

Igina Tattoni  
“Sapienza” Università di Roma

## The Stuffed Turkey

### Abstract

Using the “stuffed turkey” as a metaphor for a culture which has lost contact with spontaneity and simplicity, this essay offers some examples of Native American and Puritan poems together with passages from H.D. Thoreau’s *Notebooks* in which the recovery of the spiritual value of Nature emerges as essential to lead a “good life”, in fact the only good life possible. Large part of the essay deals with the analysis of Louisa May Alcott’s short story *An Old-Fashioned Thanksgiving*, in which the preparation of a “proper” stuffed turkey and its disastrous outcome reveal a surprising turn: deprived of its “stuffing”, the turkey resumes its role as a symbol of shared company and good feelings, thus hinting back, with all its contradictions, to atmosphere of the first Thanksgiving celebrated in 1630.

Surprisingly, the stuffed turkey, the icon recipe of the Holiday Season tables in the United States, has not been created in America but in Europe.

As a fowl, the turkey does come from the West Indies and the Maya did not only use it as food but as an ornament for its bright colored plumage. When it arrived on the courtly tables of Europe it soon became stuffed and then, stuffed as it was, it went back to the States where it became a national dish.

Its evolution or, rather, its in-volution, could be taken as a sign of a culture that, especially from the XIX century onward, has privileged the way of “heavy stuff”, rather than the way of simplicity and spontaneity.

I will propose here some Indian and Puritan poems and a few passages from Thoreau’s prose work as an opportunity to reflect their conviction that «the only good life possible is one “natural” in a sense that society has tend-

ed more and more to corrupt»<sup>1</sup>. In other words I propose these passages to reconsider a better and full relationship with Nature and with ourselves.

It is also useful to remember that the new generation of post-Revolutionary writers were striving to create a non-traditional, purely American form of literature. James Russell Lowell (1819-1891) expressed this desire in this way: «There is only one thing better than tradition, and that is the original and eternal life out of which all tradition takes its rise. *It was this life which the reformers demanded*, with more or less clearness of consciousness and expression, life in politics, life in literature, life in religion»<sup>2</sup>.

Native American Poetry offers quite a powerful example of what flowing life in literature might be – and, as we know, the following translation into written English does not help but rather deemphasizes the effect of those lines that were meant to be orally expressed:

Big Blue Mountain Spirit,  
The home made of blue clouds,  
The cross made of the blue mirage,  
*There you have begun to live,*  
*There is the life of goodness,*  
I am grateful for that made of goodness there,  
Big Yellow Mountain Spirit in the South,  
*Your spiritually hale body is made of yellow clouds;*  
Leader the Mountain Spirits, Holy Mountain Spirit,  
*You live by means of the good of this life.*  
Big White Mountain Spirit in the west,  
*Your spiritually hale body is made of the white mirage;*  
Holy Mountain Spirit, leader of the Mountain Spirits,  
I am happy over your words,  
You are happy over my words.  
Big Black Mountain Spirit in the north,  
*Your spiritually hale body is made of black clouds;*  
In that way, Big Black Mountain Spirit,  
Holy Mountain Spirit, leader of the Mountain Spirits,  
*I am happy over your words,*  
*You are happy over my words,*

---

<sup>1</sup> Eliot Porter, *In Wildness Is the Preservation of the World*, Ballantine Book, New York, 1967, p. 12 (emphasis mine).

<sup>2</sup> Felicità Jurlaro, *A Thematic Study of the History of American Literature from the Beginning to 2010*, Casa Editrice Università la Sapienza, Roma, 2011, p. 31 (emphasis mine).

*Now it is good*<sup>3</sup>.

Health, happiness, spirit, colors, a sense of orientation in a joyous majestic natural setting, and, last but not least, the recognition of the power of words. All that for Native Americans was not part of a TV spot but of a deep cultural credo!

The second example I have chosen is from the Puritan culture, a culture that we have learned to consider distant from the Native American one, actually often dramatically opposed to it. The poet is Edward Taylor (1642?-1729), the poem the first stanza of his version of *Psalm 19*:

*To the Chief Musician: A Psalm of David*  
The Heaven do declare (in truth)  
The Glory of God  
Also the firmament doth shew  
His handy works abroad.  
Day unto day vents Speech: and night  
To night tells knowledge (choice)  
There is no Speech not language quite  
Where's not heard their voice<sup>4</sup>.

Surprisingly, some of the themes are exactly the same: the spiritual glory of nature and the importance of a sort of omnipresent voice.

The passages from Thoreau's *Notebooks* bring about another important, more conceptual issue, that is the perception of a degrading process in natural environment that the poet has just discovered and analyzes with a keen eye. The first one adds to Taylor's description of the Heavens: «Most men – Thoreau claims – do not care for nature and would sell their share in all her beauty for a given sum. Thank God men have not yet learned to fly so they can lay waste the sky as well as the earth»<sup>5</sup>.

The skies then, from biblical to Thoreau's writings, are considered as a sort of reservoir of natural authentic beauty.

---

<sup>3</sup> John Collier, *American Indian Ceremonial Dances*, Bounty Books, New York, 1972 (emphasis mine).

<sup>4</sup> AA.VV., *The Heath Anthology of American Literature*, D.C. Heath and Company, Lexington, Massachusetts, Toronto, v. I, p. 347.

<sup>5</sup> Eliot Porter, *In Wildness Is the Preservation of the World* cit., p. 7 (emphasis mine).

Along the same lines Thoreau's second passage gets us close to the title and the main issue of this paper, the wild turkey:

When I consider that the nobler animals have been exterminated here – the cougar, the panther, lynx, wolverine, wolf, bear, moose, the deer, the beaver, *the turkey*, etc., etc., – I cannot but feel as if I lived in a tame, and as it were, emasculated country [...]. I take infinite pains to know all the phenomena of spring, for instance, thinking that I have here the entire form, and then to my chagrin, *I hear that it is but an imperfect copy that I possess and read, that my ancestors have torn out many of the first leaves and grandest passages and mutilated it in many places*<sup>6</sup>.

The extermination of wild animals is a sign of ecological degradation. Thoreau points out a natural degrading process which seems to be accompanied by a parallel shifting from spoken to written language. When compared to the Puritan and the Native American world evoked by the previous passages, we notice an emphasis on the printed world imagery: «I hear that it is an imperfect *copy* that I possess and *read*, that my ancestors have torn out many of *the first leaves* and *grandest passages* and mutilated it in many places»<sup>7</sup>.

The extermination of the turkey is here given as evidence of an inexorable and painful degrading of the environment.

Though exterminated in Concord, the turkey, almost half century later, is still present in Anglo American Literature. It is not mentioned as a most noble but exterminated animal but as the main dish in “An Old-Fashioned Thanksgiving” dinner in a short story by Louis May Alcott.

*An Old-Fashioned Thanksgiving* (1881) tells the story of a special celebration, the first in which a family group of young adolescents have the necessity and the opportunity to prepare a thanksgiving dinner completely on their own. When the adults will come home they will be the guests for that evening. If the food is not totally satisfying the atmosphere is definitely merry and full of friendly and lovely feelings. But, what is most important from our point of view, the main failure of that evening is the cooking results of the traditional stuffed turkey. Just at the beginning of the cooking process the stuffing causes some problems: « “[...] there's lot to do, and I don't

---

<sup>6</sup> *Ivi*, p. 10 (emphasis mine).

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* (emphasis mine).

mind saying to you I'm dreadful dubersome about the turkey" – says one of the girls – "It's all ready but the stuffing, and the roasting is as easy as can be". "I know, but it's the stuffin' that troubles me", said Tilly». Later on, after overcoming an unexpected mishap and when the cooking is almost done it is still the turkey the most problematic issue: «"My sakes alive—the turkey is all burnt one side [...]". "Well I can't help it. I couldn't think of victuals when I expected to be eaten alive myself, could I?"».

Eventually when the family is around the table, ready to start their Thanksgiving dinner

their pride got a fall; for the first person who tasted the stuffing [...] nearly choked over the bitter morsel. "Tilly Bassett, whatever made you put wormwood and catnip in your stuffin'?" demanded Ma, trying not to be severe, for all the rest were laughing, and Tilly looked ready to cry. "I did it," said Prue, nobly taking all the blame, which caused Pa to kiss her on the spot, and declare that it didn't do a mite of harm, for the turkey was all right. [...] "Don't worry about the old stuffin' and puddin', deary – nobody cared and Ma said we did surprisin' well for such young girls"<sup>8</sup>.

This final scenes remind us of the style of the March family in *Little Women*. But here is the turkey that gets our attention. Three main considerations:

— The young ones' first Thanksgiving cooking on their own can be read as a sort of a metaphor of independence.

— It is the stuffing that creates trouble.

— Ma's and Pa's wisdom suggests not to worry about the stuffing.

The metaphor of independence does not need explanation and could be discussed in details some other times.

The stuffing, on the contrary, offers the opportunity for a good deal of interesting reflections while reading about the history of the stuffed turkey.

The turkey [*Meleagris Gallopavus*] is a fowl coming from Latin America. It is in Mexico that we find its oldest traces in a period that goes from 200 B.C. to 700 A.C. According to Alexander Dumas, the turkey was already appreciated at the dinner tables of ancient Greeks and Romans, but then it

---

<sup>8</sup> Louisa May Alcott, *An Old-Fashioned Thanksgiving and Other Stories*, Penguin, New York, 1995, [www.ibiblio.org/eldritch/lma/oft.html](http://www.ibiblio.org/eldritch/lma/oft.html).

disappears from historical chronicles to reappear only in 1525. In that year Gonzales Fernando de Oviedo, Governor of Hispaniola (Dominican Republic), accurately describes it in his *Summario de la Historia Natural de las Indias Occidentales*. Some historians claim that was Christopher Columbus to import the turkey in Spain from where it spread all over Europe. The Portuguese and Spaniards called it *Pavones de las Indias* and the French *Coq d'Inde*<sup>9</sup>.

But the most famous turkey remains the one that sits on the tables on Thanksgiving Day celebrating one of the oldest and more traditional national feast in the United States that falls on the last Thursday in November. The most American of all holidays, Thanksgiving was started by governor Bradford of Plymouth colony, suggested as a national celebration by President George Washington in 1789 and then, after many controversies, officially instituted by Abraham Lincoln in 1863.

From Maya to Indian Natives and Puritans, once the wild turkey, probably brought by Christopher Columbus, arrived in Europe, lost its wild dignity and became a symbol of courtly life. In England the term “turkey” derived most probably from the fact that some Turkish merchants introduced it in Great Britain where it first appeared at the table of Henry the VIII, approximately in 1524, and, from there, it arrived in France.

In 1565 we have evidence of a group of Monks near Bourges who raised turkeys in their farm and of some missionary monks of that same order who, eventually, brought the turkey back to the “new world”.

What is certain is that during its long staying on the royal tables of Europe the turkey was transformed into a sort of strongbox and filled with all sort of stuffing: chestnut, bilberry, onions, bread etc. etc. It would be interesting to inquire into all the implications that this transformation implies especially with regard to the theme of memory, intimacy and possession but we could do this some other times<sup>10</sup>.

---

<sup>9</sup> W. F. Porter, *Family Meleagrididae (Turkeys)*, in J. del Hoyo, A. Elliott, J. Sargatal (eds.), *Handbook of the Birds of the World, Vol. 2. New World Vultures to Guineafowl*, Lynx Edicions, Barcelona, 1994, pp. 364–375.

<sup>10</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *La Poetica dello Spazio*, Dedalo libri, Bari, 1957.

Here I want rather to point out the relationship between the image of the «noblest wild animal» evoked by Thoreau and that of the “strongbox” suggested by the stuffed turkey on the royal tables of Europe. The fact that the stuffed turkey has become the symbol of the most American of all holidays shows quite effectively that when America faced the issue of its own identity, rather than holding fast to the “less travelled road” of its own nature, it has preferred to go back and to recapture the leading values of Europe; such as wealth, power and structures. D.H. Lawrence expresses this same concept when he claims that «[the world] can’t pigeon-hole a real new experience. It can only dodge. The world is a great dodger, and the Americans the greatest. Because they dodge their own very selves»<sup>11</sup>.

Thoreau, on the contrary, claims that «this curious world which we inhabit is more wonderful than it is convenient, more beautiful than it is useful; it is more to be admired and enjoyed than used»<sup>12</sup>. What Native Americans, R.W. Emerson, H.D. Thoreau and even the Puritans in their own way, held strongly, that a «leaven of wildness is necessary for the health of the human spirit»<sup>13</sup> America seems to have forgotten in its rush to wealth and to control all nature.

It is surprising how L.M. Alcott – who knows, perhaps even unconsciously! – in her short story has described, in few ironic strokes, the intellectual disappointment toward that situation. On a Thanksgiving Day, a special Thanksgiving in which a group of young people is called to show their natural skills, the traditional stuffed turkey burns in the oven and it is exactly the “stuffin” – its most recent European “heritage” – that shows the greatest signs of failure. But Pa’ and Ma’, the older generation, in their loving attitude get from that episode a seed of wisdom, giving back to the turkey its original, “natural” American style. After all, even without stuffing or, probably, just because it was without stuffing, «the turkey was all right!».

In this short story, though among trials, difficulties, contradictions, as in the first thanksgiving of 1630, the turkey becomes again a symbol of shared company, good feelings, communications and “thanks-giving”. It is no

---

<sup>11</sup> D. H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature*, Penguin Books, 1971, p. 7

<sup>12</sup> Eliot Porter, *In Wildness Is the Preservation of the World* cit., p. 11.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

more, as in most courtly tables in Europe, a means of “stuffed” and stiff ostentation.

The seed of wisdom seems to suggest that, at times, in order to go forward, one has to go a little backward in time!



## BIBLIOGRAFIA

- ALCOTT L.M. (1995), *An Old-Fashioned Thanksgiving and Other Stories*, Penguin, New York, [www.ibiblio.org/eldritch/lma/oft.html](http://www.ibiblio.org/eldritch/lma/oft.html).
- AA.VV., *The Heath Anthology of American Literature*, D.C. Heath and Company, Lexington, Massachusetts, Toronto, v. I.
- BACHELARD G. (1957), *La Poetica dello Spazio*, Dedalo libri, Bari.
- COLLIER J. (1972), *American Indian Ceremonial Dances*, Bounty Books, New York.
- JURLARO F. (2011), *A Thematic Study of the History of American Literature from the Beginning to 2010*, Casa Editrice Università la Sapienza, Roma.
- LAWRENCE D.H. (1971), *Studies in Classic American Literature*, Penguin, New York.
- PORTER E. (1967), *In Wildness Is the Preservation of the World*, Ballantine Book, New York.
- PORTER W.F. (1994), *Family Meleagrididae (Turkeys)*, in J. del Hoyo, A. Elliott, J. Sargatal (eds.), *Handbook of the Birds of the World, Vol. 2. New World Vultures to Guineafowl*, Lynx Edicions, Barcelona, pp. 364–375.