

1853

Hawthorne's friend Frank Pierce became president. The railroad systems expanded in the West through the help of munificent land grants received from the government. Nine small railroads in the East between Albany and Buffalo merged as the New York Central system. The coinage of \$3 gold pieces was authorized. A law was enacted in Illinois to the effect that any Negro who came into the state and stayed for ten days was to be fined \$50 or sold into slavery until the fine was worked out. Basques, or bodices with short skirts or tails below the waist line, were popular items of ladies' wear and continued to be for several years.

Three parts of the story of Thoreau's excursion to Canada were printed in *Putnam's Monthly Magazine*. The rest was withdrawn by Thoreau because the editor of *Putnam's* reserved the right to censor the manuscript. Thoreau made a third trip into Maine, which was also to bear literary fruit. Greeley continued to be as good a friend as any writer in search of markets could want. Munroe, the Boston publisher of the *Week*, sent back 700 copies of the work, bound or in sheets, to its depressed but ironical author. The few letters for this year are often concerned with business matters. In the extensive *Journal* there is less reflection and more observation than earlier. Thoreau's eye for nature has sharpened, but his eye for Transcendentalism has definitely clouded. It is perhaps symptomatic that this is the year in which he was suggested for membership in the Association for the Advancement of Science.

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From HORACE GREELEY

New York, January 2, 1853.

Friend Thoreau,—

I have yours of the 29th, and credit you \$20. Pay me when and in such sums as may be convenient. I am sorry you and C [urtis] cannot agree so as to have your whole MS. printed. It will be worth nothing elsewhere after having partly appeared in Putnam's. I think it is a mistake to conceal the authorship of the several articles, making them all (so to speak) *editorial*; but if that is done, don't you see that the elimination of very flagrant heresies (like your defiant Pantheism) becomes a necessity? If you had withdrawn your MS., on account of the abominable misprints in the first number, your ground would have been far more tenable.

However, do what you will.

Yours,
Horace Greeley.

George William Curtis, the editor of Putnam's and an old friend of Thoreau, insisted on omitting certain "heretical" passages from his "Excursion to Canada" without consulting the author. As a result the manuscript was withdrawn after only three of the five installments had appeared. Text, Sanborn's Henry D. Thoreau, p. 237.

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To HORACE GREELEY

Concord Feb. 9th '53

Friend Greeley,

I send you inclosed Putnam's cheque for 59 dollars, which together with the 20" sent last December—make, nearly enough, principal & interest of the \$75 which you lent me last July—However I regard that loan as a kindness for which I am still indebted to you both principal and interest. I am sorry that my manuscript should be so mangled, insignificant as it is, but I do not know how I could have helped it fairly, since I was born to be a pantheist—if that be the name of me, and I do the deeds of one.

I suppose that Sartain is quite out of hearing by this time, & it is well that I sent him no more.

Let me know how much I am still indebted to you pecuniarily for trouble taken in disposing of my papers—which I am sorry to think were hardly worth our time.

Yrs with new thanks
Henry D. Thoreau

MS., Morgan; previously unpublished.

TO ELIJAH WOOD

Concord Feb. 26th '53 [?]

Mr Wood,

I mentioned to you that Mr. Flannery had given me an order on you for $\frac{1}{3}$ of his wages. I have agreed with him that that arrangement shall not begin to take effect until the first of March 1854.

yrs
Henry D. Thoreau

[1853]

One of Thoreau's best friends among the Irish was Michael Flannery, "industrious Irishman from Kerry." According to Sanborn (The Life of Henry David Thoreau, p. 435), Flannery gave at least one note of hand to the Thoreaus "for money lent him in some pinch." This note Sophia Thoreau kept for many years and then turned over to Sanborn with instructions to collect the money if possible but in any event to surrender the note to Flannery. A number of the Concord farmers employed such Irishmen as Flannery for odd jobs. Thoreau notes, for instance, in his Journal for September 28, 1857, "that E. Wood has sent a couple of Irishmen . . . to cut off the natural hedges. . . on this hill farm." It is probable that the order on Flannery's wages is addressed to old Elijah Wood, but it may have been to his son. The year of this letter is either 1853 or 1854; it is impossible to tell from the manuscript. We incline to 1853, in which Thoreau was "borrowing money for a poor Irishman who wishes to get his family to this country" (Journal, October 12, 1853). If it had been 1854, it is questionable whether Thoreau would have written "March 1854" instead of merely "March." MS., Huntington; previously unpublished.

TO H. G. O. BLAKE

Concord Feb. 27 '53

Mr Blake,

I have not answered your letter before because I have been almost constantly in the fields surveying of late. It is long since I have spent so many days so profitably in a pecuniary sense; so unprofitably, it seems to me, in a more important sense. I have earned just a dollar a day for 76 days past; for though I charge at a higher rate for the days which are seen to be spent, yet so many more are spent than appears. This is instead of lecturing, which has not offered to pay for that book which I printed. I have not only cheap hours, but cheap weeks and months, i.e. weeks which are bought at the rate I have named. Not that they are quite lost to me, or make me very melancholy, alas! for I too often take a cheap satisfaction in so spending them,—weeks of pasturing

and browsing, like beesves and deer, which give me animal health, it may be, but create a tough skin over the soul and intellectual part. Yet if men should offer my body a maintenance for the work of my head alone, I feel that it would be a dangerous temptation.

As to whether what you speak of as the "world's way" (Which for the most part is my way) or that which is shown me, is the better, the former is imposture, the latter is truth. I have the coldest confidence in the last. There is only such hesitation as the appetites feel in following the aspirations. The clod hesitates because it is inert, wants *animation*. The one is the way of death, the other of life everlasting. My hours are not "cheap in such a way that *I* doubt whether the world's way would not have been better," but cheap in such a way, that I doubt whether the world's way, which I have adopted for the time, could be worse. The whole enterprise of this nation which is not an upward, but a westward one, toward Oregon California, Japan &c, is totally devoid of interest to me, whether performed on foot or by a Pacific railroad. It is not illustrated by a thought it is not warmed by a sentiment, there is nothing in it which one should lay down his life for, nor even his gloves, hardly which one should take up a newspaper for. It is perfectly heathenish—a fribustiering *toward* heaven by the great western route. No, they may go their way to their manifest destiny which I trust is not mine. May my 76 dollars whenever I get them help to carry me in the other direction. I see them on their winding way, but no music 'is' wafted from their host, only the rattling of change in their pockets. I would rather be a captive knight, and let them all pass by, than be free only to go whither they are bound. What end do they propose to themselves beyond Japan? What aims more lofty have they than the prairie dogs?

As it respects these things I have not changed an opinion one iota from the first. As the stars looked to me when I was a shepherd in Assyria, they look to me now a New Englander. The higher the *mt.* on which you stand, the less change in the prospect from year to year, from age to age. Above a certain height, there is no change. I am a Switzer on the edge of the glacier, with his advantages & disadvantages, goitre, or what not. (You may suspect it to be some kind of swelling at any rate). I have had but one *spiritual* birth (excuse the word,) and now whether it rains or snows, whether I laugh or cry, fall farther below or approach nearer to my standard, whether Pierce or Scott is elected,

—not a new scintillation of light flashes on me, but ever and anon, though with longer intervals, the same surprising & everlasting new light dawns to me, with only such variations as in the coming of the natural day, with which indeed, it is often coincident.

As to how to preserve potatoes from rotting, your opinion may change from year to year, but as to how to preserve your soul from rotting, I have nothing to learn but something to practise.

Thus I declaim against them, but I in my folly am the world I condemn.

I very rarely indeed, if ever, "feel any itching to be what is called useful to my fellowmen." Sometimes, it may be when my thoughts for want of employment, fall into a beaten path or humdrum, I have dreamed idly of stopping a man's horse that was running away, but perchance I wished that he might run in order that I might stop him,—or, of putting out a fire, but then of course it must have got well a-going. Now, to tell the truth, I do not dream much of acting upon horses before they run, or of preventing fires which are not yet kindled. What a foul subject is this, of doing good, instead of minding ones life, which should be his business—doing good as a dead carcass, which is only fit for manure, instead of as a living man,—Instead of taking care to flourish & smell & taste sweet and refresh all mankind to the extent of our capacity & quality. People will sometimes try to persuade you that you have done something from that motive, as if you did not already know enough about it. If I ever *did* a man any good, in their sense, of course it was something exceptional, and insignificant compared with the good or evil which I am constantly doing by being what I am. As if you were to preach to ice to shape itself into burning glasses, which are sometimes useful, and so the peculiar properties of ice be lost—Ice that merely performs the office of a burning glass does not do its duty.

The problem of life becomes one cannot say by how many degrees more complicated as our material wealth is increased, whether that needle they tell of was a gate-way or not,—since the problem is not merely nor mainly to get life for our bodies, but by this or a similar discipline to get life for our souls; by cultivating the lowland farm on right principles, that is with this view, to turn it into an upland farm. You have so many more talents to account for. If I accomplish as much more in spiritual work as I am richer in worldly goods, then I am just as worthy, or worth just as much as I was before, and no more. I see that,

in my own case, money *might* be of great service to me, but probably it would not be, for the difficulty ever is that I do not improve my opportunities, and therefore I am not prepared to have my opportunities increased. Now I warn you, if it be as you say, you have got to put on the pack of an Upland Farmer in good earnest the coming spring, the lowland farm being cared for, aye you must be selecting your seeds forth with and doing what winter work you can; and while others are raising potatoes and Baldwin apples for you, you must be raising apples of the Hesperides for them. (Only hear how he preaches!) No man can suspect that he is the proprietor of an Upland farm, upland in the sense that it will produce nobler crops and better repay cultivation in the long run, but he will be perfectly sure that he ought to cultivate it.

Though we are desirous to earn our bread, we need not be anxious to *satisfy* men for it—though we shall take care to pay them, but Good [sic] who alone gave it to us. Men may in effect put us in the debtors jail, for that matter, simply for paying our whole debt to God which includes our debt to them, and though we have his receipt for it, for his paper is dishonored. The carrier will tell you that he has no stock in his bank.

How prompt we are to satisfy the hunger & thirst of our bodies; how slow to satisfy the hunger & thirst of our *souls*. Indeed we [who] would be practical folks cannot use this word without blushing because of our infidelity, having starved this substance almost to a shadow. We feel it to be as absurd as if a man were to break forth into a eulogy on *his dog* who has n't any. An ordinary man will work every day for a year at shovelling dirt to support his body, or a family of bodies, but he is an extraordinary man who will work a whole day in a year for the support of his soul. Even the priests, the men of God, so called, for the most part confess that they work for the support of the body. But he alone is the truly enterprising & practical man who succeeds in *maintaining* his soul here. Haven't we our everlasting life to get? And isn't that the only excuse at last for eating drinking sleeping or even carrying an umbrella when it rains? A man might as well devote himself to raising pork, as to fattening the bodies or temporal part merely of the whole human family. If we made the true distinction we should almost all of us be seen to be in the almshouse for souls.

I am much indebted to you because you look so steadily at the better side, or rather the true center of me (for our true center may & perhaps oftenest does lie entirely aside from us, and we are in fact ec-

centric,) and as I have elsewhere said "Give me an opportunity to live." You speak as if the image or idea which I see were reflected from me to you, and I see it again reflected from you to me, because we stand at the right angle to one another; and so it goes, zig-zag, to what successive reflecting surfaces, before it is all dissipated, or absorbed by the more unreflecting, or differently reflecting,—who knows? Or perhaps what you see directly you refer to me. What a little shelf is required, by which we may impinge upon another, and build there our eyrie in the clouds, and all the heavens we see above us we refer to the crags around and beneath us. Some piece of mica, as it were, in the face or eyes of one, as on the Delectable *Mts.*, slanted at the right angle, reflects the heavens to us. But in the slow geological depressions & upheavals, these mutual angles are disturbed, these suns set & new ones rise to us. That ideal which I worshipped was a greater stranger to the mica than to me. It was not the hero I admired but the reflection from his epaulet or helmet. It is nothing (for us) permanently inherent in another, but his attitude or relation to what we prize that we admire. The meanest man may glitter with micaceous particles to his fellow's eye. There are the spangles that adorn a man. The highest union—the only *un-ion* (don't laugh) or central oneness, is the coincidence of visual rays. Our club room was an apartment in a constellation where our visual rays met (and there was no debate about the restaurant) The way between us is over the mount.

Your words make me think of a man of my acquaintance whom I occasionally meet, whom you too appear to have met, one Myself, as he is called. Yet why not call him *Your-self*? If you have met with him & know him it is all I have done, and surely where there is a mutual acquaintance the my & thy make a distinction without a difference.

I do not wonder that you do not like my Canada story. It concerns me but little, and probably is not worth the time it took to tell it. Yet I had absolutely no design whatever in my mind, but simply to report what I saw. I have inserted all of myself that was implicated or made the excursion. It has come to an end at any rate, they will print no more, but return me my mss. when it is but little more than half done—as well as another I had sent them, because the editor Curtis requires the liberty to omit the heresies without consulting me—a privilege California is not rich enough to bid for.

I thank you again & again for attending to me; that is to say I am

glad that you hear me and that you also are glad. Hold fast to your most indefinite waking dream. The very green dust on the walls is an organized vegetable; the atmosphere has its fauna & flora floating in it; & shall we think that dreams are but dust & ashes, are always disintegrated & crumbling thoughts and not dust like thoughts trooping to its standard with music systems beginning to be organized. These expectations these are roots these are nuts which even the poorest man has in his bin, and roasts or cracks them occasionally in winter evenings, which even the poor debtor retains with his bed and his pig, i.e. his idleness & sensuality. Men go to the opera because they hear there a faint expression in sound of this news which is never quite distinctly proclaimed. Suppose a man were to sell the hue the least amount of coloring matter in the superficies of his thought,—for a farm—were to exchange an absolute & infinite value for a relative & finite one—to gain the whole world & lose his own soul!

Do not wait as long as I have before you write. If you will look at another star I will try to supply my side of the triangle

Tell Mr Brown that I remember him & trust that he remembers me.

Yrs
H.D.T.

PS. Excuse this rather flippant preaching—which does not cost me enough—and do not think that I mean you *always*—though your letter requested the subjects.

Thoreau's Week was selling so poorly that the publisher insisted on Thoreau's taking the unsold remainder off his hands and settling the printing debt. Theo Brown, a fellow townsman of Blake, was one of Thoreau's friends and occasional companions. MS., Berg.

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To G. W. CURTIS

Concord Mar. 11 '53

Mr. Curtis:

Together with the ms of my Cape Cod adventures Mr [George Palmer] Putnam sends me only the first 70 or 80 (out of 200) pages of the "Canada," all which having been printed is of course of no use to me. He states that "the remainder of the mss. *seems* to have been lost at the printers." You will not be surprised if I wish to know if it *actually is* lost, and if reasonable pains have been taken to recover it. Supposing that Mr. P. may not have had an opportunity to consult you respecting its whereabouts—or have thought it of importance enough to inquire after particularly—I write again to you to whom I entrusted it to assure you that it is of more value to me than may appear.

With your leave I will improve this opportunity to acknowledge the receipt of another cheque from Mr. Putnam.

I trust that if we ever have any intercourse hereafter it may be something more cheering than this curt business kind.

Yrs,
Henry D. Thoreau

For earlier details of the controversy over the publication of "Excursion to Canada," see the letter from Greeley of January 2, 1853. MS., John Cooley (typescript).

From HORACE GREELEY

New York, March 16, 1853.

Dear Sir,—

I have yours of the 9th, inclosing Putnam's check for \$59, making \$79 in all you have paid me. I am paid in full, and this letter is your receipt in full. I don't want any pay for my "services," whatever they

may have been. Consider me your friend who *wished* to serve you, however unsuccessfully. Don't break with C[urtis] or Putnam.

Text, *Sanborn's Henry D. Thoreau*, pp. 237-38.

To H. C. O. BLAKE

Concord, April 10, 1853.

Mr. Blake,—

Another singular kind of spiritual foot-ball,—really nameless, handleless, homeless, like myself,—a mere arena for thoughts and feelings; definite enough outwardly, indefinite more than enough inwardly. But I do not know why we should be styled "misters" or "masters": we come so near to being anything or nothing, and seeing that we are mastered, and not wholly sorry to be mastered, by the least phenomenon. It seems to me that we are the mere creatures of thought,—one of the lowest forms of intellectual life, we men,—as the sunfish is of animal life. As yet our thoughts have acquired no definiteness nor solidity; they are purely molluscous, not vertebrate; and the height of our existence is to float upward in an ocean where the sun shines,—appearing only like a vast soup or chowder to the eyes of the immortal navigators. It is wonderful that I can be here, and you there, and that we can correspond, and do many other things, when, in fact, there is so little of us, either or both, anywhere. In a few minutes, I expect, this slight film or dash of vapor that I am will be what is called asleep,—resting! forsooth from what? Hard work? and thought? The hard work of the dandelion down, which floats over the meadow all day; the hard work of a pismire that labors to raise a hillock all day, and even by moonlight. Suddenly I can come forward into the utmost apparent distinctness, and speak with a sort of emphasis to you; and the next moment I am so faint an entity, and make so slight an impression, that nobody can find the traces of me. I try to hunt myself up, and find the

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little of me that is discoverable is falling asleep, and then I assist and tuck it up. It is getting late. How can *I* starve or feed? Can *I* be said to sleep? There is not enough of me even for that. If you hear a noise,—'t aint I,—'t aint I,—as the dog says with a tin-kettle tied to his tail. I read of something happening to another the other day: how happens it that nothing ever happens to me? A dandelion down that never alights,—settles,—blown off by a boy to see if his mother wanted him,—some divine boy in the upper pastures.

Well, if there really is another such a meteor sojourning in these spaces, I would like to ask you if you know whose estate this is that we are on? For my part I enjoy it well enough, what with the wild apples and the scenery; but I should n't wonder if the owner set his dog on me next. I could remember something not much to the purpose, probably; but if I stick to what I do know, then—

It is worth the while to live respectably unto ourselves. We can possibly *get along* with a neighbor, even with a bedfellow, whom we respect but very little; but as soon as it comes to this, that we do not respect ourselves, then we do not get along at all, no matter how much money we are paid for halting. There are old heads in the world who cannot help me by their example or advice to live worthily and satisfactorily to myself; but I believe that it is in my power to elevate myself this very hour above the common level of my life. It is better to have your head in the clouds, and know where you are, if indeed you cannot get it above them, than to breathe the clearer atmosphere below them, and think that you are in paradise.

Once you were in Milton doubting what to do. To live a better life —this surely can be done. Dot and carry one. Wait not for a clear sight, for that you are to get. What you see clearly you may omit to do. Milton and Worcester? It is all Blake, Blake. Never mind the rats in the wall; the cat will take care of them. All that men have said or are is a very faint rumor, and it is not worth the while to remember or refer to that. If you are to meet God, will you refer to anybody out of that court? How shall men know how I succeed, unless they are in at the life? I did not see the "Times" reporter there.

Is it not delightful to provide one's self with the necessities of life, —to collect dry wood for the fire when the weather grows cool, or fruits when we grow hungry?—not till then. And then we have all the time left for thought!

Of what use were it, pray, to get a little wood to burn, to warm your body this cold weather, if there were not a divine fire kindled at the same time to warm your spirit?

"Unless above himself he can
Erect himself, how poor a thing is man!"

I cuddle up by my stove, and there I get up another fire which warms fire itself. Life is so short that it is not wise to take roundabout ways, nor can we spend much time in waiting. Is it absolutely necessary, then, that we should do as we are doing? Are we chiefly under obligations to the devil, like Tom Walker? Though it is late to leave off this wrong way, it will seem early the moment we begin in the right way; instead of mid-afternoon, it will be early morning with us. We have not got half way to dawn yet.

As for the lectures, I feel that I have something to say, especially on Traveling, Vagueness, and Poverty; but I cannot come now. I will wait till I am fuller, and have fewer engagements. Your suggestions will help me much to write them when I am ready. I am going to Haverhill tomorrow, surveying, for a week or more. You met me on my last errand thither.

I trust that you realize what an exaggerater I am,—that I lay myself out to exaggerate whenever I have an opportunity,—pile Pelion upon Ossa, to reach heaven so. Expect no trivial truth from me, unless I am on the witness-stand. I will come as near to lying as you can drive a coach-and-four. If it isn't thus and so with me, it is with something. I am not particular whether I get the shells or meat, in view of the latter's worth.

I see that I have not at all answered your letter, but there is time enough for that.

Thoreau's account of his surveying trip to Haverhill may be found in the Journal (V, 109–14), where it concentrates on botanical observation. The reference to Tom Walker derives from Washington Irving's Tales of a Traveller. Text, Familiar Letters of Thoreau, pp. 261–65.

From JAMES MUNROE & CO.

We send by express this day a box & bundle containing 250 copies of Concord River, & also 450. in sheets. All of which we trust you will find correct.

Munroe now insisted on returning the unsold copies of Thoreau's first book, which were taking up needed storage space in his cellar. It was thus that Thoreau acquired "a library of nearly nine hundred volumes, over seven hundred of which I wrote myself." For Thoreau's further comments on the return of the unsold remainder, see his Journal for October 25, 1853, the day he received the books from Munroe. (V, 459–60). MS., Huntington, in a letter from Thoreau to Ticknor & Fields, February 24, 1862; previously unpublished.

THE CORRESPONDENCE OF THOREAU

To FRANCIS H. UNDERWOOD

Concord Nov. 22d '53

Dear Sir,

If you will inform me in season at what rate per page, (describing the page) you will pay for accepted articles,—returning the rejected within a reasonable time—and your terms are satisfactory, I will forward something for your Magazine before Dec 5th, and you shall be at liberty to put my name in the list of contributors.

Yours
Henry D. Thoreau.

In the summer and fall of 1853 Underwood wrote to numerous literary men of New England in an attempt to round up literary material for a projected antislavery magazine to be issued by the Boston publisher John P. Jewett. Jewett had already made his name and had begun to make his fabulous profits the year before out of one item, Mrs. Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin. The new magazine was supposed to begin publication in December of 1853. MS., Berg..

Concord Nov. 22^d '53

Dear Sir,

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Yours Henry D. Thoreau

THE CORRESPONDENCE OF THOREAU

To FRANCIS H. UNDERWOOD

Concord, Dec. 2d, 1853.

Dear Sir,—

I send you herewith a complete article of fifty-seven pages. *Putnam's Magazine* pays me four dollars a page, but I will not expect to receive more for this than you pay to anyone else. Of course you will not make any alterations or omissions without consulting me.

Yours,
Henry D. Thoreau

Apparently Underwood's reply to Thoreau's letter of November 22 was acceptable. The article was probably "Chesuncook," an account of the trip to the Maine Woods of September 1853. Because the launching of the magazine was postponed the article was not published in the Atlantic until 1858. Then James Russell Lowell deleted the line about the pine tree: "It is as immortal as I am, and perchance will go to as high a heaven, there to tower above me still," without consulting Thoreau and brought down the wrath of the author on his head. Text, Bliss Perry's Park Street Papers, p. 217.

From FRANCIS H. UNDERWOOD

Boston Dec. 5, 1853

Dear Sir,

I am extremely sorry to inform you that Mr. Jewett has decided not to commence the Magazine as he proposed. His decision was made too late to think of commencing this year with another publisher. His ill health and already numerous cares are the reasons he gives. The en-

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terprise is therefore postponed—but not indefinitely it is to be hoped. Should the fates be favorable I will give you the earliest information.

Very sincerely yours,
F. H. Underwood

Mr. H. D. Thoreau

The decision of the Boston publisher John P. Jewett not to issue his antislavery magazine provided Thoreau with still another unhappy experience in the periodical field. However, Underwood continued to work toward the establishment of a "free" magazine, and he deserves the main credit for starting the Atlantic Monthly, which ultimately appeared (with Lowell as editor at Underwood's suggestion) in November of 1857. MS., Berg; previously unpublished.

To SPENCER F. BAIRD

Concord Dec. 19th 1853

Spencer F. Baird,
Dear Sir,

I wish hereby to convey my thanks to the one who so kindly proposed me as a member of the Association for the Advancement of Science, and also to express my interest in the Association itself. Nevertheless, for the same reason that I should not be able to attend the meetings, unless held in my immediate vicinity, I am compelled to decline the membership.

Yrs, with hearty thanks,
Henry D. Thoreau

(To be returned to S. F. Baird, Washington, with the blanks filled.)
Name Henry D(avid) Thoreau

Occupation (Professional, or otherwise). Literary and Scientific, combined with Land-surveying

Post-office address Henry D. Thoreau Concord Mass.

Branches of science in which especial interest is felt The Manners & Customs of the Indians of the Algonquin Group previous to contact with the civilized man.

Remarks I may add that I am an observer of nature generally, and the character of my observations, so far as they are scientific, may be inferred from the fact that I am especially attracted by such books of science as White's Selborne and Humboldt's "Aspects of Nature."

With thanks for your "Directions," received long since I remain

Yrs &c

Henry D. Thoreau.

Early in March of 1853, according to Thoreau's Journal entry for March 5, he received a circular letter from the Association for the Advancement of Science asking him "to fill the blank against certain questions, among which the most important one was what branch of science I was specially interested in. . . . I felt that it would be to make myself the laughing-stock of the scientific community to describe or attempt to describe to them that branch of science which specially interests me, inasmuch as they do not believe in a science which deals with the higher law. So I was obliged to speak to their condition and describe to them that poor part of me which alone they can understand." MS., John Cooley; the italicized portions are a printed form.

To H. G. O. BLAKE

Concord, December 19, 1853.

Mr. Blake,—

My debt has accumulated so that I should have answered your last letter at once, if I had not been the subject of what is called a press of engagements, having a lecture to write for last Wednesday, and sur-

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veying more than usual besides. It has been a kind of running fight with me,—the enemy not always behind me, I trust.

True, a man cannot lift himself by his own waistbands, because he cannot get out of himself; but he can expand himself (which is better, there being no up nor down in nature), and so split his waistbands, being already within himself.

You speak of doing and being, and the vanity, real or apparent, of much doing. The suckers—I think it is they—make nests in our river in the spring of more than a cart-load of small stones, amid which to deposit their ova. The other day I opened a muskrat's house. It was made of weeds, five feet broad at base, and three feet high, and far and low within it was a little cavity, only a foot in diameter, where the rat dwelt. It may seem trivial, this piling up of weeds, but so the race of muskrats is preserved. We must heap up a great pile of doing, for a small diameter of being. Is it not imperative on us that we *do* something, if we only work in a treadmill? And, indeed, some sort of revolving is necessary to produce a centre and nucleus of being. What exercise is to the body, employment is to the mind and morals. Consider what an amount of drudgery must be performed,—how much humdrum and prosaic labor goes to any work of the least value. There are so many layers of mere white lime in every shell to that thin inner one so beautifully tinted. Let not the shell-fish think to build his house of that alone; and pray, what are its tints to him? Is it not his smooth, close-fitting shirt merely, whose tints *are not* to him, being in the dark, but only when he is gone or dead, and his shell is heaved up to light, a wreck upon the beach, do they appear. With him, too, it is a Song of the Shirt, "Work,—work,—work!" And the work is not merely a police in the gross sense, but in the higher sense a discipline. If it is surely the means to the highest end we know, can any work be humble or disgusting? Will it not rather be elevating as a ladder, the means by which we are translated?

How admirably the artist is made to accomplish his self-culture by devotion to his art! The wood-sawyer, through his effort to do his work well, becomes not merely a better wood-sawyer, but measurably a better *man*. Few are the men that can work on their navels,—only some Brahmins that I have heard of. To the painter is given some paint and canvas instead; to the Irishman a hog, typical of himself. In a thousand apparently humble ways men busy themselves to make some

right take the place of some wrong,—if it is only to make a better paste-blacking,—and they are themselves *so much* the better morally for it.

You say that you do not succeed much. Does it concern you enough that you do not? Do you work hard enough at it? Do you get the benefit of discipline out of it? If so, persevere. Is it a more serious thing than to walk a thousand miles in a thousand successive hours? Do you get any corns by it? Do you ever think of hanging yourself on account of failure?

If you are going into that line,—going to besiege the city of God,—you must not only be strong in engines, but prepared with provisions to starve out the garrison. An Irishman came to see me to-day, who is endeavoring to get his family out to this New World. He rises at half past four, milks twenty-eight cows (which has swollen the joints of his fingers), and eats his breakfast, without any milk in his tea or coffee, before six; and so on, day after day, for six and a half dollars a month; and thus he keeps his virtue in him, if he does not add to it; and he regards me as a gentleman able to assist him; but if I ever get to be a gentleman, it will be by working after my fashion harder than he does. If my joints are not swollen, it must be because I deal with the teats of celestial cows before breakfast (and the milker in this case is always allowed some of the milk for his breakfast), to say nothing of the flocks and herds of Admetus afterward.

It is the art of mankind to polish the world, and everyone who works is scrubbing in some part.

If the work is high and far,

You must not only aim aright,
But draw the bow with all your might.

You must qualify yourself to use a bow which no humbler archer can bend.

“Work,—work,—work!”

Who shall know it for a bow? It is not of yew-tree. It is straighter than a ray of light; flexibility is not known for one of its qualities.

December 22.

So far I had got when I was called off to survey. Pray read the life of Haydon the painter, if you have not. It is a small revelation for these

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latter days; a great satisfaction to know that he has lived, though he is now dead. Have you met with the letter of a Turkish cadi at the end of Layard’s “Ancient Babylon”? that also is refreshing, and a capital comment on the whole book which precedes it,—the Oriental genius speaking through him.

Those Brahmins “put it through.” They come off, or rather stand still, conquerors, with some withered arms or legs at least to show; and they are said to have cultivated the faculty of abstraction to a degree unknown to Europeans. If we cannot sing of faith and triumph, we will sing our despair. We will be that kind of bird. There are day owls, and there are night owls, and each is beautiful and even musical while about its business.

Might you not find some positive work to do with your back to Church and State, letting your back do all the rejection of them? Can you not go upon your pilgrimage, Peter, along the winding mountain path whither you face? A step more will make those funereal church bells over your shoulder sound far and sweet as a natural sound.

“Work,—work,—work!”

Why not make a *very large* mud-pie and bake it in the sun! Only put no Church nor State into it, nor upset any other pepper-box that way. Dig out a woodchuck,—for that has nothing to do with rotting institutions. Go ahead.

Whether a man spends his day in an ecstasy or despondency, he must do some work to show for it, even as there are flesh and bones to show for him. We are superior to the joy we experience.

Your last two letters, methinks, have more nerve and will in them than usual, as if you had erected yourself more. Why are not they good work, if you only had a hundred correspondents to tax you?

Make your failure tragical by the earnestness and steadfastness of your endeavor, and then it will not differ from success. Prove it to be the inevitable fate of mortals,—of one mortal,—if you can.

You said that you were writing on Immortality. I wish you would communicate to me what you know about that. You are sure to live while that is your theme.

Thus I write on some text which a sentence of your letters may have furnished.

I think of coming to see you as soon as I get a new coat, if I have money enough left. I will write to you again about it.

On December 14, 1853 Thoreau delivered before the Concord Lyceum a lecture on his journey to Moosehead Lake. Text, Familiar Letters of Thoreau, pp. 266-71.