

STILL
the
NEW
WORLD

AMERICAN LITERATURE IN A
CULTURE OF CREATIVE DESTRUCTION

PHILIP FISHER

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OF CREATIVE DESTRUCTION



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Introduction

Painting a Fence in America: Tom Sawyer Starts a New but Temporary Business

Of all American literature the scene that stays longest in many readers' minds is the one in which Tom Sawyer paints Aunt Sally's fence. Tom himself does only a few brush strokes before he enterprisingly enlists the neighborhood boys passing by. They compete to take turns at a task that only a short time earlier would have seemed as bad a way to spend time as breaking rocks in a juvenile prison. They fall under the spell of Tom's way of seeing the adventure and pay him for the privilege of participating. Tom has started a small business where none had existed a day before. One day later the enterprise has shut down. Improvised and temporary, it has done its job by letting Tom redesign his own, once onerous chore.

Mark Twain's scene could be called a young person's guide to the American orchestra. If we had the national wit to do so, it would have been passed out in translation to every newly arrived settler at Ellis Island, the Mexican border, and the major coastal airports. Since *Tom Sawyer* is one of the first books read out loud to a child in the United States, the scene does reach the ears of many of the nation's newly arrived internal settlers, the children of the next generation who are, in America, wise to take their clues from their

fellow immigrants rather than from their parents, who might be called, in settler language, the old-timers. The wisdom of old-timers is usually out of date as soon as its lessons have been learned.

Like his contemporary Leo Tolstoy, who wrote a set of simple parables, among them "How Much Land Does a Man Need?" in an attempt to reach into every corner of European society with his message, Twain in his sly and quick-witted style created, in Tom Sawyer's fence-painting, an almost biblical parable for the economic mind in an as-yet half-finished culture. Twain knew, as did Ralph Waldo Emerson, that there are different truths when we know ourselves to be late in time, near the completion of the world (or of our own country), ready to fit a few last details somehow onto a crowded page, and when, being near the beginning of time, we find ourselves still studying a sketch of what might someday be realized, but only if we have the freedom and the power to grasp the consequences of being truly in a still new world. Both Emerson and Twain thought that it was still the new world, still early in time and history, still fresh, and that America needed to be taken as a model because with a still lightly marked out and occupied vast land, it could remind even the old world that it too was lightly sketched on a young planet.

At first it might seem that Emerson and Twain should be seen as the philosophers of a newness based uniquely on the thin population of an enormous land, the philosophers of cheap land and careless uses, the philosophers of moving on and using up. If so, the thickening of population, the end of free or nearly free land, the marking out of major cities, the fixing of rules and paths within the professions and occupations would quickly have changed the nation into yet one more old world with the cement of regulations and the depression of the young face to face with a completely owned and crowded social space. They might have been, like Frederick Jackson Turner with his frontier hypothesis, pessimists, but in disguise, because the very conditions of newness they celebrated would have to be acknowledged to be rapidly evaporating as the sketch was progressively filled in. The heady philosophy of Emerson and Twain would turn out to be true only for the initial settler phase, a false fire that served its uses and then vanished under settled conditions that would be permanent and solid, if unexciting.

Introduction

Intellectuals in our own century, drawing on the nineteenth-century lines traced in the sand by Turner, Twain, and Emerson, were always more comfortable with the nostalgic pessimism of Turner than they were with the fresh buoyancy of Emerson or the zest of the young Mark Twain. To consider the frontier decisive at just that moment when the 1890 census had declared that the frontier was closed and the unique frontier experience ended, along with the frontier's ability to instill democratic habits of self-reliance and self-organized society, turned out to appeal to many twentieth-century intellectuals, who seem always to prefer the description of unavailable conditions, those of a past already vanished or a future remote in a utopian distance.

We might ask if Emerson and Twain had been saved from the same depressing encounter with an already filled world only by the temporary near-emptiness of the American map. The answer, I think, is a resounding No. I want to argue that a merely temporarily unfinished newness made it possible to sketch the philosophy for a new, permanently unsettled rhythm of creation and destruction. With the onset of a richly inventive modern technology that presumed destructive restlessness, along with an economy that was committed to giving free rein to that destructive restlessness, the possibility opened up that in American culture the initial, unfinished newness would define the terms of a more permanent newness guaranteed by the one genuine permanent revolution, that of competitive technological capitalism.

America became a culture willing to pay the deep costs of obsolescence and ghost towns as part of what might be called the bargain of invention. The airplanes that crisscross the skies in America today fly over tens of thousands of miles of rusting and little-used railroad tracks. Some of the tracks themselves have been covered with asphalt to make recreational trails for bicyclists and weekend hikers.

The engines of the trains that used to ride those tracks have been turned into scrap iron. One century earlier those very locomotives had ended the useful life of the mighty Mississippi steamboats that seemed like a fantasy of power and modernity in Mark Twain's youth, but had already become obsolete by his adult years. The canals in America have refilled with dirt. The wharves, along with

the towns that grew up because of those wharves and the dirt roads that led to the towns, are all grassed over as surely as graves. The farms of New England existed briefly on the site of what had been forests, but new forests have now, two hundred years later, once again replaced those farms. When the telegraph came, it buried the pony express along with the horses and riders who had once made up the pony express. A century later, geosynchronous satellites, cellular phones, computers, and the Internet have begun to eat away at the wired telephone system that had, in its time, buried the Morse code, the key operators, and the wired system of the great Western Union Telegraph monopoly.

All cultures met this ever renewed technological revolution of the past century and a half with a mixture of embrace and resistance. The structural instability that accompanied rapid technological change led in many societies to ever stronger resistance and nostalgia. Uniquely, in the culture of the United States there has been for the whole of the past hundred and fifty years a clear stake in newness itself that overwhelmed the party of nostalgia, delay, opposition, and elegiac celebration of a vanishing or vanished past in favor of a rush to the future.

The nineteenth century witnessed many land rushes in which settlers massed at the borders of newly opened territories. The gold rush to California and Nevada around 1850 no less than the rush to the Internet in the 1990s can be taken as sample instances of the energy that speeds up the possibility of change, if not the actual change itself. Workers rushed into Pittsburgh between 1880 and 1910 to work in the mills before there were houses for them to live in. A mere sixty years later, the forty miles of steel mills stretched out along the banks of the rivers were turned to scrap and leveled between 1970 and 1990, the ground being left cleared and empty. No legal or government policies encouraged or sped up the rush to build. No organized social policy resisted the rush to destroy the hundred-year tradition of steel-making in Pittsburgh. Once under way, the rush to build or to level accelerated as though with a hunger for the goal no matter what the goal.

The acceleration of frame-making and frame-breaking because of technology, occurring within a country still thinly settled, offered a

unique line of sight for philosophical reflection, and created ideas and parables for the explanation or imagination of this new condition. By a remarkable gift of timing, the philosophy suited to this condition, and therefore seemingly doomed slightly later by the short-lived process of sketch and settlement that had been linked to the physical newness of the United States with its as-yet unpopulated and profoundly unsettled early conditions, turned out to make a bold, even better, fit with that restlessly accelerated technological transformation which, with its permanently unsettled conditions, would guarantee that, in effect, it would always be a new world.

The young would always find themselves in a cultural landscape unknown to their grandfathers, piloting themselves by rules and skills that baffled those who were supposed to pass on wisdom and skill to them, but who had found late in life that the hand tools to which their muscles were tuned, and on which their skills were honed, were all gone, and the skills that went with them were obsolete in a land of power drills, electric nail guns, and composite materials used in new ways. Each generation of carpenters can teach its own sons and daughters less and less. Often it is the old who must go to school to the young, the grandfather asking the fourteen-year-old how to use the portable telephone, the satellite television, the new microwave oven. The word "pilot" itself would shift in the shifting frame and come to refer to aviators rather than Mississippi steamboat pilots.

Philosophical Parables: Frederick Jackson Turner or Tom Sawyer

Just slightly offstage in many debates about American culture is the choice between two parables. On the one side stands Turner's frontier hypothesis with its announcement that we have come too late. Only the freely available land out west, Turner claimed, provided a safety valve for the rising pressures within the settled lands to the east. Only that same frontier could offer a rigorous school for democratic habits, while eliciting the energies to challenge the unbroken fields, or ground not even yet civilized to the status of fields.

Introduction

One part of the immediate success and enduring popularity of Turner's frontier hypothesis must be found in its subtle allegory of what we might call limited-resource capitalism. A global version of Turner's hypothesis haunts recent apocalyptic pictures of exhausted resources such as the Club of Rome Report.

Land exists before it is owned, and many people prefer to blur the distinction between raw land, uncleared and isolated, and a thriving farm, well stocked, shrewdly managed, and linked to a market for its crops. Only a minute fraction of the raw land in America has, even today, become fully improved and fully productive. Nor is there any need for most land to be fully valued and exploited.

Oil in the ground is finite; once owned, it might seem unchanged by mere ownership. John D. Rockefeller did not create the oil he learned how to market. Nor did he create the automobile that provided the frame within which the oil had a value impossible to imagine earlier.

Gold and silver are the simplest examples of scarce, buried treasure. The one who finds them stakes his claim, and defends that eternal claim against all others. A significant part of wealth in the early American economy was based on these already existing resources such as land, oil, or gold that fell into the hands of those who could build a fence around them by means of legal claims. The earliest wealth in the new world came from the fur trade, in which the animal is seized, killed, and skinned, but never possessed and nurtured as farm animals are. Wealth from limited resources, from the whales in the ocean, the bison on the prairie, the oil in the ground, or the land itself, can always seem unjustly distributed and easily wasted or exhausted. Force and violence often seize it; guns and fences defend it against those who arrive slightly later.

Turner's elegiac warning about the closing of the frontier resonated as a parable for all the limited resources that, unclaimed, might seem to guarantee the promise of American life, but once claimed might build a ring of fences around the freedom of all who came after this short time of seizing, claiming, and fencing. The image of monopoly capitalism had its strongest evidence in the possibility of a monopoly of oil, like that of Rockefeller's Standard

Oil, or a monopoly of silver, or, worst of all, a monopoly of land, as had occurred in England with its aristocracy of large landowners.

If Turner's image of the closing of the frontier stood for the potential exhaustion of ownership rights over all limited resources—water rights in the West, oil, gold, furs, land, silver, iron ore, copper, and waterfalls for the generation of electricity or for the running of factory machines through water wheels and belts—then Turner's "closing" meant the closing of all possible access to future enterprise and opportunity. If the frontier, in this wider sense, had closed around 1890 or 1910, then society itself would soon have been as locked in as England was through the operation of its class system. The promise of democratic mobility would have turned out to be only a short prelude to one more depressingly rigid economic world in which there were open positions only at the bottom. This is the larger allegory of limited-resource capitalism that gave weight to the seemingly more limited pessimism of Turner's hypothesis. It is this wider account of limited-resource capitalism, often taken to be the whole of capitalism by its critics, that accounts for the attention that made Turner's hypothesis the single most important historical idea ever proposed by an American intellectual.

Looking only at the creation of wealth in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century America, we might miss the flaw in using land and oil, furs and slaves, gold and water rights as representative examples of wealth. But this is where an alternative parable, Twain's famous scene of Tom Sawyer whitewashing Aunt Sally's fence, offers a decisive counter-image to Turner's closed frontier with its hidden claim that all opportunity bears the spiritual burden of limited and only temporarily unclaimed resources.

Tom, ordered to paint the fence by Aunt Sally, manages to perform the task so that his young friends passing by, instead of pitying him chained to the task, beg for a turn and ultimately pay Tom for the right to do what had earlier seemed to them the worst possible way to spend a fine day. We might, initially, be tempted to say that Tom Sawyer tricks the boys into painting the fence. Should we think of him as the very model of a huckster, an advertising man arriving in a small town, packaging his shoddy product to sell to the gullible rubes? Isn't this a parable of the capitalist exploiting the

labor of others, getting them to pay for the privilege of working for him by duping them into believing that fence-painting is fun? The morals of Tom Sawyer are often seen as shoddy compared to those of the sentimentalized but upright Huck Finn.

In fact, the reality of Tom Sawyer, standing by his well-painted fence, is more interesting than this naive account would suggest. Tom's question to the first boy who stops to watch him paint is this: "What do you call work?"¹ The boy who hears this Socratic question, Ben Rogers, has just paused in his game of pretending to be a steamship, the *Big Mississippi*, drawing nine feet of water. The impersonation takes skill, practice, and imagination to bring off. It also takes the participating imaginations of any spectators who come to feel that Ben is not doing a bad job of convincing them that a small boy can sound like, act like, and navigate like a Mississippi River steamboat gliding down the road in a village.

It might seem that, unlike Ben Rogers, Tom Sawyer uses his imagination to prey on the imaginations of others so that they become his customers (in their eyes), buying the right to paint, while becoming his employees (in his eyes), relieving him of the need to paint the fence himself. In fact, Tom does not get out of work. He cannot, for example, leave the scene for a day of fishing. Instead, he becomes a manager, a salesman, a negotiator, and a supervisor, and this requires him to work hard all day and to bring a wide range of talents and knowledge into play. He participates in the larger job of painting the fence, but in a new way that keeps him engaged in the task and on the spot until the last inch of fence has received its third coat of paint. Tom's boss, Aunt Sally, ends up satisfied beyond her wildest dreams.

Not only is the specific job done better than Aunt Sally expected, but its very nature has been changed crucially. No longer a routine, solitary labor, it is now an event, almost a festival, not different in kind from an Amish barn raising that turns merely building a barn into a community and communal feast, or a spelling bee in school that turns practicing spelling into a social event. Tom changes the frame, sinking the dull work into a larger game or social event that converts drudgery into excitement mixed with participatory pleasure.

Tom ends the day with a pile of treasure, and this "profit" might seem to be the exploitative aspect of his day at the fence. He now has "a dead rat and a string to swing it with," a piece of bottle glass to look through, a dog collar, four pieces of orange peel, and a dilapidated old window sash.

If there is a trick here, hasn't Tom been the one tricked? Are the pieces of orange peel or the dead rat really forms of wealth? Isn't an act of imagination, or what we now call in philosophy an act of seeing-as, required to see the orange peel as treasure just as much as it is required to see painting a fence as fun? When Tom first negotiates with Aunt Sally's slave, Jim, before Ben Rogers appears, he offers to swap jobs with Jim, to trade work for work. Tom will take Jim's place and fetch water from the town pump if Jim will paint the fence while Tom goes to get the water.

Jim refuses the swap until Tom ups his offer, throwing in a marble and finally offering to show Jim his sore toe. This sore toe, now reimagined as a form of wealth—as a desirable possession rather than as a painful defect—turns the tide, and Jim agrees to trade jobs.

The world that Mark Twain pictures here is a world saturated with the imagination and with the pleasures of the imagination. It is also a world imagined as a market where each thing might be seen as a "good" for sale or for barter. A sore toe might be a hindrance if, for example, you were to enter a race, and it might be treasure, if you charge others to see it or swap it for something that someone else has imagined into wealth, such as a dead rat that a boy saw without the ordinary adult disgust. In the light of his imagination the boy saw the rat as a potential toy. He tied a string around it so as to swing it and began to carry it around with him as wealth, to own or to swap, if he can convince someone else's imagination to see it as a valuable asset just as he does. Is a sore toe only a negative fact about my foot? Is a dead rat only to be seen as an adult might see it upon finding it in the kitchen sink?

Tom Sawyer's sly opening question to Ben Rogers—What do you call work?—is part of a series of questions: What do you consider wealth? property? pleasure? Is the common positive or negative value of a sore toe, a dead rat, or an unpainted fence merely one of many possible values that might, if the right visionary imagination

enters the world, change fundamentally the toe, the rat, the unpainted fence in a way that creates not just a new personal account, but a new social fact once other imaginations also see the toe, the rat, or the unpainted fence just as the first inventor of this new way of seeing it did? Only the existence of a market can make clear the question of whether other imaginations can be made to see it the same way. We might define the world of Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn as a world without parents but with a fully functioning market system for the imagination.

Tom's question is answered at the end of the chapter by Twain's explicit account. "Work consists of whatever a body is *obliged* to do and . . . Play consists of whatever a body is not obliged to do. And this would help him to understand why constructing artificial flowers or performing on a treadmill is work, while rolling ten pins or climbing Mont Blanc is only amusement."²

At this point we might see Twain's point as the freedom to rename or to recategorize and reframe the already fixed things and actions of life. Is a dead rat wealth or a disgusting object that we might have to pay someone else to dispose of so as to avoid touching it ourselves? This, too, would bring the dead rat into the market, but not as a toy on a string. Can work really be revisualized as play? And can a small boy impersonate a Mississippi steamboat and use his hands, his voice, his way of gliding along the street to mimic the steamboat-effect so that his friends, who have already seen steamboats, will be reminded of what they already know are details of the steamboat experience? At some point he might even ask for payment—a bottle cap or a cricket in a bag—for seeing him "do" the steamboat.

Ben Rogers, in his steamboat phase, might best be described by a contemporary of Twain's, the French poet Arthur Rimbaud, who wrote the famous line "*Je est une autre*" ("I is an other"). Rimbaud's poem continued a statement that might as easily be about manufacturing as about magic: "*si le cuivre s'éveille clarion, il n'y a rien de sa faute*."³ The brass and leather that "wake up" to find themselves "trumpet" or the wood that "wakes up" to find itself "violin" or "matchstick" or "gunstock" must first have been imagined to be possible as and transformable into trumpet, gunstock, violin, or matchstick. This habit of imagining is common to both poetry and

industry. The thing as it now stands is not regarded as fixed or final. Henry David Thoreau in *Walden* speaks of the ground being made to "say" beans.

Rimbaud and Tom Sawyer might seem an unlikely pair. But Twain should not be seen as a light-hearted aesthete engaged in what we call repicturing the already existing world out of boredom and cunning in order to make it new within his own subjectivity. Rimbaud trained himself to this end. And Rimbaud's early life as a poet led more naturally than most people think to his later life as a hard-nosed colonial businessman. "I accustomed myself to pure hallucination; I saw clearly a mosque instead of a factory, a drummers' school consisting of angels, coaches on the road of the sky, a drawing room at the bottom of a lake."⁴

Twain does not force the familiar into new shapes. His is the necessary way of seeing and looking, at the most literal level, for a fast-changing world. In Twain's lifetime the city of Cincinnati was imagined as the Queen of the American West (now the Midwest) because of its key location within the river, canal, and lake system of transportation. Its access to the Ohio and Mississippi routes that would link the entire country through water, flat-boats, canals, rivers, locks, and steam power would, some day, make Cincinnati a great metropolis, perhaps the greatest in the country. The highways of America seemed for the moment to be made of water. Cincinnati was, in the key phrase, "just about to become" the great city of the American heartland. Land values reflected what this or that block of property would be worth "as soon as" the full value of the city became actual rather than potential.

Long before Cincinnati's triumph could occur, the highways of America turned to steel, and Chicago, the junction point of the rail system and the great lakes, became the city of promise, the place "about to become" or "sure to become" the key city of the Midwest. Later, the highways of the country turned to concrete and asphalt and the interstate highways and tractor trailer trucks that moved goods along them from coast to coast undid Chicago just as the rails had undone Cincinnati.

Technological change that rewrites the framing conditions of action also reassembles wealth and value along the path of change.

Boom towns become backwaters or, even worse, ghost towns. Such technological change in a society embracing it rather than impeding its dynamic makes an entirely different parable out of Tom Sawyer's whitewashing of the fence or the young boy's manufacturing of a valuable toy out of a dead rat and a string. Technological change creates far more than the rise and fall of value. It creates ever new things undreamed of ten years or ten minutes earlier. It creates as well frames within which facts that were not facts until then settle themselves and assemble. Where frames change several times within one lifetime, those who thrive on such variability come to the front and those who fear instability move to the side. Mark Twain changed from his own Tom Sawyer-like boyhood to a businessman-author who followed or created every shift of the literary market between 1865 and 1900. The energy that comes not just from mobility but also from the love of mobility rose to the surface in Twain and in his countrymen and country women. For such people what "might be" becomes as strong a category as what is, or even a stronger one. What used to be becomes nothing. All that now exists is studied with a knowledge that it might not be much longer.

Discounting Future Gains and Losses: Premature Enterprise

One important detail of such a world is the fact that a zone of time comes into existence that becomes decisive for all attempts to set value. This is the phase between the start-up of an idea that, so it is claimed, might just change everything, and the full acceptance or final rejection of the idea, the moment when its promise is, at last, either realized or exposed as empty. This intermediate zone of time between the possible and the realized (or discarded) takes on enormous importance. During this time of possibility, the value of all things becomes a wager, both those things that will, if they are actualized, rise in value, and those that will fall in value, even to zero, like the carriage trade after the widespread distribution of the automobile. Economists use the concept of discounted future return to talk about the present moment's relation to an uncertain future. Land values anticipate what might be their worth in advance of the

actual change of circumstance. This swampland that you see on your left might be the best site for a new feedlot once the railroad station is built over there—if the railroad is built at all and if its projection that it will take business away from the nearby canal turns out to be correct. The price at which the seller offers the swampland to you already includes a mark-up for the someday-to-be-built railroad station. He wants part of that future profit now.

That piece of land far out from town and of little value now because of that very distance might be the best land for a new airport, and if so the value of all the land nearby would increase by a factor of ten, except the houses that would become almost worthless because the airport noise would destroy the semirural tranquility that gives them their current value. But are those houses worthless *now*, already, just because there is the idea of using the land for a future airport in someone's mind, or because the scheme has been mentioned in the newspaper or passed by the city council? Do the towns along the canals have to be seen as future ghost towns now, in the present, even before the first railroad track has been laid? This point where knowledge, the future, and value intersect is a key topic within the epistemology of rapidly changing worlds, the epistemology of capitalism.

In a technological world that accepts what the economist Joseph Schumpeter called the "creative destruction" of what already exists and currently satisfies needs in its own way, the future and the possible, the promising idea and the articulated plan, have a complex reality long before they are real. Fictions that in stable systems are the marks of fraud and the work of charlatans are in unstable systems the sketch, or one possible sketch, of what will turn out to be the real just slightly later in one lifetime. Equally important is the fact that everything that is now fully real becomes potentially unreal because it is or might be threatened by some new scheme of things in which it would disappear or become merely decorative, as horses are today now that they are no longer primarily used for farm work. What does not exist, but might someday, takes on a half-real, half-unreal quality long before it exists. But all that now exists is equally half-real, half-unreal because it exists under the threat that it might soon become obsolete or be discarded.