

Road to the Golden Age: Thoreau's Old Carlisle Road

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Henry David Thoreau loved to saunter along the old Carlisle road, a long, uneven and rocky pathway in his native Concord, that led (and still leads) through the town's Estabrook region to the neighboring town of Carlisle. He felt a powerful connection to this primeval-looking landscape, which he knew as "Easterbrooks" and which, with its crops of apples and barberries, was a favorite spot for outings, especially at berry-picking time.

In the autumn of his forty-third year, Thoreau composed an homage to the old Carlisle road, a 330-word sequence that is considered perhaps the most obscure passage in his lifelong, seven-million-word journal. In the present essay I propose to examine this baffling piece of prose in detail. First, though, we will need a bit of background about Estabrook Country and its multiple associations with the man of Concord, for Thoreau had important personal ties to this land and its road.

As early as his boyhood, his father had built a mill in Estabrook to cut cedar wood for pencil-making in the first years of the family business. Thoreau remembered the site, and referenced "the old mill" in some of his field notes.¹ When he visited Estabrook throughout the 1850s, Thoreau pursued the same botanizing and natural-history investigations that had occupied him during his famous earlier residence in Walden Woods.² It was in Estabrook, as much as in any other locale, that Thoreau found "remarkable proof" of the continual dispersion of seeds by animals, wind, and water.³ Estabrook thus furnished a good deal of the evidence Thoreau used to support his final burst of creativity as a naturalist.

Also significantly, a spot near the southern end of the old Carlisle road had become the resting-place of Thoreau's own hand-built house, the very one immortalized in *Walden*. It had been hauled over to Estabrook in 1849, and since then a farm family had been using it as a place to store seeds.⁴ In the late journal, Thoreau remains tight-lipped about his feelings whenever passing his old house in its latter-day location. Among the handful of entries mentioning the house, he only once uses an expression that could conceivably be read as poignant – “my house that was” (JVII:235, 7 March 1855). Yet common sense suggests that Henry must have felt deep emotion whenever he passed by that former residence that was so rich in spiritual discovery. After all, at the outset of his intensified natural-history pursuits around 1851, he had worried that, in becoming a data-collector, he was moving too far from the poetic inspiration of his younger, creative years (*cf.* below, 106).

The People of Estabrook

What sort of people lived along Estabrook's roads, and what did Thoreau think of them? The area was not thickly settled, yet there were still at least a score of residences along the old Carlisle road, the Lowell road, and other ways through Estabrook Country.⁵ Thoreau seems to have progressed from an aloof characterization of the local rustics as a race of “groveling coarse & low-lived men” (J4:101, 26 September 1851, *qtd.* Ells 85) to a more sympathetic understanding that many of these families were bound by “haggard poverty and harassing debt” (JXII:367, 3 October 1859).

In summer and especially fall, the Estabrook fields were quite popular with saunterers, berry-gathering parties, poets, and picnickers who included Emerson's daughter Ellen and her friends. At various times, Estabrook harbored small commercial enterprises, including an “indifferent” tavern that was “much the haunt of drinking men from Concord and Acton.”⁶

The residents of Estabrook whom Thoreau especially favored included his friend the poet Ellery Channing, who lived on Punkatasset

Hill; Minott Pratt and his family, who lived unpretentiously on their farm and always made Thoreau welcome when he visited; the hunter George Melvin, encountered often enough in the pages of the Journal;⁷ and the astronomer-farmer Perez Blood, possessor of an amateur telescope.

An Intricate Verbal Construct

We now have enough background information to launch a textual explication of Thoreau's dense journal passage of 24 September 1859. I hope to show that it is perfectly possible to decipher the old Carlisle road passage with a little help from science, mythology, theology, psychology, folklore and women's fashion notes. At the conclusion of this essay, I will propose a still broader contextual setting for Thoreau's passage.

Before citing it, I should note that this passage is embedded in a much longer entry, from which it differs radically in style. In the Torrey-Allen edition of Thoreau's journal, the whole entry for 24 September 1859 runs to 8½ pages of natural history observations – the matrix for this eccentric passage.⁸ Here is the passage:

Road – that old Carlisle one – that leaves towns behind; where you put off worldly thoughts; where you do not carry a watch, nor remember the proprietor; where the proprietor is the only trespasser, – looking after *his* apples! – the only one who mistakes his calling there, whose title is not good; where fifty may be a-barbering and you do not see one. It is an endless succession of glades where the barberries grow thickest, successive yards amid the barberry bushes where you do not see out. There I see Melvin and the robins, and many a nut-brown maid *sashé*-ing to the barberry bushes in hoops and crinoline, and none of them see me. The world-surrounding hoop! faery rings! Oh, the jolly cooper's trade it is the best of any! Carried to the furthest isles where civilized man penetrates. This the girdle they've put round the world! Saturn or Satan set the example. Large and small hogsheads, bar-

rels, kegs, worn by the misses that go to that lone school-house in the Pinkham Notch. The lonely horse in its pasture is glad to see company, comes forward to be noticed and takes an apple from your hand. Others are called *great* roads, but this is greater than they all. The road is only laid out, offered to walkers, not *accepted* by the town and the traveling world. To be represented by a dotted line on charts, or drawn in lime-juice, undiscoverable to the uninitiated, to be held to a warm imagination. No guideboards indicate it. No odometer would indicate the miles a wagon had run there. Rocks which the druids *might* have raised – if they could. There I go searching for malic acid of the right quality, with my tests. The process is simple. Place the fruit between your jaws and then endeavor to make your teeth meet. The very earth contains it. The Easterbrooks Country contains malic acid. (JXII:348-49, 24 September 1859)⁹

As our explication will show, this passage is a sustained effort to elevate the old Carlisle road metaphysically to serve as a pathway and stimulus for the imagination. It is a vivid prose poem that has, in parts, a satirical tone. It is cryptic in parts, owing to a cascade of disparate images and themes in the middle. These apparently disconnected tropes, a torrent of images and rhetoric linked by idiosyncratic associations, occupy the five lines of print from “The world-surrounding hoop!” through “Pinkham Notch.”

Spinning Thoughts, Flying Ideas

I know of only two Thoreauvians who have commented at all on this passage. One is Steve Ells, who wrote extensively about Thoreau’s lifelong relationship to Estabrook Country and the old Carlisle Road. The second, Dr. Michael Sperber, is a neuropsychiatrist and the author of a study of Thoreau from a clinical as well as a humanist perspective.

Ells writes: "His detachment permits him to hear his thoughts, even when they spin."¹⁰ Sperber cites Thoreau's journal passage as evidence of hypergraphia ("over-writing"), a behavior associated with the manic-depressive disorder now known as bipolar depression.¹¹ And he writes: "...the flight of ideas and stream of associations, characteristic of mania, are so extensive that they obscure the meaning of Thoreau's prose."¹²

"Obscure?" Not altogether. The text's seeming obscurities are traceable to Thoreau's customary practice when making notes. He always carried a pencil and note paper in the field. He would jot down notes and details to help him recall his entire impression. At home later in the day or the week, he would make time to copy out a full and usually more polished version in his journal pages.

On the day in question, when this "manic" flight of associations suddenly demanded expression, Thoreau evidently jotted down the disjointed images as each arose. Later, he copied these essentials, perhaps with a bit of elaboration,¹³ into the "old Carlisle road" passage as he worked on the full entry for 24 September. Possibly he intended to make more of it in some future piece of writing for publication; in the event, this is the form in which he has bequeathed it to us.

Textual Explication

"Road – that old Carlisle one...": With this syntactically curious opening,¹⁴ we embark upon an excursion along a path that promises to idealize our experience, to make us see independently of the everyday world. On this road, Thoreau says, we leave "worldly thoughts" behind – we become open to higher perceptions. (Thoreau uses "worldly" not in our contemporary sense of "sophisticated," but in the traditional biblical sense, referring to the material world – the realm of all things profane – as opposed to the spiritual realm.) We do not carry a watch, that is, we are also leaving behind the idea of measured time, and therefore the everyday criterion of punctuality. We also ignore the landowner, whoever he may be; in fact we deny him any ownership rights. The apples in the orchards are not *his*, Thoreau declares.

Thoreau establishes a theme of sight, sightlessness, and vision while at the same time laying out a topography for the road's landscape. The play of vision is reciprocal between the saunterer on the road and other people who occupy a succession of "glades" and "yards." Either we are on the road and cannot see fifty berry-gatherers behind the thick shrubs, or else we are among the berry-gatherers and do not see out. In either direction, we are sightless, or else objects are invisible. The large berry-bushes are the glades; they are the boundaries enclosing the yards, that is, the spaces occupied by people busy harvesting the bushes. Finally, since the succession of glades is "endless," we are invited to visualize the landscape almost as if in a hall of mirrors, infinitely reflected, as we look about us while sauntering along the road.

In spite of all this invisibility, Thoreau can see one acquaintance (his friend George Melvin), some wildlife (the robins), and "many a nut-brown maid." We recognize that Thoreau is borrowing an old cliché in literature and folk culture ("nut-brown" connotes the fullness of nature),¹⁵ but who are the actual maids picking the berries? Are the young women of Estabrook really brown? They may be tanned after months of summer sunshine, yet the more likely meaning is that these maidens are ripe, as when a nut turns fully brown, ready to seed the earth. The adjective "nut-brown" associates the maids with health, the seasons, and the earth – with nature, reproduction, regeneration.

In contrast to so much naturalness, these maidens' apparel gives them an unnatural gait – sashaying (strutting) – and it also binds them to the world of ladies' fashion, the world of "hoops and crinoline" (short-hand for ladies' wear), hence returning us to those "worldly thoughts" we had put off. Hoop-skirts, in which increasingly wide hoops were sewn into the crinoline at intervals, causing the skirt to bell out, were ubiquitous in Thoreau's time. His mother and sisters wore them. Around late 1859, a journal for ladies spoke of the present age as "these days of crinoline and hoop-petticoats."¹⁶

The lines beginning with "The world-surrounding hoop!" and concluding with "the Pinkham Notch" comprise the delirious midpoint of

this passage. What sounds like disconnected exclamations may be read as a chain of tropes linked by the theme of *circularity*.¹⁷

Hoops and crinoline

World-surrounding hoop

Fairy rings

The jolly cooper (makes hoops)

The furthest isles (at the perimeter of the flat, circular world)

A girdle round the world

Saturn (the ringed planet)

Barrels worn by schoolgirls.

The effect of disjointed association lends Thoreau's writing the density of a prose poem or a stream-of-consciousness narrative, if there had been such a thing in nineteenth-century prose. Each trope comes into its own only when it has resonated with the others. This is the case, for example, with the image of a world encircled literally by a hoop (below, 98), *and also* figuratively by the encroachment of commerce, a theme introduced later in the same passage (below, 99).

"Hoops and crinoline," then, introduces a circle image and gives rise to the next two circular conceits – "The world-surrounding hoop! faery rings!" The world-surrounding hoop suggests Saturn, the sixth planet from the sun. Saturn is girdled by a ring – the very model of a "world-surrounding hoop."

What is Saturn doing in Estabrook? Thoreau had a real-life association between the old Carlisle road and Saturn on account of his acquaintanceship with a farmer named Perez Blood, who lived farther up the road, near the Carlisle town boundary. As the owner of an 85-power telescope, Blood doubled as an amateur astronomer. In 1847 and again in 1851, Thoreau had walked up the old Carlisle road to visit Blood and use his telescope to get a magnified look at "Saturn's rings, and the mountains in the moon."¹⁸

What about "faery rings," the richest of these circle tropes? Fairy rings are one thing in nature, another in folklore. In nature, an actual fairy ring refers to a circle of unusually lush grass-growth in a field, caused by a fungus.¹⁹ In folklore, fairy rings (also known as pixie circles)

were thought to be the miniature dance-floors of fairies. Inside the charmed circle, the tiny sprites would gather to make merry, dance, and play enchanting music.

What does this have to do with vision? Quite a lot: in some parts of Europe, superstition held that the passing mortal who stepped inside a fairy ring would be punished with the loss of an eye, or be struck blind in both. In some legends, a mortal who stepped inside the fairies' perimeter would become invisible to ordinary people outside and might remain a captive of the fairies.²⁰

With these two words "faery rings," Thoreau's circles acquire additional, mythic connotations involving magic, punishment, and blindness. Now recall that along the old Carlisle road, the successive "yards" are bounded by barberry bushes. *Those* are the fairy rings. *We* are the people who can't see out – or the ones who can't see in.

Interrupting Thoreau's prose cadences while continuing the hoop theme, we have the line about the "jolly cooper's trade."²¹ The cooper's trade, of course, is the fabrication of barrels – the wooden staves and also the hoops that hold them tightly together. If the cooper's trade is glorified as "the best of any," we have certainly left real life behind, so that the jolly cooper is not only an idealized stereotype, but practically a supernatural figure – perhaps a divinity or higher power that has set bounds to our globe with *his* hoops.

This theme of the circumferential limit of the world is continued in the next sentence-fragment, which creates an additional break in rhythm and tone: "Carried to the furthest isles where civilized man penetrates." I hear this grandiloquent conceit as sarcasm – Thoreau's spoof of the typical boast of American commerce as it began to go global by rail and ocean. This idea and these very expressions were commonplaces of the time, as we will see (below, 105).

In the exclamation "This the girdle they've put round the world!" Thoreau continues his sarcasm. "Girdle put round the world" reminds us of Shakespeare's Puck, who declares: "I'll put a girdle round the earth in forty minutes."²² By conjuring up Shakespeare's midsummer night of

shape-shifting and delirium, Thoreau lends a supernatural aura to the Estabrook lands – just as he gives Estabrook a prehistoric ceremonial atmosphere by dating the boulders from the Druids.

Yet this echo of Shakespeare's magic has a dark side, because "girdle," a double-edged metaphor, also connotes the diabolical operations of commerce. "This the girdle *they*'ve put round the world." Who are *they*? Surely this refers to the proprietors of this world, namely the businessmen who are always fencing parts of it off for worldly gain.²³ Thoreau in many writings abundantly expresses his loathing of the diabolical role of commerce;²⁴ perhaps this is what furnishes a link to Satan in the next sentence.

At this point Thoreau, having interrupted his own cadence with other people's jingles and slogans, re-establishes a strong rhythm for his own voice by using this ten-syllable line propelled by the vigorous repetition of a compact, regular dactylic foot:

Sáturn or Sátan sét the exámple.²⁵

In one of the few instances of actual wordplay in this passage, "Saturn" phonetically summons "Satan." This invocation of God's opponent, in turn, invites us to consider Saturn itself not only as a planet but also as a divinity. And Saturn, in Greek myth the ruler of the gods until he was overthrown, in turn reflects Satan, God's opponent cast down from heaven.

It is reasonable to suggest that "set the example" could mean: has provided the model for a girdled world – the world which belongs to all of us but has been enclosed for the gain of a few.

On the old Carlisle road, as noted, we do not wear a watch – yet Saturn sometimes is Father Time. Under Saturn, we risk falling back into the world of measured time and businesslike punctuality – not only that, but mortality itself – the human condition – just as we were escaping from it along the old Carlisle road.²⁶

Barrel Apparel: Hoop-Skirts and Dream-Work

"Large and small hogsheads, barrels, kegs, worn by the misses that go to that lone schoolhouse in the Pinkham Notch." Thoreau is continuing the circular "hoop" motif. Note the oneiric symbolism in this fantas-

tic conceit of girls wearing barrels for clothing: Thoreau remembers the actual experience of seeing nut-brown maids gathering berries while wearing “hoops and crinoline” (above, 96), and now, in the manner of dream-work, he reproduces the same theme literally – schoolgirls wearing hoops, in fact entire barrels.

We may even trace the operation of Thoreau’s poetic dream-work. Thoreau (along with most working and farming women, we must assume) considered hoops and crinoline to be ill-suited for field excursions such as berry-picking. Two years prior to the paragraph we are studying, Thoreau related the following anecdote in his journal:

I heard some ladies the other day laughing about some one of their help who had helped herself to a real hoop from off a hogshead for her gown. I laughed too, but which party do you think I laughed at? Isn’t hogshead as good a word as crinoline? (JX:7, 10 August 1857)²⁷

Here Thoreau writes of a young woman who literally took part of a barrel to use in her clothing. This brief entry can be taken as evidence of a mental association which, forming over the course of two years, produced the image in our 1859 passage of the barrel-clad girls.²⁸

Invisible Ink and Malic Acid

At this point, Thoreau’s delirium of associations has finished, and he resumes his metaphysicalization of the physical Estabrook Country. The “lonely horse comes forward to be noticed,” placing itself in our field of vision. The apple we feed it fulfils *nature*’s intended purpose, not that of “the proprietor.” Often in Thoreau, apples grown for the market symbolize the evils of commodification, and it is not surprising that Thoreau denies the proprietor any right to “his” apples.²⁹

By its central position in the paragraph, this apple in our hand serves to link the apples at the beginning of this passage with the malic acid quest of the conclusion. The Estabrook apple, the bloom still fresh on it, is both a fruit and a token. It affords spiritual nourishment to those who saunter along the old Carlisle road, at least for those whom Thoreau now

calls "the initiated" – those who obey a higher law than that of commerce and "worldly thoughts." The apple restores a person's balance.³⁰

"Others are called *great* roads." Indeed, Great Road was a ubiquitous highway name in Thoreau's era, as common as today's Main Street. But the old Carlisle one, Thoreau declares, is greater than any of them. With this superlative, the road is elevated beyond the worldly roads of commerce and everyday life.

In a new series of tropes, Thoreau now presents the road itself as invisible. In the first place, he declares that it is not a finished road. It is only "laid out," and thus would be represented by a mere dotted line on a map. Thoreau specifies that the road is "offered to walkers" beyond any jurisdiction or commercial concern. In fact, any wagon (whether for business or pleasure) is excluded because the road is too rocky, and the distance anyone travels goes unmeasured ("no odometer"). Also, as noted earlier, Thoreau imparts a prehistoric aura to the boulder-strewn Estabrook landscape when he interjects, "Rocks which the druids *might* have raised – if they could."³¹

Even for walkers, the road is hard to locate: "No guide-boards indicate it." We can keep it invisible (and therefore keep it secret) on the map if, instead of ink, we use lime juice to trace the dotted line. Using citrus juice to write with, as generations of schoolchildren have discovered, results in an "invisible ink" message that becomes legible only after you hold it close to a source of heat.

Quite significantly, Thoreau designates "a warm imagination" rather than a physical fire as the heat source. Imagination allows us to see – and read – what is invisible. Our experience on the old Carlisle road requires imagination, which alone gives the road its true value.

Concluding this journal passage, Thoreau indulges in Yankee humor, directly addressing you and me, and teasing us with a quasi-scientific reference to his "tests" for malic acid, a chemical compound found naturally in fruits including apples. (It is what makes apples tart.)

Thoreau couches his instructions in a mock language of mechanical operation, as if our jaws were a cider press. In plain English, he is telling

us to take a bite of the apple – or rather he dares us to do so. It may prove too bitter to swallow, for Estabrook apples ran to extreme tartness.³² Emerson, in a lecture of 1858, referred jocularly to several varieties, naming two of them the “Bite-me-if-you-dare” and the “Beware-of-this.”³³

Ingesting the apple, if we can, identifies us strongly with the earth itself and especially with the magical land of Estabrook, as Thoreau suggests in the concluding words of this passage. From the realms of the supernatural and spiritual, we are brought back down to earth, as it were, by sampling an Estabrook apple, still ignoring any proprietary rights that a landowner may claim to the fruit, and so remaining free and high-minded.

Apollo: Revolt from Worldly Service

Let us return to biography for some additional insights. From the evidence, Thoreau’s overall state of mind at the age of 42 in the autumn of 1859 was saturnine. The year had begun with the death of Henry’s father at age 71. The grieving process, to judge from journal entries (especially JXI:435-39), preoccupied Thoreau. According to biographer Richard Lebeaux, the parental death stirred multiple anxieties, and Thoreau struggled as intimations of mortality divided his spirit (and journal entries) between heavy depression and self-exhortations toward productivity.³⁴

With the passing of his father, Henry, the only surviving male in the family, legally became head of the household and personally assumed responsibility for managing the family’s graphite business. In addition, he shouldered responsibility for improving his earnings, taking on surveying jobs, and increasing his public lecturing.

While this productive work brought him a measure of what some psychologists call generativity, the jobs nevertheless rankled Thoreau. They dragged him down from imaginative contemplation and botanizing, his true callings. As he had frequently done in the past, he now likened himself to the sun-god Apollo obliged to toil in the service of King Admetus.³⁵

Estabrook Country held one highly negative association for Thoreau in this context, which undoubtedly contributed to his image of the circle as a circumference – a girdle or boundary. In those days, municipal officials were required annually to perambulate the town line in order to reaffirm the town's legal boundaries, often in the company of a surveyor. In this way, Thoreau's profession had placed him in the company of several Concord selectmen as they traipsed across lots and wilderness for several days in September 1851. By the time they had walked Concord's Carlisle boundary in Estabrook Country, Thoreau declared in his journal that he felt "inexpressibly begrimed" after a week spent with "the most common place and worldly minded men.... A fatal coarseness is the result of mixing in the trivial affairs of men." (The old Carlisle road, we recall, should be a place "where you put off worldly thoughts.") "Fatal" is a strong term, yet I am sure Thoreau means it quite literally. Remaining free is a struggle *for* life and *against* the death of the spirit. Striving to reclaim his "tone and sanity," Thoreau at that time invoked the poet's duty to remain pure and aloof. "Let him perambulate the bounds of Imagination's provinces[,] the realms of faery, and not the insignificant boundaries of towns" (J4:84-85, 20 September 1851, qtd. Ells 84). Perambulating the realms of faery is precisely what Thoreau accomplishes in the passage we are analyzing.

The Primordial Apple

Consider once again Thoreau's repeated references to apples. If the proprietor has no right to them, Thoreau implies, they belong to everyone – human and horse alike. Thoreau here counterstates a well-worn cultural trope, for in Christian tradition the "apple" offered by the beguiling serpent is the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Partaking of the forbidden fruit, the first man and woman had attained godly wisdom – had "become as one of us, to know good and evil," according to God (Gen. 3:22). They were doomed to know shame, experience mortality, and sink down to merely human existence (to the level of "groveling coarse & low-lived men," Thoreau might have said). Expelled from

Eden, the primal couple were condemned to worldly life – to work, suffer, and die. As the standard schoolbook taught, “In Adam’s fall, we sinned all.”

Wryly superimposing Genesis and paleontology, Thoreau infuses Estabrook’s fields with “the scent the earth yielded in the saurian period, before man was created and fell” in another passage in the same journal entry of 24 September (JXII:346). Is it the theme of the Fall that accounts for Thoreau’s invocation of Satan, next to Saturn? The example set by Satan that we know from the Christian creation myth is, precisely, the primordial lure of “worldly thoughts.”

The Stimulating Scent of Decay; Edenic Tropes

Thoreau experienced a powerful rush of imagination during this 24th of September in the field, captured when he jotted down this sequence of tropes and exclamations. Was there some external stimulus for these Edenic imaginings? Possibly there was: olfactory stimulation is one factor that can bring on transient pathognomic mania (i.e., a momentary flight of ideas, stream of associations, or altered consciousness).³⁶ In the overall journal entry of 24 September, the old Carlisle road passage is flanked by musings on a type of tree fern known as dicksonia. Thoreau’s highly sensitive nose prompted him to write extensively about “the sweet smell of decay” emitted by these plants:

The very scent of it, if you have a decayed frond in your chamber, will take you far up country in a twinkling. You would think you had gone after the cows there, or were lost on the mountains. It will make you as cool and well as a frog, – a wood frog, *Rana sylvatica*. (JXII:345-46, 24 September 1859)

It certainly sounds as if Thoreau got off, as we say, on the sweet smell of the dicksonia, which possibly helped trigger his rush of associations.

As he saunters the old Carlisle road in this passage, then, Thoreau is seeking to reverse the negative Christian myth of original sin, to bring humanity back to Eden and away from worldly life. The new Eden is

none other than magical, misty, prehistoric Estabrook Country, which brings forth its abundance of apples and berries every autumn for the nourishment and use of an innocent humanity. Its gates are not marked, but we can find our way into it if we make our chart visible using our "warm imagination."

In this context, we may revisit an aspect of American culture that Thoreau is satirizing. I suggested earlier that Thoreau is mocking commercial commonplaces when he exclaims, "Carried to the furthest isles where civilized man penetrates. This the girdle they've put round the world!" Let us listen to a nearly contemporaneous Fourth of July oration in which we find both of Thoreau's tropes, "the furthest isles" (a cliché equivalent to saying "the ends of the earth") and a world-surrounding girdle (in the form of the "belted" American continent). Narrating the westward progress of American independence, our speaker declaims thus:

With successive strides of progress, it has crossed the Alleghenies, the Ohio, the Mississippi, and the Missouri ... has belted the continent with rising states; has unlocked the golden treasures of the Sierra Madre; and flung out the banners of the Republic to the gentle breezes of the peaceful sea. Not confined to the continent, the power of the Union has convoyed our commerce over the broadest oceans to the furthest isles; has opened the gates of the morning to our friendly intercourse....³⁷

And so on for another couple of hours, one hot Fourth of July in Boston. This grandiloquence about the globalization of Manifest Destiny was produced by one of the great orators of Thoreau's day, Edward Everett, who may be remembered nowadays for giving the *three-hour* cornerstone speech just *before* Abraham Lincoln's 3-minute Gettysburg address in 1863. When I listen to the fulsome public rhetoric of nineteenth-century America, I realize with gratitude how modern a writer Thoreau is.

Aids to Vision: Wider Journal Contexts

Thoreau, in an often-remarked journal entry at the outset of his intensified natural-history pursuits, wrote:

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. I see details, not wholes nor the shadow of the whole. I count some parts, and say, "I know." (JII:406, 19 August 1851)

Deprived of the capacity for true visualization, Thoreau fears he is confined in the same circumscribed situation as the Unitarian minister of whom he had written, "...his sphere is already hooped. ... I do not see the necessity for a man's getting into a hogshead and so narrowing his sphere...."³⁸ On many levels, Thoreau's accounts of Estabrook Country and the old Carlisle road are intended to free him from merely counting some parts of the whole. He intends here to recapture his soaring creative vision, which sees and unifies virtually everything in nature and the world.

Heaven's Gate

In the same journal entry, only six paragraphs preceding our passage, Thoreau composed *another* homage to the old Carlisle road, which in some respects could be called an alternative or complementary draft of the passage we have explicated, echoing its ambulatory cadence:

Going along this old Carlisle road, – road for walkers, for berry-pickers, and no more worldly travellers; road for Melvin and Clark; not for the sheriff nor butcher nor the baker's jingling cart; road where all wild things and fruits abound, where there are countless rocks to jar those who venture there in wagons; which no jockey, no wheelwright in his right mind, drives over, no little spidery gigs and Flying Childers; road which leads to and through a great but not famous garden, zoölogical and

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botanical garden, at whose *gate* you never arrive, ...
When I waded through by narrow cow-paths, it is as if I
had strayed into an ancient and decayed herb-garden.
(JXII:345-46)

Once again, the uneven, rock-strewn road does not admit the minions of law or commerce – or anyone's vehicles ("jingling cart," "little spidery gigs") drawn by their commercialized horses.³⁹

The road takes walkers and berry-pickers into a not-quite garden of Eden ("great but not famous," "ancient and decayed"). As the Torrey-Allen edition of the Journal notes, this gate at which we never quite arrive anticipates Thoreau's famous metaphor only one page later: "...you may have sauntered near to heaven's gate..." (XII:347). Heaven's gate nevertheless continues to recede, urging us forward.

Readers of Thoreau will have recognized that sauntering near to heaven's gate anticipates, in turn, the paradisiacal or golden-age landscape affectingly depicted at the end of Thoreau's "Walking" (1862). The concluding paragraph reads:

So we saunter toward the Holy Land, till one day the sun shall shine more brightly than ever he has done, shall perchance shine into our minds and hearts, and light up our whole lives with a great awakening light, as warm and serene and golden as on a bank-side in autumn. (*Excursions*, 138).

And here we discover the full significance of Thoreau's idea that the road is only "laid out": the road will *never* be finished *because our presence as saunterers on the road is forever required in order to complete it in the present moment*.

Writing about the old Carlisle road and Estabrook Country in the late journal, Thoreau has created a primordial and supernatural land as a refuge from modernization and the expansion of commerce. The real world, and Estabrook Country itself, may be bounded at the perimeter by "worldly" imperatives, yet we are free to saunter into Estabrook on the pathway of invisibility, the old Carlisle road. It is the road of imagination

that leads through a land where we can see things that the mass of men cannot, and where we never reach our ethereal destination (heaven's gate), because our heaven is our presence in the moment.

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Notes

¹ Today the exact site in Estabrook Country is somewhat disputed. Ells 76, 122-23.

² *Cf.* Ells 103.

³ JXIV:187, 29 October 1860; Ells 109ff, 145.

⁴ The house's afterlife is recounted in Harding, 224. In the late Journal, Thoreau makes relatively indifferent mention of "my old house" in its final location only about four times (Ells 110 and 145-48).

⁵ *Cf.* map by Herbert Gleason (1906) at Ells 77. John Hanson Mitchell would have us believe that in Thoreau's time "Estabrook was a haunted land, the farms deserted, the families departed, and only a wind blowing" (qtd. Ells 85.) But this is poetic license.

⁶ And of Concord's "class of rowdy young men" more generally. Jarvis 102, qtd. Ells 147.

⁷ *Cf.* JIX:148, 1 December 1856; JIX:151, 3 December 1856.

⁸ The sequence is a single paragraph as edited by Torrey and Allen; Thoreau's manuscript shows an additional paragraph-like break (*cf.* Online Journal Transcripts, 30:11-12). This second "paragraph" begins at the words "There I go searching for malic acid."

⁹ This is the text as edited in Torrey-Allen, with one exception. I have preferred the manuscript's "This the girdle they've put round the world!" – a more indignant exclamation – to the editors' interpolation of a verb ("This is the girdle..."). (*Cf.* Online Journal Transcripts, *loc. cit.*).

¹⁰ Ells, 95.

¹¹ Hypergraphia is defined in Flaherty, 24-25. In some aspects, this brain-state could be related to the "detachment" observed by Ells, which permits Thoreau to hear his own thoughts: "In his writing [about Estabrook] he keeps his distance yet observes" (Ells, 94).

¹² Sperber, 30-31.

¹³ The manuscript of this passage has five phrases inserted with car-ets, two of which are in pencil rather than the ink Thoreau used upon first writing. (Online Journal Transcripts, *loc. cit.*).

¹⁴ "Road – that old Carlisle one..." is an ungrammatical way to introduce a specific road in the real world. But what a neo-Platonist turn of thought it expresses! First the essence – "road" – then the actual or accidental, "that old Carlisle one."

¹⁵ "The Nut-Brown Maid" is the heroine of an old ballad published by Thomas Percy in his popular and influential *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765), which Thoreau read as a student.

¹⁶ "Hoop Petticoats and Crinoline," 256.

¹⁷ All belong to the spectacular "circle" metaphors characteristic of Thoreau's writing, discussed notably by Charles R. Anderson in *The Magic Circle of Walden* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968).

¹⁸ Ells, 85-86. Thoreau, *Correspondence*, 187.

¹⁹ A longstanding belief held that fairy rings were watered by none other than Puck, the mythic nature-spirit invoked by classic authors, notably Shakespeare, whose Puck declares, "And I serve the fairy queen,/ To dew her orbs upon the green" (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 2:1).

²⁰ See, among other sources, Morgan 13, and Sikes 103ff. (and the illustration "Plucked from the Fairy Circle," 76).

²¹ A line apparently imitating the opening lines of a ditty sung in the sixteenth chapter of Izaak Walton's *Compleat Angler* (1656):

O the gallant Fisher's life,
It is the best of any;
'Tis full of pleasure, void of strife,
And 'tis beloved of many...

(Thoreau knew *The Compleat Angler* well, having most likely read the 1836 edition of Nicholas Harris Nicolas.) I am grateful to Brent Ranalli of the Thoreau Society for tracking down this source.

²² Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 2:1. Cf. Sperber 32.

²³ When traveling twelve miles north of Boston, Thoreau had com-

plained of fruit orchards fenced-in by commerce: “Consider Nahant, the resort of all the fashion of Boston ... the visitor comes away with a vision of Mr. Tudor’s ugly fences a rod high, designed to protect a few pear-shrubs” (*The Maine Woods*, 153-54). Actually these were privately owned pear, plum, and apple orchards belonging to Boston’s “ice king,” Frederic Tudor, who made his fortune shipping ice (including Walden Pond ice) to the furthest isles – Martinique, Cuba, and eventually India (Seaburg 198).

²⁴ That is, with the exception of his ambivalent mythologizing of the iron horse in the “Sounds” chapter of *Walden*, wherein he declares, “What recommends commerce to me is its enterprise and bravery.” In a sense, Thoreau in the present journal passage could almost be spoofing this earlier praise of commerce, which is essentially romantic, even though it is seasoned with intimations of the dark side of enterprise. (“If the enterprise were as innocent as it is early!” etc., *Walden* 117).

²⁵ Phonetically, this line is unified by the assonance of the broad “a” (Sáturn, exámple) and the alliteration of unvoiced sibilants – all those esses leading off the stressed syllables (Saturn, Satan, set, -sample) might remind us of the subtle serpent Satan speaking. The rhythm is continued with “Lárgé and small hógshéads.”

²⁶ Saturn, in legend, set a grim example indeed when he devoured his own children as each was born, so he would never be overthrown. (His horrifying act was depicted in classical art by Rubens and Goya.) Saturn’s queen, Rhea, got fed up with this repeated and depressing experience, and raised the infant Jupiter in concealment. Saturn did get overthrown by Jupiter, who became ruler of the gods. This symbolism of mortality – time devouring its children – was a factor in the evolution of Cronos/Saturn (initially a god of agriculture) into *Chronos* – Time itself. Even as Father Time, Saturn held on to his agricultural implement, the sickle, giving rise to the commonplace of the Grim Reaper.

The idea of Saturn (one of the Titans) inhabiting a primordial terrain is notably evoked in “Ktaadn”: “What is this Titan who has possession of me?” (*Maine Woods*, 71), and also evoked in “that giant who, my neighbor expects, is to bound up the Alleghanies,” JXII:346 (24 September 1859).

²⁷ The maid in this anecdote was helping herself to a barrel hoop made not of iron, but of pliable sapling-wood, commonly used for household storage barrels.

²⁸ Further, Thoreau's recollection of this maid's barrel-hoop may have combined with some memory of, or reading about, "that lone schoolhouse" in New Hampshire, an encounter which I must leave to other researchers to identify. Thoreau passed through Pinkham Notch, a pass in the White Mountains of New Hampshire, on 7 July 1858, just before ascending Mt. Washington (JXI:14), but none of his accounts of his two ascents of this peak (1839 and 1858) mentions any schoolhouse, let alone schoolgirls.

²⁹ Cf.: "Remarking to old Mr. B— the other day on the abundance of apples, 'Yes,' says he, 'and fair as dollars too.' That's the kind of beauty they see in apples" (JXIV:103, 7 October 1860).

³⁰ "I fill my pockets on each side," Thoreau remarks comically, "and as I retrace my steps, I eat one first from this side, and then from that, in order to preserve my balance" (JXI:292, 7 November 1858, qtd. Ells 97).

³¹ Why couldn't they? No doubt nature and the succession of eons are stronger than the druids' faith. In Thoreau's time, it was believed that Stonehenge had been raised by order of these priests of ancient Britain, who flourished around 800 BCE, though we now know that this prehistoric monument (c. 2500 BCE) antedates the druidic era by far.

³² Today's consumers, accustomed to fewer than 100 types of commercially grown apple, will be surprised to learn that "the number of distinct varieties grown by Americans in the nineteenth century was somewhere around 14,000" (Hensley). I am indebted to Stephen Spratt (Department of English, University of North Carolina) for calling my attention to this reference.

³³ Ells 96. Emerson, "Country Life," *Atlantic Monthly* (November 1904), qtd. Ells 92.

³⁴ For an absorbing analysis, see Lebeaux 300-306 and 314-21. It would be rewarding, but beyond the scope of this paper, to interpret the old Carlisle road passage in light of the "shift in emotional climate" (300) that the loss of his father would bring upon Thoreau, who sensed

his own mortality and did “not feel entirely in tune with the season” during the years 1858-59 (306).

³⁵ Lebeaux 321. Thoreau, in moments of melancholy, would compare his subjection to commerce to that of Apollo, the sunny god of prophecy, music, and all things high-minded, who in legend was obliged to live one year on earth in service to Admetus, king of Thessaly (e.g., *Walden* 70, where he notably complains, “trade curses everything it handles”). Cf. also Ells 131. Cf. especially Thoreau’s letter to H.G.O. Blake, written only two days after this journal entry (*Letters* No. 44, 174-76). I am indebted to Michael Sperber for calling my attention to the last-mentioned reference.

³⁶ Dr. Michael Sperber, personal comment 8/18/08.

³⁷ Everett 296. While the United States’ westward expansion to the Pacific and then to Japan was achieved largely by “Old Rough and Ready” Zachary Taylor’s victories in the US aggressive invasion of Mexico (1848) and by Commodore Matthew Perry’s black gunboats anchored in Japan’s Tokyo Bay (1853-54), our speechmaker presents this globalization of Manifest Destiny as a tranquil unfolding (to the “gentle breezes of the peaceful sea,” i.e., the Pacific).

³⁸ JIX:284, 28 February 1857. If “hogshead is as good a word as crinoline,” it is worth citing the whole passage, in which Thoreau de-means a *bête noire*, the generic Unitarian clergyman:

He dreams of a certain sphere to be filled by him, something less in diameter than a great circle, maybe not greater than a hogshead. All the staves are got out, and his sphere is already hooped. ... I do not see the necessity for a man’s getting into a hogshead and so narrowing his sphere, nor for his putting his head into a halter. (*Ibid.*)

This clergyman inhabits a “sphere,” but it is narrowed to the dimension of the hogshead being built for him, and he conceals himself in it. He cannot see out.

³⁹ Flying Childers, also mentioned in *Walden* (53), was the fastest race horse of his time in England.

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