



Nationalism and the Nature of Thoreau's "Walking"

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LIKE many American writers of the 1840s and '50s, Henry David Thoreau often found himself at odds with the bellicose direction of his own nation while fighting to create a culture less in thrall to the history and culture of other nations. As early as 1818 William Cullen Bryant had accused American poetry of being "a sickly and affected imitation of the peculiar manner of some of the late popular poets of England," and in the decades that followed, everything from the novels of James Fenimore Cooper to the Young America movement exhibited an uneasy and contentious nationalism.¹ Although Thoreau himself would be among the country's most incendiary critics of Manifest Destiny and the U.S.-Mexican War (1846–48), he was also patriotic enough to begin his historic stay at Walden Pond on July Fourth. Indeed, on his only trip abroad—later recounted as the rather desultory "A Yankee in Canada"—he even succumbed to a mild case of xenophobia. Coincidentally or not, it was after returning from this miserable, illness-plagued trip that Thoreau began the Journal entries that eventually led to "Walking" (1851)—perhaps his most original essay on nationhood and national culture. This was also when the Journal as a whole began to morph fairly quickly from what Robert Sattelmeyer has called "a literary workbook" devoted to "drafted passages intended for essays, lectures, and books"

¹Bryant, quoted in Robert Weisbuch, "Post-Colonial Emerson and the Erasure of Europe," in *The Cambridge Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Joel Porte and Sandra Morris (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 200.

into a daily, sometimes hourly, record of the moonlit ponds, autumnal forests, and “impervious and quaking swamps” within a ten-mile radius of his home.²

The famous opening lines of “Walking” are a riveting formulation of the nationalism Thoreau has in mind: “I wish to speak a word for Nature, for absolute freedom and wildness, as contrasted with a freedom and culture merely civil,—to regard man as an inhabitant, or a part and parcel of Nature, rather than a member of society.” Not only does this stirring preamble introduce the sphere of “wildness” that will dominate the essay, but it deliberately constricts the parameters of nationhood to those of nature. “If the moon looks larger here than in Europe,” Thoreau reflects a little later, “if the heavens of America appear infinitely higher, and the stars brighter,” these facts must be “symbolical of the height to which the philosophy and poetry and religion of her inhabitants may one day soar”—“else to what end does the world go on, and why was America discovered?”³

Thoreau’s emphasis on “philosophy and poetry and religion” may be the best indication that “Walking” is an essay on nationhood and national culture—something Max Weber defined as “a community of sentiment”—and not another of his many fulminations against the State—a political organization that “successfully upholds a claim to the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force in the enforcement of its order.” Essays like “Civil Disobedience” (1848), “Slavery in Massachusetts” (1854), and “A Plea for Captain John Brown” (1859) are obviously among Thoreau’s most relentless and unforgiving attacks on the government’s “use of physical force.” But “Walking” represents a more promising or utopian perspective, in which a proper “community of spirit” might, in Weber’s words, “adequately

²Robert Sattelmeyer, “Historical Introduction” to Henry David Thoreau, *Journal*, Volume 2: 1842–1848, ed. Sattelmeyer (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), p. 447.

³Henry David Thoreau, “Walking,” in *Collected Essays and Poems*, ed. Elizabeth Hall Witherell (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 2001), pp. 225–55, quotations pp. 235, 237–38. Further page references to “Walking” will be to this edition and will be cited in the text.

manifest itself in a state of its own."⁴ Sometime around 1843, Thoreau had announced that "nature is stronger than law, and the sure but slow influence of wind and water will balk the efforts of restricting legislatures. Man cannot set up bounds with safety but where the revolutions of nature will confirm and strengthen, not obliterate them." During the same period, he had said that "a state should be a complete epitome of the earth—a natural principality and by the gradations of its surface and soil conduct the traveller to its principal marts."⁵ By the time he produced "Walking," it would appear that he was looking for an answer of sorts to the concluding words of "Civil Disobedience":

I please myself with imagining a State at last which can afford to be just to all men, and to treat the individual with respect as a neighbor; which even would not think it inconsistent with its own repose, if a few were to live aloof from it, not meddling with it, nor embraced by it, who fulfilled all the duties of neighbors and fellow-men. A State which bore this kind of fruit, and suffered it to drop off as fast as it ripened, would prepare the way for a still more perfect and glorious State, which also I have imagined, but not yet anywhere seen."⁶

This "more perfect and glorious State" is not a body of people amalgamated by the machinery of state and federal governments. Instead, it derives from the far "higher" unity of a language and a culture rooted in the "slow influence of wind and water" and the kind of seasonal "revolutions of nature" that would allow a fruit to "drop off as fast as it ripened." Noting in the *Journal*, for instance, that a neighbor has brought him the carcass of a great heron, Thoreau admits that it "belongs to a different race from myself and Mr. Frost" but is "glad to recognize him for a native of America,—why not an American

⁴Weber, quoted in Anthony D. Smith, *Nationalism and Modernism: A Critical Survey of Recent Theories of Nations and Nationalism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), pp. 14, 70.

⁵*The Journal of Henry D. Thoreau*, ed. Bradford Terry and Francis H. Allen, 14 vols. (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1962), 1:455 (1837–47); unless otherwise noted, all further citations will be from this edition of the *Journal*. Thoreau, *Journal*, Volume 2: 1842–1848, p. 61.

⁶Thoreau, "Civil Disobedience," in *Collected Essays*, pp. 203–24, quotation p. 224.

citizen?”⁷ And in “Walking” he muses, “I know not how significant it is, or how far it is an evidence of singularity, that an individual should thus consent in his pettiest walk with the general movement of the race; but I know that something akin to the migratory instinct in birds and quadrupeds . . . affects both nations and individuals, either perennially or from time to time” (p. 235).

“Walking” makes it clear that Thoreau hopes to use the example of his own life—“Unto a life which I call natural I would gladly follow even a will-o’-the-wisp through bogs and sloughs unimaginable” (p. 251)—as the prototype for a “community of spirit” approximating Johann Gottfried von Herder’s notion of a “natural community.” According to Isaiah Berlin, Herder’s own opposition to the State had led him to conclude that human beings “truly flourish” only “where the group to which they belong” is able to achieve “a fruitful relationship to the environment by which it is shaped and which in turn it shapes. There the individual is happily integrated into a ‘natural community,’ which grows spontaneously, like a plant, and is not held together by artificial clamps, or soldered together by sheer force, or regulated by laws and regulations invented, whether benevolently or not, by the despot or his bureaucrats.”⁸ Although Thoreau had acknowledged in “Civil Disobedience” that the State was not despotic, per se—that Americans, anyway, expected it “to execute their will”—he had also made it plain that even the government of the United States was “liable to be abused and perverted before the people” could “act through

⁷Thoreau, *Journal*, September 1850, 2:63.

⁸Isaiah Berlin, “Herder and the Enlightenment,” in *The Proper Study of Mankind* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997), p. 424. Herder’s nationalism seems particularly attractive since, as Berlin makes clear, he emphasized both sympathy and pluralism and opposed the efforts of any nation to impose its values on any other nation, especially in the name of a greater democracy or a higher culture. But Berlin also treated Herder’s nationalism as almost exclusively cultural, not political. For a more balanced treatment of this dialectic, see Alan Patten, “‘The Most Natural State’: Herder and Nationalism,” *History of Political Thought* 31.4 (Winter 2010): 657–80. And for a study that often complements what follows, see Lance Newman, *Our Common Dwelling: Henry Thoreau, Transcendentalism, and the Class Politics of Nature* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), esp. pp. 171–83. Newman situates Thoreau within the context of “an organic community living in daily communion with the physical body of the land.”

it."⁹ Thus his longing for a more perfect union than the one alluded to in the Preamble to the Constitution—a union in which the American Revolution was ultimately less important than the “revolutions of nature.”

“Walking” is especially interesting because it was conceived during the era of Manifest Destiny. The philosopher Ernest Gellner once wrote that “it is the need for growth that generates nationalism, not vice-versa,” and this insight would seem to be borne out by the many contending nationalisms that emerged during the 1840s and ‘50s—of which a particular view of Manifest Destiny was simply the most successful example.¹⁰ When Ralph Waldo Emerson decreed that “the nervous, rocky West” was “intruding a new and continental element into the national mind,” he was hardly speaking for the nation as a whole.¹¹ While many Southerners had set their sights on Mexico, Cuba, and Brazil, a number of Emerson’s fellow New Englanders opposed expansion altogether. Some worried that the nation was expanding too fast to remain a single entity, others feared that expansion would carry slavery westward, and still others fretted, in the words of Theodore Sedgwick, that introducing “foreign States into the Union” could change “at one blow the whole nature of the confederacy, and place the freemen of the north at the mercy of the Spaniards of Mexico, or the mongrels of South America.” “To *annex* may prove to be *annexed*,” he cautioned. “Change the relative proportions of population and the right of annexation amounts to a right to re-transfer us to colonial vassalage.”¹²

As it happened, the success of Manifest Destiny actually led to the last of English rule in the United States, ending the joint occupation of Oregon Territory, which the United States had shared with England since 1819, as well as any designs

⁹Thoreau, “Civil Disobedience,” pp. 203.

¹⁰Ernest Gellner, *Thought and Change* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), p. 168.

¹¹Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The Young American,” *Essays and Lectures* (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1983), p. 216.

¹²Sedgwick, quoted in Anne Baker, *Heartless Immensity: Literature, Culture, and Geography in Antebellum America* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006), p. 7.

England might have had on Texas. And yet, one of the most notable features of Manifest Destiny was the extent to which it embodied the white, Anglo-Saxon culture of England. This contradiction was often expressed as a kind of double view in which Americans railed against English territorial claims to the continent while simultaneously relying on the English ideal of a parceled, improved land, occupied by a single, homogeneous people, to assert their own territorial rights. On the eve of the War of 1812, the most bitter confrontation between the United States and England since the Revolutionary War, John Quincy Adams suggested that the whole continent of America “appears to be destined by Divine Providence to be peopled by one *nation*, speaking one language, professing one general system of religious and political principles, and accustomed to one general tenor of social uses and customs.”¹³ What he had in mind, obviously, was a people deriving their language and culture from England, but opposed to English rule—an opposition that was especially true of the Revolutionary era. As Leonard Tennenhouse and Elisa Tamarkin have shown, the events of 1776 led to a decisive and irreversible *political* independence from England that actually accelerated a *cultural* deference to “Englishness.” Of course, Americans typically viewed their Englishness as a more perfect version of its archetype—implying, in Tamarkin’s words, that their “profound reinvestment in the symbolic authority of England” was probably “an index” to England’s “loss of real authority.”¹⁴

A double view of this sort had become ubiquitous enough by the 1840s and ’50s for Emerson to state that America, not England, was “the seat and centre of the British race.” That “Walking” would exhibit a similar attitude is hardly surprising. “Where on the globe,” Thoreau asks at one point, “can there be found an area of equal extent with that occupied by the bulk of

¹³Adams, quoted in Walter A. McDougall, *Promised Land, Crusader State: The American Encounter with the World Since 1776* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1997), p. 79.

¹⁴Leonard Tennenhouse, *The Importance of Feeling English: American Literature and the British Diaspora, 1750–1850* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), pp. 1–9, and Elisa Tamarkin, *Anglophilia: Deference, Devotion, and Antebellum America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), p. xxiii.

our States, so fertile and so rich and varied in its productions, and at the same time so habitable by the European, as this is?" (p. 236). Certainly this sentiment posits the United States as the site of a "natural community" able to improve upon or perfect European customs and habits, an impression furthered by a quotation from the geographer Arnold Guyot: "As the plant is made for the animal, as the vegetable world is made for the animal world, America is made for the man of the Old World" (p. 236). What makes "Walking" so remarkable, however, and so deserving of our attention, is that it resists the ideology of Manifest Destiny and cultural deference by equating "the whole continent of America" with "the wild."¹⁵



"Walking" was inspired by the course of American expansionism that had begun with the Santa Fe Trail, the Texas Revolution, and the throng of eager emigrants plodding toward Oregon and California. Thoreau is quick to acknowledge a "subtle magnetism in Nature" (p. 233)—symbolizing the path "we love to travel in the interior and ideal world" (p. 234)—which joins even his "pettiest walk" to "the general movement of the race" westward (p. 235). He is just as quick to ally this geographical vector with the progress of American history: "I must walk toward Oregon, and not toward Europe," he proclaims, for "that way the nation is moving" (p. 234). Nor can we ignore the astringent quality that is so typical of Thoreau's work: "If you are ready to leave father and mother, and brother and sister, and wife and child and friends, and never see them again," he says at one point, "then you are ready for a walk" (p. 226).

Such comments evoke the sacrifice and ambition of the "Great Western Pioneer" alluded to in the essay—someone who quite literally walked to Oregon. Thoreau conspicuously defines walking as a form of "sauntering," with the word itself supposedly deriving from "*sans terre*, without land or a

¹⁵Ralph Waldo Emerson, *English Traits*, in *The Selected Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Brooks Atkinson (New York: Random House, 1992), p. 599.

home.” Whatever the playfulness of this inventive etymology, it pointed to a typical feature of Western travel. Once, in the midst of a two-hundred-mile walk over stark and desiccated prairie, George Catlin felt so seared by the experience that he referred to it as being “out of sight of land.” Similarly, Sarah Royce found the Continental Divide so bare that she was forced to commemorate her crossing by standing “still upon the spot till the two wagons and the little company had passed out of hearing”—aware that “not a visible sign” would mark the spot once she was gone. Of course, Royce and all the other emigrants willing to live with little more than a cloth wall separating them from the great outdoors also fulfilled the more hopeful etymological version of *sans terre*, that is, “having no particular home, but equally at home everywhere.” One California emigrant, Louise Smith Clappe, was so taken with her itinerant, out-of-doors life that she wondered if she would ever be able to dwell “in a decent, proper, well-behaved house” again.¹⁶

Almost instinctively, Thoreau separated a life of this nature from the aims and accomplishments of the State. As early as “Civil Disobedience” he had declared, “[T]his government never of itself furthered any enterprise, but by the alacrity with which it got out of its way. *It* does not keep the country free. *It* does not settle the West. *It* does not educate. The character inherent in the American people has done all that has been accomplished.”¹⁷ Even so, Thoreau’s obvious admiration for the “Great Western Pioneer” has led a number of literary historians to rather crudely identify “Walking” with a rhetoric of Providence and Manifest Destiny. Perhaps the most forceful is Richard Schneider, who has argued that Guyot’s geographical determinism is “at the heart” of “Walking,” thus linking it to “a divine plan which Americans were obligated to implement

¹⁶George Catlin, *Letters and Notes on the Manners, Customs, and Conditions of North American Indians*, 2 vols. (1841; repr. New York: Dover Publications Inc., 1973), 1:218; Sarah Royce, *A Frontier Lady: Recollections of the Gold Rush and Early California* (1932, based on a diary of the California gold rush begun in 1849), ed. Ralph Henry Gabriel (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1977), p. 27; Clappe, quoted in Deborah Lawrence, *Writing the Trail: Five Women’s Frontier Narratives* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2006), p. 6.

¹⁷Thoreau, “Civil Disobedience,” p. 203.

by settling and plowing America's forests and prairies." Admittedly, there is some evidence for this interpretation. Thoreau characterizes those willing to saunter as the "knights of a new, or rather an old, order"—"not the Knight, but Walker Errant" (p. 226)—and professes every walk to be "a sort of crusade, preached by some Peter the Hermit in us, to go forth and reconquer this Holy Land from the hands of the Infidels" (p. 225). This appears to echo the providential rhetoric not just of Guyot but of such figures as John O'Sullivan (who had earlier affirmed "the right of our manifest destiny to overspread and to possess the whole of the continent which Providence has given us") and William Gilpin (who later claimed that "the *untransacted* destiny of the American people is to subdue the continent").¹⁸ Yet the very idea of *sauntering* in an era of emigration, annexation, and "California or Bust" is inherently a kind of stoppage or delay. It seems especially so if we see it as a deliberate perversion of "perambulation"—defined by the Oxford English Dictionary available to Thoreau as "the action or ceremony of walking officially round a territory for the purpose of asserting and recording its boundaries, so as to preserve the rights of possession."¹⁹ Even more to the point, Thoreau often vilified the consequences of western expansion, including the U.S.-Mexican War, the Compromise of 1850, the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854, and the destruction of the nation's forests. In a letter addressed to Harrison Gray Otis in 1853, he concluded: "No, they may go their way to their manifest destiny, which I trust is not mine."²⁰

This calls for a far more subtle understanding of "Walking," suggesting that Lawrence Buell is probably right to interpose a "moral absolute" of sorts between the nationalism of Manifest

¹⁸Richard J. Schneider, "'Climate Does Thus React on Man': Wildness and Geographic Determinism in Thoreau's 'Walking,'" in *Thoreau's Sense of Place: Essays in American Environmental Writing*, ed. Schneider (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2000), pp. 46, 45; John O'Sullivan, "The True Title," *New York Morning News*, 27 December 1845; William Gilpin, *Mission of the North American People: Geographical, Social, and Political* (1873; repr. New York: Da Capo Press, 1974), p. 124.

¹⁹OED, quoted in Patrick Chura, *Thoreau the Land Surveyor* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2010), p. 100.

²⁰Henry David Thoreau, *The Correspondence of Henry David Thoreau*, ed. Walter Harding and Carl Bode (New York: New York University Press, 1958), p. 296.

Destiny and the way it was carried out by the State.²¹ Like Emerson and many others at the time, Thoreau operated with an essentially elevated and paratactical view of Manifest Destiny. “My own quarrel with America,” Emerson wrote in a journal entry of 1850, is “that the geography is sublime, but the men are not; that the intentions are excellent, but the inventors, one is ashamed of; that the means by which events so grand as the opening of California, Texas, Oregon, & the junction of the two Oceans, are effected, are paltry, the filthiest selfishness, fraud, & conspiracy.”²² Thoreau may well have cited Guyot precisely because Guyot had treated Manifest Destiny as a sublime geography, a moral absolute, not an excuse for slavery, warfare, or greedy annexation. Although Anders Stephanson is undoubtedly correct that expansionism has always appeared most “prophetic” during those moments of greatest “aggrandizement or interventionism”—“when there was a need,” as he puts it, “to invest such acts with notions of essential American goodness”—many Americans genuinely believed that what Jefferson had called an “empire of liberty” was both possible and desirable.²³

That a sublime geography might derive from something other than a reactionary impulse can be seen from the role the continent played during the Revolutionary era. Martin Brückner has determined that prior to 1750 the word “American” was rarely used to designate either the people or the territory of the Atlantic seaboard, except by the British, who occasionally used it to signify the primitive, perfunctory condition of colonial troops and society. Because the geographical space of “America” was understood to be that of a colony, the colonists themselves were essentially denied a concrete identity or location beyond that of “New-Englander” or “Virginian,” a nomenclature that proved

²¹Lawrence Buell, “Manifest Destiny and the Question of the Moral Absolute,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Transcendentalism*, ed. Joel Myerson, Sandra Harbert Petruionis, and Laura Dassow Walls (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 183–97.

²²*The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. William H. Gilman et al., 16 vols. (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1960–82), 11:284.

²³Anders Stephanson, *Manifest Destiny: American Expansionism and the Empire of Right* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1995), p. xiii.

they were little more than peripheral elements of the British Empire. Things began to change, however, during the Stamp Act crisis of 1764. At first, the colonists simply turned the tables on the British by *calling themselves* Americans—as in Christopher Gadsden’s declaration that “there ought to be no New England men; no New Yorker, known on the Continent; but all of us Americans”; then, in a more radical turn, they decided to tie their identity to the geographic figure of the continent itself. By the time Thomas Paine published *Common Sense* (1776), the continent had become both a crucial metaphor and a physical presence. Warning against “distinctions too limited for continental minds,” Paine exclaimed: “The sun never shined on a cause of greater worth. ’Tis not the affair of a city, a county, a province, or a kingdom, but of a continent—of at least one eighth part of the habitable globe.”²⁴ The boldness of this move cannot be overstated. Even though most of the continent remained unexplored and uncertain at the time—still considered “an howling wilderness,” for the most part—the colonists suddenly opted to ground their identity in what Brückner calls “an ungrounded, ephemeral space.” Rather than looking to those elements of colonial society that most resembled the stable and cultivated state of British society, rather than referring to themselves as “Englishmen” or “His Majesty’s subjects,” they instead chose to identify themselves with the very name, and the very territory, that had marginalized them as a political and geographical entity to begin with.²⁵ Hoping to create a positive from what amounted to a double negative, the colonists, in effect, decided to negate the derogatory meaning of “America” by accentuating its most elusive and negative aspects.

At the same time, however, and for reasons that were peculiarly in keeping with their emerging Englishness, the colonists also adopted a version of *translatio studii* known as “the westward course of empire.” This particular application of a

²⁴Thomas Paine, “*Rights of Man*,” “*Common Sense*” and *Other Political Writings*, ed. Mark Philp (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 23, 20.

²⁵Martin Brückner, *The Geographic Revolution in Early America: Maps, Literacy, and National Identity* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, 2006), pp. 51–97.

medieval doctrine had first appeared in a poem by the English philosopher and theologian George Berkeley. The poem was entitled “On the Prospect of Planting Arts and Learning in America” (1726), and eventually it became one of the most resonant images in American history. We see its lengthening shadow in Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur’s *Letters from an American Farmer* (1784), where he claims “Americans are the western pilgrims, who are carrying along with them that great mass of arts, sciences, vigour, and industry which began long since in the east.” We see it as well in the final words of *The Pioneers* (1823), where Leatherstocking heads “far towards the setting sun—the foremost in that band of pioneers who are opening up the way for the march of the nation across the continent.”²⁶ It is also the figure Thoreau had in mind when he indicated, “I must walk toward Oregon, and not toward Europe. And that way the nation is moving, and I may say that mankind progress from east to west” (p. 234). But as Tennenhouse again has explained, Berkeley’s poem was originally paired with a missionary tract, thereby aligning it with a policy of “conquest and conversion” that was more closely associated in the minds of Americans with the French and Spanish presence in North America. Only as the English lost interest in an overseas mission did the colonists turn to Berkeley’s metaphor to suggest that when “the center of civilization” had gradually shifted from the Roman Empire to the English Empire, the world as a whole began to “celebrate” English culture. Naturally, the colonists also believed that English culture itself would improve as it leapt the Atlantic Ocean and spread even farther west to the Pacific.²⁷



Is it any wonder that when Thoreau chose to reject this metaphor of progress in “Walking,” he harked back to the

²⁶Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer* (London and New York: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd. and E. P. Dutton & Co. Inc., 1912), pp. 43–44; James Fenimore Cooper, *The Pioneers* (New York: New American Library, 1964), p. 436.

²⁷Tennenhouse, *Importance of Feeling English*, pp. 13–16.

continent itself as a positive symbol of nationalism? Certainly that is why he was so keen to counter the notion that America was innately inferior to Europe, a misconception long entrenched in European science. "In America," the Comte de Buffon had announced in his *Histoire naturelle* (1749–88), "animated Nature is weaker, less active, and more circumscribed in the variety of her productions," and even those species "which, from the kindly influence of another climate, have acquired their complete form and expansion, shrink and diminish under a niggardly sky and an unprolific land, thinly peopled with wandering savages."²⁸ Both dismayed and annoyed by this inaccurate, disparaging view, Thomas Jefferson had devoted several of the most important queries in his *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1785) to rebutting Buffon, while William Bartram's *Travels through North & South Carolina, Georgia, East & West Florida* (1791), not to mention Cooper's Leatherstocking tales, set out to prove that the American continent could be different, even wildly and strangely different, and still be equal to Europe. Adding to this accumulating opinion, Thoreau diligently cites François André Michaux, who "says that 'the species of large trees are much more numerous in North America than in Europe'" (p. 236); Alexander von Humboldt, who "came to America to realize his youthful dreams of a tropical vegetation" and "beheld it in its greatest perfection in the primitive forests of the Amazon" (p. 236); and Sir Francis Head, an English traveler, who wrote that "'the heavens of America appear infinitely higher, the sky is bluer, the air is fresher, the cold is intenser, the moon looks larger, the stars are brighter, the thunder is louder, the lightning is vividder, the wind is stronger, the rain is heavier, the mountains are higher, the rivers longer, the forests bigger, the plains broader'" (p. 237). Of Head, in particular, Thoreau remarks, his "statement will do at least to set against Buffon's account of this part of the world and its productions" (p. 237).

²⁸Georges-Louis Leclerc Buffon, *Natural History, General and Particular*, trans. William Smellie, 9 vols. (London: A. Strahan and T. Cadell, 1791), 5:115, 129.

The aesthetics of such a nationalism had led Jefferson to promote the more sublime scenery of America—Niagara Falls, the Blue Ridge of the Alleghenies, the Natural Bridge of Virginia—as “worth a voyage across the Atlantic to see these objects; much more to paint, and make them, and thereby ourselves, known to all ages.” A little over fifty years later, Thomas Cole cited many of the same “objects” in his “Essay on American Scenery” (1836), insisting that “although the character of its scenery may differ from the old world’s, yet inferiority must not therefore be inferred; for though American scenery is destitute of many of those circumstances that give value to the European, still it has features, and glorious ones, unknown to Europe.”²⁹ By the 1850s, even Thoreau was not immune to this version of translated Englishness—declaring, as we’ve seen, that “if the heavens of America appear infinitely higher, and the stars brighter, I trust that these facts are symbolical of the height to which the philosophy and poetry and religion of her inhabitants may one day soar.”

But about halfway through “Walking,” in a headlong transition that reflected both his contrary, juxtaposed view of Manifest Destiny and the way in which the essay itself combined two separate lectures, “Walking” and “The Wild,” Thoreau suddenly transforms the continent into that figure of “absolute freedom and wildness” he had referred to in the opening sentences. Although his view of the continent to this point had been relatively conventional—much in line with the westward course of empire, “the prevailing tendency of my countrymen,” and the idea of Manifest Destiny itself as an elevated or exaggerated form of Englishness—he abruptly shifts direction when he explains,

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

²⁹Thomas Jefferson to Maria Cosway, 12 October 1786, in *Writings: Autobiography; “A Summary View of the Rights of British America”; “Notes on the State of Virginia”; Public Papers, Addresses, Messages, and Replies; Miscellany; Letters* (New York: Literary Classics of the United States Inc., 1984), p. 870; Thomas Cole, “Essay on American Scenery,” in *American Art, 1700–1960: Sources and Documents*, ed. John W. McCoubrey (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1965), p. 101.

of the world. Every tree sends its fibres forth in search of the Wild. The cities import it at any price. Men plough and sail for it. From the forest and wilderness come the tonics and barks which brace mankind. Our ancestors were savages. The story of Romulus and Remus being suckled by a wolf is not a meaningless fable. The founders of every State which has risen to eminence have drawn their nourishment and vigor from a similar wild source. [P. 239]

With this statement, Thoreau effectively turns his back on the Englishness of his day and rediscovers the double negative that had helped to define the nation in the first place.

The tactic of doubling a negative to create a positive seems to have been repeatedly rediscovered as Americans struggled to separate themselves from England; indeed, it may arise in any colonized or dependent nation seeking sovereignty, at least in part because such nations are both defensive and defiant at the same time. Although Emerson alluded to the tactic when he said that "self-reliance is precisely that secret, to make your supposed deficiency redundancy," as did the editor and critic Rufus Wilmot Griswold when he declared that "most of the circumstances usually set down as barriers to aesthetical cultivation here are directly or indirectly advantageous," and it appears to be a fundamental element of American nationalism in the mid-1800s.³⁰ Take, for example, John Frémont's *Report on an Exploration of the Country Lying between the Missouri River and the Rocky Mountains, on the Line of the Kansas and Great Platte Rivers* (1843). Written to refute the belief that everything between the Mississippi River and the Rocky Mountains was a "great desert," Frémont's report implied that the very elements that seemed to make the West most ugly in the eyes of Americans were actually the source of its greatest beauty—an instance of using one form of ugliness to offset another. More broadly, the report implied that what had often been portrayed as the ugliest region of the continent might be the source of *its* most distinctive beauty, too—the region that

³⁰Emerson, quoted in Donald E. Pease, "'Moby Dick' and the Cold War," in *The American Renaissance Reconsidered*, ed. Walter Benn Michaels and Pease (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), p. 130; Rufus Wilmot Griswold, *The Prose Writers of America* (Philadelphia: Carey and Hart, 1847), p. 15.

finally rendered the American landscape equal to Europe's in the eyes of Europeans and Americans alike. While this may be one of the most direct uses of a double negative, the tactic played a surprisingly similar role in *English Traits* (1856), one of Emerson's own nationalist tracts. To cite Marek Paryz, even though *English Traits* "imagined America as a more perfect version of England," it was mainly by reimagining England itself as a less perfect version of America (pointing, among other things, to the history of social and racial blending that was often criticized in England but that was far more prevalent in America and an essential element of what Buell has labeled the "semi-Americanization of the English language").³¹

Thoreau recognized the power of the double negative almost from the beginning of his career. One of his earliest Journal entries reads, "Double a deformity is a beauty." To be sure, he spent much of the 1840s emulating Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Italian Journey* (1816–17) as well as "some of the late popular poets of England." This is only too apparent in "A Walk to Wachusett" (1842), where he sets forth in the footsteps of Samuel Johnson's *Rasselas*; notes that the landscape "reminds the traveller" of "Italy, and the South of France"; rests for a while "during the heat of the day, reading Virgil, and enjoying the scenery"; observes at one point that the "uninterrupted light" of the moon is bright enough "to read Wordsworth distinctly"; and seems to have modeled the entire essay on Petrarch's celebrated ascent of Mount Ventoux in 1336. Nor are these rather standard literary inspirations any less evident in "A Winter Walk" (1843) or *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (1849). However, in essays such as "Natural History of Massachusetts" (1842) and "Ktaadn" (1848), Thoreau starts to purge these influences and pare his language, foreshadowing the period in which he will gradually "translate" the Journal into a systematic account of the landscape he had seen his

³¹Marek Paryz, "Beyond the Traveler's Testimony: Emerson's *English Traits* and the Construction of Postcolonial Counter-Discourse," *ATQ* 20.3 (September 2006): 565–90, quotations pp. 587, 581; Lawrence Buell, "American Literary Emergence as a Postcolonial Phenomenon," *American Literary History* 4.3 (Autumn 1992): 411–42, quotation p. 427.

whole life but "did not realize or appreciate." "Before I walked in the ruts of travel," he observes in the early stages of this metamorphosis; "now I adventured."³²

Rather than visualizing the American landscape as a grander or more inclusive version of European scenery, Thoreau sets his sights on the swamps and weeds of the local meadows, the poorly managed trees of his neighbors' woodlots, and the slowly melting banks of a railroad cut—exactly the sort of "zero panorama," "low profile" landscapes (as Robert Smithson would later call them) that Europeans had found so objectionable over the years. Again, there was a precedent for this perspective. In a college essay entitled "Advantages and disadvantages of foreign influence on American Literature," Thoreau had observed that American writers "are prone to sing of skylarks and nightingales, perched on hedges, to the neglect of the homely robin-red-breast, and the straggling rail-fences of their own native land."³³ If he does not fully act upon these words until the early 1850s, the revolution, once it takes place, quickly results in a *Journal* devoted to "the barren fields" and "the smallest share of all things but poetic perception." Among the first entries in this new mode are: "I have been surprised to discover the amount of the various kinds of life which a single shallow swamp will sustain"; and, "I was as interested in the discovery of limestone as if it had been gold, and wondered that I had never thought of it before. Now all things seemed to radiate round limestone, and I saw how the farmers lived near to, or far from, a locality of limestone."³⁴ No wonder he says in "Walking" that "English literature, from the days of the minstrels to the Lake Poets,—Chaucer and Spenser and Milton,

³²Thoreau, *Journal*, 14 February 1940, 1:119; 23 November 1850, 2:107; 7 January 1851, 2:139; "A Walk to Wachusett," in *Collected Essays and Poems*, pp. 42–56, quotations pp. 45, 46, 51.

³³Robert Smithson, *The Writings of Robert Smithson*, ed. Nancy Holt (New York: New York University Press, 1979) pp. 54, 154; Thoreau, "Foreign Influence on American Literature," in *Early Essays and Miscellanies*, ed. Joseph J. Moldenhauer and Edwin Moser (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), pp. 38–41, quotation p. 41.

³⁴Thoreau, *Journal*, 28 August 1851, 2:429; the 1850 entries are found at 2:13 and 2:16.

and even Shakespeare, included,—breathes no quite fresh and in this sense wild strain. It is an essentially tame and civilized literature, reflecting Greece and Rome” (p. 244).

“Walking” was such a fresh and wild strain of writing that it significantly modified the florid, ornamental style that was so often the model for scenic description during this period and plainly Thoreau’s own model for works like “Wachusett” and *A Week*. His new alertness to nature meant that empiricism now became as important to Thoreau as poetry—as did the trajectory of science that included Louis Aggasiz, John Josselyn, John Frémont, and Charles Darwin as well as Buffon, Michaux, Humboldt, and Head. Having intimated in *A Week* that “a true account of the actual is the rarest poetry,” the two became all but identical after 1850 or so. One of the final entries in the Journal reads: “How much of beauty—of color, as well as form—on which our eyes daily rest goes unperceived by us! No one but a botanist is likely to distinguish nicely the different shades of green with which the open surface of the earth is clothed,—not even a landscape painter if he does not know the species of sedges and grasses which paint it.” Of course Thoreau was equally apt to say, “I fear that the character of my knowledge is from year to year becoming more distinct and scientific; that, in exchange for views as wide as heaven’s cope, I am being narrowed down to the field of the microscope.” Considering this contradiction, it is probably most accurate to say that Thoreau’s later writings exist in “the *interval* between the impression and the expression.” Although this self-conscious interval has commonly been interpreted as a tension between mythology and actuality, or Emerson and John Locke, it was also a reflection of the still extant disparity between political and cultural independence. Empiricism was largely aligned with the tradition of English science and objectivity, and Thoreau undoubtedly wished to demonstrate that English views of the American landscape were anything but objective; at the same time, he gradually found fault with all those who chose to rebut such views by focusing on the American “objects” that seemed most exaggerated or sublime. In essence, Thoreau began to create a “counter friction” to the

defensive, misshapen, humiliating effects of an imported culture by showing that even the lowliest of landscapes could set a new standard of beauty:

The pincushion galls on young white oaks are now among the most beautiful objects in the woods, coarse woolly white to appearance, spotted with bright red or crimson on the exposed side. It is remarkable that a mere gall, which at first we are inclined to regard as something abnormal, should be made so beautiful, as if it were the *flower* of the tree; that a disease, an excrescence, should prove, perchance, the greatest beauty,—as the tear of the pearl. Beautiful scarlet sins they may be. Through our temptations,—aye, and our falls,—our virtues appear.³⁵

So it is that Thoreau utilizes the double negative in "Walking" to extol the virtues and loveliness of the "excrescence" known as America. Aware that invoking the standards of European landscape would only make his native environment look inferior or defensive by comparison, Thoreau wisely chooses to accentuate its fundamental differences instead. Like Frémont in particular, his most lasting contribution to American landscape may have been to present it as an object of beauty in its own right: unadulterated, unadorned, only minimally improved. Certainly he depicts a landscape whose splendor emerges from the utility or necessary form of nature; from the beauty of "the thing itself, than which there is nothing more like it, no truer picture or account; which you cannot go farther and see." But that is because he also believes in the virtue of *seeing* beauty where it did not exist before—an important element of what George Kateb has termed "democratic aestheticism." "How much virtue there is in simply seeing!" Thoreau exults fairly early in the *Journal*. "We are as much as we see." This modest observation remained a fairly fallow insight for at least a decade, but as he gradually embraced the low profile landscape, it flowered into an abiding way of life. "Nature has looked

³⁵Thoreau, "A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers," "Walden," "The Maine Woods," "Cape Cod" (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1985), p. 266; Thoreau, *Journal*, 8 August 1860, 14:3; 19 August 1851, 2:406; 23 July 1851, 2:341, emphasis added; and 1 June 1853, 5:210.

uncommonly bare and dry to me for a day or two. With our senses applied to the surrounding world we are reading our own physical and corresponding moral revolutions. Nature was so shallow all at once I did not know what had attracted me all my life. I was therefore encouraged when, going through a field this evening, I was unexpectedly struck with the beauty of an apple tree. The perception of beauty is a moral test.”³⁶

In many respects, “Walking” is about the perception of beauty—as both a moral test and a means to nationhood—and the peculiar notion of wildness that defines this beauty is yet another double negative. It is true that wildness materializes as a bold and captivating image of the exhausted Old World providentially renewed by the pristine nature of the New. For Thoreau is only mildly exaggerating when he writes, “As a true patriot, I should be ashamed to think that Adam in paradise was more favorably situated on the whole than the backwoodsman in this country” (p. 238). But if the phrase “in Wildness is the preservation of the world” has become the essay’s most famous aphorism, for Thoreau himself wildness plainly represents a state of nature that has little to do with the Garden of Eden. Confessing that he has often found himself “attracted solely by a few square rods of impermeable and unfathomable bog,—a natural sink” (p. 241)—he makes it clear that he lives “a sort of border life, on the confines of a world into which I make occasional and transient forays only, and my patriotism and allegiance to the State into whose territories I seem to retreat are those of a moss-trooper” (p. 251). That Thoreau means this as both a warning and an incitement to a new nationalism (“moss-troopers” were Scottish bandits, sometimes on the side of those who opposed the English Commonwealth in the mid-1600s) is evident from what he has stressed slightly earlier. “When I would recreate myself, I seek the darkest wood, the thickest and most interminable, and, to the citizen, most dismal swamp” (p. 242). Citizens who *failed* to bring their “sills

³⁶Thoreau, *Cape Cod*, p. 893; George Kateb, “Aestheticism and Morality: Their Cooperation and Hostility,” *Political Theory* 28.1 (February 2000): 5–35; Thoreau, *Journal*, 10 April 1841, 1:247–48, and 21 June 1852, 4:126.

up to the very edge of the swamp" (p. 241) essentially failed Thoreau's test of patriotism—as did the entire country, so long as it refused to see itself as a *nation* on "the very edge of the swamp," a *nation* of "backwoodsmen," as it were, willing to "go in the back way" to "front" the fecund nature of its identity.

Thoreau's emphasis on America's darkest, thickest, most interminable landscapes is fundamentally an aesthetic image of nationhood. What one contemporary said of Emerson's widely read essay *Nature*—that it is "aesthetical rather than philosophical," or maybe "philosophy in its poetical aspect"—is even more true of "Walking." As a matter of fact, anything else would have been out of character. Much of what we think of as transcendentalism can be traced to Herder's philosophy of history, and Herder had indicated that "a poet is a creator of a people, he gives it a world to contemplate, he holds its soul in his hand"; at the same time, he had insisted that nationalism "is practiced most surely in poetry; for in the works . . . of imagination and feeling, the entire soul of the nation reveals itself most freely"; and he had argued that nations themselves are largely a product of climate and geography. Emerging from these beliefs was a fairly radical and original view of history—a view Isaiah Berlin aptly reduced to the maxim "Nature creates nations, not States."³⁷ Understood as both a slogan and a way of life, nothing comes closer to the "subtile magnetism" of "Walking."



Having recast the American continent as a double negative and transformed the ideology of Manifest Destiny into something other than an inflated form of Englishness, Thoreau hesitates to clarify what a nation of "absolute freedom and wildness" might look like. Although he appears to believe that an individual sympathy with nature ought to result in what Alan Patten has called a "community of sympathy," it is hard to form a

³⁷Emerson's contemporary, quoted in Philip F. Gura, *American Transcendentalism: A History* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2007), p. 92; Herder, quoted in Berlin, "Herder and the Enlightenment," pp. 422, 409.

picture of this national community.³⁸ Typically, the juxtapositions so crucial to “Walking” create a series of open-ended intervals or contradictions, so maybe the essay as a whole should be equated with the Old Marlborough Road—offering “the bare possibility / Of going somewhere.” Still, there are hints of what that “bare possibility” might be. And as we would expect, they tend to emerge in a negative form.

One of the most common criticisms of “Walking,” especially by those who link it to the more odious aspects of Manifest Destiny, is that the very idea of wildness is compromised by Thoreau’s lurking belief in agrarianism. The United States had been an agrarian nation from its inception and would continue to be so for many decades. In “The Young American” (1844), Emerson had noted that “the vast majority of the people of this country live by the land, and carry its quality in their manners and opinions”; half a century earlier, Crèvecoeur had called the farm “the source of every good we possess,” and Jefferson had enthusiastically declared that “those who labor in the earth are the chosen people of God.”³⁹ Such sentiments appear to be echoed by an extended passage in “Walking” that begins “It is said to be the task of the American ‘to work the virgin soil,’ and that ‘agriculture here assumes proportions unknown everywhere else’” (p. 243). Thoreau goes on to offer a detailed description of a farmer, “the type of a class,” who intended to “put a girdling ditch” around a swamp he owned and “so redeem it by the magic of his spade” (p. 243); and he concludes a paragraph later with what seems to be a justification for the policy of Indian removal that forcibly cleared the West for farming.

Despite its apparent zeal, there is something very conditional about this passage. Not only does Thoreau open with “it is said to be” rather than “it is,” but the agrarianism he alludes to is in quotation marks—not his words but someone else’s. It is also evident from his description of the farmer and his

³⁸Patten, “Herder and Nationalism,” p. 682.

³⁹Emerson, “Young American,” p. 216; Crèvecoeur, *Letters*, p. 69; Jefferson, *Writings*, p. 290.

swamp—where at one point he depicts the farmer “actually up to his neck and swimming for his life in his property” (p. 243)—that Thoreau has little sympathy for anyone who would redeem a swamp as a parcel of land rather than redeeming man himself as “part and parcel” of nature. By the “groveling habit” of “regarding the soil as property, or the means of acquiring property,” he writes in *Walden*, “the landscape is deformed, husbandry is degraded with us, and the farmer leads the meanest of lives.”⁴⁰ This judgment feels even harsher because Thoreau’s metaphor for the conflict between Indians and farmers is that of a struggle that parallels the U.S.-Mexican War and the history of Indian warfare, and he makes it clear that the farmer has triumphed because of superior weapons, not a superior life: “The weapons with which we have gained our most important victories, which should be handed down as heirlooms from father to son, are not the sword and the lance, but the bush-whack, the turf-cutter, the spade, and the bog-hoe, rusted with the blood of many a meadow, and begrimed with the dust of many a hard-fought field” (p. 243). As stirring as these words might be for some, Thoreau himself seems to feel a sense of shame—indeed, a legacy of shame—for what was supposed to be an “empire of liberty.” Certainly the comment is a direct affront to all those who believed, as John O’Sullivan believed, that “No instance of aggrandizement or lust for territory has stained our annals. No nation has been despoiled by us, no country laid desolate, no people overrun.”⁴¹ That the only image of *actual* aggrandizement and despoliation in “Walking” is identified with farming suggests that Thoreau is not advancing it as an ideal form of nationalism. If anything, farming becomes a kind of counter friction to what he has in mind.⁴²

⁴⁰Thoreau, *Walden*, p. 454.

⁴¹O’Sullivan, quoted in Thomas R. Hietala, *Manifest Design: American Exceptionalism and Empire* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), p. 193.

⁴²Of course, Thoreau could be infuriatingly indecisive, contradictory, or obscure about his beliefs—a good example being his apparent indifference to such agrarian experiments as Fruitlands and Brook Farm, which would seem to confirm his skepticism about farming, but may not after all. See Lance Newman, “Thoreau’s Natural Community and Utopian Socialism,” *American Literature* 75:3 (September 2003): 515–44.

A somewhat more baffling counter friction is exemplified by Thoreau's antipathy to the daily newspaper—which, like so many elements of "Walking," was expressed most strongly in the Journal entries of 1850 and early 1851. Obviously Thoreau was a diligent and regular reader of newspapers. Even in the mossy depths of Maine, or on the ragged summit of the Saddleback, he was alert to the weathered remnants of newspapers and the ubiquity of the public events they covered; moreover, his denunciations of the U.S.-Mexican War, the Fugitive Slave Law, and the treatment of John Brown were largely informed by newspaper accounts. But he seemed sincerely worried that the Fourth Estate might become the State. At one point he rather disdainfully refers to newspapers as "the Flag of our Union"; at another he calls them "a bible" we "read every morning and every afternoon, standing and sitting, riding and walking"—"capable of exerting an almost inconceivable influence for good or for bad." Yet he is cutting much closer to the bone when he claims that "if you do not read the newspapers, you may be impeached for treason. The newspapers are the ruling power. What Congress does is an afterclap." That is why he tries to appropriate the newspaper by specifying the "Walker Errant" as "a sort of fourth estate, outside of Church and State and People" (p. 226). Intentionally or not, this stance is quite contrary to Emerson, who says in *English Traits* that "the power of the newspaper is familiar in America and in accordance with our political system"—adding that "the tendency in England towards social and political institutions like those of America is inevitable, and the ability of its journals is the driving force." Since Emerson advanced this opinion as more newspapers were being published in the United States than in any other country, it is clear that *many* Americans saw the newspaper as a defining feature of the nation.⁴³

Thoreau displays his most striking and overt antipathy to newspapers after acknowledging how "astonished" he is "at the power of endurance, to say nothing of the moral insensibility, of

⁴³Thoreau, *Journal*, 26 April 1851, 2:181; April 1851, 2:179; 17 November 1850, 2:102; Emerson, *English Traits*, p. 592.

my neighbors who confine themselves to shops and offices the whole day for weeks and months" (p. 227). What makes this situation so chilling in his eyes is that the sedentary, "insensible" life of his fellow citizens is implicitly regulated by the artificial deadlines of the daily editions. Alluding to Napoleon Bonaparte's "three-o'clock-in-the-morning courage" but advancing it by twelve hours, Thoreau exclaims, "I wonder that about this time, or say between four and five o'clock in the afternoon, too late for the morning papers and too early for the evening ones, there is not a general explosion heard up and down the street, scattering a legion of antiquated and house-bred notions and whims to the four winds for an airing" (p. 227).

A despair such as this could never be associated with the type of nationalism that is anonymous, abstract, and utterly separated from nature, and it places Thoreau at odds not only with Emerson's *English Traits* but with one of the most original and influential studies of nationalism to appear in recent decades, Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*. For Anderson, anonymity is everything. "An American," he writes, "will never meet, or even know the names of more than a handful of his 240,000,000-odd fellow-Americans. He has no idea of what they are up to at any one time. But he has complete confidence in their steady, anonymous, simultaneous activity." Amplifying this anonymity is a standardization of space and time in which the newspaper becomes a critical factor: "The obsolescence of the newspaper," Anderson continues, "creates this extraordinary mass ceremony: the almost precisely simultaneous consumption ('imagining') of the newspaper-as-fiction. We know that particular morning and evening editions will overwhelmingly be consumed between this hour and that, only on this day, not that." Each "communicant is well aware that the ceremony he performs is being replicated simultaneously by thousands (or millions) of others of whose existence he is confident, yet of whose identity he has not the slightest notion."⁴⁴ Of course, this anonymous simultaneity is precisely what Thoreau objects to.

⁴⁴Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London and New York: Verso, 2006), pp. 26, 35, 188.

For him, the net effect of such a “mass ceremony”—or what Anderson more generally refers to as lives lived “parallel”—is the very “mass of men” who “serve the state thus, not as men mainly, but as machines,” slavishly governed by the run of an afternoon edition.⁴⁵ Certainly he finds no solace, as Margaret Fuller does, in the idea that newspapers “address America rather than Americans.”⁴⁶

Thoreau is not blind to the sort of abstract parallelism Anderson explores, but he prefers a natural, if still anonymous, community united by its awareness of a larger moon, a brighter star, and “something akin to the migratory instinct in birds and quadrupeds.” “The stars are the apexes of what wonderful triangles!” he writes in *Walden*. “What distant and different beings in the various mansions of the universe are contemplating the same one at the same moment! Nature and human life are as various as our several constitutions. Who shall say what prospect life offers to another? Could a greater miracle take place than for us to look through each other’s eyes for an instant? We should in all the ages of the world in an hour; ay, in all the worlds of the ages. History, Poetry, Mythology!—I know of no reading of another’s experience so startling and informing as this would be.” A negative corollary is the young woman from New Hampshire who found her new life in Ohio so isolated and lonely that as she milked the cows each morning she looked up to heaven and wondered “are these the stars and the moon I used to see at Exeter?”⁴⁷ It is interesting to note that about halfway through “Walking,” Thoreau actually misquotes the most famous slogan of Manifest Destiny, writing “Westward the *star* of empire takes its way” (p. 238, emphasis added) rather than “Westward the *course* of empire takes its way.”⁴⁸ Since he subsequently makes it clear that “the West of

⁴⁵Thoreau, “Civil Disobedience,” p. 205.

⁴⁶Margaret Fuller, “American Literature,” in *Papers on Literature and Art* (New York: Wiley and Putnam, 1846), p. 140.

⁴⁷Thoreau, *Walden*, p. 331; Ohio woman, quoted in Annette Kolodny, *The Land before Her: Fantasy and Experience of the American Frontier, 1630–1860* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), p. 32.

⁴⁸Thoreau was not the only one to use “Westward the star of empire takes its way.” John Quincy Adams may be have been the first to misquote Berkeley, but as Daniel

which I speak is but another name for the Wild," it is apparent that even the "star of empire" can represent a "wonderful triangle" of "distant and different beings" so long as it creates a natural sympathy with each other and with nature itself.

Near the end of the essay, however, Thoreau evokes yet another star which hints at a nationalism much closer to what John Dewey, citing Plato and Rousseau, once called a State no "larger than the number of persons capable of personal acquaintance with one another."⁴⁹ Lamenting how "We hug the earth,—how rarely we mount!"—Thoreau recalls the time he climbed to the top of a white pine near his home, discovering not just "new mountains in the horizon which I had never seen before,—so much more of the earth and the heavens"—but also, "on the ends of the topmost branches only, a few minute and delicate red cone-like blossoms, the fertile flower of the white pine looking heavenward" (p. 253). Elated by the fortuitous beauty of a life lived in nature, he carried the blossom "straightway to the village" and "showed it to stranger jurymen who walked the streets,—for it was court-week,—and to farmers and lumber-dealers and wood-choppers and hunters, and not one had ever seen the like before, but they wondered as at a star dropped down" (pp. 253–54). Although Thoreau recounts the episode as a lesson in how people usually "see only the flowers that are under" their feet, ignoring the heavens above their "heads and unobserved by them," its most compelling aspect is how an individual act of discovery suddenly gives rise to a community of strangers and neighbors united by the beauty of "a star dropped down." What makes this community even more extraordinary is that it is as fleeting as it is serendipitous, and thus a perfect expression of the "bare possibility / Of going somewhere" that is both the destination of "Walking" and the "preservation of the world." Not only does such a community

Walker Howe points out in *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815–1848* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 704, it also appeared as the motto for George Bancroft's *History of the United States of America* (1834).

⁴⁹Dewey, quoted in Sandra M. Gustafson, *Imagining Deliberative Democracy in the Early American Republic* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), p. 33.

reflect Thoreau's belief that social reform begins with individuals, not institutions; not only does it anticipate Dewey's belief that "locality is the only universal," and that the nation is "a spread of localities" while the State is something that exists in Washington and other seats of government"; but it is hard to imagine anything more empirical and poetic at the same time.⁵⁰

Of course, it is also hard to imagine anything more utopian. As a moral absolute, the natural community of "Walking" is clearly quite different from that of either Manifest Destiny or Englishness. For this reason, it may be best to approach the essay as a meditation on what Paryz, citing Emerson's *English Traits*, has called the difference between the "best of actual nations" and the "best imaginable nation." "One of the most memorable statements that Emerson makes with regard to England," Paryz remarks, "is that it 'may be the best of actual nations but is far from the best imaginable nation!'" Unfortunately, this contradiction signified a rather debilitating situation for Emerson himself. Because he viewed the United States as a more perfect, if less complete, version of England, Emerson reserved the label of "best *imaginable*" for his own nation. But because he feared that by becoming the "best of actual nations," the United States would eventually "face the danger of forfeiting its promise," he also felt it needed to "*remain*, precisely, imaginable." Paryz sees this contradiction as an essential weakness of *English Traits* and suggests that it proves how troubling the colonial legacy was for Emerson despite such addresses as "The American Scholar" (1837) and "The Young American." Indeed, Paryz believes that the colonial legacy set such "limits to his imagination and his language" that *English Traits* itself became "a substitute for a thorough depiction of

⁵⁰John Dewey, "Americanism and Localism," in *The Middle Works, 1899-1924*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston, 15 vols. (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, c. 1976-c. 1983), 12:12-16. Dewey notably elaborates the notion of localism when he says, "The wider the formal, the legal entity, the more intense becomes local life. The defeat of secession diversified the South even more than the North, and the extension of the United States westward to the ocean rendered New England less exclusively a New Englishish homogeneity." However, he also makes a point of lauding local newspapers, with their focus on "murders, family jars, weddings, and banquets to esteemed fellow citizens" while warning against national papers dedicated to instilling some sort of abstract or homogenized Americanism.

America's past entanglements and future possibilities." Which is why he concludes that the "absent core" of Emerson's oeuvre "is a book on American Traits."⁵¹

Thoreau was far less crippled by this legacy. Despite his relentless condemnation of slavery and governmental overreach, he still considered the United States the "best of actual nations." Among other things, his xenophobic view of Canada was matched by an equally derisive view of England—as we see from a conversation he had with Emerson about a year before he wrote "Walking." "Rambling talk with H.T. last night," Emerson notes in his journal. "We dispensed pretty fast of America & England, I maintaining that our people did not get ripened, but, like the peaches & grapes of the season, wanted a fortnight's more sun, & remained green,—whilst, in England because of the density, perhaps, of cultivated population, more caloric was generated, & more completeness obtained. . . . Henry thought the English, 'all train,' mere soldiers, as it were, in the world. And their business is winding up, whilst our pioneer is unwinding his lines."⁵² No doubt this difference of opinion explains why Thoreau viewed the backwoods roughness of America as a sign of its actual, not just its imaginable, greatness, and it is one reason the "Great Western Pioneer" becomes such a potent symbol in "Walking." To someone like Nathaniel Willis—whose introduction to *American Scenery; or, Land, Lake, and River: Illustrations of Transatlantic Nature* (1840) had argued that an American's "first thought is of the villages that will soon sparkle on the hill-sides, the axes that will ring from the woodlands, and the mills, bridges, canals, and railroads, that will span and border the stream that now runs through sedge and wild-flowers"—Thoreau had a simple and straightforward reply: "Hope and the future for me are not in lawns and cultivated fields, not in towns and cities, but in the impervious and quaking swamps" that already existed.⁵³

⁵¹Paryz, "Beyond the Traveler's Testimony," pp. 588, 566, emphasis added.

⁵²Emerson, *Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks*, 11:283–84.

⁵³N. P. Willis, *American Scenery; or, Land, Lake, and River: Illustrations of Transatlantic Nature*, 2 vols. (London: George Virtue, 1840), 1:2.

The desire to protect these “impervious and quaking swamps” is what makes “Walking” such a remarkable model of Thoreau’s own version of the “best imaginable state”—that is, the “still more perfect and glorious State, which also I have imagined, but not yet anywhere seen.” The great paradox of Manifest Destiny was that for all the excitement it generated, Americans commonly associated the nation’s progress and expansion with some ultimate degeneration or fall. This eschatology is epitomized by Emerson’s fears of forfeiting the nation’s future and echoed in “Walking,” when Thoreau speaks of “a sort of breeding in and in, which produces at most a merely English nobility, a civilization destined to have a speedy limit” (p. 248). But “Walking” presents an entirely different image of America—an America ready, in Robert Smithson’s words, to deliberately “*rise into ruin before*” it is “built.”⁵⁴ Thoreau had already pointed to this double negative at the end of “Civil Disobedience” when he spoke of “a State which bore this kind of fruit, and suffered it to drop off as fast as it ripened.” It is also what he means in “Walking” when he says that “the civilized nations—Greece, Rome, England—have been sustained by the primitive forests which anciently rotted where they stand” (p. 243). And it is most clearly expressed when he indicates, “I would not have every man nor every part of a man cultivated, any more than I would have every acre of earth cultivated: part will be tillage, but the greater part will be meadow and forest, not only serving an immediate use, but preparing a mould against a distant future, by the annual decay of the vegetation which it supports” (p. 249). Why else might Thoreau hail “a people who would begin by burning the fences and let the forest stand!” (p. 230)? Certainly the more general category he calls “the Wild” equates the state of “annual decay” with a steady “rising into ruin.” Instead of a nation apt to degenerate or fall by rising, what Thoreau proposes is a nation needing to rise by falling. For only if America held true to its extravagantly rotting nature would it fulfill its promise as the “best imaginable nation”—a theme he returns to again and again in the natural

⁵⁴Smithson, *Writings*, p. 54.

history essays and that is indicative of a general trend in his work toward what Thomas Allen has called "a republic in time" rather than "a republic in space."⁵⁵

For the "Walker Errant," for a *nation* of "Walkers Errant," the West of Thoreau's Manifest Destiny was basically a guarantee that the "best of actual nations" would forever rise into ruin and become the "best imaginable nation" as well. "Walking" was meant to be the map to this elusive West—to the Oregon that was "not toward Europe," and to the Oregon in each of us, so to speak. Purely imaginary and poetic, it is one of the most unreasonable and utopian maps in American history. No wonder it was as little followed then as it is now—still evident in various forms of environmentalism or Wai-Chee Dimock's notion of a *longue durée* but little else.⁵⁶ On the other hand, Thoreau's devotion to the beauty of low profile landscapes meant that "Walking" avoided the jingoism and exceptionalism that has gradually morphed from the U.S.-Mexican War into the Bush Doctrine, and it specifically decried the sort of global depredation that has resulted from national sovereignty as much as corporate greed. Thus it remains an ornery and compelling counter friction, not only for a country still deeply divided about the role of nature but for a country even more starkly split over what it might mean to be the "best of actual nations," or the "best imaginable nation," in a world that has largely become its empire.

⁵⁵Thomas M. Allen, *A Republic in Time: Temporality and Social Imagination in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008).

⁵⁶Wai-Chee Dimock, *Through Other Continents: American Literature across Deep Time* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), esp. pp. 7–22.

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