

Michael Granger, François Specq and Laura Dassow Walls, eds.
Thoreauvian Modernities: Transatlantic Conversations on an American Icon.

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The 19th century author Henry David Thoreau may belong among the early North American philosophers. This proposal receives some justification from the celebrated fact that the writers, teachers, sermonists, and activists among whom Thoreau belonged were all deeply impressed by European idealism. Today, this proposal receives additional justification from contemporary scholars, who discern in Thoreau's compositions anticipation of trends in areas of 20th Century philosophy, analytic and continental. Published in 2013, *Thoreauvian Modernities* offers a collection of new essays giving evidence for the latter claim. For the international team of contributors, Thoreau may be regarded as among the 19th Century thinkers truly ahead of the age and anticipating the thought of contemporary philosophers like John Rawls and Hans-George Gadamer. What the reader of *Thoreauvian Modernities* must decide is whether the claims to Thoreau's modernity truly succeed in deflating the appraisal that regards Thoreau as a mere anti-modern or as an author expressing nostalgia for pre-modern existence. For among the 20th Century's intellectual lessons must be the caution that tirades, nostalgia, and primitivism offer us fruitless guidance.

For scholars committed to exploring areas of philosophy, *Thoreauvian Modernities* promises a selection of four essays, of the sixteen total, devoted to "Thoreau and Philosophy." These essays explore the author's intellectual commitment to ontology in "Being is the Great Explainer: Thoreau and the Ontological Turn," to virtuous character in "Character and Nature: Toward an Aristotelian Understanding of Thoreau's Literary Portraits and Environmental Poetics," and to personal autonomy in "A Sort of Hybrid Product: Thoreau's Individualism between Liberalism and Communitarianism." Not one of the "Thoreau and Philosophy" essays explicitly takes up the question of whether the literary compositions of the author Thoreau may be explored and taught as genuine contributions to philosophy. Moreover, one of the four essays, "Thoreau's Work on Myth: The Modern and the Primitive" explores not philosophy at all, but the New England author's concept and use of mythology. But this aberration on the part of the editors seems compensated by additional essays in the third part of the collection, "Thoreau, Language, and the Wild," where philosophical themes are again explored. There, an American professor of English, in "Thoreau's Radical Empiricism: The Kalendar, Pragmatism, and Science," presents the author's aim to reconceive scientific, nature study as restoring the situatedness of human life and a British scholar, in "The Maze of Phenomena: Perception and Particular Knowledge in Thoreau's Journal," makes the case for the interpretation of Thoreau's vision of poetic science in the terms given by Immanuel Kant's critical philosophy.

Of the sixteen contributors, only one scholar is listed as actively pursuing studies in Philosophy in addition to English, Literature, and American Studies. This is the French contributor Joseph Urbas, Professor of American Literature at the Université Michel de Montaigne – Bordeaux III and author of the insightful essay, "Being is the Great Explainer." Because all sixteen contributors are allied to the aforementioned areas of study, *Thoreauvian Modernities* may give us

insight into possible kinships between Literature and Philosophy, as well as between these areas and areas of biology and of linguistics and writing. What becomes clear is that, for the author Thoreau as for the contemporary scholar of Thoreau, rigid distinctions among the disciplines and among the phenomena of study cannot be meaningfully maintained. To consider the truths given in the compositions of Thoreau must be to entertain the question of the unity of knowledge, as well as the possibility of alternate mediums, like poetry, journal writing, novels, orations, and philosophical essays, for the expression of truth.

Henry Thoreau left us examples of all these. For the inchoate Thoreau scholar, what *Thoreauvian Modernities* teaches is that the author's multitudinous journal, now thoroughly studied and carefully prepared for future study, provides us insight into the philosophical reasonings of the author of celebrated, moral compositions like "Civil Disobedience" and "Life Without Principle." What is surprising to learn is that the author Thoreau, in the journal, is very often concerned with what he perceives to be the misleading claim to objectivity in modern science and, by contrast, the appeal for him of the romantic, idealist proposal that truth, moral truths and spiritual truths especially, may be learned through the patient, passionate observation of particular, relative phenomena in nature. From *Thoreauvian Modernities*, one also learns that the author's reasoned commitments are, for many, obscured by his penchant for mainstream, scientific activities like empirical measurements and assiduous record-keeping. One remarkable product of this personal activity, a lengthy almanac of local, natural phenomena, suggests to some scholars that the maturing Henry Thoreau departs from the idealism expressed in his most celebrated compositions.

"Thoreau's Radical Empiricism," the essay by an American Professor of English, proposes to help solve the question of the author's adverse commitments to spiritual idealism, on the one hand, and to verifiable, empirical science, on the other. According to Kristen Case, the New England author was, above all, concerned with giving expression to an empirical science the aim of which is to restore human life to the natural world. For Thoreau, she claims, this means an empirical science distinguished by artistic, subjective reports that provide needed orientation, as opposed to the dry, abstract reports of mainstream science. For example, Professor Case notes that Thoreau's personal almanac, the *Kalendar*, records the month of November as the month for taking shelter. This is as much to say that, for Thoreau, as for Emerson, all philosophical, literary, and science pursuits are, in the end, moral pursuits and that moral pursuits are to be understood as those pursuits orienting human life into belonging upon Earth. Professor Case suggests that the author's concept of science anticipates areas of 19th Century American pragmatism. But pragmatism is never defined by Professor Case; those among us committed to the idealist interpretation of the New England author may yet find in Thoreau's *Kalendar* grounds for an idealist interpretation of the author's nature study along the lines given by George Berkeley's immaterialism, where perceived reality must always be reported as mind-dependent.

The British contributor, Michael Jonik, Lecturer at the University of Sussex, argues in the essay "The Maze of Phenomena: Perception and Particular Knowledge in Thoreau's Journal" that the author's evident concern for the observation of particular phenomena in nature may be grounded in the critical philosophy of Immanuel Kant. Clearly, Jonik has in mind to defend the aforementioned purists, who wish to interpret all Thoreau's authorial activities in terms of idealism.

Most successful among the collection's philosophy essays is that of Professor Urbas: "Being is the Great Explainer." The title, we are told, originates as a statement in Thoreau's journal. The French scholar provides an erudite survey of the 19th Century movement of idealism to which the author belonged and gives evidence that, above all, New England idealism pursued an

ontological project in contradistinction to the worldly, epistemological project inherited from modern, European philosophy and the 17th Century's John Locke. Whereas Locke would debunk the very idea of "substance" and whereas the modern world would translate culture and wild forests alike into superfluous appearances, the American idealists, claims Professor Urbas, were each given toward championing our sense of being, the being of spirit especially. The scholar finds ample evidence for this claim in Thoreau's novel *Walden*, where the author exhorts the homeless of New England to locate the needed sense of genuine reality by which to build our flourishing life. For many philosophers, more thinking will be needed for the essay to make conclusive that the encounter with fundamental being of Henry Thoreau is significantly different from the epistemological search for justification of modern philosophy. One key to distinguishing Thoreau's philosophy may reside in the aim of moral philosophy, if we understand moral philosophy to explore the orientation and possible boundaries of human life. For Thoreau, the recovery of our sense of being is the needed condition of our moral situatedness upon Earth. John Locke, for his part, does not share this moral concern as much as the intellectual concern about beguiling metaphysics and bad science.

Given that some areas of 20th Century philosophy has come to repent the modern quest for justified knowledge, Professor Urbas claims that the "ontological turn" of 19th Century America places Thoreau and others among the truly modern. At the same time, the New England author's own compositions seem, to Urbas, at times problematically obscured by an understanding of being as permanence. In other words, for Professor Urbas it may be that Thoreau, too, was concerned with locating justification, if not for the purpose of certainty, then for the purpose of securing a genuinely, moral life. The well-known problems that arise for foundational epistemology arise, by analogy, for the foundational, moral philosophy of the author Thoreau.

The international team of editors of *Thoreauvian Modernities* promise a conversation that bridges national boundaries and linguistic differences. The editors inform the reader that the collection derives from an unprecedented, academic conference: "the first ever such meeting on European soil devoted to Thoreau" held, in 2009, in Lyon, France at, we must suppose, the University of Lyon. This academic conference more or less coincides with the one-hundred and fifty anniversary of the August 1854 publication of *Walden; Or, Life in the Woods* in Massachusetts. So, if anniversaries are meaningful indicators of importance, there is reason to believe the collection timely. However, far less certain is the claim that the collection achieves the laudable, international goals announced by the editors. Remarkably, none of the eleven essays authored in northern Europe are provided in their native languages; the North American reader may easily and falsely believe that all essays were originally composed in American-English. This oversight does little to build the sense, among North American readers especially, that there exist counterparts in greater Europe with whom unprecedented conversations about Thoreau are possible. Indeed, to read the European essays is to hear the selfsame, academic voice heard throughout North America speaking back at us. We may perhaps celebrate this as an accomplishment of our age, but the promised diversity of *Thoreauvian Modernities* is not at all evident. Among the North American contributions, including those of the editor and professor, Laura Dassow Walls, there seems no intention to converse with the European audience that must have been attending at the conference in Lyon.

In the same vein, the compositions of the scholars shows us that between northern Europe and North America, there is more in common intellectually than there is different. The collection gives evidence that the trans-Atlantic academic world represented in *Thoreauvian Modernities* shares the exact same authorities and the same library of texts. Professor Christian Maul's

(Germany) “A Sort of Hybrid: Thoreau’s Individualism Between Liberalism and Communitarianism”, one of four “Thoreau and Philosophy” essays, may refer easily to the theory of justice of the American philosopher John Rawls and Professor Joseph Urbas (France) may refer easily to the works of Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor. The laudable, international aims of the collection invite the concern that areas of world scholarship remain unrepresented and un-voiced and that Thoreau scholarship, at present, is the property of an elite few; we, for our part, remain the poorer.

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