

*To Harrison Gray Otis Blake**December 31, 1856*Concord Dec 31st '56

Mr Blake,

I think that it will not be worth the while for me to come to Worcester to lecture at all this year. It will be better to wait till I am—perhaps unfortunately—more in that line. My writing has not taken the shape of lectures, and therefore I should be obliged to read one of 3 or 4 old lectures the best of which I have read to some of your auditors before.¹ I carried that one which I call “Walking or the Wild” to Amherst N.H. the evening of that cold Thursday, & I am to read another at Fitchburg Feb 3^d— I am simply their^a hired man.— This will probably be the extent of my lecturing hereabouts.²

I must depend on meeting Mr Wasson³ some other time.

Perhaps it always costs me more than it comes to to lecture before a promiscuous audience. It is an irreparable injury done to my modesty ever— I become so indurated.

O Solitude!^a Obscurity! Meanness! I never triumph so as when I have the least success in my neighbor’s eyes. The lecturer gets 50 dollars a night—but what becomes of his winter? What consolation will it be hereafter to have got \$50000 for living in this world? I should like not to exchange *any* of my life for money.

These, you may think, are reasons for not lecturing when you have no great opportunity— It is even so perhaps— I could lecture on dry oak leaves,⁴ I could—but who could hear me? If I were to try it on any large audience, I fear it would be no gain to them, & a positive loss to me. I should have behaved rudely toward my rustling friends.

I am surveying instead of lecturing at present.⁵ Let me have a skimming from your “pan of unwrinkled cream.”⁶

H. D. T.

Correspondent: See p. 22.

¹ Earlier in the fall Blake had invited T to lecture in Worcester, Massachusetts, and T, not having any new lectures, responded in a November 19 letter that he was hesitant to repeat "What Shall It Profit," which he had read in Worcester on January 4, 1855. If Blake was sure it would be "worth the while," however, he wrote that he would "make an independent journey from Concord for that purpose" (p. 483).

² T read "Walking, or the Wild" in Fitchburg on February 3, 1857, and he repeated the lecture in Worcester on February 13. These two were the only lectures he gave in 1857 (see "T's Lectures after *Walden*" 1996, pp. 283-289).

³ David Atwood Wasson (1823-1887), son of David and Nancy Littlefield Wasson of Brooksville, Maine, attended Bowdoin College but was suspended and withdrew. He then studied law and briefly practiced, but left to enter the Bangor Theological Seminary. He then became the minister of an orthodox congregation in Groveland, Massachusetts. Wasson, however, could not agree with his people on theology, so the church dismissed him after a short time. He established an independent church in Groveland but then moved to Worcester, where he substituted for a year for Thomas Wentworth Higginson in his independent church and then became his associate in 1856. Not long after, Wasson, in ill health, moved to Concord and rented the Thoreaus' previous home. In 1865 Wasson became the minister of Theodore Parker's Twenty-Eighth Congregational Society, but he stayed there only a little longer than a year. In 1851, he married Abigail A. Smith (1817-1904), daughter of Daniel and Abigail Jewett Smith of Newburyport. Wasson praised T's attention to and reverence for facts, which, Wasson claimed, "constituted the vital essence of his genius." Although T "did, it is true, limit himself to facts almost wholly inarticulate, having his blind side, and a very blind side indeed," he had "on another side such an eye, so sympathetic, so deep-seeing, as was given to few in his century, -indeed in some respects it was perhaps the best eye of the century" (*Beyond Concord: Selected Writings of David Atwood Wasson*, ed. Charles H. Foster [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1965], p. 227). Wasson wrote a poem in T's memory in April 1863 for the Boston *Commonwealth*.

⁴ In a Journal entry dated December 19, 1856, T had written:

Withered leaves! this is our frugal winter diet, instead of the juicy salads of spring and summer. I think I could write a lecture on "Dry Leaves," carrying a specimen of each kind that hangs on in the winter into the lecture-room as the heads of my discourse. They have long hung to some extent in vain, and

have not found their poet yet. The pine has been sung, but not, to my knowledge, the shrub oak. Most think it is useless. How glad I am that it serves no vulgar use! (*Journal* 1906, 9:191)

⁵ On December 30, T had begun surveying "The Lee Farm (so called) belonging to Davis Elwell" (http://www.concordlibrary.org/scollec/Thoreau_surveys/29a.htm). In *Journal* entries he records working on this project on December 30 and 31, 1856, and on January 1 and 4, 1857; in a January 4 entry he writes:

After spending four or five days surveying and drawing a plan incessantly, I especially feel the necessity of putting myself in communication with nature again, to recover my tone, to withdraw out of the wearying and unprofitable world of affairs. The things I have been doing have but a fleeting and accidental importance, however much men are immersed in them, and yield very little valuable fruit. (*Journal* 1906, 9:205)

⁶ T quotes from Ellery Channing, "Baker Farm": "Pan of unwrinkled cream, / May some poet dash thee in his churn!" (*The Woodman, and Other Poems*, p. 90).

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Editor's Note

This letter is addressed "H. G. O. Blake / Worcester / Mass" and postmarked "{illegible}ncord {illegible}".

Author's Alterations

their] there
Solitude!] ~-