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Henry David Thoreau's De-genera Description

The clay especially assumes
an infinite variety of forms ...
H.D. Thoreau, *Journal, 1848*

At the very beginning of the fourth chapter of *Nature,* which goes by the title of "Language", Ralph Waldo Emerson says:

> Language is a third use which Nature subserves to man.
> Nature is a vehicle of thought, and in a simple, double, and threefold degree.
> 1. Words are signs of natural facts.
> 2. Particular natural facts are symbols of particular spiritual facts.
> 3. Nature is the symbol of spirit.
>
> 1. Words are signs of natural facts. The use of natural history is to give us aid in supernatural history; the use of the outer creation, to give us language for the beings and changes of the inward creation. Every word which is used to express a moral or intellectual fact, if traced to its root, is found to be borrowed from some material experience. *Right* means *straight, wrong* means *twisted. Spirit* primarily means *wind; transgression,* the crossing of a *line; supercilious,* the *raising of the eyebrow.* We say the *heart* to express emotion, the *head* to denote thought; and *thought* and *emotion* are words borrowed from sensible things, and now appropriated to spiritual nature. Most of the process by which this transformation is made, is hidden from us in the remote time when language was framed; but the same tendency may be daily observed in children. Children and savages use only nouns or names of things, which they convert into verbs, and apply to analogous mental acts. (Emerson *20)*

With these words Ralph Waldo Emerson provides us with a theoretical definition of the great American Symbolism and of Transcendentalism. He fully represents, also, the point of view of the American Romantic writer who perceives the vastness of the space around him, and feels a dramatic sense of solitude and separation from it. Against this solitude the observation of the landscape, of the *outward,* is the only possible way of looking at and understanding the *inward.*

Through observation of the outward space, of that same American landscape that English travellers found so unfamiliar, so different in its sublimity from the European models, and therefore so difficult to "describe" ("with the Hudson, the travellers felt comfortable; with Niagara, they felt tested; with the Mississipi, they felt overcome", [Mulvey 12]), the Romantic American writer — in Tony Tanner's words — fulfills that same "centrifugal tendency" of his own self by which Emerson had already labelled the poets' attraction to narcotics:

> When he writes about 'The Poet' and his attraction to narcotics of all kinds Emerson says: 'These are auxiliaries to the centrifugal tendency of a man, to his passage out into free space, and they help him to escape the custody of that body in which he is pent up [...]. Near the end of *Walden* Thoreau has some marvellous lines about the 'ethereal flight' of a hawk which sported alone 'in the fields of air'. 'It appeared to have no companion in the universe... and to need none but the morning and the ether with which he played.' Thoreau ends the book, appropriately enough, with the parable of the bug which hatches out in an old table and breaks free into 'beautiful and winged life', and Whitman at the end of *Song of Myself* literally feels himself diffused back into the elements: 'I depart as air...' In these three seminal American Romantics we find a similar 'centrifugal tendency'; a dilation of the self, which can become an abandoning of self, into the surrounding vastness. (Tanner 28)

Through observation only can mankind give proper names to the various aspects of reality, and realize how deep is the relationship between *words* and *signs* of Nature — between *language* and *Nature* itself. This is the reason why the American

Romantic writer places on the visual quality of his relation to Nature ("I am becoming a transparent eyeball" says Emerson), an emphasis much deeper and stronger than that recommended some years later, in Europe, by John Ruskin himself.

Henry David Thoreau, the disciple *par excellence* of Ralph Waldo Emerson, seems to take the principles expressed by his mentor literally, and to the literary territories explored by Whitman, Hawthorne or Melville, rather prefers those of Natural History. Following the principle according to which "the use of natural history is to give us aid in supernatural history", Henry David Thoreau undertakes the rather ambitious task of analysing and understanding the universe itself and its laws. His attempt to discover the laws of the universe and his need to describe it, of course, through "words", will slowly transform itself in the intuition of elaborating a new model of writing, more suitable for describing natural facts and eventually, through them, supernatural facts.

In order to reconstruct this process, and its related strategies, we believe that it is necessary to elaborate an analysis of *description* in its relations with *narration* throughout the writings of Henry David Thoreau.

It seems opportune, however, to start with a premise, under the terms of which Henry D. Thoreau is a "de-genera" writer, in the sense that his writings, from *A Week* ... to *Walden,* from the essays to the *Journal,* far from reflecting individual literary genres canonically, present elements that are simultaneously ascribable to different genres: from the novel to the literary essay, from the short story to poetry and scientific prose.

In doing this Thoreau in truth is doing no more than emphasize a widespread *anxiety of influence* of the American intellectual who searches for "native" models (Poe's attempts to canonize the short-story form) to be placed in opposition to the models of the past; an anxiety this that Transcendentalism, the first great native attempt at founding an epistemological and hermeneutic theory of the universe, did not succeed in relieving.

> It is perhaps this lack of a clear "ruling mode" which lends to some of the greatest works of American letters, especially during the American

> Renaissance, their range — or, to put it more negatively, their lack of formal definition. And that peculiarity is especially noticeable in Thoreau. We can, with relative ease, call *Moby Dick* a novel; but what are we to call *Walden?* (Hildebidle 55).

This premise made, Thoreau is however the only *letterato* of the American Renaissance who — within this first and general change with regard to genre — then effects a further change as far as the role given to description is concerned, in the sense that Thoreau's entire *opus* is essentially an endless and continuous description within which there appear limited narrative sequences.

But Thoreau, naturally, does not limit himself to overturning quantitatively the existing proportions between description and narration in the text: he pushes himself to overturn even the internal nature of the two terms, continuing to "de-generate" from the norm towards the poles. What I mean is that:

–if "narration" (at this point I feel it is necessary to use quotation marks) is commonly a grand, complex universe, rich in elements, of which "description" is just one;

-if "narration/diegesis" moves action forward while "description" creates a temporary digression;

-if "narration", through the plot element, provides us with a link to the story while "description" creates a "fluctuating sequence of stasis" (Barthes);

-if, in conclusion, "narration" is the primary and unavoidable moment while "description"— although useful in its informing features or in its ideological clues — is however an accessorial moment ... what I mean is that Henry David Thoreau does something quite different.

When he describes, he is in fact "narrating" (once again I quote mark the canon) History, Reality, understood as a chain of real data. So it is his description that carries the facts, the actions forward; his description is not at all a digression with regard to the facts that are canonically "narrated", but it is an audacious diegesis. And with the same overturned logic, his narrative sequences are not a whole of verbal decisions that move action forward, that is to say they are not a "narration", but rather a momentary and

perpendicular detachment from the diegetic chain; a sort of momentary digression, perhaps not superfluous, certainly informing and ideologically useful, but anyway collocable in the same place occupied by "description" in relation to the *fluxus* of canonical diegesis. In this sense *Walden,* or *Cape Cod,* in their variegated descriptive features *are* the Natural History of New England; while within these works the narrative sequences that inform us of the winter visitors to Walden Pond, or the wreck of the *Jasper,* or the Wellfleet oysterman, constitute in a Barthes-like manner a "fluctuating" stasis that is also useful, indeed indispensable, for the enhancement of the chain of diegetic data.

So complete, so total is the reversal that Thoreau introduces, that in order to analyse its mechanisms it is necessary to work out in our turn an opposite theorem, different from that worked out by the semiology of narrative texts (and therefore probably unsuited by its very nature to application on Thoreau's texts).

The initial postulate of our theorem — which I would like to call here "Thoreau's theorem" — rests on a question: Why does all this happen? Why does Thoreau, who proclaims himself a *letterato* ("I have chosen letters ... "), reverse the norm followed by those men of letters who were his peers?

All this happens because he has *other* external points of reference, he has other "intertexts": Charles Darwin especially, and with him a great variety of scientists and the Natural History Writers.

It is not by chance that Thoreau is one of the first American readers (in terms of a theoretically "literary" frontier) of Charles Darwin, just as he was a reader and friend of naturalists such as John Muir or John Burroughs; it is not by chance that his disputes regarding Agassiz's creationism are comparable — for their subjective vigour and their objective scientific rigour — to Emerson's disputes with his Unitarian peers.

Thoreau's intertextual universe is the natural history text, the *only* text to present the diegesis of the world and history as a chain of data, through description that is not accessorial, not superfluous, not "fluctuating stasis", and is therefore primary with regard to the narration. A narration that *also* exists in Darwin, but

in the form of that model that Thoreau will apply to his — at this point let us say — "narrative" digressions. It is in fact Darwin who will draw breath for an instant in order to narrate for us the incomparable beauty of an army of ants that will lead to the narration (not "description") of the ants in Walden; it is Darwin, who in the *Voyage of the Beagle* embellishes his scientific descriptions — of striking beauty and certainly by no means superfluous — with the desolation of mountains or the dark sea that surrounds this extreme point of the earth ... it is Darwin who sparks off brief and parallel narrative sequences in *Ktaadn,* or the narration regarding the victims of the *Jasper* in *Cape Cod.*

From close by we can see the almost perfect correspondence between Thoreau and his so well introjected scientific model, limiting ourselves to reporting here that he read the New York edition of the *Journal of the Voyage of the Beagle* in 1846, that is to say while he was still at Walden Pond, and that from the abundance of notes made in his notebooks both the interest in and the effect of the book can be inferred. The *Voyage* indeed was written by a naturalist, but it was also a diary — highly descriptive in the scientific sense of the term, but also containing "secondary" elements for a scientist (although Darwin did not in any way consider them inferior) regarding travel anecdotes or episodes from the various ports of call. In a word Thoreau was attracted to this natural history text as a possible literary model for his own writing. During 1846 Thoreau climbed Mount Ktaadn, the account of which later constituted the first chapter of the book *The Maine Woods,* published posthumously in 1865; and here we have juxtaposed quotations drawn alternately from Darwin (from Chapter X of the *Voyage,* in which he narrates the climbing of the mountains of Tierra del Fuego, in December 1832) and from *Ktaadn;* but not the posthumous version, rather the pages of the diary from fall 1846, the year of the climb and therefore the unrevised text written directly by Thoreau. The parallels that exist between these two diegetic descriptions can be noted:

Darwin: I continued slowly to advance for an hour along the broken and rocky banks, and was amply repaid by the grandeur of the scene *(V 210).*

Thoreau: ... over huge rocks loosely poised I climbed a mile or more—still edging towards the clouds. The mnt was a vast conglomerate or aggregation of loose rocks, as if sometime it had rained rocks ... (*J2 339*)

Darwin: The gloomy depth of the ravine well accorded with the universal signs of violence. On every side were lying irregular masses of rock and torn-up trees; other trees, though still erect, were decayed to the heart and ready to fall. [...] For in these still solitudes, Death, instead of Life, seemed the predominant spirit. *(V 210)*

Thoreau: Some aerial and finer spirited winds roared through the ravine all night—from time to time arousing our fire—[...] It reminded of the creation of the old epic and dramatic poets, of Atlas, Vulcan, the Cyclops, and Prometheus—such was the Caucasus and the rock where he was bound. (*J2 338*)

Similarly, the same parallel comes into play with the narrations, which in Darwin, that is in the natural history text, and subsequently in Thoreau too, constitute as we have already said, a "fluctuating stasis", a temporary digression, though not superfluous, from the diegetic chain. There is a page taken again from the section regarding Tierra del Fuego (Chapter IX of the *Voyage)* in which Darwin suspends his (diegetic) anthropological descriptions of the tribal organization in Tierra del Fuego, in order to pass on to the brutal killing of a child thrown to the rocks for having dropped some precious eggs; he continues then with considerations that are no longer scientific, that is descriptive, but are personal, that is to say, narrative:

> The habitable land is reduced to the stones on the beach; in search of food they are compelled unceasingly to wander from spot to spot, and so steep is the coast, that they can only move about in their wretched canoes. They cannot know the feeling of having a home, and still less that of having domestic affection; for the husband is to the wife a brutal master to a laborious slave. Was a more horrid deed ever perpetrated, than that witnessed on the west coast by Byron, who saw a wretched mother pick up her bleeding dying infant-boy, whom her husband had mercilessly

> dashed to the stones for dropping a basket of sea-eggs! How little can the higher powers of the mind be brought into play: what is there for imagination to picture, or reason to compare, for judgment to decide upon? *(V 217)*

A similar methodological procedure is found in *Cape Cod* at the beginning of which there is a sudden movement from the (diegetic) description of the Cape to the narration (historically contemporary with his first visit to the Cape) of the wreck of the brigantine *Jasper,* coming from Europe, and the continuous washing up of wreckage and bodies. There is even the body of a young girl who seems to form a pair — in as much as she is an innocent victim — with the young Tierra del Fuego boy; both are wrecked by uncontrollable natural forces. Thoreau, like Darwin, suddenly interrupts his natural history considerations to "narrate" the wreck and some episodes in particular:

> One man was keen to identify a particular body, and one undertaker or carpenter was calling to another to know in what box a certain child was put. I saw many marble feet and matted heads as the cloths were raised, and one livid, swollen and mangled body of a drowned girl—who probably had intended to go out to service in some American family—[...] with wide open and staring eyes, yet lustreless, dead-lights; or, like the cabin windows of a stranded vessel, filled with sand. *(CC 5-6)*

We have stated that Thoreau was searching for a writing model that Transcendentalism itself — fluctuating between the essay and lecture forms, between the sermon or address and the journal (essential for the neophyte) — did not seem to know how to propose forcefully; a writing model that would allow for an objective achievement and verbalization of the Truth. And we have also stated that he felt he had found that model in History, or rather in Natural History. At this point, it is important to understand why, for it is here that the theorem is worked out.

The passage from, or better the perfection of, History to Natural History, has its origin in the problematic relationship of Thoreau and Transcendentalism with that Past that has not intersected the personal experience of the observer and cannot

therefore be a guarantee of the observer's own truths. Indeed, not by chance does the Emerson of *Representative Men* see in Biography (that is in history filtered through a subject) the only possible method of historical analysis. (Emerson *619ff)* And Thoreau sees in an "exaggerated" history the only possible means of recovering events that otherwise are not supported by direct testimony:

> Exaggerated history is poetry, and truth referred to a new standard [...] He who cannot exaggerate is not qualified to utter truth. *(EE 264-65)*

If the exaggeration moves in a mythical direction, that is even better (the archetypal figure of Prometheus, so recurrent in Thoreau):

> To some extent mythology is only the most ancient history and biography l....J We moderns .., collect only the raw materials of biography and history, "memoirs to serve for a history", which itself is but the material to serve for a mythology *(W 60).*

Natural history, instead, that is to say even the ancient history of the universe, but observable through the day-to-day, and therefore the present, is what permits Thoreau to free himself from any obligation to the past.:

> While I am listening to the waves which ripple and break on this shore, I am absolved from all obligation to the past *(Ibidem).*

From here comes his decision to chose Natural History as his point of departure in developing a *literary* model (let us not forget that Thoreau has just declared, "I have chosen letters...") capable of carrying him through facts to the truth. And it is from the adoption of this model that the first essays are born, including "Natural History of Massachusetts" (the first substantial essay written by Thoreau following his degree, and published in the Transcendentalist journal *The Dial* [*NHE 1-29*]); as well as his conceptualization of geography as history in the most complete sense (therefore economic history too, for example), which finds

its simplification in the journey along the Concord and Merrimack rivers made together with his brother John in 1839, and published ten years later with the title, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers.*

This informing digression on the role of Natural History in Thoreau allows us to return to the initial postulate through the founding element of the Natural History Writers' method: description. The natural historian must know how to observe the facts, he must know how to break reality into its component parts (as Linnaeus said) in order to classify it better, he must collect elements. In a word — Thoreau noted in his diary on January 22 1852 — he must know how to describe the world, starting from the collecting of disconnected data:

> Having by chance recorded a few disconnected thoughts and then brought them into juxtaposition, they suggest a whole new field in which it was possible to labor and to think. Thought begat thought. *(J4 277-78*)

At this point it is even clearer why Thoreau elected Gilbert White or John Muir or John Burroughs to be his reference texts (although maintaining a distance from them at times): these were among the Natural History Writers famous in the early nineteenth century in America for their minute descriptions of the new world. And one understands why Thoreau is among the most faithful readers of Charles Darwin, starting from those five years spent travelling round the world, from 1831 to 1836, on board the *Beagle,* and which perhaps captivated him because of their presentation in diary, in journal form.

At this point the way Thoreau's mind works can be seen more clearly due to successive binominal terms that are used back-to-front in comparison with their normal forms. He does not limit himself to adopting the Natural History Writers' method as a literary model for a first-level de-genera *shift* (that is to say the already-identified crossed overturning of the original binominal terms of narration-diegesis and description-digression); in his writing he adopts the Natural History Writers' model in as much as it is a representation on a reduced scale of a much bigger model

that is Natural History *per se.* It is as if he adopts for his writing the same model of operation as the universe, or rather the same model with which a universe as understood Transcendentalistically manifests itself to man.

So is Thoreau a scientist in the last analysis? No. If in the end Henry David Thoreau, with *A Week* or with *Walden,* or with the *Journal,* does not provide us with novels, neither does he provide us with historical-scientific treatises in the canonical sense; because as a writer using several de-genera levels, at this point he makes use of yet another *shift* in the context of his textual ascendent: the Transcendentalist shift towards the symbolic. This can also take us back to another consideration: if in order to rewrite the definitive Natural History text (his incomplete and unpublished *Book of Concord)* he does not change continent but travels almost exclusively on foot through his native New England (with the few exceptions that we know of), it is because Walden or the Merrimack River, or Ktaadn or Cape Cod are already his Galapagos and his Tierra del Fuego. His field of action is circumscribed because horizontal exploration, which is fundamental for the scientist, can be carried out in the complementary verticality of his ascent of a mountain or his descent into an abyss. A verticality that inhabits not so much the folds of his descriptions as much as the folds of his narrative sequences. These last are not superfluous, even when they are digressions from the diegesis and are often mounted into his descriptions in order to give us the key to the universe of the metaphor and the symbol — in a word to the universe of the *higher laws* of Transcendentalism.

This seems to be the bottom line of Thoreau and his Transcendentalist speculation; this seems to be the model of the virtual function of the second and most important part of his theorem. Indeed, if in the first part of the theorem the adoption of the model of the Natural History Writers was postulated in order to cast the literary *in* the scientific, to break the territorial boundaries of genre, it is in this his last shift towards metaphor and symbol that he recovers the aesthetic text within the scientific text, applying a final re-equilibrium of emphasis.

The sounding of Walden Pond, an episode I will refer to

briefly, is another example of this final shift towards the higher laws of transcendence. In January 1846 (again the same year as the climbing of the Ktaadn and the first trip to Cape Cod, his first significant movement away from Concord), Thoreau sounds the depth of the pond, held to be bottomless in Indian legend and in the minds of the more superstitious inhabitants of Concord. The lake proves to have an undulating sandy bed that hides no entrance to hell. The sounding, described in Chapter XVI of *Walden,* and so precise as to be within a few centimetres of today's measurements, was carried out by Thoreau with extreme scientific precision; but shortly afterwards the same criteria used by Thoreau for scientific purposes are immediately distorted in an attempt at symbolic measurement of human intellect. In the same way the extraordinary narrative sequence of the death of the pickerel with their "transcendental beauty" (again in Chapter XVI of *Walden),* or the sequence whose protagonist is the poor girl victim from the wreck of the *Jasper,* with her wide-open, inanimate eyes that are ringed with sand like the inanimate portholes of a ship — these are rings in a narrative passage that are introduced into the descriptions of a celestial abyss such is Ktaadn, or a marine abyss complete with wreck such is the ocean here, and these rings bring us to the Transcendentalist universe of metaphor and symbol, and in a literary manner — "I have chosen letters..." — they ferry us towards Melville's ocean.

In the end indeed, just as the method of sounding the greater or lesser depth of a pond experimented at Walden might be applied by analogy to the symbolic fathoming of a human being; just as the already-mentioned pickerel, the prematurely dead fish bound for heaven with a "few convulsive quirks", allow Thoreau to exorcise on the page and in himself — Transcendentalistically — the death of his brother John, at the same time this double overturning of Thoreau's — firstly applied to the canon of genre and the statute of "description" and "narration", and then to his own scientific intertexts — is a powerful attempt at resolving Transcendentalism's linguistic *impasse;* and perhaps this reveals the true figure of this writer, a solitary inhabitant of the distance that separates — and

therefore unites — literature and the philosophy of science.

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