
In 2017 America celebrated the bicentennial of Henry David Thoreau’s birth with notable exhibitions and new publications. Since Thoreau may not be among the top literary figures outside his home country, two German publications—Frank Schäfer’s *Henry David Thoreau: Waldgänger und Rebell* and Dieter Schulz’s *Henry David Thoreau: Wege eines amerikanischen Schriftstellers* come as welcome birthday presents familiarizing a German-speaking readership with Thoreau, as “wood-walker and rebel” (Schäfer), as a prominent literary figure, a first-rate naturalist, a pioneer ecologist and an advocate of non-violent political action. Schäfer takes an *l’homme et l’œuvre* approach. He reads Thoreau’s work in the context of his life and does not aim at any groundbreaking new scholarly insights. With a general readership in mind, the book got notable coverage in the German press and the reviewers agreed that it was a carefully researched, knowledgeable, and reader-friendly biography with occasional blind spots with regard to America’s intellectual history. On the other end of the spectrum, Schulz’s study abounds with references to the country’s history of ideas; it clearly aims at an academic audience and therefore deserves to be reviewed in this journal.

Unlike his two previous publications *Amerikanischer Transzendentualismus* (1997) and *Emerson and Thoreau, or Steps Beyond Ourselves* (2012), Schulz devotes his third book entirely to Thoreau and his writings. Like William E. Channing he sees the writer first and foremost as a ‘poet-naturalist’ whose nature walks are primarily a dialogue with nature, as acts of reading the signs of the *liber naturae*. From the subtitle to the final paragraph, images of paths (*Wege*) and walks dominate the book. It is not surprising for a passionate walker, that terms like ‘journey,’ ‘travel,’ ‘walking,’ ‘excursion,’ used more or less interchangeably, inform his thinking and writing. Schulz uses these terms, as one would expect, not only as structuring principles in the chapters on Thoreau’s often meandering and digressive travelogues. The chapters on “Civil Disobedience” and “Extravagant Rhetoric” follow the same organizing principle. “Civil Disobedience” he reads as a “spiritual journey,” a journey to the end of the night, as it were, a night spent in the Concord jail that released him as a person with a new political awareness. In the chapter on Thoreau’s at times extravagant rhetoric he takes the term ‘extravagance’ at its word as a form of wandering off (*extra-vagari*) from conformist village talk to a language “without bounds.” Schulz shows a special predilection for Thoreau’s favorite term ‘excursion’ since it lends itself to a number of productive amplifications. Following *Webster’s Third International*, Thoreau sees an excursion as a trip made with the positive intention of returning to the starting point as all his nature walks always did. According to *Webster’s*, ‘excursion’ is also a departure from a direct or proper course (*ex-currere*), a digression, a movement outward and back. The excursionist is, as Schulz emphasizes, a Grenzgänger (border figure) who moves outward and back, oscillates between the familiar and the wild. Unlike the settlers, loggers or hunters who (ab)use nature with a purpose in mind, the border figure is one, to use a Kantian term, ‘disinterestedly pleased’ with nature. He never positions himself vis-à-vis nature, he is part and parcel of nature, engaged in a continuous dialogic exchange with the natural world.

Walking – thinking – writing: these are the steps where the actual, philosophical and literary aspects of walking converge. As a walker Thoreau first gets in touch with nature physically; he reads the book of nature first with his feet,
as Schulz puts it. His dialogue with the abundant signs of nature results in a thinking process, ceaseless and unresolvable, with “volatile” and provisional, yet never definitive answers. For Schulz this continuous dialogic exchange implies a clear critique of the Romantic notion of the sublime as a singular moment of ecstatic rapture and uplift “into infinite space,” where one is nothing but one sees all. Thoreau’s sublime experience occurs in a finite space on solid ground; it is a continuous process with ecstatic moments when the walker steps out of himself (ex-stare), when his dull senses are heightened and he eventually turns homeward refreshed and renewed. On a metaphorical level, the excursion into nature is one into language not surprising for someone who loves to trace words back to their etymological roots hoping to learn thereby the true, original language of things. Village talk would be conformist prose lacking variety, novelty and wildness while the book of nature rightly read is poetry leaving behind the tame, mealy-mouthed jargon of the village. One only has to wander far enough beyond the confines of home to learn nature’s wild, extravagant language. He would be a true poet who would learn to speak “without bounds,” to “impress the winds and streams into his service,” to im-print, as it were, the wild, elemental forces into his writing. Despite his claim for extravagance, Schulz emphasizes, Thoreau never loses solid ground, never remains without but always returns within bounds. “Poetry puts an interval between the impression & the expression - waits till the seed germinates naturally,” Thoreau maintained in his Journal. The poetic process is a departure from home and a return home, an exposure to the wild and a natural rephrasing. Thoreau distrusts bold metaphoric flights into infinite space; he prefers a language rooted in the finite world of things. His metaphors are homely, Schulz maintains.

Drawing on Emerson’s essay “The Method of Nature” and Hans-Georg Gadamer’s Truth and Method, Schulz in chapter seven succinctly summarizes Thoreau’s nature writing project and gives it a philosophical underpinning. What Emerson, Gadamer and Thoreau share is the concept of method, a term derived from the Greek met-hodos which means, “to share a path,” “to accompany things on their way.” Since “the path of things is silent,” it needs a hermeneutical animal, the walker-as-reader, constantly engaged in a dialogue with his surroundings, that is, a reading of the signs in the liber naturae. Schulz refers to a long European tradition of literary and philosophical walking ranging from Goethe, Schiller, Seume and Schelling to Nietzsche and Heidegger. Had Thoreau known Nietzsche he would have gladly adopted his thesis that “someone who has attained only some degree of freedom of mind cannot feel other than a wanderer on earth.” And with Heidegger, Thoreau saw himself as a hermeneut unterwegs zur Sprache, a language that would do justice to an adequate rendering of nature. Thus, Schulz is able to place Thoreau in a wider transnational context and makes one of the truest Americans, as Emerson called him, truly one of ours.

Schulz’s book is based on a long and intensive commitment to Thoreau as a nature writer. It takes the reader on its way through his œuvre; it offers subtle, intellectually stimulating readings and embeds the writings in a rich cultural context. The book, jargon-free and elegantly written, is a pleasure to read. A reader with a good proficiency in English will enjoy it to the fullest since the at times long original quotations exhibit Thoreau’s full stylistic virtuosity. Schulz’s study is, to my knowledge, so far the profoundest German publication on Thoreau the nature writer, philosopher of nature, ecologist, cultural critic and, above all, the great ‘poet-naturalist.’

Joseph C. Schöpp (Berlin)