

THOREAU IN HIS CORRESPONDENCE: “WORDS OF REFRESHMENT”

Robert N. Hudspeth, The Claremont Graduate University
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Thoreau the hermit—it’s an idea that won’t die. A recent article in the *New Yorker* trotted out yet again the image of Thoreau as a misanthropic, withdrawn loser. Perhaps even more tellingly, in a recent book review the *New York Times* a distinguished historian casually says that Thoreau left his hut on Walden pond to attend an abolition meeting in mid 1860. The fact that he lived at the Pond for only 26 months from 1845 to 1847 appears never to be remembered. At the very least, the existence of something like 630 letters to and from Thoreau belies the notion that he was a recluse. He was the member of a family, a professional writer and lecturer, a friend, and, after his father died, a pencil manufacturer. Every one of these roles was in part fulfilled by writing letters. As we all do, he offered himself in his several guises as it suited the occasion. To write to his mother was one thing, to demand an overdue payment for pencil lead was another. I have to make a standard caveat here: we know what we know because we have surviving letters, and letters were and are subject to the predations of time. Some letters are destroyed, some letters are simply lost. So while I’m willing to make some pretty sweeping statements about Thoreau in his correspondence, I am always haunted by

the specters of the letters that cannot now speak; the ghosts of correspondence that eludes us.

For my purposes today I propose to examine the correspondence between Thoreau and two friends, Waldo Emerson and Harrison Gray Otis Blake. I choose these two because they are men with whom Thoreau regularly corresponded—at least for a short time in the case of Emerson—and because the letters to these two let us see into Thoreau’s mind. I’m interested here in how the letters do more than merely convey information, for they are very specifically literary productions and ought to be read as such. In them there are complex questions about silence and language and about the ability of the mind to create.

I’ll begin with Emerson, who had moved to Concord in 1834, at which time Thoreau was at Harvard. While we have no idea when they met, Concord was a small town and Emerson was becoming well known as a lecturer, and, after the publication of *Nature* in 1836 (the year before Thoreau graduated from Harvard and moved back to Concord), he was controversial as a writer. However, at that time there was not much reason for them to write each other, for Thoreau lived just down the road from Emerson’s house on the Cambridge turnpike.

That is, until January 1843 when Emerson left Concord on a lecture trip, and Thoreau moved into the Emerson home as a handyman and all-purpose assistant to

Emerson's wife and their children. Then, in May of that year, the physical relationship reversed: Emerson was at home and Thoreau moved to Staten Island, as a tutor to Emerson's nephew until Thanksgiving 1843. Finally, four years later, he again moved into the Emerson home, and Waldo left for England on an extended lecture tour. As a result, the Thoreau-Emerson letters fall into three tidy units. After 1848 there are no really interesting letters between them. They never again were in the peculiar physical relationship that had one anchored in the Emerson house in Concord and the other one somewhere else.

To begin, the formalities of the letters give us one small insight into their friendship. Emerson frequently addressed Thoreau as "Dear Henry" and signed himself "affectionately R.W.E." For his part, Thoreau always addressed Emerson as "Dear Friend," and usually signed himself "your friend, H.D.T. or more simply, "Henry D. Thoreau." There was but one time, February 1848, that Thoreau began a letter "Dear Waldo." This is the single time in the existing letters that he addresses someone not in his immediate family by a Christian name. He was man to observe strict formalities.

In part, these 1843 letters are business letters between Emerson, the editor of the *Dial*, and Thoreau, both his trusted associate editor and a frequent contributor. Emerson depended on Thoreau to solicit contributions and even to edit them. "The

Dial for April,” wrote Emerson in February, “What elements shall compose it? What have you for me? What has Mr [Charles] Lane?” (*Correspondence 1*, p. 138). He goes on, “If (as he is a ready man) he offers us anything at once, I beg you to read it, & if you see & say decidedly that it is good for us you need not send it to me” (*Correspondence 1*, p. 139). There is here a solid trust between Thoreau and Emerson that underlies a broad spectrum of experience—personal, familial, and professional.

Thoreau knew that Emerson wanted news from Concord, and he was always ready with a report about their neighbors. Alcott, for instance, was a frequent topic in their letters. In January 1843 Alcott had been jailed because he did not pay his tax. Thoreau wrote a long, witty description of the aftermath that begins: “I suppose they have told you how near Mr A— went to the jail—but I can add a good anecdote to the rest. When Staples came to collect Mrs Ward’s taxes, My sister Helen asked him what he thought Mr A. meant—what his idea was—and he answered ‘I vum—I believe it was nothing but principle—for I never heard a man talk honester’—” (*Correspondence 1*, p. 124). That’s just the beginning, for Alcott’s release from jail coincided with a lecture at the Concord Lyceum. “There was a lecture on Peace,” says Thoreau, “by a Mr Spear (ought he not to be beaten into a ploughshare)” he quips (*Correspondence 1*, p. 124). At the end of the lecture Alcott and Charles

Lane appeared in the hall, both of whom proceeded immediately to address the audience. “I saw our hero’s head moving in the free air of the Universalist Church,” writes Thoreau, knowing that Emerson will enjoy not only the event but also Thoreau’s witty representation of it (*Correspondence 1*, p. 125). In fact, both men were good at describing their friends and acquaintances. The Transcendentalists watched each other very closely. In fact, their many descriptions of each other make an interesting if minor sub-genre.

The best of these early Thoreau letters to Emerson was written on February 12, 1843, when Thoreau said he would send Emerson “some thoughts, which I have lately relearned, as the latest public and private news” (*Correspondence 1*, p. 136). The entire letter is comprised of a series of Thoreau’s examination of the themes of trust, friendship, and silence, topics that concerned him his entire adult life. “Perhaps,” he says, “it is only essential to friendship that some vital trust should have been reposed by the one in the other. I feel addressed and probed even to the remote parts of my being when one nobly shows, even in trivial things, an implicit faith in me” (*Correspondence 1*, pp. 136-137). He understands that this trust is the reality that binds two individuals, “When one confides greatly in you, he will feel the roots of an equal trust fastening themselves in him” (*Correspondence 1*, p. 137). The subject, of course, is the friendship between him

and Emerson—it is the two of them about whom he is talking obliquely. “When such trust has been received or reposed, we dare not speak, hardly to see each other; our voices sound harsh and untrustworthy” (*Correspondence 1*, p. 137). Yes, the voice is untrustworthy, but the only way to convey this is with his voice, or rather with his pen. He writes what cannot be said adequately, knowing that he confronts an inherent paradox: he must speak what cannot be spoken. Inevitably, he turns to figures of speech: “We communicate like the burrows of foxes, in silence and darkness, under ground” (*Correspondence 1*, p. 138). This is a graceful, imaginative tribute to Emerson and a confession of Thoreau’s faith, for he ends the letter with a simple, one-sentence paragraph: “I believe these things” (*Correspondence 1*, p. 138).

Three months later Thoreau and Emerson traded places: Thoreau moved to Staten Island to live with Emerson’s brother William, who had engaged Thoreau to be his son’s tutor. Emerson was back home in Concord. This part of the correspondence lasted from May to November 1843, when Thoreau returned home for good. Now the letter-writing relationship changed: it is Thoreau who wants news from Concord, somewhat desperately wanting it, for he is clearly homesick; Emerson is now more at leisure to compose his letters, and he wants news from the New York area that he knows quite well. Thoreau knows he can depend on

satisfying Emerson's interest in mutual acquaintances while describing the Staten Island area, about which Emerson knows less well.

An early exchange is typical: Emerson writes first on May 21, asking yet again for contributions from Thoreau for the *Dial*, and he chats about Ellery Channing, Hawthorne, Charles Lane, and Alcott. It's business and local news alone. Thoreau's response more extensive and probing. He begins with comments on men whom he knows Emerson values, such as Henry James, Sr. About him, Thoreau says that to meet him "makes humanity seem more erect and respectable. I never was more kindly and faithfully catechised. It made me respect myself more to be thought worthy of such sincere questions" (*Correspondence 1*, p. 179). Thoreau doubts that James will either write or speak very "inspiring," but he "has naturalized and humanized New York for me" (*Correspondence 1*, p. 179). Emerson, after all, knew James and had formed his own assessment of him well before Thoreau met him. There's not much Thoreau can tell him that he does not already know. What would interest him (and Thoreau knew this) is what Thoreau thought of James; it is Thoreau who is being described for Emerson; it is Thoreau's mind and judgment that is on display. Emerson learns more about him than about Henry James, Sr.

A similar reading is inherent in Thoreau's description of New York City. In

this letter he says “I don’t like the city better the more I see it, but worse. I am ashamed of my eyes that behold it. It is a thousand times meaner than I could have imagined. It will be something to hate that’s the advantage it will be to me. . . . The pigs in the streets are the most respectable portion of the population”

(*Correspondence 1*, p. 181). This is not information, this is performance. Thoreau is writing for Emerson’s delight. He is using a letter to express an opinion, sure enough, but he is making literature out of letter writing, for it is an early example of a defining trait in Thoreau’s prose: paradox (useful hatred and respectable pigs). Moreover, it uses a second, equally defining technique, that of exaggeration. The same principle informs the passage late in *Walden* about “extra-vagance,” and it is the source both of extreme satisfaction to some readers and of extreme distaste in other readers. Often, the path to “truth” for Thoreau is by way of overstatement.

At Thanksgiving Thoreau returned home to Concord. It was five years until the men were again separated and thus again writing to each other. In November 1847 Emerson left for England on a lecture tour and Thoreau again moved into the Emerson home in Concord. He begins the new correspondence with a long, full, often imaginative letter, with a comment on letter writing: “I have almost never written letters in my life, yet I think I can write as good ones as I frequently see” (*Correspondence 1*, p. 313). He was right, of course, and the letter in which it is

written is a good example. He is playful, while being earnest: “This world,” he says, “is a cow that is hard to milk— Life does not come so easy—and ah! how thinly it is watered ere we get it” (*Correspondence 1*, p. 313). As he does so often, Thoreau turns to figures of speech and to verbal play. The cow, a natural image for these small town writers, is an apt choice to express an opinion about life’s hardness. But to me the play is more important than the idea.

Thoreau’s command of wit was masterful. He could joke about others, but he could turn his wit back on himself, as he does in this letter. Since Emerson was abroad, Thoreau knew that letters to him would be read by no one else (unlike the ones Emerson was sending him). That let Thoreau be candid about what must have been a painful experience—he had received a marriage proposal! “I have had a tragic correspondence,” he wrote to Emerson, “for the most part all on one side, with Miss Ford. She did really wish to—I hesitate to write—marry me—that is the way they spell it. Of course I did not write a deliberate answer—how could I deliberate upon it? I sent back as distinct a *No*, as I have learned to pronounce after considerable practice, and I trust that this *No* has succeeded.” And he does not stop there, for he launches into a vivid image: “Indeed I wished that it might burst like hollow shot after it had struck and buried itself, and make itself felt there. *There was no other way*. I really had anticipated no such foe as this in my career”

(*Correspondence 1*, p. 316). His discomfort stands out starkly through the image. The letter concludes: “So Good-bye and a truce to all joking” (*Correspondence 1*, p. 318). But both he and Emerson knew that the truce would not hold. “Joking,” however, is a poor term for the irony, for the image making, and metaphor making that characterizes Thoreau’s best letters. Emerson called them “wonderful refreshment,” which they surely were (*Correspondence 1*, p. 354).

However, at the very end of this correspondence we can see an emerging independence in Thoreau. In March 1848 Emerson says to Thoreau: “It is a pity, however, that you should not see this England, with its indiscribable material superiorities of every kind; the just confidence which immense successes of all sorts have generated in the Englishman that he can do everything.” “I admire the English,” he goes on, “I think never more than when I meet Americans. . . . Great is the self respect of Mr Bull” (*Correspondence 1*, p. 354). Thoreau would have none of it. In his final letter directed to England, he first gives Emerson a full budget of local news in fine detail and then, unbidden, responds to something Emerson had written his wife about a proposal to establish a trans-Atlantic literary journal. “Who,” Thoreau asks, “has any desire to split himself any further up by straddling the Atlantic? We are extremities enough already. There is danger of one’s straddling so far that he can never recover an upright position”

(*Correspondence 1*, p. 379).

There is here a new, sharp tone in Thoreau's letter. He is challenging Emerson in a way he has not before done. He goes on at length about his objections to communal efforts, the result of which is to merge friendship and antagonism, a psychological position that he had already laid out for Emerson and to which I will return momentarily. After this 1848 letter was finished but not yet mailed, Thoreau added a postscript that shows that he suspected he might have overstepped a line, as he finds a suitably local figure of speech to offer: "I trust however that the most prosaic Concord news acquires a certain value by the time it reaches London, as Concord cranberries have done. But don't think that these berries have soured by the way, as did the first receives— They are naturally harsh and sour. Yet I think that I could listen kindly and without selfishness to men's projected enterprises if they were not too easy.—if they were struggles not unto death but even unto life" (*Correspondence 1*, p. 380). Thoreau had in this letter satisfied Emerson's need to hear from Concord, to have the minutiae of their daily life, but he also satisfies a growing need of his own to analyze and judge the life, both literary and physical, that he, Henry Thoreau, was living in and around Concord. On that note the substantive correspondence between Thoreau and Emerson ended when Emerson returned to Concord.

Of their correspondence we may draw three thematic conclusions about Thoreau the letter writer. First, the letters were self-conscious performances. He was entertaining Emerson through his verbal portraits of individuals, through his exaggerations, and through his figures of speech; second, that figurative speech itself is the center of the writing. Like Emerson himself, Thoreau speaks in figures; finally, friendship is both what is acted out in the letters and is at times the overt subject. This is friendship evolving before our very eyes.

In the surviving letters, it is primarily Emerson to whom Thoreau can exercise his wit. There is an early imaginative letter to his brother John in which he adopts the persona of an Indian; he wrote one letter in Latin to his sister Helen, when she was teaching Latin, but it is to Emerson that the full flow of Thoreau's verbal wit emerges. Quite clearly both he and Emerson are performing for each other. Part of what each man craved (and could, in turn, deliver) was verbal entertainment. They are men of words, and words mattered to them on several levels—as the vehicle for serious thought, as descriptions of places and men, and as enjoyment of verbal creativity. For instance, to describe his meeting with John O'Sullivan, the editor of the *Democratic Review*, Thoreau turns out an aphorism: “We had nothing to say to one another, and therefore we said a great deal” (*Correspondence 1*, p. 124).

Now, play is all to the good, and we ought to enjoy verbal wit when we find it, for it's hard enough to create, and the larger world of politics and business affairs seems hell-bent on destroying imaginative language. But there is a deeper level to figures of speech that needs some consideration. Take the metaphor I have already quoted about friends who "communicate like the burrows of foxes, in silence and darkness, underground" (*Correspondence 1*, p. 138). Thoreau's very point is that language is inadequate, that true friends cannot speak baldly because ordinary language is not a one-to-one representation of reality. Instead of saying abstractly "We don't understand each other because language is inadequate," Thoreau instead offers the concrete metaphor that images foxes and "silence and darkness." The metaphor conjures a specific physical reality that stands in for an abstraction. We shall have occasion to look further into this with the letters to Harrison Blake, but we see it emerging first in the letters to Emerson. Thoreau is seldom so imagistic and metaphoric with any other correspondent than these two.

A startling instance of his verbal play, this time as paradox, came in a July 8, 1843 letter from Thoreau to Waldo and Lidian Emerson. At the end of an extended conceit in which he imagines Concord situated in Greek fable, he suddenly says "But know, my friends, that I a good deal hate you all in my most private thought" (*Correspondence 1*, p. 202). It comes from nowhere and leads to nothing. It sounds

bizarre to our ears, but the Emersons were aware of the habit of conflating hatred and love, for it was a common rhetorical move among some of their literary friends, and they knew Thoreau to be fond of paradoxes as a way of signaling a reality that defied common language. “Friendship” is one of those abstractions that so moved the Transcendentalists in their writing. They were conscious of being enmeshed in a tension between their need for privacy and isolation and their need of other people. Their primary topic was “self” (yet another abstraction) and its “fulfillment” (another abstraction), but they recognized both the need for some human contact and the significant satisfactions that such contact offered.

Thoreau wrote an entire letter to Emerson on the subject on February 12, 1843 (I have already quoted a bit of it on the subject of “trust”). In the letter Thoreau struggles to come to terms with the contradictions he finds (such as the need for silence between friends, as he obliterates silence with his words, as when “we hate the kindness which we understand,” as when “nothing sensible passes between” friends). The letter is not an essay with a thesis and a demonstration of logical connections: it is a series of perceptions about trust, about the incommunicability of friendship, about friendship’s tenuousness, and about its divine origins. Thoreau is writing a testament of faith to Emerson in a letter devoid of the customary details of daily life. We should keep in mind that this letter on

friendship is not about an abstraction; it is about the specific relationship between Thoreau and Emerson. As will be true with the letters to Blake, Thoreau's letters to Emerson are connections with a specific person. They are about a specific reality.

Thoreau himself has provided me with the perfect transition, for at the end of the very last letter to Emerson under our consideration he says "I have had earnest letters from H. G. O. Blake" (*Correspondence 1*, p. 380). Exactly as his significant correspondence with Emerson ends he begins the most interesting correspondence of his career.

Harrison Gray Otis Blake is something of a shadowy figure. Were it not for the letters Thoreau wrote him he would be lost to history. Born in Worcester in 1816, Blake graduated from Harvard in 1835 and from the Divinity School in 1838 (he was one of the three-student committee that invited Emerson to deliver his famous address to the divinity students in that year). However, instead of becoming a minister, Blake became a teacher in a number of schools in Eastern and central Massachusetts. Like so many of his contemporaries, he was deeply affected by Emerson. Blake may well have known Thoreau slightly during their overlapping years in Cambridge, but we do know that by 1838 they had been introduced by Emerson. Blake settled in his native Worcester. He first wrote Thoreau in the spring of 1848, initiating a correspondence that Thoreau pursued

the rest of his life. We have fifty two surviving letters to Blake, but, frustratingly all of Blake's letters to Thoreau save for the published fragment of his first one have disappeared.

The one surviving Blake letter lets us see why he made himself attractive to Thoreau. In the spring of 1848 Blake had been in Concord and had talked with Thoreau. In the conversation, Blake had asked Thoreau if he never was in need of friends, to which Thoreau replied "No, I am nothing." This so impressed Blake that he said he "would know of that soul," that he "would be roused by its words to a truer and purer life." "Speak to me," he says, "as you are prompted" (*Correspondence 1*, pp. 357, 358). In saying these things, Blake is offering himself as a willing audience and a man to be trusted; he makes it very clear that if Thoreau will but "speak," Blake will hear.

It is reasonable, I think, to assume that Thoreau's reply on March 27, 1848, set the pattern for his subsequent relationship with Blake: he specifically responds to comments Blake makes, showing that his own letter is part of a true conversation. Thoreau's ideas are not made in a vacuum. His ideas emerge from specific subjects Blake has named as important to him: the need for companions, simplicity, self-abnegation, and one's relation to God. We ought always to read Thoreau's letters with the thought in mind that they originally depended on Blake;

they were written to a real, receptive listener, and they were written because of that listener. As Thoreau says almost immediately, the fact that Blake has been a such a reader confirms “that it is not in vain that man speaks to man” (*Correspondence 1*, p. 359). Somewhat later, Thoreau makes a fundamental claim that underlies his correspondence with Blake: “What can be expressed in words can be expressed in life” (*Correspondence 1*, p. 361). If silence was an important theme in the Emerson letters, language is central to Thoreau’s letters to Blake, not only in what they say, but how they say it. Moreover, we should read them with a memory that Thoreau has a real faith in the connection between language and human activity.

Thoreau’s style in this first letter sets the pattern that will persist: he is given to imperative statements (“Let nothing come between you and the light” [*Correspondence 1*, p. 362], for instance); he asks rhetorical questions, the answer to which should, he implies to Blake, be obvious, and if they are not, something is wrong: “If a man constantly aspires, is he not elevated?” (*Correspondence 1*, p. 361). There is little or no argument in the letter. It is a series of pronouncements that have a thematic unity but which often come as spur-of-the-moment sentences. They have an aphoristic quality so very typical of his best writing: “If you would convince a man that he does wrong—do right” (*Correspondence 1*, p. 362).

The most important part of Thoreau’s style in these and subsequent letters is

his consistent use of figurative language: metaphors, symbolic images, parable-like narratives that dominate the letters to Blake. Unlike the letters to Emerson, these letters seldom or never deal with daily life per se. Instead, Thoreau uses ordinary life concretely in figures of speech. For example, Blake had written that Thoreau wanted to “sunder yourself from society, from the spell of institutions, customs, conventionalities, that you may lead a fresh, simple life with God. Instead of breathing a new life into the old forms, you would have a new life without and within” (*Correspondence 1*, p. 358). Thoreau answers with an elaborate metaphor of a thrush building a nest over a cuckoo’s. Instead of raising the eggs of both birds (that is the conventional life and a better one), the thrush should “[d]estroy the cuckoo’s egg, or build a new nest” (*Correspondence 1*, p. 360). That comprises an absolutist position: don’t compromise, don’t try to have it both ways. Either lead a cuckoo’s life or lead a better one. To Blake’s straightforward question, Thoreau answers with a figure of speech because he understands that more prosaic language is simply not adequate to the task. Thoreau clearly predated Emily Dickinson’s injunction to “Tell all the truth / But tell it slant.”

It’s impossible for me to do justice to the fifty-two letters Thoreau wrote to Blake, for there is simply too much there, but I can at least try to give you a sense of what they are. (And let me say that not all of the fifty-two are intellectually

ambitious.) Twenty of them are “business” letters, mostly about arranging Thoreau’s lectures in Worcester. Still, thirty-two of the letters are substantive. First, I find the overall theme to be best expressed as “how to live.” The letters are, to my reading, ethical. I understand my late friend Brad Dean’s insistence that they are the letters of a “spiritual seeker,” and he’s not at all wrong to highlight that part of their content. But I do find Thoreau’s larger theme to be what I would judge ethical. Images of making, of building, of work abound in the letters and they serve to answer the question “How shall I live?” “Will you live,” Thoreau asks Blake, “or will you be embalmed” (*Correspondence 2*, p. 55). Right at the end of the correspondence, in May 1860, Thoreau observes “Men & boys are learning all kinds of trades but how to make *men* of themselves” (*Correspondence 1958*, p. 578). He returns to it a few paragraphs later: “The principal, the only thing a man makes is his condition, or fate” (*Correspondence 1958*, p. 579)

The question of “work” is often on Thoreau’s mind. At one point Blake apparently has remarked on how difficult he has found it to live more satisfactorily. In response, Thoreau says “True, a man cannot lift himself by his own waist-bands, 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 waist-bands, being already within himself” (*Correspondence 2*, p. 183).

For Thoreau, true work depended on an ability to cultivate a truer perception of reality, to separate the wheat from the chaff, to use his own frequent image. “I would fain lay the most stress forever on that which is the most important—imports the most to me—though it were only (what it is likely to be) a vibration in the air. . . . I should be prompted to tell men not so much how to get their wheat bread cheaper—as of the bread of life compared with which *that* is bran. Let a man only taste these loaves and he becomes a skilful economist at once” (*Correspondence 2*, p. 348). And it is here that we approach a deep reality in the Blake letters, for the whole question of *why* one should strive so intensely, should reject so completely the common life around us, should be so fiercely committed to experimenting remains to be answered. That answer lies in the fact that Thoreau shows himself in these letters to be an absolute Idealist, a man for whom the most meaningful “reality” is not corporeal but internal, a man for whom the mind, not the body is the gateway to the celestial kingdom (his image, borrowed from Bunyan). “Do you,” he asks Blake, “separate distinctly enough the support of your body—from that of your essence?” (*Correspondence 2*, p. 59). It is essences that most concern Thoreau. It’s remarkable that he persistently yokes the language of work with the language of being.

In a characteristically elaborate conceit, Thoreau at one point says to Blake,

“It is easy enough to maintain a family, or a state, but it is hard to maintain these children of your brain (or say, rather, these guests that trust to enjoy your hospitality), they make such great demands; and yet, he who does only the former, and loses the power to *think* originally, or as only he ever can, fails miserably. Keep up the fires of thought, and all will go well” (*Correspondence* 1958, p. 558).

We can see these fires burning most warmly in 1850, when Thoreau writes an extraordinary meditation to Blake. Thoreau had just been to Fire Island to supervise the recovery of the bodies and goods of Margaret Fuller and her family, all of whom died in a stormy shipwreck. Thoreau had spent days tracking down Fuller’s belongings that had been pillaged by thieves who made a living by plundering wrecks in the area. It was a time of death and crime that took Thoreau among the most sordid of human experiences. Yet he used the experience to reassure himself about the seen and the unseen (and I would pause a moment to note that it was to Blake that he wrote this, not to Emerson, who had sent Thoreau to Fire Island in the first place); and I would also note that he first drafted a version of it in his Journal. It was not a suddenly-appearing idea; he had thought this one through. In what I think the best moment in all of Thoreau’s correspondence, he says this to Blake: “I find that actual events, notwithstanding the singular prominence which we all allow them, are far less real than the creations of my

imagination. They are truly visionary and insignificant—all that we commonly call life & death—and affect me less than my dreams. This petty stream which from time to time swells & carries away the mills and bridges of our habitual life—and that mightier stream or ocean on which we securely float—what makes the difference between them?” (*Correspondence 2*, p. 77). That in itself is a handsome, metaphorically rich, confession of faith, one made out of an immediate experience of human destitution. Thoreau goes on to create a wonderful and lasting figure of speech: “I have,” he says, “in my pocket a button which I ripped off the coat of the Marquis of Ossoli on the sea-shore the other day. Held up it intercepts the light—an actual button—and yet all the life it is connected with is less substantial to me, and interests me less, than my faintest dream. Our thoughts are the epochs in our lives, all else is but as a journal of the winds that blew while we were here”

(*Correspondence 2*, pp. 77-78). This is the perception that Thoreau struggles to make concrete throughout the Blake correspondence. How shall we attain that reality contained in our “thoughts”? How shall we distinguish between the real and the false? At one level, this is deeply personal. It is a confession made for an adequate reader, that is for Blake, not for an anonymous “public.” He and Blake are engaged in what Marilynne Robinson calls “preaching,” which she defines as “the extraordinary moment when someone attempts to speak in good faith, about

something that matters, to people who attempt to listen in good faith” (*Givenness*, p. 146).

As an example of his figurative language, let me quote a rich mountain passage: “I keep a mountain anchored off eastward a little way, which I ascend in my dreams both awake and asleep. Its broad base spreads over a village or two, which do not know it; neither does it know them, nor do I when I ascend it. I can see its general outline as plainly now in my mind as that of Wachusett. I do not invent in the least, but state exactly what I see. I find that I go up it when I am light-footed and earnest. It ever smokes like an altar with its sacrifice. I am not aware that a single villager frequents it or knows of it. I keep this mountain to ride instead of a horse” (*Correspondence* 1958, p. 498). Throughout his writing, mountains are important (think of his experiences on Mt. Ktaadn); he frequently visited Mt. Monadnock, Mt. Wachusett, and the mountain ranges in New Hampshire. The experience of climbing was deeply symbolic and meaningful for Thoreau. They fed his imagination. “It is after we get home,” he tells Blake, “that we really go over the mountain, if ever. What did the mountain say? What did the mountain do?” (*Correspondence* 1958, p. 498). There are connotations surrounding mountain imagery: ascension, withdrawal from the lower life, and remoteness, just to name the most obvious. “I suppose,” says Thoreau, “that I feel

the same awe when on the summits that many do on entering a church”

(*Correspondence* 1958, p. 497).

All of this occurs in letters and it occurs to Blake. But why? Why not just write all of this in his journal, for journal-keeping was a major activity in Thoreau’s life? After all, a letter sent is a letter gone. It can’t be reused in an essay or lecture. It surely was intellectual effort to write these dense, sometimes convoluted but always deeply felt letters to Harry Blake. There is one obvious answer: the letters are unmediated. No editor stands between the two men. Then, too, there is little time between the writing and the reading of a letter. But mostly, the letters are genuine connections between two specific beings. Not only that, they are addressed to the best of their being. Early on, in 1849, he begins a letter to Blake by saying “I feel that I am unworthy to have received or to answer” Blake’s letters, “though they are addressed, as I would have them to the ideal of me It behoves me, if I would reply, to speak out of the rarest part of myself” (*Correspondence* 2, p. 42). Blake has shown Thoreau that he cares only for what Thoreau cares most for: “the rarest part of myself,” that is, his soul, or spirit, or self—words really do fail here to name that reality of pure innerness. The two men were trying something unusual and awfully difficult—to talk past the ordinariness of immediate living to the unpronounceable absolute of being. Thoreau is trying to

put into words what Marilynne Robinson calls “a vision of reality that incorporates into the nature of things the intuition that Being has a greater life than we see with our eyes and touch with our hands” (*Givenness*, p. 150). Thoreau and Blake write intensely about ultimate matters, free from the clutter of daily life. It is telling that in his letters to Blake Thoreau never mentions Blake’s wife (whom Thoreau knew). The letters lack the conventional niceties that Thoreau habitually observed with other correspondents.

And so it is that the letters are saturated with figures of speech.

Paradoxically, to approach that “Being” beyond sight and touch, Thoreau turns to the language of sight and touch. That, to me, is the most striking quality of the letters, more, almost, than the intensity of Thoreau’s approach to Blake. The letter from which I just quoted ends with an extended, seven-paragraph long conceit built on New England maple sugar gathering. Thoreau imaginatively connects the gathering and boiling of the sap to make sugar to the process of refining life to its essential sweetness. “Heaven,” Thoreau says, “will be propitious” to the farmer of the soul. One thinks when reading Thoreau in all his writings that everything in the physical world can be converted by the imagination into spirit. Thoreau can move from a concrete *this* to an abstract *that*. He can at least imagine that pure reality, which is the necessary step to realizing it. He unites a power of observation with a

power of image making in language. His vocation to think into language, that is to write.

A letter to Blake was an occasion for making imaginative language, and that, for Thoreau, was one important step to defend against a meaningless existence. To him life depended on imagination, and language was its raw material. In an important way, to write well was to create one's self. He recognized that silence was natural, that it was the metaphysical void that all individuals inherit. At the same time he recognized the imaginative power of language to make constructive war on that silence. One does not, however, make language to speak into the silent void of nature, one makes language to connect with someone else to their mutual benefit. Thoreau was quick to acknowledge to Blake how much it meant to have a listener with whom he could deeply sympathize: "I know that the nature toward which I launch these sounds is so rich that it will modulate anew and wonderfully improve my rudest strain" (*Correspondence 2*, p. 44). This simple statement may well be the most accurate definition of what the Blake letters meant to Thoreau, who, theoretically, could have spent his life writing his journal and never publishing a word. But instead, he wrote for audiences, both wide and narrow, but audiences still. Hermits don't write letters; Thoreau did. And in those letters we find him making his way toward a richer life through the imagination expressed in

language.

The mind matters: **how** we think, **what** we think, have results. In the words of the philosopher William Gass, “to live some fictions, rather than others, improves our chances; enriches, elevates, and regulates life; allows us to [in Emerson’s words’] ‘work at a pitch above’ our last height.” I think Thoreau would wholly accept William James’s claim that we have capacities to answer the questions that matter most to us. “Human motives,” James writes, “sharpen all our questions; human satisfactions lurk in our answers; all our formulas have a human twist.” In his letters, Thoreau worked hard to understand his motives, and we find results specially in thirty-two of the letters to Blake. Thoreau loved to exaggerate, and he tempts his critics into following him, so I need to be clear: good as they are, the Blake letters are not all of Thoreau—they lack the intense observation of and thought about nature that fundamentally characterizes his life and writing. But still, the Blake letters *are* remarkable.

As I noted with mountains, space was symbolic for Thoreau, and the West was quite meaningful. In his essay “Walking” he says, “When I go out of the house for a walk, uncertain as yet whither I will bend my steps, and submit myself to my instinct to decide for me, I find, strange and whimsical as it may seem, that I finally and inevitably settle southwest.” Thoreau had to write his letters eastward

when Emerson was in England. As good as they are, the letters are symbolically going in the wrong direction. On the other hand, Worcester, Massachusetts is thirty-six miles *southwest* of Concord. Thus, Thoreau was receiving challenges that Blake sent from the west, and he spoke back to the west in his answers. This symbolizes, in Thoreau's own terms, the attempt the two men made to realize "the west" as imaginative purity. For what it's worth we, here at the Huntington Library, are 3,000 miles from Concord—and yes, we are southwest of the town. One hopes that we are as faithful listeners as was Harrison Blake.

Short Titles

- Correspondence 1* *The Correspondence of Henry D. Thoreau, Volume 1: 1834-1848*, ed. Robert N. Hudspeth (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013)
- Correspondence 2* *The Correspondence of Henry D. Thoreau, Volume 2: 1849-1856*, ed. Robert N. Hudspeth, with Elizabeth Hall Witherell and Lihong Xie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018)
- Correspondence 1958* *The Correspondence of Henry David Thoreau*, ed. Walter Harding and Carl Bode (New York: New York University Press, 1958)
- Givenness* Marilynne Robinson, *The Givenness of Things* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2015)