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The Railroad in American Poetry

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THE RAILROAD IN AMERICAN POETRY

by

James C. Bodenstedt

A Thesis

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of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

1992

THE RAILROAD IN AMERICAN POETRY

By

/ James C. Bodenstedt

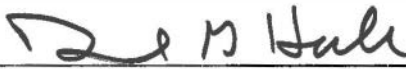
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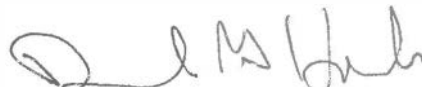
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Introduction

In many ways travel by train is a speeded-up version of what we are all doing— a here and now experience of what it's like to be human. We get on at the station and enter a closed system. The railroad car becomes our home, a microcosmos on rails. This mass of iron and steel will carry us from here, to our destination, there. It holds its own light, air, water food, and even provisions for sleep. As we pull away from the station, we begin what seems a linear journey ruled by the contours of the track and an engineer's watch. Gradually, the train picks up speed. Faster and faster it accelerates as we notice the passing of old warehouses, telephone poles, trees and fields. At top speed we may even forget that we're moving at all. The train window frames nature outside like a freshly painted landscape. Our own thoughts of traveling through space and time fade in and out of consciousness. We may wonder: Are we going or staying? Is there time or no time? What is the lure of this mystical summons we hear in the night? Why, suddenly, do we reminisce about our childhoods through these train windows? What is our destination?

Trains, whether we observe or ride in them, tend to make us reflective and introspective. They are a powerful expression of transcendence. For over 150 years poets have used railroad imagery in an attempt to enter into the universal experience of trains. The railroad has always taken a strong hold on the imaginations of many American poets. Trains are a part of our consciousness— a sort of icon that evokes a myriad of emotions associated with romance, mystery, loneliness, sorrow, and even serenity. I will examine the remarkably strong hold the railroad image has had on the consciousness of poets, ranging from the Transcendentalists to contemporary

American poets. For many of the nineteenth-century poets, the image of the railroad expresses the promise and the danger of technology in modern industrial society, while the contemporary poets do not generally write poems "about" the railroad, but use train imagery to journey through the psychic landscape of the country and one's own mind and being. Today's train poems reveal why they must take a journey through the landscape of the self in order to be fully awake in the world.

There are hundreds of railroad poems out there that reveal poets' psychic journeys. Almost every major and minor American poet since Emerson has either written a train poem or has used railroad imagery in their poems. Trains continue to fascinate our poets' imaginations despite the railroad's demise, because they still represent profound metaphors in American consciousness— symbols of speed and power personifying industrial society itself; yet at the same time trains remain a symbol of time's passage upon our scarred, native soil.

Today, trains are rapidly disappearing from the American landscape. All that really remains are freight trains and one national railroad passenger service known as Amtrak. Ever increasing competition from cars, buses, and planes keeps any hope for the comeback of the locomotive doubtful. But poets still ride trains and write train poems. And it's no wonder. The train is undoubtedly the most aesthetic of our mechanical creations, and seemingly has a soul. This speeding mass of materiality does something to our poets. It beckons them to abandon the everyday, and run one's whole soul out to the wind. It mythologizes their personal experiences so that in their poetry they can recreate the world with holism and mysticism. The train serves the poet as a perfect way to grapple with the complexities of language and metaphor.

In examining railroad verse, we will look at how the consciousness of the poet explores what trains are, because like any good poem, railroad poems also probe into the language depths of the unconscious mind, which is the repository of primal, sensory images, and reach forth toward a harmony or wholeness with the rational, ordering, conscious mind. The first four chapters of the thesis invite us to travel along the nineteenth-century railroad of Emerson, Thoreau, Dickinson, and Whitman. On their trains we find that the image of the railroad is incorporated harmoniously into the landscape. Succeeding chapters examine the poetry of the twentieth-century. I separated the chapters into the following themes to represent the diversity of the railroad in American poetry: "Come Serve the Muse, Again;" "Arrivals and Departures at the Station;" "Sketches of American People and American Landscapes;" "Troop Trains and Holocaust Trains;" and "Journeying Through the Landscape of Consciousness." In these chapters the image of the train will take us on an inward journey of personal and spiritual freedom.

Certainly any journey involving the trainscape of American poetry begins with Emerson.

Emerson: Nature and Machine

No one in the nineteenth-century spent more of his life seeking the harmony between man and nature than Ralph Waldo Emerson. After his engagement in 1835 to a woman he barely knew, a Miss Lydia Jackson, biographer Gay Wilson Allen records that Emerson wrote these words to Jackson: "I am born a poet, of a low class without doubt yet a poet That is my nature & vocation. My singing be sure is very 'husky,' & is for the most part in prose." This lover of woods and ponds was a fine poet in his own right and day, and described himself, Allen notes, as "a perceiver & dear lover of the harmonies that are in the soul & in matter" (Waldo Emerson 243). In prose he sung his finest but it was the poetic side of life that interested Emerson most. He was a man who looked to nature to fire his soul— to teach and inspire him. According to his brother Edward's account, Waldo, as his family members called him, took daily walks in the Concord woods "to listen for the thoughts, not originated by him. . . ." Emerson kept a journal his entire life and recorded his "inspirations" with nature (Works I: xxv).

His own professional writing career began shortly after the coming of the railroad. Even this lover of nature could not ignore the new technological age. Emerson the poet, philosopher, essayist, and lecturer was an American writer who greatly influenced the writers of his own day. He was at the forefront when American literature was born from the same expansive land as the American railroad. By the time the passenger railroad first appeared on the American scene in the 1830's, a young Emerson had already been settled in Concord where he often took the train to go on lecture tours in Boston and New York and other New England towns. Like most

Americans, Emerson's own life was directly touched by the inevitable change the railroad would bring. By mid-century the railroad had captured the public imagination and Emerson's. As a result, industrialization quickened. The American economy was expanding at a remarkable rate.

It should be of no surprise then when we find railroad imagery used in Emerson's journals and essays. Interestingly though, his collected poems contain not one single railroad poem. This is not to say that Emerson did not think aesthetically about the railroad; he did a great deal, but he no doubt had mixed emotions about it over the years. His primary contribution to our understanding of the railroad in American poetry comes from his great faith in man's ability to bring into harmony, nature and machine. Emerson's philosophical ideas are a prescription to achieve the balanced life and a way for us to understand how the railroad cannot be separated from nature, and why it should not be separated from the "Ideal" in art.

We begin with Emerson by withdrawing from society in the direction of nature. Since Emerson's more intense emotional experiences took place in the woods, near ponds, or along rivers, nature becomes the bedrock of his thought: "We need nature," he wrote in 1837, "and cities give the human senses not room enough" (Works IV: 288). No wonder then that his first published work of importance is titled Nature (1836). Not only does the book express his constant, deeply felt love for the natural scenes in which he passed so much of his time, but it is the foundation on which he builds upon his fundamental philosophy— the harmony of man and nature, nature and technology, indeed, all things.

In Nature Emerson is after a true theory of nature. In his chapter "Idealism," he is

driven to accept that the world is an illusion— that only the mind is the true guide to knowledge. Ideas such as truth, goodness, and justice are the only real existents. "Things" he considers to be mere appearances, shadows and symbols perhaps of divine truth, but worthless in themselves. The "Soul" is higher, finer, and truer than matter, and "Nature" in his words, "is the projection of God . . . the expositor of the Divine Mind" (Allen, Waldo Emerson 269).

In Nature Emerson uses the railroad to illustrate his enthusiasm for technological progress. For example, in explaining the uses of nature as "Commodity," he says that man:

. . . no longer waits for favoring gales, but by means of steam, he realizes the fable of AEolus's bag, and carries the two and thirty winds in the boiler of his boat. To diminish friction, he paves the road with iron bars, and, mounting a coach with a ship-load of men, animals, and merchandise behind him, he darts through the country, from town to town, like an eagle or a swallow through the air. (Works I:13)

Elsewhere in his chapter entitled "Idealism," Emerson demonstrates through the use of a railroad image how seeing a landscape from a moving train refutes the philosophical concept of materialism and makes everything seem ideal:

What new thoughts are suggested by seeing a face of country quite familiar, in the rapid movement of the railroad car! Nay, the most wonted objects, (make a

very slight change in the point of vision,) please us most. In a camera obscura, the butcher's cart, and the figure of one of our own family amuse us. (Emerson I: 51)

In understanding the railroad in American poetry, Emerson's "Ideal Theory" must be taken into account, since the railroad is matter and in nature and, poetry, in Emerson's words, is the business of "the poet, who re-attaches things to nature and the Whole . . ." (Emerson III: 18). For Emerson, "matter is a phenomenon, not a substance" (Emerson I: 62); therefore, it becomes the work of the poet to disclose the railroad's harmony and underlying unity of experience with nature. His "Ideal Theory," then, is a hypothesis to account for nature by denying the pre-eminence of matter, but as Emerson himself says, his own theory does not satisfy the demands of the spirit: "It leaves God out of me" (63). Emerson addresses this void in his chapter titled "Spirit." Ultimately, for him, it is the soul of man that matters. He writes:

We learn that the highest is present to the soul of man; that the dread universal essence, which is not wisdom, or love, or beauty, or power, but all in one, and each entirely, is that for which all things exist, and that by which they are; that spirit creates; that behind nature, throughout nature, spirit is present; one and not compound it does not act upon us from without, that is, in space and time, but spiritually, or through ourselves: therefore, that spirit, that is, the Supreme Being, does not build up nature around us,

but puts it forth through us, as the life of the tree
 puts forth new branches and leaves through the pores
 of the old. (Emerson I:63-64)

Thus, Emerson's train, (if we may call it such), is a powerful symbol of this spirit. It is more than a material substance. It defies space and time. It is a phenomenon, a happening, an experience in the American landscape— an "ideal" locomotive. In an 1848 journal entry he wrote, "The Railroad is that work of art which agitates and drives mad the whole people; as music, sculpture, and picture have done on their great days respectively" (Emerson VII: 504).

But still, Emerson was a practical man. He held stock in at least six railroads, and like many investors, believed in the commercial expansion that was in the air (Cronkhite 308). His attitude toward this enterprising spirit had been more explicit in his 1844 lecture, "The Young American:" "Railroad iron is a magician's rod, in its power to evoke the sleeping energies of land and water" (Emerson I: 364). His remark is an apt description of the nation's enthusiastic response to technological progress. Throughout the lecture Emerson is certain of the compatibility of nature and machine. A year earlier in a journal entry he wrote "Machinery and Transcendentalism agree well" (Emerson VI: 396). Leo Marx points out that much of the lecture of "The Young American" addresses this very proposition (234). In it Emerson announces that America is progressing and Europe is fading fast from American consciousness. A distinct and national culture is emerging because of the railroad and the magnificent land in which it rides:

This rage of road building is beneficent for America

Not only is distance annihilated, but when, as now, the locomotive and the steamboat, like enormous shuttles, shoot every day across the thousand various threads of national descent and employment and bind them fast in one web, an hourly assimilation goes forward, and there is no danger that local peculiarities and hostilities should be preserved. (Emerson I: 363-364)

But Emerson, always true to nature, gives the land equal importance to its contribution to the new society:

The railroad is but one arrow in our quiver. . . . The land is the appointed remedy for whatever is false and fantastic in our culture. The continent we inhabit is to be physic and food for our mind, as well as our body. (364-365)

Emerson is confident that the machine (locomotive, factory, or any enterprise of technology) could serve nature or the rural ideal. He truly believes that the new technology will be redeemed by contact with nature and so will the young American who will renounce the values of a commercial society and be no longer driven by lust for power and wealth, but become self-sufficient and independent. In developing this independent spirit, Emerson believes the West will play a crucial role— and so will the railroad which has already acquainted "the American people with the boundless resources of their own soil" (364). Emerson observes that largely through the railroad "the nervous rocky West is intruding a new and continental element into the national mind, and we shall yet have an American genius" (370).

Thus, for Emerson, the railroad and nature are not necessarily incompatible. In origin the railroad was "an act of invention, an intellectual step, or short series of steps . . . that act or step is the spiritual act" (192). Ultimately, for Emerson, the railroad is a part of Nature; his poet's vision sees that the factory-village and the railway "fall within the great Order not less than the beehive or the spider's geometrical web. Nature adopts them very fast into her vital circles, and the gliding train of cars she loves like her own" (Emerson III:19).

Emerson understands that accomplishing a harmony between technology and nature will take effort. Besides lectures like "The Young American," according to Marx, Emerson "issued calls to scholars, artists, and writers urging them to lead the way" (240). Marx further elaborates that Emerson's essays on "Art" (1841) and "The Poet" (1844) ". . . urged American intellectuals to conquer the new territory being opened up by industrialization. The two essays provide an aesthetic corollary to the program of "The Young American" (240-241).

"Readers of poetry," writes Emerson in "The Poet," "see the factory-village and the railway, and fancy that the poetry of the landscape is broken up by these, but they are mistaken. They assume that the new technology is anti-poetic, because, for one thing, these works of art are not yet consecrated in their reading" (19). Marx assures us that Emerson does not think that factories and railroads are inherently ugly; what is ugly to Emerson, which Marx also quotes from "The Poet" in his text, "is the dislocation and detachment from the 'Whole'" (241). Emerson's way of solving this dilemma, asserts Marx, whether in a poem or a landscape, is to re-attach the new technology to Nature: "The poet," wrote Emerson, "who re-attaches things to nature and the Whole,— re-

attaching even artificial things and violations of nature, to nature, by a deeper insight, — disposes very easily of the most disagreeable facts" (qtd. in Machine 241).

"The artist," wrote Emerson in 1841 "must employ the symbols in use in his day and nation to convey his enlarged sense to his fellow-men (Emerson II: 352). Emerson is saying that artists must seize upon what is most distinctive in the life of the times; only then will the spirit of their age become known. An artist who incorporates these images of the new technology into his work might well produce the kind of "model" Emerson envisages— one which is harmonious on a human scale.

Certainly Emerson's program follows from the assumptions of his philosophic idealism. Ultimately he wants artists to depict the machine from an ideal viewpoint, to assimilate it harmoniously into the landscape, resolving the problems or conflicts we see in reality. The aesthetic order of this kind, is a kind of reconciliation, a way for artists to show the others the way. Emerson's position exemplifies, in Leo Marx's words, a belief that "what he (the poet) achieves in art they (all men) can achieve in life" (242).

Thoreau: "What's the railroad to me?"

According to Leo Marx, Henry Thoreau put Emerson's program for young Americans to the test (242). Like Emerson, Thoreau withdraws from society in the direction of nature. He builds himself a cabin at near-by Walden Pond in the spring of 1845, where he will live for two years, a period he eventually writes about in his most famous book, Walden (q.v., 1854). As Thoreau will have us see it, the purpose of his stay is to get back to the naked simplicity of life, where he might chew the cud of his thoughts, and get to the very core of the universe, by living deep and sucking out all the "marrow of life." His desire was "to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived" (61):

But as scholars tell us, the meaning of Walden is more complicated than Thoreau's affirmations, especially when we take into account the railroad in the Walden Pond landscape. Thoreau must have been determined to know the railroad as he was "determined to know beans" during his stay at Walden, since there scarcely exists a chapter in which he does not mention seeing or hearing the engine. Several scholars have already done excellent studies in this area. This analysis draws from their work to examine and clarify the small poem in the chapter "Sounds."

Essentially if we look at the canon of Thoreau's work, we can find some works that are pro-railroad and some works that are anti-railroad. This is to be expected and is certainly true of the Transcendentalists. When examining the total work of any writer there will be contradictions in opinions throughout the years. Generally, though, G. Ferris Cronkhite assures us that Thoreau was more or less ambivalent toward the

railroad (316). His personality leaned that way. He was not the traveler nor optimist that Emerson was. Of greater concern to Thoreau were the effects of the railroad on him. His interest at Walden is to observe what transpires in his own mind and heart.

So off goes the scholar to become beanhoer to try out Emerson's prescription for a new life. Thoreau moves to the pond to make a symbol of his life, and does so by employing himself in the language business of perceiving metaphors and symbols. He answers Emerson's call to "employ the symbols in use in his day and nation" by later writing Walden. In the process of examining his own consciousness and through his craft, Thoreau employs the railroad, in Cheryl B. Torsney's words, as "a companion symbol to the pond" (26). Her insightful essay, "Learning the Language of the Railroad in Walden," reveals a plausible interpretation of the railroad and pond, not as "adversaries," but "twin symbols offering alternate routes to transcendence" (19). She argues that the railroad takes man on the same trip that the pond does. In numerous examples the author relates how the pond and the railroad are linked together. She writes:

His many implied comparisons of the railroad with nature, particularly with the pond itself, have prepared us to accept it, too, as a symbol of transcendence. . . . Complementary, not contradictory symbols, the pond and the railroad together multiply the spiritual dimensions of Walden. (22-23)

Torsney concludes that Thoreau was well aware of the power and function of metaphor and symbol, that through them, man could come to better understand his own nature in the universe.

Cronkhite's essay reports that Thoreau may have first encountered the railroad in 1839 when he and his brother rowed their boat up the Merrimack River and found railroad tracks parallel to its banks. Despite Thoreau's notorious statements that he would "rather ride on earth in an ox cart, with a free circulation, than go to heaven in the fancy car of an excursion train and breathe a malaria all the way" (qtd. in Cronkhite 318), or "We do not ride on the railroad; it rides upon us" (Thoreau 62), Cronkhite notes that "Thoreau was not actively hostile to the railroad, and did himself "ride the cars" to Cape Cod, to Maine, to Canada" (Cronkhite 318). In Walden, he even symbolically indicates his secret ambition to "be a track-repairer somewhere in the orbit of the earth" (Thoreau 77).

Cronkhite rightly argues that beneath Thoreau's alternating tones, however, "the continuing and consistent note in Thoreau's remarks about the railroad is his mistrust of the contemporary pursuit of material rather than spiritual values" (Cronkhite 319). Thoreau often saw the railroad as a symbol of what was wrong with contemporary life. Cronkhite reminds us that it was Emerson who taught Thoreau the importance of spiritual values over material ones. Thoreau abided by Emerson's teachings more seriously than the master himself did. Of course, Thoreau remained true to his own hard-headed, individualist way. He pondered the train deeply:

We have constructed a fate, an *Atropos*, that never turns aside. (Let that be the name of your engine.) Men are advertised that at a certain hour and minute these bolts will be shot toward particular points of the compass; yet it interferes with no man's business, and the children go to

school on the other track. We live the steadier for it. We are all educated thus to be sons of Tell. The air is full of invisible bolts. Every path but your own is the path of fate.

Keep on your own track, then. (79-80)

If the track in the above passage stands for what Cronkhite calls "an individual's proper course of life" (319), then metaphorically, Walden can be read as Thoreau's "track" to a new life.

Interestingly, when it comes to the railroad, a person's relationship to it can be one of participator (riding in the train), observer (watching the train), or listener (hearing the train in the distance). Throughout Walden, Thoreau maintains an observer and listener status. Never does he ride the rail in the telling of his story. The closest he gets to being a participant is when he walks along the track's embankment to the village: "The Fitchburg Railroad touches the pond about a hundred rods south of where I dwell. I usually go to the village along its causeway, and am, as it were, related to society by this link" (Thoreau 77).

As a listener, Thoreau compares the whistle of the locomotive penetrating his woods, to "the scream of a hawk sailing over some farmer's yard . . ." (77-78). And as an observer, he links a railroad car with the physical world: "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" (78).

In his chapter "Sounds," Thoreau, like an Indian depicted in an old Western film with his ear to the rail, listens for the massive beast, the iron horse to invade his Walden territory. Not surprisingly, he hems and haws and reluctantly accepts the train into his

place (both physically and in his consciousness). In one particular episode, Thoreau the prose writer and observer of freight cars becomes Thoreau the poet:

And hark! here comes the cattle-train bearing the cattle of a
 thousand hills, sheepcots, stables, and cowyards in the air,
 drovers with their sticks, and shepherd boys in the midst of
 their flocks, all but the mountain pastures, whirled along
 like leaves blown from the mountains by the September gales. . . .

So is your pastoral life whirled past and away. But the bell rings,
 and I must get off the track and let the cars go by;—

What's the railroad to me?

I never go to see

Where it ends.

It fills a few hollows,

And makes banks for the swallows,

It sets the sand a-blowing,

And the blackberries a-growing,

but I cross it like a cart-path in the woods. I will not have
 my eyes put out and my ears spoiled by its smoke and steam
 and hissing. (82-83)

Critics do not address this brief metamorphosis. Cronkhite simply says that such lines demonstrate Thoreau's "insouciance" for the railroad, which may be partially true in tone (318). Ronald Christ writes that "Thoreau's poem . . . does not even present the railroad as a symbolic embodiment of the 'pulse of the continent'" (from Whitman's "To

A Locomotive In Winter"), and shows how Thoreau was simply being "coy" (94). Marx regards the passage as a literary example of the pastoral ideal "in the literal, agrarian sense," being "whirled past and away," but makes no direct mention to the poem itself (254). Tornsey comes closest to articulating the poem's significance. She argues that Thoreau was looking for a way "to reconcile nature with the ubiquitous railroad," and in his search for an answer to the question "What's the railroad to me?" he discovers that the railroad, like the pond, is "embedded in the language of metaphor and symbol" (26). But why does Thoreau change from prose to rhyme? What purpose does it serve?

This poem, like all the poems in *Walden* not enclosed within quotation marks, was written by Thoreau himself, and perhaps is the first railroad poem published by a major American author of this period, but it is difficult to take it seriously. One could easily argue that the poem is not a poem at all, but a saucy, quasi-limerick. It does have a nonsensical tone to it and appears to go nowhere. Even the opening line feels a bit flippant, as Marx recalls Thoreau's commitment to stand "right fronting and face to face to a fact" (253). Thoreau takes this hard look at the locomotive in the landscape and asks himself a question he is certain of the answer to: "What's the railroad to me?" Thoreau, rather, gives an open-ended reply true to his transcendental spirit— "I never go to see / Where it ends." And why doesn't he go? Because Thoreau does not have to. He well knows what the railroad represents— what in the nineteenth-century society called progress with a capital "P." And he knows where it ends— in the village of Concord or Boston or any place where there's modernization, industrialization, and civilization. But Thoreau, for the very simple reason that he is skilled in the art of

disguising art, chooses to make a transcendental leap. For an instant he suspends the reader in a pure moment of integration where Emerson would applaud his harmonious infusion of the railroad-in-the-landscape. Indeed, the railroad he truly knows all about is barely visible in the image. In fact, it is there but not there, sort of on the fringe of consciousness while nature balances the image like a yin-yang symbol and surrounds the railroad with its overgrowth. The poem is reminiscent of ancient Chinese painting where man or civilization (in this case the railroad) is always painted small in comparison to the natural world, emphasizing the spiritual over the material.

In an honoring way to the Emersonian Ideal, Thoreau, in a last ditch effort, shifts to the persona of the poet to reconcile the railroad-in-the landscape. For a moment he succeeds in expressing his true desire for the railroad to get along with nature. But Thoreau also knows better. Frustrated with impending change, and the realization that the pastoral way of life was being "whirled past and away," he returns to prose and adopts what Marx calls a "testy, tight-lipped, uncompromising tone" (255): ". . . but I cross it like a cart-path in the woods. I will not have my eyes put out and my ears spoiled by its smoke and steam and hissing." Marx's concludes that Thoreau's action to get off the track was "the only sensible thing to do" (254). His only alternative was to become like the men of Concord or continue with the Walden experiment to define his answer to the question, "What's the railroad to me?" If Thoreau is to find an answer, Marx concludes that he must step aside to "protect his powers of perception" (255).

Thus, the poem serves as a way for Thoreau to arrest his powers of perception. By using this lyric form, he has constructed an organic tension between the railroad and nature, which eventually seeks resolution in the penultimate and climatic chapter,

"Spring."

Truly, Thoreau is skilled in the art of disguising art. By the time we get to "Spring" we realize that the organizing design of Walden has been made to conform to the design of nature itself— the sequence of Thoreau's final chapters follows the sequence of the months and seasons and the movement towards nature's time, the daily and seasonal life cycle. It is also the movement that redeems the railroad. When in the spring, the winter snow, sand, and clay thaws, it flows down the railroad banks creating beautiful forms. As Thoreau says, "Few phenomena gave me more delight... " (201).

In this passage, then, we are reminded of the little poem and its power to evoke the Emersonian Ideal— the blending of the natural world of Walden with the mechanical world of the railroad. The structural tension of the poem is resolved in the melting of the bank and the coming of spring. According to Marx, the scene is a series of lessons in natural order and organic forces in play with each other— new forms emerging from the disintegration of old forms— whether in Thoreau's perceptions or in physical reality (261). In the end, Thoreau was able to translate this same wisdom and respect for the forces of nature to the man-made environment, to the locomotive. He could see that the railroad bank had its own seasons and cycles of its lives. This is why he declares, "I never go to see / Where it ends," because Thoreau does not fear "endings," or resent change, or even civilization. True, he gets testy at times in Walden, but that was his nature. Marx calls him a "tough, unillusioned empiricist" (263).

Finally, we arrive with Thoreau in defining the answer to his question "What's the railroad to me?" "There is nothing inorganic" (204), he writes, thus implying that even

the iron horse, in Tornsey's phrase, equally plays a part in the "transcendence of all nature" (26). Tornsey argues that, like the pond, Thoreau presents the railroad as a companion symbol of transcendence. Thoreau the poet uses the language of metaphor and symbol to give meaning and value to the railroad as part of the natural order. On the one hand, he re-affirms the Emersonian ideal to unify nature and machine, and yet, Marx believes Thoreau learned much more from his Walden experiment. Unlike Emerson who put his faith into natural facts and social institutions or in anything "out there," he says that Thoreau, in the end, found the location of meaning and value in his own consciousness, his own "imaginative perception . . . , analogy perceiving, metaphor making, mythopoeic power of the human mind" (264). For this reason Thoreau found his own way and can tell us, "Keep on your own track, then" (80).

Dickinson: "I like to see it lap the Miles—"

If any nineteenth-century poet kept to her own track, it was Emily Dickinson. She lived intensely in one place as Thoreau did, and spent her life composing brief lyrics, her "letter to the world," records of her own states of consciousness— tiny ecstasies set in motion by the seasons or her home or the bee in the garden. Like Emerson, she pared down her poems to the intrinsic and the essential, but her artistry in tempering the simple meters and the delicate, imperfect rhymes was greater than his. Yet during her lifetime she remained virtually unknown as a poet.

No doubt Emily Dickinson was a recluse. Even her own family was unaware of her love of writing poems. Yet she did make a trip to Washington, Baltimore and Philadelphia in 1855 and did get out of the house from time to time, even if it was to take the train to Boston for eye exams (Wolff 127,165-166). Her worldly family brought news from the outside, and much of this came to the little town of Amherst by train. Since she lived right there in the village, the sounding of the train was all too familiar to her ear.

Indeed, the locomotive must have had a "horrid-hooting" sound that penetrated the very walls where she felt alone to write her tiny verses. And one day in 1862, the sound of the locomotive kept pounding in her head. Perhaps it was a cool, crisp day in fall when the sound of the locomotive wafted into an open window, and brilliantly, Dickinson seized the moment to write her only railroad poem "I like to see it lap the Miles—."

The seventeen-line poem is a riddle and the solving of a riddle by scholarly critics. As Patrick F. O'Connell points out, the poem remains one of the most widely

anthologized of Dickinson's poems, yet has received very little critical attention and commentary (469). One of the main reasons for this he suggests is that the public opinion of the poem mostly accepts the interpretation as an example of Dickinson's attempt at "silly playfulness" (470). On a first reading, the poem does appear to be simply a bemusing, childlike account of an oversize engine in a landscape much like the Little Blue Engine in the children's classic The Little Engine That Could that puffs its way, "I think I can, I think I can, I think I can." A reader can easily make the connections between the locomotive and the equine imagery. At first, the poem seems dull and a bit quaint in comparing a locomotive to a horse, but the rhythm is agreeable. The poem's saving grace comes in the final stanza:

And neigh like Boanerges —
 Then — punctual as a Star
 Stop — docile and omnipotent
 At its own stable door — (#585, 286)

The stanza contains intriguing images. What does the simile "neigh like Boanerges" mean? O'Connell tells us that the word "Boanerges" is the name given by Jesus to the Apostles John and James, who were called the "Sons of Thunder" (473). The word also means a vociferous, loud-voiced preacher or orator. Dickinson here is comparing a fire and brimstone preacher to a "horrid-hooting" train. The next line is equally intriguing. What does Dickinson mean to be as "punctual as a star"? "Punctual" means to arrive on time, be prompt. This certainly makes sense for a train, but how can a star be punctual? It has already arrived; therefore, it is never late. Or, like a train, it arrives each night at the same hour. Still, it is a powerful image because

it links material reality (the locomotive) with the immaterial (the star). Emerson would have appreciated this line. The conscious mind cannot at first quite grasp it, but the unconscious mind, as a railroader might say, allows the image to "breathe" like the up-and-down motion of the track on the ties as the weight of the train passes over.

Suddenly, the next to last line brings us to a "Stop" and ingeniously provides us with a paradox— "docile and omnipotent." The train is both submissive and all-powerful at once. How can this be? The poem carries a bit of sarcasm. Although the poet says she likes to see it lap up the miles, lick up valleys, and feed itself from tanks, there is a wariness about all this in the final stanza.

Simultaneously, the poet seems to be concealing and revealing the locomotive's identity. Yet, the poem is more than a miniature sketch of the iron horse. It is a means of achieving a single moment of intensity. How do we begin to name or describe that intensity? The poem communicates beyond the pedestrian level of celebrating the new technology, as if Dickinson intended the irony in her poem to be directed at the Emersonian faith that the railroad would fall naturally into the quasi-divine Order of Nature. O'Connell's essay confirms this hunch. As he states, "The poem demands to be read on two levels simultaneously" (470). On one level the poem demands a positive, conscious response toward the locomotive, and on another, it requires us to go "beneath the surface" of the subject and respond to the poem's paradox (470). O'Connell points out that the solution to the riddle lies in the oxymoron "docile and omnipotent." He poignantly elaborates that these two words create biblical juxtapositions that suggest "the one and only time when the all-powerful God was submissive to another: in the Incarnation, and more particularly in the birth of the

infant, Christ" (473). Thus, as he argues, "the juxtaposition of star and stable presents an entirely new meaning" (473). O'Connell concludes the essay by recognizing the poem's "apocalyptic vision" and its ironic warning of impending technological catastrophe" (474).

But O'Connell's biblical interpretation stretches too far. In truth, the solution to the riddle cannot be solved, because for Dickinson, at the point of paradox in the poem, the train itself becomes the riddle. Indeed, for her, all of life is a riddle. God, death, and resurrection is the riddle. The poet's message: man better get a hold of the iron horse's reins, or Thoreau's maxim may come true: ". . . it rides upon us." But which will it be? We cannot know for sure since Dickinson hides behind a humorous mask. We can say that her train is charged with paradox and is disproportionately large for the landscape, hinting that technology dehumanizes and isolates man.

Whitman: "Come Serve the Muse"

If Emily Dickinson's train is charged with paradox, as though her poem's vision, like the eyes of birds, is focused in opposite directions at once, then Walt Whitman's train is charged with "motion and power," as though his poems' vision perpetually, grandly, rolls in like the waves at sea. Dickinson is the poet of exclusion. She delves into her secret soul and pares down her tangled darkness. Whitman, on the other hand, is the poet of inclusion. He spreads his brawny arms to encompass all the cosmos. While Dickinson's train is disproportionately large for the landscape, reflecting the argument that technology dehumanizes man, Whitman's train appears to be just the right size to not produce an inherent conflict between praising unspoiled nature, the traditional rural life, or rapid industrial growth.

Therefore, Emerson's "Idealism" is perfectly carried out by Whitman. Indeed, Whitman is the American bard Emerson was looking for. Whitman's poetry agrees with the Emersonian philosophy that the most important symbols of their day can be translated back into the "Oversoul."

Erroneously, many students of Whitman look toward him simply as a "nature" poet, but the truth is, he praises modernization in his poems, and took advantage of it in his life. Certainly, he rode the rails, but not as much as he rode the ferries. He was a lover of ferries, and said himself, he had a "passion" for them. Yet Whitman indeed loved the train enough to enjoy its benefits. In his actual life, writes Allen, "Whitman marveled at the mechanical achievement that enabled him to take "a flying picnic" a hundred miles away and return the same day" (Allen, Solitary Singer 77). In "Specimen Days" Whitman provides numerous glimpses of other lifetime rail travels, especially in the

telling of his trip out West. In his diary jotting titled "Begin A Long Jaunt West," he describes a day's long journey: "By day through the latter State—then Indiana—and so rock'd to slumber for a second night, flying like lightning through Illinois" (Whitman 690).

And who ever would have thought (except for Whitman) that in the contemplation of a single spear of grass, one would also see and hear the locomotive? It is in the poetry that Whitman transforms the railroad into symbol.

According to Ronald Christ, Whitman began using the locomotive "for visual and auditory images" as early as the 1855 edition of Leaves of Grass in such poems as "Song of Myself" and "A Song for Occupation" (97). The 1856 edition included "Salut au Monde" which incorporated the railroad, Christ tells us, "as a unifying force in the world" (97). The poem was published long before the better known railroad poems "Passage to India" (1871) and "To A Locomotive In Winter" (1876) were published. But these two later works truly seize the visual and auditory power of the locomotive.

By using the locomotive symbolically, Whitman sought to use it as the fulfillment of the Emersonian Ideal to break down the barrier between art and reality. Recall Emerson's injunction to artists to employ in their art the symbols of their day. Whitman undoubtedly adhered to Emerson's call when he wrote his final ode to the locomotive in "To A Locomotive In Winter."

"Thee for my recitative," Whitman begins in an operatic way, asking the locomotive to lend itself to his verse and enter into the act of writing the poem. The next eleven lines then describe in his characteristically catalog fashion, the physical parts of the locomotive as it drives through a winter storm, taking special note of its sounds: the

"measur'd dual throbbing;" the "beat convulsive;" the gyrating shuttling at thy sides;" and the "metrical, now swelling pant and roar, now tapering in the / distance, "which takes the train past where the poet is standing and out of sight. Other visual impressions recorded are the "black cylindrical body," the brass and steel, the complex valves and springs, the signal lamps, and the "floating vapor."

After describing the locomotive's physical properties in lines one through seventeen, the poet elevates his facts into symbol and then directly addresses the locomotive-god:

Type of the modern—emblem of motion and power—pulse of the
continent,

For once come serve the Muse and merge in verse, even as here

I see thee. . . . (367)

Here we can see the poet, as Robert French writes, "pleading for inspiration of a certain kind; what he wants, what he needs, is the bardic element, the wild impassioned tones that he hears in the music of the locomotive" (32). For the remainder of the poem, the poet cries out for the wild music of the locomotive to be his music:

With storm and buffeting gusts of wind and falling snow,

By day thy warning ringing bell to sound its notes,

By night thy silent signal lamps to swing.

Fierce-throated beauty!

Roll through my chant with all thy lawless music, thy swinging

lamps at night,

Thy madly-whistled laughter, echoing, rumbling like an earthquake,
 rousing all,

Law of thyself complete, thine own track firmly holding,
 (No sweetness debonair of tearful harp or glib piano thine,)

Thy thrills of shrieks by rocks and hills return'd,

Launch'd o'er the prairies wide, across the lakes,

To the free skies unpent and glad and strong. (367-368)

We move from the poet's stolid "recitative" to his impassioned, rolling "chant." Whitman's own imaginative powers could see that the locomotive, in French's words, "is as tightly structured as a poem . . . a law unto itself" (34-35). Whitman declares "No sweetness debonair of tearful harp or glib piano thine," thus showing that he was not interested in ornament and rhyme, as Christ points out, that he was after an organic way of writing, embodying in the locomotive a theory of poetry closely resembling Emerson's statement in his essay "The Poet:" "For it is not metres, but a metre-making argument that makes a poem,— a thought so passionate and alive that like the spirit of a plant or animal it has an architecture of its own, and adorns nature with a new thing" (Works III: 9 10).

What we have, then, in the poem, is Whitman's impassioned desire to invoke the muse. He wanted for his own poetry what he found in the locomotive— "a lawless music," firmly on its own track. Whitman's "metre-making argument" carries us from his "recitative" to his impassioned "chant." The architecture of the locomotive changes from merely a descriptive, "black cylindric body," to a living, breathing, "Fierce throated Beauty." The locomotive gathers power and momentum and, like nature, it is a law

unto itself. Even this man-made organism can "serve the Muse and merge in verse," much like nature has done in the past. Obviously, Whitman did not want the locomotive to become bigger than nature, but to lend beauty to it by driving through the hills and prairies and lakes of the real world and even soar to "the free skies unpent and glad and strong." The locomotive, then, as the praised object in the poem, is on equal footing with nature and the poet's imagination.

Thus, in "To A Locomotive In Winter," while Whitman gives due praise to the locomotive's physical and poetic powers, in "Passage to India," he emphasizes the spiritual significance of the railroad as a truly poetic symbol. Keeping in line with his Emersonian faith, Whitman, like his transcendental colleague, attaches the railroad to nature and "the Whole." In section three of the poem, amid the great technological achievements of his century that unified the world and reduced time and distance (the Suez Canal, the transcontinental railroad, and the transatlantic cable), the poet becomes overwhelmed by the sight of the railroad moving across the landscape:

I see over my own continent the Pacific railroad surmounting every
barrier,

I see continual trains of cars winding along the Platte carrying
freight and passengers,

I hear the locomotives rushing and roaring, and the shrill steam-
whistle,

I hear the echoes reverberate through the grandest scenery in the
world, . . .

Or crossing the great desert, the alkaline plains, I behold enchanting

mirages of waters and meadows,
 Marking through these and after all, in duplicate slender lines,
 Bridging the three or four thousand miles of land travel,
 Tying the Eastern to the Western sea,
 The road between Europe and Asia. (322-323)

Here we see Whitman's yearning for the railroad to circle the globe and to unite humankind as one. In section five the poet realizes that God's purpose was apparent from the first— that all the continents spanned, connected by one network, welded together, would become one globe: "O vast Rondure, swimming in space, / cover'd all over with visible power and beauty . . ." (323).

Thus, the railroad is both physical and spiritual in nature; connected to the land and humankind. In order to demonstrate his aesthetic and spiritual view of mechanical advances, Whitman concentrates on the railroad-in-the-landscape and the varied topography and vegetation of the American West. This description of the transcontinental railroad is the final link in the direct route to the Far East. After the railroad has done its work to join Europe, Asia, and the New World, "the true Son of God, the poet" shall come singing his songs to announce that "Nature and Man shall be disjoin'd and diffused no more, /The true son of God shall absolutely fuse them" (324). Hence, the physical passage of the railroad over the earth clears a path for the spiritual passage of the soul in section seven:

O soul, repressless, I with thee and thou with me,
 Thy circumnavigation of the world begin,
 Of man, the voyage of his mind's return,

To reason's early paradise,
 Back, back to wisdom's birth, to innocent intuitions,
 Again with fair creation. (326)

The final two stanzas celebrate the attributes of the soul and the spiritual meaning of human life. In a farewell gathering, the divine bard and his soul steer,

. . . for the deep waters only,
 Reckless O soul, exploring, I with thee, and thou with me,
 For we are bound where mariner has not yet dared to go,
 And we will risk the ship, ourselves and all.

O my brave soul!
 O farther farther sail!
 O daring joy, but safe! are they not all the seas of God?
 O farther, farther, farther sail! (328)

Clearly "Passage to India" embodies the fulfillment of Emerson's demand for a national bard. And Whitman, who took it upon himself to be that hero poet, succeeds in weaving his songs to fuse the past and present, nature and machine. The railroad as a literary symbol unites the engineering triumphs of his day with the fathomless capacities of the human soul. And who, other than Emerson could have loved this poem more? Much of what this poem accomplishes follows Emerson's philosophy of the Oversoul. Emerson believed that the soul was undefinable and unmeasurable but that it pervaded all places, all things, and all humankind. Sun, moon, animal, tree, and even the railroad are all part of "the shining parts," which make up the soul (Works II:

269).

Whitman clearly carried out Emerson's "Idealism." He understood the literary significance of the railroad, that like the soul, the train would also abolish time and place and define the events of his day. More than any other poet of his time, Whitman adhered to his master's words— "The soul is the perceiver and revealer of truth" (Works II: 279). The transcendent power of the railroad as literary symbol helped Whitman along his way.

Poetry and the Twentieth Century Limited

American railroads and American poetry came into the twentieth century on the same track. The railroad revolutionized life and changed the face of the continent. By 1917, our once agrarian nation had evolved as the foremost industrial economy in the world. Track mileage soared. Passenger trains and freight trains increased steadily. The train had tied the nation together in a web of wood and steel and, seemingly, fulfilled Whitman's vision to unite the world in brotherhood. At the same time, poetry had made a radical break from the English tradition and held the promise and hope of Whitman's vision, but American poets of the early century still clung to the British continent.

According to poet Robert Bly American poetry had missed Whitman's sign posts and made an unfortunate wrong turn. In his 1963 seminal essay titled "A Wrong Turning In American Poetry," Bly argues that American poetry had moved outward, away from the depths of the soul Whitman plumbed, toward the world of things. He describes the poets of this movement as belonging to the "generation of 1917" or the "objectivist generation," which includes Eliot, Pound, Moore, and Williams (7-8). Admittedly, Bly speaks in generalities to demonstrate how much of American poetry written then and even up to the time of his essay's publication, was a poetry that did not penetrate the unconscious because it failed to produce "images" that could do so.

The great poetry of the twentieth-century, writes Bly, belonged to the Spanish and German tradition. In the poems of Neruda, Vallejo, Jimenez, Machado, and Rilke, Bly encounters a poetry that moves "inward," toward the spiritual life of the inward man in contrast to American poets who shunned their deep selves and limited their poetry to

the objective world (7-16). Much of this "wrong turning," Bly ruminates, is the result of the 1917 generation of poets who perpetuated in their poems what Bly calls the "disintegration of personality" (24). The poets of this generation supported Eliot's famous "objective-correlative," defined simply as a "formula" to write poems expressing the poet's emotions through objects, situations, or a chain of events (8). For these poets, the poem is constructed more like an idea— to continue the contrast— rather than, as Bly observes, the Spanish poets and Rilke who convey their emotions by "passionate spontaneity" (10). Thus, Bly argues that by having put their trust in the outer world, the poets of the 1917 generation suppressed individual personality and moved away from the deep self. Theirs is a poetry that lacks "spiritual life" writes Bly, because their poems "centered on objectivism" (15). He surmises that all later poetry of the century was tainted by these ideas.

Bly makes other keen observations about the century's poetry. Following the 1917 generation of poets came what he thinks might be called the "metaphysical generation." These were poets of the twenties and thirties who imagined themselves to be like the English metaphysical poets who controlled their poems by their philosophical and religious strictures, wit, and conceits. Such poets as Eberhart and Tate belonged to this generation. Bly describes this kind of poetry as "detached, doctrinaire," and "philosophical" in nature. He believes this poetry to be "abstract" and stuffed with esoteric terms and doctrines. Again, unlike the Spanish poets, these poets, overall, did not write about their inward selves (23).

Bly adds a final generation to round out his essay. He defines them as the "generation of 1947," the "war generation," and even the "hysterical generation," and

includes in it such poets as Shapiro, Lowell, Berryman, Schwartz, Jarrell, and Nemerov. Bly finds fault with these poets, in general, because they continued to accept the ideas handed down to them by the older poets of the 1917 generation. They were "hysterical" in their obsession with technique and style, often exhibiting, Bly says, an "impersonal and changeable" conviction in their poetry (23-24).

Thus, we learn from Bly that much of American poetry since the twenties to the early sixties "is a poetry without the image," and therefore, "a poetry essentially without the unconscious." "The important thing about an image," wrote Bly, "is that it is made by both the conscious and the unconscious mind" (20-21). In essence, the image leaps into the unconscious mind of the poet or reader and reveals in an instant what he didn't know or had forgotten before.

Bly concludes that American poetry's "wrong turning" occurred because it did not share more in this inward movement of creating images as opposed to the century's early obsession with the objective world. He concedes exceptions, of course, but his main point distinguishes in broad terms between the destructive track American poetry was headed on and the spiritual track taken by the great poets of Europe and South America.

Since the essay's publication, and much to Bly's credit for his hard work in bringing to contemporary poets' attention the works of other traditions, American poetry today has finally risen from underneath the ashes of the modernists' generation. In his anthology Contemporary American Poetry, A. Poulin Jr.'s essay "Contemporary American Poetry: The Radical Tradition" traces the differences and similarities between the old generation and the new one being formed. Briefly, Poulin

characterizes contemporary American poetry as "more intimate and personal." He writes, ". . . a personal poetry occurs as the result of the exploration of and response to the most inner reaches of the poet's self below the rational and conscious levels. Poems grow out of images discovered in the depths of human darkness, as it were, amidst the substrata of preconscious feeling and intuition" (579).

In summary, then, the "image" becomes the defining factor in the poetry of the twentieth-century.

The railroad or train as image has helped American poetry's return to a poetry of personal and spiritual freedom, despite the claim by one Canadian scholar who wrote:

. . . the train has made little progress in American poetry— even if the U.S. boasts the most complex rail system in the world and Americans are supposed to have an eye for these things. . . . Generally, that noisy concatenation of locomotives, boxcars, mobile salons, not to mention the cabooses, has no great attraction for the twentieth-century muse.

Except in Canada. (Jones 34-35)

Obviously this scholar does not want to admit that America is a nation built on rails and poetry. Nor has he read our poets closely. The native poetry of this land has its roots in the rich traditions of folksong, jazz, and blues, which are exhaustive in their use of railroad imagery, not to mention the hundreds of railroad workers who wrote rhyming verses of legends and personal impressions. On the contrary, the railroad has always been a part of the consciousness of American poets and, I suspect, there exists something universal about trains in any age or place, including the United States.

By definition, a train would appear to be a linear succession of events, but it is more than that. It is an icon fixed in our imaginations. The train has endured so long as a symbol and image in our poetry because what we say about trains we also say about consciousness. The universal experience of trains mirrors the universal experience of consciousness. Both experiences speak of power, rhythm, motion, timelessness, transcendence, time-space continuum, and even nostalgia.

When speaking of the poem, most readers would agree with poet Archibald MacLeish that "a poem should not mean but be," but discovering what a poem "is" often involves identifying what it "does." Although American poets of the twentieth-century have internalized the railroad image in a myriad of individual and intimate ways, I have found that the poems almost always seem to fall within a theme category that best reflects the image and what it "does."

Come Serve the Muse, Again

A poet does not only consciously decide whether to use a train image or not, but is compelled to do so because the natural aesthetics of the beast are so darn irresistible. It can sigh and hiss, clank and groan; emit impassioned shrieks and mournful bellows; balk at hauling a heavy load or pant rhythmically as it romps the rails and ties. Certainly Whitman and Dickinson could not resist merging its charismatic qualities into their muse, and so the same is true for the poets of the twentieth-century. While an older generation of poets could still enjoy an occasional ride on a great steam locomotive and the steady passenger service of diesel trains up to the late 1950's, a younger generation of poets have inherited the only surviving, high speed passenger train, Amtrak. Naturally, the increased competition from buses, airplanes, and most of all, the automobile, has significantly lessened journeys by rail, yet a few poets still ride and call on the locomotive to "come serve the muse, again."

Like Whitman and Dickinson, these poets establish the train as the central object in their poems. Whereas Whitman's train is a "Fierce throated beauty" and Dickinson's "prompter than a Star," these poems, too, focus around an animated image. The train appears larger than life and seems to have a life of its own.

Archibald MacLeish was undoubtedly enamored of the steam locomotive. He published several train poems during his lifetime, and two of these concentrate on the dynamic forces and music of the locomotive. In his poem "Grazing Locomotives," the title (as the initial image of the poem), implies a pastoral world, a kind of "machine in the garden." The poet likens the locomotives to grazing bovines. What is deemed central is the locomotive itself, its essential nature, and how it serves the muse. The

first stanza, of the three stanza poem, describes the locomotives in the countryside as "Huge upon the hazy plain." In the second stanza, these locomotives move "Slow and solemn in the night," solidifying the image of the locomotives as "grazing" bovines, impressive and serious. The final stanza underscores subtly an image-to-statement shift:

Still sweating from the deep ravines
 Where rot within the buried wood
 The bones of Time that are their food,
 Graze the great machines. (MacLeish 100)

The poet has great admiration for these "grazing locomotives," that are animal-like, "sweating." The "grass" mentioned in the first stanza is replaced by "the bones of Time" in the third stanza, implying that this is what the great machines graze for food. The image of grazing is also a metaphor for the slow passage of time. It is interesting to think that the locomotive primarily came into being to "eat up" time. Hence, the poet honors the locomotive by putting this idea into image.

MacLeish's other poem, "Way Station," is the "Ars Poetica" of railroad poems. Indeed, the two poems have much in common. Both poems emphasize, as in the famous last line of "Ars Poetica," that "A poem should not mean / But be." Listen to the rhythm of locomotive rhyme and we will be reminded, as "Ars Poetica" reminds us, that "A poem should be motionless in time / As the moon climbs:"

The incoherent rushing of the train
 Dulls like a drugged pain
 Numbs

To an ether throbbing of inaudible drums

Unfolds

Hush within hush until the night witholds

Only its darkness.

From the deep

Dark a voice calls like a voice in sleep

Slowly a strange name in a strange tongue . . . (MacLeish 93)

Even when a train has stopped, as in the final line of this poem, it breathes and lives—it gives "A stir A sigh." A good poem like this one works the same way. It continues to have a life of its own. It lives on in the reader's mind like the sound of a train at night "Among / The sleeping listeners. . . ." As in this poem, often the image of the train is one of a great, mystical summoner.

Other train images that serve the muse focus on the onomatopoeic powers of language. Both William Carlos Williams and Russell Atkins have poems that use this poetic device to simulate the sounds and rhythms of freight cars and trainyards. In Williams's poem "To freight cars in the air" we are reminded of Whitman's ode "To a Locomotive In Winter, "although Williams's train is less grounded than his or Dickinson's. Instead of a train driving through a winter storm or chasing itself down hill neighing like "Boanerges," we get a "clank, clank / clank, clank / moving above the treetops." This train image reaches ethereal heights "moving still trippingly / through the morningmist." Often, as the case in this poem, the train will make a bend and disappear into "silence" or some place that is hazed and dulled over. The image itself holds meaning because inherent within it is the idea that the train remains a steady

explorer of the unknown. Interestingly, the sound and rhythm of the poem takes us somewhere "to the left" (Williams 301).

Atkins' poem, "Trainyard at Night," epitomizes the use of onomatopoeia. The first line begins with a "THUNDER THUNDER," and is followed by successive lines of the train's onomatopoeic language:

. . . the sharp scrap making its fourth lap

with a lot of rattletrap

and slap rap and crap—

I listen in time to hear coming on

the great Limited

it rolls scrolls of fold of fold

like one traditionally old

coldly, meanwhile hiss hiss

hiss insists upon hissing insists

on insisting on hissing hiss

hiss s ss ss sss sss s

sss s s

s (Atkins 20)

The sounding of the final line "s", preceded by the several "hiss's" and "sss's" fades off from the poem into silence like an engine's last breath. Essentially, the poem means what it sounds. The train is what it can be in language and serves the muse of the poem in this way. The aesthetics of the poem are the representation of train.

In their own unique ways, the above four poets summon the train to come serve

their muse. Appropriately, as Emerson would have liked, each call to the train from the natural world, although they do not call as Whitman did— "Thee for my recitative." These poets are not as polite in their requests. They rouse the train from nature's hideaway to listen to the locomotive's muse.

Atkins's train is like a snake in a "huge bold blasts black" thunderstorm, "when whoosh!" we find ourselves on a rickety ride (20). His train's sounds fade off into the physical world we cannot see. Williams's train takes us above the "treetops" and disappears behind nature's silent curtain. MacLeish's train in "Way-Station" rushes us through a landscape to briefly pause between major stops on a route. Wherever this is ". . . night witholds / Only its darkness . . . Among / The sleeping listeners . . ." where . . . leaves stir faintly on the ground / When snow falls from a windless sky— / A stir A sigh" (MacLeish 93). The final image is almost breath-like, indicating that this train comes from somewhere natural; beyond the material world. The reader may sense an awakening of his own unconscious mind, that "voice in sleep." Emerson would have loved this poem for its tight, internal rhyme and its spiritual nature.

MacLeish's other poem, "Grazing Locomotives," probably best characterizes Emerson's faith in the harmonious blending of nature and machine. The title immediately fuses the two worlds of the primal and the material in such a way that it personifies the locomotive as a "grazing bovine." The train image is essentially one long sentence that weaves its way through a night landscape, "Slow and solemn in the night. . . ." Like nature, or the bovine, the poem is perfectly balanced in its structure and rhythmns. It, too, moves slowly with alternating rhyme, "slow and solemn," each step deliberate but unconscious to the next patch of grass. As readers, we find

ourselves staring into the night to admire these "Grazing Locomotives" (100).

Unfortunately, the opportunities to lean on the fence to watch these snorting heifers are becoming fewer and fewer. The poets in this section focus on the locomotive itself to discover how its muse can serve their muse. Regrettably, few other poets in the twentieth-century call on the locomotive in this way, perhaps because they choose to retain the locomotive image in other dimensions of time. But there will always be one poet who, as long as there is a train, will not be able to resist the engine's "horrid-hooting" stanza, or whatever that sound will be in the future, even if it is a quiet humm.

Arrival & Departure at the Station

Few American poets can probably recall the arrival or departure time of their town's passenger train. And likewise, what poet today can set his watch by it? Yet, despite its uncertain future, the railroad remains a powerful, although changing image in American consciousness and American poetry.

The sight of a train can whisk us back in time to our childhoods. The single-file images of boxcars penetrate the layers and layers of conscious thought build-up, and reach back to the days when we played with pleasure and naivete. Riding a train, with all its movements and rhythms, takes us out of our selves and beyond, until we begin to hear again in the near distance those familiar sounds from the trainyards of our past— the smashing of couplings locking together, wheels grinding and shrieking, whistles hooting, and men shouting, the train crew detaching cars, adding others, rearranging our world; time standing still. We are caught between, then and now, our own departures and arrivals.

Poems considered in this section speak of coming or going, returning home or setting out for different worlds. Often, our memories accompany us. With the exception of the train itself, no other aspect of railroad life receives more homage in poetry than the railroad station; for this is where the traveler begins or ends his journey.

Langston Hughes's poem, "Pennsylvania Station" embodies in one fleeting image the essence of the coming and going at a railroad station. The poet compares Pennsylvania Station to "great basilicas of old," where people "pass through the great concourse of steel and stone / to trains, or else from trains out into day," with the same

"search . . . for a dream of God. . . ." One could conclude that train stations are like holy places to be revered, that God can be found even there. Perhaps we depart or return to the station because we have, as Hughes says, "Some seed to find that sprouts a holy tree. . . ." The poem reminds us that even a place like Pennsylvania Station can provide nourishment to the soul (Hughes 71).

But not all train stations inspire veneration. Ed Ochester's poem "The Penn Central Station at Beacon, N. Y." is less reverential. Here the poet compares the station to an "elephant graveyard," and not "some vast basilica of old" as in Hughes's poem. Furthermore, not only is it cemetery like, but it is a graveyard "without spines or tusks," lacking even the deadest semblance of life. Indeed, even the "stationmaster in a green eyeshade" is "snoozing or dead." The poet takes notice of other such spiritless particulars as "Dust in the slantlight" and "Yesterday's *Times* for sale." However, what makes this railroad station intriguing is the fact that it contains no living, breathing, hurrying traveler. No one lugging baggage. No one waiting for a loved one or sleeping on a bench. There is no arrival or departure time. In truth, the poet claims,

Twice a day empty trains

go by without stopping—

Eisenhower Eisenhower Eisenhower Eisenhower—

one-eyed trains twice a night—

FDR & FDR & FDR & FDR—

shuttle between

Albany Albany Albany Albany

Manhattan Manhattan Manhattan Manhattan (Ochester 20)

The reader must wonder what is at stake in the poem. Patriotism? No. What matters is one's own reconciliation with the passage of time. Through the process of the poem the reader becomes the unseen traveler that must fill the void.

But how can we come to terms with our own mortality if we don't know our own destinations? The speaker in John Berryman's poem "The Traveller" wonders, too. Recognizing and fearing his own oddity in the world ("They pointed me out . . ."), he still believes he is not alone in his "destination" because he has taken "the same train that the others took, To the same place." He even "tried to name / The effects of motion on the travellers. . . ." Yet, in the final two lines the train stops and a couple who he had been watching who "knew / The end of their journey," get off the train. The speaker "descended too." Curiously, with this final image, the reader suspects that the traveler gets off the train because he does not really know his destination or the end of his own journey; and furthermore, cannot truly face being alone or rejected. After all, the speaker says, "Were it not for that look / And those words, we were all of us the same" (Berryman 88).

Other train poems focus on similar harsh realities for the traveler. In another example, Dave Smith's poem "Cumberland Station" depicts an old, broken-down railroad station in a depressed economy. The narrator finds it hard to sit in the station even if it is to go to visit his grandfather:

Grandfather, you ask why I don't visit you
 now you have escaped the ticket-seller's cage
 to fumble hooks and clean the Shakespeare reels.
 What could we catch? I've been sitting in the pews

thinking about us a long time, long enough to see
 a man can't live in jobless, friendless Cumberland
 anymore. The soot owns even the fish. (Smith 23-25)

The decrepit station symbolizes the speaker's depressed spirits and those of the people of Cumberland.

As shown, train poems can encompass a broad spectrum of human feelings. If arrivals and departures can conjure up the emotions of fear, doubt, or depression, then they can also create the antitheses of these feelings. For example, MacLeish's poem "Arrival and Departure" celebrates the love of beauty and the attachment to the new and the familiar. We arrive with the poet at a particular destination, "the Place 'la Gare," where during the train's brief stop and its departure, the poet notices a woman's long, golden hair flowing in an open window:

The window opens:

heavy hair
 falls all gold
 from sill to air . . .

The poet is so awestruck by the beauty of all this he says,

Our journey to the
 world stopped there. (MacLeish 490)

The poet suspends us in the between time of arrival and departure. Little towns, "cats," "heavy hair" — these are places and things of this world. There's no need to journey any further. Beauty is right before our very eyes— even from the train window.

Some images of arriving trains tend to carry along with them tiny awakenings for the

reader. MacLeish's poem above is a tiny explosion of the here and now. Nancy Willard's poem "Coming to the Depot" awakens us to the very essence of life: birth and death.

The poem begins with the image of a newly married couple; a man who once "rode this train with one bag and a beer / and silence when he wanted it and his own speech . . . and a woman who was once beautiful / lurches down the aisle fighting / a diaper bag and a baby. . . ." As the newlywed husband contemplates his life he turns his attention from his wife to the scene beyond the train window which allows him insight into his future and his lost past:

and beyond the window, the milkweed blows.

It's twilight. I was a seed once, he thinks.

I was a seed. It was that easy. (Willard 20-21)

Through the image of a "milkweed" seed, the poet awakens us to the passage of time— the twilight of our own lives. In arriving, we remember what we once were and what we will become.

In summary, the poems considered offer compelling images of time's passage marked by a train's arrival or departure. Even the railroad station retains its awe. And whether we experience the breath-catching, chest-tightening emotion of drawing nearer and nearer to our destination, or anticipate the joy and exhilaration of setting out on a new adventure, these poems lure us to images of trains that call us as travelers in this life to explore the unknown possibilities of where we are going. The images do not glorify the locomotive as in the previous chapter, but instead honor the quest of the traveler. Somehow it is a special quest centering around the end or the

beginning of a journey, where the traveler encounters and questions the mysteries of life.

!

Sketches of American People and American Landscapes

More than any other poet in the nineteenth-century, Walt Whitman knew the landscape surrounding him and its inhabitants. In the 1855 Preface to his "Leaves of Grass," he boldly stated, "The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem. . . . The proof of a poet is that his country absorbs him as affectionately as he has absorbed it" (449, 467). Whitman "affectionately absorbed" America in his verse. He did so by Emerson's urging and paid close attention to nature and the natural language of the people. Essentially, he fell in love with the American idiom. Perhaps only Carl Sandburg or Robert Frost could claim the same equal affection for the American tongue and American landscapes in the twentieth-century. But the question is really moot. Whitman says in "A Backward Glance O'er Travel'd Roads," "The Poetic area is very spacious—has room for all— has so many mansions!" (439) In our own backward glance over the railroad in American poetry, we begin to see these "many mansions" and how, through the images of railroads, poets have affectionately absorbed their country and its people.

The poems considered in this section address the American experience. They focus on American people and American landscapes. They are called "sketches" not because the poems are hasty or undetailed, on the contrary, but to emphasize the poet's own vision of America. No one railroad poem can encompass all of America. The poems, then, do not focus on the poet or "I" in the poem, but usually bring the landscape from the outside into the train, into contact with human society. As a result, the poems tell us something about the human condition.

Theodore Roethke's poem "Night Journey" evokes the inner life of a reader through

vivid depictions of the natural world. The poem's compact, alternate rhymes gracefully interrelate the rider's sensations, steel bridges, and the rhythmic rising and falling of the horizon as glimpsed in sudden illuminations, through the train window at night. The physical qualities of the body, the natural landscape, and the man-made environment coexist harmoniously in this poem— a testimony to the Emersonian "Ideal:"

. . . Full on my neck I feel
The straining at a curve;
My muscles move with steel,
I wake in every nerve.
I watch a beacon swing
From dark to blazing bright;
We thunder through ravines
And gullies washed with light.
Beyond the mountain pass
Mist deepens on the pane;
We rush into a rain
That rattles double glass.
Wheels shake the roadbed stone,
The pistons jerk and shove,
I stay up half the night
To see the land I love. (Roethke 484)

The poem is tight and bears much resemblance in rhyme and rhythmic style to Dickinson's "I like to see it lap the miles—." Whereas Dickinson highlights the locomotive's paradoxical powers, Roethke highlights the train's rhythmic power as it passes through the American landscape.

Some train images flow rhythmically through a poem without ever being present in the poem. Instead, the title of the poem becomes the initial thrust of the railroad image. For instance, Donald Justice's poem, "American Sketches: Crossing Kansas by Train" fits this criteria. Much like William Carlos Williams does in his poetry, Justice, who dedicates this poem "For WCW," immediately engages the reader by entering him swiftly into the image experience. Without the title as part of the train image experience, the reader could not know that the succeeding images involved the railroad. But the rhythm of the poem keeps the reader inside a train "crossing Kansas" and moves the reader deeper to the richness of Kansas:

Where dark trees

Gather about a

Waterhole this

Is Kansas the

Mountains start here

Just behind

The closed eyes

Of a farmer's

Sons asleep.

In their workclothes (Justice 28)

The image is beyond belief. Our understanding it rests in our mind's unconscious rendering of American landscapes. As the train crosses Kansas, we allow our conscious thoughts to shift to the image experience of the poem— we can be on that train that crosses Kansas and see the mountains behind the farmer's sons' eyes. In this poem, much like the Spanish poetry that Bly spoke of, the image experience is the source of meaning.

But image experience does not mean that the railroad as image alone pays tribute only to the picturesque. To call on Duke Ellington, image don't mean a thing if it ain't got that swing. Swing is the payoff in a working railroad image. It is the epiphany of the poem, a transcendental moment of bliss when the train image seems to accelerate on its own, balanced on a razor's edge, leaving friction and exhaustion behind in its wake. Roethke's poem does this and so does Justice's, and many more of the railroad poems still to be discussed.

Interestingly, Richard Hugo has a poem that pokes fun at the myth of the railroad picturesque in an American small-town scene. The poet appears to be saying that traveling through the American landscape does not always conjure romantic images from a Thomas Cole painting:

It makes no sense, that town hanging wherever
you are, whatever you do. It reminds you
of nothing, the religion, if anything, grim.

The highest point was the steeple, protestant you think,
for certain not lax. It hovered like a mean bird

over the six homes you counted and you know
 if you lived there you'd go to church or be stoned
 in the dirt streets Monday, saying hello. . . . (Hugo 324-325)

The landscape framed in the train window is the reality of desolation. Although the train is the carrier to and from these places of desolation, it still "swings" in the final stanza by its tight lines and shortness of breath:

Years later you take the same train. You find
 the same town. This time, a tavern, neon
 "Grain Belt on tap" in the window and neon cross
 on the church. You count nine houses. The market
 that must have been there before has macadamed
 the parking lot. When you pull out you look back
 long as you can. Not very long. (Hugo 324-325)

Even short railroad poems have that swing. William Stafford's poem "Vacation" is a brief moment, a sketch in time, and truly resonates with beauty, power, and swing. At the very moment the narrator pours a cup of coffee, he gets a glimpse outside the window:

Three Indians in the scouring drouth
 huddle at a grave scooped in the gravel,
 lean to the wind as our train goes by.
 Someone is gone.

There is dust on everything in Nevada . . . (Stafford 23)

The final line, "I pour the cream" comes after a break which heightens the surprise and

pleasure to our senses. It jolts us a bit. The white smooth image of cream wonderfully juxtaposes the dry, dusty, Nevada. Through the language experience of the poem, somehow, our inner senses are awakened.

Train images can wake us up and make us keenly aware of who we are. Outside the train window we gaze at our past, present, or future. We are in motion, or, as Larry Levis says in his poem "Train," "There is a train I'm on" (Levis 39). Inside this train, there exists a kind of microcosm— a system more or less analogous to the outside world. This elongated world is moving through a larger, rounder world, and yet, there is a life we live. Countrymen we see and talk to. Things we take notice of outside the train window. Across this twentieth-century landscape looms one bard who undoubtedly loved the America he saw. Carl Sandburg, who wrote poetry about mid-America and the life of ordinary people, frequently used the image of the railroad to express the train's faults and shortcomings. His railroad poems are too numerous to cite in full here, but one senses when reading his work, that Sandburg had an acute knack for the American idiom and rhythm of speech. Indeed, his poems are like sketches of American life.

Sandburg's poem "Still Life" compares the view outside a train window with the likes of a still-life painting. The poet, as if he had been asked by the railroad to write an enticing advertisement to get people to ride the rails, calls the reader to "Cool your heels on the rail of an observation car." Succeeding images of "gray village flecks . . . horses hitched . . . the post office . . . A barnyard and fifteen Holstein cows" are all captured in Sandburg's poetic paint of language (Sandburg 90). The window of this train becomes the frame and canvas of a passing countryside. Sandburg's words

represent the point. Colorful and positive, this poem is a rarity for Sandburg in that it is not negatively critical or at least ironic in its view of the railroad. Other important poems of his pose the railroad in a lesser light.

One such pithy, ironic poem is one of Sandburg's best-known early poems, titled "Limited." The narrator-rider in the opening line declares "I AM riding on a limited express, one of the cracktrains of the nation." The very irony in the title suggests the might of the modern high speed express train and the phenomenon of barriers and restrictions. The poet inwardly observes: "(All the coaches shall be scrap and rust and all the men and women / laughing in the diners and sleepers shall pass to ashes.)" The image leads us to two contrasting views: a sense of unlimited speed, power and comfort represented in the train, and the natural and human characteristic of inevitable decay. These viewpoints collide in the poem's last line when the narrator asks a question of double meaning and is answered unequivocally with one word: "I ask a man in the smoker where he is going and he answers: "Omaha."" The final word holds the melody of the poem and contains the transcendental moment when the reader can feel the image of the train streak through "Omaha" and head for man's ultimate destination— the place of "ashes." Sandburg chose the perfect word to swing between the rational and unconscious mind (20).

One of the poets writing during Sandburg's lifetime was Robert Frost. Frost did not particularly like the train either, as he expresses in a persona poem "The Egg and the Machine." Frost's antagonism toward the railway can be seen in the narrator's cruelty to hurl turtle eggs at the passing train. The reader can imagine the train as an old steam engine clipping along in end rhymes. In this poem the narrator appears

misguided indeed:

He gave the solid rail a hateful kick.
 From far away there came an answering tick
 And then another tick. He knew the code:
 His hate had roused an engine up the road.

.....

He found suspicious sand, and sure enough,
 The pocket of a little turtle mine.
 If there was one egg in it there were nine,
 Torpedo-like, with shell of gritty leather
 All packed in sand to wait the trump together.

'You'd better not disturb me any more,'
 He told the distance, 'I am armed for war.
 The next machine that has the power to pass
 Will get this plasm in its goggle glass.' (Frost 73)

While Frost may have harbored intense, antagonistic attitudes toward the railroad, Archibald MacLeish remained faithful to the Emersonian Ideal. Two of his poems intersect the train with the daily lives of the people. "Burying Ground By the Ties" returns to America's past to pay tribute to those men who laid the rails. The poet speaks in the voice of the "foreign-born men:" "Niggers, Portugese, Magyars, Polacks / . . . Scotsmen, Englishmen, Chinese, Squareheads, Austrians" who "laid the steel to this land from ocean to ocean:"

It was we (if you know) put the U. P. through the passes
 Bringing her down into Laramie full load,
 Eighteen mile on the granite anticlinal,
 Forty-three foot to the mile and the grade holding:

It was we did it: hunkies of our kind.

It was we dug the caved-in holes for the cold water:

It was we built the gully spurs and the freight sidings:

.....

The place of our graves is marked by the telegraph poles! . . .

The poet leaves us in the final line with a timeless image of "trains going over us here in the dry hollows. . ." (MacLeish 266). The men who built the rails will not go "nameless," because even the greed that killed them cannot bury their spirits.

In MacLeish's other poem, "Crossing," we get a glimpse of a moment in time— a wave by a "dining car cook" to a "little girl on the crossing at Ghent, New York" and a poet who wonders:

Why a forgotten touch of human grace

Is more alive forgotten than its memory

Pressed between two pages in this place? (MacLeish 413)

In such moments of "human grace," trains are timeless. This is a popular motif in train images and appears time and again.

Raymond Carver's poem "The Moon, the Train" is a fine example of how traveling by train can bring people together in a common experience. The train represents a

microcosmos of its own, as the poet insists in his first line— "The moon, the landscape, the train." In this poem we look from the train and see what there is to see:

. . . a lighted tennis
 court, and it's probable, even at this hour, we'll
 find Franz Kafka on the court. He's crazy about
 tennis and can't get enough of it. In a minute, sure
 enough— there's Kafka, dressed in whites,
 playing doubles against a young man and woman.

The two worlds are distinct— "None of the players even bothers to look up / at the passing train." Attention from the outside world shifts inward when "Suddenly the track curves / and begins to go through a woods . . . everything behind us is in darkness." At this moment we enter the world of the train, but as the poet declares, "no one in the train car seems to show the slightest / interest in the game or who was playing on the court under / the lights." The speaker's profession captures the essence of the poem's railroad image. The poem ends on a humorous note, re-emphasizing the wonderful fraternization that can happen on trains:

"So that was Kafka," someone behind me spoke up.

"So," somebody else replied. "So what? I'm Perlmutter.

Pleased to meet you. Let's have a drink." (Carver 23-24)

Lawrence Ferlingetti's train poem takes a less peopled route, so he discovers. The central subject of his poem is the lone wandering of the individual. In one hundred seventeen lines, the poet, "crossing the country in coach trains / (back to my old / lone wandering)," sees an "indominatable" and "inscrutable" American landscape, yet he

wonders why there are "no people anywhere—"

All hiding?

White Man gone home?

Must be a cowboy someplace. . . .

Not having seen anyone in the outside world but "one lone brakeman's face / stuck out of darkness—" the poet, in the penultimate line dramatically ponders then, "Who stole America?" A break occurs and we are left hanging with the final, quintessential line, "Myself I saw in the window reflected." An unusual twist in language, but effective. The beat of the line slows like a train coming to a stop. The image of the railroad is one of "indomitable" discovery. Yet, what is America without its people? (Ferlingetti 186-189).

In summary, America would mean very little without its trains, its poets, and its people. For most of the poets discussed in this section, the railroad is sheer magic: "Yet there isn't a train I wouldn't take, / No matter where its going," wrote Edna St. Vincent Millay ("Travel" 94). The train is the classic American icon fixed in the imaginations of these poets. Their poems endure as familiar sketches of American people and American landscapes.

Troop Trains and Holocaust Trains

We cannot escape it. Neither should we suppress it. But there is the image of train deep in our consciousness that is ugly and evil. Poets could not forget the trains that took their brothers and sisters, fellow countrymen, or themselves off to war. Nor did poets forget the millions of Jews herded on board trains that would ultimately take them to their death. Emerson's Idealism cannot survive here. Indeed, it appears almost ludicrous. Even Whitman, who was able to translate the evils of the Civil War "into a new tongue," could not have ever imagined such horrors, or been able to elevate the events to spirit. When men, women, and children are dehumanized, there seems little hope. Poets writing about the Holocaust face the dark image of train within their own consciousness and unconsciousness. The following few poems reveal the nature of the troop train and Holocaust train.

Troop trains were common sights in war. In Karl Shapiro's poem "Troop Train," "luck" plays a hand in a soldier's survival: "Luck also travels and not all come back." Yet, in the final stanza, the poet will not let death dictate life:

Trains lead to ships and ships to death or trains,
 And trains to death or trucks, and trucks to death,
 Or trucks lead to the march, the march to death,
 Or that survival which is all our hope;
 And death leads back to trucks and trains and ships,
 But life leads to the march, O flag! at last
 The place of life found after trains and death—
 Nightfall of nations brilliant after war. (Shapiro 57)

The image of life leading "the march" ultimately conquers luck and death. But the image of the troop train remains cyclical in the mind of the reader. The train took men gloriously to war but it also brought home their dead bodies.

For other poets, though, trains will forever be associated with the Holocaust. The central subject of their poems is the dark side of trains— the horror, the death, the inconceivability of the Holocaust embedded in our collective consciousness and unconsciousness. Michael Harper's poem "The Dance of the Elephants" recreates humanity's horrendous sin:

Part I

The trains ran through the eleven
Nights it took to vacate the town;
relatives and lovers tacked in a row
on the button-board sidings,
wails of children tossed in a pile
wails of women tossed in a salad
to be eaten with soap and a rinse.
Those who took all they had to the borders,
those who took their bottles
three centuries old, those who
thought only of language, the written
word, are forgiven.
One daughter is riding on the train
above her mother, above her mother,

into the tunnel of the elephants.

Culture tells us most about its animals
singing our children asleep, or let them
slip into a room as smoothly as
refrigeration. (Harper 166-167)

The image of the "tunnel of the elephants" represents man's inhumanity to man and his ability to ignore such an enormous atrocity. Part II of the poem is centered in an image of innocence— a child's music box, where inside a toy elephant dances to "Beethoven's a passion dance." In the final stanza the train image transforms from an image of death to an image of life:

Sung in America,
the song some telescopic sight,
a nickelplated cream,
a small girl cuddles her elephant,
the song in the streets
leaping the train windows,
and what love as the elephant chimes. (166-167)

William Heyen's poem "The Trains" mentions the death of Nazi war criminal, Commandant Stangl of Treblinka, and his signed document still in existence in Berlin, requesting "an order of transmittal from Treblinka:"

248 freight cars of clothing,
400,000 gold watches,

25 freight cars of women's hair.

For this poet trains will forever be associated with the Holocaust and the sounding of the word "Treblinka":

Some clothing was kept, some pulped for paper.

The finest watches were never melted down.

All the women's hair was used for mattresses, or dolls.

Would these words like to use some of that same paper?

One of those watches may pulse in your own wrist.

Does someone you know collect dolls, or sleep on human hair?

He is dead at last, Commandant Stangl of Treblinka,

but the camp's three syllables still sound like freight cars

straining around a curve, Treblinka,

Treblinka. Clothing, time in gold watches,

women's hair for mattresses and dolls' heads.

Treblinka. The trains from Treblinka. (Heyen 38)

The image of train is reduced to the abstract of sound in the word "Treblinka." Even more frightening is the realization that people were treated as materials for commodities: paper, watches, mattresses, dolls. The poet keeps the ghosts of the Holocaust alive by turning his questions toward himself and us, the readers, and not directing them to the past.

In summary, the images of trains in these few representative poems are like no

others. They are unforgettable and unforgiving, as they should be.

7

Freedom Trains

America has long had its poor and oppressed. These individuals do not share in the promise of the American dream. The reason is sometimes difficult to define, but freedom is a part of it. As individuals, or a people, we cannot be whole unless we are free— free from racism, prejudice, and bigotry. Poems analyzed in this section focus on the lack of freedom for some peoples and their broken human spirits.

Surely, Langston Hughes is the best poet of the century to represent the use of the railroad as a symbol of freedom for the African-American spirit. Like Whitman, he declared, "I too sing America . . . I am the darker brother" (Hughes 275). Yet several of his railroad poems speak of the isolation and oppression of African-Americans.

In his poem "Railroad Avenue," an abandoned boxcar symbolizes the "untouched" and "forgotten" black human spirit, where "laughter" is—

Shaking the lights in the fish joints,

Rolling white balls in the pool rooms,

And leaving untouched the box-car

Some train has forgotten. (Hughes, Selected Poems 186)

The laws favoring or promoting segregation and suppression of African-Americans were known as "Jim Crow" laws. The narrator in Hughes poem "One-Way Ticket" seeks freedom from such oppressive policies:

I pick up my life

And take it with me

And I put it down in

Chicago, Detroit,

Buffalo, Scranton,
Any place that is
North and East—
And not Dixie.

I pick up my life
And take it on the train
To Los Angeles, Bakersfield,
Seattle, Oakland, Salt Lake,
Any place that is
North and West—
And not South.

I am fed up
With Jim Crow laws,
People who are cruel
And afraid,
Who lynch and run,
Who are scared of me
And me of them.

I pick up my life
And take it away

On a one-way ticket—

Gone up North,

Gone out West,

Gone! (Selected Poems 177)

As the title suggests, the train is a "one-way ticket," a symbol for freedom, a way to "pick up" and start over in a new place; somewhere where there is not the favoring and promoting of racism.

Hughes's most popular railroad poem is titled "Freedom Train." The reader can't help but sing this poem, and hope and pray that one day all people will be free from oppression. Its subject of freedom from prejudice and racism is very much alive today. The poem has the power, rhythm and sound of an old folk song. Its language is natural and of the earth. Like a repeated chorus, the image of this Freedom Train is sung throughout the poem:

I read in the papers about the

Freedom Train.

I heard on the radio about the

Freedom Train.

I seen folks talkin' about the

Freedom Train.

Lord, I been a-waitin' for the

Freedom Train!

Obviously the image does not speak of a literal train, but one that acts as a metaphorical train for freeing the human spirit. The speaker of the poem is

... gonna check up on this

Freedom Train.

wants:

Somebody tell me about this

Freedom Train!

has:

... got to know about this

Freedom Train!

.....

... 'Cause freedom ain't freedom when a man ain't free.

More than anything, the speaker hopes that "the Freedom Train will be yours and mine." The poet's freedom train remains a symbol for the Civil Rights Movement. He had hoped that what he heard was true— freedom for all humankind (276-278).

Quincy Troupe's image of train in his poem, "In Texas Grass," symbolizes the hardships of African-Americans and their "rusted" hope for a better life. Similies abound in the poem. The "rusted / trains in texas grass" essentially represent the "long forgotten / promise of 40 acres & a mule" and the injustices done yesterday and that still continue today. The train is a symbol of hardship and lost hope— a "waiting, waiting" for justice:

... & even now, if you pass across

this bleeding flesh ever-

changing landscape,

you will see the fruited

countryside, stretching, stretching,
 old black men, & young black men,
 sitting on porches
 waiting, waiting for rusted
 trains in texas grass (Troupe 443-444)

In John Logan's poem "Grandfather's Railroad," the poet as a young boy does not quite understand his grandfather's explanation of "the old underground railroad," and confuses the metaphor with the physical railroad. Yet, in the boy's imagination, what does it matter?:

... My grandfather told me

The old underground railroad
 Wound thru Montgomery
 County; he pointed a fine

Haired finger and led
 Across the dust-lit land
 The believed Negroes— gold

.....
 Black men roar past
 Shadowing the field like clouds
 Or giants that seem to slow
 And stride as lean as trees
 Against the north sky. (Logan 15-16)

For the black slave, the "railroad" was always a powerful symbol for freedom. For Native Americans, the railroads represented the white man's westward expansion; the taking and destroying of Indian land, and the breaking of treaties. In a poem that combines the image of the railroad and a Native American tribe's plight, poet Edward Dorn in "La Maquina a Houston" examines the cruel treatment of a people, the Apache, whom we treated as "exiles" and "prodded out into the light" and "motioned the way with our shotguns," to cheat them of their own share of creation. The poem reminds us that we are of one land but sadly remain a separate and selfish people. Even the Apache's dogs showed them more loyalty and honor than the white man:

. . . As the train moves off at the first turn of the wheel

With its cargo of florida bound exiles

Most all of whom had been put bodily

Into the coaches, their 3000 dogs,

Who had followed them like a grand party

To the railhead at Holbrook

began to cry

When they saw the smoking creature resonate

With their masters,

And as the maquina acquired speed they howled and moaned

A frightening noise from their great mass

And some of them followed the cars

For forty miles

Before they fell away in exhaustion (Dorn 250-252)

The "La Maquina" is a train of oppression. The "heavy breathing of the lonely maquina" stays with us.

In summary, the images of trains in these poems and other poems like them represent the struggle of a people to gain equal rights and freedom under the same law. While Hughes's poems speak best of the plight of the African-American spirit, the other poems also express his desire for "a train that's yours and mine!" (278)

Journeying Through the Landscape of Consciousness

Poet Gary Snyder coined the term "landscape of consciousness" during a 1964 interview with Gene Fowler that was later published that same year in the Literary Times (Chicago). We use the phrase here to relate how the railroad image in this section of poems travels through what Snyder, in a collection of interviews and talks titled The Real Work, calls "the structure of the whole mind." For Snyder, mind means "Original Mind." And Original Mind, in terms of poetry and life, means "bringing us back to our original, true natures . . . seeing the universe freshly in eternity, yet any moment" (72). The "real work" of the poet concedes Snyder, or for any man, is to "uncover the inner structure and actual boundaries of the mind, "the exploration of consciousness itself (XIV). The value and function of poetry is to help us understand and transcend the self, and the image in poetry fuses our two worlds of consciousness. It merges the conscious, objective world with the unconscious, subjective world.

Emerson had also spoken of these ideas but in a different way. In his essay "The Poet" he writes,

The poet knows that he speaks adequately then only when he speaks somewhat wildly, or "with the flower of the mind;" not with the intellect used as an organ, but with the intellect released from all service and suffered to take its direction from its celestial life; . . . For if in any manner we can stimulate this instinct, new passages are opened for us into nature; the mind flows into and through things hardest and highest, and the metamorphosis is possible. (Emerson III: 27)

For Emerson, the mind's coming into contact with the "true nectar" means coming nearer to the "spirit of the world, the great calm presence of the Creator" (28).

We can best approach the poems then, in terms of the image penetrating the different realms of consciousness, because ultimately, as stated before, what we say about trains we say about consciousness. Thoreau may have said it best: the "outer and inner life correspond;" poetry is "the self-consciousness of the universe . . . the seat of the soul"— where the inner world and the outer world touch, where they "interpenetrate" each other (qtd. in Snyder xi-xii). This section examines how train images "interpenetrate" this outer and inner world, how eight representative poems take us through the natural landscape and the landscape of consciousness.

Denise Levertov is a poet who can eloquently combine the powers of nature with the powers of consciousness. In her poem "By Rail Through The Earthly Paradise, Perhaps Bedfordshire," she journeys through a scenic landscape that awakens her inner being. In essence, the speaker, at one with herself and the landscape, desires to become like that which she sees. By the merging of landscape and consciousness, we travel with her on this transcendental journey.

The poem begins with simple, declarative, image statements:

The fishermen among the fireweed.

Towpath and humpbacked bridge. Cows

in one field, slabs of hay

ranged in another.

The initial images immediately immerse us in a natural landscape, where we can hear

the poet's reflective, inner voice.

In the third stanza the poem shifts to thought-conscious statements:

Common day

precious to me.

There's nothing else

to grasp.

Here the poet recognizes the beauty and essence of the moment. She does not wish to be in any other place, in any other time, or want any other "Common day" than the one she has.

In the fourth stanza we begin to feel the rhythm of this train in the long and short lines set off by commas. The poet also returns to the particulars outside the train window, where the rhythm of the train parallels the natural rhythms of the landscape:

The train

moves me past it too fast, not much,

just a little, I don't want

to stay for ever.

Horses,

three of them, flowing across a paddock

as wind flows over barley.

In this stanza the poet's conscious thought merges with the unconscious image. While the poet hesitates and consciously thinks that she does not want the train to move "too fast" past her "Common day," she perceives through her unconscious vision horses flowing like wind over barley. This is one moment in the poem when we

"interpenetrate" the objective and subjective world of the poet, which helps us in succeeding images to accept the poet's other realms of consciousness. The poem continues in stanza five with an image-to-statement shift:

Oaks in parkland, distinct,
growing their shadows.

A man from Cairo across from me
reading *A Synopsis of Eye Physiology*.

The brickworks,
fantastical slender chimneys.

Because we are traveling not only through a literal landscape, but also the poet's mind, we can accept the image that "Oaks" are "growing their shadows." The poet shifts back to the outer world where she takes notice of a fellow passenger and chimneys.

After declaring her emptiness of "want" in stanza six the poet declares in stanza seven that she is "troubled" by her "own happiness" and wishes "the train now / would halt for me at a station in the fields, / (the name goes by / unread)." The final few stanzas bring us back to the image world:

In the deep aftermath
of its faded rhythm, I could become

a carved stone
set in the gates of the earthly paradise,

an angler's fly

lost in the sedge to watch the centuries.

The speaker imagines herself being a part of the landscape. The train connects her outer world with her inner world of experience. Through the aesthetic process of the poem we arrive with the poet. All connections are made at once. In the train's "faded rhythm" we see the flowing rhythm of horses. In the "carved stone," we are reminded that we are as common as the "Common day." In the "angler's fly," we return to the initial image of the poem— "The fisherman among the fireweed." We desire like the poet to become "lost in the sedge to watch the centuries." (Levertov 187-188)

Emerson would have approved. Obviously, by the poem's end, the poet's mind is "inebriated by nectar," and through the image of the train in her earthly paradise, we have journeyed through the poet's landscape of consciousness, and our own.

Robert Penn Warren's poem "Last Night Train" also takes us beyond the confines of the railroad tracks into the landscape of consciousness. The image of train in this poem focuses on the spiritual connection the narrator feels for a fellow passenger. A heavy usage of internal rhyming consonants gives the poem a rough train-like rhythm. The initial thrust of the poem opens with the rush of a train and the narrator's close attention to a woman passenger:

In that slick and new-fangled coach we go slam-banging

On rickety ruin of a roadbed, past caterpillar-

Green flash of last light on deserted platforms,

And I watch the other passenger at this

Late hour— a hundred and eighty pounds of

Flesh, black, female, middle-aged,

Unconsciously flung by roadbed jerks to wallow,
 Unshaped, unhinged, in
 A purple dress. Straps of white sandals
 Are loosened to ease the bulge of color-contrasting bare instep.
 Knees wide, the feet lie sidewise, sole toward sole. They
 Have walked so far. Head back, flesh snores.
 I wonder what she has been doing all day in N.Y.

Both the image of the train and the image of the woman are part of the narrator's objective thoughts. The long, consonant sounding lines, such as "In that slick and new-fangled coach we go slam-banging" or "bulge of color-contrasting bare instep" bring out the humanness of the scene. When we reach the final line of the stanza, we shift from images to statement, where the poet and reader hold steady before making a descent into the subjective realm of the mind. For a brief moment the second stanza maintains this conscious-thought level, but eventually shifts to an image that penetrates the inner world of consciousness:

My station at last. I look back once.
 Is she missing hers? I hesitate to ask, and the snore
 Is suddenly snatched into eternity.

The image of a "snore" being "snatched into eternity" establishes a key relationship between the narrator and black woman. At this moment the poet "interpenetrates" both worlds of consciousness and is free to travel back and forth between the two. The word "eternity" gives off a kind of spiritual resonance that seems to put us somewhere out there in the cosmos.

A line in stanza three continues this timeless image in the form of a simile: "The last red light fades into the distance and darkness like / A wandering star." The train seemingly fades off into "eternity" with the snoring woman aboard. The poet turns inward with his thoughts. The landscape of consciousness deepens. The poet turns to his deeper self: "Alone, I now stand under the green station light, / Part of nothing but years." The woman he saw on the train appears to be out of the scene.

Stanza four maintains the image of infinite time. The narrator almost seems like he will sail right out of the poem:

I stare skyward at uncountable years beyond
 My own little aura of pale-green light—
 The complex of stars is steady in its operation.
 Smell of salt sedge drifts in from seaward,
 And I think of swimming, naked and seaward,
 In starlight forever.

The speaker interpenetrates the outer world of "pale-green light" and the inner unconscious body world of "swimming, naked and seaward, / In starlight forever."

With stanza five the poet returns to the image of the woman on the train:

But I look up the track toward Bridgeport. I feel
 Like blessing the unconscious wallow of flesh-heap
 And white sandals unstrapped at bulging of instep.

In the poet's journey inward, he rediscovers his humanness. He could not forget the woman. Her own humanness made an indelible impression on him. Indeed, in the

final stanza, the poet connects himself to her "instep" with his "heels:"

I hear my heels crunch on gravel, making

My way to a parked car. (Warren 73-74)

There appears a finality to the moment in the image of a parked car, but this remains in direct contrast to the image of the moving train that will forever in the reader's imagination carry the woman snoring into eternity. The poem brings us back to our original, human selves.

Robert Bly's "Passing An Orchard By Train" pays attention to the physical landscape while also rendering a profound perception of a man's inward life. Through the process of reading the poem, it is as if the train image takes us into a psychic field where we are beyond the fences of the conscious (that which we see, the orchard), and travel by train into our unconscious. The poem itself is an image that carries us beyond the picture of an orchard. Implicitly, it carries a psychic state, a spiritual resonance.

The first stanza returns us to a primordial state. As readers we look out and see "Grass high under apple trees." Immediately, we are connected with a nature that evokes a simple diction, a momentary idleness, that suddenly explodes "rough and sexual, / the grass growing heavy and uneven." These images are not simply intellectual or emotional impressions of what Bly sees or feels, but what really are spiritual and unconscious perceptions of his own instincts. In the poem we begin to trust Bly's intuitions.

In the second stanza the image of the moving train continues to plunge inward with exhilaration:

We cannot bear disaster, like
 the rocks—
 swaying nakedly
 in open fields.

The poet speaks to us through these simple, somewhat elliptical images. Rocks do not realistically sway nakedly in open fields, nor do they bear disaster. In order for us to understand, we must allow this image to be perceived and re-perceived in our unconscious modes. Despite what may appear as an irrational connection that we "cannot bear disaster, like / the rocks— / swaying nakedly in open fields," the image dissolves any rational consciousness we may have left. The rocks, now, risk everything. They appear stronger than our outward selves that "cannot bear disaster."

The undercurrent in the third stanza implies that our outward selves are like apples easily bruised:

One slight bruise and we die!
 I know no one on this train.
 A man comes walking down the aisle.
 I want to tell him
 that I forgive him, that I want him
 to forgive me.

The poet's exclamation is a deliberate acknowledgement to the awakening of our inward beings. To get closer to our inward selves, the poet moves the reader further off into solitude, where we "know no one on this train." A simple statement but the line holds a mixture of quiet and intensity. But we are not alone on this train— "A man

comes walking down the aisle." As we encounter him, we can see that the image is vague, he is simply "A man." We need not know anymore than this because the poet's concern is with the inward man and not the outward. We must wonder though, if this "man" extemporaneously could be a deeper inward self that the poet envisions. The poet sees in his own outward self and possibly the man's, the shortcomings of their egos that keep them from being forgiving human beings.

But in the outer world, we do not say these things to strangers. The train image in the poem reveals our schism. We are left to learn that the "other," "A man . . . walking down the aisle," may be our own deep self. In summary, the train image in this poem turns us inward from the outer self to the inner self that wants "to forgive" (Bly 65).

Another popular and often anthologized Bly poem is "In A Train." This is a tiny poem of four lines, much like a haiku in what it does. The poem is steeped in particulars:

There has been a light snow.

Dark car tracks move in out of the darkness.

I stare at the train window marked with soft dust.

I have awakened at Missoula, Montana, utterly happy.

The central subject is not the fact that the poet is riding by rail, but more profoundly the experience of being "awakened." Indeed, as the title suggests, the solitary experience of traveling in a train brings us to an in-between state of consciousness, whereby the mind empties itself of conscious thought in order to receive the swaying of the car or the landscape outside the window. The poet empties our rational minds through his stark images, rhythms and sounds in the poem, readying us for this

pleasant surprise: "I have awakened at Missoula, Montana, utterly happy" (Bly 59). In this poem the train is more than a vehicle of transportation. Here, it acts as a vehicle of transcendence, the deep self awakening in solitude.

Carl Sandburg's tiny poem "Window" is very similar to Bly's "In A Train." Sandburg's "Window" is an imagistic poem which describes night, seen from a train window, as "a great, dark, soft thing / Broken across with slashes of light" (57). Both poems are brief and imagistic, and without the scaffolding of conscious thoughts. Because of this they move more swiftly through the landscape of consciousness and provide as much exhilaration and swing as other railroad poems do.

While many railroad poems arouse exhilaration, there are still others that widen the field of consciousness by arousing feelings of sympathy, pity, or sorrow. Allen Ginsberg's "Sunflower Sutra" is such a poem marked by pathos.

One of the most important poetry works of the twentieth-century, Ginsberg's book Howl includes in later editions this familiar anthology staple that goes back to Whitman's long, lyrical, free verse lines. However, the train image in this poem casts some grave doubts upon Whitman's conviction that the transcontinental railroad had completed the long-sought commercial and mystical "Passage to India." In "Sunflower Sutra" the poet "howls" against everything in our mechanistic civilization which kills the spirit, unlike Whitman's praising of mechanical progress. The poem's force and energy come from a redemptive quality of love for a sunflower, while at the same time the poem destructively catalogs the evils of our time through the image of the locomotive:

Unholy battered old thing you were, my sunflower O my soul, I loved you

then!

The grime was no man's grime but death and human locomotives,
 all that dress of dust, that veil of darkened railroad skin, that smog of cheek,
 that eyelid of black mis'ry, that sooty hand or phallus or protuberance
 of artificial worse-than-dirt—industrial—modern—all that civiliza-
 tion spotting your crazy golden crown— (138)

The poem's primary focus is on the sunflower which had gone completely to seed and was all black and sooty from the locomotives. But the poet, enraptured even by the beauty of a decrepit sunflower, makes our sooty souls holy again in that famous, long final line:

—We're not our skin of grime, we're not our dread bleak dusty imageless
 locomotive, we're all golden sunflowers inside, blessed by our own
 seed & hairy naked accomplishment-bodies growing into mad black
 formal sunflowers in the sunset, spied on by our eyes under the
 shadow of the mad locomotive riverbank sunset Frisco hilly tincan
 evening sitdown vision. (139)

For Whitman, the railroad served as the inspiration for the hope that man could achieve his spiritual goals. Ginsberg, however, gains strength and hope from the sunflower itself— not from the train which he depicts as primarily emphasizing the alienation of modern man from a natural environment of great healing and mystical powers.

Through the contrasting images of sunflower and locomotives, the emphatic howls of grief and rage, we come away from the poem with a new visionary awareness— that

"we're all golden sunflowers inside."

May Sarton's poem "After A Train Journey" combines the hope of Whitman and the healing power of Ginsberg. This is a poem Emerson would have considered to be "inebriated by nectar," spoken "with the flower of the mind" (Emerson III 27). In the first stanza we begin the journey through the poet's awakened consciousness:

My eyes are full of rivers and trees tonight,
 The clear waters sprung in the green,
 The swan's neck flashing in sunlight,
 The trees laced dark, the tiny unknown flowers,
 Skies never still, shining and darkening the hours.
 How can I tell you all that I have been?

Truly, the poem reads like a love letter to the reader. As we read, we become "drenched" with the poet's journey. Ironically, there are no train images in the poem itself, but the title carries the image of train through the unconscious mind of the reader. The first stanza of the poem sets a contemplative mood through the soft sounding of "s's" in such words as "eyes," "rivers," and "trees." End rhymes establish an early rhythm of a train in motion, and images are of the earth and saturate the poet's eyes. The last line in the stanza indicates the poet's transcendental merging with the views outside her train window. Stanza two further explains the transformation of the poet's conscious mind:

My thoughts are rooted with the trees,
 My thoughts flow with the stream.
 They flow and are arrested as a frieze.

How can I answer now or tell my dream,
 How tell you what is far and what is near?
 Only that river, tree, and swan are here.

The poet's "thoughts" become fused with the natural world. Her own being had absorbed the landscape through the train window and, as a result her own consciousness journeyed the same landscape of nature as the train. Interestingly, the poet again uses the repetition of words and images to further the effects of rhythm and rhyme, and to give the poem a certain cohesion or form. Stanza three continues with the same poetic devices used before:

Even at the slow rising of the full moon,
 That delicate disturber of the soul,
 I am so drenched in rivers and in trees,
 I cannot speak, I have nothing to tell,
 Except that I must learn of this pure solitude
 All that I am and might be, root and bone,
 flowing and still and beautiful and good,
 Now I am almost earth and almost whole. (Sarton 233)

The imagery remains constant and the poet's consciousness is "drenched" with the natural setting. By penetrating this inner world of consciousness from the views of the train window, the poet desires to "learn of this pure solitude," and to become, "almost earth and almost whole."

Emerson would have approved of the harmonious blending of nature and machine. In fact, the image of the train is indistinguishable from the physical landscape and the

landscape of consciousness. In a poem like this, Whitman is right— we can reach our spiritual goals. Ginsberg, too, would have to agree that Sarton's train, although hardly physically visible, strengthens the "root and bone" of the soul.

In conclusion, all eight poems are representative of the type of railroad poem that explores consciousness in a deep and serious way. To use Thoreau's word, the train images "interpenetrate" the poets' outer and inner worlds. Through a combination of objective and subjective experiences, the poets greatly desire to bring into harmony their personal selves with the landscape of nature. For instance, Levertov wishes to merge her being with the "earthly paradise;" Warren thinks of "swimming naked and seaward, / In starlight forever;" Bly seeks "forgiveness" from a stranger while passing an orchard by train. Ginsberg wants to bless the "golden sunflowers inside" us all; and Sarton, "drenched in rivers and trees," desires to become "almost earth and almost whole." Emerson would have praised these poets, indeed.

Conclusion

The nineteenth-century poets were part of a generation in which the railroad brought about tremendous change in American life. By the latter half of their lives, the steam engine was an everyday sight that attracted their eyes, ears, and often their imaginations. These writers were railroad observers and riders and, whether individually they paid homage to or grumbled about their iron horse, each recognized the railroad's importance in American culture, and each transformed the train's mass of materiality to the language of poetry.

Essentially, Emerson, Thoreau, Dickinson, and Whitman, by incorporating the image harmoniously into nature's landscape and the landscape of their verse, called on the railroad (to use Whitman's phrase), to "come serve the Muse". Although Emerson had never written a railroad poem, he certainly assimilated the train's image in his poetic prose. He found, as his brother noted him saying, "that, though he did not have a musical ear, he had 'musical eyes'" (Emerson II: 444). Perhaps Emerson never chose to translate the sounds of the locomotive into his poetry, but he clearly understood that even the singing locomotive had its roots in nature— iron-ore, steel, coal, steam, wood— all these elements, like art, are never fixed, "but always flowing" (365). He had a great faith in the young American to bring into harmony, nature and machine. He called for artists to depict the machine from an ideal viewpoint by assimilating it harmoniously into the landscape, hoping that this would show that Nature and the railroad were not incompatible, and that this act in art would help resolve conflicts in reality. To the young American he cried out:

Luckily for us, now that steam has narrowed the Atlantic

to a strait, the nervous, rocky West is intruding a new and continental element into the national mind, and we shall yet have an American genius. How much better when the whole land is a garden, and the people have grown up in the bowers of a paradise. (Emerson I: 369-370)

Emerson's "American genius" would later come dressed as a beanhoer, a recluse in white, and a self-proclaimed, hat-wearing, no tea-drinking American rough. His "garden" was never actualized because of the century's rapid territorial expansion, its "Manifest Destiny." Only in art did the railroad come into harmony with nature.

Emerson's student, Thoreau, was somewhat bitter about the railroad's invasion of his woods and ponds, at least privately. In art, in Walden, he adhered to his teacher's wishes and blended the natural world of the woods and pond with the mechanical world of the railroad. Although he resented the materialism that the railroad brought down its tracks, he realized that, ultimately, the railroad and nature spoke the same language. His poem bore testimony that, like the pond, the railroad could serve as a symbol of transcendence and a source for renewal.

Dickinson barely held in check her train passing through the landscape. She played with physical perspective and popular railroad imagery to resolve the paradox between what she perceived as a threatening animal and a supernatural being. The poem's syntax forced us to unexpected levels of meaning, yet we always remained in the circuit of nature and machine.

Whitman, on the other hand, exulted in the cultural implications of the railroad and its new-found route to the Far East. He rhapsodized over the railroad as muse to his

verse and as an actual, physical way to humankind's artistic and spiritual wholeness. Both his poems relied on the railroad-in-the-landscape and, indeed, could not have emerged, as Whitman says about his Leaves in "A Backward Glance O'er Travel'd Roads," "from any other era than the latter half of the Nineteenth Century, nor any other land than democratic America . . ." (Buell 435). While the transcontinental railroad was being built, Whitman desired to be the poet of the common people and to put himself "freely, fully and truly on record" (Buell 444). He was a poet who would radically change American poetry by his long loosely-connected, image-packed, free verse. His poems went far beyond the traditional rhythm and rhyme and stock poetic devices so typical in his century. He was the answer to Emerson's call for an American bard. He laid the track for American poetry to come.

Unfortunately, it would be a track that would go mostly unused for over half a century. Bly's essay pointed out the "wrong turning" American poetry made: its movement away from the image and the unconscious. Instead of driving deeper into the inward self, much of the twentieth-century's early poetry became obsessed with the objective world. Meanwhile, the popularity of the railroad proved that the aesthetics of the train were still irresistible to poets. Poets continued to ride the rails and write train poems. The railroad images in their poems helped American poetry find its way back to the Whitman track of a more intimate, personal, and spiritual poetry, although the poets chose their own alternate routes to get there.

A few poets chose to establish the train as the central subject in their poems, focusing on it as an animated image and possessing the powers of the Muse. For them, the aesthetics of the train became the aesthetics for the poem.

Other poets sought to explore the quest of the traveler, the images centering around the arrival or departure of a journey. In these poems often the train image juxtaposed the traveler's intense, human emotions.

Probably the greatest number of poets used the railroad image to capture the likes of American people and American landscapes. Often we witnessed how the train traveling through the natural landscape awakened the poet's inner senses and brought riders together in a common experience.

Yet, there were poets who brought to us the dark side of trains— trains of unforgettable death and trains full of cries for freedom. These poets needed to write about these silenced subjects.

And finally, there were poets who wrote railroad poems to journey through the landscape of their own consciousness, to explore, as Gary Snyder said, "the inner structure and actual boundaries of the mind." Railroad imagery in their poetry penetrated and fused the different realms of consciousness. In the poets' journeys inward, we may have discovered something about ourselves, and through the process of the poem may have become, as Sartre wrote, "almost earth and almost whole."

Caboose Thoughts

Railroads have proved their usefulness. More than any other factor, they accelerated industrialization and urbanization in nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century America, but they also provided a powerful aesthetic in which American poetry could express itself in image and music. While the symbol of early nineteenth-century America was still the clipper ship under full sail, by the end of the century and well into the next, it was the steam locomotive that became the classic American Icon. The railroad created a new economic order. It raised cities in the wilderness and left bypassed towns in economic ruin. At every point where the railroad touched and transformed the nation, poets used it as a symbol or an image to personify not only the unchained force of industrial expansion itself, but also the expansion of consciousness.

In his essay "The Poet" Emerson wrote, "The poet . . . writes primarily what will and must be spoken" (7). Undoubtedly the railroad was a unique phenomenon in American history that had to be "spoken" in our poetry. The poets' songs of the railroad became unique events in themselves. I think of Walt Whitman's poem "When Lilacs Last In The Dooryard Bloom'd" that combines a tragic event in American history with the image of the railroad and the power of poetry. It is this poem that inspired the writing of this thesis and awakened my own consciousness to the railroad in American poetry.

Sections five and six of the poem allude to the actual funeral procession that carried Lincoln's body from Washington to Springfield, Illinois, where he was buried. The narrative sequence plots the circuitous route of the train carrying the coffin through the

land. Whitman imaginatively encompasses the image of the train without specifically ever mentioning it. Yet, for me, it remains the most powerful image of the railroad in American poetry:

5

Over the breast of the spring, the land, amid cities,
 Amid lanes and through old woods, where lately the violets peep'd
 from the ground, spotting the gray debris,
 Amid the grass in the fields each side of the lanes, passing the endless
 grass,
 Passing the yellow-spear'd wheat, every grain from its shroud in the
 dark-brown fields uprisen,
 Passing the apple-tree blows of white and pink in the orchards,
 Carrying a corpse to where it shall rest in the grave,
 Night and day journeys a coffin.

6

Coffin that passes through lanes and streets,
 Through day and night with the great cloud darkening the land,
 With the pomp of the inloop'd flags with the cities draped in black,
 With the show of the States themselves as of crape-veil'd women
 standing,
 With processions long and winding and the flambeaus of the night,
 With the countless torches lit, with the silent sea of faces and the
 unbarred heads,

With the waiting depot, the arriving coffin, and the sombre faces,
With dirges through the night, with the thousand voices rising strong
and solemn,
With all the mournful voices of the dirges pour'd around the coffin,
The dim-lit churches and the shuddering organs—where amid these
you journey,
With the tolling tolling bells' perpetual clang,
Here, coffin that slowly passes,
I give you my sprig of lilac.

The coffin that "journeys" on the train memorializes the circumstances of Lincoln's death and links his death with the coffins of the war dead and all the dead that journey endlessly through time. The image of the train expresses the collective grief of the people, but it also carries the sprig of lilac the poet places on the coffin. This one image is representative of the railroad in American poetry, because embedded deep in the consciousness of Americans, is the same communal nature of train— the same perpetual renewal and unity of all life— the same perennial bloom of the lilacs on your train and mine. As long as there exists a railroad poets will forever incorporate the image of the train into nature's regenerative cycle of life and death.

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