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The Panorama in/of Nineteenth-century New England: Wording Nature's Spectacle

"I went to see a panorama of the Rhein" – Henry David Thoreau notes in his late essay "Walking," and goes on: "It was like a dream of the Middle Ages. I floated down its historic stream in something more than imagination, under bridges built by the Romans, and repaired by later heroes, past cities and castles whose very names were music to my ears, and each of which was the subject of a legend… I floated along under the spell of enchantment, as if I had been transported to an heroic age, and breathed an atmosphere of chivalry." Thoreau's immediately following paragraph opens in exactly the same way: "Soon after I went to see a panorama," he begins, but this time it was a panorama of the Mississippi and the impression it made was both similar and very different. "As before I had looked up the Moselle, – Thoreau imparts his experience, – now I looked up the Ohio and the Missouri and heard the legends of Dubuque and of Wenona's cliff, […] I saw that this was a Rhine stream of a different kind; that the foundations of castles were yet to be laid, and the famous bridges were yet to be thrown over the river; and I felt this *was the heroic age itself*" (*Essays* 128-9). That Thoreau's course of thinking here belongs to what is usually considered the manifest destiny mainstream of the essay "Walking" might well be considered self-evident. I find it telling, however, that a way for Thoreau to

make his point in the essay is by involving the popular visual medium of his time.

"Moving panoramas" or "moving dioramas," as these entertainments were also called, literally flourished in America's frontier era of Manifest Destiny (Oetterman 323-344). As Kevin J. Avery points out, "panoramas perfectly accommodated that age. Most of them were portraits of vast territories, represented in linear sequence giving the viewer the impression of traveling over the landscape, often by boat or train" (Avery XI). Floating down the stream of the panorama was "something more than imagination," Thoreau puts it in "Walking." And Thoreau loved to travel, especially on foot or by boat, and always in his thinking; the "profession" – or "art" – of walking was above all his own; he was a Walker, a Saunterer, for whom physical and spiritual walking were one and who considered the proper derivation of the word "saunterer" to be from "Sainte Terre," or Holy Land. Thoreau would therefore never miss a chance to saunter, the one provided by the already quite popular in his day 360-degree visual medium included. "I went to see a panorama" – the phrase he uses twice in his late essay "Walking" – was, actually, a common reference to an already common practice in his native New England in the 1850s. However, the fact that in an essay devoted to his philosophical concept of walking Thoreau involves references to the panorama, or rather to the "travels" into far-away landscapes and historical times the popular visual medium was offering, bears a significance, which I think needs to be underscored. In other words, that the 1850s, or the decade of Thoreau's most intense mature writerly work, was also the decade of moving panorama fever (*Ibid*.), is not a mere coincidence of little importance. Clearly in "Walking" Thoreau refers to the panorama in order to illustrate – or visualize – the advantages of the West,

"which is but another name for the Wild," over the tamed, too civilized East; moreover, he engages the popularity of the panorama among his immediate Concord and Concord area audience to make this point even stronger. Hardly, however, the fact that Thoreau puts together the popular idea and the popular visual medium of the time for the sake of creating an impressive visual image deserves special attention. What I find significant here is *the suggestive power of the panorama* once it entered Thoreau's thinking and writing.

Thoreau was never enthusiastic about landscape painting always preferring the landscape itself. But – thrilled as he was with the technical innovations and, in general, the scientific advancement of his day – it seems likely that the panoramic paintings in specific, with their capability of revealing an all-encompassing view of a particular landscape, gave him the idea of how to achieve a similar effect with words. Dealing with H. D. Thoreau's late essays, mostly "Autumnal Tints" and "Wild Apples," in what follows I will underscore their intense visuality as a mode of mature Thoreau's nature per se, already environmentalist thinking. My point is that Thoreau's as if winding 360-degree verbal panorama of New England's Fall is made to provide a most thorough view of his native landscape and thus, by keeping its readers/viewers immersed in the powerful, *nearly optical* illusion of being surrounded with the real amazing landscape, it does, in fact, *preserve* the exceptionally picturesque Concord environment – poetically, ecocentrically, transcendentally, why not even really.

In the beginning of "Autumnal Tints," finished in the winter of 1859, Thoreau writes: "I formerly thought that it would be worth the while to get a specimen leaf from each changing tree, shrub, and herbaceous plant, when it had acquired its brightest characteristic color, in its transition from the green

to the brown state, outline it, and copy its color exacty, with paint, in a book, which should be entitled "October, or Autumnal Tints" […] What a memento such a book would be!" But since he has made "but little progress toward such a book," Thoreau explains, he has "endeavored, instead, *to describe all these bright tints*;" so what he offers are "some extracts from my notes," or verbal pictures of the purple grasses, the red maple, the elm, the fallen leaves, the sugar maple, the scarlet oak – following the order in which the autumnal tints present themselves, Thoreau makes sure to emphasize (*The Essays* 178-9). As a result of such ordering, Thoreau's verbal paintings as if *move*, coming one after another as the season advances; the intensely visual effect thus created is nothing less than that of a "moving panorama" of the Concord area Fall.

1846 was the year when an itenarant scene-painter named John Banvard brought his "3-mile" picture of the Mississippi River from the frontier town of Loisville, KY, where he painted it, to Boston, where an estimated two million people saw it; at least four more panoramas of the subject circulated well into the 1850s, the decade of the moving panorama fever (Avery, *ibid*.). Henry Thoreau must have seen at least one of those panoramas and the impression he was left with – along with that of panoramas of European landscapes – he recorded, as already mentioned, in "Walking," first delivered as a lecture at the Concord Lyceum on April 23, 1851. Although Thoreau went on working on the manuscript – as, in fact, he did on all his texts, be they older or new, in the course of what would be the final dozen years of his life – this part of the essay remained untouched. Hardly the reason was simply the illustrative potential of the panorama – moreover, Thoreau would never "simplify" that way. Rather, I think, he kept the panorama episode for the sake of the representational, or visual pattern

the popular medium had suggested to him – a pattern he would use a lot in the 1850s, though in a way very different and certainly far from the popular. All Thoreau's late work demonstrates his growing passion for *accuracy of description*, or, in Lawrence Buell's words, an "increase in representational density as the writing process advanced" (*Environmental Imagination*, 116). Mindful of all the scientific, philosophical, poetical, and personal reasons lying behing this shift in Thoreau's thinking and, respectively, writing, I am inclined to believe that the visual medium of the day provided him with a useful tool to achieve the accuracy he was becoming more and more passionate for. It suggested a way to combine optics with writing, the visual with the word, or rather a possibility to unlock the optical potential of the word and make his writing a visual medium itself. This is how his descriptions of the bright autumnal tints become the wished for "memento" he speaks about in the beginning of his late essay by the same title; this is how his words *preserve* the gorgeously colorful New England leaves for ever – and even better than paints.

On February 22, 1859 Thoreau read "Autumnal Tints" in Worcester, MA, holding up as illustration a large, handsome scarlet oak leaf displayed on a board. Although mid-nineteenth century New England was providing quite a wide audience for natural history work (Buell 412-416), the initial reactions were contradictory: someone remarked he had seen plenty of autumnal leaves, thank you very much; Caroline Healey Dall thought the lecture was charming, but Thoreau was not; Thomas Wentworth Higginson, however, declared it "one of the best lectures" of the season (Petrulionis 47-48). A week later Thoereau read "Autumnal Tints" in Concord – to "constant spontaneous bursts" of applause. As many times before, Bronson Alcott proved himself to be one of Thoreau's best hearers when he

commented: “A leaf becomes a Cosmos, a Genesis, and Paradise preserved.” (Dean and Hoag 299-303). Made by a true transcendentalist, Alcott’s comment infallibly caught the metaphorical power of Thoreau’s autumnal leaves; however – and typical of hazy Alcott – it missed their literal, or representational power. In other words, Thoreau’s fellow Concordian’s comment missed Concord, whileas in Thoreau’s essay Concord is omnipresent and the paradise it preserves is Concord’s autumnal paradise of the late 1850s, the one Thoreau knew better than anyone else. Emerson’s well-known observation on Thoerau’s genius to infer “universal law from the single fact” (“Thoreau”) is even less specific than Alcott’s; neither of the two fellow transcendentalists discussed Thoreau’s genius to make “the single fact” – or the single leaf – *immediately and quite sensualy present*. I am not merely underscoring that Thoreau was, perhaps, more Kantian than anyone else in his New England transcendentalist milieu; rather, I am referring to what Lawrence Buell called “Thoreau’s shift from homocentrism to ecocentrism” (*The Environmental Imagination*), as, in my thinking, this very transition – along with his boundless love for his native Concord – underlies Thoreau’s marked penchant for *visuality* in his late work. The growing representational density of Thoreau’s mature writing is thus revealed in its peculiar function to *preserve* – in both the lirerary and the environmentalist sense. Had he copied the New England Fall colors exactly, with paint, in a book, “you would need only to turn over its leaves to take a ramble through the autumn woods,” Thoreau says in the beginning of “Autumnal Tints;” but “it would be *better* still,” he adds, “if I could *preserve the leaves themselves, unfaded*” (178). And this is exactly what he achieves in his lecture/essay – through words. “Autumnal Tints” is nothing less than an album of masterful verbal “photographs,” which, unlike

naturalistic paintings, do not copy, but preserve the leaves themselves, unfaded – the Concord autumn leaves as they were in the 1850s.

Thoreau's intensely visual poetic imagery is breathtakingly beautiful; however, the beauty it captures so masterfully is a beauty *endangered*. That deforestation was a problem for both nature and man Thoreau was aware of even before his sojourn at Walden Pond; his deepening biocentrism over the post-Walden years was his reaction against the rapid devastation of nature he was witnessing. Though in *Walden* the denuded shores of the pond are mentioned, the book allows nothing to shatter its overwhelming optimism – to the extent even that in *Walden*'s seasonal agenda there is no room left for autumn. With the time passing, however, autumn – with all its symbolic and immediate references to death – becomes more and more present in Thoreau's work. Finally, in "Autumnal Tints," as Laura Dassow Walls observes in her recent biography of Thoreau, "Thoreau anticipates his own death." (*Thoreau. A Life* 130). As it turned out, delivered for the third time on December 11, 1860 in Waterbury, Connecticut, "Autumnal Tints" was Thoreau's very last lecture. The shadow of death is almost tangible in "Autumnal Tints" – in fact, the essay celebrates nature's extraordinary beauty in the face of death (perhaps Thoreau's own included). That autumn means gorgeous beauty quickly transformed into fallen, decaying leaves is only a part of the natural cycle of life and can bring only a temporal sense of ending; in "Autumnal Tints" however – as in all his late work, especially in "The Maine Woods" – Thoreau foresees and laments the *unnatural*, detached from the cycle of life, man-caused death of the trees. His celebration of New England's autumnal tints is also a celebration of a beauty which is threatened and may be lost very soon; very soon, it seems, the only true ramble through the autumn woods of the 1850s may be the ramble

through the leaves of Thoreau's essay – therefore these leaves are supposed to *preserve* nature's leaves unfaded and forever. Present day science has left no doubt that Thoreau's "green" late work provides knowledge about the Concord area ecosystem in the 1850s which is fundamental to the study of all its transformations ever since. In his 2017 book *The Boatman: Henry Thoreau's River Years* Robert M. Thorson approaches Thoreau as diagnostitian of the "highly disrupted Anthropocene landscape" (19) that his region had increasingly become in his lifetime, and in his most recent 2024 book, *Thoreau. Thinking Disobediently*, Lawrence Buell points out that today Thoreau's late work "serves as a valued resource for life-scientists studying the history of the plants and forests of the Northeast and the effects of climate change" (73).

This said, it may not be surprising that – unlike in Worcester – there is no record of Thoreau holding up as illustration any handsome leaf specimen from the Concord woods while delivering his "Autunmal Tints" lecture in his home town in early 1859. He was, after all, speaking before his fellow Concordians about their *native* woods; in this case, therefore, he seems to have found it appropriate not to provide illustrations, but to take the well-known out of the daily routine, to *defamiliarize* it and make it truly *seen*, that is, to make a yet unseen *spectacle* out of the habitually unnoticed. At the end of *Walden* Thoreau had stated that "Only that day dawns to which we are awake;" in "Autumnal Tints," after a dozen post-Walden years, he was still pleading the same, though already by presenting his verbal "moving panorama" of gorgeous autumn elms, sugar maples, and scarlet oaks, thus as if suggesting that only those woods can last to which we are awake. Was Thoreau's Concord audience his best audience? In a way it was, because of having the potential to relate Thoreau's extraordinarily visual art of

expression to the immediate reality of the surrounding landscape and, possibly, delight in it to a greater extent. However, Thoreau meant much more than delight. “Unable to redeem his townsmen by morally awakening them – as Robert Milder properly observes, – Thoreau could at least work *to save* a portion of redemptive nature till their descendants should have grown wise enough to profit from it” (199). “Autumnal Tints” is exactly that – a portion of mid-nineteenth century New England nature saved by means of astounding verbal “photographs” which transform all listeners and readers into an audience of “spectators” in the hope of “waking them up,” be they Thoreau’s contemporaries or their descendants.

In February1860, just a year after he delivered “Autumnal Tints” and before this same Concord audience, Thoreau displayed another such portion of Concord vicinity landscape by giving what turned out to be his final speech at the Concord Lyceum – “Wild Apples.” Intensely poetic, this speech took up anew the praise of the West and the Wild from “Walking,” but, even more than “Autumnal Tints,” was filled with gloominess and nostalgia. “The era of the Wild Apple will soon be past. It is a fruit which will probably become extinct in New England,” Thoreau warned his last Concord listeners, but – all the the more so because of that – provided them with a most enchanting visual image: “Apples, these I mean, unspeakably fair […] Painted by the frost, some a uniform clear bright yellow, or red, or crimson, as if their spheres had regularly revolved, and enjoyed the influence of the sun on all sides alike, – nnn some with the faintest pink blush imaginable, […] some touched with a greenish rust, like a fine lichen, here and there, with crimson blotches or eyes more or less confluent and fiery and wet” (216). Verbal pictures like this leave no doubt that Thoreau was a preeminently visual writer – and moreover, as recent scholarship has observed, a visual writer whose spiritual vocation was more dependant on

real seeing than that of Emerson (Peck 50). Thoreau surely understood best why "the noblest part of man's noblest feature is named from this fruit, 'the apple of the eye'" (202), finding the sensuality of this metaphor much more appealing than the abstractness of Emerson's "transparent eyeball." His 1860 Concord lecture offered wild apples both skillfully seen and masterfuly displayed – after "Autumnal Tints," one more "moving" verbal panorama, providing the audience with the chance to walk – and and *see* – with Thoreau.

Through all his late work, which often included lecturing, Thoreau was defending the cause of Nature, or, as stated in "Walking," was declaring his wish "to speak a word *for* Nature." But speaking *for* Nature also meant to let Nature speak for herself, namely, to find his writerly ways to make Nature express herself "directly." The success of Thoreau's late natural history essays Robert Milder explains as resulting in Thoreau's "new power and willingness to write about himself obliquely" (184), or to foreground other things than himself. This same tendency towards a minimally mediated, objectivist rendering of natural phenomena H. Daniel Peck observes in Thoreau's Journal of the 1850's and finds it even "modernist" (73). Although undoubtedly part of the same conceptual endeavor, Thoreau's portrayals of New England's autumnal tints and wild apples, set in the format of public lectures to later become essays, are executed in a mode both same and different: they are maximally precise, as if utterly objectivist, and, at the same time, maximally mediated, as far as the man behind the words is persistently and clearly present. Or shall we say the man behind the eyepiece? I am tempted to think that writing in the 1850's, the decade of the daguerreotype and the moving panorama fever, Thoreau saw the new practice of providing documentary visual accounts of reality as a possible literary practice as well; more specifically, he saw a way to let Nature express herself directly by "documenting" it *visually*, as in a photograph. But letting

Nature plead her cause unmediatedly was just one side of Thoreau's environmentalist project; its other side was to actively and openly defend Nature's cause, to be Nature's advocate. Therefore the "photographer" would be both "erased," as if completely personally uninvolved in what he was documenting, and, at the same time, noticeably present; in both cases his major argument pro Nature's cause would be above all *beauty*. I would like to conclude by maintaining that in a time, when photography was still only representational, Thoreau the visionary, the transcendentalist, the poet, was already providing fine-art verbal photography – and moreover, fine-art photography with environmentalist cause.

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