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Walled In: Spatial Immobility in American Culture

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“I got to keep movin’/ I got to keep movin’/ blues fallin’ down like hail....And the days keeps on worryin’ me/ there’s a hellhound on my trail”: so sang Robert Johnson on his classic 1937 recording, “Hellhound on My Trail,” capturing in words and music the drive towards mobility that has long been recognized as a significant theme in American culture. Relentless motion has epitomized the American quest for life, liberty, and personal individuality. We associate these themes with Walt Whitman’s refrain (#46) in *Leaves of Grass* (1855): “I know I have the best of time and space—and that I was never measured, and never will be measured..... I tramp a perpetual journey....Not I, not any one else can travel that road for you, you must travel it for yourself....Shoulder your duds, and I will mine, and let us hasten forth” (Whitman, 2373). An individual journey that is “perpetual,” representing life itself, mastering “time and space” and resisting measurement and classification: these are the long-established tropes of American mobility. Such classic American novels as Melville’s *Moby Dick*, Clemens’ *Huckleberry Finn* (wherein Huck plans at the novel’s end to “light out for the territory ahead of the rest” [Clemens, 366]), Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*, Kerouac’s *On the Road* represent the desire to “hasten forth,” on a new path, in search of new prospects, new opportunities for fulfillment, realization, and personal expression.

But Robert Johnson’s narrator is not setting out voluntarily, not proudly “hasten[ing] forth”; rather, he is haunted, pursued by a tempest of emotional torment that pounds him like a

hailstorm—he is chased by a hellhound (the mythological equivalent of Cerberus, a dog with three heads and a dragon tail) seeking to capture him and drag him down to the Kingdom of the Dead (in accordance with ancient Greek and Roman mythology) (Hamilton, 39). This individual is not setting out on a grand journey of self-discovery: he is desperate, tormented, obsessed, frightened, and mortified. All he may hope for is a temporary respite, a moment of solace, for (as Johnson sings in his 1936 recording, "Come On in My Kitchen") "it's goin' to be rainin' outdoors"—thereafter, the narrator will have to move again ("got to keep movin'") in a desperate flight that has no beginning and no end. What a different sort of mobility than Whitman envisioned in *Leaves of Grass*!

This contradiction between two visions of mobility—the dominant optimism of Whitman's quest for identity and opportunity compared to the relentless fatalism of Robert Johnson's flight from self-reckoning—underscores the fact that there has also been a clearly-established counter-tradition in American culture, one that renders mobility as pointless and futile and instead focuses on immobility in relation to the anxiety concerning fulfillment of identity, love, and personal integrity. We may recognize this theme of immobility most readily in Melville's "Bartleby the Scrivener" (1853) with its focus on "pallid hopelessness" (Melville, 1975), its depiction of a characteristic window "with no view at all," facing "within three feet...a wall" (Melville, 1956), Bartleby's statement that he "like[s] to be stationary" (Melville, 1972), and the story's concluding phrase that links Bartleby and all humanity with "on errands of life, these letters speed to death" (Melville, 1975). We may term this an overt artistic expression of immobility. But this distinctly American drive toward immobility may be isolated as well in statements of American culture that, on their surface, claim an affinity with a Whitmanesque mobility. The overt artistic expressions of immobility, combined with those fatalistic and

existentialist refrains of mobility that end up embracing the opposite value of immobility, together establish a clear counter-tradition of immobility as an ironic foil, an antithesis to the dominant mythic theme of mobility in American culture.

Chuck Berry's "Promised Land" (1964), written while Berry was incarcerated at the Federal Medical Center in Springfield, MO, for purported violation of the Mann Act, describes—in a little over 2 minutes—a journey that navigates the entire United States: from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific Ocean. The narrator departs his "home in Norfolk, Virginia" and journeys—by means of bus, train, and airplane—to the "Promised Land" of Los Angeles, CA. Along the way, the narrator travels through: North Carolina (Raleigh, Charlotte); Georgia (Atlanta); Alabama (Birmingham); Mississippi; Louisiana (New Orleans); Texas (Houston); New Mexico (Albuquerque)—before arriving in Los Angeles. The musical narrative is often lauded for its Whitmanesque spirit that sets out across the country with a sense of aspiration, a dream of success, and an announcement of arrival at the quested-for location. This affirmative reading of positive mobility is supported by Berry's use of Biblical metaphors: the "Promised Land" is the land of Canaan, the sought-after homeland for the Biblical Israelites: thus, the narrator seeks a righteous destination, one worth searching for and meriting a quest. The "swing low, chariot" description of the narrator's airplane further exploits the intertextual association to the well known African-American spiritual, "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," with its persistent refrain: "comin' for to carry me home" and its connotation that that "home" is "over Jordan" (that is, Canaan) or else, Heaven (as an allegory during American slavery).

But a closer reading of the song reveals several intriguing aspects: first of all, the breakneck speed of the music evokes a sense of desperation and urgency; secondly, aside from the phrase "California on my mind," there is no expressed reason for the narrator's frantic

mobility. Instead, after he makes the initial decision to leave Norfolk for Los Angeles, things happen to him: his bus breaks down and he's stranded in Birmingham; his train takes him to New Orleans which he yearns to leave for undisclosed reasons; in Houston he gets the help he needs to fly to Los Angeles. There is the sense of wonderment at the possibilities of motion and speed in modern America, but there is little sense of a goal, a quest, an ideal that underlies the goal of self-knowledge or personal fulfillment. When the narrator's plane lands in Los Angeles, after a frenetic journey that is even exhausting to hear about, let alone experience, the narrator rushes to the telephone in the airport terminal and instructs the operator to call a number in Norfolk: "Tell the folks back home, 'this is the Promised Land calling and the Poor Boy's on the line!'" So the song ends—with a "rub it in their faces" proclamation to the people he fled from in Norfolk: it is as if the narrator has not arrived, cannot begin to fathom the significance of his journey or his mobility until he first gauges the envious reaction of his hometown neighbors to his implied success.

How is this a purposeful mobility? It is important to remember that Berry's home was St. Louis and not Norfolk and that he wrote the song (along with several others evoking mobility) while confined in prison in Missouri. The song describes a desperate flight to escape from the American South, written by a musician whose career had been blindsided in part from complications resulting from his ownership of the racially-integrated Club Bandstand in St. Louis (the basis for his Mann Act trial). Berry's first trial was declared void because of the racism of the judge, but the second trial produced the same guilty verdict. It is possible to read the movement in the song as a fantasy of freedom while in confinement, a desire to escape from the bigotry that then characterized the American South, and a desire to remind the "folks back home" (wherever home may be) that the "poor boy" has now made it to the "Promised Land."

Moses, we may recall, was not allowed to reach the Promised Land but only was able to glimpse it from Mt. Pisgah before he died. In his song, Berry is able to construct a version of himself as Moses, delivering his musical heritage to posterity with a desperate flight back to freedom.

But the irony of the song's conclusion (nothing about the Promised Land, only the placing of the phone call that announces his arrival and suggests he will gloat to the people from whom he fled) associates Berry's song of mobility not with a Whitmanesque journey of discovery, but rather with a sense of ironic motion that undermines the purposeful basis of mobility itself. Berry's confined-fantasy of motion is thus more in tune with Thoreau's 1850 entry from *The Journal*: "Nature is as far from me as God, and sometimes I have thought to go West after her.... From time to time I overlook the promised land, but I do not feel that I am travelling toward it" (Thoreau, 1491). Motion is most fully contemplated while "stationary," like Bartleby; mobility, in other words, may engender immobility: and while immobile, one conjures visions of mobility.

In John Barth's 1958 novel, *The End of the Road*, the narrator Jacob Horner has an experience of immobility that takes place on his 28th birthday: he had completed the academic courses and the oral exams for his master's degree, but had not commenced his M.A. thesis (the portion of the work that would display his own individualized vision); he decides to take a trip and goes to Baltimore's Pennsylvania Station. He informs the ticket seller how much money he has to spend and receives 4 possible destinations—all in Ohio. Then we arrive at this account of his immobility:

> So I left the ticket window and took a seat on one of the benches in the middle of the concourse to make up my mind. And it was there that I simply ran out of motives, as a car runs out of gas. There was no reason to go to Cincinnati, Ohio.

> There was no reason to go to Crestline, Ohio. Or Dayton, Ohio; or Lima, Ohio. There was no reason, either, to go back to the apartment hotel, or for that matter to go anywhere. There was no reason to do anything. My eyes, as Winckelmann said inaccurately of the eyes of the Greek statues, were sightless, gazing on eternity, fixed on ultimacy, and when that is the case there is no reason to do anything—even to change the focus of one's eyes. Which is perhaps why the statues stand still. It is the malady cosmopsis, the cosmic view, that afflicted me.
>
> When one has it, one is frozen like the bullfrog when the hunter's light strikes him full in the eyes, only with cosmopsis there is no hunter, and no quick hand to terminate the moment—there's only the light. (68-69)

Jacob Horner remains immobile, paralyzed, in conflict as to the ultimate basis for choosing any movement from among the vast assortment of possible selections he might designate. He is snapped from this spell with the help of the Doctor, a non-licensed physician with an existential bent, who reminds him that the point of life is motion itself: purposeful motion is less important than that we move—life, when viewed contemplatively at its completion, is the collection of all the choices and movements we made; these are best interpreted after we have made the choices and not before. Focusing on purpose leads one to immobility and paralysis since there is no ultimate reason for making one choice over another in the face of existential absurdity and the certainty of death.

Bob Dylan reflects this same theme of ironic motionlessness in his 1970 song, "Time Passes Slowly." The narrator is contemplative, reflective, "up here in the mountains." He recalls a past "sweetheart...fine and good-lookin'" with whom he sat "while her mama was cookin'": the narrator, in the midst of this serene and idyllic moment, "stared out the window to the stars high

above"; he reveals surprisingly that one reason time passed slowly for him was because he was, even then, "searchin' for love." At this point, the narrator vocalizes the song's bridge:

> Ain't no reason to go in a wagon to town,
>
> Ain't no reason to go to the fair.
>
> Ain't no reason to go up, ain't no reason to go down,
>
> Ain't no reason to go anywhere.

This is Dylan's narrator's version of cosmopsis, but, as if to undermine it, there is a musical interlude in which Dylan's piano becomes more forceful, percussive, and suggestive of march rhythms. The band's playing becomes progressively louder, and the tempo becomes more insistent, slightly faster: the insinuation is that some sort of movement is created from out of this tribute to immobility. When the song resumes, the narrator again emphasizes that "time passes slowly" but now describes himself as being "up here in the daylight"; he is trying, he asserts, "so hard to stay right." Evoking a "red rose of summer that blooms in the day," he bemoans that "time passes slowly and fades away," but the song stumbles along, after the vocal, with a succession of rhythmic highhat walking cadences before tapering off into oblivion. The entire ode to the slowness of time takes a little over 2 minutes.

If "time passes slowly and [ultimately] fades away," what should one do? Once again, the music undermines and ironizes the literal sense of the lyrics. Movement is impelled musically as the narrator pays tribute to the pleasures of meandering, contemplating, and biding time. "Time Passes Slowly" was written in Woodstock, NY, during a period wherein Dylan had ceased touring, ceased being "on the road," in order, first, to recuperate from the very serious motorcycle accident that had hospitalized him; and then, second, to think about life and its significance. (Could "try hard to stay right" relate to avoiding the frantic movement that may

place one in a hospital bed?) If the sensual pleasures that Dylan's narrator describes ("we sit beside bridges and walk beside fountains/Catch the wild fishes that float through the stream") are so fulfilling, why does he need to summon forth the memory of the past sweetheart? More importantly, why does he describe all of this philosophical meditation as being "lost in a dream"? Here we are reminded of the poem Edgar Allan Poe wrote in the last year of his life, 1849, "A Dream Within a Dream": in that short poem, Poe first proclaims, like Dylan's narrator, that "All that we see or seem/Is but a dream within a dream"; but then, like Dylan's musical interpretation, Poe's narrator considers the fearful effect of such a proclamation. Staring at a "surf-tormented shore," the narrator wonders whether he might be able to "save/One [grain of sand] from the pitiless wave"; he asks, in anxiety and dread: "Is all we see or seem/But a dream within a dream?" (Poe, 1645). The vision of life as a dream renders all motion meaningless; simultaneously, if all motion is meaningless, then how can life be a dream: of what does it consist if not its actions and events and their significance?

The following year, Dylan released "Watching the River Flow" (1971), an ironic embrace of immobility coupled with voyeurism that somehow simultaneously offered a sincere affirmation of an America spirit in fervent and dynamic motion. "What's the matter with me?" the narrator asks, tongue-in-cheek, "I don't have much to say." Instead of words, the narrator is mystified by his own actions: "daylight" is fast approaching yet he's still in an "all-night cafe"! In moonlight, he walks past "where the trucks are rollin' slow" to "sit down on this bank of sand/ And watch the river flow."

At this point, precisely coinciding with the lyric of immobility and watching, the music winds down to a standstill, and then, inexplicably, starts itself back up for a new verse: it is as if the narrator has, as Barth's Jacob Horner had expressed it, "run out of motives as a car runs out

of gas." But then, refueled, he keeps on moving. Does he sing the praises of watching from his riverbank perch? No, he yearns to be "back in the city/Instead of this old bank of sand." Recalling an old folk song, the narrator sings, "If I had wings and I could fly,/I know where I would go," but instead he will "sit here so contentedly" and "watch the river flow." How contented can the narrator be if he wishes to be back in the city? How satisfied is he with his voyeurism if he wants to be somewhere he is not—not in nature, but back in the city, "with the sun beating down over the chimney tops"?

In the song's first bridge, the narrator observes that "people [are] disagreeing...about everything" and this "makes you stop and all wonder why"; indeed, "yesterday" the narrator "saw somebody on the street/Who just couldn't help but cry": strangely, this poignant eyewitness observation is accompanied by a joyous musical crescendo that induces musical exuberance. Since the river will roll "no matter what gets in the way and which way the wind does blow," the narrator will watch "as long as it does." In the song's second bridge, the narrator describes "people disagreeing everywhere you look," but then, revealing his own ironic perspective, he coins a deliberately contrived rhyme, calling attention to the artifice of his words: "makes you wanna stop and read a book." If that were not enough, the narrator continues the dubious rhyme, at the supposed expense of deriding another observed citizen, by noting that "yesterday" he "saw somebody on the street/That was really shook": this time the crescendo is tumultuous and the music suggests the pervasive, ever-flowing motion of a rushing river. The song concludes with the motion of the band's fervor as Dylan's narrator embraces the stationary act of "watchin'"—but this immobile narrator is watching mobility itself. After the fourth repetition of "watchin' the river flow," the narrator and band screech once again to a halt: "I'll sit down on this bank of sand/And watch the river flow"—at this last word of movement, the music begins again, forcing

itself into activity in order to bring the song to its end.

What is Dylan's narrator watching? He is watching a river that is relentless, eternal, and ceaseless; it is unstoppable, unperturbable, and indomitable. Against this transcendent motion, all individual complaints are rendered as insignificant. The narrator's wish to be "back in the city" where the "one I love [is] so close at hand," the "people disagreeing," the person "on the street/Who just couldn't help but cry," the one "that was really shook"—these and all other individual disappointments are transitory and, in comparison to the whole, relatively insignificant. Here, Dylan's evocation of immobility-in-motion recalls the words of Emerson in "The Over-Soul" (1841): "man is a stream whose source is hidden" (Emerson, 1049). Emerson affirms "a higher origin for events than the will I call mine.... When I watch that flowing river, which, out of regions I see not, pours for a season its streams into me, I see that I am a pensioner; not a cause, but a surprised spectator of this ethereal water" (1049). Emerson embraces an "attitude of reception" that is akin to Dylan's "watchin'" (1049). The concept of the rushing river Emerson describes as: "we live in succession, in division, in parts, in particles. Meantime within man is the soul of the whole; the wise silence; the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related; the eternal ONE...the act of seeing and the thing seen, the seer and the spectacle, the subject and the object, are one" (Emerson, 1050). Mobility, then, may only be understood by means of immobility; immobility entices us to imagine ourselves in motion.

As a final testament to this ironic foil to the mythic tradition of naive mobility, let us consider the classic vision of Johnny Cash's "Folsom Prison Blues" (1956). Here the narrator is confined and incarcerated: "I'm stuck in Folsom Prison and time keeps draggin' on." But instead of describing the conditions of his immobility, the narrator makes us feel the claustrophobic imprisonment by contrasting it with the relentless mobility that goes on outside the prison walls:

"I hear the train a-comin', it's rollin' 'round the bend...that train keeps a-rollin', on down to San Antone." Meanwhile, in opposition to the speed of the railroad train in the open air, the narrator has not "seen the sunshine since I don't know when"; for him, "time keeps draggin' on."

Cash's narrator reminds us, however, that there is every reason for him to be in prison. His mother advised him when he was young how he should avoid guns and behave himself. Despite this wisdom, he confesses that he "shot a man in Reno just to watch him die": here we are presented with the ultimate act of cynical, depraved inhumanity—causing the death of another human being merely to observe it taking place. The narrator's guilt is experienced when he hears the "whistle blowin'" that signals the speeding motion of a passing train: at that sound of freedom and mobility, the narrator, locked up and caged in, announces: "I hang my head and cry." But the immobility that is the narrator's fate is beyond his ability to describe. Instead, he conjures, in his imagination, fanciful images of the people on that rushing train as an ironic contrast to his enforced solitude and confinement: "I bet there's rich folks eatin' in a fancy dining car/They're probably drinkin' coffee and smokin' big cigars": freedom of movement is perceived in terms of social class elevation. The narrator is tough and without self-pity; he has no illusions about his transgression or his punishment: "I know I had it comin', I know I can't be free." What ultimately torments him, however, is precisely what he cannot be and does not have: freedom--to be mobile, to come and go at will. "But these people keep a-movin', and that's what tortures me." Tortured by the fantasy of imaginary people in trains hurtling past his prison walls: these images create a powerful ironic impression of the narrator's oppressive immobility. The song ends with a dream, a wish: "if they freed me from this prison, if that railroad train was mine," he would become motion itself, he would "move it on a little farther down the line." Mobility would take him "far from Folsom Prison," and there he would "stay": once free, once

far away, the sound of the "lonesome whistle" would "blow my blues away." The lyrics remind us that, in the words of Poe, "All that we see or seem/Is but a dream within a dream": the whistle is "lonesome" because the narrator projects his loneliness onto the train's voice; the narrator's "blues"—at the misery of his enforced immobility and in penance for his transgressions—are his present state and need to be eradicated in the future ("I'd let that lonesome whistle blow my blues away"). But traveling will not transport the narrator to a place where his blues depart: only his inner self can achieve that solace.

Johnny Cash's narrator knows what Emerson asserts in "Self-Reliance" (1841): "At home I dream that at Naples, at Rome, I can be intoxicated with beauty, and lose my sadness. I pack my trunk, embrace my friends, embark on the sea, and at last wake up in Naples, and there beside me is the stern Fact, the sad self, unrelenting, identical, that I fled from" (Emerson, 1045). The narrator of "Folsom Prison Blues" can only position himself logistically in relation to himself: he is in prison here, and where he would like to be is there: "Far from Folsom Prison, that's where I want to stay." Mobility entices him with the possibility of change, but the narrator understands that mobility, for him, is impossible; he understands, with Emerson, that "change is not amelioration. For every thing that is given, something is taken" (Emerson, 1046). For the narrator, he "shot a man in Reno," and now there is no more mobility, there is only time..."and time keeps draggin' on." What will break that relentless cycle of mobility inducing immobility and motionlessness conjuring movement? When will the narrator again see the "sunshine" of individual peace? His journey, regardless of whether it involves mobility or immobility, is a navigation of time: he must appreciate, as does Emerson, that: "Society is a wave. The wave moves onward, but the water of which it is composed, does not. The same particle does not rise from the valley to the ridge. Its unity is only phenomenal. The persons who make up a

nation to-day, next year die, and their experience with them.... Nothing can bring you peace but yourself. Nothing can bring you peace but the triumph of principles" (Emerson, 1047-1048).

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