

Editor's Notes

A full draft of this letter survives on three leaves, two at MCo-SC and one at VtMiM. The leaf at VtMiM is the source for an emendation.

Blake] *FL 1894*; B-- *in copy-text*

Whitman] *FL 1894*; W-- *in copy-text*

In ... writer-] *MS draft (VtMiM, aberms.thoreauhd.1856.11.19)*; lacking *in copy-text, FL 1894, and FL 1906*

Substantive Variants

The text of this letter is based on a published source, *LVP 1865*; potentially authoritative substantive variants in *FL 1894* and *FL 1906* are reported below.

Eagleswood, ... 1856.] *in copy-text*; Eagleswood, N. J., November 19, 1856. *in FL 1894 and FL 1906*

shall] *in copy-text*; should *in FL 1906*

Sunday] *in copy-text*; Saturday *in FL 1894 and FL 1906*

To Harrison Gray Otis Blake

December 6 and 7, 1856

Concord Dec 6 '56^a

Mr Blake,

What is wanting above is merely an engraving of Eagleswood, which I have used.¹ I trust that you got a note from me at Eagleswood about a fortnight ago. I passed thro' Worcester^a on the morning of the 25th of November, and spent several hours (from 3.30 to 6.20) in the travellers' room at the Depot, as in a dream, it now seems. As the first Nashua train unexpectedly connected with the first from Fitchburg, I did not spend the forenoon with you, as I had anticipated, on account of baggage &c- If it had been a reasonable hour I should have seen you, i.e. if you had not been gone to a horse-race. But think of making a call at half past three in the morning! (Would it not have implied a 3 o'clock in the morning courage in both you & me?)² As it were ignoring the fact that mankind are really not at home-are not out, but so deeply in that they cannot be seen-nearly half their hours at this season of the

year. I walked up & down the Main Street at half past 5 in the dark, and paused long in front of Brown's store³ trying to distinguish its features; considering whether I might safely leave his "Putnam"⁴ in the door handle, but concluded not to risk it. Meanwhile a watchman (?) seemed to be watching me, & I moved off. Took another turn round there, a little later-, and had^a the very earliest offer of the Transcript⁵ from an urchin behind, whom I actually could not see, it was so dark.- So I withdrew, wondering if you & B. would know that I had been there. You little dream who is occupying Worcester when you are all asleep. Several things occurred then that night, which I will venture to say were not put into the Transcript. A cat caught a mouse at the Depot^a, & gave it to her kitten to play with. So that world-famous tragedy goes on by night as well as by day, & nature is *emphatically* wrong. Also I saw a young Irishman^e kneel before his mother, as if in prayer, while she wiped a cinder out of his eye with her tongue; and I found that it was never too late (or early?) to learn something.- These things transpired while you & B. were, to all practical purposes, no where, & good for *nothing*-not even for society,-not for horse-races,-nor the taking back of a P. Mag. It is true, I might have recalled you to life, but it would have been a cruel act, considering the kind of life you would have come back to.

However, I would fain write to you now by broad daylight, and report to you some of my life, such as it is, and recall you to your life, which is not always lived by you, even by day light.

Blake! Blake! are you awake? Are you aware what an ever-glorious morning this is?- What long expected never to be repeated opportunity is now offered to get life & knowledge?

For my part I am trying to wake up,-to wring slumber out of my pores;- For, generally, I take events as unconcernedly as a fence post,-absorb wet & cold like it, and

am pleasantly tickled with lichens slowly spreading over me. Could I not be content then to be a cedar post, which lasts 25 years? Would I not rather be that than the farmer that set it? or he that preaches to that farmer-?-& go to the heaven of posts at last? I think I should like^a that as well as any would like it. But I should not care if I sprouted into a living tree, put forth leaves & flowers, & bore fruit.

I am grateful for what I am & have. My thanksgiving is perpetual. It is surprising how contented one can be with nothing definite-only a sense of existence- Well anything for variety. I am ready to try this for the next 10000 years, & exhaust it. How sweet to think of! my extremities well charred, and my intellectual part too, so that there is no danger of worm or rot for a long while. My breath is sweet to me. O how I laugh when I think of my vague indefinite riches- No run on my bank can drain it-for my wealth is not possession but enjoyment.

What are all these years made for? And now another winter come, so much like the last? Cant we satisfy the beggars once for all?

Have you got in your wood for this winter? What else have you got in? Of what use a great fire on the hearth & a confounded little fire in the heart? Are you prepared to make a decisive campaign-to pay for your costly tuition-to pay for the suns of past summers-for happiness & unhappiness lavished upon you?

Does not Time^a go by swifter than the swiftest equine trotter or racker?⁶

Stir up Brown- Remind^a him of his duties, which outrun the date & span of Worcester's years past & to come. Tell him to be sure that he is on the Main Street, however narrow it may be-& to have a lit sign, visible by night as well as by day.

Are they not patient waiters-they who wait for us?⁷ But even they shall not be losers.

Dec. 7th

That Walt Whitman, of whom I wrote to you, is the most

interesting fact to me at present. I have just read his 2nd edition (which he gave me)⁸ and it has done me more good than any reading for a long time. Perhaps I remember best the poem of Walt Whitman An American & the Sun Down Poem⁻⁹ There are 2 or 3 pieces in the book which are disagreeable, to say the least, simply sensual. He does not celebrate love at all- It is as if the beasts spoke. I think that men have not been ashamed of themselves without reason. No doubt, there have always been dens where such deeds were unblushingly recited, and it is no merit to compete with their inhabitants. But even on this side, he has spoken more truth than any American or modern that I know. I have found his poem exhilarating-encouraging. As for its sensuality,-& it may turn out to be less sensual than it appears-I do not so much wish that those parts were not written, as that men & women were so pure that they could read them without harm, that is without understanding them. One woman told me that no woman could read it-as if a man could read what a woman could not. Of course Walt Whitman can communicate to us no experience, and if we are shocked,^a whose experience is it that we are reminded of?

On the whole it sounds to me very brave & American after whatever deductions. I do not believe that all the sermons so called that have been preached in this land put together are equal to it for preaching-

We ought to rejoice greatly in him. He occasionally suggests something a little more than human. You can't confound him with the other inhabitants of Brooklyn or New York. How they must shudder when they read him! He is awefully good.

To be sure I^a sometimes feel a little imposed on- By his heartiness & broad generalities he puts me into a liberal frame of mind prepared to see wonders¹⁰-as it were sets me upon a hill or in the midst of a plain-stirs me well up, and then-throws in a thousand of brick. Though rude & sometimes ineffectual, it is a great primitive poem-an

alarum or trumpet note ringing through the American Camp. Wonderfully like the orientals too, considering that when I asked him if he had read them he answered "No! tell me about them."

I did not get far in conversation with him—two more being present, and among the few things which I chanced to say, I remember that one was, in answer to him as representing America, that I did not think much of America or of politics & so on—Which may have been somewhat of a damper to him.

Since I have seen him I find that I am not disturbed by any brag or egoism in his book. He may turn out the least of a braggart of all, having a better right to be confident.

He is a great fellow—

H. D. T.

Correspondent: See p. 22.

¹ T wrote the first eight pages of this letter, 486.18 to 490.1 ("Concord Dec 6 '56 . . . sometimes ineffectual, it is"), on two folios of Eagleswood letterhead, which consisted of a landscape enclosed in an oval with the line, "Eagleswood, Perth Amboy, N. J." centered under the oval. He removed only the image from the first folio; from the second folio he removed both the image and "Eagleswood, Perth Amboy, N. J.," noting at the top of the page "Eagleswood again all cut off!" He attached the strip he removed to an otherwise blank page of manuscript volume 22 of his Journal (NNPM, MA 1302:28); it is preceded and followed by an entry for October 26. See http://thoreau.library.ucsb.edu/writings_journals_pdfs/J11TMS22.pdf, p. 46, and "To Harrison Gray Otis Blake, December 6 and 7, 1856," following p. 000.

² T modifies a well-known quotation by Napoleon recorded in Emmanuel-Auguste-Dieudonné, comte de Las Cases, *Memorial de Sainte Hélène: Journal of the Private Life and Conversations of the Emperor Napoleon at Saint Helena*, 1:10: "As to moral courage, I have very rarely met with *the two o'clock in the morning kind*. I mean, unprepared courage, that which is necessary on an unexpected occasion, and which, in spite of the most unforeseen events, leaves full freedom of judgment and decision." Emerson had quoted this saying in the essay on Napoleon included in *Representative Men*, p. 233. In "Walking," T writes, "Buonaparte may

talk of the 3 o'clock in the morning courage, but it is nothing to the courage which can sit down cheerfully at this hour in the afternoon over against one's self whom you have known all the morning,—to starve out a garrison to whom you are bound by such strong ties of sympathy" (*Excursions* 2007, p. 188).

³ Theophilus Brown was part-owner of a clothing store in Worcester.

⁴ The September 1856 issue of *Putnam's Monthly* printed Higginson's account of a trip to Mt. Katahdin that he and Brown had made. It was probably this issue that T was returning.

⁵ The *Worcester Transcript*, a Whig paper, began publication in 1851.

⁶ A "racker" is a full-stride racehorse, as opposed to a trotter.

⁷ T may allude here to the concluding lines of Whitman's "Sun-Down Poem," from the second edition of *Leaves of Grass* (1856), which he mentions later in the letter:

You have waited, you always wait, you dumb beautiful ministers!
you novices!

We receive you with free sense at last, and are insatiate henceforward,

Not you any more shall be able to foil us, or withhold yourselves from us,

We use you, and do not cast you aside—we plant you permanently within us,

We fathom you not—we love you—there is perfection in you also,
You furnish your parts toward eternity,

Great or small, you furnish your parts toward the soul. (p. 222)

⁸ As T reported to Blake in his November 19 letter, he and Alcott had visited Whitman (see p. 484).

⁹ The text of "Poem of Walt Whitman, an American" is the first of twelve untitled poems in the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, published in 1855. The poem had this title only in the second, 1856 edition. In the three editions published after 1856, it is titled "Walt Whitman," and in the 1881-1882 and 1891-1892 editions it is "Song of Myself."

Later versions of "The Sun-Down Poem," which was first published in the 1856 edition, are titled "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry."

¹⁰ T later used a version of this expression in "An Address on the Succession of Forest Trees": "Though I do not believe that a plant will spring up where no seed has been, I have great faith in a seed—a, to me, equally mysterious origin for it. Convince me that you have a seed there, and I am prepared to expect wonders" (*Excursions* 2007, pp. 181-182).

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

Published: *LVP* 1865, 143-148; *Life* 1890, 160-161; *FL* 1894, 341-347; *Life* 1896, 118; *T: Home* 1902, 310, 311; *FL* 1906, 292-296; *Life of HDT* 1917, 385, 386; *Cor* 1958, 442-445; *Spiritual Seeker* 2004, 140-144

Editor's Notes

This letter is addressed "H. G. O. Blake / Worcester / Mass." and postmarked "Concord Mass. Dec 8".

Within this letter T makes several references to his stationery, which is letterhead from Eagleswood, where he had spent a month surveying for Marcus Spring. In the first sentence of the letter he indicates that he trimmed an engraving off the top of the leaf. Writing vertically on manuscript p. 3 he comments about a browned spot, "Left on the stove too long." (Presumably he was drying the ink.) On manuscript p. 5, above the first line on that page, he writes "Eagleswood again all cut off!"

Irishman] *PE*; Irish- / man *in MS*

Author's Alterations

Concord Dec 6 '56] Eagleswood, Perth Amboy, N. J. *printed above and cancelled*

Worcester] worcester

had] *interlined with a caret*

Depot] depot

like] *followed by cancelled to be*

Time] time

Remind] remind

shocked,] *followed by cancelled and if we are shocked*

I] *followed by cancelled am*

From Calvin Harlow Greene

December 7, 1856

Rochester Mich Dec 7th/56

My Dear Friend

If you should come West on a lecturing tour this winter and should come into our State but not into our "neighborhood" be so kind as to inform me.- During the month of September last I had hoped & some expected to have seen you, but inexorable circumstances forbade-