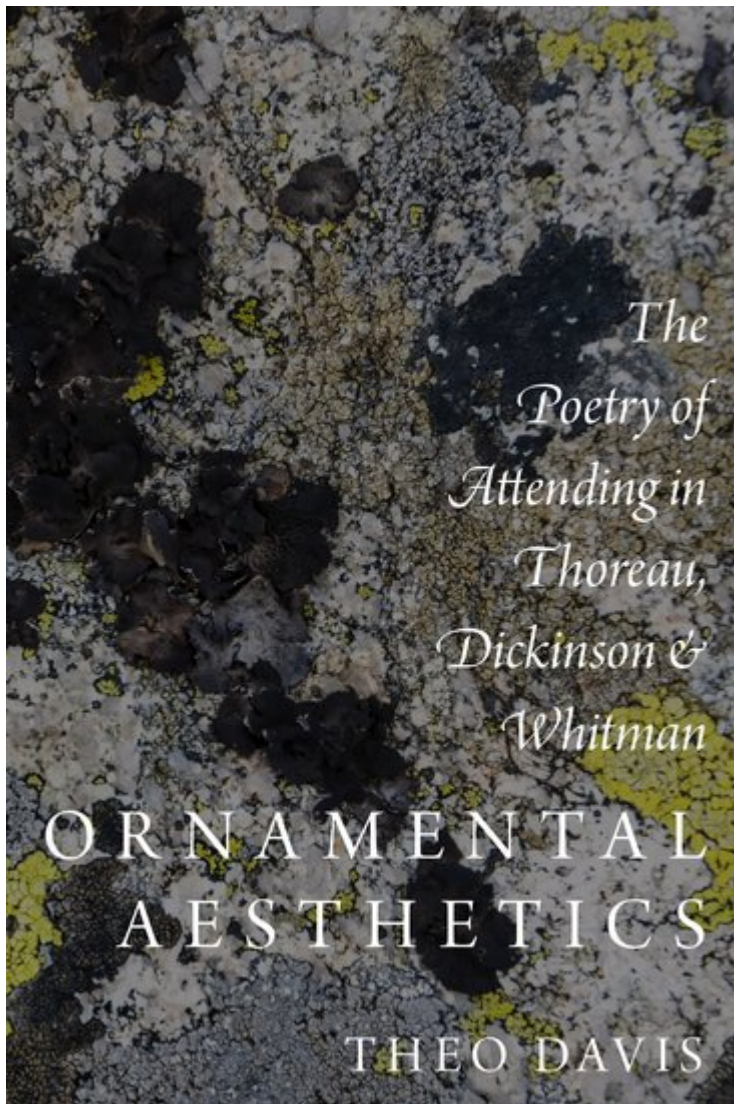
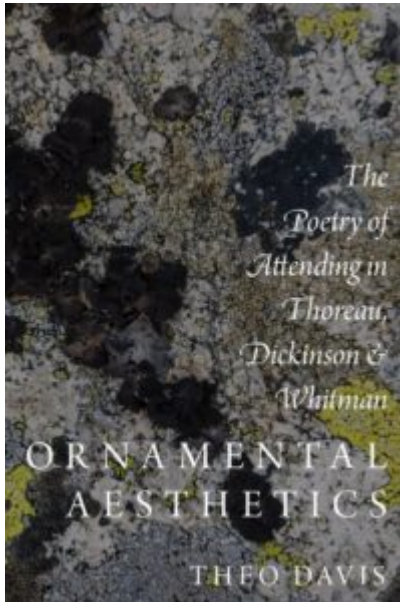


The Arts of Accompaniment: Ornament and Poetry in the American Renaissance





Theo Davis, *Ornamental Aesthetics: The Poetry of Attending in Thoreau, Dickinson, and Whitman*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017. 264 pp., \$69.

Coming to terms with Theo Davis's rich and compelling new book, *Ornamental Aesthetics: The Poetry of Attending in Thoreau, Dickinson, and Whitman*, requires a reversal of common assumptions about the status and function of ornament and, with it, of poetry. For in Davis's conception, poetry has a fundamentally ornamental purpose. In Davis's hands, this notion is far from trivializing; it is a view that critically illuminates the poetics of her chosen authors. Ornament in this study is less a noun than a verb; it is a movement, or a gesture, as indicated by the introductory chapter, "To Ornament." "To ornament" is to offer something to one's attention, to single it out, and to suggest and perform a relation to it, leaving a formal trace of the encounter. Movement is also captured in the sense of being drawn "to" ornament as a mark of attention and esteem on which we consequently place our attention, extending the ornamental gesture.

Ornament, then, is recuperated as a dynamic index of relationality, the marking and drawing of a response. But ornament, Davis cautions, is never the thing itself—it "need not fuse to presence or convey it, it can simply go along with it" (129). The work of poetry, like that of ornament, is not trivial; it is an essential accompaniment to the immediate experience of the world.

It is of course a lot of fun to declare, despite their own seeming disdain for ornament, and despite reams of serious canon-making arguments, that Whitman is, after all, a poet who troubles himself about his ornaments or that Thoreau is himself an ornament to nature (as in the chapter title, "Beautiful Thoreau: An Ornament to Nature"). But Davis avoids flippancy toward her poets, though critics come in for some schooling. Davis's method is cantankerously ahistoricist—it does not desire to embed these poets in their political or social context, a method Davis holds to be reductive of their projects. But *Ornamental Aesthetics* does devise and draw on an intellectual and aesthetic genealogy of its own—in Greek and Renaissance poetics, including

theories of the lyric, with dives into the phenomenology of Heidegger. Recourse to this archive leavens each chapter, from an introduction to ornamental aesthetics, to chapters devoted to each of the three authors. This serves in quite salient ways to illuminate both the theory of ornament that Davis assiduously recovers and the aesthetic rationale of each body of work under consideration. If this course in poetics sounds dry and old-school, prepare to be convinced otherwise. Aesthetics, poetry, and literature are rigorously and even passionately defended as necessary accompaniments to human existence in, and with, the world.

Focusing on the quality of relation performed between poetry and the world it approaches, particularly the effects of style and address, Davis urges us to see anew the aesthetic work of poetry to relate, notice, and attend, and she re-litigates the ethics of doing so. She finds that poetry marks a site of snagged, even aggravated attention in Thoreau's *Journal*; of glancing perception and recognition in Dickinson's poetry; and of contact and honorific adornment in Whitman's. Reading their poetry as seeking relation with the world rather than representing or interpreting it attunes us to primary registers of their work that have been obscured by the way we read.

Ultimately it is "the quality of accompaniment" Davis brings to her own readings of these poets as she assiduously attends to their poetic projects that yields the strongest demonstration of her claims (192). The chapter on Thoreau is particularly evocative. Jettisoning notions of any narrative logic or informing interpretation, Davis reads aesthetically, attending to the "unprecedented art of seeing, being affected, and knowing" that we find in Thoreau's *Journal* (39). In one example after another, we come to Thoreau's "caught up, engaged moments of looking" (72)—often he is touching, moving, or gathering, and so placing his hands on the thing he looks at. Davis stays with such moments of contact—Thoreau's impressions simultaneously on and of nature—refusing to regret them as human interference or appropriation. Against environmentalist and new materialist readings, Davis asserts Thoreau's "nature" is a play of forces acting and responding, and Thoreau's mental and physical encounters with it are not set apart from nature as an intruding agency, but are one of the forces within it. The traces of his impressions on the snow, on the bent or arranged leaf, in the flash of wing from the flushed duck, in the gathered egg, are "forms created by the exertion of impacts" and "capable of further impacting the mind that is attending to them" (71). Thoreau's transfer of impressions into the *Journal*, like the transfer of design onto a textile, marks the ornamentality of his work and extends his "gesture of crowning attention" onto new ground (61).

Davis refuses either traditional regret for Dickinson's "rococo" side, or recent readings of Dickinson's art as grounded in material craft (127). Instead, Dickinson's poetics are described as "smatter[ing]" thought across fields where "images or ideas are posed" and temporarily "lit" with the poet's attention (121, 91). What we experience in her poetry, in the drift, the glancing, the flickering of attention as it

rests, briefly, on objects, then flutters away is “the instability of perception” and its “quick, sparkling temporality” (120). In Dickinson, these moments on the verge of seeing or grasping are as close as we come to a necessarily unrepresentable truth; they are a kind of exhilarating essence of human experience, and Dickinson marks them with poetic quickness and light, and frequently studs them with imagery that itself betokens ornament. This reading leads to a central claim about ornament: “far from being what must be stripped away to see presence, ornament is what we can see at all in the face of Being: it is what survives in relation to presence” (127). Davis’s attention to Dickinson’s odd orthography in using “opon” for “upon” yields the insight that there is close connection between placing “upon,” a gesture of ornamenting and poetic attention, and “opening” onto awareness or coming near a world of presence (102). Davis thereby argues that Dickinson’s poetics cannot be anchored to a context or material substrate, because such effervescent placing makes any grounding for experience “fugitive” (102).

Davis’s reading of ornamental aesthetics as primarily gestural—as overtures of attending, recognition and appreciation—pay off in her reading of Whitman’s poetics as invested in a structure of address rather than a politics of representation. Accompaniment—coming and going along—is something that Whitman’s poetry commands his reader to do at every turn, but in this reading it is furthermore the ornamental desire of his poetry to accompany the world with praise and adornment. His primary gestures of laying on, whether of hands on bodies, arms on shoulder, or lines upon lines, is a mode of bestowing rather than laying bare. Drawing on concepts in classic rhetoric and lyric commemoration, Davis’s Whitman notices and praises decorous modes of behavior, styling his poetics not as embracing the indecent but as extending the appropriate. In this vein, Whitman pays homage not universally, to every single creature (as this would confer no distinction), but democratically, to objects that have not previously received such honors. This Whitman adorns rather than undresses, and confers distinctions rather than leveling them.

For all its extolling of the ornamental arts of accompaniment, *Ornamental Aesthetics* keeps company with few critics. The polemical nature of its defenses, the diversity of paths with which it parts ways, and the frequency of such partings seem a deep part of the engine that drives the book’s innovation. Davis slices through Gordian knots that have been the recent agon of academics. At times, however, the body count can clutter the fresh vista. The debate with Dickinson’s materialist critics seems particularly fraught, likely because those critics have of late done so much to challenge the way we read and the way we define poetry, two prongs of Davis’s own challenge. Davis obviously must defend her use of lyric convention against those who suggest that its importation to Dickinson’s poetry is a distorting modernist back-formation, but her interest in lyric as occasional poetry (in the Whitman chapter) also meets up with some of this schools’ central findings in ways that suggest a relation.

Ornamental Aesthetics yields an exhilarating portrait of these authors in part because it consistently demolishes the partition between mind and world that has long been perceived to characterize these authors' predicaments. They are not the cerebral skeptics alienated from a world of experience, relationship, and sensual feeling, a Cold War way of reading them that persists into concerns that poetry itself is partitioned from the world and so risks appropriating it, divorcing one from its materiality, or failing to fully embody it. But Davis insists we fully embrace poetry's ornamental function. Poetry need not be the world, it need only attest to its presence and accompany our experience of it. Here we find these poets well aware of the limits of poetry and the mind's ability to apprehend the world, yet fully exhilarating in the approach, inhabiting the senses, and seeking connection. Davis brings to poetics a newly enlivening framework of gesture, relation, and immediacy that boldly recasts how we read these poets, and with it the worldly work of poetry.

This article originally appeared in issue 18.2 (Spring, 2018).

Dorri Beam is an associate professor of English at Syracuse University. She is the author of *Style, Gender, and Fantasy in Nineteenth-Century American Women's Writing* (2010).