
The Laws and Concept of Natural Time in Walden.

One of the more superficial lessons often gleaned from Thoreau's Walden is the superiority of the "natural" laws of time over those of commercially-motivated, fast-paced humans. This viewpoint has its supports in Thoreau's almost constant juxtaposition of timeless, melodious birdsong to the screeching, interruptive quality of the train whistle in "Sounds." His message, however, contains more complexity than a single condemnation of civilization's rule by the ticking clock; at various moments, he stresses the good qualities of the railroads by comparing their noises more favorably toward natural time, equating the whistle's regularity to the sun. Thoreau utilizes the qualities of sound to demonstrate how various tones found in nature and civilization connote with the pace of living in each place. The relationship of natural versus civilized time is confounded by seemingly contradictory examples of, for instance, a whippoorwill singing "almost with as much precision as a clock," the human construct also governing the railroads' time. By the end of "Sounds," Thoreau somewhat reconciles his love of a natural time with its civilized associations by suggesting a blend of the two as a standard of living. The domesticated cockerel embodies this suggestion, a bird that keeps time for rural people, but on a looser schedule than that of the railroad. One important implication of "Sounds," then, is that human conventions of time-measurement do contain value; Thoreau believes that natural time allows one to live more freely.

It seems highly appropriate that Thoreau's musings on time come in the form of sound, possibly the most temporal of senses. Not only are sounds necessarily finite—a piece of music has a definite end whereas a painting does not—but they mark the passage of time with rhythm, as a ticking clock or a musical piece. Noises also serve as temporal reminders for various human actions, like waking up in the morning or boarding a train, for which visual stimuli would not serve as well—imagine being woken up by a flashing light as opposed to the jolt of an alarm clock.

To Thoreau, however, a difference exists between the type of time marked by birdsong and that of the railroad, one signifying a natural, timeless quality and the other a harsh disruption in the smooth flow of natural life. He sits "...in undisturbed solitude and stillness, while the birds sang around...until by...the noise of some traveler's wagon on the distant highway, I was reminded of the lapse of time" (1827). Here, a traveler's wagon instead of a railroad serves as the vehicle of commerce between places, embodying the scheduled, unnatural reminder of the lapse of time, taking Thoreau out of the undisturbed reverie of birdsong. In the same paragraph, he describes his employment of the exemplary time of birds and the "uncivilized" Puri Indians:

As the sparrow had its trill...so had I my chuckle or suppressed warble which he might hear out

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of my nest. My days were not days of the week...nor were they minced into hours and fretted by the ticking of a clock; for I lived like the Puri Indians, of whom it is said that 'for yesterday, to-day and to-morrow they have only one word...(1827)

Here, Thoreau explicitly compares himself to birds by noting the sparrow's "trill" in relationship to his "warble," on top of his description of his house as a "nest." It follows then, that the type of time he subsequently speaks of belongs to the birds as well as the Native Americans, since he also puts himself forward as living by their idea of time. He posits this way of life as superior by claiming it as neither "minced" nor "fretted" into time measurement, verbs which equate confinement and anxiety with civilized time. The two passages combine to contrast the melodic birdsong to the fragmented ticking of a clock, the birdsong existing as a more unified whole, exemplifying, perhaps, the "one word" the Puris use for the passage of days. It is not the birds, but the wagon that reminds Thoreau of the passage of time. Industrial society lives by the compressed time of the clock, each second marked by ticking, thereby calling one's attention to the every passing instant. The Puris, and the author at Walden, live by the wholism of nature, birdsong calling one to forget the particularity of each moment and view time as a harmonic flow.

The author particularly seems to believe the railroad is warping of nature, a thing of the city that forces its commercial schedule onto all those around it, limiting their freedom. Thoreau writes, beginning with the view of the "restless city merchants,"

Here come your groceries, country; your rations, countrymen! Nor is there any man so independent on his farm that he can say them nay. And here's your pay for them! screams the countryman's whistle; timber like long battering rams going twenty miles an hour...With such huge and lumbering civility the country hands a chair to the city. (1829)

The author clearly demonstrates the dependency of the more "natural" countryside upon the city- the fact that no man "can say them nay" perfectly illustrates the powerless position of more nature-bound humans, exchanging timber (dead nature) for rations, supplying chairs to the city. Although not explicitly, Thoreau does include a discussion of time and sound here, with the city and country both shouting to each other, suggesting the hurried character of the transactions of commerce, going "twenty miles an hour" on a train through the country. The fact that he describes the city merchants, the arbiters of trade, as "restless," and the country's civility as "lumbering" suggests that the country still moves more slowly than commerce, and thus in a more natural way. Again, the farmers trade biological objects to the city whereas the city gives them the non-specific, possibly processed, "rations." Rural areas, then, still maintain some hope of returning to natural time.

Even as Thoreau seems disapproving of industrially-driven time, he also finds beauty and power

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in the railroad comparable to that of birds. His problem with the railroad seems not to be simply its existence, but instead that it is used for the wrong thing (excessive commercialism, speeding up the sense of time). At alternate points, he comments on the relationship between the man-made clock and the natural time of sunrise and sunset-both the railroads and the birds use these time-pieces. Thoreau demonstrates the relationship of the admirable qualities of the railroad to its particular time-setting in the following passage:

I watch the passage of the morning cars with the same feeling that I do the rising of the sun, which is hardly more regular. Their train of clouds stretching far behind and rising higher and higher, going to heaven while the cars are going to Boston, conceals the sun for a minute and casts my distant field into the shade...If the enterprise were as innocent as it is early!...They go and come with such regularity and precision, and their whistle can be heard so far, that the farmers set their clocks by them, and thus one well conducted institution regulates a whole country. Have not men improved somewhat in punctuality since the railroad was invented?...I have been astonished at the miracles it has wrought... (1829-30)

The romanticized image of the "clouds stretching far behind and rising higher and higher, going to heaven" surely illustrates a certain power of the railroad-its enormous figure chugging across the countryside, its by-products able to reach heaven while it reaches Boston, a destination that would have seemed almost as far before the train's invention. Thoreau, on the next page, explicitly notes that humans have improved on punctuality, and that as a result, he has "been astonished at the miracles it has wrought," his amazement deriving from its overwhelming power to regulate the time of the countryside. Despite his amazement and appreciation of the railroad's potentialities, he maintains a sense of its confinement of humans by regulating time so precisely-his comment, "...and thus one well conducted institution regulates a whole country," doubtless reflects his earlier outrage at the farmers trading lumber for their rations, seemingly without any other options. The exclamation "If the enterprise were as innocent as it is early!" supports this point, an outburst that undermines the "miracles" of punctuality the railroad creates. A comparison to natural, freer time results again from the notations on sound; with the trains, the "whistle can be heard so far, that the farmers set their clocks by them," thereby regulating the country. It is the sound, then, that drives men to live by the trains, for, if there existed no powerful, far-reaching whistle, the farmers would have to set their clocks by something else, perhaps, birds or the sunset. (Incidentally, the magnificent cloud emanating from the train, covers the sun momentarily, disrupting its function as a timepiece.)

Regularly at half past seven, in one part of the summer, after the evening train had gone by, the whippoorwills chanted their vespers for half an hour...They would begin to sing almost with as much precision as a clock, within five minutes of a particular time, referred to the setting of the sun, every evening. (1833)

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This passage demonstrates, subtly, Thoreau's differentiation between the time of nature and civilized man—although the whippoorwills sing so regularly that he can predict them within five minutes, important distinctions exist. First, they sing with almost as much precision as a clock, only living "within five minutes of a particular time" instead of being so regular that the farmers set clocks by them. Therefore, the birds live within freer boundaries of time than industrialized society. Second, the whippoorwills sing according to the setting of the sun, contrasting directly with the railroads' shrouding of this natural timepiece; indeed, much of a clock's artificiality derives from its ignorance of sunrise and sunset, with people, perhaps, eating dinner at six o'clock every evening regardless of whether the day has truly ended.

Although Thoreau never explicitly delineates a solution to the time conflict modern man faces, his final discussion on the cockerel hints at a possible reconciliation of industrialization and nature. He chooses the rural clock of the cockerel's song as the ultimate timekeeper:

The note of this once wild Indian pheasant is certainly the most remarkable of any bird's, and if they could be naturalized without being domesticated, it would soon become the most famous sound in our woods...No wonder that man added this bird to his tame stock,—to say nothing of the eggs and drumsticks. Who would not be early to rise, and rise earlier and earlier every successive day of his life, till he became unspeakably healthy, wealthy, and wise? (1835)

Here, Thoreau wishes the rooster to "be naturalized without being domesticated," yet understands why humans domesticated them both for their song and its use as food. He feels that this domestic bird would flourish if wild, yet still wants humans to live by its time, rising "earlier and earlier" to its crowing. The fact that he selects a domesticated bird, while recommending it as naturalized demonstrates a sort of compromise between pure nature and industrialization because he does not ask humankind to completely ignore established conventions of civilization. He even uses the product of our wisdom, a proverb ("...healthy, wealthy, and wise"), to predict the outcome of naturalizing the cockerel, furthering the idea that he values the advance of people along already established trends. However, his dream of man rising earlier every morning alludes to his previous discussion of the whippoorwills' free sense of time—just as they function within five minutes of sunset, so humans should wake up on a looser schedule, slightly changing each day. Thus, his final recommendation includes preconceived human ideals as well as a new deference for the environment, living by a natural, though familiar clock rather than the train whistle.

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