

Author's Alteration

withdrawn] *interlined with a caret above cancelled* refused

To Harrison Gray Otis Blake

February 27, 1853

Concord Feb. 27th '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.¹ This is instead of lecturing, which has not offered, to pay for that book which I printed.² 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 beeves 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 *anima*-tion.³ 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 west-ward one, toward Oregon California, Japan⁴ &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^a one should take up a newspaper for. It is perfectly heathenish—a flibustiering⁵ 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,⁶ 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 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).⁷ 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,⁸—not a new scintillation of light flashes on me, but ever and anon, though with longer intervals, the same surprising & everlastingly 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^a 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 fellow men”. 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.⁹ 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,¹⁰—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.¹¹

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,¹²—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.¹³ 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 now 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 forthwith and doing what winter work you can;^a and while others are raising potatoes and Baldwin apples for you, you must be raising apples of the Hesperides^a for them.¹⁴ (Only hear how he preaches!) No man can suspect that he is the proprietor of an Upland farm,^a 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 God^e who alone^a 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^a, which includes our debt to them, and though we have his receipt for it, for his paper is dishonored. The cashier will tell you that he has no stock in his bank.

How prompt we are to satisfy the hunger & thirst of^a our bodies; how slow to satisfy the hunger & thirst of our *souls*. Indeed we would be practical folks cannot use this word^a 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'nt any. An ordinary man will work every day for a year at shovelling dirt to support his body^a, 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. Have'nt we our everlasting life to get? and is'nt that the only excuse at last for eating drinking^a sleeping, or even carrying an umbrella when it rains? A man might as well devote himself to raising pork, as to fattening^a 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 eccentric,) and as I have elsewhere said "give me an opportunity to live."¹⁵ 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 zigzag, 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 eirie 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^a Mts,¹⁶ slanted at the right angle, reflects the heavens to us. But in the slow geological upheavals & depressions^a, 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 micacious particles to his fellow's eye. These 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 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*^a, 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 mutal acquaintance the my & thy make a distinction without a difference.

I do not wonder that you do not like my Canada story.¹⁷ 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^a 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 privelege California is not rich enough to bid for.¹⁸

I thank you again & again for^a 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 organised 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 a faint expression in sound of this news which is never quite distinctly proclaimed. Suppose a man^a were to sell the hue, the least amount of coloring matter in the superficies of his thought,—for a farm.—were to exchange^a an absolute & infinite value for a relative^a—& finite one—to gain the whole world & lose his own soul!¹⁹

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 Brown²⁰ that I remember him & trust that^a 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*^e—though your letter *requested*^e the subjects.

Correspondent: See p. 22.

¹ In his “Field Notes of Surveys,” pp. 500-501, T records eighteen days of work in the seventy-six days between December 13 and February 26; presumably these are “the days which are seen to be spent.” T mentions a number of these surveys in his Journal entries from December 13, 1852, through February 11, 1852; see *Journal* 5 1997, pp. 408-465.

² By the terms of his contract with James Munroe, the publisher of *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, T was responsible for reimbursing the cost of publication. The book sold poorly, and T paid off his debt with earnings from other jobs; see *A Week* 1980, pp. 469 and 478-480. Nine months after this letter he recorded in his Journal: “Settled with J. Munroe & Co—and on a new Act placed 12 of my books with him on sale. I have paid him directly out of pocket since the book was published 290 dollars and taken his receipt for it— This does not include postage on proofsheets &c &c— I have received from other quarters about 15 dollars. This has been the pecuniary value of the book—” (*Journal* 7 2009, p. 176).

³ The anima is “the animating principle in living things, the soul” (*OED*).

⁴ Japan had ceased trading with most Western countries in 1639, but the country offered a potential market that was available to the United States from West Coast ports. Early in 1852 President Millard Fillmore authorized Admiral Matthew Calbraith Perry to lead an expedition seeking to arrange the exchange of Japanese sailors shipwrecked on American territory with American sailors stranded in Japan. The larger purpose of the expedition was to convince the Japanese to sign a commercial treaty with the United States. Perry arrived in July 1853 to present his terms and returned in February 1854, at which time the Japanese agreed to a treaty.

⁵ A filibustier or filibuster is an unauthorized armed expedition into a foreign country. In the mid-nineteenth century the term referred to private attempts by United States citizens to overthrow governments in Latin America. Though President Millard Fillmore tried to suppress such excursions, they continued through the period.

⁶ T may have in mind Austen Henry Layard’s description of the Chaldean shepherd on the Assyrian plains: “Whilst he watched his sheep by night, he marked the stars as they rose above the horizon” (*Nineveh and Its Remains*, 2:336). The Chaldeans were a Mesopotamian people who flourished between the tenth and sixth centuries BCE under the Assyrian Empire. They and the Assyrians figure in the Hebrew Scriptures and are often invoked in Romantic-era historical texts such as Layard’s and also in literary works such as Byron’s *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* and *Manfred*. Byron writes of Childe Harold, “Like the Chaldean, he could watch the stars, / Till he had peopled them with beings bright / As their own beams; . . .” (*The Works of Lord Byron*, 8:138). In a Journal entry dated January 21, 1853, T muses on the lack of “change in the prospect” over eons in a long paragraph which begins: “I am somewhat oppressed & saddened by the sameness & apparent poverty of the heavens—that these irregular & few geometrical figures which the constellations make are no other than those seen by the Chaldaean shepherds I pine for a new World in the heavens as well as on the earth—” (*Journal* 5 1997, p. 446).

⁷ T’s reference to a glacier in the Swiss Alps suggests an allusion to a well-known speech in Byron’s *Manfred*. In an alpine setting, Manfred addresses the sun, beginning, “Thou earliest minister of the Almighty, / Which gladden’d, on their mountain tops, the hearts / Of the Chaldean shepherds, till they pour’d / Themselves in orisons! . . .” (*The Works of Lord Byron*, 11:60). T undercuts any parallel between himself and Byron’s Romantic arch-rebel by

identifying himself as a Swiss with his “goitre, or what not.” Goiter, an abnormal growth or swelling of the thyroid gland in the front of the neck often caused by a lack of dietary iodine, was at the time prevalent in Switzerland, where the soil is deficient in iodine.

⁸ Franklin Pierce defeated Winfield Scott in the 1852 presidential campaign; see p. 115, note 4, and p. 134, note 4.

⁹ In choosing this example T may have in mind his reaction when he actually did confront the fire he and Edward Hoar had set on April 30, 1844, and which he describes in a Journal passage written after May 31, 1850. After giving an alarm, T asked himself, “What could I do alone against a front of flame half a mile wide” then “walked slowly through the wood to Fair Haven Cliff climbed to the highest rock & sat down upon it—to observe the progress of the flames which were rapidly approaching me” (*Journal* 3 1990, p. 76).

¹⁰ In expressing his negative view of philanthropy, T may be playing on Ecclesiastes 9:4, “for a living dog is better than a dead lion.” See also *Walden* 1971, p. 74: “There is no odor so bad as that which arises from goodness tainted. It is human, it is divine, carrion.”

¹¹ On January 6, 1853, the day after Walden froze over, T describes in his Journal large and small bubbles trapped in the ice; two days later he notices that these bubbles have been acting as lenses, focusing the sun’s rays and melting the ice beneath them (*Journal* 5 1997, pp. 426-427 and 435-436). T described ice formations in the first winter he kept a journal, and throughout the 1850s he recorded information about the ice on the ponds and rivers in Concord. In March 1855, he “made a burning-glass of ice, which produced a slight sensation of warmth on the back of [his] hand, but was so untrue that it did not concentrate the rays to a sufficiently small focus” (*Journal* 1906, 7:226).

¹² T alludes to a saying that recurs in the Gospels: “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God” (Mark 10:25); also see Matt. 19:24 and Luke 18:25.

¹³ T plays on the parable of the talents in Matt. 25:14-30, where the approving master commends his servant who has invested his talents well: “Well done, good and faithful servant; thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy lord.”

¹⁴ The Baldwin apple was named for Loammi Baldwin (1744/45-1807), who discovered it while surveying for the Middlesex Canal. The apple had a superb flavor, and Baldwin successfully propagated it throughout New England. In a Journal entry dated February 20, 1852, T characterizes the genius as a seedling and the

common man as a Baldwin, “propagated by mere offshoots or repetitions of the parent stock” (*Journal* 4 1992, p. 361). The Hesperides were the three daughters of Hesperus who were charged with guarding the golden apples that Hera gave to Zeus as a wedding present. Hercules stole the apples as one of his labors.

¹⁵ In a long passage on the subject of friendship in *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, published four years earlier, T wrote:

The true and not despairing Friend will address his Friend in some such terms as these. . . .

... “You are purely good,—you are infinitely good. I can trust you forever. I did not think that humanity was so rich. Give me an opportunity to live.” (*A Week* 1980, p. 269)

¹⁶ The Delectable Mountains form part of the landscape in John Bunyan’s allegory of salvation, *The Pilgrim’s Progress*. The shepherds of the Delectable Mountains have a looking glass that “would present a man, one way, with his own features exactly; and turn it but another way, and it would show one the very face and similitude of the Prince of the pilgrims himself” (part 2, p. 404).

¹⁷ Three installments of “An Excursion to Canada,” T’s account of his 1850 trip, appeared in *Putnam’s Monthly Magazine* in the January, February, and March 1853 numbers. The January number contained “Concord to Montreal,” the February, most of “Quebec and Montmorenci”; it is not known which of these Blake was responding to.

¹⁸ T complained of Curtis’s editorial overreaching in a letter to Greeley dated December 29, 1852, which is known only because of Greeley’s January 2, 1853, response; see p. 139. As T notes in his March 11, 1853, letter to Curtis, Putnam sent back the entire Cape Cod manuscript, but only “the first 70 or 80 (out of 200) pages” of “An Excursion to Canada,” constituting the part that had already been printed (pp. 154-155). For more information about this situation, see *Excursions* 2007, pp. 478-481.

¹⁹ Jesus’ words to his disciples, “For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul” (Matt. 16:26; see also Luke 9:25), pose a question that T explored repeatedly. One lecture version of his essay “Life without Principle” was titled “What Shall It Profit”; see *Reform Papers* 1973, p. 369.

²⁰ Theophilus Brown.

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

Published: *LVP* 1865, 85-93; *Life* 1890, 176, 218-219, 244-245; *FL* 1894,

251-261; *FL* 1906, 209-217; *Cor* 1958, 295-300; *Spiritual Seeker* 2004, 81-88

Editor's Notes

This letter is addressed "H. G. O. Blake / Worcester / Mass" and postmarked "Concord M{*illegible*} Feb 28".

God] *PE*; Good *in MS*

upheavals & depressions] *PE*; & upheavals depressions *in MS*. *T* originally wrote depressions & upheavals; *in marking to transpose these two words he misplaced the ampersand*

always] *PE*; *underlined twice in MS*

requested] *PE*; req{*MS torn*}ested

Author's Alterations

which] even

Above] *preceded by cancelled* I am a

your] my

can;] ~:

Hesperides] hesperides

farm,] *followed by cancelled* i.e.

alone] *interlined with a caret*

God] god

of] our

word] world

body] *preceded by cancelled* family

drinking] drink,

fattening] fattening

Delectable] delectable

upheavals & depressions] upheavals *and* depressions *marked for transposition*

Myself] myself

an] and

for] to

there] their

a man] *interlined with a caret*

to exchange] *preceded by cancelled* to begin

a relative] *interlined above cancelled* an absolute

that] he