

WORKING ON THE CONCORD AND MERRIMACK: THOREAU'S MILLS

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ABSTRACT: *In the 1830s the Concord River flowed from the village of the same name (the heartland of American Transcendentalism) to meet the Merrimack among the textile mills of Lowell (a principal hearth of the American industrial revolution). A trip along both rivers in 1839 resulted in A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers, Henry David Thoreau's first and longest book. During the 23 years following the excursion, Thoreau made himself into a profound if selective landscape observer. Using the Week and the writings that followed, and in particular the Journal, this paper outlines several aspects of Thoreau's understanding of manufacturing including: clear insights into the effects of industry on the environment; a "Transcendentalist distaste" for industry; an enthusiasm and aptitude for mechanical invention; and a moralizing concept of work that privileges autonomy over any structural constraints. It is suggested that these radical, penetrating, and contradictory insights are all framed and limited by what we might term "moral localism."*

*"It is nothing but work, work, work"
Life Without Principle*

*"Men labor under a mistake"
Walden*

INTRODUCTION

The Concord River is less than 20 miles long but in the 1830s it linked two iconic American landscapes. In fact it flowed from the land of the mind to the land of the pocketbook. It arises at the confluence of the Sudbury and Assabet Rivers in Concord, home of Emerson, Thoreau, the Alcotts, Hawthorne, and Transcendentalism. It empties into the Merrimack in what was then a tangle of canals, locks, and mills in the first planned industrial city of America: Lowell, Massachusetts. An excursion along this route with his ill-fated brother John in 1839 is the ostensible theme of Henry Thoreau's first and longest book *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*. (John Thoreau died of tetanus in 1842 and the *Week* is in part an elegy to him). It is not too far-fetched to cast Thoreau's own short life as a voyage away from the benign certainties of Emerson's Transcendentalism to a more penetrating, empirical encounter with the world of early modernism of which manufacturing was an increasingly dynamic and problematic part. In point of fact Thoreau died a manufacturer of sorts. His father predeceased him by about three years and he took over as proprietor of his family's pencil manufactory and graphite mill (Harding, 1982). A clear but limited and deeply negative perception of

the natural and human costs of industrialization pervades his work. The purpose of this paper is a brief exploration of these perceptions.

There is consensus in the immense and varied Thoreau literature that he was a consummate though profoundly ideological *landscape* observer; that his life was devoted to the reading and writing of *places*; and that an idiosyncratic and critical reading of human *economic* activity was central to his rhetoric (e.g. Buell, 1995). These facts are unmistakable from even a casual reading of *Walden*, which is the text that forms most people's affections or aversions to Thoreau. It is curious that his work has not been examined in these terms by many geographers and discussions such as Harvey's (1996) and Lowenthal's (1976) have been brief and in some cases dismissive. Certainly Thoreau's oeuvre is a rich field for examination of symbolic and ideological construction of landscapes (e.g. Cosgrove, 1998) during the antebellum epoch of geographical transformations accompanying the beginnings of industrialization, regional specialization, and agricultural decline in New England.

The industrial revolution certainly had reached Concord in Thoreau's time, with canals and dams in the vanguard. The Concord River had been dammed at Billerica for saw and grain mills, and by

1817 the village of Concord was connected to Boston by canal. Just west of Concord were gunpowder mills at Acton and textile mills in Clinton. During the 1830s a great textile complex had grown up in the “instant city” of Lowell when the Lowell family expanded their operations west of Boston (Brown and Tager, 2000). McGregor (1997) provides a detailed account of the influx of manufacturing into Concord itself. The Fitchburg Railroad (which figures prominently in the soundscapes of *Walden*) arrived in 1843. Damon’s cloth mill on the Assabet employed about 60 people, the Loring Pail and Tub Company about 10, and the Thoreau family’s pencil company also had a handful of employees. This was the world to which Thoreau returned in 1843 after Harvard, work as a schoolteacher, as live-in handyman for Emerson, and a spell tutoring the latter’s three nephews on Staten Island. His strong mechanical aptitude led him to work on improvements in the family pencil business. He told Emerson he was so engrossed that “for weeks ... he could think of nothing else, and even in his dreams he worked at the new machines” (Harding, 1982, p. 157). He began to establish himself as a writer and lecturer and embark on the intellectual and artistic trajectory that was to take him out of Emerson’s shadow, and which has been interpreted in numerous and sometimes conflicting ways in the immense literary, philosophical, ecological, and biographical literature his work has inspired.

Thoreau indisputably moved toward a more penetrating empirical observation of landscape. A chronological reading of his *Journal* reveals an intellectual migration from the literary, classical, and moralizing observations which fill his early writings including the *Week*, to penetrating empirical ones, associated with a lifelong self-education in botanical and zoological nomenclature. He encountered Darwin’s work in the last years of his life. Late works such as *Faith in a Seed*, *The Succession of Forest Trees*, *Wild Fruits*, and others can be seen as founding documents in a more modern, ecological vision of the wild. This project was never separate from the biting economic critique that is perhaps clearest in *Walden* and *Life Without Principle*. How far Thoreau moved toward a “modern” epistemology is contested. It is an anachronism to recruit Thoreau as a positivist. Kroeber (1997) finds his “shallow ecology” to be ultimately anthropocentric and hardly a direct intellectual forebear of modern “deep

ecology.” Walls (1995) finds in him a synthetic vision inspired by Humboldt. Tauber (2001) roots all Thoreau’s work in moral (that is, value-assigning) judgments, while Taylor (1996) undertakes the seemingly unpromising project of reconciling Thoreau’s radical individualism with a vision of a new kind of political community. Others point to the fundamental solipsism in his thought, so scathingly criticized by Buranelli (1957). Exaggeration and paradox are the stock-in-trade of Thoreau’s writing, and his work deploys many registers. Critics generally agree, however, that two are crucial. One is a search for the “wild” through consummate nature writing which ostensibly describes real landscapes, while actually reorienting, fragmenting, and revalorizing them through selective seeing and subtle tropes of evasion and foregrounding (Pipkin, 2000). Second is relentless economic moralizing, seeking to reveal the inherent absurdity of his neighbors’ livelihoods, and to drive a wedge into the marriage of morals and commerce in the early republic. In the following sections I attempt to distinguish several strands in Thoreau’s thinking about the emerging manufacturing landscapes of Massachusetts.

SIGNS OF INDUSTRY

As many critics and commentators have noted, for Thoreau the task of seeing and the ancillary one of naming are *the* problems. Again and again he speaks of the difficulty of seeing, the education of the eye, and how one cannot see until mentally prepared to do so. This lifelong refinement of vision revealed all too clearly the effects of human industry on the world of the two rivers. The most obvious effect was damming associated with textile mills and grist mills. This had a profound impact on the shifting ecology of meadows and fish populations. As McGregor (1997) details, seasonal variations and natural shifts of channels had historically killed trees and produced economically valuable hay. The Algonkin name for the Concord may be translated as “Grass Ground River,” a fact Thoreau develops at length at the beginning of the *Week*. He was well aware of the flood problem in the 1830s. Near the end of his life the *Journal* for 1859 reveals a more detailed and quantitative concern for changing water levels when he worked as a surveyor for a group of farmers engaged in a lawsuit against a

grain mill owner. The dams rendered the Concord less variable and permanently flooded wide areas that had been extremely valuable for hay. Capricious and unregulated actions by the dam owners also produced intermittent and unpredictable flooding. Thoreau notes that “thousands of acres” had been flooded since the dams at Lowell were built. “Wayland ... is the greatest loser by the flood. Its farmers tell me that thousands of acres are flooded now ... where they remember ... the white honeysuckle or clover growing once ... Now there is nothing but blue-joint and sedge and cut-grass there, standing in water all the year round ... they look sadly round to their wood-lots and upland as a last resource” (*Week*, Ch. 1). Thoreau also very explicitly notes connections between the activities of corporate manufacturing and declining fish populations. “Salmon, Shad, and Alewives were formerly abundant here ... until the dam and afterward the canal at Billerica, and the factories at Lowell, put an end to their migrations...” The human consequences of these changes extended beyond the farmers: “One would like to know more of that race, now extinct, [who] professed the trade of fishermen, and even fed their townsmen creditably ... Dim visions we still get ... from the tales of our seniors sent on horseback ... with instructions to get the one bag filled with shad, the other with alewives.” Other changes wrought by industry are noted. Thus the Pawtucket dam at Lowell had geomorphic consequences on the river channel (“in the banks are being abraded and the river filled up”) and the water is being warmed (“Shad are still taken in ... the Concord River at Lowell, where they are said to be a month earlier than the Merrimack shad, on account of the warmth of the water”) (*Week*, Ch. 2).

Two tropes recur in Thoreau’s treatment of these effects: I will term them the *elegiac* and the *naturalizing*. The *elegiac* voice mourns the fate of the Concord fish, but in a light tone, regretful rather than tragic: “whole migrating nations, full of instinct ... turned adrift, and perchance [know] not where men do not dwell, where there are not factories, in these days.” The commercial virtue of enterprise that built the factories is rhetorically applied to the remnants: “it is thought that a few more enterprising shad may still occasionally be seen.” The recourse for the fish is to wait for a remedy in deep time: “Perchance, after a few thousands of years ... nature will have leveled the Billerica dam, and the Lowell factories, and the Grass-ground River run clear again,

to be explored by new migratory shoals” (*Week*, Ch. 2). This is a muted tone, without the scathing edge Thoreau applies to incompetent farmers and misguided townsmen. Specifically, it obscures to the point of invisibility the responsibility of the dam owners. I will return to this “moral attenuation” below. The *naturalizing* trope crosses and recrosses the line between the nature and the visible consequences of industry. In the *Journal* of May 6, 1859 vast numbers of gnats on the ground are casually read as industrial waste: “I then discovered that what I had mistaken for some black dye on the wet shore was the bodies of those that were drowned and washed up, blackening the shore.” Likewise the teasel, an alien plant used in textile carding, is associated with factories, but in such a way that nature prevails: “I frequently see the heads of teasel, called fuller’s thistle, floating on our river, having come from factories above, and thus the factories which use it may distribute its seeds by means of the streams which turn their machinery” (*Journal*, Nov. 17, 1860).

SITES AND SOUNDS

The effects of industry -- changes in the river, pollutants of various kinds -- were plain to see. The actual sites of industry, factories and mills, enter only quite rarely into Thoreau’s public texts. Most often they do so aurally; the associated metaphors of sound bring home to us the quietness of the preindustrial world. Noise and industry are firmly linked in metaphor: “If you stand perfectly still anywhere in the outskirts of the town and listen, stilling the almost incessant hum of your own personal factory ...” (*Journal*, March 4, 1859). Factories make themselves heard poetically and indirectly even in disastrous circumstances, as when Thoreau is woken “by the peep of robins ... aroused by a fire at the pail-factory about two miles west” (*Journal*, May 17, 1855). There was a more brutal sound when a powder mill in Acton exploded (*Journal*, Jan. 6, 1853). A contrast is often drawn between the noises of nature and those of industry, “undulations of celestial music, instead of factory bells” (*Walden*, Ch. 2). The sounds are heard, but the eye is averted. The *Week*, in particular, contains many such evasions. For example in Ch. 6 the brothers pass “the artificial falls where the canals of

the Manchester Manufacturing Company discharge themselves into the Merrimack” coming to the “the Amoskeag Falls ... But we did not tarry to examine them minutely, making haste to get past the village here collected, and out of hearing of the hammer which was laying the foundation of another Lowell.” Germic (2000), basing his argument principally on the *Week*, notes and explores this Transcendentalist disdain for industry. He goes on to implicate Thoreau in the ideological and cultural project of “American exceptionalism” – the illusion that industrial labor conflicts somehow never crossed the Atlantic. In their entirety, Thoreau’s works tell a more complex story. But his most self-consciously shaped works, namely the public genres of publications and lectures, unquestionably avoid both description and direct criticism of the workings of manufacturing, along with accurate accounts of the labor relation itself. The two million words of the *Journal* were written in a much less self-conscious voice. They belie the rhetorical evasions and reveal the ubiquity of factories even in the small parochial world of Concord. Most of Thoreau’s texts are available in searchable electronic form. Allowing for the different size of each corpus, the word “factory” occurs nine times more frequently in the last six years of the *Journal* than in all the published works and lectures combined. Clearly, as Germic suggests, strong filtering was in play as the public works were shaped. The *Journal* also reveals many everyday encounters with factory workers. Thoreau sometimes employed them as assistants in surveying. For example, one May day he notes that his assistants “being accustomed to work indoors in the factory, are quite overcome by this sudden heat” (*Journal*, May 6, 1859).

INSIDE THE MILL

Thoreau distinguished himself from Emerson and from fellow Transcendentalist disciples such as Bronson Alcott by his remarkable practicality and handiness. Emerson relied on him for odd jobs and much later Edward Emerson (1917) wrote a memoir of his recollections of Thoreau, which provides some balance to the self-mythologizing of Thoreau’s literary persona. E. Emerson outlines Thoreau’s improvements in the family graphite mill and pencil works, including the addition of a special

clay to the graphite to produce what were renown as the finest American pencils of the time, a drilling machine for inserting the lead, and an air-blown separator to collect fine graphite powder. Thoreau puts his own practicality as handyman and surveyor in the foreground in *Walden*, most obviously of course, as a cabin-builder.

An enthusiasm for the mechanical and an unfeigned admiration for the inventions of industry surface quite often in the *Journal*. One such entry records a visit into a heart of the ongoing revolution in production technology and gender roles: a large textile mill staffed by “working girls.” On January 1, 1851 Thoreau had given a poorly attended lecture on Cape Cod in Clinton, a few miles west of Concord on the Nashua river (Dean, 2004). The sponsor was the Bigelow Mechanics Institute, carrying forward the mission of paternalism typical of labor relations in manufacturing before they turned ugly in the 1850s. The next day Thoreau visited the gingham mill, which had been founded in 1843. The Bigelow fortune was based on power looms and cotton, and had expanded into specialized textiles including counterpanes, lace, tweed, carpets, and gingham. The journal entry is one of unqualified enthusiasm. The author of *A Plea for John Brown* and *On Slavery in Massachusetts* makes no comment on the provenance of the cotton. He records enthusiasm for the Bigelows’ inventions. He visits pattern rooms and looms and is extremely impressed by the machinery and by the quality control exercised by the mill girls, sisters of the regimented, chaperoned, barracked and much-studied workforce of Lowell. They are assimilated unproblematically into the technical triumph: “I am stuck by the fact that no work has been shirked ... Every thread has been counted ... The operator has succeeded only by patience, perseverance, and fidelity” (*Journal*, Jan. 2, 1851). A similar visit to give a lecture near Worcester elicited a journal entry describing with similar knowledgeable enthusiasm a wire rolling and drawing mill. A revealing comment by the mill owner which patronizes and heroizes the workers is recorded at face value: “Washburn said the workmen were like sailors; their work was exciting and they drank more spirit than other laborers. In hot weather would sometimes drink two quarts of water an hour and sweat as much” (*Journal*, Jan. 5, 1855). At least for humorous effect, and to highlight his manual skill, Thoreau is capable of imagining himself in a

factory: "A man once applied to me to go into a factory, stating conditions and wages, observing that I succeeded in shutting the window of a railroad car in which we were traveling, when the other passengers had failed" (*Week*, Ch. 7).

WORKING

Work was a matter Thoreau took very seriously in his own life and was a perennial source of metaphor and social criticism. The myth that Thoreau was a shiftless sponger on his family is thoroughly exploded by Harding (1982) who records significant cash flow in the opposite direction. Thoreau worked at various kinds of day labor and was a sought after surveyor, while his relentless industry in writing is evident in the millions of words of his output. An effort rightly to define work is a major part of the project of *Walden* and throughout Thoreau's public oeuvre. He makes a distinction between two kinds of effort which is strongly informed by Transcendentalist aversion to cities, to industrialism, and indeed to any critical examination of the mechanics of everyday life. Rightly understood work is a moral project. In this sense, metaphors of labor are frequently applied to writing itself. "He will not idly dance at his work who has wood to cut and cord before nightfall ... but every stroke will be husbanded ... and so will the strokes of that scholar's pen. The scholar may be sure that he writes the tougher truth for the calluses on his palms" (*Week*, Ch. 3). A contrasting understanding of work is as a necessary evil, "getting a living." This is the Thoreau of: "I hate the present modes of living and getting a living. Farming and shopkeeping and working at a trade or profession are all odious to me" (*Journal*, Nov. 5, 1855). Real -- moral -- work requires amplitude and time: "the truly efficient laborer will not crowd his day with work, but will saunter to his task surrounded by a wide halo of ease and leisure, and then do but what he loves best" (*Week*, Ch. 3). Meanwhile, getting a living is presented either as easy or a waste of time. Feeding oneself is a marginal business, subsidiary to the moral work of his life. "Why should we live with such hurry and waste of life? We are determined to be starved before we are hungry" (*Walden*, Ch. 2). A principal ideological project of *Walden* is to demonstrate how little work -- hoeing of bean fields,

occasional day labor, surveying, etc.—is truly needed to live. The contrast between Thoreau's high "moral work" and his light labor of subsistence, each with their "halo" of contemplative leisure, compared with the profitless and misguided drudgery of others pervades his public works and also a good deal of the *Journal*. The latter contains occasional glimpses of another more realistic view, as when Thoreau has been surveying and "a vulgar necessity dragged me along round the bounds of the farm, to hear only the stale answers of my chain-man shouted back at me" (*Journal*, Feb. 11, 1853).

There is no doubt that this contradictory and radical view strongly colors Thoreau's assessment of commerce in general and manufacturing in particular. Diggins (1972) discusses it at length, taking issue with attempts in the 1960s to equate Thoreau's view with the Marxist idea of alienation. It is even more radical, Diggins suggests, in that it thoroughly marginalizes work in a "sauntering," contemplative, minimalist, account of getting a living. Marx places production at the center of life and seeks to reclaim it for the alienated worker. Free, productive labor objectifies and affirms the life of the individual, validating itself *socially* by satisfying needs of others and *individually* by the freely given recompense the worker receives. Thus, for Marx, work confirms and realizes the worker's human and social natures (Diggins, p. 577). Thoreau never pays much attention to work and its products as social transactions. His attitude to supplying a demand is implicit in an often-cited passage of *Walden*. Indians visiting Concord have failed to sell their woven baskets. Thoreau observes that he, too,

had woven a kind of basket of a delicate texture, but I had not made it worth any one's while to buy them. Yet not the less... did I think it worth my while to weave them, and instead of studying how to make it worth men's while to buy my baskets, I studied rather how to avoid the necessity of selling them (*Walden*, Ch. 1)

This passage is usually read as sardonic commentary on the failure of the earlier book, the *Week*, to find a market. Nevertheless, the remark annihilates any social understanding of needs and useful production. Thoreau does not admit that the consumer of his labor may constrain its results:

As for my own business, even that kind of surveying which I could do with most satisfaction my employers do not want. They would prefer that I should do my work coarsely and not too well ... When I observe that there are different ways of surveying, my employer commonly asks which will give him the most land, not which is most correct
(*Life Without Principle*)

Despite the evasions of the public texts, Thoreau was well aware of the forms work took in the wage labor of manufacturing. His specific objection to it exactly echoes Emerson's own argument. Industrial work's repetitious quality is dehumanizing, taking value away from the worker, rather than adding it to the product. Emerson has it that: "There is in each of these works an act of invention ... that act or step is the spiritual act; all the rest is mere repetition of the same a thousand times. And I will not be deceived into admiring the routine of handicrafts and mechanics, how splendid soever the result" (1841). Speaking of a bucket factory that he was very familiar with Thoreau tells us: "They may make equally good pails, and cheaper as well as faster, at the pail-factory ... but that interests me less, because the man is turned partly into a machine there himself ... You come away from the great factory saddened, as if the chief end of man were to make pails" (*Journal*, Oct. 19, 1858). He finds the intrinsically communal nature of mill work objectionable, too. Of the mill girls he writes: "Consider the girls in a factory, - never alone, hardly in their dreams" (*Walden*, Ch. 5).

MORAL LOCALISM

In a writer as rich in rhetorical resources and as enamored of paradox as Thoreau it is hardly surprising to find a variety of potentially contradictory views in his texts. We have noted four elements in his symbolical, rhetorical, and ideological construction of early New England industry. Two of the elements clearly bear the marks of Transcendentalism. One is the aversion to the actual sites of industry -- the factories and mills -- typically avoided in the public texts, or reduced to distant sounds. This is the evasion noted by Germic. The second is the thorough moralizing of work, with the implied distinction between the spiritualized effort of seeing, making, and thinking, and mere

"getting a living" which is diminished (as easy) or dismissed (as misguided). Thoreau takes this view further, perhaps, than even Emerson had. Two other elements seem more personal to him. One is the profound observation of nature, increasingly informed by taxonomic vocabulary, that dominates the later years of Thoreau's *Journals* and informs modern assessments of him as a proto-ecologist. This refined and penetrating vision revealed very clearly the scope of manufacturing's impact: lost hay, changed farmer's lives, decimated fish populations, warmed water, changes in river channels, and pollution in the form of dyes and alien species. Finally, particularly in his private writings, Thoreau inscribed his own enthusiasm for machinery, his keen interest in the workings of mills, dams, and looms, his own inventive capacity in the family business, and his general manual skills.

David Harvey, in a brief assessment of the "famous and influential exploration of *Walden*," suggests that Thoreau's ecological view is constrained by geographic scale, yielding only "limited natural knowledge embedded in ecological processes operating at a small scale" which is "insufficient to understand broader socio-ecological processes ... that cannot be directly experienced and which are therefore outside of phenomenological reach" (Harvey, 1996, 303). This judgment is, of course, based on Thoreau's most carefully contrived and in some ways most evasive text which takes a stance of aggressive rhetorical localism, insisting that everything worth knowing can be learned by "much traveling in Concord." A close reading of Thoreau's whole oeuvre suggests a profound intellectual connection with and knowledge of the broader world (as explored in Christie, 1965). In fact books such as the *Maine Woods* and *Cape Cod*, and even more the late writings such as *Wild Fruits* and *Faith in a Seed*, show a dawning understanding of the interplay between the local and the non-local (e.g. in the form of invasive plant species), particularly after Thoreau's encounter with Darwinism (Pipkin, 2000). I would like to suggest that the seemingly diverse elements of Thoreau's perception of manufacturing and its environmental and human consequences are shaped by a localism of a different kind.

How are we to reconcile Thoreau's clear understanding of the effects of industry on the landscape with his habit of defusing criticism in naturalizing and elegiac tropes? Thus mill-owners

are misguided in enslaving themselves to false values and “low ends,” but are not held directly responsible for millions of dead fish, miles of flooded meadow, and dozens of lost livelihoods. They are never subject to the scathing *ad hominem* criticism Thoreau reserves for the local, immediate actions of farmers and loggers. And given his perception of the tedium, repetition and dehumanizing nature of wage labor, why is the relation itself never criticized in terms that are true to the necessity, the lack of choice, and the constraints upon “girls” in the mills and factory labor in general? If anything laborers themselves are implicitly criticized for their acquiescence. Thoreau insists, in his rhetoric at least, on their ability to walk away from uncongenial labor. Here is revealed Thoreau’s absolute insistence on moral autonomy as a condition of action -- a myth that pervades his thought; a “solipsistic” or perhaps even “narcissistic” moral universe in which “protection of his autonomy was the crucial and abiding parameter of moral action” (Tauber, 2000, 163). Intent and its outcomes are all. This leads to moral attenuation of the indirect and unforeseen consequences of actions, and a reluctance to acknowledge the desperate constraints and compulsions of laboring lives, or the social nature and purposes of even repetitive labor. This is what I would term *moral localism*.

To some extent this moralizing focus on intention and assumed autonomy was a uniform characteristic of mid-century thought. So Boyer (1978) suggests in his study of the moral order of nineteenth-century urbanism. It was an intellectual world in which what we would recognize as structural concerns had little meaning. Yet many of Thoreau’s near contemporaries dealt with manufacturing differently, not least Marx, who placed work under structural constraints and limits of consciousness which tyrannized workers in ways that Thoreau’s thought could not admit. Far closer to Thoreau in spirit was John Ruskin. He, too, sanctified the creative making of craftspeople and vehemently opposed mass production and “engine-turned precision” (Lang, 1999, p. 12). Ruskin attempted experimentally and unsuccessfully what Thoreau did very well, including work as a day laborer and exercise of what Ruskin called the “practical crafts” such a carpentry and brick-laying (Lang, p. 13). Yet Ruskin, like Marx and unlike Thoreau, thought systematically about larger social structures, envisioning a social order in which

unlimited private enterprise would coexist with “authoritative” and “exemplary” government manufactories (Lang, p. 15). Ruskin’s is a paternalistic vision; Thoreau’s is a much more democratic one. In his complete and consistent individualism Thoreau values autonomous invention and moral work, shuns the sites of repetitive labor, and is reluctant to assign culpability for the clearly visible but unintended environmental consequences of industry. The four strands of his thought described above are consistent in the light of this attitude -- an attitude extreme even by the standards of nineteenth century moralizing individualism. It is quite alien to our predilections, first, to trace responsibility for environmental and human damage through remote chains of effects and, second, to dissolve intentionality into a structural world of unacknowledged conditions and unintended consequences.

The long trends of economic change in New England confounded all efforts to foresee consequences. The future of manufacturing there would have surprised Thoreau and most of his contemporaries. Today, in the face of economic restructuring, manufacturing decline, and the unstoppable service economy, the mills and company boarding houses of Lowell have become museums and restaurants, and the preserved canal complex beckons tourists to the “Venice of America.” But immediately following Thoreau’s death the growth of manufacturing seemed equally unstoppable, and it had a paradoxical result for the domesticated landscapes he loved and apotheosized as the “the wild.” The urbanization and regional specialization associated with industry had the effect documented by Foster (1999) in *Thoreau’s Country* -- more than a century of agricultural decline and abandonment. This produced the contemporary world of rural New England, a landscape up to 60% wooded, with vastly more trees and deer than Thoreau could ever have seen in Massachusetts. Manufacturing, in fact, was to transform New England into something much more like Thoreau’s ideal -- local and tame though it was -- of “Wilderness.”

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In 1839, Thoreau saw the damage that dams were doing to fish on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers. On this Thoreau bicentennial, most of the waterfront mills that drove the Industrial Revolution are shuttered or have been converted to other uses. More than two centuries after Thoreau first witnessed the Industrial Revolution begin to strangle our rivers, the shad's redress should be apparent: the removal of the dams that once powered a now completed chapter of American history. Advertisement. Continue reading the main story. View of Lowell, Massachusetts at the confluence of the Merrimack and Concord rivers, with a row of textile mills or factories mainly along the Merrimack River . [Place not identified: publisher not identified, between 1840 and 1860] Photograph. Retrieved from the Library of Congress, . More Photos, Prints, Drawings like this. Photo, Print, Drawing. Print shows view of a salt works on the Merrimack River, near Newburyport, Massachusetts, with large meadow in the foreground. Contributor: Aitken, Robert. Date: 1776. Contributor: Dole, Nathan Haskell - Thoreau, Henry David - Oliver Wendell Holmes Collection (Library of Congress). Date: 1900. Book/Printed Material. A week on the Concord and Merrimack rivers. Also available in digital form. Thoreau's A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers chronicled an 1839 journey with his brother that eventually inspired Leff to follow the same route. In 2004, with a son, a girlfriend, and a buddy for company in separate segments, Leff strove to see more than meets the eye, which first notices layers of the industrialization and suburbanization that have lined the riverbanks since Thoreau's day. The Thoreaus began their adventure in their hometown of Concord, Massachusetts, where they put in to the Concord River. It's a concept that works, but is also appropriate in a world where traveling to the far reaches to find the unusual is having negative consequences on the environment. In this book we learn local travel can be as interesting as the far away.