

From Benjamin Bowen Wiley

December 21, 1856

Chicago Dec 21. 1856

Mr Thoreau

So much time had elapsed since I wrote you that I feared I should get no reply; I was therefore surprised & delighted as well as encouraged, when your letter of 12th reached me. I do not want to encroach on your time but I shall take the liberty of writing to you occasionally, in hopes of drawing out a response, even though it be a criticism, for this would be valuable to me, as I do not want to slumber in false security. Like those knights who loudly sang hymns while they were passing the enchanted isle, I will remember that I am going to tell you some of my outward, though more of my inward life. This of itself will be a strong incentive to virtue.

The arrival of your letter at this time makes me think of Napoleon's practice of leaving letters unopened for weeks till in many cases there was no necessity for a reply.¹ Though I wanted your views, I kept on in my path and already more than dimly apprehended that no man can penetrate the secrets of creation & futurity- Still I like to dwell on these themes, particularly the latter, as I have never found a present worthy to have permanent dominion over me. I like to send my thoughts forward to meet my destiny more than half way and prepare myself to meet with alacrity any decree of Eternal Fate. I am obliged for the excellent quotations from Confucius and the idea given of his teachings. I trust that if on this planet I attain the age of 40 years, I shall by the wisdom that may be mine merit the respect of those whose standard is infinitely high and whose motto is excelsior.² "To be rich & honored by iniquitous means is for me as the floating cloud which passes"³ speaks to me with power. The last N^o of the Westminster magazine contains an article on Buddhism⁴ which I presume you may have seen. It does

not mention him (Confucius)^a though as you told me he was above all sects

On my way back to Providence after my unforgotten Concord visit, I pondered deeply on what you had told me "to follow the faintest aspiration &c." I perhaps almost resolved to give up my Western plans of trade. Soon after, I walked with Newcomb⁵ and I of course fully agree with you in your high estimate of him and when you speak of my few opportunities for repeating those walks, I hope you only refer to my distance—not to his health. He asked me if I knew any active outdoor sphere he was qualified to fill and from what he said I doubt not he would come here did such a place present itself. He could much better than I afford to let books alone, as he has studied much more and has a more original and powerful mind, at least for metaphysical thoughts. It would give me deep satisfaction to have him here if I am to remain here. Just before your letter reached me I had been thinking of a future White Mountain trip with him and was not putting it far off. It is a good plan for traders to go to higher spheres occasionally.

I will give you some of my reasons for coming here though I withhold such as these from "business men" or "worldlings" technically so called (I have told these to no other person).^a I think I can truly say that I am content with my outward circumstances but I hope at some future day to sustain a refined intercourse with some good & gentle being whom I can call *wife*, or better still *companion* and I know that all persons would not be satisfied to live on what would content me. At that time I should want to carry out my ideas of life as well as I *can* now but I should want to give my companion the facilities to carry out her views. Again, unless I deceive myself, I wish to be liberal beyond the sphere of my own family. The perfect transparency of soul that I would have between us leads me to say that I also had some thought of reputation.

While in business formerly I travelled courses that I shall never tread again, and this, united with the success that generally accompanies able industry but which at the same time whets the edge of envy & malice & also my habit of refusing to justify my acts^a, raised against me in some quarters the voice of calumny, though it is true that it is not often applied to those concerns where I feel that censure may be due. Not from any inconvenience of this kind however did I leave Providence, for such would have been the very thing to make me remain there, as I am ready and like to face difficulties & dangers. My former partner^b is my personal friend, but as partners I felt that we were entirely unsuited to each other and I dissolved the connection against his will and that of his present associate. Had it not been for my personal relations to him I should have recommenced there, as my friends wished me to do, but such a course would have brought me into direct competition with him and would inevitably have taken away much of his profit and that I *will not* do particularly as here is a field large enough for all and where I am specially invited to take a^a prominent^a part in a large house. Do not imagine from what I said that my former course was a type of all that is disgraceful in man. I was intensely busy and acted thoughtlessly & unintelligently and my acts were such as are all the time adroitly done by^a *decent* men rather with eclat than with damage to their *reputation*. That other men do the same however is no excuse for me and having during the quiet of my past summer drunk somewhat of eternal truth I see & feel my errors and so help me God shall not again fall into them. My very retirement from trade was in the eyes of my detracting neighbors not the least of my short-comings though *I* know it to be one of the most fortunate things I ever did. As I place character however infinitely before reputation, I am not necessarily pledged to trade again. The fact that I am almost invariably popular and flattered & courted in

Providence circles shows me that I need a higher monitor than the voice of the multitude who must necessarily know so little of the motives that actuate me. So little do detracting remarks ruffle my temper that were it in my way I should gladly assist any of the *quintette club* that try to injure me though of course with the littleness of soul which they display I cannot have particular love for them. I trust that if I have future antagonists they may be greater than these little men who have never had the manliness to face me. I expect to find in Montaigne somewhere the story of Alexander the Great who when urged to punish a slanderer, refused, saying he would live so purely that all men would see the fellow spoke falsely⁷

I thus give you the leading motives that influenced me to come here. Since I arrived I heard that one of my leading prospective partners is dissatisfied with the determination I have shown to attend to higher things than trade. I am perfectly aware that I have lost caste with mere traders. The gentleman referred to is now here and our grand council will soon begin. Walden will not change color during its continuance nor the Concord stop flowing. I am here at the wish of others as well as the result of my own reasoning but I will not become a common business drudge for all the wealth of Chicago. Instead of a trader I am going to be a man. I believe a divine life can be nourished even in this Western Shrine of Mammon. Should our Council not end in a partnership, I have no settled plans for the future. I should in all probability soon favor myself with a visit to Concord. Were I more gifted I would now leave trade forever and be your Plato. I freely admit to you that this kind of life is not what pleases me. Do not interpret my remarks into the grumblings of disappointment, for I am what the world calls singularly favored by fortune. I await the result of our Council calmly though my wishes^a would lead me to the haunts of Nature. If you think my ideas erroneous write a severe criticism for me. I would like to have you tell me just what you think

I have a good deal of leisure now. I have read Montaigne's Essays to some extent & with unfailing interest. The ancient anecdotes make the valuable part of the book to me though they are so well incorporated with his generally sensible & pithy remarks that no common man can approach him. I have read some of Emerson, a man to whom I am much indebted. I saw his notice of Mr Hoar.⁸ You mentioned to me Miss Hoar⁹ when I was there. In one respect of *infinite* moment^a I think Emerson has put in for me the key-stone of an arch which has^a cost me much labor & travail to build. He will be here next month to lecture¹⁰ and I shall call on him, as he asked me to do. Most men here are intensely devoted to trade but I have found one with whom I have unreserved & delightful intercourse—Rev Rush R Shippen¹¹ the Unitarian minister. Mr Emerson will remember him. He is no ways priestly but has that open guileless countenance that wins the fullest confidence. He is of course intelligent & well-informed. He generously places his library at my disposal. I gladly accepted an invitation to take tea with him tomorrow as there is entire absence of ceremony. I am glad to find such a man with whom I can talk of the Infinite & Eternal. In addition to his library I have access to a public one of about 2000 volumes & I think I can largely extend my facilities. *Very* few books I *read* but I like to look at the tables of contents the engravings & portraits of others. The N.Y. Tribune often has things of more than transient interest. Some of their political articles are most powerful. Their notice of "Walden" introduced it to me.¹²

I take walks of considerable length almost daily and think I am in that respect^a the most enthusiastic of the plus 100,000 people here. I generally go along the Lake shore. I have to go 3 miles to reach woods my way. The Lake is the great feature of the place. Everything being level I have nothing on the land to meet my New England bred eyes and have learned (from Newcomb) to watch the clouds and I find it not the least valuable of his suggestions. One

cloudy morning I saw in the East over the Lake as the moon rose what resembled a vast bird with outstretched wings holding her course towards the East. I recorded in my Journal that I might consider it emblematic of my own desire of progress towards the source of inward illumination. One morning I saw in the East a perpendicular pillar of cloud that would have answered well enough to guide any Israelites that were going in that direction—¹³another morning I saw on the hitherto level surface of the frozen lake ice-hills of considerable size. I was glad to see hills anywhere.

The Lake water is carried over the city for drinking &c. It is almost always discolored by storms. That which comes moderately clear I fancy I can render white by beating with my hands and if allowed to stand, a sediment of lime is deposited. It makes some trouble with stranger's^e digestive organs and I am not entirely accustomed to it. If you have at your tongue's end a description of your own way to make a filter, I should probably put it in practice & should appreciate your kindness. I have been wondering how you know the different species of plants as described by science. Is the description so accurate that you know them at sight?

are millers that come round our summer lamps Chrysalides and into what are they next transformed?¹⁴

I have written much more than I expected to do. I hope I may ere long have a reply from you. Please remember me to Mr Emerson if you meet him.

I am yours sincerely B B Wiley

Correspondent: See p. 464.

¹ The anecdote comes from the memoirs of Louis Antoine Fauvellet de Bourrienne (1769-1834), Napoleon's private secretary, who wrote: "To satisfy himself that people wrote too much, and lost, in trifling and useless answers, valuable time, [Napoleon] told me to open only the letters which came by extraordinary couriers, and to leave all the rest for three weeks in the basket. I declare that at the

end of that time it was unnecessary to reply to four-fifths of these communications." Many were letters of thanks or acknowledgment or complaint, and others were requests or demands which, by not reading them, he "was spared the unpleasing office of refusing." See *Private Memoirs of Napoleon Bonaparte, during the Periods of the Directory, the Consulate, and the Empire*, 1:65. Emerson used the tale in his essay on Napoleon in *Representative Men*, which may have been Wiley's source.

² "Excelsior" was "used by Longfellow (quasi-interjection as an expression of incessant aspiration after higher attainment) as the refrain of a popular poem ['Excelsior,' 1841]; hence employed with similar sense by many later writers" (*OED*).

³ Wiley quotes a sentence from T's translation of a passage from *Confucius et Mencius* that T included in his December 12 letter to Wiley; see p. 494.

⁴ The title of the article is "Buddhism: Mythical and Historical," *Westminster Review*, October 1856, 296-331; the author is not identified.

⁵ Charles King Newcomb.

⁶ Daniel W. Vaughan.

⁷ It was Plato, not Alexander, who figured in the anecdote Wiley mentions. In "Upon Some Essays of Virgil" (*Essays* 3.5), Montaigne writes: "Somebody told Plato that all the world spoke ill of him: 'Let them talk,' said he, 'I will live so as to make them change their note.'" See *The Complete Works of Michael de Montaigne*, p. 398.

⁸ Wiley refers to Emerson's tribute to his townsman, Samuel Hoar (1779-1856), in *Putnam's Monthly Magazine*, December 1856, 645-646. Hoar died on November 2.

⁹ Elizabeth Sherman Hoar, Samuel Hoar's daughter.

¹⁰ Emerson met Wiley in Chicago when he lectured on January 22, 1857, on "The Conduct of Life."

¹¹ Rush Rhees Shippen (1828-1911), son of Henry and Elizabeth Evans Shippen, attended Allegheny College but did not graduate. He was the first student to enroll in the Meadville Theological School, from which he graduated in 1849. That year, he became the minister at the First Unitarian Church in Chicago, where he served until July 1857. In 1855 he married Zoe Rodman (1825-1910), daughter of David and Sally Tanner Rodman. Shippen then moved to the Church of the Unity in Worcester, Massachusetts. He was later secretary of the American Unitarian Association. Said not to be an original thinker, Shippen was a good speaker and efficient administrator.

¹² Horace Greeley published (and probably wrote) a pre-

publication notice, "A Massachusetts Hermit," which appeared in the July 29, 1854, *New-York Daily Tribune*. It consisted mainly of excerpts from *Walden*. See also p. 205.

¹³ Wiley alludes to the form in which God appears to Moses and the Israelites wandering in the desert: "And the Lord went before them by day in a pillar of a cloud, to lead them the way; and by night in a pillar of fire, to give them light" (Exod. 13:21).

¹⁴ Millers are "any of various white or white-powdered insects, esp. moths" (*OED*). "Chrysalides" is a plural form of "chrysalis," "the state into which the larva of most insects passes before becoming an imago or perfect insect. In this state the insect is inactive and takes no food, and is wrapped in a hard sheath or case" (*OED*). T responded to Wiley's question in a letter dated April 26, 1857: "The 'millers' you speak of are the perfect or final state of the insect. The chrysalis is the silken bag they spun when caterpillars, & occupied in the nymph state" (*Cor* 1958, p. 478).

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

Published: *Cor* 1958, 456-460

Editor's Notes

This letter is addressed "Henry D. Thoreau Esq. / Concord / Mass." and postmarked "Chicago Ill 23 Dec 1856".
stranger's] *PE*; strang'ers in *MS*

Author's Alterations

(Confucius)] *interlined with a caret*
(I . . . person)] *interlined with a caret*
& also . . . acts] *interlined with a caret*
a] an
prominent] *interlined above cancelled* important
done by] *followed by cancelled* business men
wishes] *interlined above cancelled* nature
of *infinite* moment] *interlined with a caret*
has] his
in that respect] *interlined with a caret*