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François Specq



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- 1 In our fast-paced era, scholarly editions have become laden with a kind of magic aura, and a new volume is always a much-expected event. After a five-year break, Princeton University Press has brought out a new volume in its much-admired edition of *The Writings of Henry D. Thoreau*, whose first one appeared thirty-seven years ago. Many people would probably wonder why it should be necessary for scholars to spend several years of their lives preparing editions whose textual apparatus is arcane and arduous. Joseph J. Moldenhauer belongs to this rare class of dedicated scholars who, at the head of an editorial team, have enough energy and expertise to go through the complex process of editing classic American authors, according to the demanding requirements of the MLA's Committee on Scholarly Editions (formally Center for Editions of American Authors).
- 2 After editing *The Maine Woods* (1972), Moldenhauer has thus prepared a 650-page volume of Thoreau's writings entitled *Excursions*. Even more than *The Maine Woods* (which, after all, had been projected by Thoreau), this volume is an editorial construction: Thoreau only published two volumes in his lifetime—*A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* and *Walden*—and he never even projected the publication of a book entitled *Excursions*. The editors of the Princeton edition of Thoreau's writings have thus taken up a tradition that dates back to the years following Thoreau's premature death, during which his publisher—Ticknor and Fields of Boston—, under the guidance and supervision of Thoreau's sister, Sophia, issued composite volumes of Thoreau's works. The present volume combines nine texts—« Natural History of Massachusetts », « A Walk to Wachusett », « The Landlord », « A Winter Walk », « A Yankee in Canada », « An Address on the Succession of Forest Trees », « Walking », « Autumnal Tints », and « Wild Apples »—that initially appeared in book form in *Excursions* (1863) and *A Yankee in Canada, with Anti-Slavery and Reform Papers* (1866). One thus has in one's hands a somewhat old-fashioned editorial concept, and one

may legitimately approach it with a form of skepticism as to the relevance of a comparatively heterogeneous collection of texts, loosely related through the elusive notion of « excursions »—although, as a literary genre, the « excursion » was typical of the Romantic period, after Rousseau and Wordsworth had established the figure of the writer as walker or rambler—, and adhering to the long-standing but debatable editorial tradition separating Thoreau’s political thought from his interest in nature.

- 3 But, to be sure, without denying the artificial character of this compilation of articles of various dates, lengths and ambitions, one’s initial distrust, if not entirely swept away, is eventually toned down as one goes through this chronological juxtaposition of texts, unified as they are by what can only be called the formidable intensity of Thoreau’s relation to the world and the density of his prose. And that is also where the value of a scholarly edition comes to the fore: through the textual apparatus, one is admitted, so to speak, into the writer’s mental workshop and his never-ending process of revision and correction, as the editors, whenever possible, collated the various forms and stages of a text. The editors have also done a great job of identifying many of Thoreau’s wide-ranging allusions and references, from classic authors to contemporary travel writers and manuals of botany or entomology. This makes Thoreau’s kaleidoscopic prose more palpable, and will without doubt encourage the exploration of unexpected or not so well-known areas of literature and science—like a traveler suddenly drawn to go up the tributaries of a river. We are grateful to Moldenhauer and Princeton University Press for their continuing dedication to providing modern readers with editions of Thoreau’s writings that are sound, beautifully-produced and enduring pieces of scholarship in their own right.
- 4 In a different category, but one that is no less essential, a third edition of the Norton Critical Edition of Thoreau’s *Walden, Civil Disobedience, and Other Writings* has now appeared, edited by William Rossi. A comparison of this much-expanded volume with the second edition (1992), already edited by Rossi, testifies to some of the new emphases and reorientations of Thoreau scholarship in the intervening years. The most important change is the addition of three essays, « Slavery in Massachusetts », « Walking » and « Wild Apples », to Thoreau’s two most famous texts, *Walden* and « Civil Disobedience » (the latter title, still conjectural to date, being now curiously preferred to the authorial « Resistance to Civil Government », adopted in the second edition, in the wake of Wendell Glick’s Princeton edition of Thoreau’s *Reform Papers* of 1973). This addition is logically complemented by an additional selection of critical essays, which all together point to the enduring value of the entire span and scope of Thoreau’s literary career. This considerably expanded section includes extended coverage of major criticism on Thoreau’s political thought and environmental concern, and a usefully-updated bibliographical section. Aimed at a general audience, this excellent edition is bound to be widely and profitably used at all levels from high school to graduate school, comforting us in the thought that at both ends of the spectrum, Thoreau is definitely well-served by eminent and dedicated Thoreauvians.

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Thèmes : Comptes rendus

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