Thoreauvian Modernities, Transatlantic Conversations on an American Icon is a groundbreaking collection of essays. It originated in a May 2009 colloquium organized by François Specq and Michel Granger at the École Normale Supérieure Lettres et Sciences Humaines (ENS LSH) in Lyon, France. This volume is the first of its kind to offer an international perspective of Thoreau’s work by bringing together dedicated Thoreauvians from universities across the United States and Europe.

As the editors argue, the sixteen essays collected in this volume are scholarly meditations inspired by thinking about Thoreau. They follow three lines of inquiry: the dialogic nature of Thoreauvian Studies; the timely and timeless articulations of Thoreau’s work; and the boundless exploration of Thoreau’s transatlantic and planetary commitment, which was indeed “without bounds.” The essays explain not only why Thoreau’s proto-environmental and political writings, such as Walden and “Civil Disobedience,” remain crucial to our understanding of the world but also why constantly reinterpreting Thoreau is a means of keeping his work alive and unsettling for a new generation of enthusiastic scholars.

Thus, the series of “dialogues” presented in this volume analyze both how Thoreau himself engaged in the historical, economic, and philosophical debates of his time and how the essayists themselves converse with Thoreau’s writings and with one another’s interpretation of his works. The essays also consider the alternative modes of thinking about economics, science, and the environment by suggesting that Thoreau offered a literary anthropology, wherein the author “constantly sought to articulate the timeless and the timely, convinced as he was that it is ... necessary to widen our views of the universe in ways that were inevitably proper to our historical situation but that simultaneously spoke to our common, eternal condition as human beings” (2). Last but not least, the volume explores Thoreau’s work as it pertains to intellectual developments on both sides of the Atlantic, with the authors engaging a variety of philosophical approaches, ranging from those of John Dewey and Richard Rorty to those of Hans Georg Gadamer, Gayatri Spivak, Jacques Derrida, and Bruno Latour.

The exploratory features of the original conference are further emphasized by the thematic organization of the published volume. “Thoreau and (Non)Modernity,” the first of three parts, deals mostly with issues of definition, wherein Thoreau is considered as a “modern” social thinker. Laura Walls, who also gave the plenary address, writes in “Walking West, Gazing East: Planetarity on the Shores of Cape Cod” that Thoreau’s complex and multipolar work offers a transcendence of modernity itself and, in doing so, prefigures a planetary and cosmopolitan rather than insular and national postmodern perspective. In
“Antimodern Thoreau,” Michel Granger analyzes Thoreau’s distrust of capitalism, urbanization, and even democracy. “Thoreau’s Multiple Modernities” is William Rossi’s answer to Bruno Latour’s question of how nature is transcribed and translated for an audience, wherein he advocates for an ontological condition that absorbs both the modern and postmodern conditions. David M. Robinson argues that modernity is characterized by crucial shifts of consciousness and suggests in “Thoreau, Modernity, and Nature’s Seasons” that even though he was socially antimodern, Thoreau had been intellectually alert and attuned to a mode of thinking whose decisive embodiment was Darwin’s *The Origin Of Species*. The first section of the volume concludes with “An Infinite Road to the Golden Age,” a close reading of a Journal passage where Randall Conrad suggests that the old Carlisle road represents a symbol of Thoreau’s antimodern refusal of commodification and Manifest Destiny.

“Thoreau and Philosophy,” the second section of the volume, presents Thoreau’s writings in relation to modern and current philosophical debates. In “‘Being Is the Great Explainer’: Thoreau and the Ontological Turn in American Thought,” Joseph Urbas traces the presence in Transcendentalism of ontological themes of the being, foundation, ground, reality in order to qualify and, at best, to displace the predominant notion that Thoreau’s modernity lies in his interest in science and his emphasis on epistemology. In “Character and Nature: Toward an Aristotelian Understanding of Thoreau’s Literary Portraits and Environmental Poetics,” Henrik Otterberg debunks the misleading postmodern emphasis on discontinuities associated with various interpretations of the Journal and argues that Thoreau brings an Aristotelian sense of consistency and law to his understanding of both human and physical nature. Bruno Monfort analyzes in “Thoreau’s Work on Myth: The Modern and the Primitive” the complex links between modernity and Thoreau’s use of mythology and argues that mythological references, such as the “winged horse” for the train in *Walden*, point not to an antimodern stance but rather to a permanent anthropological function of mythopoeia. In the concluding essay of this second part, Christian Maul argues in “‘A Sort of Hybrid Product’: Thoreau’s Individualism between Liberalism and Communitarianism” that Thoreau favors synthesis over division in accordance with the Transcendentalist argument that individualist self-reliance and the collective demands of society are not mutually exclusive, a point which can easily be made about the various essays in this volume.

“Thoreau, Language, and the Wild,” the final section of the volume, consists of seven essays. In “Nature, Knowledge, and the Method of Thoreau’s Excursions,” Dieter Schulz analyzes “walking” as a connective practice and draws a parallel between Thoreau’s daily excursions and Gadamer’s notion of method, which in its original sense referred to the idea of “following something on its way.” Methodically analyzing Thoreau’s late work, Kristen Case points out in “Thoreau’s Radical Empiricism: The Kalendar, Pragmatism, and Science” that Thoreau’s observations have contributed to the contemporary study of global warming and argues that the Kalendar project foregrounds one of the main tenets of ecocriticism, the reconception of the human as part of nature. Michael Jonik, in “The Maze of Phenomena: Perception and Particular Knowledge in Thoreau’s Journal,” argues that ecological perception is another way of describing Thoreau’s poetics and suggests that the author “becomes an intimate cartographer in which the thinking of place

http://www.as.uni-hd.de/prolepsis/14_01_rat.html
becomes an ongoing exploration of the terra nova of thought” (210). In “Poetics of Thoreau’s Journal and Postmodern Aesthetics,” Francois Specq writes that “[t]he dedicated reader...comes to realize that the Journal is more than the sum of its parts” (219). This is a fair assessment not only of the Journal itself, but also of the present volume. Reading Thoreau as a representative of “nature noir,” David Dowling, in “Fraught Ecstasy: Contemporary Encounters with Thoreau’s Postpristine Nature,” considers how Thoreau’s denunciation of environmental degradation anticipates the writing of Canadian novelist Douglas Coupland. In “Brute Neighbors: The Modernity of a Metaphor,” Thomas Pughe uses an ecocritical argument to suggest that animal tropes play a subversive role in Thoreau’s work insofar as they question the separation between human and nonhuman beings. Finally, in “‘Tawny Grammar’: Words in the Wild,” Michel Imbert also points to the “tractable otherness” of the animal in order to argue that Thoreau regarded the nonhuman as a reflection of the ungraspable nature within the human.

While it does not do justice to the breadth and wealth of scholarship presented here, this overview shows, as Specq wrote when analyzing the Journal, that the volume itself is more than the sum of its parts. This is a testament not only to the importance of constantly reinterpreting Thoreau’s work but also to Thoreau’s own understanding of natural science, philosophy, and literature. As Thoreau himself stated in the conclusion to *Walden*, “the universe is wider than our view of it.” The essays collected in this volume, as well as the transatlantic colloquium from which they originated, contribute to our better appreciation if not of the universe itself then of Thoreau’s cosmos.

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