

FRANÇOIS SPECQ, LAURA DASSOW WALLS, and MICHEL GRANGER, eds., *Thoreauvian Modernities: Transatlantic Conversations on an American Icon* (Athens: U of Georgia P, 2013), 310 pp.

In June 2009, Thoreau scholars from the United States and Europe (mostly France) convened in Lyon—"the first ever such meeting on European soil devoted to Thoreau," as the organizers insist (xi). *Thoreauvian Modernities: Transatlantic Conversations on an American Icon* is its outcome. Several of the sixteen contributions present compelling new ideas on hotly debated topics in recent Thoreau scholarship, particularly regarding Thoreau's intense preoccupation, in his later life, with recording the particularity of his natural surroundings. While *Walden* remains a touchstone for virtually all the critics in this collection, it is his Journal and "Kalendar" project that elicit the most fascinating readings. A few of the contributors, particularly Michel Granger, William Rossi, and David Robinson, focus on the book's nominal topic—Thoreau's relation to modernity—by negotiating Thoreau's critique of modernity with his modern conception of knowledge. But one clearly senses the editors' effort to graft a common theme onto a diverse set of inquiries. While readers interested in a systematic study of Thoreau's position vis-à-vis modernity should not expect too much from *Thoreauvian Modernities* (they might instead turn to the recent studies by Shannon Mariotti and Clemens Spahr as well as to the essays compiled by Jack Turner in the *The Political Companion*)¹, this does not make the book less worthwhile. The exigencies of marketing academic events and publications all too often require making false promises, but in this case ample compensation is offered by the book's—less marketable—quality of bringing together an international roster of experts whose common topic is quite simply Thoreau.

¹ Shannon Mariotti, *Thoreau's Democratic Withdrawal: Alienation, Participation, and Modernity* (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 2010); Clemens Spahr, *Radical Beauty: American Transcendentalism and the Aesthetic Critique of Modernity* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2011); Jack Turner, ed., *A Political Companion to Henry David Thoreau* (Lexington: UP of Kentucky, 2009).

Before considering a few of the more striking essays assembled here, some words are in order regarding an editorial decision that yields problems more severe than the collection's packaging. It seems accurate to refer to the book as conference proceedings rather than as an essay collection. Though surely revised with great care after their initial presentation at the conference, the pieces collected by the editors retain the somewhat provisional character of conference talks. The essays' main text seldom exceeds fifteen pages; in many cases it amounts to no more than ten. Brevity can be a virtue if it is the result of willful condensation, but here it tends to keep the authors from presenting fully developed arguments. Consequently, *Thoreauvian Modernities* collects spirited statements rather than landmark essays. Strangely, this feel of the provisional even affects some of the more extended pieces, like co-editor Laura Dassow Walls's otherwise fascinating "Walking West, Gazing East: Planetary on the Shores of Cape Cod." Reading Thoreau's *Cape Cod* against the essay "Walking," Walls proposes a "heuristic" (30; 36) for reading those of his texts (like the Journal, Kalendar, maps, and drawings) that "resist being read by more conventional literary tools" (31). Her heuristic consists of four qualities—mobility, planetarity, vascularity, and transjectivity—which she defines and describes in her analysis of *Cape Cod*. In brief, her four terms aim to show that Thoreau's texts are characterized by different kinds of relationality that create interstitial spaces between the self and changing surroundings (mobility), differently scaled perspectives (planetarity), networks of meaning that knot together the ideational, textual, and material (vascularity), and subject and object (transjectivity). Walls's conceptual quartet has the advantage of addressing head-on the literary scholars' central problem of being confronted by Thoreau with texts that question their own literariness. Indeed, several of the other contributors, such as Dieter Schulz, Kristen Case, and Michael Jonik, whose essays I discuss below, describe Thoreau's nature writings along similar lines, though without using Walls's terminology. But in how far her terms offer alternative "literary tools" (31) rather than figurative descriptions of Thoreau's texts remains unclear. Some of her earlier essays—particularly her brilliant engagement with Bruno Latour in "Romancing the Real: Thoreau's Technology of Inscription"—con-

stitute efforts in this vein that are much more carefully developed.²

One of the collection's most provocative contributions is Joseph Urbas's "'Being is the Great Explainer': Thoreau and the Ontological Turn in American Thought," which boldly projects the current-day "ontological turn" back onto the nineteenth century. Urbas's erudite essay draws on a wide range of writers associated with the Transcendentalist movement to underline his point that the New Englanders turned to "the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century writers [...] of the Platonizing period that preceded the psychological and epistemological turn of the eighteenth century" because their chief interest was not in knowledge or science but in the permanence of laws and Being, in whose service knowledge and science stood (115). What's provocative about this reading is not only that it implicitly aims to delegitimize some of the most influential critical approaches of recent decades, such as that of Stanley Cavell,³ but also that it complicates readings of Thoreau that celebrate his naturalism as a welcome turn away from metaphysics. Urbas is right, of course, that the Transcendentalists, including Thoreau in his scientist phase, looked for moments of contact with the real—and in that sense with Being—but his pitting ontology against epistemology ultimately obscures the point that in such moments of contact knowledge and Being join forces to the point where the distinction between them collapses. As Emerson famously writes in *Nature*: "I am nothing, I see all" (10).⁴ But though he may be overstating his case, Urbas brings to attention a useful conceptual distinction that can serve as a lens for the way several of the other essays interpret Thoreau's scientific-poetic endeavors.

² Laura Dassow Walls, "Romancing the Real: Thoreau's Technology of Inscription," *A Historical Guide to Henry David Thoreau*, Ed. William Cain (New York: Oxford UP, 2000): 123–51.

³ Urbas takes on Cavell explicitly in another recent article, "Cavell's Moral Perfectionism or Emerson's Moral Sentiment?," *European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy* 2 (2010): 41–53.

⁴ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature. The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, Eds. Alfred R. Ferguson et al., 10 vols. (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 1971–2013). I: 3–45.

Dieter Schulz, in "Nature, Knowledge, and the Method of Thoreau's Excursions," seems to be in basic agreement with Urbas. In order to make sense of Thoreau's science, he approaches him through Gadamer and distinguishes between the modern scientific method à la Francis Bacon—which Thoreau explicitly rejected—and the Greek understanding of method, which originally means "following or accompanying something on its way" (174). In this ancient sense, the science of nature finds its paradigmatic practice in the excursion. Rather than studying nature as an object separate from the subject, the excursionist scrutinizes nature by experiencing it herself—a type of relational knowledge Walls calls "transjective" (31). The excursionist's experiential findings are necessarily provisional and dynamic. But Schulz's Thoreau does not despair over the limits of tentative knowledge. "[W]e can trust in the structural and ontological priority of Being," Schulz writes—and closely echoes Urbas by concluding that "Being always precedes and exceeds knowing" (180).

Kristen Case, on the other hand, emphasizes Thoreau's antifoundational empiricism. In "Thoreau's Radical Empiricism: The Kalendar, Pragmatism, and Science"—one of the collection's highlights—she discusses Thoreau's relational epistemology as suggestive of an "understanding of knowledge that anticipates twentieth-century developments, including pragmatism, ecological science, and science studies" (189). Thoreau's interest, she maintains, "is at least as much the act of perception as it is the object being perceived" (194). In contrast to Urbas and Schulz, she argues that for Thoreau the vagaries of knowledge are not abetted by a preceding Being; rather, observation itself is our mode of being in the world: "Thoreau learned in the course of documenting his increasingly intimate relation to the natural world [...] that close observation is a mode of participation, that we are part of the world we would know" (196).

A similar line of argument is pursued by Michael Jonik in his searching "'The Maze of Phenomena': Perception and Particular Knowledge in Thoreau's Journal." Jonik slightly revises Stanley Cavell's placement of Thoreau in the context of Kantian epistemology. Where Cavell sees Thoreau, following Kant, recovering the object of knowledge (the thing-in-itself) in Jonik's reading "Thoreau's emphasis shifts from the 'recovery' of the object to its *relationality*," which requires

acknowledging “the resistant thingness of objects” (203; emphasis in orig.) as well as grasping how the particular thing relates to the human (cf. 207). In *Thoreauvian Modernities*, touting the relationality between subject and object sometimes comes close to turning into a trite gesture that is sure to garner consent. For this reason, it is all the more welcome that Jonik points to the immense difficulties this relationality poses for Thoreau. As he remarks, Thoreau’s perceptions in the Journal “do not harmonize poetry and science but arise from their unresolved *agon*” (209).

If for Jonik, Thoreau’s late praxis of perception recovers the poetic despite its apparent focus on natural facts, François Specq pushes this argument even further by approaching the Journal from the vantage point of its poetics. Implicitly rejecting the “ontological turn” Urbas makes out in Thoreau,

Specq reads Thoreau’s Journal as a demonstration of “the process whereby presence is established” (231). The process of perception, in this reading, far outweighs any notion of Being, because it is the act of coming to know that the poet (even the naturalist poet) seeks over and over. For Specq’s Thoreau, “only the process of perceiving truly constitutes reality” (230). Thus the reign of poetic epistemology is reinstated. While one had wished for more in-depth explorations of the many provocative ideas presented in these pages—even at the cost of reducing the number of contributions—*Thoreauvian Modernities* remains an important addition to Thoreau scholarship for the way its contributors’ views overlap in the questions raised, and dramatically diverge in the interpretations offered.

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