

ON IMPRESSIONISM AND IMPRESSIONS:  
IN GETTING TO KNOW BOSTON

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Field Techniques  
First Exercise  
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It is another one of those rainy, gloomy fall days in Boston, one of those days that make you think of the dark winter soon to come, and of that wet, that encompassing wind that will embrace us, and chill our spines until spring takes its turn again... And I -- I dream of warm days, of sandy beaches, and of that peace that was summer, hoping that, at least, at the very least, the trolley will come, that trolley that never comes, and that takes even longer to arrive when it rains...

I glance from my watch to the rail line for the upteenth time in the last twenty minutes, looking for that light at the mouth of the tunnel to announce the end of this miserable wait. But there is no light and no trolley, and disappointed still, I pace the sidewalk one more time.

People around me are restless as well. We all go through the same set of motions, following the same sequence of steps as dancers in this unrehearsed ballet, coreographed individually, but which somehow is coordinated by our common irritation, responding to the music of the storming traffic behind us. I look at this people -- my dance partners -- one by one, wondering if I too share their look of anxiety and annoyance, that look that betrays a silent curse on the MBTA drivers, directors and whomever else is responsible for this outrageous delay. How can one depend on the undependable, on the unreliable "T"?

"Better light up a cigarette," I tell myself remembering trolley-riders' rule number three: "the T always shows up after you've taken the second puff..." But the man in brown by my side has apparently had the same thought. He has just brought out a cigarette while I hopelessly searched for mine through the eclectic arsenal in the bottom of my purse. "Let him waste a cigarette," I finally decide. I have laughed at this silly myth before, but it is something to cling to when you are desperate, and besides, no one knows -- the trick does work sometimes, as "thank goodness", it seems to have worked now. There comes the "BC" car dragging itself along uncertainly to the stop...

But why does it have to be so darn crowded? How I regret having signed-up for this late afternoon class that forces me to head home with the 9-to-5 downtown crowd! It is not that I despise them personally, they in their business-suited, Saks' Fifth Avenueish, brief-cased style. I despise them as a group, not so much as representatives of the 'business world' (which I must confess, I do despise), but rather as the 5-to-6 pm trolley crowd. They have occupied all the available seats, they step on your feet, they read the sports' section or the business' section when, peering over their shoulders, you would much rather read if Somoza has resigned at last!

I hesitate for a moment -- "should I wait for the next car?" Rule number five says that when the trolley delay is longer than usual, there will be another car -- not as crowded-- shortly after. "Silly rules, silly trolley, silly crowd," I murmur deciding to go in after all, at the last minute, fighting my way in and through elbows, brief-cases and umbrellas (at the very last minute!), trying to keep my balance as the car jerks out of the stop, swings to right, then to the left, and I almost fall over a Filene's shopping bag strategically placed in the aisle.

How can one stand this daily torture? And to believe that only a little over a year ago I found the trolleys to be quaint, riding them fun, and the crowd interesting! And to think that I was thankful for having trolleys to get around the city, and that I even rode all the lines one time, from first to final stop -- Mattapan to Harvard Square, Boudoin to Revere, BC to Lechmere -- everyone of them, every rail tentacle, just to see how broad was my domain through the trolley, how large was my new universe of action!

I smile as I remember the madness of those first weeks, and that unsatiated thirst to see this city, to learn her, and to feel her in all her vibrations, dance to all her sounds, and paint her with all her colors. But then, it was summer -- my first summer in Boston, that summer I came to Boston alone and on my own, testing the boundaries of my new freedom. There was then just the city and I, strangers to each other, and I, a stranger to myself still.

I came to Boston that summer to stay, to study like so many others did. I left Illinois and its drabby cornfields one morning, without regrets, only too glad to escape its monotonous plains. I came in a truck -- a huge rented truck -- hauling along all that had been left of ten years of marriage, of ten years of being persons that were not me, that were not of me, and that I did not want to be. I hauled furniture, books, old photographs. Everything else -- the persons I was not, the feelings I did not want to feel, the memories I did not want to remember -- I threw out of the window. They stayed, I hope, somewhere between Illinois and Massachusetts, probably in the long and never-ending hills of the Pennsylvania Turnpike.

I arrived in Boston lighthearted, so 'lighthearted' in fact that I did not even mind the late afternoon traffic dragging <sup>that</sup> through the freeway. It was early in the summer, early enough to catch the last batch of the year's graduating class still dragging their books and mattresses down to the sidewalks as I carried mine one, two, three stories up to 'roaches retreat', the apartment I mistakenly rented the day the roaches must have gone to the beach (or simply hid under the dust). On moving day, however, they were there to greet me, crawling from every corner and every crack -- and there were many cracks to crawl from. But that summer I learned to live with the roaches, yelling at them as we played 'hide and seek' and 'spray and sweep', almost every night.

People who live alone often talk to themselves, but I talked to the roaches. They were, in fact, the only intruders in my solitude. For I knew almost no one in the new city, no one whose name I would write on the "in case of emergency notify ..." card in my wallet. Yet, in a way, it was a self-imposed solitude I clung to those first weeks. I wanted to be alone, and I knew I needed to be alone for a while. I had lived with others all my life, adjusted to others and their tastes and whims for so long, that I had never been able to know for sure how I really liked to live, what I really liked on my own and what I had simply grown accustomed to. In fact, out of the many places I have lived throughout the years, Boston was the first one which I had moved to out of my own will. I had chosen to come to Boston, out of a limited

range of choice, it is true, but, nevertheless, it had been a personal choice.

I did not know the city when I came, but I liked her from the beginning, or should I say, in the beginning. I wanted peace, that inner peace that a big city can give to a stranger, and that peace which Boston had in store for me, whether on Saturday afternoons in the Commons, or on Sunday concerts in Copley Square. For who ever said that 'one is never so alone as in a crowd' was right. I moved along with the people of Boston, but not at their pace. And I was alone, I felt alone yet never quite lonely. There was the city: the city, still a mystery box to be opened, <sup>and</sup> examined, its mystery <sup>to be</sup> unveiled; the city, still out of focus for me then, her colors blended, like an impressionist painting at first sight.

I have always preferred 'realism' in literature, but nothing appeals more to me than 'impressionism' when it comes to paintings. I have paid my homages to Da Vinci and Fra Angelico in the Louvre but never with the same enthusiasm with which I gazed at the Monet's, Renoir's, Degas' and all the others in the Jeux de Paumme. There is a particular quality to the "Haystacks", for example, that I never quite found in "La Gioconda", if one may forgive my frankness and ignorance. It is just that an impressionist painting requires a little extra effort from the observer -- at least three different sightings to be exact -- before one can finally capture its total mood and appreciate its greatness. At first sight, for instance, a "Haystack" seems rather out of focus, maybe not even like a haystack. One can see a total ensemble, a blend of colors, but one cannot quite comprehend what it is, not yet. Then one notices the details, and the ensemble is disjointed, the colors separated, <sup>and</sup> the brush details become salient. But little by little, one by one, the details will be forged together, falling together and into a pattern in the third sighting of the picture, until suddenly, <sup>and</sup> in a blink of the eyes, there, there a haystack stands, there all the colors take a new shape, and the details are shaped into a pattern. The ensemble appears again, but this time one can comprehend and capture its contours in a totality, never to be disjointed again -- if one does not let it to be. The entire process does not take more than a minute for most people, but what a delight

it is to go through the same process over and over again, seeing all the details that might have been missed before, going from the whole to its parts and vice-versally, seeing the parts take shape into the whole one more time.

As I think back, the process of my getting to know Boston by living in Boston seems now to have been somehow analogous to that of capturing the content of an impressionist painting. It has been a much more complex process, I know, lasting much longer -- and I do not believe <sup>for</sup> it can be so easily reversed. For I can remember how Boston was just a blurred picture, a meaningless totality when I first saw her, and I still remember noticing her details spring up and break her apart for a while. Yet, I do not know when nor how these details fell into their places producing a pattern, nor do I know when or how the city was to come into focus for me. And worst of all, I cannot think <sup>of,</sup> nor see her details isolated, detached from the patterns that they now form. They seem to be and to have been forever part of this ensemble which is now Boston, like the links in a chain that cannot be broken.

So it is with the trolleys, and the people who ride them daily, and the aspects of "trolley-behavior" which captured my attention at first, but which now are aspects of my own behavior in the trolley. Yet, I still remember the first time I rode a trolley-car in Boston and how chaotic the station and everything else seemed. I was indeed, quite lost and hesitant, not even knowing if I wanted the "Inbound" or the "Outbound" car. . . . There was no sequence to the stations in my mind, and I had to constantly check with the little map I had picked up at the Tourists Information Center, which station came next, worrying that I had missed mine. And the people, the people in the stations, in the trolley, everywhere, were simply an amorphous blob moving to a beat I could not quite capture nor comprehend.

But slowly, I started noticing the details: the buildings and signs on my way home which demarked my itinerary and allowed me to remember where to get out; the little bits of people's behavior which let me know, for instance, that when 'inbound' I had to pay on my way in the car, and when 'outbound' on the way out. These were little bits of information, which, like the small details in an impressionist painting, had to

be pulled out of the ensemble and viewed in isolation, before they could fall into a pattern, and then as a pattern, merge into the context of the totality.

My daily runs on the "BC" trolley-line, for example, have made<sup>me</sup> aware of the patterning of what I have come to call "trolley-behavior," and of the particular symbolic means through which people can silently communicate with each other in the rather formal, impersonal context of the trolley. If you are trolley "habitué", for example, you never come in without a book; it would be unthinkable. How else could you establish your territory and let others know that they would better stop coveting your seat? You plan to stay for a while if you open a book and keep your eyes on it, reading voraciously. Yet, it is also the book, when its pages are flipped as you compare how many more pages till the end of the chapter with how many stops until yours by looking out of the window a couple of times, that will announce you are almost ready to depart. Once closed and put away in your bag, the book becomes your passport out of and through the crowd. Those standing will watch for your cue, and open the way for you -- but you must move out fast, else you get caught in the struggle over your seat (unless, of course, someone decides to guarantee it and blocks your way out!). Your book is also your 'status' symbol, and you must either read the current MBTA best-seller (last summer it was "Roots"-- this week it seems to be "Nixon's Memoirs") or something really profound like the "Illiad", if you are to gain a certain 'respect.' Textbooks, of course, are always in order, and so are newspapers. But if you don't want people breathing over your neck to find out the Red Sox's latest standings in the American League, you should leave the paper for home, and take a book instead to the "T." The book is in the last instance the best way to isolate yourself from the crowd, and to make time go faster -- the ride seem somehow shorter.

These small facts, of course, can only be learned through continuous observation, better yet, through 'participant-observation' and actual 'experience,' for they are somehow meaningless outside of the context of 'trolley-behavior', and they can only be thoroughly comprehended through the daily ordeal of riding the "BC" line. (Unless, of course, somebody tells you!).

Here perhaps the analogy to the impressionist painting falls short of explaining the actual process, the reasons behind the process of getting to know a city and making it fall into focus. Unlike a painting, a city is a dynamic totality which moves, changes and breaths, and which one must interact with at different levels simply to carry on the business of living. For the facts, the details and then the patterns of life in a new city are isolated from the totality and observed because one needs to learn about them to adapt, <sup>and</sup> to fall into the pace of the city in order to 'survive.' The details are not simply colors on a picture, but may <sup>be</sup> markers you will want to remember to situate you in space, or they might be the people who will cash your checks, bring your correspondence, give you a seat in the trolley. They need to fall into places and to form patterns, to become 'stereotypes', at least in the beginning, so that life can be a little more predictable and less full of tensions (the tensions which life in the city eventually brings).

It is too sad however, and perhaps inevitable that, as you get to know the city better, as you learn the patterns that set her pace, she loses some <sup>rest of</sup> ~~the~~ the mystery that enchanted you at first. You yourself fall into a certain pattern of living, and stop visiting the places, the little nooks and crannies of the city that had that special appeal at first.

Like the afternoons I used to spend in the Commons' lying on the grass, watching the children play in the pond, lovers embracing as they walked, and the old men taking a short nap on the benches. Those afternoons are long gone now, and so are the evenings, those warm summer evenings I walked around Harvard Square, losing myself in bookstores, tasting exquisite dishes in small restaurants, and stumping my feet to the tune of the dozens of musicians who filled the the Square with music and laughter.

But then, it was summer -- my first summer in Boston, that summer I came to Boston -- when it was warm, and the days were not gloomy, and when I was out of pace with the city and just falling into pace with myself. And I had the time, then, the time to let myself be, and to let my curiosity about the city lead me into 'explorations.'



I have become part of Boston's ensemble now. I am just one of the millions of trolley-riders, stuck in this traffic right now, wanting to get home fast, to get a seat, to open my book and immerse myself in its pages, to isolate myself from this pushy crowd.

Come on, trolley ! Get going !