
*Julien Nègre, L'arpenteur vagabond. Cartes et
cartographies dans l'œuvre de Henry David Thoreau*

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REFERENCES

Julien Nègre, *L'arpenteur vagabond. Cartes et cartographies dans l'œuvre de Henry David Thoreau*, Lyon, ENS éditions, collection Signes, 2019, 353 p., 28€. ISBN: 979-10-362-0115-8

- 1 This is quite a beautiful book, both in its elegant prose and its color reproduction of many maps consulted or created by Thoreau. Its style is clear and eloquent and its structure limpid. The short introduction distinguishes it from Robert F. Stowell's *The Thoreau Gazetteer* (1970), which collects many of the maps relevant to Thoreau's life, in that the earlier book simply reproduces the maps without explicit commentary, whereas the present volume intends to clarify and theorize the role played by maps and the "cartographical gesture" (38) in Thoreau's work and thought.¹ While Stowell's book provides images of many of Thoreau's copies of contemporaneous maps, Nègre's also offers reproductions of the sources of those copied maps, which meant a good amount of archival research to identify and locate the originals.
- 2 The introduction also very briefly situates the author's perspective in relation to that of various scholars of geopoetics and the importance of place in American literature, as well as to several recent trends in Thoreau scholarship. The author rather uses the "prism" (28) of maps to focus on three related aspects of Thoreau's work: his technical and detailed observation of natural phenomena, his particularly extravagant use of language, and his political positioning and "les contours problématiques des territoires de l'individu et du commun" (29). The map, both as a literal object and a metaphor, is understood as central to Thoreau's general project of perception and clarification,

bringing things to light in a new way, “en établissant un nouveau régime de visibilité” (31).

- 3 The first chapter situates the author's analysis within the field of map theory, details several essential characteristics of maps, gives an overview of the crucial importance of maps in the 1840s and 1850s in the United States, and introduces Thoreau's work as a surveyor. An investigation into the dynamic relations between map and text, a recurring concern throughout the book, is also opened in the first chapter. Whereas maps had been theorized in a Foucauldian fashion as representing the rational domination of a space, since the 1990s and especially the 2000s a new more pragmatic (“processual,” 58) approach to maps allows them to be understood as having a fluid nature determined by the dynamic practices associated with them. This approach, according to Julien Nègre, makes it possible to overcome a theoretical antagonism between map and text and to focus on their interactions. Maps may be embraced as expressions of the desire for precision and detail without implying a form of hegemonic domination, thus entering into a “productive tension” (60) with the more intimate representations that a text is capable of.
- 4 The second, third and fourth chapters generally follow the three-part thematic outline given in the introduction: Thoreau's exploration of nature, his language play, and his political thought. The three chapters also correspond to different elements of Thoreau's oeuvre: the second is about the early texts including *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, the third is devoted to *Walden*, *Cape Cod* and *The Maine Woods*, and the fourth concerns the political writings. A fifth and final chapter, before a short conclusion, analyzes Thoreau's late natural history writings. The journal makes its appearance occasionally when relevant, within this structure.
- 5 The question of the relation of maps to the discovery of the unknown is a central issue in the second chapter. Through reading the early essays and especially *A Week*, the author shows that despite the apparently cartographical act of exploration in his excursions, the territory discovered does not therefore become entirely known. “L'espace arpenté ne devient pourtant pas un espace connu” (62). The unknown, represented by the blank areas on the map, remains within the familiar terrain to which Thoreau returns time and again, always experiencing the surprise of novelty. The vocabulary of Deleuze – *espace lisse*, *espace strié* – is used here and throughout the book to describe how, despite the cartographical process of exploration and discovery, the territory is for Thoreau never fully closed or comprehended. “En remplaçant l'inconnu et ce qui n'est pas perçu (*the unseen*) au centre de la carte de cet espace bien connu qu'est le Massachussets, Thoreau refuse implicitement de considérer l'entreprise cartographique comme un geste de normalisation qui rendrait le monde définitivement familier” (82). In discussing *A Week*, Julien Nègre shows that the map becomes 4-D so to speak, by including the human history of the area explored; thus, space becomes stratified and complexified.
- 6 The third chapter follows the Deleuzian logic further as it explores how Thoreau's central texts emphasize disorientation, marginal spaces and phenomena which resist formalization and allow for “play” (110, 193). This play is not only that of language but of thought and space, and the French word “jeu” has a spatial connotation (meaning latitude or the interval between two spaces) and could be translated here perhaps as “cushion,” “breathing space” or “wobble room” as well as “play.” Julien Nègre shows through comparisons that the three maps used by Thoreau during his excursions in

Maine differed significantly from one another in the details of the areas he explored, adding to the challenge of the trip, but “cette imprécision est ce qui donne cependant à cet espace toute sa saveur” (130). In Cape Cod Thoreau had access to high-precision maps; here, Thoreau explicitly states how different reality was from the maps he consulted, and the text is analyzed as bringing out everything that the map lacks. Essentially a large sandbar, *Cape Cod* has few landmarks and is in constant movement as the sand shifts, and the author shows how Thoreau highlights the dynamism of the “land” rather than its fixity.

- 7 Regarding the political writings, Julien Nègre portrays Thoreau as a surveyor of political space, mapping the relations between the individual and the community, and defining a politically charged boundary between the prison cell and the space outside. Thoreau’s essay “Walking” is discussed in this chapter, as the essay’s speaker intends to walk in the direction away from the community, and yet later in the text, he follows the general movement of civilization in its march toward the West. The essay offers a sort of anti-cartography in that it criticizes the surveyor as a diabolical figure, lauds the swamp as a place that resists surveying and celebrates the Wild as an indeterminate zone. This chapter also discusses the importance of in-between spaces in Thoreau’s writings, situated between the wilderness and the town, and argues that the “undecidability” of Thoreau’s texts has a political dimension (256).
- 8 The final chapter portrays Thoreau’s late natural history writings as essentially a cartographical endeavor, attempting to map the relations between living things in the Concord region, a practice now called ecology. The *Kalendar* project is particularly cartographical, displaying an ideal of exhaustivity proper to mapmaking. The late essays also show how the surveyor is an interpreter of natural signs (303). Despite the aim of exactitude, these late texts also offer a celebration of the unexpected: “La cartographie souple et dynamique que déploie le texte sait intégrer le hasard et l’imprévu” (319). In this sense Thoreau becomes a new kind of mapmaker, one who attends to the peripheral and neglected places and entities that do not figure on property maps.
- 9 The book establishes a dialogue or a back-and-forth between two figures, both essential to Thoreau: the surveyor and the wanderer, *l'arpenteur et le vagabond*. In many ways, the dialogue implicitly takes place on a deeper level, between two French philosophers: Descartes and Deleuze. The latter reappears throughout the book as the spokesperson for resistance to rational domination of space; the former is continually present *en filigrane* as the master of mapmaking. This binary is not only expressed in terms of Thoreau’s activities in nature (surveying and wandering) but also generally through various other binaries: the goal of formalization and the resistance to it, determination and indetermination, known spaces and unknown or neglected areas, the marks on maps and the blank spots, civilization and the wild, orientation and disorientation, the organization of systems and chance or aleatory elements of nature, the ideal of exhaustivity and the infinity of nature’s complexity making this ideal impossible. The relations between the two are explored in various ways. The author speaks at times of an “oscillation” between two poles (the texts “oscillent entre, d’une part, un ancrage et une référentialité spatiales solides et, d’autre part, une tendance permanente à l’excursus fantasme et au pas de côté” [193]; see also 249). At other times the relation is described as a paradox (20, 177, 319). It is generally not surprising to find a tense relationship between these two approaches in the work of a thinker who has one foot

in romantic transcendentalism and one in empirical science. One of the fascinating aspects of this book is to bring these two figures into dialogue, a dialogue which it would have been helpful to broach and analyze in a more frontal way, as they are essential to the work and thought of Thoreau.

- 10 The study also includes a number of beautiful close readings of passages, revealing how Thoreau's language dynamically embodies these questions (100, 163-4, 179, 181-2). Beyond the unfortunate lack of an index, it is only to be regretted that the book was written in French and so its readership will be more limited than it deserves. But the beauty of the prose as well as the very high quality of the readings offered will give it an important place in French Thoreauvian studies.

NOTES

1. STOWELL, Robert F. *The Thoreau Gazetteer*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970.
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Subjects: Recensions

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