

The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Volume 9: Poems. A Variorum Edition. Historical introduction, textual introduction, and headnotes by Albert J. Von Frank. Text established by Albert J. Von Frank and Thomas Wortham. Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011. 864 pp. ISBN: 9780674049154. \$95.

Ralph Waldo Emerson's reputation rests today in large part on his prose works: essays such as *Nature* and "Self-Reliance" and public addresses like "The American Scholar" and the "Divinity School Address." But nineteenth-century critics and readers recognized him as one of a handful of America's most eminent poets, and at least for some time, Emerson thought of himself primarily as a poet. In 1835 he announced to his future wife, Lydia Jackson, "I am born a poet, of a low class without doubt yet a poet. That is my nature & vocation."¹ From the beginning, though, Emerson's readers often found the poems themselves baffling and unpoetic. Indeed, his poetry represents a significant departure from the popular works of his contemporaries, including Longfellow, Whittier, Poe, and the many producers of newspaper verse. The departure was deliberate: Emerson's poetics, as did his philosophy of life, called for radical originality. It is not surprising, then, as Albert J. von Frank observes in the historical introduction to this edition, that Emerson's "demand for independence and originality—his deliberate aim to do something new in verse—vastly increased the chances that he would disappoint the expectations of many readers" (xxvi). Thus to many of his contemporaries the rhythms of his poetry often seemed flawed, its rhymes imperfect, and its meaning hard to come by. In important ways Emerson's work and poetic theory anticipated not only Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson but modernist poetry of the twentieth century as well.

Emerson was not only a groundbreaking poet but arguably the nineteenth century's most important poetic theorist. The influence of his theory on Whitman alone merits that label. His essay "The Poet," published in 1844, trumpeted his call for the "true poet" as opposed to writers whom he disparaged as mere "men of poetical talents, or of industry and skill in metre." His ideal seer and singer would

be first "a beholder of ideas" and then an "utterer of the necessary and causal." And so followed Emerson's famous dictum, "it is not metres, but a metre-making argument that makes a poem,—a thought so passionate and alive, that, like the spirit of a plant or an animal, it has an architecture of its own, and adorns nature with a new thing."² Such poets lift the imagination of the reader to the exhilaration of insight and become, in Emerson's extravagant expression, "liberating gods."³ Emerson's own poetry, as von Frank notes, suffers in comparison with this exalted vision. But what the theory presents is the ideal, which can exist only in momentary embodiment in various practitioners of the poetic art. Through the medium of such poems as "Threnody," "Bramha," "Terminus," and "The Sphinx," to mention only a few, today's reader may well find herself momentarily transported, like Emerson's ideal poet, through the forms of nature into the soul of things. Emerson's poems are hardly mere historical relics.

Emerson scholarship has been enriched, even revolutionized, over the past seven decades by the publication of several series of editions of his works (some are still ongoing but within sight of completion). Prepared by scores of pioneering editors and their successors, these series include, to date, ten volumes of letters, sixteen volumes of journals and miscellaneous notebooks, five of lectures, three of topical notebooks, four of sermons, one of antislavery writings, one of poetry notebooks, and the collected works series, of which the present work comprises volume 9. Von Frank and Thomas Wortham, the editors of this volume, make fruitful use of the labors of their predecessors. The ready availability of reliable editions of Emerson's journals, notebooks, and letters has facilitated their task and enriched the resulting volume immeasurably. This edition of meticulous scholarship represents the first ever variorum edition of Emerson's poems. That is to say, it presents the text "in immediate association with all the variants found in all authorized printings or editions, as well as in printings and editions, including posthumous ones, that arguably might reflect the author's intentions" (ix).

The volume at hand collects all the poems Emerson chose for publication in his lifetime. It excludes certain works—drafts and fragmentary poems—first published posthumously in the 1884 Riverside edition of *Poems*, edited by James Elliot Cabot and Emerson's son, Edward Waldo Emerson, and a few additional ones in the 1904 Centenary Edition, edited by Edward. The younger Emerson justified this editorial decision by arguing that it was "on the whole preferable to

take the risk of including too much rather than the opposite, and to leave the task of further winnowing to the hands of time."⁴ Von Frank and Wortham take an opposing position, choosing to honor Emerson's intention *not* to publish the unfinished and fragmentary work. Their decision, while not the only defensible one, seems sound: the edition includes "no more and no less than all the poems that Emerson thought finished and fit to print" (cix). And in any event, the poetry notebooks and the journals, containing the bulk of the additional texts, have already been published.⁵

The variorum edition includes a statement of editorial principles, historical and textual introductions by von Frank, and the texts of the poems themselves, established by von Frank and Wortham. A headnote by von Frank precedes each poem, briefly discussing the sources and composition of the poem and often making use of Emerson's letters, journals, and poetry notebooks. Each poem is followed by additional information under three headings: Texts, Variants, and Notes. Under the heading "Texts" is presented a list of all the texts, both manuscript and print, that constitute the historical collation. Also under this heading are listed variations in the format of the poem and the location, generally in the notebooks and journals, of pre-copy-text forms. Under the heading "Variants," the reading adopted by the editors is given first, whether or not it follows the copy-text reading, and is followed by a chronological list of all differing readings. Finally, under "Notes," the editors provide information, keyed to specific lines, useful to understanding allusions in the poem, occasionally citing relevant scholarship. Thus all the information needed for study of a particular poem is conveniently available in proximity to the text itself, rather than in appendices.⁶ The volume includes an index to the poem's texts only.

The ordering of the poems in this edition privileges Emerson's own publication strategies; that is, the editors do not present the works in chronological order according to their composition. Instead, they arrange them in the order in which Emerson himself positioned them in the three collections published in his lifetime: *Poems* (1847), *May-Day and Other Pieces* (1866), and *Selected Poems* (1876). In the *Selected Poems* section of this edition, however, only the eight poems that had not appeared in either of the previous collections are presented, and appendix C helpfully lists the full contents of the 1876 *Selected Poems*. In a fourth and final section, the editors print thirty-one poems that were published but not

collected in Emerson's lifetime, presumably on the theory that even if Emerson did not consider them appropriate for collection, he at one time believed them fit for publication. One ramification of this ordering is that the author's earliest published poems, which remained uncollected in his lifetime, appear very late in the volume. This arrangement is not an optimal one for a reader interested in studying Emerson's development as a poet; nevertheless, it is defensible as being consistent with the editors' decision to reflect, as nearly as possible, Emerson's own publication practice.

The central task facing the editors was the intricate one of establishing texts for the poems, each of which has its unique and often tortuous manuscript and publication history. The editors present a critically edited, unmodernized text of each poem. As they explain in the Statement of Editorial Principles, following the Greg-Bowers-Tanselle theory, the editors have chosen as copy-text the version of each poem that reflects, as closely as can be ascertained, "the author's initial coherent intention." They then have emended the copy-text to reflect any authorial change in that intention as determined by "evidence from other relevant forms of the text according to conservative editorial principles" (civ). On the theory that each subsequent printing is likely to introduce nonauthorial corruption, they have chosen as copy-text "the earliest feasible form"—preferably manuscript printer's copy or printer's proof, but when neither of these has survived, the first printed form of the poem (civ–cv). The copy-text then may be emended, based on three sorts of evidence: Emerson's own handwritten corrections or revisions (often in "correction copies" of his printed works); his own instructions, expressed elsewhere, concerning the text; and variants in subsequent versions that appear, in the judgment of the editors, to reflect the author's intention. In the last case in particular, the editors weigh their decisions by relying in part on evidence of pre-copy-text forms and of the author's established usage. Both of these editors, it should be noted, bring to this work, as general editor of the series Ronald A. Bosco observes, "a lifetime of devotion to Emerson scholarship," and especially to the poetry and the poetry notebooks (viii). Since the clear text of each poem presented by the editors relies to some degree on their best critical judgment and knowledge of Emerson's usual practice, no two sets of editors would be likely come up with exactly the same texts. The unavoidable subjective element is countered by the fact that this is a variorum edition; the variants, compiled in a

list following each poem, give the reader the evidence upon which the editors have based their critical choices to emend or not to emend the copy-text. Thus, "all of the editor's activity in ascertaining the author's intention is open to scrutiny and may be dissented from or corroborated at the reader's discretion" (cx).

The editors' task of determining the author's intention and sorting out authoritative revisions meets its greatest challenge with regard to Emerson's late revisions of his poems, particularly those included in *Selected Poems* (1876). It is widely recognized that in roughly the last decade of his life, beginning about 1872, Emerson suffered from increasing mental debility. *Selected Poems*, prepared for publication during this period, was really a project of joint editorship involving not only the poet himself but also James Elliot Cabot, whom Emerson had named as his literary executor, and Emerson's children, especially his daughter Ellen. The large majority of poems in this collection had previously appeared in either *Poems* or *May-Day and Other Pieces*. When variants in these previously published poems appear in the 1876 collection, the editors faced straightforward decisions in some circumstances and virtually impossible ones in other cases. When these variants corresponded to changes made in Emerson's correction copies of the earlier editions, the editors could rationally assume the changes to be authorial. But when no such evidence existed, the editors had no way of determining definitively whether these variants were changes made by Emerson or by one or more of his assistants. There is direct evidence, for example, that Ellen Emerson substantially reorganized the poem "May-Day" for *Selected Poems* but none that she altered any others. Even more confounding, assuming that a mentally diminished Emerson himself was responsible for these revisions, how authoritative should they be considered? The editors candidly acknowledge that they have "no practical or theoretically defensible way to deal with the ambiguities inherent in these possibilities." Beyond providing all the evidence to the reader, as the variorum format requires, they could only weigh their "impression . . . that a given emendation is the work of a poet and not of a grammarian or an 'improver'" (cxl). Thus do the complexities of the composition and publication processes overmaster the most meticulous editorial theory when critical choices regarding the text are involved. And yet as consumers of texts, most of us want those choices to be made; we want a poem, not simply a tedious list of variants. When their editorial backs are against the wall, editors must, as von Frank and

Wortham have done here, muster all the logic they can, all the while recognizing the unavoidable imperfections of their systems.

Von Frank's gracefully written historical introduction serves many purposes. It traces the history of Emerson's poetic endeavors, from his childhood attempts at versifying through his final efforts to shape his poetic legacy by the publication of *Selected Poems*. Captivated in his youth by the concept of eloquence, Emerson first saw poetic effusions as just another form of eloquence, a way of prettifying one's thoughts. But something began to change for him in the five years from 1830 to the winter of 1834–35. Emerson was at the beginning of this period a twenty-seven-year-old as yet undistinguished minister; by the end of the period he was well on his way to becoming, in von Frank's phrase, "not so much a Transcendentalist as the Transcendentalist—and a major American poet" and "well positioned to be, for the rest of his career, the central voice of American literary Romanticism" (xxxvii, xxxvi). Some portion of this rapid development can be ascribed to Emerson's ambitious program of reading the European Romantics, including, among many others, Goethe, Coleridge, and Carlyle. But von Frank also emphasizes the death from tuberculosis of Emerson's wife of sixteen months, his grief, and the associated distancing of himself from traditional Christianity. A transformed and deepened Emerson turned to poetry now, von Frank tells us, and "thought meaning would dominate in his poetry over persons and narratives and the concrete sensual imagery of external nature" (xlv). In December 1834 Emerson began recording his draft poems in a poetry notebook, signaling a new and deliberate commitment to the art. Von Frank goes on to chronicle Emerson's creative outbursts of 1845–46, partly fueled by his discovery of the Persian Sufi poet Hafiz; his waning creativity, reflected in the near complete cessation of poetic publication in the decade between *May-Day* and *Selected Poems*; and his struggles to focus on the editorial challenges of producing *Selected Poems*. Von Frank's analysis of Emerson's development as a poet in connection with his biography, especially the biography of the mind, significantly enriches the reader's experience of the poetry.

Among the other sorts of useful information the reader will find in the historical introduction is the publication history of Emerson's poetry. Von Frank discusses the appearance of individual poems in various contemporary periodicals and Emerson's arranging the publication of each of the three collections

that appeared in his lifetime. He also explores in some detail the reception of these works. On another front, he analyzes the relationship between Emerson's philosophy and his poetry, demonstrating in particular how Emerson's theory of metamorphosis, the belief that constant change is the law of nature, plays out in the poetry. In a line from his *Poetry Notebooks*, Emerson himself described poetic composition as "Chasing with words fast-flowing things."⁷ Von Frank also relates Emerson's poetry to his theory of language, which Emerson saw as essentially metaphoric. He notes the "synergy between Emerson's theory and practice of the art of poetry" (liv), observing that like Emerson's ideal poet, Emerson associated the creative process with joy and exuberance.

Von Frank and Wortham have given us, for the first time and in a usable format, the relevant raw materials essential to further scholarship and criticism of Emerson's poetry. They have established reliable texts that should become standard. And von Frank's introduction is notable not only for its presentation of factual matters relating to the composition and publication of Emerson's poems but for its insightful connection of Emerson's poetry with his poetic theory, his Transcendentalist philosophy, and his biography. Emersonian scholars and more casual readers alike are greatly indebted to the editors of this truly excellent volume.

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Notes

1. *The Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Ralph L. Rusk (New York: Columbia University Press, 1939), 1:435.
2. *Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Joseph Slater, Alfred R. Ferguson, and Jean Ferguson Carr (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1984), 3:6.
3. *Ibid.*, 3:17.
4. *Poems* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1884), v–vi.
5. *The Poetry Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Ralph H. Orth, Albert J. von Frank, Linda Allardt, and David W. Hill (Columbia: University of Missouri Press,

- 1986); *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. William H. Gilman, Ralph H. Orth, Linda Allardt, Ronald A. Bosco, George P. Clark, Merrell R. Davis, Harrison Hayford, David W. Hill, Glen M. Johnson, J. E. Parsons, A. W. Plumstead, Merton M. Sealts Jr., Susan Sutton Smith, and Ruth H. Bennett, 16 vols. (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1960–1982).
6. There are two exceptions to this general practice: Appendix A presents Henry David Thoreau's insightful extended criticism of "The Sphinx," recorded in his journal. Appendix B treats the special issues associated with the poem "May-Day," the history of which spans thirty years between its original composition and its first publication.
 7. *The Poetry Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 440.