explorations

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REVIEW

Tadeusz Sławek. 2014. *Henry David Thoreau – Grasping the Community of the World. Dis/Continuities: Toruń Studies in Language, Literature and Culture,* vol. 7. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang

Alina Mitek-Dziemba (University of Silesia)

A handsome and well-designed book, Tadeusz Sławek's study of Thoreau's *Journal* is a translation of his Polish book *Ujmować. Henry David Thoreau i wspólnota świata*, published five years earlier by the University of Silesia Press in Katowice. It is a faithful English rendering of the collection of more than 700 fragments or aphorisms aimed at illuminating select aspects of the thinking of the American transcendentalist writer whose prose has largely been unknown to the Polish reader apart from his major work *Walden, or Life in the Woods,* and a collection of essays such as *Civil Disobedience*, *Life Without Principle* or *Cape Cod*. Most elements of the original Sławek's book have been meticulously reproduced; the differences concern the layout, which is a bit more artistic in the Polish publication (containing also pictures of favourite Thoreauvian places, a fact that clearly points to the popularizing ambition behind the first book), and footnotes (sometimes amplified in comparison with the original, as is illustrated by the very first reference to Emerson's notion of 'self-sufficingness', missing from the Polish version but clearly given pride of place in the English one). There is also an interesting divergence in the title: instead of the Polish word for expressing and (literally) taking hold of but also taking away from something, written with a hyphen so as to highlight the much ambiguous action (which incidentally also means to endear somebody to something, signalling affection), the English translator Jean Ward uses 'grasping', which to my mind is more about the character's firm hold of the world or its purely intellectual understanding (grasping is somehow more masculine, a determined effort to understand completely or to take advantage of something; yet the change in meaning may also be due to the use of the original verb in the imperfective form which has no counterpart in English).[1] The Polish title is also vaguer in terms of syntax: it remains purposefully unclear who takes hold of what (or, indeed, what takes hold of whom), with the

[1] My observation is well supported by the way the title gets elaborated in the book: on page 148 Sławek writes about his (or Thoreau's) favoured relationship to the world as 'co-participation,' construed as a 'powerful sense of the community of thought and place,' which 'arises out of the care with which I embrace the world,' or its 'attentive and friendly observation.' Later on, he adds after Peirce that the community is glued together by a 'powerfully sympathetic connection' which goes beyond the rational capacities of its individual members (150).

conjunction *and* democratically distributing privilege, while the English paraphrase leaves the reader in no doubt as to the human agency. The change in emphasis may prove to be problematic as the exclusiveness of the human claim to meaning is repeatedly questioned in Sławek's work, the eponymous community being conceived as an act of writing oneself together with the non- and pre-human (41). Otherwise, there appear to be no significant differences in the contents of the two books, although in what follows I will attempt to trace and document translation problems and their often unsatisfactory solutions regarding especially some of the concepts used in Sławek's narrative.

That the English book, more academic in appearance, still reads differently may be ascribable to the fact of the paradoxical *absence* of translation: the Polish original revolves around Thoreau's texts as they are rendered into Polish by the author, which means, despite his declarations to the contrary, an e**lucid**ation of the complicated nineteenth-century prose (the entries of the Journal adduced in the book sound perfectly contemporary to me). The English version translates everything *except* Thoreau, who speaks in his own voice, and with no footnotes and commentaries of the authoritative edition at hand, the reader may at times feel lost in the slightly archaic environment. The sense of loss, however, may well have been intended by Sławek, who shuns the diligent scholar's discussion and historical illumination of a text on the basis of other specialist studies; the composition of the book is anything but academic, with little background information, no division into chapters, no systematic chronology behind the narrative of Thoreau's life and even no titles to guide the reader as to the possible contents of the fragments. Admittedly, there is a bibliography at the end, followed by indexes of names, places, and concepts; reading the latter is instructive enough to reveal a number of recurring motifs and conceptual nodes within the book (including, to quote the entries with the largest number of records, 'animal,' 'bond,' 'community,' 'earth,' 'experience,' 'home,' 'place,' 'time,' 'thinking,' 'walking,' and 'state'). Most of the terms listed in the index are however not specific enough to give a hint on the interpretative structure of the work which emerges instead, to use Walter Benjamin's famous metaphor, as a cluster of constellations: it aspires both to *redeem* the phenomenal existence of actual things and to gloss it over by examining larger philosophical ideas. Constellations group together bits and pieces of experience, Benjamin explains, although they do so without the ambition to subsume the latter under conceptual categories.[2] Ideas are thus more like symbols, whereas the aim of concepts is to elicit intellectually graspable elements from experience. In this way, the *salvation* of phenomena in the constellations of philosophemes means that no event or item of experience gets pigeonholed for good, an instance of the general rule; it is rather singled out and 'handled with care' as a fleeting embodiment of an idea,

[2] Walter Benjamin offers the analogy in his preface to *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, where he dwells upon the method underlying his thesis. Its aim is twofold: "the salvation of phenomena and the representation of ideas," and the task can be accomplished through arranging phenomena, which are first "divested of their false unity," into constellations that help to apprehend them and thus provide their interpretation: "Ideas are to objects as constellations are to stars. This means, in the first place, that they are neither their concepts nor their laws. They do not contribute to the knowledge of phenomena (…). Ideas (…) remain obscure so long as phenomena do not declare their faith to them and gather round them." It is important not to overlook the essentially religious lexicon of Benjamin's musings: it is finally "faith" and not the power of comprehension or knowledge that is able to "redeem" phenomena. Cf. Walter Benjamin: *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. Trans. John Osborne. London and New York: Verso, 2003 (1998), pp. 33-35.

not to be neglected or passed over, a wandering star promising a glimpse of truth that itself remains stubbornly contingent and local.[3]

Are these constellations as permanent a feature of the phenomenal sky as Benjamin's astronomical analogy may suggest? Constellations are up (and down) there, Sławek's narrative seems to suggest, for the careful (both attentive and caring[4]), interested (as opposed to disinterested in the Kantian sense) and unhurried[5] onlooker whose perspective is that of the body in motion, an agent always at a distance from, yet deeply immersed in, the 'hustle and bustle of the everyday' (the rhyming pair of words is to replace 'krzątanina codzienności', an original Polish phrase of rare beauty), looking both at the sky and around himself in recognition of his own 'un-self-sufficingness.' As evidenced by the plethora of quotations here, the question of the perception is deeply confused, and it is in this sense that I find the fact that Sławek's writing is clearly gendered (using masculine pronouns throughout) justified: his is not a disembodied voice of the philosopher speaking from the vantage point of transcendental or universal ontological analysis. On the contrary, since the profession of philosophy Sławek's Thoreau describes wishes to distance itself from that of the 'professor of philosophy,' a professional academic thinker and teacher, professing merges with living (25), which translates into being locked in the hermeneutic circle of always beginning with and returning to life (as what is located in the here-and-now, in the individual body and its changing natural/cultural environment). There is therefore no exceptional position and no socially sanctioned privilege behind the gendered expression but a recognition of the inherent limits of philosophy as it aspires to become an art of living. And more than that: as it strives to be an art of human and more-than-human living articulated together due to their lack of separation or, to repeat Emerson-and-Sławek's odd coinage, their 'un-self-sufficingness.'

To invoke the phrase 'art of life' (24) and the famous Thoreauvian distinction between philosophers and mere professors involved in the examination of other thinkers' ideas is to locate oneself in the specific frame of reference and conception of philosophy which is no doubt linked to the question of the form and function of discourse. If Sławek sums up the contents of Thoreau's oeuvre as 'simply a spiritual exercise' (28), a way of introducing discipline into thinking and experiencing the world that the passage of *Walden* dwells on, he both alludes to the ancient notion of philosophy as a practical art (*techne*) of living well (*eu zen*) that was once supposed to precede and permeate all discursive interventions (a notion aptly characterized in the context of ancient philosophy by Pierre Hadot and transplanted to the American ground by Stanley Cavell and Richard Shusterman[6]), and repeats the American thinker's gesture in offering what is not a systematic reading of his work but a series of fragments being philosophical exercises (or essays, in the etymological meaning of the word) based on Thoreau's reflection. What we

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[3] Sławek's own idea is that of a truth which is fragile, temporary and moving about: in one of the fragments he alludes to Thoreau's image of truth as "a gossamer borne on the wind of the fortuity of fate" (28).

[4] Both meanings are suggested in the author's careful choice of words: 'troskliwe spojrzenie' is not just 'careful looking,' as Jean Ward's simple translation has it (29).

[5] 'Unhurried' is another case of simplified translation, replacing the beautiful Polish coinage 'niespieszny'.

[6] See Pierre Hadot: *Philosophy as a Way of Life. Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*. Trans. M. Chase. Oxford and Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 1995; Richard Shusterman: *Practicing Philosophy. Pragmatism and the Philosophical Life*. New York and London: Routledge, 1997.

are thus invited to do as readers of Sławek's book is not just to treat the philosopher's dispersed thoughts as variations on common themes and build them into a coherent interpretative perspective; the aim of reading is an exercise itself, as the reader is bound to repeat the meditation or act of reading in his or her own context (and at his or her existential risk). That the exercise also implies strenuous linguistic effort and experimentation with language should be obvious to Sławek's readers; the poetic neologisms coined in the process of his interpretation of Thoreau's words (unfortunately, only occasionally preserved with accuracy in the English version[7]) call for a meticulous attention to the way philosophical tongues contribute to the making and unmaking of Thoreau's – and our own worlds.

However, by approaching a certain philosophical formation intent on practicing, and not just reading or studying philosophy, Sławek simultaneously marks his distance from the former, by now well-entrenched discourse. The ancient Socratic idea of philosophizing-and-living places special emphasis on altering the course of one's life, unlearning one's previous knowledge (*dogma*) and arriving at the newly recovered truth. The narrative is based on the twin notions of unity and totality, calling for a complete transformation of the human being in the quest for a perfectly shaped existence, in both moral and aesthetic terms. A similar figure of 'transfiguration' (introduced as a Biblical trope) can be found in Thoreau; except that, as Sławek stresses, his identity project is conceived purely negatively as an exercise in stripping one's self naked, in depriving existence of the pretence of harmonious and consistent quality which 'in normal circumstances' would testify to the constant presence of rational subjective control. Contrary to expectations, Thoreau's *Journal* is not a chronicle of the coming-of-age of the self-reliant subject; it is situated at a far remove from autobiographical writing and its characteristics which assume exclusive preoccupation with one's self and an attempt at providing an accurate account of its relationship to the world. This is because, in the first place, Sławek's Thoreau is not interested in self-fashioning, or focusing on his own distinct way of living which makes him a unique human figure. His identity project involves instead what the author of the book inventively calls 'zoe-graphy' (46), a discontinuous narrative that strives to articulate (with little eloquence) the human in community with other beings, often giving precedence to pre- and non-human space, as is illustrated by the countless lists and descriptions of plants, animals and natural phenomena. Second, the idea of bare existence, a persistent trope of Thoreau's work in Sławek's reading, means that the tree of life is stripped of anything that is inessential (12), losing its ornamentation of leaves, or social attributes, petrified habits and state of

[7] The erasure of neologisms, rather than an attempt at their reconstruction, seems to be the main strategy behind Jean Ward's translation of the text. Compare, for instance, the following fragment, riddled with words combined on the basis of phonetic similarity and playing with prefixes in the Heideggerian manner: "To, co istnieje, co bytuje, nie wy-powiada się, nie jest elokwentne i wy-gadane; gdyby było, ukrywałoby się, skrywałoby swą *bare existence* pod warstwami retorycznych ornamentów. Im bardziej coś mówi o sobie, tym bardziej nas zwodzi, od-wodząc od siebie. To, co chce ukazać się ogołocone do kości bytowania, będzie (jak pękający lód w przywołanym fragmencie) nieustannie jedynie próbowało poszukiwać sposobu wy-powiedzi." The English version focuses instead on meaning, reducing puns: "That which exists does not 'utter,' does not 'proclaim itself'; it is not eloquent or easy of speech; if it were, it would hide itself away, it would conceal its 'bare existence' under layers of rhetorical ornamentation. The more something speaks of itself, the more it leads us astray, luring us *away* from itself. If it wishes to reveal itself stripped to the bone of its existence, it will constantly (like the cracking ice in the passage quoted) be striving only to find a means of utterance."

possession. Bare existence is thus so crude as to lose its unifying character or 'name,' dissolving into scattered fragments, 'the grains and crumbs of events,' simple trivial things that are not combined 'into one collective history.' Sławek's (or Thoreau's) art of living appreciates and redeems a single moment without transfiguring the whole.

The ambivalence of authorship signalled in the previous sentence and sensed throughout the book is, I think, not the case of appropriating and instrumentalizing Thoreau's voice by the Polish philosopher delighting in deconstructionist games but a purposeful gesture aimed at drawing attention to, and thus empowering, the reader (as an embodied individual, not the literary scholar's theoretical construction). The *Journal* Sławek reads is a second-hand (or third-hand, or fourth-hand) book, a book with a past and a long list of readers whose lives have materially marked the book's pages. Hence the name of Eliot Alison (or Elliott Allison), a previous owner of fourteen Thoreau volumes, appears in Sławek's narrative as both that of the author (of another journal written on the margins of Thoreau's work, which makes him a somewhat Sławkian figure) and the exemplary reader who interprets and enacts Thoreau's zoobiographical narrative in his own project of bare (stripped naked, made elementary[8]) living. Reading and writing as ways of relating with real seriousness to the world become thus an essence of the philosophical existential project offered by the community of the world's readers including Thoreau and Elliott, but also Sławek and Cavell (with his *Senses of Walden*). But the community of readers tends to open and expand more than we may suspect, to be finally able to embrace non-human agents. Reading is an exercise in careful looking, and 'perception does not belong exclusively to the human world and the human level of existence' (74). The narrator of the *Journal* thus 'strives to speak with a pre-human voice,' yielding a biography 'written as an animal might write it, or the wind stirring the leaves of the trees' (129). Sławek's conclusion underlines a radical reworking of the notion of readership in Thoreau's oeuvre, one that gravitates towards the final 'capitulation' of literature and its dissolution in the practices of the world. The growth of environmental consciousness in Thoreau, his 'increasing biocentrism' (162) is certainly one of the major challenges that Sławek's book has to face, and its way of narrating the evolution is interesting in a philosopher who has long identified himself with deconstruction.

This is not to say that the community of being-in-the-world Sławek dwells on is solely natural, or pre-political (the bare life he uses as a quote from Agamben's work is certainly not). Thoreau's decision to stay away from his Concord community in the wilderness, on the frontier, in recognition of the importance of *zoe*, 'brute' existence, is an intensely political and critical gesture, and a number of the book's constellations of ideas refer to the polis and its collective, often erroneous, ways of living. Again, this makes Thoreau a Socratic figure (34, 294), but at the same time introduces him as heir to the distinct tradition of American philosophizing that, in contradistinction to European thinking, redefines the individual quest for perfection in social terms. Pragmatism, like

[8] The Polish word used by Sławek throughout the book is *ogołocony*, a somewhat richer version than 'bare,' and one certainly resonating with theological meanings (*ogałacać* is the verb used in the description of Christ's shedding of transcendence in Philippians 2:7: *Lecz ogołocił samego siebie, przyjąwszy postać sługi*, as Biblia Tysiąclecia has it). The use of 'bare' in translation is however well justified in both Thoreau's application of the term and its currency in contemporary philosophical thinking which Sławek finds so inspiring (G. Agamben, R. Esposito).

transcendentalism, is never explicitly mentioned in the book, but Sławek seems to be nearing the conclusion that a long succession of American thinkers, from Romantics like Emerson and Thoreau to pragmatists like James and Dewey, and to postpragmatists such as Cavell and Shusterman, follow in the footsteps of ancient philosophers professing the art of living well which necessarily takes place within, not apart from, social community. Thoreau's zoegraphy is admittedly a form of 'zoepolitics' (291); the two cannot be told apart. Even the figure of the devoted reader of Thoreau's *Journal* can support this interpretation since, on the basis of the scant information that the book imparts, he is clearly portrayed as the writer's double, a naturalist remaining on the outskirts of the city yet working for a local magazine and busying himself with identifying places of possible fires from an observation tower on the hill. And if the last section of Sławek's book, commenting poignantly on the last entries of the *Journal* and the words spoken by Thoreau on his deathbed, points in the direction of 'wildness' ('moose' and 'Indian'), it is again a political trope, reminding the reader that the voice of the American thinker in the wild is that of a prophet learning the ways of nature whose utterances are there to be heard, even though they may not be listened to – carefully enough.

REFERENCES

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AUTHOR'S BIO: Alina Mitek-Dziemba, PhD, is Assistant Professor in the Chair of Comparative Literature, University of Silesia, Katowice, Poland, and a graduate of both the English Department and Philosophy. She is a translator of the works of neopragmatist philosophers into Polish (Richard Shusterman and Richard Rorty) and an author of several articles discussing points of intersection of philosophical aesthetics and comparative literature. In 2011 she published a book in Polish based on her dissertation, entitled *Literature and Philosophy in Pursuit of the Art of Living. Nietzsche, Wilde, Shusterman*. She is a co-editor of the anthology *The Tree of Knowledge. Postsecularism in Translations and Commentary* (2012, with Piotr Bogalecki), the first volume in Polish to discuss the so-called postsecular turn from the poststructuralist perspective. She also edited a bilingual collection of essays entitled *The Ties of Community: Literature, Religion, Comparative Studies* (2013). Her research focuses on contemporary philosophy, comparative literature, environmental aesthetics, animal studies, somaesthetics and post-secular thinking.

E-MAIL: greyhaired(at)interia.pl