tinues to provide the most ample and illustrative quotes and citations for apparently any reading, however peculiar or irrelevant it may appear. The major merits, then, of *Approach and Avoid: Essays on 'Gravity's Rainbow'* turn out to be – somewhat paradoxically – its very lack of consistency and of a common denominator, however broadly defined. With a few notable exceptions, this collection illustrates the immense richness and seemingly inexhaustible arsenal of possible, plausible, pleasant, and provocative, ponderings on Pynchon's masterpiece. Judging from the first 25 years of *GR* criticism, it will be interesting to be around for the next 25 years. As Herman points out, and as this collection of essays shows (for better or for worse), 'Pynchon fits late twentieth-century research interests like a fashionable glove.' However, it is my sincere hope that one doesn't have to be a dedicated Derridaean deconstructivist to be on the future Pyndustry catwalk.

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Michael West, *Transcendental Wordplay: America's Romantic Punsters and the Search for the Language of Nature*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2000. xvii + 518 pp., ill.; ISBN 0-8214-1324-4; cloth, $59.95.

European observers have often been puzzled by American culture's bizarre preoccupation with correct spelling, a feature most obviously exemplified by the peculiar institution of the spelling bee competition. The spelling bee, in which players attempt to spell aloud words assigned to them by an impartial judge, is an old custom that was revived in schools in the nineteenth century in the United States, where it enjoyed a great vogue, and where local, regional, and national competitions continue to be held annually. Yet this obsession with orthography, Michael West argues in *Transcendental Wordplay: America's Romantic Punsters and the Search for the Language of Nature*, is only part of the story about America's complex relationship with language. Indeed, the dialectical antithesis of the spelling bee phenomenon is an equally time-honored American fascination with puns, anagrams, word-plays, quibbles and all other varieties of verbal wit.

In the first part of this voluminous study, West sets about explaining how punning became both a popular pastime and serious literary endeavor in nineteenth-century America. The initial impetus, he suggests along rather traditional literary-historical lines, came from Europe, where Romanticism had spawned a new and philosophically oriented interest in language and linguistic origins. West is particularly interested in the science (or pseudo-science) which he labels 'Romantic etymology,' and by which he understands different, highly speculative attempts to understand linguistic origins, evoke transcendent meanings and possibly arrive at a universal 'language of nature.' Imported into America, Friederich Schlegel's brand of 'Romantic irony' and S. T. Coleridge's strategy of 'desynonymization' necessarily underwent a number of sea-changes, as these methods were adapted to local historical conditions and inscribed with contemporary concerns. In this part of the book, West demonstrates an impressive familiarity with a relatively obscure group of American antebellum schoolmasters, grammarians and language-theorists including William

Cardell, John Sherman, James Brown and William S. Balch. Yet West has little interest, generally speaking, in advancing a master theory about American etymologizing, preferring to emphasize the 'multipurpose' flexibility of discourse (69). Likewise, West is not concerned to describe how the scientifically respectable discipline of modern comparative philology gradually eclipsed these earlier forms of linguistic amateurism. His tastes, on the contrary, cause him to favor writers who are (rather like himself, one assumes) eclectic, mischievous and idiosyncratic, and whom he frankly categorizes as 'eccentrics' or even 'cranks' (140). Nineteenth-century speculative etymology, West concludes, could mean a variety of different things to different people in different circumstances.

In the second part of *Transcendental Wordplay*, West goes on to construct a genealogy linking the admittedly 'minor' discourse of Romantic etymology with the 'major' classics of American Romanticism. By far the strongest element in this part of the book is West's illuminating discussion of Thoreau, part of which has previously been published in *ELH*. During his years at Harvard, and especially while temping as a schoolteacher in Canton, Massachusetts, Thoreau had immersed himself in the current vogue for speculation about linguistic origins and originary languages. *Walden*, according to West, 'cannot be fully understood except as the chief literary monument of the etymological fervor that permeated the American Renaissance' (156). In his masterpiece and also in later texts, Thoreau loaded his prose with innumerable, highly complex philosophical puns, believing that 'by exploring analogies between the sounds of words, however coincidental, the perceptive listener may suddenly overhear the universal harmony' (215). Punning, for Thoreau, was a way of (re-)connecting the multiplicity of words with the mystical unity of the divine *logos*. Lacking a comparable background, modern readers tend to overlook this aspect of Thoreau's writing, but West's commentaries on *Walden* demonstrate how one might go about unpacking the text's occult significance.

Transcendental Wordplay could have ended here, were it not for West's intention to show that what was true of Thoreau was equally true of Emerson, Irving, Poe, Cooper, Hawthorne, Melville, Dickinson and Whitman. This is quite a mouthful, to be sure, and West's decision to broaden the scope of his analysis makes it virtually impossible to summarize his study. Suffice it to say that on a general level West makes a plausible case for his main thesis that many canonical American writers used their familiarity with etymological scholarship to forge a philosophically and spiritually resonant literary style. Once again, however, West's main undertaking is to show when and where this exchange took place, not to explain why it happened or discuss what it means in, say, social, historical or political terms. Writing in a predominantly expository or even celebratory mode, West makes no attempt to criticize any of the writers whom he studies. Thus, insofar as there is a common element linking Thoreau's, Whitman's, Melville's and Dickinson's use of puns, West (again rather conventionally) locates this shared feature in the word 'transcendental' – that is, in a general Emersonian wish to explore correspondences and expose the interconnectedness of all things. The different varieties of Romantic punning that West explores, in other words, should be seen as so many American inflections of Carlyle's 'everlasting yea.'

Both in content and in form *Transcendental Wordplay* aims for, but never quite achieves, a refreshing mixture of traditionalism and innovation. In the book's preface, West professes his 'mistrust' for most current academic writing, which he views as both jargon-ridden and unnecessarily hostile, and calls upon American literary critics to return to basics. Fittingly, considering the book's subject, West aspires to write in a playful, informal, densely allusive style, which he believes will appeal to 'ordinary readers' who also 'recoil from most academic literary criticism' (xvi). By interspersing his formal pontifications (West's pun, not mine) with myriad informal jokes, asides, witticisms and anecdotes, *Transcendental Wordplay* ambitiously undertakes to resist academic dullness, and to revive as well as explain the ebullient transcendental style. It is easy to sympathize with this endeavor, but it does not take one of West's pathologically suspicious ideology critics to see that his stylistic project undermines itself, if only because West's prose shares at least one telltale characteristic of the modern academic discourse that he disdains so much: excessive prolixity. Weighing in at more than 500 pages, *Transcendental Wordplay* is an extremely and in several ways unnecessarily long book. Moreover, the book's opaque structure, with its 14 mutually overlapping chapters, makes the underlying argument hard to discern and follow. West may well claim transcendental precedence for his freewheeling resistance to formal economy – think of Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* or Melville's *Moby-Dick* – but at some points in his discussion he might have benefited more from modeling himself on other textual precursors, like Poe's brief tales or Dickinson's compact lyrics. Thoreau, as West notes, not only punned but also tried to contain punning's tendency to overwhelm other discursive modes, and perhaps West should have followed his hero on this point, too. At its best, in any event, transcendental wit was never the same as sheer loquacity or undue long-windedness, and one cannot help thinking that West sometimes treads perilously close to the latter.

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Mark Turner, *Cognitive Dimensions of Social Science*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001. 224 pages; ISBN: 0-1951-3904-6; $25 cloth.

Let us start by carving out two basic premises: Firstly, no matter what methodology or tradition the social scientist subscribes to, one thing remains an unquestionable, fundamental condition of her endeavour: she cannot ever escape her own cognitive constitution. Secondly, almost all that can be called the social scientist's object, that is, almost everything that somehow constitutes human society or culture is, unavoidably, mediated through human cognition.

And so what? These may just seem to be pretty banal and somewhat futile observations. But not so. It may be that most social scientists would subscribe to them, but, and this is the point, they do not seem to take them as seriously as they should. And, in this respect, the cognitive scientist Mark Turner argues, 'social science as a whole is in a position something like biology before the theory of evolution':