The Journal of Henry David Thoreau edited by Damion Searls

Review by Geoff Wisner — Published on November 16, 2009
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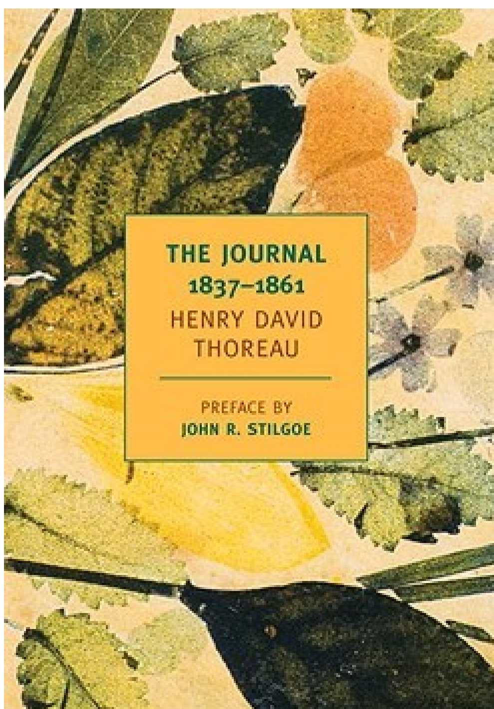
The Journal of Henry David Thoreau, edited by Damion Searls. NYRB Classics. 700 pp, $22.95.

Walden is surely one of the greatest American books. Whether we measure it by its influence on the lives of its readers, by the precision of its language, by the number of memorable sentences it contains, or by its sheer originality, it stands almost alone.

Yet the Journal that Thoreau kept from 1837 to 1861 may have a claim to be even greater. Though he began it as a kind of commonplace book and a workshop for his "real" writings, Thoreau eventually came to view it as a work of literature in itself.

More than once in his Journal, Thoreau praises the value of a "concentrated and nutty" prose style. Yet readers who dislike *Walden* are likely to feel that it is *too* concentrated and nutty. Each rooster and bean patch and rising sun in *Walden* carries a freight of meaning, and reading it can sometimes feel more like attending a lecture than taking part in a conversation.



The Journal is different. In some ways it feels like a greatly expanded version of *Walden* itself. The pond appears in all seasons, and the bulk of the Journal concerns Thoreau's life within the boundaries of the village of Concord. But the Journal is funnier, more playful, more tolerant of ambiguities and contradictions, better able to explore matters slowly and from all sides, better able to express Thoreau's doubts and fears, and better able to encompass and express the rhythms of nature.

The Journal, however, is more than two million words long. As edited by Bradford Torrey and F.H. Allen and published in 1906, it amounts to fourteen volumes. Few people will read the whole thing, especially as the only readily available version is the handsome but unwieldy two-volume Dover reprint, in which each big page holds four pages of the original.

Damion Searls' new edition is meant to showcase the Journal as a unified work of literature. More than any previous version, it allows a direct encounter with this great work and approximates the experience of reading the whole. In fact, by clearing away some of the underbrush in the fourteen volumes, it highlights the better-known passages and uncovers hidden gems and significant connections.

Because Searls' introduction was not included in the original galleys, I read the text of this new edition without knowing his intentions for the work. I was impressed with what I read, but even more once I saw Searls' strategy mapped out.

Most obviously, Searls has made this a big book. "The present book—the largest one-volume edition yet published—is conceived as an abridgment, not a selection: it aims to preserve the feel of the Journal as a whole." The Journal proper is bookended by two much shorter sections. The first is drawn from the "early, notebooky" years, when Thoreau was in the habit of cutting up and plundering his Journal pages for other purposes. The last, called "The Constantly Descending Route," covers the final year of the Journal, when Thoreau, though slowly dying of a lung condition and often unable to walk as far as Walden Pond, made a last desperate journey to Minnesota in search of a climate that might cure him.

The 600 pages in between show the editor's real achievement. Best known as a translator and fiction writer, Searls has an extraordinary sensitivity to Thoreau's language and to his intentions for the Journal. The Journal, he writes, "is above all a book of rhythms: the long ebb and flow of the year and the quicker rhythms of Thoreau's roving from topic to topic . . . . Seasons mattered deeply to Thoreau and I have tried to preserve the balance between the seasons, from his long summer walks to his heavier reading in the snowed-in winters."

Because months mattered too, Searls made the creative decision to include "one set of months less abridged than the rest, a representative Thoreau calendar with an extra March to fetch the year around." He lists these special months in the introduction, noting that they "constitute a sort of book within the book and might fruitfully be read on their own."

This is a canny and impressive approach, but no less impressive is Searls' unobtrusive use of the phrase "to fetch the year around," which is one of the most important in the Journal. Never content just to enjoy the quality of each month or season, Thoreau was always looking for clues to the season to come. He was alert to any indication that plants or animals anticipated the turn of the year, and especially the approach of spring. The hens that he saw

wandering from the barn on a sunny February in 1851 "strive to fetch the year about." In April 1856, while surveying a farm, he noticed something that lifted him from his drudgery: "As I was measuring along the Marlborough road, a fine little blue-slate butterfly fluttered over the chain. Even its feeble strength was required to fetch the year about." And in August 1853 he wrote, "I think that within the week I have heard the alder cricket,—a clearer and shriller sound from the leaves in low grounds, a clear shrilling out of a cool moist shade, an autumnal sound. The year is in the grasp of the crickets, and they are hurling it round swiftly on its axle."

Several more of Searls' decisions strike me as especially astute: his focus on the subjects that dominated Thoreau's attention at certain times (the moonlight walks of 1851, the hatching turtles of 1854), his preservation of what might strike others as unnecessary repetitions, and his inclusion of the context for some of the more striking passages.

> Across the arc of the Journal as a whole, I reflected Thoreau's changing interests; for the years when he was preoccupied with, say, turtles, I kept a lot of the entries about turtles, and I always tried to keep enough texture to show, for example, his depression and reduced writing in 1855, after *Walden* was published. This is part of what I mean by trying to produce an abridgment of the whole, not just a selection of "the good bits." There are plenty of good bits here, of course, but the point is that they are not as good when torn out of context.

Searls does not always succeed in keeping the connections intact in this endlessly connecting work. For instance, he includes two passages from September 1851 in which Thoreau passes by the local gunpowder mill, the first time coughing as he breathes the fumes of "carbonic acid gas," and the second time talking with a worker about the dangers of working with gunpowder. "The workmen there wore shoes without iron tacks. He said that the kernel-house was the most dangerous, the drying-house next, the press-house next."

Yet Searls includes no excerpt for January 7, 1853, the terrible day when the place exploded. Sure enough, Thoreau wrote, "The kernel-mill had blown up first, and killed three men who were in it, said to be turning a roller with a chisel." Thoreau witnessed the blackened and dismembered bodies of some of the victims, and saw their clothing caught in the branches of the trees. Two gloomy reflections from later in the month that Searls does include were surely prompted by this tragedy. "The bones of children soon turn to dust again," Thoreau wrote on the 16th. Five days later, he wrote, "In the night I dreamed of delving amid the graves of the dead, and soiled my fingers with their rank mould."

For the most part, though, Searls shows excellent judgment in making his selections. While paying attention to the balance and rhythm of the Journal as a whole, he chooses passages "by my personal proclivities as much as by anything else—a preference for berrying over fishing, owls over muskrats, ice over sunsets, to name a few at random." (Thoreau wrote more about muskrats, as it happens, than about any animal, and despite his lack of affinity for them, Searls does include several good muskrat passages.)

Among much else, this edition of Thoreau's Journal contains many of Thoreau's thoughts on the project of keeping a journal. In January 1852 he wrote, "I do not know but thoughts written down thus in a journal might be printed in the same form with greater advantage than if the related ones were brought together into separate essays. They are now allied to life, and are seen by the reader not to be far-fetched. It is more simple, less artful."

In his Journal, Thoreau sought to capture his life in nature, and in his native Concord, where he felt he was "born into the most estimable place in all the world, and in the very nick of time, too." In the end, he was so successful that he achieved a kind of pantheistic identification of self and book and world. Watching the Concord River rise

over the meadows in the fall of 1857, he felt his own spirits rise, and expressed his belief that “some flow, some gradual filling of the springs and raising of the streams,” would appear in his Journal as well.

“These regular phenomena of the seasons get at last to be—they were *at first*, of course—simply and plainly phenomena or phases of my life. The seasons and all their changes are in me. I see not a dead eel or floating snake, or a gull, but it rounds my life and is like a line or accent in its poem. Almost I believe the Concord would not rise and overflow its banks again, were I not here.”

Geoff Wisner is the author of *A Basket of Leaves: 99 Books That Capture the Spirit of Africa*. He is currently editing an anthology of African memoirs and two companion volumes of writings on animals from Thoreau’s Journal.