

Editor's Note

PE supplies the date "Before March 27, 1848" from the contents of T's reply to Blake, which was dated "March 27, 1848."

To Harrison Gray Otis Blake

March 27, 1848

Concord, March 27, 1848.

I am glad to hear that any words of mine, though spoken so long ago that I can hardly claim identity with their author, have reached you. It gives me pleasure, because I have therefore reason to suppose that I have uttered what concerns men, and that it is not in vain that man speaks to man. This is the value of literature. Yet those days are so distant, in every sense, that I have had to look at that page again, to learn what was the tenor of my thoughts then. I should value that article, however, if only because it was the occasion of your letter.

I do believe that the outward and the inward life correspond; that if any should succeed to live a higher life, others would not know of it; that difference and distance are one. To set about living a true life is to go a journey to a distant country, gradually to find ourselves surrounded by new scenes and men; and as long as the old are around me, I know that I am not in any true sense living a new or a better life. The outward is only the outside of that which is within. Men are not concealed under habits, but are revealed by them; they are their true clothes. I care not how curious a reason they may give for their abiding by them. Circumstances are not rigid and unyielding, but our habits are rigid. We are apt to speak vaguely sometimes, as if a divine life were to be grafted on to or built over this present as a suitable foundation. This might do if we could so build over our old life as to exclude from it all the warmth of our affection, and addle it, as the thrush builds over the cuckoo's egg, and lays her own atop, and hatches that

only;¹ but the fact is, we—so there is^v the partition—hatch them both, and the cuckoo's always by a day first, and that young bird crowds the young thrushes out of the nest. No. Destroy the cuckoo's egg, or build a new nest.

Change is change. No new life occupies the old bodies;—they decay. *It* is born, and grows, and flourishes. Men very pathetically inform the old, accept and wear it. Why put up with the almshouse when you may go to Heaven? It is embalming,—no more. Let alone your ointments and your linen swathes, and go into an infant's body. You see in the catacombs of Egypt the result of that experiment,—that is the end of it.

I do believe in simplicity. It is astonishing as well as sad, how many trivial affairs even the wisest man thinks he must attend to in a day; how singular an affair he thinks he must omit. When the mathematician would solve a difficult problem, he first frees the equation of all encumbrances, and reduces it to its simplest terms. So simplify the problem of life, distinguish the necessary and the real. Probe the earth to see where your main roots run. I would stand upon facts. Why not see,—use our eyes? Do men know nothing? I know many men who, in common things, are not to be deceived; who trust no moonshine; who count their money correctly, and know how to invest it; who are said to be prudent and knowing, who yet will stand at a desk the greater part of their lives, as cashiers in banks, and glimmer and rust and finally go out there. If they *know* anything, what under the sun do they do that for? Do they know what *bread* is? or what it is for? Do they know what life is? If they *knew* something, the places which know them now would know them no more forever.

This, our respectable daily life, in^v which the man of common sense, the Englishman of the world, stands so squarely, and on which our institutions are founded, is in fact the veriest illusion, and will vanish like the baseless

fabric of a vision;² but that faint glimmer of reality which sometimes illuminates the darkness of daylight for all men, reveals something more solid and enduring than adamant, which is in fact the corner-stone of the world.

Men cannot conceive of a state of things so fair that it cannot be realized. Can any man honestly consult his experience and say that it is so? Have we any facts to appeal to when we say that our dreams are premature? Did you ever hear of a man who had striven all his life faithfully and singly toward an object and in no measure obtained it? If a man constantly aspires, is he not elevated? Did ever a man try heroism, magnanimity, truth, sincerity, and find that there was no advantage in them? that it was a vain endeavor? Of course we do not expect that our paradise will be a garden. We know not what we ask.³ To look at literature;—how many fine thoughts has every man had! how few fine thoughts are expressed! Yet we never have a fantasy so subtle and ethereal, but that *talent merely*, with more resolution and faithful persistency, after a thousand failures, might fix and engrave it in distinct and enduring words, and we should see that our dreams are the solidest facts that we know. But I speak not of dreams.

What can be expressed in words can be expressed in life.

My actual life is a fact in view of which I have no occasion to congratulate myself, but for my faith and aspiration I have respect. It is from these that I speak.— Every man's position^e is in fact too simple to be described. I have sworn no oath. I have no designs on society—or nature—or God. I am simply what I am, or I begin to be that. I *live* in the *present*. I only remember the past—and anticipate the future. I love to live. I love reform better than its modes. There is no history of how bad became better. I believe something, and there is nothing else but that. I know that I am—I know that another^e is who knows more than I who takes^e {*MS torn*} interest^e in me, whose creature and yet^e

{*MS torn*} kindred^e, in one sense, am I. I know that the enterprise is worthy— I know that things work well. I have heard no bad news.

As for positions—as for combinations and details—What are they? In clear weather when we look into the heavens, what do we see, but the sky and the sun?

If you would convince a man that he does wrong—do right. But do not care to convince him.— Men will believe what they see— Let them see. Pursue, keep up with, circle round and round your life as a dog does his master's chaise. Do what you love. Know^a your own bone; gnaw at it, bury it, unearth it, and gnaw it still. Do not be too moral. You may cheat yourself out of much life so. Aim above morality. Be not *simply* good—be good for something.— All fables indeed have their morals, but the innocent enjoy the story.

Let nothing come between you and the light.⁴ Respect men as brothers only When^a you travel to the celestial city carry no letter of introduction. When you knock ask to see God—none of the servants. In what concerns you much^e do not think that you have companions—know that you are alone in the world.

Thus I write at random. I need to see you, and I trust I shall, to correct my mistakes. Perhaps you have some oracles for me

Henry Thoreau.

Correspondent: See p. 358.

¹ The British—but not the American—cuckoo lays its eggs in another bird's nest.

² T alludes to Prospero's speech to Ferdinand and Miranda after Prospero dissolved the group of spirits he had created (Shakespeare, vol. 1, *The Tempest*, 4.1.151-156):

And, like the baseless fabric of this vision,
The cloud-capp'd towers, the gorgeous palaces,
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,
Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve;
And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,
Leave not a rack behind:

³ T alludes to Mark 10:38: “Ye know not what ye ask: can ye drink of the cup that I drink of?”

⁴ T alludes to the meeting of Alexander and Diogenes as related in *Plutarch's Lives of the Most Select and Illustrious Characters of Antiquity*: when Alexander asked Diogenes if there was anything he could “serve him in”, Diogenes replied, “Only stand a little out of my sunshine” (p. 304).

Copy-text: PE lines 359.6-361.24 (Concord ... in life.), *LVP* 1865, 41-45; PE lines 361.25-362.11 (My actual ... bone; gnaw), AL (NN-BGC, Henry David Thoreau Collection, 1837-1917, Series III); PE line 362.12 (at), ALS (MH-G, Walter Deane [1848-1930] Papers, Autograph Collection); PE line 362.12 (it, bury ... gnaw it), AL (NN-BGC, Henry David Thoreau Collection, 1837-1917, Series III); PE line 362.12 (still. Do not be too), ALS (MH-G, Walter Deane [1848-1930] Papers, Autograph Collection); PE lines 362.13-25 (moral. You ... for me), AL (NN-BGC, Henry David Thoreau Collection, 1837-1917, Series III); PE line 362.26 (Henry Thoreau.), ALS (MH-G, Walter Deane [1848-1930] Papers, Autograph Collection)

Published: *LVP* 1865, 41-46; *FL* 1894, 192-197; *T: Home* 1902, 209; *FL* 1906, 160-164; *Cor* 1958, 214-217; *Spiritual Seeker* 2004, 35-39

Editor's Notes

This letter is addressed “H. G. O. Blake / Worcester / Mass.”

The copy-text is a composite of a published source, *LVP* 1865, and two manuscript sources, one at NN-BGC, the other at MH-G. The manuscript was originally a folio, only one leaf of which survives. Blake cut the signature out of the surviving leaf, which is at NN-BGC. Beneath the address on that leaf are a pencilled drawing of a face, several doodles, and Blake's note in ink:

The signature of this letter ‘Henry Thoreau’ I have cut out today on the application of Mrs. Edward Hoar of Concord, for Mr. Dean, a botanist, I understand. H. G. O. Blake. July 26, 1886.

On the reverse side of the paper was a part of ‘at it’, the word ‘still.’ & ‘Do not be too’

The portion that Blake cut out is now at MH-G; on the verso he wrote:

Frm. letter dated March 27, 1848, in vol. of. ‘Letters.’

For images of the parts of the manuscript, see “To Harrison Gray Otis Blake, March 27, 1848,” following p. 406.

position] *PE*; posi{*MS blotted*}n
 another] *PE*; {*MS torn*}ther
 takes] *PE*; tak{*text obscured by sealing wax*}

interest] *PE*; {*MS torn*}nterest
 yet] *PE*; ye{*text obscured by sealing wax*}
 kindred] *PE*; {*MS torn*}ndred
 much] *PE*; muc{*MS cut*}

Substantive Variants

A portion of the text of this letter is based on a published source, *LVP* 1865; potentially authoritative substantive readings in *FL* 1906 are reported below.

so there is] *in copy-text (LVP 1865)*; so thin is *in FL 1906*
 in] *in copy-text (LVP 1865)*; on *in FL 1906*

Author's Alterations

Know] know
 When] when

From Horace Greeley

April 3, 1848

New-York, April 3, 1848.

My Friend Thoreau:

I have but this moment received yours of 31st ult.¹ and was greatly relieved by² the breaking of your long silence. Yet it saddens and surprises me to know that your article was not paid for by Graham; and, since my honor is involved in the matter, I will see that you *are* paid, and that at no distant day.² I shall not forget the matter, and hope you will not feel annoyed at my interference in the premises. I choose to speak about it, and don't believe Graham will choose to differ with me. Don't fear for my time; I expect to visit Philadelphia on my own business next week, and will have time to look into the matter.

As to "Katahdin and the Maine Woods," I will take it and send you the money if I cannot dispose of it more to your advantage within the week ensuing.³ I hope I can.

Yours,
 Horace Greeley.

Correspondent: See p. 280.

¹ That is, March 31; the letter is not extant.

² T's article "Thomas Carlyle and His Works" was accepted by