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Review

Journal (Volume I: 1837-1844). By Henry D. Thoreau. Edited by John C. Broderick, Elizabeth Hall Witherell, William L. Howarth, Robert Sattelmeyer, and Thomas Blanding. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981. Pp. 702. \$22.50.

The recent appearance from Princeton University Press of the first volume (1837-1844) of Thoreau's massive *Journal* is a signal event for scholars of American literature, and any who doubt the fact need only read the editors' "General Introduction" (intended as a prefatory statement to the entire publication project) to learn why. The tale told therein of Thoreau's friends' and previous editors' conscious and unconscious alterations of his text recalls the ill treatment afforded another classic American writer at the hands of her friends and editors. Mabel Loomis Todd, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, and Martha Dickinson Bianchi perhaps did Emily Dickinson's readers a greater disservice because apart from their transcriptions of her poetry the public knew no other of her work, but H. G. O. Blake, Francis H. Allen, and Bradford Torrey committed a comparable injustice by not allowing admirers of *Walden* and *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* a view of what a "complete" text of the journal vividly reveals: a writer in his workshop, struggling to order and make beauty from his raw materials.

We now have, then, only a partial portrait of Thoreau, and due to the almost religious scrupulosity of the present editors at the Thoreau Textual Center at Princeton, we will have to live with our present knowledge until the whole *Journal* is published, a fact that makes us wish that somehow their work could be expedited to match Torrey and Allen's remarkable achievement of transcribing and annotating in a little over three years what in the *Walden* edition of Thoreau's *Writings* (1906) became no fewer than fourteen volumes of journal entries! Torrey and Allen obviously were heroically committed to their task, as was Thoreau's earlier editor, his friend H. G. O. Blake, to whom Thoreau's sister Sophia bequeathed the forty-seven manuscript notebooks and who in the 1880s and '90s published four volumes of excerpts from them; and as the new editors make apparent, these individuals intended Thoreau's reputation no intentional harm by their many excisions, emendations, and alterations. Rather, it was they who succeeded in raising the value of Thoreau's literary stock at a time when he very well might have remained as obscure a man of letters as the unfortunate Herman Melville, whose installation in America's literary pantheon did not take place until the 1920s. Thus, though we cannot deny that Thoreau's previous editors perpetuated the stereotype of Thoreau the quaint

naturalist, they at least succeeded in presenting to the general reader a man whose prose easily eclipsed the work of other nature writers like John Burroughs and John Muir, whose spiritual paternity was laid at his door. Blake, and Torrey and Allen only did what they thought right to bring to public attention an American Gilbert White of Selborne. If publishing pressures, financial or other, inhibited them from, for example, duplicating passages in their editions of the journal that appeared in other of his published works, we must recall that they did not have the support of any National Endowment nor of scholars enough interested in such tasks to form a Center for Editions of American Authors to oversee their task.

What, then, does the Princeton edition present to us? Quite simply, "Thoreau's original stage of composition—the *Journal* as unmediated by any later intentions," with later revisions "selectively" reported in the "Editorial Appendix." As one might expect, though, to establish the earliest stage of composition of a document of over six million words, a work that not only was heavily revised and rewritten during the author's lifetime but that also inevitably suffered in the hands of those who inherited and used it for their own purposes, is no mean task. The present editors, particularly William L. Howarth, author of *The Literary Manuscripts of Henry David Thoreau* (1974), have assiduously tracked down different segments of Thoreau's journal in the various repositories in which they reside and have collated them as accurately as possible: one simply must believe that (barring some such unexpected miracle like the recent discovery of one of Hawthorne's lost notebooks on Hawthorne Street in Boulder, Colorado) when the complete Princeton *Journal* is published the editors will have examined every relevant fragment for the light it sheds on Thoreau's composition. And even with all such rigor to establish the primary text, we never will have a complete record of Thoreau's first intentions, for sometime in 1841 the author transcribed the contents of his first two volumes of notebooks (for the period from 1837 to 1841), no significant parts of which survive, save for their indexes. Thus, part of the *Journal* just published consists of a "redaction of the original, selected and edited to an unknown degree by Thoreau," at present clearly the "earliest surviving state of his intentions," but not the *ubr*-document all Thoreauvians would love to have.

For this edition the editors have prepared a "Textual Introduction" that is a model of clarity, and, mercifully, they have chosen to place all textual matter at the back of the volume. Here we find the "Textual Notes" that report "significant features of the manuscripts and sources for editorial emendations," a "Table of Emendations" that lists "all changes made from copy-text other than the normalized features" described earlier in the "Introduction," a "Table of Alterations" that reports Thoreau's "substantive current" changes in the text, and "Selected Later Re-

visions” made by the author of passages that do not appear in altered form in other of his printed works. In short, enough grist for any bibliographer’s mill and, again I stress, all appended to the volume in as unobtrusive a way as possible, leaving the first five hundred pages of the book for the pleasure of the general reader. When one compares the sheer economy and readability of this volume to the ponderous and distracting editorial apparatus that overwhelms the Harvard-Belknap Press edition of Emerson’s *Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks*, one wishes that Thoreau’s *alma mater* had heeded his advice to “simplify” matters as much as one can. Thoreau’s friend Waldo has not fared well at the hands of his twentieth-century admirers, but Princeton’s *Journal* is a book as Henry would have wanted it: sturdy and designed for its primary purpose, to be read.

And what, finally, does this new edition of the early years of Thoreau’s journal tell us of its author? In his “Historical Introduction” to this book Robert Sattelmeyer summarizes the most important lesson brought to us from this portion of Thoreau’s life. “From 1837 to 1844,” Sattelmeyer writes, the journal “changed (in its surviving form) most dramatically, from a kind of display case for his reading, his poetry, and his original thoughts and aphorisms to a writer’s workbook, fragmentary and almost irrecoverable because so many pages were excised for his compositions.” The earliest journal entries, even in their redacted form, are best treated as a choice repository of words and thoughts stocked by a young Harvard College graduate, and except for a more-than-usual frequency of felicitously turned phrases, it might be the commonplace book of any one of his classmates who continued into maturity the habit of writing he had acquired during his undergraduate days. Between 1837 and 1842, in particular, as Sattelmeyer notes, the journal is “a record of the results of Thoreau’s intellectual and literary labors, not his efforts to compose.”

But here, too, we find the first notices of more important composition, portions, for example, of the essays on “Friendship” and “Sound and Silence” that found their way into his first book, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (1849) and, more importantly, the record of the two-week boating and hiking trip taken with his brother John in September 1839, the seminal event around which he would organize *A Week*. Here, too, are his tantalizing references to his affection for Ellen Sewall, who later rejected his proposal of marriage and who, in most Thoreau scholars’ opinions, represented the apex of his interest in the opposite sex. As romantically tinged as such passages are, however, they show little evidence of the emotional man who later would declare all nature his bride and prove his fidelity to her by inspiredly rendering in impeccable (and chaste) prose, her every nook and curvature.

By 1842 Thoreau’s heightened interest in literary com-

position is evident. In that year Emerson succeeded Margaret Fuller as editor of *The Dial*, and Thoreau both served as his assistant and began to prepare essays and reviews for inclusion in that transcendental periodical. Now he turned to his journal entries to prepare what became “The Natural History of Massachusetts,” published in July 1842, and he also began to draft “A Winter Walk” and “A Walk to Wachusett,” two of his finest occasional pieces. As might be expected, given Thoreau’s habit of literally excising entire passages from his notebooks for use in the preparation of his manuscripts, only a small portion of the total journal for these years is extant; but we do have some record of his sojourn at Staten Island, where he lived with William Emerson as he attempted to impress New York’s literary lions, and his extensive commentary on the English poets, which served him so well in the preparation of his first two books. By 1844 it was clear that Thoreau, even as he devoted more time to work in his father’s pencil factory, had plans for the literary life, and within a year he would make his most serious attempt to date to realize that aspiration, at a hut near Walden Pond. This volume of the *Journal*, then, is Thoreau’s, and our, prelude to the Walden years and as such sharpens our understanding of the literary and philosophical baggage he took with him to the Pond.

The excitement this volume engenders, then, is most akin to anticipation. Not that we fail to delight in his prose and ideas for their own sake, for one of the pleasures of this text is how graciously it invites us for either a brief visit or a prolonged stay with its author, and here we already have the kinds of sentences that in *A Week* Thoreau would praise in other writers—“verdurous and blooming as evergreen and flowers, because they are rooted in fact and experience.” But here, too, we know that still we are with the young Thoreau, partially under Emerson’s sway, yet every day gaining confidence in his powers of observation and expression. If, as I have suggested, some of the earliest entries herein could have been written by any of his college classmates, by the end of this volume we are assured that something had transformed a promising youth into an articulate and ambitious young writer. How much of this is attributable to his close relationship to Emerson or to such formative events as his brother’s death by lockjaw or his rejection by Miss Sewall, we never will know; but from this edition we do learn as much as we probably ever will.

The textual editing that produces such books and that begins to answer such questions is painstaking and, to some, seemingly dull work, but its completion is a joy to us all. We should rejoice, then, in the labors of Blake’s and Torrey and Allen’s successors and wish them godspeed as they continue to piece together the life and work of one of our more unique American authors. Indeed, if this first volume of the *Journal* is any indication,

we shall not be disappointed when the whole work is before us, the record of a man's splendidly honest and remarkably diligent conversation with himself and his age. To know, as precisely as possible, what Thoreau said and when he said it cannot but improve the thought of a gen-

eration whose imprecision and inarticulateness border on the tragi-comic.

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