

CONCORD IS STILL THE CYNOSURE TO MY EYES

Robert Hudspeth
Concord Free Public Library, October 14, 2017

I intend today to speak to you of a body of writing that is off the beaten track for people interested in Thoreau. This writing lies in the margins, not because it is unimportant or uninteresting, but because it gives the reader no sustained narrative; instead it goes by fits and starts. I mean, of course, Thoreau's correspondence, the letters written by and to him that span his life from 1834 to his death in 1862. I would safely guess that everyone in the room has read at least a portion of *Walden*, many of you have probably read it more than once. Probably many of you know "Civil Disobedience" as well. From there it may drop off: the essays "Walking"? "Life Without Principle"? The travel books to Maine? to Cape Cod? The voluminous Journal? Sad to say, I think the letters come last in my speculative list. I also know that, interesting as they are, they are not readily available in user-friendly, cheap editions. You do, however, know one line from a Thoreau letter: "Concord, which is my Rome—and its people, who are my Romans," the title of the exhibition that sponsors this talk (*Correspondence 1*, p. 152). It's from an 1843 letter to Richard Fuller, Margaret Fuller's brother Leslie got to that title before me, but I found a another good one, again in Thoreau's letters. This one was written to his mother from Staten Island in 1843: "Concord," he says, "is still a Cynosure to my eyes" (*Correspondence 1*, p. 218). Cynosure, which means center of attention or attraction, derives from the Greek and originally referred to the pole star, the most important aid to navigation for ancient travelers. And, indeed, the town acted as a cynosure for Henry Thoreau. How it did and what resulted are

our concerns today.

A reading of the letters allows us to see Thoreau as a man living in a specific time and addressing himself to specific people. There is a common misperception about Thoreau—that he was some kind of hermit, or at least an anti-social, truculent outsider. Well, he was often a stinging critic of his townsmen, but that’s not nearly the whole truth. As fine a book as *Walden* is, and it *is* a genuine masterpiece, its very success leads some, perhaps many readers to think that this is all that there is to Thoreau: he went away, lived by himself, wrote books and sometime later died. Every biographer has had to deal with this misperception, and one of the ways they do it is to draw on the letters.

First a few facts, and then to work: we now have 646 surviving letters to and from Thoreau (338 written by him; 308 written to him). We know of 52 correspondents. Unlike the published writings, this body of material is subject to time and chance. Some letters are saved by those who receive them; many, perhaps most, are destroyed. Or, if saved, they are subsequently lost or later destroyed. In Thoreau’s case, we have, for example, absolutely no surviving letter to him from a member of his immediate family: none from father, mother, brother, or sisters. We have no letters written by Thoreau from Cambridge to Concord when he was a student at Harvard, though there must have been many. We know he courted a young woman; no letters exist between them so far as we know. Thoreau carried on a long, intense philosophical discussion with a friend in Worcester, but only one fragment from his correspondent survives. I would guess with certainty that there are correspondents about whom we are ignorant. So, fair warning: anyone who sets out to construct theories based on the letters needs to remember that tomorrow may

bring new data.

Not only that, but we must remember that letters are not essays. They are written to specific individuals at a specific time, under specific circumstances that may well affect their content. Let me use an example that involves Concord from an early Thoreau letter written to Isaiah T. Williams, a man somewhat younger than Thoreau who had lived in Concord for a short time. Young Williams had moved to Buffalo to study law and writes Thoreau to say how very homesick he was for Concord, and how hard he had found it to adjust to Buffalo. He says to Thoreau, “You are ready to ask—how I like the West— I must answer—not very well— I love New England so much that the West is comparatively odious to me—” (*Correspondence 1*, p. 84). To which Thoreau writes back, “It is curious that while you are sighing for New England the scene of our fairest dreams should lie in the west—it confirms me in the opinion that places are well nigh indifferent” (*Correspondence 1*, pp. 89-90) . On the surface this sentence seems to undercut my topic, for it dismisses the very significance of “place” to Thoreau. In the context, however, it’s not quite so simple. Thoreau is trying to lift Williams’s spirits, to encourage him to look about him in Buffalo and to understand nature as it is at *that* place. He also suggests that what we call a “place” is a function of the mind and the imagination. Yes, Concord was important, but it was not the only possibility of being placed.

Another tricky part of reading letters is to remember that one really cannot demand of them a consistent “philosophy.” What is written today may well not be “believed” tomorrow. Here I’m going to borrow from Thoreau’s good friend Waldo Emerson for an exact description of the inconsistency I mean. This is from the essay

“Circles”: “Our moods,” Emerson says, “do not believe in each other. To-day I am full of thoughts, and can write what I please. I see no reason why I should not have the same thought, the same power of expression, to-morrow. What I write, whilst I write it, seems the most natural thing in the world; but yesterday I saw a dreary vacuity in this direction in which now I see so much.” I think Emerson gets it exactly right: we think all over the place depending on our current mood. At this moment I value *this*, later I value *that*, but writing freezes the moment and leads later readers wrongly to assume that each moment is much like previous ones. This is specially true when we write letters, for we write different people at different times under different circumstances. Letters are not the vehicle for sustained opinions, for, more than we would like to admit, we are not consistent creatures. Think of the letters as fragments of a point of view. We may be able to re-assemble those fragments to make them clearer and more complete.

With that caveat in mind, my aim here is to observe and try to understand the presence of Concord in these letters. I want to understand what roles Thoreau played as a Concord resident and, beyond that, to understand what Concord meant to him. With some few exceptions (I’ll point to them as I go along) Concord is the place where Thoreau’s letters originated. He wrote them here; the town and its surroundings are a background, one most often unstated, but very much present. There are a number of times when Thoreau talks about Concord, when he becomes something of a local reporter. But whether or not Concord is the subject matter, Thoreau was often concerned with “place,” with the local. What it meant for him to “be at home” was significant and complex. The “meaning of Concord” was often implied rather than overtly stated.

Most obviously Thoreau was a Concord resident who took part in the town's activities. As a young man, he was chosen as a curator of the Concord Lyceum, which meant that he busied himself writing friends from college to solicit them as lecturers. Later, as he matured as a writer, he frequently lectured for free for his townsmen. They heard him define his understanding of the individual's relationship with the government; they heard his account of his trips to the Maine woods and to Cape Cod, and he entertained them with his account of walking in the local woods; Concord residents were often his first and sometimes most enthusiastic audience. They turned out to hear him, and he valued their attention. He took them seriously and they returned the compliment.

In 1854 Thoreau became a spokesman for the town when he drew up a petition letter to Emerson: "The undersigned," he wrote, "wishing to enjoy equal advantages with their fellow countrymen at a distance, earnestly request, that Mr Emerson will read to the Lyceum as many of the lectures which he has read abroad the past winter as may be convenient for him, including the one on Poetry; though they promise to repay him only with an eager attention" (*Correspondence 2*, p. 206). The petition is signed by 43 Concord residents, who represent a cross-section of Concord's society.

It is also very easy to forget that Thoreau was a Concord businessman. At first he assisted his father in running their family pencil factory and lead sales, and then, after the senior Thoreau's death, Henry ran the business by himself. Our collection of letters has a number of purely business letters about buying, selling, shipping, and billing. Thoreau offered a high-quality lead for electrotyping, a process that had begun to grow dramatically in the 1850s. Not only that, Thoreau was a popular town surveyor. One letter

describes him “being in the field” for 76 straight days at a dollar a day (see *Correspondence 2*, p. 140). In 1859 the members of a “Committee of the Proprietors of Sudbury and Concord River Meadows,” wrote Thoreau to engage him as a surveyor. They were drawing up a petition to the governor and legislature to remove obstacles from the Sudbury river. An area exceeding 10,000 acres, the meadows along the Concord river had been injured by a dam built at Billerica to supply the Middlesex canal. The claimants said that the river’s unusually shallow drainage was compounded by dams and other obstructions so that the large meadows on its banks were often flooded, ruining the crops. From mid-June to mid-August of 1859 Thoreau was often on the river taking measurements of it, the banks, and the bridges. You can see his survey of the meadows in the exhibition. It’s item 138, and his survey of the bridges on the river is item 24 (see <https://concordlibrary.org/special-collections/thoreau-surveys/107a> and <https://concordlibrary.org/special-collections/thoreau-surveys/107b>).

Thoreau’s letters reveal him to be an entertaining reporter of Concord’s daily life, its news and its follies. There is a real pleasure in uncovering small facts about the past, for this gives us a more concrete understanding of what Concord was in the nineteenth century. These details are not portentous, they don’t cause us to re-evaluate the local history of the town, but they do give us specificity. If one thinks about it, one finds that we know little detail about the past. We know big events, we can read big speeches from important people, but we know little in detail, and Thoreau was man interested in detail. Facts mattered to a keen observer of all parts of the world in which he lived. For instance, in June 1840, Thoreau writes an unidentified correspondent who had written him about

the possibility of establishing a singing school in Concord. Whoever the writer, he assumed that Thoreau knew the town well enough to give him the facts he wanted. In his response, Thoreau makes it clear that the town was already well furnished with singing opportunities: “The town or parish,” he writes, “contemplate a school the next winter which shall be public, and open equally to old and young—learned and unlearned. The people . . . have been accustomed to look to the parish for these things, and to them a dollar ever has lost some of its weight when it has passed once through the assessor’s hands” (*Correspondence 1*, p. 68). When I looked into this I found that the Concord First Parish supported public singing of sacred music through a singing fund that originated in a bequest from Abigail Dudley in 1814. The town had long supported singing schools, which were created every two or three years.

Did you know that in 1847 a Concord resident had a telescope? Well, Perez Blood, who lived just North of the town, had one, and Thoreau looked through it. As he says to his sister Sophia, “I went to see Perez Blood’s some time ago with Mr E[mer]son. He had not gone to bed, but was sitting in the woodshed in the dark alone, in his astronomical chair, which is all legs and rungs, with a seat which can be inserted at any height, we saw Saturn’s ring, and the mountains in the moon, and the shadows in their craters, and the sunlight on the spurs of the Mts in the dark portion. &c &c” (*Correspondence 1*, p. 310). Apparently the low-power scope so piqued the interest of Blood and his friends that they went in to Cambridge to look through the much larger Harvard telescope. Here is Thoreau’s report, this time written to Emerson: “Mr. Blood and his company have at length seen the stars through the great telescope, and he told me that he thought it was

worth the while. Mr Peirce made them wait till the crowd had dispersed (it was a Saturday evening) & then was quite polite” (*Correspondence 1*, p. 315). The scene is a good reminder that Thoreau was not the only Concord resident who was scientifically curious and that he was on easy conversational terms with his fellow townsmen.

I am sure that many Concordians would have agreed when Thoreau expresses his dismay at the prospect of having a “muster” of the entire Massachusetts militia in and near Concord. From August 9-11, 1859, the entire 7,000-man Massachusetts militia was to assemble at an encampment in Concord. Thoreau knew what was coming: “The prospect is that Concord will not be herself that week. I fear it will be more like Discord. Thank fortune, the camp will be nearly 2 miles west of us; yet the *scamps* will be ‘all over the lot.’ The very anticipation of this muster has greatly increased the amount of travel past our house, for a month; & now, at last, whole houses have begun to roll that way” (*Correspondence 1958*, pp. 555-556). Thoreau was probably right to be concerned, for The Boston and Fitchburg railroad ran special trains for the troops, the town set aside forty acres for the spectators, a crowd of about 25,000 according to Boston newspaper accounts. Thoreau’s letter helps us remember that he dealt daily with not only the pleasures of being in Concord but also its travails. He was not insulated from the scamps who undoubtedly raided his family melon patch.

Some of Thoreau’s best reporting on Concord was written to Waldo Emerson, with whom in the 1840s he several times had lively exchanges. Because they were neighbors, they needed to write only when one or the other was away from Concord. Such absences occurred three times between 1842 and 1848. First Emerson was in New York lecturing

while Thoreau moved into his home to look after Lidian and the children; then Thoreau went to Staten Island for a few months in 1843; finally Emerson left Concord for England for an extended lecture tour in 1847 and 1848, again asking Thoreau to live in the Emerson home. As one would expect, the surviving letters show us Concord from its domestic life to its political. For instance, when the railroad came to Concord, fires came to the woods, as Thoreau tells Emerson in November 1847: “As I walked over Conantum the other afternoon I saw a fair column of smoke rising from the woods directly over my house that was But it turned out to be John Richardson’s young wood on the SE of your field— It was burnt nearly all over & up to the rails and the road. It was set on fire no doubt by the same Lucifer that lighted Brooks’ lot before. So you see that your small lot is comparatively safe for this season, the back fires having been already set for you” (*Correspondence 1*, p. 317). This is news that is more than entertainment, for a wood lot was a profitable property, and fires caused by the railroad were increasingly common in this era.

Less grave is the report Thoreau writes about local politics. “They have been choosing between John Keyes & Sam Staples if the world wants to know it as representatives of this town,” Thoreau says, “and Staples is chosen. The candidates for Governor—think of my writing this to you—were Gov. Briggs & Gen Cushing—& Briggs is elected, though the Democrats have gained. Aint I a brave boy to know so much of politics for the nonce? but I should’nt have known it if Coombs had’nt told me” (*Correspondence 1*, pp. 317-318). Thoreau goes on to be skeptical of his Concord neighbors’ attempt at world harmony: “They have had a Peace meeting here . . . and some men—Dea[con]

Brown at the head—have signed a long pledge swearing that they will ‘treat all mankind as brothers’ henceforth. I think I shall wait and see how they treat me first. I think that nature meant kindly when she made our brothers few. However, my voice is still for peace” (*Correspondence 1*, p. 318). As is often the case, Thoreau’s reporting does double duty: it simultaneously informs and entertains as he casts himself as a “brave boy” and as a skeptic of universal reform.

Sometimes Thoreau simply records the local news, knowing that when Emerson was abroad he most wanted the specificity of Concord. Here is an example of how a casual mention of what came to be “Civil Disobedience” began a train of local news: “Lectures begin to multiply in my desk,” says Thoreau. “I have one on Friendship which is new—and the materials of some others. I read one last week to the Lyceum on the Rights & Duties of the Individual in relation to Government.—much to Mr. Alcott’s satisfaction.— Joel Britton,” a local wood dealer, “has failed and gone into Chancery—but the woods continue to fall before the axes of other men— Neighbor Coombs [the same Coombs who gave Thoreau his political news earlier] was lately found dead in the woods near Goose Pond—with his half empty jug—after he had been missing a week” (*Correspondence 1*, p. 347).

At this time, Thoreau was close enough to Emerson that he could describe a painful encounter with another Concord resident. Here’s the way he dramatizes it: “I have had a tragic correspondence,” he writes, “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” (*Correspondence 1*, p. 316). And so the reporting goes: burned woodlots, elections, the lecture on Civil Disobedience, financial failure, proposals of marriage—they all interest Thoreau, who knows they likewise interest Emerson. It’s all part of being in a small town that can entertain through its smallest details.

So far, so good: but, there is another side to Thoreau, another role he plays, that of a keen and vigorous critic who stands apart from his townsmen. Writing to sister Sophia in 1852, for example, he explodes about his Concord neighbors, who had been caught up in a series of seances, or “spirit rappings.” The passage is savage and quite funny. Though it is long, it is worth quoting in its entirety: “Concord is just as idiotic as ever in relation to the spirits and their knockings,” he begins. “Most people here believe in a spiritual world which no respectable junk bottle—which had not met with a slip—would condescend to contain even a portion of for a moment—whose atmosphere would extinguish a candle let down into it, like a well that wants airing—in spirits which the very bull frogs in our meadows would blackball. Their evil genius is seeing how low it can degrade them. The hooting of owls—the croaking of frogs—is celestial wisdom in comparison.” All of that sounds bad enough, but Thoreau is just getting warmed up: “If I could be brought,” he says, “to believe in the things which they believe—I should make haste to get rid of my certificate of stock in this & the next world’s enterprises, and buy a share in the first Immediate Annihilation Company that offered— I would exchange my immortality for a glass of small beer this hot weather. Where *are* the heathen? Was there ever any superstition before? And yet I suppose there may be a vessel this very moment setting sail from the coast of North America to that of Africa with a missionary on board! Consider

the dawn—and the sun rise—the rain bow & the evening—the words of Christ & the aspirations of all the saints! Hear music! See—smell—taste—feel—hear—anything—and then hear these idiots inspired by the cracking of a restless board—humbly asking ‘Please Spirit, if you cannot answer by knocks, answer by tips of the table’.!!!!!!” (*Correspondence 2*, p. 113). I have to admit that part of this is written for effect; he’s showing off a literary habit of exaggeration and verbal play because he knows his sister likes to be entertained. Still, from Thoreau’s perspective, this is Concord at its worst. It’s a Concord he wants no part of.

It is, of course, easy to see Thoreau as simply a nay-sayer who withdrew from his fellow citizens. The continuing and completely understandable legacy of *Walden* is partly the cause, and we need look no farther than the opening pages, where he uses his townsmen as foils to his experiment in living. Let me quote the whole passage, though it is rather long: “I would fain say something,” he begins, “not so much concerning the Chinese and Sandwich Islanders as you who read these pages, who are said to live in New England; something about your condition, especially your outward condition or circumstances in this world, in this town, what it is, whether it is necessary that it be as bad as it is, whether it cannot be improved as well as not. I have travelled a good deal in Concord; and everywhere, in shops, and offices, and fields, the inhabitants have appeared to me to be doing penance in a thousand remarkable ways. What I have heard of Bramins sitting exposed to four fires and looking in the face of the sun; or hanging suspended, with their heads downward, over flames; or looking at the heavens over their shoulders ‘until it becomes impossible for them to resume their natural position, while from the twist of the

neck nothing but liquids can pass into the stomach;’ or dwelling, chained for life, at the foot of a tree; or measuring with their bodies, like caterpillars, the breadth of vast empires; or standing on one leg on the tops of pillars,—even these forms of conscious penance are hardly more incredible and astonishing than the scenes which I daily witness” (*Walden*, p. 4). This is not, however, a description to a friend, it is not reporting. The passage is a hyperbole, a literary device, written to introduce a complex narrative that will critique what we would call middle-class life. Thoreau looks at his imagined townsmen as people engaged in doing penance for meaningless activity. It is a staged scene that pungently tells the reader that Thoreau has found common life so unsatisfactory that he can express himself only through exaggerations to convey his dismay. Thoreau’s use of exaggeration is a topic in itself (and a fascinating one), but let me turn to Flannery O’Connor, who memorably describes a writer’s need to make exaggerations: “When you can assume that your audience holds the same beliefs you do,” she says, “you can relax a little and use more normal ways of talking to it; when you have to assume that it does not, then you have to make your vision apparent by shock—to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost blind you draw large and startling figures.” Thoreau was quite good at drawing “large and startling figures.” This is Thoreau at his literary best: contemporary society is so vacuous that it must be represented in exaggerated terms. He finds it necessary to create a drama that pits his brave self against a grotesque town. But it is just that: a literary drama, composed, shaped, and rhetorically necessary. If we read this passage as if it were reporting of the sort we find in the letters we misread both *Walden* and the letters. As I hope to show, Thoreau was quite capable of

presenting Concord both as a physical place and as a construct of the mind; there was a “real” Concord and an “imagined” one.

A better example of Thoreau’s supposed withdrawal from society can be found in his best-known and shortest letter, one he wrote to Cyrus Stow, the Concord Town Clerk, on January 6, 1841: “I do not wish to be considered a member of the First Parish in this town” (*Correspondence 1*, p. 72). That’s it—the whole letter. You can, by the way, see this letter in the exhibition. It’s item 81. A few years later, when he came to write “Civil Disobedience,” he revises the wording of his withdrawal, turning it into a fiction: “Know all men by these presents, that I, Henry Thoreau, do not wish to be regarded as a member of any incorporated society which I have not joined” (*Reform Papers*, p. 79). This is witty, but it has a specific point: Thoreau did not want to pay a tax for the Parish after they had enrolled him without his consent in 1840. He was legally evading a tax, not withdrawing from the Concord community. The question of how Thoreau situated himself in Concord is more complicated than this note would lead one to believe.

There are passages in the letters that unmistakably show that Thoreau was not at ease with his townsmen. Here is one from 1854, written to Harrison Gray Otis Blake, a friend in Worcester (about whom we will hear more soon): “Ah! what foreign countries there are, greater in extent than the U.S. or Russia, and with no more souls to a square mile—stretching away on every side from every human being with whom you have no sympathy,” he begins. “Their humanity affects me as simply monstrous. Rocks—earth—brute beasts comparatively are not so strange to me. When I sit in the parlors or kitchens of some with whom my business brings me—I was going to say in contact—(business, like

misery, makes strange bedfellows) I feel a sort of awe and as forlorn as if I were cast away on a desolate shore” (*Correspondence 2*, p. 193). This is a revealing drama in which he is the central character. Thoreau here exists on two levels. He is a Concord businessman, going about his surveying, furthering the local commerce as well as his own income. He is integrally a part of the community. At the very same moment he deeply feels his desolate estrangement from that community. He is simultaneously in and out of it. At a physical level Thoreau engaged his neighbors, in fact served them well as a surveyor, but on an emotional and intellectual level he felt himself an outcast. The passage does not explain in any detail *why* he feels as he does; he is only reporting to Blake the truth of his emotions. He has surveyed both the land and its inhabitants and himself. The work on the land has rewarded him with money, but it is offset by the cost of his alienation.

From the roles Thoreau played in Concord, I want to turn to the question of what the town meant to him, a topic that is more complicated than we have so far seen. Early in his life, the town and its rivers were sources of verbal play—Concord was the stuff of comic delight. Before he graduated from Harvard, he writes a classmate about an afternoon in which he sailed on the Sudbury River, casting himself as a Homeric traveler who landed on the beach to find the “Natives a harmless inoffensive race, principally devoted to agricultural pursuits—appeared somewhat astonished that a stranger should land so unceremoniously on their coast” (*Correspondence 1*, p. 13). This is not the “real” Concord but an imaginative one, and yet it is Concord still in its physical presence embodied in one of the rivers. A year later Thoreau writes an even more imaginative, much longer letter to his brother, John, casting both of them as Native Americans living in the pre-settlement

Concord. In the letter, Henry passes along the latest political news that Albert Nelson had defeated Stedman Buttrick to be the local representative to the Massachusetts legislature by turning the characters into Indians. “Our old men say they will send the young chief of the Karlisles [that is, Nelson] who lives in the green wigwam and is a great medicine, that his words may be heard in the long talk which the wise men are going to hold at Shawmut by the salt-lake [that is, Boston]. He is a great talk—and will not forget the enemies of his tribe” (*Correspondence 1*, pp. 28-29). This is all good fun between brothers, but it’s also an occasion to exercise his imagination. Concord here is the material for the imagination; the town is to be used and enjoyed and turned into literary performance. As literature it presages the passage from *Walden* that I quoted earlier.

Concord provided friendship for Thoreau. As Leslie Wilson notes in her introduction to the catalog of the exhibition, Thoreau’s friendships extended far beyond the town’s famous writers: he writes letters to Lidian Emerson and her sister Lucy Jackson Brown; he often mentions George Minot and Edmund Hosmer; I’ve already quoted his reference to Eseck Coombs, a local drunk with whom Thoreau socialized. That said, Thoreau found his deepest Concord friendships among the writers: Emerson, Ellery Channing, and Bronson Alcott, all of whom lived here, with the occasional residencies of Nathaniel Hawthorne, and visits from Margaret Fuller. Friendship was important to Thoreau. It was sometimes the subject of his writing; it was always a common, almost everyday experience in the town. I will focus for a time on Alcott and Channing, for Thoreau valued each of them and frequently describes them in his letters. For instance writing to Emerson, who himself deeply admired Alcott, Thoreau describes Alcott’s brush

with jail for failure to pay his local tax: “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 honest’” (*Correspondence 1*, p. 124). Thoreau is here writing in January 1843, well over three years before he, himself was arrested by the same Sam Staples for the same crime of tax avoidance and five years before he wrote the essay that we now know as “Civil Disobedience.” Clearly Thoreau knew the dramatic value of arrest and escape, though he was more capable of writing that drama than was Alcott. Thoreau knew that Emerson would both share his admiration for Alcott and understand both the comedy and the seriousness of the event. It entertained Thoreau, and he in turn entertained Emerson. We have two Concordians sharing a complex moment about a third one.

Alcott is remembered partly because of his improvidence—his stubborn adherence to the life of a philosopher brought hardship to his family that is hard to ignore. Moreover, he lacked the literary gift of language that marks Emerson and Thoreau, so he is an interesting, though shadowy figure to us in our generation. But there was a triumph for him in Concord, one that Thoreau catches nicely in an 1861 letter to Daniel Ricketson: “You may be interested to hear that Alcott is at present perhaps the most successful man in the town. He had his 2d annual exhibition of all the schools in the town at the Town Hall last Saturday—at which all the masters & misses did themselves great credit, as I hear, & of course reflected some on their teachers & parents. They were making their little speeches from 1 till 6 o’clock *pm*, to a large audience which patiently listened to the end.

In the meanwhile the children made Mr A. an unexpected present, of a fine edition of Pilgrim's Progress & Herberts Poems—which, of course, overcame all parties” (*Correspondence* 1958, p. 609). This is a Concord that has rewarded good work and shown its appreciation to a man who had often not succeeded by the world's notion of success. Thoreau had long known and admired Alcott, and he knew that all too few in Concord shared his opinion. This moment of triumph deserved to be recorded.

But if Alcott was a misunderstood genius, Ellery Channing topped him. The son of a distinguished Boston doctor and nephew of the great Rev. William Ellery Channing (for whom he was named), Ellery Channing was determined to be a poet, even if it meant poverty, which it did, or obscurity, which it also did. Thoreau, however, valued Channing in ways he did no other man, Emerson included. Ellery was his frequent walking companion in the Concord woods, and Thoreau seemed never to tire of his mercurial temper. An early description catches it well, written again to Emerson: “I see Channing often,” Thoreau says. “He also goes often to Alcott's, and confesses that he has made a discovery in him—and give vent to his admiration or his confusion in characteristic exaggerations—but between this extreme & that you may get a fair report—& draw an inference if you can. Sometimes *he will* ride a broom stick still—though there is nothing to keep him or it up—but a certain centrifugal force of whim which is soon spent—and there lies your stick—not worth picking up to sweep an oven with now. His accustomed path is strewn with them But then again & perhaps for the most part he sits on the cliffs amid the lichens, or flits past on noiseless pinion like the Barred Owl in the day time—as wise & unobserved” (*Correspondence 1*, p. 346). Not only does Channing share Thoreau's

interest in Alcott, but, like Alcott, Channing has chosen a life of serious writing. Channing is eccentric; he may exaggerate, but Thoreau has seen something else in Channing: he knows how to be quiet and observe. For Thoreau, Channing may be the consummate Concordian: he is complex, entertaining, and deeply devoted to his writing all at once. I suspect that Thoreau saw something of himself in Channing's willful exaggerations; I think Ellery was simultaneously a warning and a confirmation, a man who indeed walked to his own "drummer," but whose poetry never attained what it might have with more care and thought.

These writers were peers; they were fellow readers from whom he could borrow books; he could discuss Plato with Alcott and Carlyle with Emerson; they were fellow writers whose works he could read and respond to; they read and responded to his. As he says to Lidian Emerson, "What wealth is it to have such friends that we cannot think of them without elevation" (*Correspondence 1*, p. 197). I think it also telling that both Channing and Alcott to some degree fell outside of respectability in the town, just as Thoreau did to some more conventional minds.

The title to the Library's exhibition and to this talk make it clear that the fact of Concord was often on Thoreau's mind. In a homesick letter to Lidian Emerson written from Staten Island in 1843 he says he feels "like the man who, when forbidden to tread on English ground, carried Scottish ground in his boots, I carry Concord ground in my boots and in my hat—and am I not made of Concord dust?" (*Correspondence 1*, p. 167). It sounds as if Thoreau imagines himself having been created like Adam, but now cast out of his Eden called Concord. There was "nature" on Staten Island, but it was not the "nature"

that Thoreau had invested himself in and that he knew in great detail. Not all “nature” was the same. He was not at home on Staten Island; he was not “placed” either emotionally or intellectually.

For that reason we can see that Concord was a defining place; it was a center that he never forsook. One tends to forget how much Thoreau traveled: to Maine three times; to Cape Cod three times; to Canada; to the White Mountains, to the more local mountains; to cities around Massachusetts to lecture, to Minnesota for his health. He was surprisingly often on the road, but I would emphasize the fact that he always returned. He stayed in Concord by choice, despite the several opportunities, all conveyed in his correspondence, that he was offered to move to some new place: Isaac Hecker urged Thoreau to go to Europe on a walking expedition; Horace Greeley seriously solicited Thoreau to move to New York City to be the tutor for the Greeley children, and Thoreau entertained the idea long enough for the two to talk actual salary. His good friend in New Bedford, Daniel Ricketson, offered to buy Thoreau a small island in the Middleborough ponds if he would move down there. Thoreau’s reply to Ricketson may stand for his reply to all: “I am engaged to Concord,” he says, “& my very private pursuits by 10,000 ties, & it would be suicide to rend them” (*Correspondence 2*, p. 466). He was not about to commit that sort of suicide, but he did not just ignore the question of where to live, for on several occasions he directly discusses the relationship between staying at home and going abroad. Again, in 1843, while living on Staten Island, he writes Emerson and quotes Abu Musa, an Arab philosopher: “Staying at home is the heavenly way” (*Correspondence 1*, p. 202). The very next year he wavered in his response to Isaac Hecker, saying: “*Far* travel,

very *far* travel, or travail, comes near to the worth of staying at home” (*Correspondence 1*, p. 266). A decade later he put it quite bluntly to Daniel Ricketson: “I have a real genius for staying at home” (*Correspondence 2*, p. 314). But still he traveled. Concord provided the emotional and physical security to make sojourning not only possible but rewarding. He always had a place to come back *to*.

A comment written to Alcott lets us understand at least one way in which staying and going were bound up fruitfully for Thoreau. In 1856, when Alcott was living temporarily in Connecticut, Thoreau expresses a wish to visit the Connecticut River valley: “I also wish to get some hints from September on the Connecticut to help me understand that season on the Concord;—to snuff the musty fragrance of the decaying year in the primitive woods” (*Correspondence 2*, p. 458). This brief comment clearly shows that traveling was one way to see Concord anew, and see it better. The ability to compare and contrast was important to Thoreau, for he was a collector of detail. Going abroad was a version of knowing home much better.

However, being at home and being “placed” did not mean that Thoreau was always satisfied. Concord could show him the dark side of human life, the side that he most wanted to escape. Here is a telling moment written again to Harrison Blake in Worcester. Thoreau had a habit of writing to Blake about the topic of “how to live.” There is an ethical thread that binds up the extensive correspondence between the two, so it is not unusual to find this somber admission from Thoreau after he had spent several days in the field surveying for several of his townsmen: “I find it, as ever, very unprofitable to have much to do with men,” he says. “It is sowing the wind, but not reaping even the whirlwind,—only

reaping an unprofitable calm and stagnation. Our conversation is a smooth and civil and never-ending speculation merely" (*Correspondence 2*, p. 221). Having warmed up, he continues, "I have seen more men than usual lately, and well as I was acquainted with one, I am surprised to find what vulgar fellows they are. They do a little business commonly each day, in order to pay their board, and then they congregate in sitting rooms and feebly fabulate and paddle in the social slush" (*Correspondence 2*, pp. 221-222). Underneath this criticism of other men I hear a fear, a fear that Thoreau felt lest he let himself always "paddle in the social slush." He was forever "reading" his environment, looking at the facts before him, whether they were facts of the organic world of nature or the social world of his neighbors. One might say that his life was devoted to paying ever closer attention to the smallest details of his living. Thoreau was always insistent on understanding what he observed, and what he observed here was a way of life he intensely tried to avoid. Concord's inhabitants were full of "lessons" for him. The problem was how to read them aright and to avoid the common failures of other men. He is applying the same mental habits he formed in observing nature as he observes other men. As a result, I think that in moments like this Thoreau is not concerned with judging others but judging himself through his observation of his townsmen.

Concord was (and is) a physical place, a home for people, a landscape rich and varied, a series of ponds and marshes and three rivers. All of that mattered to Thoreau, for he had an extraordinary capacity to examine the physical world in all of its manifestations. The satisfactions that Concord offered him appear to be endless. But that is only the beginning of an answer to what Concord "meant" to Thoreau, for the very

physicality of Concord allowed him to experience and write about a reality beyond that material world. We must remember that he was a thoroughgoing philosophical idealist, a man for whom the physical world was not the final reality, for whom there was another reality beyond the physical. Thoreau defined that perception to Blake in 1850. On the surface it seems to have nothing to do with Concord, but I think it does. Thoreau was on Fire Island responding to the aftermath of the shipwreck that killed Margaret Fuller and her family. Emerson and the Fullers had sent Thoreau there to try to recover the bodies and any belongings that might have survived. After it was all over, he wrote 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. . . I have 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). I find this confession of faith to be revealing in many ways, one of which helps us understand better Thoreau’s attachment to “Concord.” The town was real, physical, and complex, but it also fed Thoreau’s imagination, and imagination was paramount for him. In short, Concord did not obtrude itself but instead fed his thoughts, those “epochs” of his life. The town satisfied his bodily needs but, more importantly, it worked as part of his imagination. It is an abiding paradox that this writer who was so attuned to the physical world, who walked

the woods daily, who kept scrupulous records about the changes season by season, was a writer for whom the physical world was finally, not the point. He had an uncanny ability to entertain simultaneously his genuine commitment to “nature” and the immaterial reality that lies behind it.

You may notice that here I have been quoting letters to Harrison Blake. These are the letters that most clearly reveal the Concord of the mind. Here’s a direct example of how “Concord,” in the presence of the Assabet River, could in Thoreau’s letter become something more than mere water. Thoreau is writing Blake to thank him for visiting him and for their boating expedition on the Assabet: “If, forgetting the allurements of the world,” he writes, “I could drink deeply enough of [the river]; if cast adrift from the shore, I could with complete integrity float on it, I should never be seen on the mill-dam again. If there is any depth in me, there is a corresponding depth in it. It is the cold blood of the gods. I paddle and bathe in their artery. . . . That river,—who shall say exactly whence it came, and whither it goes? Does aught that flows come from a higher source? Many things drift downward on its surface which would enrich a man. If you could only be on the alert all day, & every day— And the nights are as long as the days” (*Correspondence 2*, p. 388). Here Thoreau describes his Idealist vision: shed the “allurements of the world,” immerse oneself deeply in the physical, and then experience the artery of the gods. Finally, all of this depends on being “on the alert all day, & every day.” This is the possibility of Concord; this is the enticing vision of what might be. It is here that Thoreau reaches the deepest meaning of “Concord.” He is at home in both worlds.

Thoreau’s persistent interest in the mind and in the unseen reality of being at its

purest was aided and abetted by a Concord that he could reconfigure in his mind. Again to Blake, he says, “It should not be in vain that these things are shown us from day to day. Is not each withered leaf that I see in my walks something which I have traveled to find?—traveled, who can tell how far? What a fool he must be who thinks that his El Dorado is anywhere but where he lives!” (*Correspondence* 1958, p. 538). The search for the fabled treasure of El Dorado begins and ends at home. At every turn the letters, like his public writing, confront us with paradoxes: the man who traveled abroad often also traveled much in Concord; the man who was devoted to nature was equally devoted to spirit; the man who was troubled by his townsmen was devoted to them.

Thoreau spent his adult life examining and recording the immediate world in great detail for a number of reasons. One was to find the material for the figures of speech to make concrete and understandable the immaterial reality that most interested him. And Concord found its place in this mix of nature, metaphor, and philosophy. I think it revealing that in his letters Thoreau finds Concord useful on several levels, but he never talks about the Concord of history. The town, after all, had already quite a history, one which he knew quite well. But he does not invoke that history to his correspondents. When Concord appears in the letters it appears in the present tense.

And so we come back to the beginning: on the eve of his move to Staten Island in 1843 Thoreau writes: “I expect to leave Concord, which is my Rome—and its people, who are my Romans” (*Correspondence 1*, p. 152). It is the Rome of the Republic, not the Rome of the Empire, I think, that Thoreau must mean. His Rome/Concord is devoted to the *res publica* (“the common good,” from which we derive the English “Republic”). A town of

that sort, Thoreau intimates, breeds citizens with Roman virtues of constancy, dignity, and truth. His Massachusetts Rome embodies private virtues in its public presence. Thoreau's "Rome" most surely did not correspond exactly with the actual Concord of the 1840s and '50s, but that's not the point. In his mind the two merged, and from that merger he drew strength and encouragement. If he thought the town could stand for the "*res publica*," he knew that there was a part for him to play. As long as Concord was a "cynosure," he knew where to steer.

I have saved for last what I think the most telling and meaningful example of Thoreau's relationship to his "Rome." In February 1854 Thoreau measured a piece of land for his cousin George Thatcher. Thatcher was one of three legatees of Deacon Ruben Brown, who had recently died. Here is Thoreau's description: "Measuring on Mr. Hubbard's plans of [18]36 and [18]52, which I enlarged, I make the whole area wanted for a cemetery 16 acres & 114 rods. This includes a path one rod wide on the north side of the wood next the meadow, and is all of the Brown Farm north of the New Road, except the meadow of about 7 acres and a small triangle of about a dozen rods next the Agricultural Land. The above result is probably accurate within half an acre; nearer I cannot come with certainty without a resurvey" (*Correspondence 2*, p. 197). The town of Concord later bought the land to create the "New Hill Burying Ground." When it was dedicated in 1855 it was named "Sleepy Hollow." So what we have in the letters is Thoreau helping to create the Sleepy Hollow cemetery in which he is buried. I can't think of a more apt symbol: Thoreau the Concord surveyor helped create the place where he would forever lie. He lived here; he died here; he remains here. His identification with the town is complete. I

quoted earlier his question, “am I not made of Concord dust?” Well, yes, then and now: dust to dust. His remains are the very soil of Concord, in the very place he defined both with his surveying instruments and with his pen.

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)
- Reform Papers* Henry D. Thoreau, *Reform Papers*, ed. Wendell Glick (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973)
- Walden* Henry D. Thoreau, *Walden*, ed. J. Lyndon Shanley (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971)