

human soul" (p. 164)—while simultaneously representing a heterodox means of salvaging spiritual faith from the rising tide of economic and scientific materialism. Finally, in Part IV, Franklin briefly traces the links between late-Victorian hybrid religions (for which H. P. Blavatsky's Theosophy serves as the representative case study) and New Age spiritualities of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

The temporal, geographical, and disciplinary breadth of *Spirit Matters*, which accounts for the book's most compelling and original insights, also inevitably compromises the extent to which it is able to develop and unravel its many threads. Franklin himself acknowledges that he has "only brushed the surface" (p. xvi) of his subject matter, since there were quite literally "thousands of works . . . published in nineteenth-century Great Britain that were outside the domain proper of orthodox Christianity and represented spiritual positions defined between it and scientific naturalism or foreign faiths" (p. xvii). One is left wondering about the rationale behind the exclusion of a number of relevant texts, such as James George Frazer's *The Golden Bough: A Study in Comparative Religion* (1890), which receives not even a passing mention in *Spirit Matters* despite its formative influence on the poetry of W. B. Yeats and T. S. Eliot. Notwithstanding such omissions, *Spirit Matters* offers a fascinating look into the heterogeneous landscape of Victorian spirituality that will be of interest to a broad spectrum of readers and should inspire new avenues of research.

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THEO DAVIS, *Ornamental Aesthetics: The Poetry of Attending in Thoreau, Dickinson, and Whitman*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016. Pp. xii + 245. \$65.

In *Ornamental Aesthetics: The Poetry of Attending in Thoreau, Dickinson, and Whitman*, Theo Davis deftly and passionately challenges influential, current critical approaches to literature. In the process, she advances an original, provocative approach to poetry. Her methodology and individual readings are refreshing, difficult, nuanced, and inspiring. This is a brilliant, contrarian, important book.

Counterintuitively, Davis claims that three nineteenth-century American writers—Henry David Thoreau, Emily Dickinson, and Walt Whitman, all of whom have been associated with stripping away the decorative in the service of valorizing less trivial pursuits—are

deeply invested in the serious power of adornment as a means of “marking out persons, objects, and the world—or reality itself—for attention and praise” (p. 1). Rather than associating ornamentation with superfluous detail, Davis delineates a formal practice that goes along with, touches upon, and illuminates “the Open,” Martin Heidegger’s term for “that objectless place where innerness is discovered, is ‘found’ in and for itself” (quoted on p. 123). Heidegger plays a central role in Davis’s advancement of a nonrepresentational theory of poetry. Whereas representation is based on a fundamental alienation between subject and object, “ornamentation can be found to have a *privileged* relationship to truth: it can point to what is unrepresentable, and indicate its presence and its value, without performing the transformative mediation of representation or the full merging of truth into the sensory and temporal” (p. 11). The stakes of the argument are unapologetically huge: ornamental aesthetics provides access to truth and the real in a way that representational practices, grounded in materialism, cannot. This is decidedly not a historicist argument; Davis considers these three writers not because they are Americans of a particular time, but because they share formal, intellectual, and spiritual interests. These interests are rooted in pre-Aristotelian Greek practices of praiseful song that marks and gives value. By positing an ornamental, non-representational aesthetics, Davis asks, “What comes of thinking of literature as a way of connecting and relating to life, rather than as a way of framing and recalling it?” (p. 29).

Davis pursues the answer to this question in three chapters, each devoted to a single author’s work, which she situates in relation to a range of relevant critical and theoretical arguments. Centering on the disjointed, varied, intense observations of transient natural beauty in Thoreau’s journals (which she considers to be poetry), Davis makes the case for the importance of human mind as an accompaniment to the natural world. Thoreau attends to what he finds beautiful—a duck “showing different lustres as it turned on the unrippled element in various lights,” for example (quoted on p. 53). Thoreau stops short at the observation, declining to turn it into a symbol or to move beyond immediate notice and appreciation; for Davis, “it is the lack of meaning to this duck’s beauty that lets it be so ‘splendid’” (p. 54). Thoreau attends to specific transient presences that ornament the world, but his attention is not simply passive and absorptive. Davis argues instead that Thoreau is committed to a relational poetics of beauty, in which human observation touches and changes the natural world, which responds in turn. Davis demonstrates Thoreau’s interest in making

as well as receiving impressions, memorably in a scenario where he plucks lily buds, blows on them, floats them in a bowl, then watches them bloom in response. Davis thus develops what she calls an idea of “form as effect,” in the process insisting, against disciplinary tendencies that value the negation or rejection of human presence in nature, on “the ongoing urgency of remaining aware of and engaged with the kind of activity that goes on within a human being” (p. 89). Possessing the power to destroy the world may charge us with a moral responsibility, but nothing can be accomplished by trying to efface ourselves, for our minds are part of the world—a fact that is not a choice.

In chapter 2, Davis treats the decorative aspect of Dickinson’s poems, which has been largely ignored, or criticized for its seeming superfluity. As with Thoreau, Davis stresses the way Dickinson’s mental activities go along with the natural world in a companionate way: Dickinson’s thoughts skitter across the surface of an idea just as the butterflies she describes rest briefly on a “Beam,” then flutter across an open sky (or sea, or both) into a beyond. Along with the moving, changeful things that Dickinson observes, the accompanying “thoughts also exist and are part of reality” (p. 112), though they do not capture or represent that reality. Because both thoughts and material objects are phenomena, neither Dickinson nor Thoreau are concerned with the distinction between interiority and materiality. In this chapter Davis juxtaposes her formulation with the materialist turn in Dickinson criticism, which has often stressed physical features—of Dickinson’s manuscripts, her epistolary enclosures, her surroundings—at the expense of mental processes, both Dickinson’s and the critics’. Davis claims that these critics have formulated approaches via which they “seek to contact a reality that their very presence ruins,” manifesting the subject/object division inherent in representational poetics (p. 112).

When considering the implications of Davis’s argument for reading Dickinson, poems come to mind that potentially question the limits of an ornamental aesthetics. When “a Visitor in Marl,” for example, “influences Flowers” “till they are . . . Elegant as Glass,” he adorns them while freezing them, perhaps to death (F588A). In F604A, a Robin “squanders” “Threnodies of Pearl” on the “Head” of a listener who cannot tolerate the beauty and turns to the “Robin in [the] Brain / To keep the other – still – .” Anointed by, but almost unable to endure, the song’s beauty, the speaker charts a division between internal and external birds and casts the brain as a refuge. A third poem proclaims that “impotent to cherish / We hasten to adorn,” suggesting the inadequacy and perhaps the undesirability of ornamentation

(F1239B). Dickinson often assumes multiple perspectives on important topics; are there ways that she recasts, rejects, reveals the limits of, or warns of the dangers of an ornamental aesthetics?

In Davis's most surprising chapter, she turns to ornamentation in Whitman's poetry. Against a long, distinguished tradition of understanding Whitman's poetics as a form of democratic representation, Davis convincingly showcases his interest in making distinctions among people through ornamentation, elevating some over others. The central problem in the study of Whitman's poetry has been the way that his goal of democratic representation cannot be accomplished; critics have identified various gaps between aspiration and practice. For Davis, however, Whitman is notable not for his idealized vision of democracy, but rather for his attempts to accept and celebrate an imperfect world "basically lacking in justice or right" (p. 144). Whitman shares with Thoreau and Dickinson the sense of beauty in ornamentation: in laying upon the grass, in people wrapping and draping arms around each other (placing upon is the central gesture of ornamentation for Davis). But Whitman also claims the authority to bestow honor, situating himself above others, and he manifests an "uneasy disequilibrium" about who or what should be selected for praise (p. 174). For Whitman, ornamentation of the Open comes at the expense of moral standards: to embrace the real, one must be fully inclusive, even of the "ugly" or the wrong: slavery, prostitution, or violent death, for example. Via an agitated, uneven strewing of adornment, Whitman seeks both to adjust actively what is "appropriate"—the key word for Whitman's poetics according to Davis, signifying a "terrain in which the vision of incarnating an ideal has been abandoned"—and to find a way to accept and praise a world that is not just (p. 179).

Davis's argument makes profound sense of Whitman's elevations of some more than others. His active arranging of people sits uncomfortably beside his insistence that "the universe is duly in order. . . everything is in its place," even while he includes many things that should have no place in a just world (all Whitman quotations are from the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, available at the Whitman Archive: <<https://whitmanarchive.org/published/LG/1855/whole.html>>). But what, then, do we make of Whitman's own insistence that he "give[s] the sign of democracy"? Though Davis acknowledges that "at one point" Whitman claims the social goal of equality (p. 174), versions of the word "equal" appear seven times in the 1855 version of "Song of Myself," and twenty-seven times in the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*; in one of Whitman's formulations, "the

new rule shall rule as the soul rules, and as the love and justice and equality that are in the soul rule." Davis does not fully account for those aspects of the poem that strain against her argument. The challenges in "Whitman and the Distinction of Ornament" are different than in the previous chapters, because they involve the social so directly. Thoreau's and Dickinson's experiences with the Open are singular, while Whitman treats centrally the relation of self to other, and of selves inhabiting a social system. The presence of the social perhaps poses challenges to the kind of encounter with "truth" or "the real" that Davis describes.

Davis situates her argument against a current tendency toward historical contextualization, but her decision to attend to three writers who share a time period and a national culture raises the question of whether broader historical contexts might inform their common aesthetic orientations. It is understandable that Davis sets her claims in contrast to trends in materialist and posthumanist criticism, in order to establish specific ground for her approach. These need not be opposed, however, and there is perhaps more common ground than acknowledged. Davis's primary distinction between a representational and an ornamental aesthetics is thoroughly compelling. This is an exciting book that makes capacious and significant claims with precision, clarity, and theoretical sophistication. In *Ornamental Aesthetics*, Davis makes a stellar contribution to the fields of nineteenth-century American literature, poetics, environmental studies, and humanism/posthumanism, as well as to Thoreau, Dickinson, and Whitman studies.

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KEVIN GILMARTIN, ed., *Sociable Places: Locating Culture in Romantic-Period Britain*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017. Pp. xii + 269. \$99.99.

Sociable Places: Locating Culture in Romantic-Period Britain is a collection of essays, by some of the leading scholars in the field, that builds on previous studies of sociability in the Romantic period by explicitly foregrounding the role of place in constructions of the social. The focus on place is intended as a marker of the material basis for considerations of sociability: when people of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries gathered, they did