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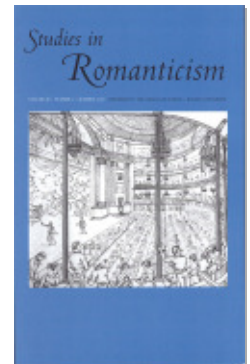
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*Ornamental Aesthetics: The Poetry of Attending in Thoreau,  
Dickinson, and Whitman* by Theo Davis (review)

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cated by one such discipline: political science. The quantification of thick, mutable opinion into big data and polling trends is our own blessed structure of political reason. But what happens when all the polls are wrong? Where is the accurate formula for deception—for the political lie that is told and the lie that one tells oneself? Who can quantify the partisan bile that rises and falls spasmodically? To live through the disruption of a machine of understanding is to live, as Michael shows us, through another phase of Romantic modernity.

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Theo Davis. *Ornamental Aesthetics: The Poetry of Attending in Thoreau, Dickinson, and Whitman*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016. Pp. 264. \$65.

Somewhere between the material, the philosophical, and the formal, Theo Davis in her most recent work, *Ornamental Aesthetics: The Poetry of Attending in Thoreau, Dickinson, and Whitman*, constructs a masterful and nuanced argument for the need to return the ornamental to a set of three writers who, we thought, had rid themselves of it long ago. Davis therefore presents the reader with a welcome challenge from page one: to insist on the importance of the ornamental in this group of writers is already to carve out a critical space in which Davis finds herself uniquely alone. And yet, one of the greatest strengths of Davis's book is her ability to situate herself both within and apart from the more well-known approaches to her three authors, designating for her reader the precise location of her own argument and contribution to the field. While Davis relies especially upon the work of Martin Heidegger, she also comes into extended meaningful contact with Sharon Cameron, Jane Bennett, and the traditions of (all types of) historicism and materialism, arguing for a new type of formal criticism that is indebted to, though separate from, most current scholarship.

For Davis, a theory of ornamentation is centrally concerned with how the mind and objects relate. Though her argument is not exactly an object-oriented ontology, Davis does want to borrow from various strains of new materialism to allow that objects themselves have an affective quality that cannot be entirely contained within the mind—that, to reference Bennett's book, there is a certain vibrancy to matter that exists regardless of whether there is a mind to make sense of it or not. However, the mind, the individual, and experience remain key for Davis, and not only as the stone upon which we always must stumble (as it is for many new materialists). Main-

taining the importance of the mind and thinking, Davis argues that Thoreau, Dickinson, and Whitman all offer us access to a more fluid conception of Heideggerian Being, undoubtedly made more fluid by her attentiveness to the object. Ornament is that which, on the one hand, “adorns and draws attention to” that which is immediate perceptual experience, and, on the other, that which connects with a sense of totality, or, Davis argues, the Heideggerian Open (12). Most important is the move Davis makes to dissolve the divide between the mind and the object while simultaneously maintaining the solidity of each: “what we will see increasingly is how fully thinking ornament entails abandoning the notion that thinking is an internal process always opposed to, and apart from, the world of things, objects, or others” (35). Thinking, therefore, always must take place in the world, and must always refer to objects that attract—ornaments—within that world.

In perhaps the most theoretically grounded chapter of the book, Chapter 2, “Dickinson’s Ornamental Form,” Davis contends that there is an openness to Dickinson’s ornamentation that leads us directly to Heidegger’s doorstep, allowing us to peer into the Open. Much of Davis’s project in the Dickinson chapter is to perform the conceptual work needed to adopt Heidegger as her thinker of presence. Davis wants to highlight in Heidegger the importance of groundedness in thinking—that thinking cannot take place in a vacuum. If the three main figures of her book show us anything, it is that there is a necessary relation between thinking and the mind on the one hand, and place or the object on the other. However, this groundedness of thinking is not also a rigid fixity. On the contrary, Davis wants to bring out how the identities of objects, contexts, subjects, and the mind are always in flux, always “restless” (138). For example, in a clever close reading of a handful of Dickinson poems, Davis understands Dickinson’s rendering of “upon” as “opon,” as a type of adornment within Heidegger’s Open: in the face of pure Being, Davis tells us through Dickinson, there must always necessarily be the specific, the ornament which is located “upon,” that allows us to slide into the open. The ornamental is therefore not superfluous: it is an essential characteristic that demands, and must be given, attention.

With much of the theoretical ground covered in the Dickinson chapter, Davis is free to attend to specifically literary matters in her other chapters. While we still find lengthy discussions of Heidegger in Chapter 1: “Beautiful Thoreau: An Ornament to Nature,” what emerges here is another one of Davis’s main argumentative themes: the underappreciated text or critical disposition. Davis’s chapter on Thoreau focuses on the *Journal* precisely because it in many ways proves a recalcitrant subject. The *Journal*’s lack of cohesion, its elusiveness, and its resistance to interpretation are prime mate-

rials for Davis's critical approach. The Thoreau scholar will find this particular chapter of great interest, as Davis—respectfully—rejects the ecocritical tradition that has grown up around the figure of Thoreau. Davis turns away from the work of scholars such as Lawrence Buell who praise Thoreau for attempting to allow nature to speak. Instead, Davis's Thoreau comes in the form of an observer, engaged in a relational and responsive dialogue with nature. This relational quality between subject and object brings us another key term for Davis: attending. What Davis means by attending is the way in which “beauty will suddenly dawn in the mind in a way that ornaments it” (61). While we generally believe that “a life must yield some fruit, that it has a finished end of a narrative arc,” what becomes clear in reading the *Journal* is that there is no such moment of ultimate reconciliation (62). Beauty, or meaning, can emerge at any moment, and it is “Thoreau's work” that can show us “that thinking is not so much about completion as it is about attending” (62).

In her final chapter, “Whitman and the Distinction of Ornament,” Davis makes the rather perverse yet ultimately successful claim that the ornamental in Whitman undermines our understanding of him as a celebrator of democratic representation. The perversity of the claim fits in with the overall curious intellectual project of the book, a book, after all, on ornamentation: to consider seriously that which normally is cast off as mere accessory or superficiality. All three writers, Davis notes, are better known for their explicit rejection of the ornamental and the artificial. However, in Whitman, Davis is interested in latching on to a more natural type of ornamentation “that emerges from, and partakes in, natural processes and activities” as opposed to the type of ornamentation “that is made with excessive strain and artifice” (143). Democratic representation in Whitman has to be rethought within an ornamental aesthetics, Davis argues: because the ornamental always carries with it the focus on the particular at the momentary expense of everything else, a persistent universal representation becomes impossible to sustain, and is not, as it turns out, what Whitman is after. While Davis's claims in this final chapter can at times prove befuddling, she ultimately makes an important point of clarification. For Whitman, the social field is not perpetually open: Whitman's praise of the strange or the ugly in effect resists a democratic openness that could one day come to find something like slavery beautiful; the corollary of this point is that such a field could, on the other side, also find room for marginalized groups. Davis emphasizes therefore not a democratic openness to all in Whitman, but rather a potential for praise, or, the potential for the work of attending the beautiful.

While Davis's familiarity with Heidegger and the critical history of her three authors proves a worthwhile read, her relaying of the philosophy and

the history at times seems somewhat detached from her central thesis. In her discussion of Dickinson, for example, it becomes clear that the chapter is as much about Heidegger as it is about Dickinson. While this is not inherently a problem, and plenty of successful scholarship delicately navigates the path between philosophy and literature, Davis's application of Heidegger serves more as an interesting companion piece to Dickinson. Even though Davis's Heidegger supplies us with a new language through which we can understand Dickinson, Davis never returns her argument to Heidegger himself. Davis could have amended this small issue by demonstrating not only how the philosophy complicates the poetry, but by also showing how the poetry complicates the philosophy. A more rigorous tying together of the literary and the philosophical would have only made Davis's compelling text that much stronger.

And yet the use of Heidegger and Davis's astute sense of the critical tradition is precisely what allows her to pull off such impressive and singular readings of Thoreau, Dickinson, and Whitman. Indeed, Davis is truly at her best after she has provided the theoretical and philosophical ground upon which her argument rests. In an oversaturated field of scholarship, it seems to me for these reasons that Davis's work is one with which we must contend.

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Timothy Campbell. *Historical Style: Fashion and the New Mode of History, 1740–1830*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016. Pp. 376. 54 illus. \$65.

In *Historical Style*, Timothy Campbell connects fashion to what he describes as a new mode of history, showing how “Britons reinvented the material life of the past as a source of novelty for the present” (2). This syncing of fashion with time proves one of the most arresting aspects of Campbell's recasting of the role of the past across a variety of visual and textual genres. Fashion is often defined in the context of time, but usually not with the long historical view Campbell traces. In the eighteenth century and Romantic eras, fashion, like other cultural modes and forms of consumption, often marked progress and a quickening sense of pace. Trends changed from season to season, pocket watches ticked, and carriages clipped across improved roads. For Campbell, however, fashion develops rather a sense of historical currency that upends conventional accounts of change and improvement, as well as revising the relations among past, present, and future.