

Finding Words for Nature: Reading Thoreau

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Henrik Otterberg, *Alma Natura, Ars Severa: Expanses & Limits of Craft in Henry David Thoreau* (Gothenburg, Sweden: University of Gothenburg, 2014), 281 pp., \$20 paper.

Alma Natura, Ars Severa: Expanses & Limits of Craft in Henry David Thoreau, is the published doctoral dissertation of Swedish scholar Henrik Otterberg (formerly Gustafsson), comprising a notable introduction and six previously published, peer-vetted essays: four articles from the Thoreau Society journal *The Concord Saunterer*, one from *SPELL: Swiss Papers in English Language and Literature*, and a chapter from the 2013 collection *Thoreauvian Modernities: Transatlantic Conversations on an American Icon* (University of Georgia Press). Overtaxed readers are advised to find time for this book, a penetrating and far-reaching study of major Thoreauvian concerns. Although this work has an as yet limited distribution, it deserves a wide readership both as an important contribution to the transatlantic dialogue on Thoreau and as an elegantly argued, richly allusive study simply too good to be overlooked. In his 60-page “Introduction” Otterberg examines the backgrounds, connections, and implications of his more than 15-year project, and he creates a matrix, both containing and informing, within which the separate essays coalesce. By no means a full summary, this review engages selected points from each chapter to suggest the emerging nexus.

Alma Natura, the Transcendentally (or otherwise) perceived boundless bounty of nature, and *Ars Severa*, the problematic expression of

natural extra-vagance in confining language, are familiar themes of Henry Thoreau and Thoreau scholars in a conversation now advanced by Otterberg, who provides perceptive framing insights and close readings credentialed by a seemingly pervasive knowledge of interdisciplinary contexts. Some 80 of the volume's 281 pages are strategically consigned to notes that either nuance and extend textual discussions or apply apt contexts from history, philosophy, religion, science, anthropology, linguistics, literature, literary history, critical theory, and other areas – clarifying, without congesting, the main text. Distracting by their number and bulk, the notes are never gratuitous. Otterberg's "Introduction" summarizes the "running queries" integral to the "expanses and limits" of Thoreau's craft as follows:

How to comprehend, evaluate and convey the natural realm as a self-contained ideal, but also with due attention to its increasing hybridity as transformed by human technologies? Will outward nature taken as a whole present an immanent or transcendent order? Which rhetorical tools to wield in portraying it, and what faith to put in their fidelity to the task of translating its truth, whether empirical or spiritual (i.e. immanent or transcendent)? Or, for that matter, to what degree may one trust human language to the challenge of conveying elusive interiorities of the writing self (i.e. human nature)?
(17-18)

The first chapter, titled "Immanence and Transcendence in Thoreau's 'A Winter Walk,'" argues against a critical consensus that Thoreau in this essay speaks as an Emersonian Transcendentalist, "rejecting outright formal science" (73). Instead, says Otterberg, "Close reading [...] arguably reveals a fledgling openness to formal, – positivist inquiry – and more fundamentally an interest in nature as primarily presenting an immanent order, regardless of the idealist philosophy brought to bear upon it" (73). Indeed, "The essay's careful investigations of natural detail depart from Emerson's habitual swift motions toward pithy generalizations.

Furthermore, Thoreau's budding recognition of the self-sufficiency of wild nature, its cross-informing and coherently functioning structure forming a 'tawny grammar' of its own, represents a radical departure from his mentor's ideas" (80). Thus, beyond its "conventional imagery and reliance on received Transcendental philosophy," the essay also manifests "forays into a more 'scientific' logic of perception and a radically modern, immanent view of nature and man" (84).

The next two chapters, "Henry Thoreau and the Advent of American Rail" and "Tenth Muse Errant: On Thoreau's Crisis of Technology and Language," take Thoreau's physical and philosophical railroading beyond previous limits, exploring the impact of technology on his life and thought as well as its implications for his craft. The first essay, "Advent," demonstrates that "Thoreau's attitude towards the railroad was ambivalent even in the years before *Walden*" and that his "idealistic disdain for [its] materialism and intrusiveness was soon complicated by a pragmatic indulgence of its efficiency, and thereafter by a selective admiration of its more 'natural' characteristics and effects" (88). Ever cognizant of its alignment with the unimproved ends of false economy, misspent time, and anesthetized consciousness, Thoreau nonetheless not only used it to further his own higher purposes (such as travel for lectures, excursions, and library visits) but also grudgingly admired its apparent naturalness (as when it abetted the dispersion of seeds) and even its occasional beauty (manifested, for example, in a vapor trail "like the purest downy clouds in the summer sky" [100]).

Focusing on "Resistance to Civil Government," the 1850s journal, and especially *Walden*, Otterberg's second "technology" essay, "Tenth Muse Errant," argues that "Thoreau's remaining *external* critique of technology gradually develops into an *internal*, or aesthetic, crisis of perception and writing," posing "the vexing question of how, ultimately, to differentiate language from technology?" (115). Believing in "a dynamic chain of correspondence, where a revealed natural language secures communication between man and God" (124), Thoreau seeks the language to convey this perceived truth. Examining the Deep Cut passage in "Spring," wherein the melting sandbank is likened to the "laboratory of the Artist" (126)

responsible for the world itself, Otterberg also finds the writer-artist Thoreau working on “Spring” in his laboratory of words, implicitly acknowledging that “everything of human construction might [...] be considered technological” including the pen in his own hand. Thus, “the overt crisis of technology in *Walden* ultimately reflects itself as a crisis of craft” (126).

Says Otterberg, “As a writer, [Thoreau’s] most pressing problem” becomes how to “free himself from [the] traditional bounds [of language] and make himself understood?” (129). “His problem [...] is that he cannot escape the blunt tool of language if he would prophesy as to nature’s worth” (135). “Language cannot translate experience with anything approaching purity,” and Thoreau cannot reproduce his genuinely “felt nature epiphanies [...] by way of his craft” (135-36). “He must not lose himself to his tools; he must be alert lest his language ossify into stock phrases and hackneyed images, empty rhetoric and posturing” (139). *Technology* – derived from *techne*, skill in craft or art, and from *logos*, signifying word or speech – induces what Otterberg views as Thoreau’s mistrust of writing as thoughts cut “like a railroad” into “tracks” and “causeways,” limited in their capacity to “communicate higher truth” (153).

“So Thoreau stresses the superiority of direct experience” (141). “‘My life has been the poem I would have writ,/ But I could not both live and utter it’” (144). “The [autobiographical] writer,” says Otterberg, “is a spectator retroactively involved in the immediate experience of life’s real participant” (145). “In *living* he may be unique and [...] at ‘liberty,’ but in *writing* he is bound to be common, civilized, cultivating” (144). Thus, Thoreau, in the “Conclusion” to *Walden*, professes his “‘desire to speak somewhere *without* bounds,’” extra-vagantly, with “a redeemed language [...] that has truth as its governing ideal” (146-47).

In his next chapter, “Hound, Bay Horse, and Turtle-Dove: Obscurity and Authority in Thoreau’s *Walden*,” Otterberg examines three contexts of the puzzling passage – its long critical debate, its function in “Economy” establishing the book’s protagonist, and its relationship to Thoreau’s rhetorical schooling – “to more fully explain the role of the passage in *Walden*” (175). In the hundred plus (and mounting) responses

to this passage, Otterberg finds a "gradual shift" in interest from "what it may have meant to Thoreau" to what it means to the reader-critic "and should [mean] to others" (183), with Stanley Cavell's 1972 take on the animals as a reminder of readers' own losses coloring "virtually every later" explication (181).

For Otterberg, the passage is part of Thoreau's attempt, in "Economy" and throughout *Walden*, to valorize his counterculture ethos, here by identifying obscurity as an expression of the gap between even a Transcendental writer's language and the natural truths to be expressed. Thus, he sets up his animal passage by admonishing, "'You will pardon some obscurities, for there are more secrets in my trade than in most men's, and yet not voluntarily kept, but inseparable from its very nature'" (176).

Reviewing Thoreau's training in rhetoric at Harvard, notably under Edward Tyrell Channing, Otterberg finds the classical standard of "perspicuity" subtly challenged by "a backhanded sanction of obscurity as strategy" (190). "Further, [Thoreau] would have learned that he could choose at times to challenge audiences with obscure expression to good effect" (191), safe in knowing that a "stubbornly elusive original meaning does not necessarily hamper readers from finding valuable significance in what is written." In the case of *Walden*'s lost animals, Otterberg views Thoreau's goal as "to foster the reader's interest, sympathy, in some sense even participation, in the narrator's quest – and also, importantly, to instill a budding respect for his ethos" (193).

Elucidating what he terms an "'ecosystematic' [...] aesthetic underlying Thoreau's animal passage," Otterberg says, "we could try to conceive of texts as networks of significant relations [...] constantly changing as kept alive and nurtured (or indeed challenged) by various readers and *their* imaginings and reasonings in turn." "Indeed we may claim such potential as the stuff of *Walden* [...]. While [Thoreau] harbors the ambition of detailing a representative life, the detail is at length the least important to *Walden*'s narrator – or better, it is something to be jettisoned by the reader when seriously considering his or her own options of living authentically" (194). Viewed this way, in terms of a universalizing "lasting transferential potential"

intended by *Walden*'s author, "Thoreau's mythological parable aspires rather to timelessness than to situatedness" (201).

Although the functional obscurity in *Walden* and elsewhere is decidedly non-Aristotelean, Otterberg judges that Thoreau "can be characterized as a reader and environmental writer of Aristotelean bent," notably "In his abiding emphasis on consistency and probability and in his search for law rather than stochastic variation in literature as in nature" (234). In the chapter titled "Character and Nature: Toward an Aristotelean Understanding of Thoreau's Literary Portraits and Environmental Poetics," Otterberg argues that "Thoreau harbored an Aristotelean view of human character and poetic style," whereby "A writer's welter of worldly actions [...] influence[s] the writer's character, which in turn ultimately determines the style emanating from his or her pen" (243): "he saw *all* writing, regardless of genre, as autobiographical in the final analysis" (238). Otterberg contends also that just as Thoreau "comprehends literature [...] as permeated and directed by its author's ethos, he *correspondingly* [emphasis added] tends to see nature as fundamentally law-bound, this core trait sanctioned either by a deity akin to the Christian God, as hinted in early Thoreauvian texts, or by a more self-sufficient and protoecological regime of interaction, cooperation, and development, as presented in later ones" (238-39).

In the later journal, Thoreau, more than before, allows nature to express its truths as facts, less conformed to and confined by the limits of language. Says Otterberg, "the later Journal [...] [favors] a more pragmatic empiricism and solid rootedness in natural phenomena actually observed by the writer." "That Thoreau's stylistic economy eventually becomes frugal with metaphorical and metonymical anthropocentrisms, to instead lavish itself with empirical observation, is true enough," says Otterberg. He adds, however, "Yet the apparent formlessness of his later Journal conceals a crucial aspect of its larger rationale," namely his "goal to compile a comprehensive phenological 'Kalendar' of the natural events taking place in Concord and its environs" (239). If, as Thoreau wrote, a fact will ultimately "'flower in a truth'" (240), Otterberg concludes that this evolved concept of a natural fact "springs from a series of discrete observations over

time, ultimately forming a sort of normal distribution in a statistical sense" (241). More scientifically found – and founded – than a romantic epiphany, "the sum of his field observations would contribute to the construction of an 'archetypical' year for the inclined reader to await and follow" – a calendar that, its scientific basis notwithstanding, Thoreau referred to in his Journal as "'my New Testament,'" implicitly a justification by observation of the ways of nature to man (240).

Otterberg's final chapter, "Figuring Henry: Thoreau's Autobiographical Accounts in *Walden*," characterizes *Walden* primarily as autobiography of a particular kind, the apology (Latin *apologia*), in this case a "prolonged speech of self-defense" (246) vindicating Thoreau's "beliefs and actions [...] in the face of [...] public controversy" (264) in the form of what he describes early in "Economy" as "'very particular inquiries [...] made by my townsmen concerning my mode of life'" (246).

But if *Walden* is Thoreau's account of – and accounting for – his extravagant living and thinking, Otterberg also identifies a nagging realization by Thoreau of the discrepancy between the book with its narrator-protagonist and the encompassing life of its author. Interpreting a *Walden* assertion that "our liber or true bark [...] cannot be removed without girdling and so destroying the man" (257), Otterberg detects an admission "that the protagonist's life as rendered in *Walden*, despite all the care that has gone into the writing process, is necessarily other [...] to that of its actual writer in any number of respects" (258). Indeed, the reference in "Solitude" to "a part of me, which, as it were, is [...] but spectator [...] taking note" is, to Otterberg, Thoreau's acknowledgment of the limits of his literary craft. Essentially, *Walden*'s contained and static account of protagonist Thoreau reduces that lived experience and, at book's end, terminates the protagonist himself, the author's other off-page lives notwithstanding. As for the life left out – and left off – by *Walden*, Otterberg says that Thoreau leaves these to the readers to figure, who must "fill in the holes themselves, as it were by the incidentals as well as profounder aspects of *their own lives*" (262). In this way, elsewhere termed "ecosystematic," might Thoreau's "rendered past" be internalized by readers into their own present "as a springboard to self-redemptive action" (260).

Although Henry Thoreau had broad intellectual interests pursued in books as well as nature, Otterberg emphasizes that “Almost never did he follow obediently the logic of [an] author’s reasoning or argumentation, bringing instead his own order to whatever he read, in accordance with his own theoretical convictions” (186). In this book Henrik Otterberg also participates in such “ecosystematic” conversation – with Thoreau and many others – bringing to the stimulating fray his own order, inspired by but not restricted to the thematic criticism of the Geneva school. Like Thoreau’s writings and nature’s designs, *Alma Natura, Ars Severa* seems calculated to generate discussion.

A trifle disconcerting in this otherwise physically well-produced volume are remnant page headings and numbers from the original journal and book publications, the more confusing as this book’s pages from first to last are also numbered consecutively. Surely, this dual pagination will cause citation errors in academic forums. Less bothersome is that Otterberg, meticulous scholar that he is, imports such an abundance of substantively engaged background information and sidebar discussion into his text and notes that tracking his main arguments requires close attention – an attention rewarded by the combined value of his own first-rate thinking and that of the distinguished company he keeps in this book.

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Note: *Alma Natura, Ars Severa*, which was awarded a grant from the Swedish Academy in 2015, is available from the following sources:

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