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C., the prime backdrop for American cultural history from Marian Anderson to Martin Luther King Jr. and “I have a dream,” from Solidarity Day to

the Million Man March. The Berkshires in the summer are indeed “The Muses in Arcadia,” the fruition of the artistic movement westward on Twenty from Boston.

*the word heads west to Chicago along the great road*

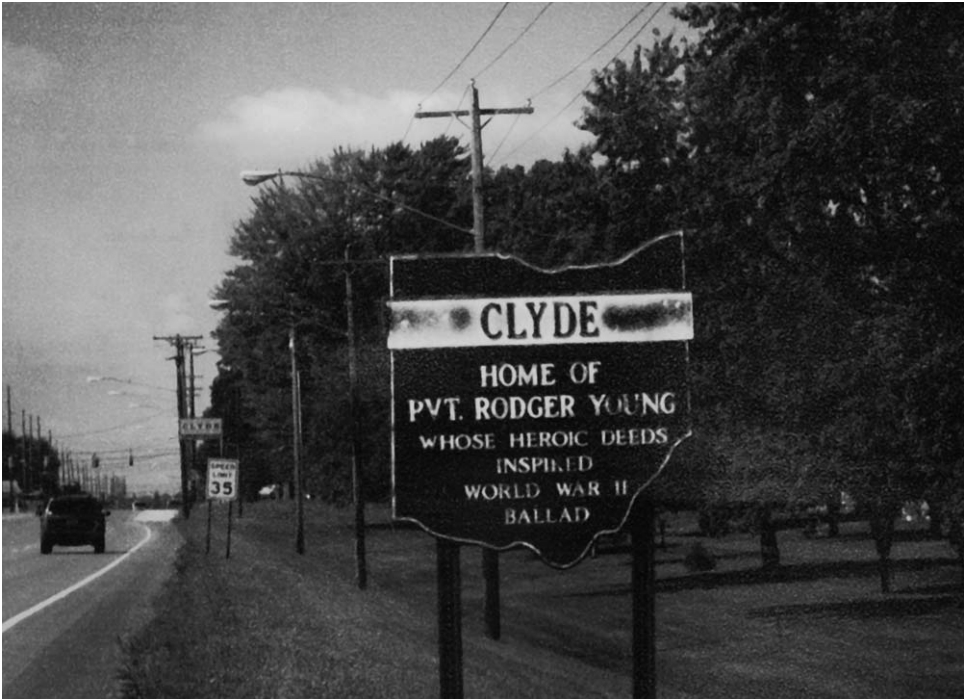
Though it’s not about Massachusetts, the following discussion belongs here. The literary word maintained its primacy much farther west along the route of US 20. The epic migration of African Americans from the deep south to the industrial north spawned great writing as well as great music. Toni Morrison was born and grew up in Lorain, Ohio; her first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, is set there. Lucille Clifton came from DePew, New York, and attended my SUNY college in Fredonia. Born in Tennessee, Ishmael Reed grew up in Buffalo and attended the University of Buffalo.

At the south entrance to the tiny southwestern Ohio town of Camden, on US 127, there was for years a post bearing two signs. The first said “Camden Ohio / Birthplace of Sherwood Anderson.” The second, beneath it, said “Famous Author.” Just in case you wouldn’t know who or what Sherwood Anderson was. It’s a good bet that most Americans today wouldn’t know who he was, though both Ernest Hemingway and William Faulkner acknowledged him as a powerful influence in their portrayal of the darker sides of the American character. A recent rereading of *Winesburg, Ohio* confirmed my memory of its power, and showed how important a stylistic influence he had been on Hemingway. Anderson’s gritty stories influenced many American writers in the twenties and thirties. Faulkner’s life and career were going nowhere special when he met Anderson, who advised him to write about his home town, as Anderson had. Faulkner’s epic creation of Yoknapatawpha County was the result. Faulkner called Anderson “the father of my whole generation of writers.”

Anderson had left Camden very young with his family and his feckless father, to live and grow up in Clyde, on US 20 in western Ohio. He left Clyde for Elyria, also on Twenty, where he prospered in the paint business. He grew dissatisfied with his narrow life, the pettiness of some of his neighbors, and the culture of his towns. He abandoned his business to write, both advertising copy and fiction (if there’s a difference), winding up in Chicago during the richest years of the Chicago Literary Renaissance.

Like many towns with literary offspring, Clyde has a cautious, arms-length relationship with its famous adopted son. He is mentioned on the town's web site. A few associated sites remain and are acknowledged, including the house he lived in, but they are not, as of 2002, highlighted or signed. "Winesburg, Ohio," the fictional name of the grim town in Anderson's fiction, probably did not take kindly to his representation of it. The most honored son of Clyde, to judge by the tourist signs at its borders, is Private Rodger Young, the infantryman whose heroic, selfless death in the Solomons in World War II was immortalized in a beautiful patriotic anthem by Frank Loesser. Rodger Young is a hero in Clyde; Sherwood Anderson clearly is not, not yet, at least. But he was a great writer. And a "Famous Author."

US 20 heads west from Clyde, Ohio, to Chicago. Once it went right downtown, along the lake and right into the Loop, the heart of the city, and exited westward along Lake Street. Since 1938, it has been routed northwest from the southwest side, though it still runs briefly on West



*Sherwood Anderson's home town—but he's not a hero there.*



Lake Street. Twenty has always been a main road to the “City of the Big Shoulders.” The Chicago that Anderson found his way to was a wonderfully yeasty city then, and it is still. Its glories are many, none grander than its literary heritage, as fine as its architecture and its sweeping lakefront parks.

That a city with such a corrupt political history should have preserved its precious lakefront for the use of its ordinary people is a great, improbable joy to me, and to millions of Chicagoans and their manic, ball-chasing dogs. I swim at North Avenue Beach every summer. Try to imagine twenty miles of beautiful public beaches on the Hudson or the East River in Manhattan. You can’t, can you? Too bad. Hosannas to architect and planner Daniel Burnham, and to generations of civic-minded Chicagoans.

Chicago’s literary heritage is the subject for another book, but, briefly: its early literary scene included L. Frank Baum, Carl Sandburg, Edgar Lee Masters, Vachel Lindsay, Floyd Dell, Harriet Monroe, Jane



*Mac in Lincoln Park, Chicago*

Addams, Ben Hecht, Upton Sinclair, Theodore Dreiser, Ring Lardner, and Ernest Hemingway, who grew up in suburban Oak Park. In later years, Chicago would nurture Richard Wright, James T. Farrell, Peter de Vries, Gwendolyn Brooks, Nelson Algren, Studs Terkel, Saul Bellow, Mike Royko, Ana Castillo, Sandra Cisneros, and Gary Paul Nabhan. Local boys like Frank Norris, Archibald MacLeish, John Dos Passos, William L. Shirer, Kenneth Rexroth, and David Mamet started here and flourished elsewhere. Ivan Doig left the rural Montana he so richly chronicles for the “east” and his college education at Chicagoland’s Northwestern University, while I was in grad school there. Chicago theatre is strong, especially at the Goodman and Steppenwolf theatres. New, witty, verbal styles of American comedy began in Chicago: with Bob Newhart, Compass Players Mike Nichols and Elaine May, Barbara Harris, and Shelley Berman, and Second City performers Severn Darden, John Belushi, Alan Arkin, Bill Murray, and Stephen Colbert.

The Great Road is a Road of the Word from Boston to Chicago.