To Ralph Waldo Emerson

March 11, 1842

Concord March 11th 1842

Dear Friend,

I see so many “carvells ticht, fast tending throw the sea” to your El Dorado, that I am in haste to plant my flag in season on that distant beach, in the name of God and king Henry. There seems to be no occasion why I who have so little to say to you here at home should take pains to send you any of my silence in a letter—Yet since no correspondence can hope to rise above the level of those homely speechless hours, as no spring ever bursts above the level of the still mountain tarn whence it issued—I will not delay to send a venture. As if I were to send you a piece of the house-sill—or a loose casement rather. Do not neighbors sometimes halloo with good will across a field, who yet never chat over a fence?

The sun has just burst through the fog, and I hear blue-birds, song-sparrows, larks, and robins, down in the meadow. The other day I walked in the woods, but found myself rather denaturalized by late habits. Yet it is the same nature that Burns and Wordsworth loved—the same life that Shakspeare and Milton lived. The wind still roars in the wood, as if nothing had happened out of the course of nature. The sound of the waterfall is not interrupted more than if a feather had fallen.

Nature is not ruffled by the rudest blast– The hurri cane only snaps a few twigs in some nook of the forest. The snow attains its average depth each winter, and the chic-a-dee lisps the same notes. The old laws prevail in spite of pestilence and famine. No genius or virtue so rare & revolutionary appears in town or village, that the pine ceases to exude resin in the wood, or beast or bird lays aside its habits.

How plain that death is only the phenomenon of the individual or class– Nature does not recognise it, She finds
her own again under new forms without loss. Yet death is
beautiful when seen to be a law, and not an accident— It
is as common as life. Men die in Tartary—in Ethiopia—in
England—in Wisconsin. And after all what portion of this
so serene and living nature can be said to be alive? Do this
year’s grasses and foliage outnumber all the past. Every
blade in the field—every leaf in the forest—lays down its life
in its season as beautifully as it was taken up. It is the pas-
time of a full quarter of the year. Dead trees—sere leaves—
dried grass and herbs—are not these a good part of our
life? And what is that pride of our autumnal scenery but
the hectic flush—the sallow and cadaverous countenance
of vegetation—its painted throes—with the November air
for canvass—

When we look over the fields we are not saddened be-
cause these particular flowers or grasses will wither—for
the law of their death is the law of new life. Will not the
land be in good heart because the crops die down from
year to year? The herbage cheerfully consents to bloom,
and wither, and give place to a new.

So is it with the human plant. We are partial and selfish
when we lament the death of the individual, unless our
plaint be a paean to the departed soul, and we sigh as the
wind sighs over the fields, which no shrub interprets into
its private grief.

One might as well go into mourning for every sere
leaf—but the more innocent and wiser soul will snuff a fra-
grance in the gales of autumn, and congratulate nature
upon her health.

After I have imagined thus much will not the Gods feel
under obligations to make me realize something as good?

I have just read some good verse by the old Scotch poet
John Bellenden—

“The fynest gold or silver that we se,
May nocht be wrocht to our utilitie,
Bot flammis kein & bitter violence;
The more distress, the more intelligence.
Quhay sailis lang in hie prosperitie,
Ar sone owreset be stormis without defence.”

From your friend
Henry D. Thoreau

Correspondent: See p. 53.

1 T quotes John Bellenden, “Allegorie of Vertue and Delyte,” in Chronicle of Scottish Poetry, 2:56. T borrowed volume 2 from the Harvard College Library in 1837, and he borrowed all four volumes of the collection in 1841. By using Bellenden’s ship and El Dorado images, T implies that many letters sail from New England to New York City, Emerson’s El Dorado, the place where he made money as a lecturer.

2 Emerson arrived in New York City on February 25, delivered his six-lecture series “The Times” between March 3 and March 14, and returned to Concord on March 18.

3 See p. 103, note 4.


Copy-text: ALS (NN-BGC, Henry David Thoreau Collection, 1837-1917, Series III)

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Editor’s Note
This letter is addressed “R. W. Emerson / New York.” and endorsed “H. D. Thoreau / March 1842”.

Author’s Alterations
homely\] followed by cancelled but
blue-birds,\] followed by cancelled and

To Isaiah Thornton Williams
March 14, 1842

Concord March 14\(^{th}\) 1842

Dear Williams,

I meant to write to you before but John’s death, and my own sickness, with other circumstances, prevented. John died of the lock-jaw, as you know, Jan. 11\(^{th}\) I have been