

The Library of America interviews Lawrence Rosenwald about Ralph Waldo Emerson

In connection with the publication in March 2010 of [*Ralph Waldo Emerson: Selected Journals 1820–1842*](#) and [*Ralph Waldo Emerson: Selected Journals 1841–1877*](#), edited by Lawrence Rosenwald, Rich Kelley conducted this exclusive interview for The Library of America e-Newsletter.

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The two volumes of Ralph Waldo Emerson: Selected Journals draw from writings in more than 182 individual journals and notebooks over almost 60 years. The 2,000 pages in these volumes represent fully one-third of the material in the regular journals and are the most comprehensive selection ever made from his work. How did you decide what to include?

There were two principal goals: to keep Emerson's best writing, and to keep what was most significant biographically and historically. I wanted to keep what best illuminated Emerson, and what best showed Emerson illuminating the world.

There were some goals I didn't have. I didn't, for example, care much about proportionality of representation. I included a lot from the mature journals, those in which Emerson displayed the form he'd mastered, but much less from the early journals or the very late ones—before Emerson had found his form or after he had lost some of his power. And I didn't keep material on Emersonian themes that wasn't up to Emersonian standards—many of his comments on English national character, for example, seem lifeless now.

Emerson began his journal as a 16-year-old student at Harvard College. The last entry is dated January 1877 when he was 73. Do you find that his writings break down into distinct periods?

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Yes, I do. Until 1833, in what Emerson called Journal A, he's a young man trying to find his form, working out the relation between a couple of competing models, John Locke's commonplace book on the one hand, the Puritan diary of spiritual experiences on the other. Then suddenly he gets it right, he makes the apt synthesis. Everything before that is prologue; it's in 1833—a year he spent mostly traveling in Europe after resigning his ministry—that the main show begins. And the show goes on, in largely the same way, until Emerson loses his power in the 1860s. He doesn't lose it altogether, there are some great passages still to come, but there's more mechanical writing, more copying and stocktaking and summing up, fewer dazzling flashes—time to take in sail. So: the prologue, the main show, the decline.

In your book Emerson and the Art of the Diary you call the Journals “one of the great masterpieces of American writing” and “his chief literary performance.” How do the Journals relate to Emerson’s other literary works?

Meaning no disrespect to those who admire the essays and the poems—I admire them too—I think the *Journals* are his great work, the one where he really found his form.

It's weird, you know; you have eminent critics like Harold Bloom, who claim—rightly—that Emerson was a great, great American writer, but who then claim that “[Emerson's] true genre was no more the lecture than it had been the sermon . . . and certainly not the essay, though that is his only formal achievement, besides a double handful of strong poems.” So what was his “true genre”? Clearly the *Journals*, though it's surprising how few people acknowledge that.

One of the delights of Emerson’s Journals is how many literary luminaries fill its pages—on one page we’re with Emerson and Nathaniel Hawthorne on a 20-mile stroll to Harvard Village, on another we’re listening to a dinner table conversation with Thoreau. And you provide brief portraits of each of them in the Biographical Notes. While devoted to his two wives, Emerson seems to struggle to find the right tone or distance for his relationships with the other women in his life, Margaret Fuller and Caroline Sturgis, in particular. Can you help us put those relationships in context?

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A very good question, to which I wish I had a very good answer.

There are some really, really embarrassing moments in Emerson's writing about Fuller in particular. It's pretty clear that he couldn't figure out what to do with her, with her intensity and vitality, sexual vitality. He was hampered by decorum and by sexism. He was hampered by his bloodless ideas about what friendship should be: "I do then with my friends as I do with my books. I would have them where I can find them, but I seldom use them." What feelings he was actually having about these women he had close friendships with is hard to figure out. On this topic at least he wasn't a great writer, and John Jay Chapman was brilliantly correct to say that an inhabitant of another planet could learn one thing from Italian opera that couldn't be learned from Emerson, namely that human beings came in two sexes.

That said, though, it's important to say that Emerson worked hard both at love and friendship, hard and genuinely and undogmatically. His journals are filled with vivid observations of his two wives and of his many women friends. Hawthorne turned against Fuller, and wrote appallingly narrow-minded things about her. Emerson stayed friends with her, and wrote beautiful and just tributes to her after her death. Whatever pomposities he wrote about "seldom us[ing his] friends," his women friends in particular, he spent a lot of time with them, he didn't condescend to them professionally, he remained a person they'd come to talk to.

In this one area, the journal is only a partial record, and maybe not the best partial record.

In your book you write that "the literary work is precisely the creation of the author's conscious will. The journal . . . is the creation of the author's character." You remark that "Emerson's aesthetic gods were nature and character." What did Emerson mean by character and what do we learn about his character in the Journals?

"Character" in this context for Emerson means the opposite of will, design, craft. It's spontaneous, it's deeper than our artistic intention. Emerson wrote after Hawthorne's death that he'd always thought Hawthorne's work unworthy of Hawthorne himself—this about Hawthorne, who was with Thoreau the great literary craftsman of the period! Henry James thought that judgment "odd almost to fascination." But for Emerson the inner self was *always* more interesting than the

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intention, the design. And for him, the journal lent itself better to revealing character than did, say, the novel.

What we learn about Emerson's character in particular in the *Journals* isn't so much that he was mean or generous, affable or reserved, though we learn those things too; above all what we learn is the nature of the movement of his thought and feeling, the flight of response and intuition leading from sentence to sentence and entry to entry.

Let's talk about his other god, nature. Some of the most passionate and joyous passages in the Journals celebrate nature. Would you say the Journals contain Emerson's best writing about nature?

I would indeed, but in saying that I'm not thinking so much about the passages that celebrate nature as the ones that just describe it, feature by feature. He was an extraordinary writer about his walks with Thoreau and Ellery Channing. During his walks, he noticed colors and scents and flowers and breezes, what was in bloom, what stood out, and every new landscape gave him a new opportunity to be an observer. Take this entry from the autumn of 1848 as an example:

I go twice a week over Concord with Ellery, &, as we sit on the steep park at Conantum, we still have the same regret as oft before. Is all this beauty to perish? Shall none remake this sun & wind, the sky-blue river, the riverblue sky, the yellow meadow spotted with sacks & sheets of cranberry pickers, the red bushes, the irongray house with just the colour of the granite rock, the paths of the thicket, in which the only engineers are the cattle grazing on yonder hill; the wide straggling wild orchard in which nature has deposited every possible flavour in the apples of different trees. . . . where is he who is to save the present moment, & cause that this beauty be not lost?

As you note in your book, the journals kept by the Transcendentalists in Emerson's circle all shared common traits of being both a diary and a commonplace book, but they differed from Emerson's in more closely following the calendar, and in having narration consistently precede reflection. Emerson actively resisted this "pressure of days" and cultivated a flaneur quality to his writing. He emerges, in your portrayal, as the virtuoso of journal writing. Did he refine his art as

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he discovered its importance to him? If journal writing was so vital, why didn't he publish any of the journals during his lifetime?

In my view, yes, he did refine his art; the proof of that, for me, is that when he's at this best there's almost nothing one can cut—he's gotten rid of the dross, he knows the difference between the spontaneous and the mechanical. He wrote once, "in good prose every word is underlined." At their best, one can say of his *Journals* that every entry is indispensable.

As for publication, that's a complicated question. He was publishing excerpts from them all the time, of course. He didn't publish them in their entirety. He did show them to friends, though, uncensored. You might say that the *Journals* were his text for the inner circle, and to that inner circle he made them public.

Perhaps the most compelling narrative arc we get to follow in the Journals is how Emerson's reading and thinking move him from the traditional teachings of Christianity through discoveries about other religions and philosophies to what Harold Bloom has called the founding of "the actual American religion, which is Protestant without being Christian." The climax seems to come when his graduation address to the Harvard Divinity School in 1838 gets him banned from Harvard for 29 years. Is it possible he didn't understand what upset people about his preaching a religion that urges an individual to find a direct relation to God unmediated by priests or church?

I think the most compelling narrative arc we get to follow is the one that leads from self-sovereignty to citizenship, as Emerson comes to realize that he has no choice but to care about, and be involved in, the great drama of his time, the drama of slavery.

As for that other drama you mention—maybe he didn't understand, that's certainly possible. By 1838 he'd already left his church job, he'd remained on astonishingly good terms with the people who fired him, he had a history of amiable relations with people he vigorously disagreed with. So for him to be the object of a ban, of execrations, was new, and was probably hard for him to imagine in advance. He did, to be sure, write during the period of controversy that he was more comfortable with criticism than with praise:

I hate to be defended in a newspaper. As long as all that is said is said *against* me, I feel a certain sublime assurance of success but as soon

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as honied words of praise are spoken for me, I feel as one that lies unprotected before his enemies.

But this is a statement about public prose, not about private relations, and it's still possible that the personal intensity of the controversy caught him by surprise.

The most moving passages in the Journals are those surrounding the death of his first wife, Ellen, who died of tuberculosis at 19, and the sudden death by scarlet fever of his five-year-old son Waldo. Emerson's entries are surprisingly confessional. He records opening the coffin of each more than a year after their deaths. Was that a common practice in that time? Do you think the publication of these volumes could change the public perception of Emerson as a person?

Re the first question—I don't know, alas. Re the second—I hope so, I hope so very much. In spite of much distinguished scholarship, we still tend to see Emerson as Olympian, detached. He wasn't, and the *Journals* make that clear.

We also get to see Emerson agonize over how involved he should get in politics—in particular, before the Civil War we watch him move from being an anti-slavery adherent to an activist and propagandist. His breaking point comes with Daniel Webster's defense of the Fugitive Slave Law. Why was this the defining event for Emerson?

Because up to that point he had this notion that you could stay outside of politics, concern yourself with the eternal things and let the transient things pass away. With the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law, he saw you couldn't do that. Either you obeyed the law and returned slaves to their owners, or you disobeyed it and helped them stay free. There was no place you could go to where you wouldn't have to choose; so he chose.

Edmund Wilson once wrote that he found Emerson's aphorisms "dazzling." Isn't one way to read the Journals to follow Emerson's own advice about how to read and "read for the lustres"?

Interesting—I find that many of Emerson's *sentences* are dazzling, but the sentences he writes as intentional aphorisms, epigrams, often seem to me less good, way less good than those of the great aphorists. In any case, what I think about reading the journals is that any way of reading them that delights and

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engages a reader is just fine with me—skipping, continuous, intermittent, forwards, backwards.

On the other hand, I'd be lying if I didn't say that readers who read for the lustres, Emersonian as they may be, will be missing one of the great pleasures and illuminations of this edition, namely, the opportunity to follow Emerson's sequence of thought, the transitions between one insight or mood and another. "The experience of poetic creativeness," he wrote, "is not found in staying at home, nor yet in travelling, but in transitions from one to the other, which must therefore be adroitly managed to present as much transitional surface as possible." So by all means read for the lustres, but also take the time to see the poetic creativeness manifested in the "transitional surface" the edition makes visible.

Look, for instance, at the entries that precede and follow the "nature" entry I quoted part of above:

[Before]

It is better to hold the negro race an inch under water than an inch over.

Better races should perish if a new principle be taught; all the world may well be bankrupt, if they are driven so into a right Socialism.

Races

You cannot preserve races beyond their term. St Michael pears have died out, and see what geology says to the old strata. Trilobrium is no more except in the embryonic form of crab & lobster.

'Tis important that the eye should be achromatic, but *Swedenborg* sees all amiss with this dull prismatic blur of misplaced gaudiness.

Why do his images give no pleasure?

[Afterwards comes this bit of almost science-fictionlike speculation.]

Will they, one of these days, at Fourierville, make boys & girls to order & pattern? I want, Mr Christmas office, a boy, between No 17 & No 134, half & half of both; or you might add trace of 113. I want another girl like the one I took yesterday only you can put in a leetle more of the devil.

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How did you first become involved with Emerson's work? Do you have any favorites among the Journal entries?

Regarding the first question, my high school English teacher, Steven Bach, now a writer on film, told us our junior year that Emerson started his journals when he was 18. So I thought, well, I'll start mine at 17 and get a headstart! So I felt him as a comrade before I ever got interested in him in any scholarly way.

I was fascinated by journals but not yet by Emerson's in particular when I was asked to translate Maurice Gonnaud's great intellectual biography of Emerson, the English title of which is *An Uneasy Solitude*. Much of that work is based on Gonnaud's fine readings of, and generous quotations of, passages from the *Journals*. And as I read, I thought, this stuff is amazing! So when it came time to move from studying Puritan journals to studying one of the great works in the genre, Emerson's was the one that presented itself to me.

My favorite entry is the briefest one: "28 January 1842. Yesterday night at 15 minutes after eight my little Waldo ended his life." He wrote that one sentence at the top of the page, then left the rest of the page blank. It's deeply moving to me. When a great writer knows that all he can do is note the devastating fact, can't make it a piece of writing, that's for me a revelation of wisdom.

In an essay on Emerson in The New York Review of Books Harold Bloom wrote: "Emerson, by no means the greatest American writer, perhaps more an interior orator than a writer, is the inescapable theorist of virtually all subsequent American writing. From his moment to ours, American authors either are in his tradition, or else in a countertradition originating in opposition to him." Do you agree? Where do we see Emerson's influence now? What can he teach today's writers?

Oh, dear—I can't agree, really. There's too much American writing, American writing is too diverse, for *anyone* to be its inescapable theorist, for *anyone* to be everyone's tradition or countertradition.

But Emerson is wonderfully alive as a writer. Every time someone says Emerson's finished, he gets revived. His influence and what he can teach are linked: they both have to do with his power to attend to the movement of his thought and feeling, and his trust in that movement as the source of wisdom. Putting it politically, I'd say that Emerson animates the protest of artists and

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thinkers against the social pressures that suppress and conventionalize art and thought. Putting it personally, as regards what it *feels* like to be inspired by Emerson, I'd quote John Jay Chapman, who wrote of him, "he let loose something within me which made me in my own eyes as good as anyone else."