

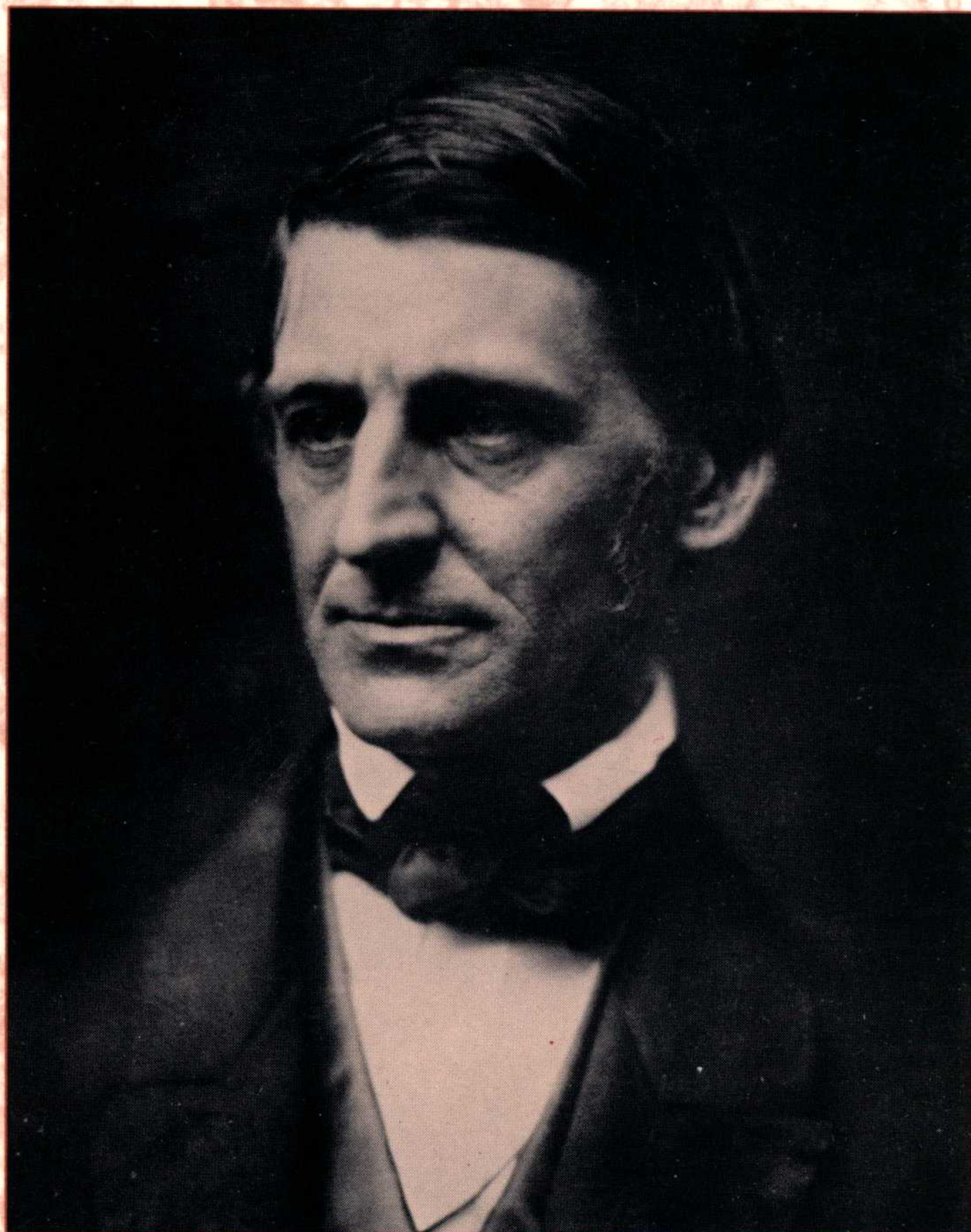
EMERSON



IN HIS



JOURNALS



Selected and edited by

JOEL PORTE

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EMERSON in His Journals

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Preface

WHEN EMILY DICKINSON was twenty-one years old she wrote her brother Austin requesting shocking details from his experience as a teacher in Boston's North End. "I like to get such *facts* to set down in my *journal*," she explained facetiously, "also anything else that's *startling* which you may chance to know—I don't think deaths or murders can ever come amiss in a young woman's journal." From our vantage point, Dickinson's little joke in 1851 takes on added meaning, for we know that her own "journal," then scarcely launched, would take the form of gnomic verses filled with startling facts, including deaths and murders, far more affecting than the usual run of sentiment and sensation to be found elsewhere. She would devote her private writing career to recording her inmost being and thereby exemplify a signal aspect of the reticent New England mind. "Introspection," Henry James notes, "thanks to the want of other entertainment, played almost the part of a social resource." Appropriately, "Says I to myself" would serve as the motto of Henry Thoreau's journal. And Emerson, in an essay published seven years before Emily Dickinson wrote her letter to Austin, suggested with perhaps only slight hyperbole the intensely intimate significance of these private scriptures for the spiritual isolatoes of his time and place: "Each young and ardent person writes a diary, in which, when the hours of prayer and penitence arrive, he inscribes his soul. The pages thus written are to him burning and fragrant; he reads them on his knees by midnight and by the morning star; he wets them with his tears; they are sacred; too good for the world, and hardly yet to be shown to the dearest friend." Though some may balk at imagining Ralph Waldo Emerson in the fervent posture described here, he too attempted to inscribe his soul in pages reserved for his eyes alone.

For over fifty years—in Hollis Hall at Harvard, in hotel rooms at home and abroad, in ships at sea and railway cars, in his study in Concord—he filled a motley assortment of more than two hundred ledgers, notebooks, and diaries with what has come

to be known collectively as his "journal." Readers familiar only with Emerson the Guru—a seldom-smiling public man of indeterminate antiquity—may find it a little hard to believe that this distant figure, descendant of generations of Puritan divines, was capable of unburdening himself privately with the unflinching candor of a Montaigne and the passion of a Rousseau or a Byron. Beginning with his troubled adolescence, Emerson's development was marked by sharp crises of thought, emotion, and identity, and by much inner and outer conflict. Throughout it all, in an age, as he said, when "the mind had become aware of itself," he continued to anatomize his consciousness and experience in these pages with scrupulous honesty.

I have placed the word journal in quotation marks because Emerson's compilation is in no sense a typical record of daily events. His own conception of what he was engaged in was fluid, and the definitions he offers of his journal are as varied as its contents. The earliest booklets (Emerson's "Wide Worlds"), with their dedications—to the imagination, to the future, to eloquence, to America—begin as self-conscious dissertations on set topics, though they quickly take on the character of a diary with their confessions and "childish sentiment." Emerson also used many of these pages as a commonplace book where he could record his discoveries of the best that had been thought and said by others, "all those words & sentences that in all your reading have been to you like the blast of trumpet." By means of elaborate indexes, he drew on this rich fund of reading when he came to prepare his lectures and essays, as he did also with his own thoughts, for Emerson sometimes conceived of his book as a "Savings Bank" where he could deposit his daily "fractions" and hope to see them grow into "integers." In even the smallest fragment of his jottings he tried to draw on all his experience. "One word of this sentence," he notes, "I learned in Boston, one in Cambridge, one in Europe." He defined his journal additionally as "a book of constants" in which he could build up for himself an enduring compendium of literary and scientific wisdom. "Man paints himself out with secular patience," he observes, meaning that the record of his thoughts must be made with an eye to the centuries and not just to the passing days.

But Emerson by no means neglected the quotidian in this lifelong autobiographical project. He understood that he could

not capitalize on his experience without cataloguing even the most insignificant event or mood. His intent was to set everything down. "If it be agreed," he writes, "that I am always to express my thought, what forbids me to tell the company that a flea bites me or that my occasions call me behind the house?" He goes on to say here (in October 1832) that a visit to the outhouse will, on reflection, probably seem less significant than other, higher matters. But two years later he would ask, "what is there of the divine in a barber's shop or a privy?" and respond, "Much. All." Later still he would record Henry Thoreau's observation "that God was in the jakes" and conclude that Spinoza had little to teach such a precocious metaphysician. The transcendent integer that Emerson thus constructed from such trivial fractions was clearly not predictable from the start, but the frankness and inclusiveness of his journal allowed for surprises of this sort. It is interesting to note that similar speculations are not to be found in Emerson's regular published writings.

A large portion of Emerson's journals was first made available by his son and grandson in a series of volumes published between 1909 and 1914, and these were in turn the source for Bliss Perry's popular selection, *The Heart of Emerson's Journals*, in 1926. As the editors of the new Harvard edition have pointed out, "In the first printing of the journals we lost much of Emerson. The Montaigne in him was unduly overshadowed by the Plotinus, the brooding doubter by the cosmic optimist, the private man in his freedom and infinitude by the public man in the confining garments of 'the gentleman.'" According to the Victorian canons of pre-World War I America, Emerson in his journals first appeared considerably regularized and cleaned up. Whatever was deemed too personal or unseemly was excised, many entries were printed only in part for the same reason, and a good deal of material was suppressed altogether. Emerson was presented mainly as a wisdom-writer and cultural commentator in line with his son's preference for the detached reflection and the genial overview. Largely missing from this presentation were the sharp edges and dark corners of Emerson's private jottings. He was not often allowed to be angry, frightened, silly, puzzled, shocked, sarcastic, or satiric. And he was almost never permitted to exhibit an interest in such things as sex or the functions of the body. As a result, when Emerson wondered if there was anything divine in

base things, he was given leave to talk of a barbershop or a load of bricks, but not of a privy. His observation that he had "organs" and delighted in pleasure but feared that "this pleasure is the bait of a trap" went unprinted, as did his curious admission, in 1851, that he preferred the "engendering of snails" to the sentimental disguising of sexuality in religious enthusiasm. It is not surprising, then, that Hemingway scorned Emerson (along with "Hawthorne, Whittier, and Company") for being overly fastidious and avoiding "the words that people always have used in speech, the words that survive in language." On the evidence available to him, Hemingway could see only that these representatives of the American literary establishment had "nice, dry, clean minds" but no bodies. "This," he insists, "is all very dull."

An eviscerated and bowdlerized Emerson might indeed seem dull, but we are no longer constrained to keep him muffled under the deadening weight of Victorian editorial standards. In 1833 Emerson doubted that any man renders "written account to himself of himself" and wondered if the time would come when he would "be able without a blush & without harm to utter to the world [his] inmost thought." One hundred years after Emerson's death, readers of the journal in its original form can reconstruct his remarkable life in a way not possible before and explore the issues raised by Henry James in 1888: "the question of [Emerson's] inner reserves and skepticisms, his secret ennuis and ironies." Though Emerson himself sometimes believed that "the last chamber, the last closet," of any man's life is never opened, that "there is always a residuum unknown, unanalysable," he nevertheless provided the materials for such an analysis as few other writers have done and thus came close to writing the book that Poe said could never be written, *My Heart Laid Bare*. In Emerson's hands, however, it is not the blazing self-confession that Poe longed for, but a more subtle and difficult achievement—the steady and candid recording of thoughts and feelings and fantasies without inhibition or reservation. This was his way of satisfying Rousseau's desire, which he applauded, to entertain and utter the unvarnished truth about a human life. We must be privileged not only to experience, along with our diarist, the Transcendental sublime but also to "know the worst," as Emerson says, "and tread the floors of hell."

As he was reading Rousseau's *Confessions* in 1847, Emerson

reminded himself "that it is not the events in one's life, but in the faculty of selecting & reporting them, that the interest lies." It is the Emersonian angle of vision that gives his journal entries their special flavor and value, and I have titled this volume *Emerson in His Journals* so as to draw attention to that unique presence. In making my selections from the more than three million words of the now indispensable Harvard edition of Emerson's *Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks*, I have been biased in favor of material that serves to bring Emerson most vividly to life. Naturally those passages that tell us something about Emerson personally had a strong claim to be included—entries that cast light on his doubts, dreams, fears, aspirations, quirks, social and intimate relations, and the like. He was a great human character, not simply a dispenser of timeless wisdom in Yankee accents, and that is the Emerson who deserves to stand forth in these pages. This book is not intended as a chrestomathy of choice passages for the student of nineteenth-century American literature; nor is it designed for scholars concerned with the detailed development of Emerson's thought; still less is it offered as a monument to an American Worthy. I have placed my emphasis on the *diary* aspect of Emerson's journals, since it is the Transcendental and philosophical Emerson who has been set in marble and thereby distanced from us. But I have not turned away from serious reflection in favor only of anecdote and personal revelation. Emerson appears here in all his moods and modes. There is, however, as even Bliss Perry was willing to admit, "some over-writing of spiritual experience" in the full journal, and it is no longer necessary to sustain Emerson's reputation on the jet stream of high-minded abstraction. One of my aims has been to illustrate Emerson's peculiar strengths as an observer and writer—his keen eye for truth or folly, his penetrating wit, his verbal agility, his quotable apothegms. But I have not only leaned toward polished sentences and paragraphs such as one finds in the orations and essays. Emerson's words are often more powerful in homespun than in the elegant garb of the public man of letters. His journals are valuable precisely for the glimpses they afford of his restless mind groping toward its formulations.

The text presented here is essentially that of *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks* minus the elaborate scholarly apparatus that was needed to reproduce the manuscript pages in

type but that tends to impede the general reader. I have left Emerson's erratic spelling untouched and have emended his punctuation only occasionally for the sake of clarity or to correct an obvious slip of the pen. Some paragraphing has been added, especially in cases where Emerson's intention is uncertain. I have not followed now outmoded practices that add nothing to the sense or rhythm of Emerson's sentences (such as commas before and after dashes or before and within parentheses). Emerson's own usage in this regard was not consistent, and he himself often omits the redundant punctuation. Ellipses within or at the end of sentences are indicated in the usual way, and a space between entries under the same date marks either the omission of intervening material or a change of subject. I have adopted a uniform mode of dating entries in place of Emerson's haphazard practice, though I should add that a great many of the entries cannot be dated with precision, even when they occur between dates supplied by Emerson himself; he often added material later on or skipped around chronologically. Lacking any sure indication, I have sometimes used my intuition or made an educated guess. I have also rearranged the order of entries that are clearly or probably misplaced. Words in brackets represent my own interpolations, and footnotes are my own unless marked [RWE] for Emerson's notes or [JMN] for annotations borrowed from the full Harvard edition. In general, my policy has been to prefer parsimony to an abundance of notation, since the sixteen volumes of *Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks* are available to readers who wish more information on Emerson's allusions.

Emerson once endorsed Goethe's practice of publishing his book "without preface" and letting it "lie unexplained." I have already violated that injunction in order to give the reader of this volume some sense of the history of Emerson's journals and their place in his life's work as a writer. But I could not ignore the first piece of advice he gives in the same 1836 journal entry: "Stick by yourself." Though I have been guided by the rather loose principles of selection enunciated above, I have not hesitated to make choices on the basis of my own tastes and interests. Especially in those cases where I have carved out a portion of a longer entry or ventured to piece together the *disjecta membra* of seemingly random or disparate jottings, I have had to depend on my own sense of what—to use Oliver Wendell Holmes's phrase—is Emerson-

ially Emersonian. I am well aware, in view of the enormous wealth and variety of Emerson's journals, that other choices could have been made just as reasonably: *quot doctores tot lectiones*. But as I have proceeded I have kept in mind Ben Jonson's words on Shakespeare: "He was, indeed, honest, and of an open and free nature; had an excellent phantasy, brave notions, and gentle expressions, wherein he flowed with that facility, that sometime it was necessary he should be stopped." I hope I have never stopped Emerson from uttering the best he had to say. In any case, readers intrigued by the microcosm presented here will find further delights awaiting them in the full body of his work.

J. P.

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Chronology

- 1803 May 25, Election Day, Emerson is born in Boston, the fourth child of William and Ruth Haskins Emerson.
- 1811 William Emerson dies on May 12, age forty-two.
- 1812-1817 Attends Boston Public Latin School.
- 1817-1821 At Harvard College.
- 1821-1825 Teaching in Boston at his brother William's school for girls.
- 1825 February, admitted to Harvard Divinity School; studies interrupted by eye trouble; teaching in Chelmsford.
- 1826 Teaching in Roxbury and Cambridge; approbated to preach on October 10; lung trouble; November, voyages south.
- 1827 Returns to Cambridge in June; meets Ellen Tucker in December.
- 1828 Brother Edward becomes deranged; Emerson engaged to Ellen on December 17.
- 1829 Ordained junior pastor of Boston's Second Church; marries Ellen on September 30.
- 1831 Ellen dies on February 8, age nineteen.
- 1832 Increasing ill health; decides he can no longer serve communion, resigns pastorate; sails for Europe on December 25.
- 1833-34 Travels in Italy, France, and Great Britain; meets Carlyle; begins career as lecturer with talks on "natural history"; continues to preach; receives first half of the Tucker inheritance in the spring; October, Edward dies.
- 1835 Lectures in Boston on biography; buys home in Concord on August 15; marries Lydia Jackson in September.
- 1836 Completes lecture series on English literature; brother Charles dies in May; Margaret Fuller visits in July; *Nature* published anonymously in Boston in September; Waldo born, October 30; winter, lectures on the philosophy of history.
- 1837 Receives final portion of Tucker estate in July; August, Thoreau graduates from Harvard, where Emerson delivers "The American Scholar"; fall-winter, lectures on human culture.
- 1838 April, writes President Van Buren about Cherokees; July 15, delivers address at Harvard Divinity School; July 24, Dart-

- mouth Oration ("Literary Ethics"); winter, lectures on human life.
- 1839 Preaches last sermon in January; Ellen born, February 24; winter, lectures on "The Present Age."
- 1840 July, first issue of Transcendental journal, *The Dial*.
- 1841 First series of *Essays* published in March; spring, Thoreau joins household; November 22, Edith born; winter, lectures on "The Times."
- 1842 January 27, Waldo dies; Emerson succeeds Fuller as editor of *The Dial*.
- 1844 Edward born on July 10; April, last issue of *The Dial*; October, *Essays, Second Series* published.
- 1845 July 4, Thoreau moves to Walden Pond; winter, lectures on "Representative Men."
- 1846 December, *Poems* published.
- 1847-48 Second trip to Europe, October-July.
- 1849 Lectures on "Mind and Manners in the Nineteenth Century"; *Nature; Addresses, and Lectures* published.
- 1850 January, *Representative Men* published; July, Margaret Fuller Ossoli drowns off Fire Island.
- 1851 Excoriates Webster for supporting the Fugitive Slave Law; winter, lectures on "The Conduct of Life."
- 1853 Ruth Haskins Emerson dies.
- 1854 Lectures on "Topics of Modern Times" in Philadelphia; heavy lecture schedule throughout the country.
- 1855 Antislavery lectures in Boston, New York, and Philadelphia; sends letter to Whitman praising *Leaves of Grass*, July 21.
- 1856 August, *English Traits* published.
- 1860 December, *The Conduct of Life* published.
- 1862 Lectures on "American Civilization" in Washington and meets President Lincoln; Thoreau dies on May 6.
- 1863 Aunt Mary Moody Emerson dies in May.
- 1864 Emerson attends Hawthorne's funeral on May 23.
- 1865 April, Lincoln assassinated.
- 1866 Lectures in the west; receives Doctor of Laws degree from Harvard.
- 1867 *May-Day and Other Pieces* published in April; named Overseer of Harvard College; delivers second Phi Beta Kappa address ("The Progress of Culture").
- 1870 Writes preface to *Plutarch's Morals*; publishes *Society and Solitude*; lectures at Harvard on "Natural History of Intellect."

- 1871 April–May, travels to California by train.
- 1872 Speaks at Howard University; house burns on July 24; October, sets out for Europe and Egypt with Ellen.
- 1873 May, returns from trip; summer, begins new term as Harvard Overseer.
- 1874 December, *Parnassus* published.
- 1875 December, *Letters and Social Aims* published, edited by James Elliot Cabot.
- 1882 April 27, Emerson dies of pneumonia in Concord; Whitman visits his grave and observes: “A just man, poised on himself, all-loving, all-inclosing, and sane and clear as the sun.”

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Prospects

1820-1824

WE FIRST MEET Emerson in his journals in the middle of his junior year at Harvard, when he was not yet seventeen. Having recently decided to call himself Waldo (mainly because there were so many Ralphs in his family), Emerson seems to have come to a new sense of his nascent identity; this may account for his decision to begin a journal, entitled "The Wide World," as both a "receptacle of . . . old ideas" and a "record of new thoughts." The title suggests a self-consciously grandiose intent and may indicate that Waldo was trying to import into his pages some of the urbanity of a Dr. Johnson ("Let observation with extensive view,/Survey mankind, from China to Peru"). The young scholar was already well steeped in eighteenth-century British literature—from Swift and Addison and Steele to Fielding, Johnson, and Burke—and their influence was marked on both his style and his ideas. "They have censured vice with wit and recommended virtuous principles in moral strains so artfully," he notes, "that they could not displease."

Yet there was a newer literature from old England finding its way into the eager hands of Harvard students, and Emerson puzzled over its implications. In a college theme book presumably kept in his sophomore year, the young (and sometimes priggish) moralist "thirsted to abuse the poetical character of Mr Wordsworth" and wondered whether the vaunted originality and genius of the Romantic school justified their abandoning "the good old-fashioned march of Milton or Pope & Dryden." Much as Emily Dickinson sixty years later would ambivalently proclaim that Hawthorne "appalls-entices," Waldo ventured cautiously

into the strange seas of Byronic self-reliance and observed—with how much unconscious approval and identification we can only guess—that “the proud feelings of independence which distinguish him seem to have imparted the wish not to be governed by the opinions & customs of others.”

For the young Emerson, pride and self-doubt unquestionably weighed in equal measure. The Emerson family, well established in New England since Puritan times and distinguished for a long line of divines, mingled in Waldo's blood with the prosperous mercantile Haskins family on his mother's side. But the premature death of his father in 1811 had left the family destitute and dependent on charity. Though Waldo could be proud of his respectable ancestry, his prospects in 1820 were not bright. As the President's freshman (or orderly) at Harvard, he had learned to respond quickly to the tap of Mr. Kirkland's foot. During vacations he was obliged to teach at his uncle's school in Waltham in order to meet expenses, and in his junior year he waited on table at the student commons. Prestigious and costly clubs such as the Porcellian and the Hasty Pudding were out of the question for him. Nor did he manage to stand out in his scholastic performance. Though an avid reader and a budding litterateur, he considered himself dreamy and lazy—“often idle, vagrant, stupid, & hollow,” as he noted in October 1820. “This is somewhat appalling & if I do not discipline myself with diligent care I shall suffer severely from remorse & the sense of inferiority hereafter.” Although the gravity of this self-appraisal is clearly qualified by self-mockery (note the “somewhat”), Emerson here begins the endless process of soul searching that constitutes one of the principal interests of his journal. There is no better example, in these early years, of Emerson's extraordinary ability to set his life down on paper than the journal entry of April 18, 1824, in which—preparing to enter his majority—he unsparingly examines what he is, what he has been, and what he may reasonably expect to become. Though Emerson describes himself as the “dupe of hope,” he was at least not self-deceived.

In view of the fact that his father, grandfather, and great-grandfather were all ministers, his decision to devote himself to divinity had to be influenced by the opinions and customs of others. What his own heart dictated was clearly a life in literature, but that scarcely represented a well-defined or potentially remu-