

Circling Emerson

Representative Man: Ralph Waldo Emerson in His Time, by Joel Porte, *New York: Oxford University Press, 1979. xxix + 361 pp. \$15.95.*

THE BEST PARTS of this uneven but intriguing book are its Preface and Epilogue. In the opening pages, Professor Porte creates a careful appreciation of Emerson as "circular philosopher" and draws the limits of that figuration. At the close of the book, we are given forty pages on Luther, Thoreau, and Emerson as representative figures—the Protestor, the Prodigal, and the Preacher-Poet, each with his share of prophetic pronouncements. But what of the intervening 300 pages? Despite many felicitous readings of particular passages, they contain no comprehensive assessment of the seasons of Emerson's life. We read of "A Summer of Discontent" and "The Fall of Man," and we bracket those with Emerson's "Rites of Spring" and his "Winter's Tale," but we do not leave with a resolution of the year just traced. And that is what we most require of a satisfying biography: the measure of a man's life. This is not to say that such a resolution need (or can) be final or dispositive; I do not want something that "disposes" of Emerson. I ask simply that the portrait of the man, no matter how partial, be finished, be brought to a just conclusion. This book does not satisfy that demand.

One might object to this criticism, and in so doing might array against me the opening lines of "Circles," one of the central essays in Emerson's work:

The eye is the first circle; the horizon which it forms is the second; and throughout nature this primary figure is repeated without end. It is the highest emblem in the cipher of the world. St. Augustine described the nature of God as a circle whose centre was everywhere and its circumference nowhere. We are all our lifetime reading the copious sense in this first of forms. One moral

we have already deduced in considering the circular or compensatory character of every human action. Another analogy we shall now trace, that every action admits of being outdone. Our life is an apprenticeship to the truth that around every circle another can be drawn; that there is no end in nature, but every end is a beginning; that there is always another dawn risen on mid-noon, and under every deep a lower deep opens.

Any "circle" that Professor Porte might revolve around Emerson could be outdone, so why ask for one? But I do not ask that we circle Emerson with finality; only, that Emerson *be* circled by his biographer, that a measure of his circumference be taken and his center located. While Porte has provided us with some of the points on Emerson's compass (and some of these are newly marked, and well-marked), he has not encompassed Emerson. We do not come away from this book feeling that Emerson has been circumscribed and centered.

Some of Emerson's injunctions (*e.g.*, "There is no outside, no inclosing wall, no circumference to us") and the changes in his tone and terms are familiar enough to make such a project seem impossible. But his injunctions are meant not to dissuade us from trying to comprehend others, but to keep us respectful of the awesome task that is. As to Emerson, this formidable project becomes downright intimidating. How is one to "comprehend" his penchant—talent, really—for putting together words that provocatively play off one another? His willingness to entertain a new formulation of thought composed by the apt juxtaposition of opposites? His orchestration of these formulae to a surprising but satisfying revelation? Yet, he himself insisted that "life is communicable." And it was his very purpose, his "capital secret," "to convert life into truth." Characteristically, what Emerson offers us on any particular occasion is a *vision*: a spoken scene. And it is, I think, the constancy of his achievement of such

revelatory vision that marks his special mastery. It is for this experience that we keep returning to his works, and in this regard he rarely disappoints us. What disappoints me is that we rarely return the favor; we do not envision *him*. And it is in behalf of some such eventual project—the envisioning of Emerson—that I find fault with this biography.

In the grip of Emerson's vision, I am disheartened by Porte's studious attention to Emerson's strained marital relations, his masturbation fantasies, and his theory of "spermatic economy." No doubt, in this day of "psycho-history" and "psycho-biography," such matters are obligatory. Still, I prefer to think they are not; and, even if they are, it is passing strange that we engage so enthusiastically in psycho-analysis without the *analysand*. There is precedent, of course, for this activity (*e.g.*, Freud on Leonardo da Vinci), but that does not satisfy me. More importantly, it might be said that Emerson *is* present, in his words. There is something to this response; but, if the man's words are so central, why not make more use of them? For example, what of Emerson's harping on the division between inner and outer, between things "internal" and "external"? And what about his repeated references to the "secrets" he had it at heart to tell us, if only we would learn to listen? And what of his discovery of "spiritual laws" that disclose the human condition? Don't these words name themes worth following out somewhere amidst the welter of pages devoted to "psycho-historical" concerns?

We are told at the beginning of the book that it is not a "standard" biography, one, that is, "with an emphasis on factual detail and chronology." Instead, we have here a "spiritual biography," which attempts to characterize the spirit of Emerson's life. This is the same as the attempt to characterize the spirit of Emerson's works, because they "issued from, and constitute the record of, [his] *life*." Porte's emphasis here is upon Emerson's life as the ground of his works, whereas I am inclined to think that his works *embodied* his life. The writer's pre-occupation with words, his

bent for wording the world, signals not merely his need to "record" his life, but rather his desire to enact, to perform, his life in (with) words. It is, therefore, as a writer that we are to know Emerson, and that will require our coming to understand how he revealed himself to the world in just *this* way, through his writing.—So, yes, there is a sense in which we analyze the man by analyzing his words. But that truth is not something just discovered in this psychological century of ours.

I would be remiss if I failed to convey, beyond my opening remarks, what is good about Porte's book. In addition to the general value of his careful combing and combining of material from Emerson's *Journals* and letters and some fine readings of individual passages, there is a sustained attempt to link Emerson's "development of his extraordinary mind and spirit" with the growth of the spirit of America. Also, there is Porte's concern, central to the book, to study Emerson's life as it moved through its periods of "crisis." Here there is much to be learned, and Porte is aided in his efforts by Erik Erikson's work on "identity crises." Not until the end of the book, however, do we reach the right level. There, in the Epilogue, Porte draws together several strands of Emerson's "never-ending creation of his own character." Emerson comes off not as some mindless idealist or optimist, but as a preacher-poet convinced of our capacity for transcendence, for self-overcoming. He took delight in enacting such metamorphoses of the self, or soul, before his astounded audiences. It seems to me that we might take particular note of this, for Emerson's obvious obsession with the dialectics of renewal, especially self-renewal and re-birth, affords us an emblem with which to encircle or net something integral to his practice (of writing, of life). The emblem is this: the integrity of his self or soul was not the integrity of unity; rather, it was an integrity conceived as an activity, something that could not be achieved once for all. It was the goal Emerson continuously sought after, and only when it was achieved could the individual soul find itself transcendent.

The life of man is a self-evolving circle, which, from a ring imperceptibly small, rushes on all sides outwards to new and larger circles, and that without end. The extent to which this generation of circles, wheel without wheel, will go, depends on the force or truth of the individual soul.

Reviewed by THOMAS D. EISELE

First Treasury Secretary

Alexander Hamilton: A Biography, by Forrest McDonald, *New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1979. xiii + 464 pp. \$17.50.*

THAT ALEXANDER Hamilton was among the most luminous and creative of the Founding Fathers every schoolboy has at least an inkling. That he was the only Founding Father who really mattered—the only one who knew what was really good for America—is a notion that will strike many schoolboys, past and present, as a bit peculiar. Yet such is the implicit thesis of Dr. Forrest McDonald's book, which is an admirable book in a dozen different ways. If only intellectual detachment were one of them!

The case for lionizing Hamilton—a job McDonald relishes thoroughly—is, on any showing, impressive. The greatness of the man cannot readily or honestly be mistaken, even if, as McDonald notes, the first Treasury Secretary, like the other Founding Fathers, "has had his ups and downs at the hands of historians."

He was brilliant: That much goes almost without saying. At age twenty-two, he worked out the design of a national bank, whose purpose was the creation of much-needed capital. He comprehended any subject on which he turned his ferocious