Planned Obsolescence, Nature and the Self in American Literature

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In the 1980s, as it became increasingly apparent that humanity had lefts its mark on every inch of the surface of the earth and altered its atmosphere, the idea of a strictly natural world was obsolete and needed to be reimagined. As a result, American environmentalist Bill McKibben claimed in his essay *The End of Nature* published in 1989 that nature had ended 'both as a biophysical entity and as a meaningful concept', that our world had become 'postnatural'.[1] This radical shift is the consequence of the evolution of the American representation of the natural world, which was first discovered and used to construct an American identity, then appropriated and finally obsolete if not destroyed.

The original state of the American natural landscape was depicted as divine. Indeed, when Columbus described what he had seen in what he thought to be the Indies, he used religious terms such as 'heavens' or 'Paradise' and was convinced that he was where 'Our Lord placed the Tree of Life'.[2] Indeed, Columbus initiated the belief that America was a paradise on earth, the 'Garden of Eden restored' after Adam and Eve's original sin.[3] Later, the eighteenth-century European settlers retrieved this Edenic idea of nature since they viewed North America, as Donald Worster explains, as a 'complete, eternal, and morally perfect order', as the example of the 'divine creation as perfectly intact as it was at the beginning of time'.[4] Therefore, these immigrants, who gradually began to consider themselves as more

[1] Leo Marx, 'The Idea of Nature in America', *Daedalus*, Vol. 137, No. 2 (Spring 2008), p. 18.
[2] Richard Gray, *A History of American Literature* (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), p. 3.
[3] Donald Worster, *The Wealth of Nature: Environmental History and the Ecological Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 9.
[4] ibid., p. 10.

American than European, traded the old past they left in Europe for this unique, untouched and presumably sacred nature in order to search for a new identity, for the American self.

The American process of self-discovery thus started as connected with the natural world, which was depicted as sublime, inspiring either positive feelings of wonder that awakens the mind or feelings of awe inspiring a form of respect merged with the fear of the divine. For example, in his *Travels*, the botanist William Bartram describes American wild plains as having 'a pleasing effect, rousing the faculties of the mind, awakening the imagination by its sublimity, and arresting every active, inquisitive idea, by the variety of the scenery, and the solemn symphony of the steady Western breezes'.[5] On the other hand, the divine may also be shown as dreadful in sublime aesthetics since, for example, Irish philosopher Edmund Burke (1729-97) defined the sublime as 'associated with fear, gloom and majesty'.[6] In *Travels*, Bartram also describes nature with frightening terms, which is obvious in the passage about a 'dreadful battle' between a 'voracious trout' and a 'greedy alligator' in which adjectives such as 'terrific', 'horrid' or 'dreadful' stress the gloomy aspect of the events. In addition, the earthquake and the 'clouds of smoke issue from' the alligator's 'nostrils' suggest an incident that is almost apocalyptic and perhaps even prophetic as the 'greedy' animal could be interpreted as a powerful train releasing smoke and making the earth tremble, which would be a metaphor of the development of industrialism.

However, although the industrial development in America was incredibly rapid, this may not have been the cause of a radical shift in the American conception of the natural world. In his famous memoir *Walden* (1854), Henry David Thoreau does not reject the intrusion of the machine, which symbolises industrialism, in the American landscape. He is more concerned by the new market economy that was related to the rising of industrialism, meaning capitalism, commercialism and materialism. The young transcendentalist claims that

[5] William Bartram, *Travels of William Bartram* (New York: Dover Publications, 2003), p. 155.
[6] Barbara Novak, 'American Landscape: Changing Concepts of the Sublime', *The American Art Journal*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (Spring 1972), p. 36.

most of civilised people are 'all poor in respect to a thousand savage comforts, though surrounded by luxuries'.[7] In fact, he condemns comfort since, instead of improving man's life, it imprisons him in 'modern house[s]', in which he cannot be satisfied with the 'necessary of life' but becomes exclusively interested in collecting 'gross necessaries'.[8] Consequently, Thoreau advocates for a spiritual process of self-realisation through a transcendental experience in sublime nature. In addition, in *Walden*, he betrays an attempt to reconcile the transcendentalist pole with the empirical pole as he accounts for a multi-sensorial experience of natural facts that would allow the individual to grow spiritually. The process of self-realisation is therefore closely connected with the natural landscape, in which mankind does not appropriate or invade but contemplates and respects the natural world. He offers an alternative to his mentor Ralph Waldo Emerson's representation of nature as Emerson, in his essay *Self-Reliance*, opts for an aggressive and self-centred form of optimism promoting man's boundless potentialities as he experiences nature. This particular essay was criticised by other transcendentalist authors and philosophers such as Elizabeth Peabody who condemns its "egotheism" as it only rejects man's conceptions of God to put the individual on a pedestal.[9] Besides Emerson, the transcendentalist poet Walt Whitman also conveys through his poetic language a form of egotism and self-centredness in his famous epic poem 'Song of Myself'. Indeed, the predominance of the American self as illustrated by the repetitions of "I", "myself", "me", somehow obscures the transcendentalist conception of nature as a whole in which everything is interconnected. As exemplified by Emerson's and Whitman's individualism, the importance of self-realisation through the contemplation of the sublime and divine natural landscape was being reduced to the worship of the divine American—or, more largely, the human—self.

[7] Thoreau, *Walden*, p. 27.
[8] ibid., p. 28.
[9] Gura, *American Transcendentalism*, p. 216.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the American natural landscape began to be used and transformed for the sake of economic growth, which also had disastrous effects on the environment and therefore eventually on human health. As a matter of fact, in cities, 'slums festered in polluted air', 'tenements were overrun with vermin and prone to fire and disease', and 'odors, bad water and crowding' were proliferating. The expansion of civilization and industrialisation, the changing landscape was perhaps best represented in popular American works of fiction such as in Owen Wister's novel *The Virginian: A Horseman of the Plains* or in Gene Stratton-Porter's novel *The Girl of the Limberlost*. People converted the remaining natural landscape into a place for self-recovery from the pressure caused by the life in the city. A way back to the wrong nature as William Cronon called it, since nature was not preserved for its own sake but for what it had to offer to the welfare of the human self. Even the delimitation of national parks could be regarded as a misguided conservationist action, as it did not exactly "saved" the natural landscape but rather, as Alison Byerly suggests, transformed the 'sublime landscape into a series of picturesque scenes', thus aestheticizing the landscape to permit 'the viewer to define and control the scene' and to consider it as an 'object of artistic consumption'. [10]

Furthermore, as Rachel Carson demonstrated in her environmental book *Silent Spring*, progress had a significantly harmful impact on the environment and on human health. But the pesticides were not the only responsible party. Indeed, Thoreau predicted that the American economic system would alienate mankind from the natural world, which would eventually become obsessed by comfort, by the accumulation of meaningless luxuries, of wealth and manufactured products. And, in our postmodern world, these predictions could rightfully be perceived as realistic. In his famous essay entitled 'Postmodernism, Or the Cultural Logic of

[10] Alison Byerly, 'The Use of Landscape: The Picturesque Aesthetic and the National Park System', Cheryll Glotfelty & Harold Fromm (eds) *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1996), p. 53.

Late Capitalism' published in 1984, Frederic Jameson related the American capitalist economic system to the concepts of progress, Postmodernism and postmodern sublime and claimed that 'Postmodernism is what you have when the modernization process is complete and nature is gone for good', replaced by a 'more fully human world than the older one' in which '"culture" has become a veritable "second nature"'.[11] The obsolescence of nature was a consequence of progress, of the modernization of landscape, which caused at the same time the fragmentation and the obsolescence of the American self.

In Don DeLillo's novel *White Noise*, the characters are part of a community of consumers who realise collectively their selves through the act of consuming and wasting in the postmodern landscape. For example, as opposed to Thoreau's self-realisation in sublime nature, the protagonist Jack Gladney is part of a communal experience in a postmodern place, which is the mall. The mall barely includes 'gardens and promenades'; Jack thus does not relate to the 'sounds' of the natural elements but to the 'roar that echoed and swirled through the vast gallery', 'the noises from the tiers' or 'the sound of people eating', which lead him to identify himself as a member of this human community of consumers. In addition, when Jack's daughter Steffie 'murmur[s]' the brand of 'Toyota Celica' in her sleep, he explains that when he 'realized this was the name of an automobile', 'the truth only amazed [him] more' and describes the 'utterance' as 'beautiful and mysterious', the product of a 'child's brain noise' that 'struck [him] with the impact of a moment of splendid transcendence'.[12] While the transcendentalists could experience a state of oneness in sublime nature, Jack's 'moment of splendid transcendence' occurs in a context where manufactured products are constantly bought and consumed, worshipped as divine and eventually become part of the consumer's self. In addition, they are closely related to "computer-generated" brands and to the realm of simulation and cultural representation, to the "universally pronounceable". Nonetheless, the

[11] Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, Or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), p. vii.
[12] Don DeLillo *White Noise* (London: Picador, 2011), pp. 180-81.

self is not only fragmented as it is deprived of its essence, of its subjectivity, but it is also wasted.

When Jack is looking through his family's garbage, he is almost violating their privacy and discovering their "deepest nature". As Cynthia Deitering mentions, the protagonist describes his relatives' 'selves as idiosyncratic producers of waste' so that 'the familiar notion of finding one's identity in commodity products is transformed into the notion of finding one's identity not in the commodities themselves but in their configuration as waste products'.[13]

Moreover, besides defining their selves, toxicity also works differently in DeLillo's novel. Indeed, the Airborne Toxic Event, this chemical spill from a rail car that releases a black noxious cloud over Jack's home region, is a reminder of the characters' vulnerability. In other words, in the postmodern landscape, consumers have the illusion of being safe since, through the act of consuming and wasting, they tend to forget their vulnerability, which is also illustrated by the passage describing the community taking part into the "human buzz of a vivid and happy transaction". However, the absence of death is another simulation created by postmodern society, which Laura Barrett summarises as 'our illusion that we can control everything, including death', that we can plan our obsolescence, our death, just like we plan the death of commercial products.

One final extract would be the denouement of DeLillo's story, this scene in the supermarket during which humans 'walk in a fragmented trance, stop and go' as 'clusters of well-dressed figures frozen in the aisles, trying to figure out the pattern' but 'in the end, it does[ ] [not] matter what they see or think they see' since '[t]he terminals are equipped with holographic scanners, which decode the binary secret of every item'.[14] Human perception is

[13] Cynthia Deitering, 'The Postnatural Novel: Toxic Consciousness in Fiction of the 1980s', Cheryll Glotfelty & Harold Fromm (eds) *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1996), p. 198.
[14] DeLillo, *White Noise*, pp. 374-375.

here replaced by technology, by the ‘holographic scanners’ that ‘decode the secret of every item’ and allow man to know about every product and even about every human self, as if individuals were equipped with a QR code. The final step of postmodern self-realisation therefore happens through the waste of the product they bought and consumed, as if the self was just a frozen figure waiting on being wasted.

In conclusion, American literature displays that the evolution of the representation of the natural world occurred in parallel with the deterioration of the American—or human—self. By believing that they could control their environment, humans contaminated and ultimately destroyed both their environment and any original idea of selfhood or subjectivity. Through their appropriation and overexploitation of the landscape, they did not only plan the obsolescence of commercial products but also of nature and, consequently, of themselves. Planned obsolescence was and is not a means of salvation for the American people, as Bernard London thought, but a means to a wasted end.

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