The myth making of nation building: *Walden* and the technological sublime

Nicolas Brinded (Goldsmiths, University of London)

Abstract

This paper will explore the role of the sublime as a mythic structure that became linked to an American idea of nationalism. In the nineteenth-century, the first painters of American scenery used the aesthetics of the natural sublime to hint at the grandeur of the New World, and the boundless possibility and plenty offered by the largely untouched continent. In the later nineteenth-century and early twentieth century the sublime mutated into a celebration of man-made feats. Railroads, bridges, and skyscrapers came to be regarded as an American technological sublime, and were celebrated as examples of native industry and craftsmanship. The technological sublime replaced the natural sublime both figuratively and literally, as the country became more and more overrun by Euro-American colonization, and wilderness areas were annexed to National Parks.

Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* (1854) dramatizes the narrator's encounter with the technological sublime, which is represented by the railroad that runs through the south end of the pond. *Walden* was written during the period in which the railroad was expanding throughout the United States, and the natural sublime was making way for the technological sublime. Thoreau is both fascinated and appalled, and spends much time pondering the implications of the railroad upon commerce, as well as celebrating its technological achievements. I argue that Thoreau attempts to enfold the railroad into a version of the landscape sublime, but finds that he is unable to when he considers the wider picture of capitalism into which it fits. Through Thoreau's ambivalent relationship to the railroad I will explore myths around which ideas of American nationalism were constructed.

Keywords: Walden, Thoreau, USA, American literature, nineteenth century, nature, trains, technology, sublime, railroad

> 'The American railroad, in short, was a vehicle of territorial conquest and nation-building.' (Marx 1988, p. 186)

The above quote from Leo Marx refers specifically to the manner in which railroad companies expanded into the western United States in the nineteenth-century, clearing and reshaping the American landscape in order to make way for train tracks. The first railroad to open in the United States was the Baltimore and Ohio in 1830, and by the onset of the Civil War in 1861 there were over thirty-thousand miles of railroad track (Brogan 2001, p. 378). The national network of railroads completely changed the American way of life, as historian Hugh Brogan (2001, p. 379) notes 'It is scarcely too much to say that [the railroad] underlay every new development, whether in politics, economics, culture or religion in the middle and latter years of the nineteenth century'. The expanding network of railroads across America became a tool for 'territorial conquest' as areas of wilderness were annexed to railroad companies and razed to put down tracks; Native American populations were aggressively displaced.

The nation-building aspect of the railroad is both physical and symbolic: the railroad connected the nation in a way that transformed commerce and travel, and helped to actually build one 'nation' as opposed to a number of disconnected regions; symbolically it served an important role in altering the myth of the American nation, from a place of agrarian plenty into a place of great technological prowess, and it is this metamorphosis of the American myth that I shall examine at length in this paper, particularly within the context of Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* (1854).

Thoreau's narrative tells of his several years spent living a life of quiet austerity outside of mainstream society in a small hut by Walden Pond in Concord, Massachusetts. This situation allowed Thoreau to, as he described it: 'live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived' (2008, p. 65). Thoreau is desirous of a pastoral existence, yet finds that his retreat is interrupted by the intrusion of the noisy sounds of a nearby railroad. Yet, it is not merely the railroad itself that concerns Thoreau, but rather what it represents. As Marx goes on to state (1988, p. 184):

> [T]he more we consider the evocative power of this complex image, the more apparent it will be that from the time of its initial appearance in the American landscape the railroad's merely visual or perceptual attributes have been inseparably bound up with its underlying thematic, social, or ideological significance.

It is these significances that seem to greatly trouble Thoreau, and in the following I shall examine what they mean for the national mythology of the young United States.

To the early settlers, America was a land of infinite pastoral possibilities: 'Most Elizabethan ideas of America were invested in visual images of a virgin land. What most fascinated Englishmen was the absence of like European society; here was a landscape untouched by history – nature unmixed with art' (Marx 1964, p. 36). The myth of America as 'virgin land' was eventually displaced, or moulded, into the idea that the land itself was divinely conferred upon the settlers, and through the land one might commune with divinity. Angela Miller elaborates on the place of landscape within ideas of nationalism (2007, p. 92):

> Images of American landscape were […] among the first popular expressions of cultural nationalism in the early decades of the nineteenth century; the United States turned to Romantic images of nature as a source of patriotism. Anglo-Protestant beliefs merged with wilderness ideas and shaped the United States' emergent sense of exceptionalism: the idea that America was different than Europe because of its nature, a place apart, an unpeopled wilderness where history, born in nature rather than in corrupt institutions, could begin again.

Early representations of the American continent were thus often concerned with expressing the wonder of the New World, and served an ideological function by implying that the 'exceptional' qualities of the land – the vast swathes of untouched wilderness which set it apart from Europe – were reflected in its citizens, its society, and its democratic ideals. American artists such as Thomas Cole (1801-1848), Asher Brown Durant (1796-1886), and Frederic Edwin Church (1826-1900) drew upon the tradition of European landscapists such as J.M.W. Turner (1775-1851) and John Martin (1789-1854) to create canvases in which the American environment is represented in terms of the sublime of Edmund Burke (1729-1797). Burke's idea of the sublime was that it arises from feelings of fear and awe (2008, p. 36-37):

> Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling.

The 'strongest emotion' that Burke alludes to is something that American landscape artists attempted to arouse within the viewer by depicting the wonder of the New World. It might be awesome and terrifying in its immensity, in its breadth and scope, and its wildness, but these qualities also suggest the Divine at work in the land. As the literary critic Chandos Michael Brown (2012, p. 162) notes, 'To contemplate this tremendous landscape was to grasp God's design for a great nation, and the vision was wondrous and terrible… and sublime'.

It was not only in the visual arts of nineteenth century America, but also in written culture that tropes of the sublime recurred. A prominent passage from the essay 'Nature', by Ralph Waldo Emerson (Thoreau's contemporary), illustrates how the landscape was interpreted for spiritual purposes (1982, p. 39):

> Standing on the bare ground, - my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space, - all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eye-ball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God. The name of the nearest friend sounds then foreign and accidental: to be brothers, to be acquaintances, - master or servant, is then a trifle and a disturbance. I am the lover of uncontained and immortal beauty. In the wilderness, I find something more dear and connate than in streets or villages. In the tranquil landscape, and especially in the distant line of the horizon, man beholds somewhat as beautiful as his own nature.

Emerson charts an experience in which the process of looking becomes as important as that which is 'seen'. That is, by communing with the land as a mediator, Emerson provides a link between the artist, the landscape, the sphere of social relations ('to be brothers, to be acquaintances, - master or servant'), and yet, through the process of interpretation, he transcends all to become 'part or particle of God.' Emerson's desire to mythologise the land is notable in the final line: 'In the tranquil landscape, and especially in the distant line of the horizon, man beholds somewhat as beautiful as his own nature'. Yet, the act of mythologising (which disregards the trappings of society because it is 'something more dear and connate than in streets or villages') is also an act of self-reflection: it is man's own nature that Emerson sees. Nature is held up as the spiritual analogue to man's own inner self, yet this is only possible in the 'wilderness', a feature that is abundant in the New World. There is, then, a moral weight attached to appreciating natural scenery, particularly American scenery, in which wilderness is abundant.

However, the natural environment of nineteenth century America was not being treated with due care: forests were cut down for logging, once-wild fields were being divided into plots of farmland, and, as noted, the railroad was expanding ever further into the wilderness. The 19th century artist Thomas Cole wrote in a letter of March 1836, referring to the building of the Canjoharie and Catskill railway line in the town of Catskill, that he was appalled by the 'copper-hearted barbarians… cutting *all* the *trees* down in the beautiful valley on which I have looked so often with a loving eye' (quoted in Wallach 2002, p. 340, emphasis in original). It is clear that Cole sees appetite for profit as the driving force behind the desecration done to the valley. His desire to aim 'maledictions on all dollar-godded utilitarians' (quoted in Wallach 2002, p. 340) implies that he sees all capitalist profit making as ultimately destructive, embodied in this particular case by the railroad companies. The

trees in Cole's valley are being removed to make way for even more of the country to be connected and colonised, eventually even more trees will be cut down as Euro-American expansion moves further towards the interior of the continent. Literary critic Deborah Madsen, in a discussion of James Fenimore Cooper's romance novel *The Pioneers* (1823), notes that, in the time-frame of the novel (1998, p 77):

> [T]he American landscape is changing its status and becoming an asset rather than a communal holding. Nature is being violated and nature's laws are being replaced with petty legal systems that condone exploitation when they should promote conservation. The wilderness is vanishing and with it the values that distinguished America from the corrupt societies of the Old World; the opportunities for spiritual renewal offered by the wilderness are shrinking. The exceptional destiny of America is precisely to resist this kind of corruption but, where the original colonist believed they had purified their society and their church, Cooper represents this as a struggle that is still urgent in the nineteenth century as it had been two centuries earlier. What is at stake in this struggle is the national character and the future of the American nation.

The continued intrusion of man into the frontier risks not just altering irreparably the landscape, but also the character of the American nation – the myth of the nation as a land and people that could be markedly different from Europe. How best to overcome this dialectical tension?

The historian David Nye writes that, in keeping with this changing landscape, the expanding marketplace of the nineteenth century enacted a transition from the celebration of the sublimity of the land and a move towards technological progress as a new symbol of the sublime (1994, p. 37):

> The sublime was inseparable from a peculiar double action of the imagination by which the land was appropriated as a natural symbol of the nation while, at the same time, it was being transformed into a man-made landscape. One appeal of the technological sublime in America was that it conflated the preservation and transformation of the natural world… [Americans] were assaulting the natural world with axes, shovels, plows, and railroads, literally reworking the landscape, usurping the place of natural things with man-made objects. They were vigorously projecting themselves into the world, mixing their labour with it, and building internal improvements.

As such, an American idea of the sublime shifted from a celebration of the land into a celebration of man-made technological accomplishments. The landscape was the origin of the American sublime, the 'source of patriotism' identified by Angela Miller (2007, p. 92). Nye posits that the more the natural landscape was reshaped by technological advancements such as the railroad, bridges, and skyscrapers, the more the sublime came to be recognised in machinery and architecture. We will see in *Walden* that Thoreau struggles to reconcile these two different interpretations of the sublime, and the train that thunders past Walden Pond is

described by Thoreau in terms previously reserved for the natural sublime. That the sublime came to be seen in technological advances, and in particular came to be exemplified in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century city, is borne out by novels of the period. In Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* (1900), Carrie Meeber finds walking the streets of Chicago to be an utterly disorienting experience (2009, p. 15):

> These vast buildings, what were they? These strange energies and huge interests, for what purposes were they there? She could have understood the meaning of a little stone-cutter's yard at Columbia City, carving little pieces of marble for individual use, but when the yards of some huge stone corporation came into view, filled with spur tracks and flat cars, transpierced by docks from the river and traversed overhead by immense trundling cranes of wood and steel, it lost all significance in her little world.

Carrie Meeber's reaction to the urban environment recalls Burke's idea of the sublime as engendering feelings of fear and awe.

As with the natural sublime before it, the technological sublime was seen as an indicator of the exceptional quality of the American nation and its people. Nye continues (1994, p. 43):

> Rather than treat the sublime as part of a transcendental philosophy, Americans merged it with revivalism. Not limited to nature, the American sublime embraced technology. Where Kant had reasoned that the awe inspired by the sublime object made men aware of their moral worth, the American sublime transformed the individual's experience of immensity and awe into a belief in national greatness.

Nye (1994, p. xiii.) cites railroads, bridges, skyscrapers, 'the earth-shaking launch of a space shuttle', as examples of the American technological sublime. All of these examples became ways by which the United States celebrated itself, its industry and its craftsmanship. Nye further explores the manner by which the technological sublime was fused with the landscape sublime (1994, p. 59):

> The machine – whether locomotive, steamboat, or telegraph – was considered to be a part of the sublime landscape, and at first it was included in pastoral paintings as a harmonious part. This confusion of the natural and technological sublime was encouraged by the owners and managers of the railroads, who not only offered clergymen tips on sermons but also commissioned paintings of the landscapes visible along their lines. The public was exhorted to use the railways not only because of their speed and convenience, but also as a means of enjoying scenery.

In the passage above Nye describes how a rhetorical sleight of hand allowed the railroad companies to appropriate the landscape sublime. The national mythology of sublime nature as an indicator of the divine mission of the American project was remoulded to include the advance of machinery and technology. Furthermore, by commissioning paintings that

blended the railway into the natural world, railroad companies were able to imply that the machine could be seamlessly inserted into the wild, that a marriage of technology and nature was not only possible, but actually desirable: that technology, far from damaging the environment, could bring American citizens closer to nature.

Written during this period of historical flux, Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* engages with the idea of the technological sublime when the narrator describes in great detail his ambivalence toward the railroad that skirts the edge of Walden Pond. The railroad tracks, as Thoreau (2008, p. 81) writes, pass 'about a hundred rods south of where I dwell' – very close to the pond. Thoreau is both fascinated and appalled, and spends much time pondering the implications of the railroad upon commerce, yet at the same time celebrating its technological achievements. Thoreau's ambivalence stems from his distaste for capitalist practises that he elaborates on at several junctures in the text, often juxtaposing the world of commercial and capitalist activity – the world of man – against the natural world.[1]

The second chapter, 'Where I Lived and What I Lived For', provides a useful metaphorical example of the divide between nature and commerce that recurs throughout the text (2008, p. 59):

> I have frequently seen a poet withdraw, having enjoyed the most valuable part of a farm, whilst the crusty farmer supposed that he had got a few wild apples only. Why, the owner does not know it for many years when a poet has put his farm in rhyme, the most admirable kind of invisible fence, has fairly impounded it, milked it, skimmed it and got all the cream, and left the farmer with only the skimmed milk.

A clear hierarchy is offered here: the poet, who converts the arable pastures into metaphor and simile, will have 'enjoyed the most valuable part of a farm', whereas the farmer, concerned with profit, is spiritually destitute (although, presumably, financially better off than the creative artist, who, in Thoreau's case, lives in a small cabin). The boundaries that the narrator recognises are not those of ownership and property, but those of symbolism, which is 'the most admirable kind of invisible fence'. In this passage the figurative is placed above the literal: the 'invisible boundaries' are 'admirable' and the metaphorical 'cream' which the poet will glean from observing the farm is more valuable than the literal cream that the farmer can take to the market. The farmer, however, is left unaware of this exchange, believing that the poet has taken 'a few wild apples only'. To the poet the farm yields an experience that is close to Emerson's becoming 'part or particle of God' and the poet is able to appreciate the farm in a way that the 'owner' never can, precisely because he seeks to

[1] A theme that Thoreau had already explored somewhat in his essay 'Resistance to Civil Government' (1849).

'own' it. An inability to appreciate nature, sublime or otherwise, is, in this instance, linked to a desire for commerce, and it is only the artist who can respond to the American landscape in the way that reaps the 'most valuable part'. To try to profit financially from the natural world, is, apparently, to lose sight of its true value.

The railroad is described in the fourth chapter, 'Sounds', in which, as above, the poet is attempting to commune with nature, perhaps to even reach the transcendent state of his friend Ralph Waldo Emerson.[2] Thoreau writes that he undertook no reading during his first summer at Walden Pond, instead spending his time hoeing beans and sitting watching the scenery. Sometimes, lost in meditation, a whole day would pass without his realising it: 'I grew in those seasons like corn in the night and they were far better than any work of the hands would have been... My days were not days of the week, bearing the stamp of any heathen deity, nor were they minced into hours and fretted by the ticking of a clock' (2008, p. 21). It seems important to Thoreau to distinguish 'his' days from the days of civilised society that seeks to divide and subdivide time into units. Thoreau's contemplation allows him spiritual growth, and frees him from clock time, which regulates the opening and closing of shops, offices, and factories. Thus an opposition is cast between two conceptions of time. As with the example of the poet and the farmer, the possibility of a transcendental experience is associated with a freedom from man-made boundaries, be they of land ownership or of the clock, both of which are inextricably tied to capitalism and commerce.

Thoreau goes on to describe a summer afternoon by the pond, noting the hawks circling, the 'tantivy' of wild pigeons, white pine bows, a fishhawk, the 'glassy surface of the pond', a mink, and some reed birds: in short a vision of pastoral tranquillity (2008, p. 81). Into this scene Thoreau adds that 'for the last half hour I have heard the rattle of railroad cars, now dying and reviving like a partridge' (2008, p. 81). It appears as if Thoreau is attempting to respond poetically to the American landscape, but is interrupted by modernity. The railroad does not seem to fit into the picture that Thoreau has drawn so far concerning the wildlife of the pond. It is man-made, not natural: a noisy interference. Thoreau's description accords with Leo Marx's (1964, p. 343) exploration of the incidents in American nineteenth-century literature in which the pastoral and the technological collide:

> Within the lifetime of a single generation, a rustic and in large part wild landscape was transformed into the site of the world's most productive industrial machine. It would be difficult to imagine more profound contradictions of value or meaning than those made

[2] Emerson actually owned the land in Concord upon which Thoreau's cabin stood.

> manifest by this circumstance. Its influence upon our literature is suggested by the recurrent image of the machine's sudden entrance onto the landscape.

Thoreau provides a prime example of just what Marx describes: Thoreau's restful afternoon is interrupted by the intrusion of the engine cars racing past; yet the sound of the railroad cars is described as 'now dying and reviving like a partridge', the whistle of the locomotive sounds like the 'scream of a hawk' (2008, p. 81), and the steam cloud the carriages leave in their wake are 'like many a downy cloud which I have seen, high in the heavens' (2008, p. 82). Thoreau's response to the railroad, then, is to liken it to the natural occurrences around him, in order to frame it as part of the American landscape, to effectively create a vision similar to that which railroad companies wanted to promote by encouraging painters to paint landscapes involving railways: the freight cars as belonging to an Arcadian natural scene. There is little doubt that the train has echoes of the sublime, the description that follows of it as an 'iron horse' that makes 'the hills echo with his snort like thunder, shaking the earth with his feet, and breathing fire and smoke from his nostrils' (2008, p. 82) conjures the dread and wonder that Burke ascribed to the 'strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling'. Thoreau's claim that 'it seems as if the earth had got a race now worthy to inhabit it' suggests that he is attempting to place this great symbol of modernity – the train – within the philosophical framework of the sublime, where the train is able to stand side by side with nature because they share the same ineffable qualities. The train, therefore, becomes both a signifier of progress which further suggests the divine at work in the American landscape.

However, the railroad will not quite fit into this framework. Thoreau also notes just one paragraph earlier that the railroad and the commercial enterprise that it facilitates are damaging to the country, and, ultimately to the poet's consciousness (2008, p. 82):

> All the Indian huckleberry hills are stripped, all the cranberry meadows are raked into the city. Up comes the cotton, down goes the woven cloth; up comes the silk, down goes the woollen; up come the books, but down goes the wit that writes them.

In the course of just a few pages, Thoreau has gone from likening the railroad to sublime nature, to chastising it for expediting the stripping of huckleberry bushes – for essentially doing the same work as the farmer who, because of his desire for profit, cannot appreciate nature. How does the reader interpret this sudden shift of position? Should the poet attempt to integrate the railroad into his landscape, even if his initial reaction is to decry the commercial possibilities that the modernised, post-industrial landscape suggests? Perhaps, like many early landscape paintings featuring the railroad blending into a pastoral setting, Thoreau is undertaking to reconcile nature and technology – to envision a harmonious future in a far

from harmonious present. In 1854 the American Civil War was only seven years away from starting, and Thoreau had already made his anti-slavery feeling known in 'Resistance to Civil Government' (1849). Nevertheless, this seeming volte-face is disorientating, and subsequent passages seem to oscillate between believing the railroad to represent an paradigmatic example of where and how nineteenth-century America has gone awry and, alternatively, attempting to integrate it into a vision of a sublime landscape.

The next change of position occurs when Thoreau (2008, p. 83) notes that: 'The startings and arrivals of the cars are now the epochs in the village day... farmers set their clocks by them'. This observation appears to place the railroad in opposition to nature: if it is a device for the 'mincing' of days into hours and the 'fretting' of clock time, then it is counter to the meditative time that allows Thoreau's spiritual 'growth'. However, the following passage offers another contradictory response – by approving the enterprise and bravery of those involved in the commercial enterprise of the railroad – before going on to praise commerce itself as: 'unexpectedly confident and serene, alert, adventurous, and unwearied. It is very natural in its methods withal, far more so than many fantastic enterprises and sentimental experiments, and hence its singular success' (2008, p. 84). Is the suggestion that commerce is 'natural' another rhetorical attempt at a unification between nature and culture? In the following passages Thoreau lists some of the goods that are transported on the railroad, each conjuring up images of a particular American activity – lumber from the Maine woods; Thomaston lime; salt fish from New England; 'tall pine, hewn on far northern hills' (2008, p. 85) – which together provide a link, symbolic and actual, between the various communities joined via the railroad.[3]

The final passage concerning the railroad in 'Sounds' begins with Thoreau switching positions once more when he considers that the cattle train carries oxen, calves, and sheep away from their 'natural' environment. The farmers' sheep dogs are anthropomorphised as workers in the capitalist mode of production, disenfranchised as the animals that they previously shepherded are shipped away. For the dogs: 'Their vocation, too, is gone' (2008, p. 86). Is Thoreau's conclusion that it is impossible to relocate the railroad into the realm of the natural when the railroad seeks to bring the natural into the realm of the commercial? The ultimate judgement on the railroad is reserved for the final sentence of this paragraph: 'I will not have my eyes put out and my ears spoiled by its smoke and steam and hissing'. Does this conclusion imply that Thoreau's attempt to see the railroad in terms of the natural sublime has

[3] It should be noted that Thoreau's examples are all from the North West.

been obviated? Does the reader assume that this is Thoreau's final word and judgement on the subject, ignoring the apparently contradictory arguments and counter-arguments that have gone before?

The contradictions that make up *Walden* have long been a source of puzzlement for critics. Literary critic Michael T. Gilmore (1986, p. 293) believes that the inconsistency of Thoreau's arguments makes *Walden* 'in important ways... a defeated text.' The literary theorist Walter Benn Michaels, despite providing a post-structuralist reading that builds *Walden*'s many contradictions into the framework of the text, nevertheless believes that the unresolved nature of Thoreau's work 'makes us nervous' (1992, p. 421). Literary critic Richard Bridgman's *Dark Thoreau* (1982, p. 76) claims that it 'suffers from an insufficiency of depth and a confusion of attitudes' before going on to state that 'I do not mean to condemn Thoreau with niggling accusations of inconsistency, but I am prepared to claim that his presentation will often puzzle and disconcert the attentive reader'. However, one might consider that, rather than weakening Thoreau's argument, his many ideological oscillations are a necessary part of his investigation and a means by which he can explore and understand – get to the bottom of – a rapidly industrialising society and culture. The fathoming of depths has a particular significance in *Walden*: in the sixteenth chapter, 'The Pond in Winter,' Thoreau attempts to fathom Walden Pond. Pointing out that 'Many have believed that Walden reached quite through to the other side of the globe' (2008, p. 192) Thoreau seeks to get to the literal bottom of things and sound out the pond. However, he does not completely disregard the idea of the pond as 'bottomless': 'What if all ponds were shallow?' he writes, 'Would it not react upon the minds of men? I am thankful that this pond was made deep and pure for a symbol. While men believe in the infinite some ponds will be thought to be bottomless' (2008, p. 192). Once again, the metaphorical is as, or more, important than the literal. Yet Thoreau must nevertheless consider both positions, and 'fathom the depths' before he can reach this conclusion. In all cases it is the symbolic that carries the most significance. As the ecocritical theorist Lawrence Buell (1995, p. 11) asserts: 'Thoreau was not really *that* interested in nature as such; nature was a screen for something else'.

These same motifs occur in chapter nine, 'The Ponds', in which Thoreau again mentions the huckleberry bushes (2008, p. 119):

> The fruits do not yield their true flavor to the purchaser of them, nor to him who raises them for the market. There is but one way to obtain it, yet few take that way. If you would know the flavor of huckleberries, ask the cowboy or the partridge. It is a vulgar error to suppose that you have tasted huckleberries who never plucked them. A huckleberry never reaches Boston; they have not been known there since they grew on

> her three hills. The ambrosial and essential part of the fruit is lost with the bloom which is rubbed off in the market cart, and they become mere provender. As long as Eternal justice reigns, not one innocent huckleberry can be transported thither from the country's hills.

The railroad is not mentioned by name in this passage, nor does it need to be: the reader already knows how the huckleberries reach Boston. Once again, nature and commercial practises are juxtaposed: one can only truly 'taste' the fruit if one understands also where the fruit comes from, and obtains it directly from the source. Both sides of the coin of commerce are denigrated – neither the purchaser nor the seller fully appreciates the fruit. As Thoreau explains in the first chapter (2008, p. 21):

> I cannot believe that our factory system is the best mode by which men may get clothing. The condition of the operatives is becoming every day more like that of the English; and it cannot be wondered at, since, as far as I have heard or observed, the principal object is, not that mankind may be well and honestly clad, but, unquestionably, that corporations may be enriched.

It is, then, not just the railroad itself that Thoreau finds distasteful, but the commerce that it represents. As previously noted, the sound of the freight cars blends into the bucolic surroundings, and can be allegorised as 'natural.' However, it is the commercial practises that cannot be absorbed so readily. This, then, is the crux of the matter: the American way of life is changing, has already changed. The 'myth' of the nation as a pastoral paradise has long since given way to one in which industry drives a major part of the economy. The railroad, of course, is a major facilitator of this change, and as such the national myth has been re-aligned to incorporate the 'iron horse'. That the motifs of the sublime recur in both concepts of the nation is entirely appropriate, given that the language of the sublime speaks to awe and terror, facets that can be discerned in both versions of the American myth. Thoreau, in his flawed attempt at a pastoral retreat, finds that he cannot escape the technological sublime, symbol of the new mythology of the United States, and does much to reveal that what this symbol truly represents is a rapidly shifting economy. 'So is your pastoral life whirled past and away', Thoreau (2008, p. 86) drily observes of the railroad, and this, indeed, seems to be the case.

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