ForeWord Reviews

LITERARY COLLECTIONS

Ralph Waldo Emerson: Selected Journals, 1820-1842
Ralph Waldo Emerson
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Writers' journals have historically provided unique glimpses into historical events, the creative process, and personal joys and turmoils. With the work left by Ralph Waldo Emerson—published by editor Lawrence Rosenwald in two volumes—all three of these aspects are captured and presented with stunningly expansive range.

Emerson began keeping a journal at age eighteen, and by the time he penned his last entry, the articulation of his interior landscape took up 182 journals, in which he recorded personal thoughts and observations, and several notebooks of lectures and letters. Harvard has published a sixteen-volume edition, but it doesn't even include all of Emerson's letters, sermons, and other writings.

Watching his evolution as a writer is part of the pleasure; the journals begin in 1820, when he was a teenager breathlessly and dramatically exclaiming: "Spirits of Earth, Air, Fire, Water, wherever ye glow, whatsoever you patronize, whoever you inspire, hallow, hallow, this devoted paper." Nearly sixty years later, and just five years before he died, that adolescent fervor had greatly mellowed with literary practice but the passion remained. His very last entry begins, "All writing should be affirmative."

Over that sweep of decades, Emerson chronicles his changing philosophies, political activism, and personal struggles, including the loss of his young son Waldo, and of his close friends Henry David Thoreau and Margaret Fuller. He writes about railroads, Plutarch, Quakers, morals, education, horses, and thousands of other topics, always endeavoring to draw on both his classical knowledge and contemporary observations. Occasionally, the conflation of journal entries creates the disconcerting effect of an author dashing from one subject to another, in a stream-of-consciousness style. Even in these instances, Emerson's best thoughts are given the chance to shine.

Although Rosenwald's edition is far more navigable than the formidable multi-volume work done by Harvard, it's still a feast best enjoyed by Emerson fans. The work possesses innumerable rich passages, but also contains the mundane details that make up a life: comments

on visitors, observations on the weather, and random facts that Emerson found worthy of jotting down, but which aren't connected to any larger thoughts.

By presenting such a large scope of the writer's work, Rosenwald not only illuminates the insights of one of America's most important intellectuals, but also highlights an important era in the country's history. From antislavery activism to the Civil War and beyond, Emerson provides a personal view on such intense turmoil, and by folding in his own life experiences, he comes to life through his words. This work will be a vital addition to Emerson scholarship and the history of literary and intellectual thought.