



Specq, François, Laura Dassow Walls, and Michel Granger, eds. *Thoreauvian Modernities: Transatlantic Conversations on an American Icon*. Athens: University of Georgia P, 2013.

The editors of this volume offer a collection of “scholarly meditations inspired by thinking about Thoreau,” international in scope (1). The sixteen individual authors, some well known for their contributions to American Renaissance scholarship, represent institutions in Great Britain, France, Germany, Sweden, and North America. The topics of their meditations are varied, unified by efforts to engage Thoreau in a series of dialogues that explore his ideas from the perspective of twentieth- and twenty-first-century discoveries and sensibilities (1). Some contributors pursue the dialogue motif by examining a sub-set of Thoreau’s ideas in the context of thinkers such as Hans Georg Gadamer, Douglas Coupland, Immanuel Kant, or Aristotle. Overall, the issues addressed include Thoreau’s social and economic philosophy, his metaphysical and epistemological speculations, his linguistic and rhetorical strategies, and his spiritual and scientific investigations of nature. Ecocritical and environmentalist concerns emerge, therefore, as prominent but not exclusive foci of attention. Readers coming to the book with a specialized interest in ecocritical studies will find nine or ten essays (roughly two thirds of the whole) potentially pertinent and useful.

Engagement with primary texts is central to some of the most thought-provoking portions of the book. Kristen Case examines Thoreau’s Kalendar project: his detailed documentation of seasonal patterns of development in the Concord environment. Case concentrates on the relationship Thoreau implies between the observer (human) and the observed (nonhuman), arguing that he treats each animal or plant as both “neighbor” and as “irreducibly different” other (193). Thus he models an “increasingly intimate relation to the natural world,” demonstrating that “close observation is a mode of participation, that we are part of the world we would know” (196). David M. Robinson addresses similar subjects in his essay on Thoreau’s perception of “nature’s seasons,” citing the essays and the journal as well as *Walden* (69). One of Thoreau’s chief aims as a naturalist, Robinson points out, was “to synthesize a theory of nature’s processes of change and renewal” and, at the same time, to “reconcile . . . observations about the phenomena of the natural world with human self-conceptions and aspirations” (75). Thoreau was “not exempt from the era’s qualms,” Robinson further notes: he vacillates, rather, between conflicting inclinations, sometimes imputing intentionality to nature’s processes and sometimes adopting a more rigorously Darwinian view of “chance and adaptation” (77). Robinson provides a succinct summary of Thoreau’s familiarity with Darwinian and pre-Darwinian evolutionary theory, situating his work in the history of ideas. Ultimately, Robinson argues, Thoreau integrated evolutionary principles into his own thinking more fully than did most of his contemporaries: he embraced the proposition that “men and women must rethink their assumption of their centrality in the natural world” (81).

Thoreau’s journal serves as the focal point for essays by Michael Jonik and Francois Specq. Examining the careful natural historical records of the late journals, Jonik emphasizes Thoreau’s

“post-Kantian” propensity “to avoid hasty judgments concerning observed phenomena” (201). Explicitly as well as implicitly, Thoreau recommends “slowed processes of seeing” in order to counter “the fast complacencies” of unexamined assumptions (202). In observation, ideally, “place and mind become intimate” (202). Nature’s particulars must be “*directly* experienced” if they are to be understood (206, author’s emphasis). Jonik presents Thoreau’s “ecological perception” as that of a “poet-scientist” for whom natural phenomena must be “perceived in relation to humanity” (209, 207): the relationship between human observer and natural particulars requires “ongoing movement” and must be “interactive” (209). Specq’s analysis of Thoreau’s “uncompromising enterprise” as naturalist likewise emphasizes the complexity of his approach (219). Even in the face of “his desire for an underlying order or structure in the natural world,” he fully acknowledges “the enigma of the visible” (220). Even more strongly than Robinson, Specq argues that Thoreau’s journal expresses essential agreement with Darwinian theory. Just as nature manifests “instability or provisionality” in its workings, the observing human must put aside the wish “to arrive at a definitive interpretation of the cosmos” (230).

Henrik Otterberg draws on both the *Journal* and the *Kalendar*, as well as the “Address on the Succession of Forest Trees,” in his discussion of Thoreau’s “environmental imagination” (130). He describes Thoreau’s method of thinking and writing as “a series of discrete observations over time” leading finally to “a fact” (133). Thus he adopts an “ecocritical outlook,” gradually creating “composite environmental depictions” that lead to “insight into deeper structures” (134). “Diligently logging his various field sights,” Thoreau is in search of “lawbound process in nature” (135).

Other noteworthy essays in the collection approach Thoreau’s relationship with nature from literary, linguistic, and rhetorical structures perspectives. Dieter Schultz points out that excursions on foot—that is, walking—provide both organizational principle and point of view for much of Thoreau’s writing. Schultz goes on to contend that Thoreau discovers “profound affinity between writing . . . and the operations of nature” (174). “Perceiving the signs in nature,” he transfers them “onto the page” (175). Like several other contributors, Schultz emphasizes the personal relationship Thoreau establishes with nature-as-subject: “in order to study nature, we have to become a part of it,” and “the walker” experiences the natural environment with undeniable immediacy (183). Thomas Pughe discusses Thoreau’s repeated representation of animals as his neighbors, analyzing the implications of this metaphor. It is rooted, Pughe argues, “both in natural theology and in naturalism” (249). Thoreau’s persistent use of it indicates his ever increasing commitment to “a biocentric world,” his appreciation of “the interconnectedness of life forms” (250, 251). Michel Imbert’s linguistic approach to Thoreau’s presentation of nature emphasizes how “English words in *Walden* tend to go wild” (266). Throughout *Walden*, Imbert asserts, Thoreau’s “wildcat etymology” and “extra-vagant” expressiveness bolster his effort to locate “life at its rawest” (272). Imbert’s discussion of Thoreau’s “dislocation of ordinary language” and exploration of words as “animated shifting signs” helps to explain the fascination this nineteenth-century writer’s work has continued to inspire, underlining an important feature of his “modernity” (273).

In sum, a number of the contributors to this new collection tackle issues clearly pertinent to ecostudies. Because Thoreau’s writings have attracted so much attention and stimulated intriguing debate within the field, the question of his “modernity” remains significant. The multifaceted approach the editors take to this question displays Thoreau’s relationship to

nature in varied cultural, historical, and interpretive contexts. The international group of contributing scholars presents a thought-provoking array of meditations on Thoreau's scientific understandings and literary representations of the physical environment. The insights generated by these diverse approaches stand to enrich ecocritical analysis of Thoreau's writing in unforeseen ways, suggesting new avenues for fruitful comparison together with unexplored patterns of political, social, and philosophical influence.

Reviewed by Judith P. Saunders, Marist College