

A BIT OF UNPUBLISHED CORRESPONDENCE
BETWEEN HENRY D. THOREAU AND
ISAAC T. HECKER.

BY E. HARLOW RUSSELL.

At first thought, and in the light of later years, which revealed such a wide difference in the characters and careers of these two remarkable men, it seems surprising that Henry Thoreau and Isaac Hecker could ever have got into any personal relation whatever. But at the time of this little correspondence they were both young; and youth, no less than misery, acquaints us sometimes with strange bed-fellows. To be sure, both were ardent idealists, both were frank and sincere, both of high and knightly courage. Their armor was their honest thought, and simple truth their utmost skill. This must have been the ground of such sympathy as existed between them.

Hecker at this time had just spent the best part of a year in the spring-morning atmosphere of Brook Farm, then in its prime, where his genial and attaching disposition had won him not a few admiring friends, among whom was George William Curtis, who named the aspiring enthusiast "Ernest the Seeker"; and now, with his eager but somewhat irresolute hand in the strong grasp of Orestes Brownson, the youth was being half-led, half-impelled from within, toward the Catholic Church. He had recently been for some months a lodger in the house of Thoreau's mother at Concord, while taking lessons in Latin and Greek of George Bradford, whose rare worth as a teacher he had learned at Brook Farm. That was how his acquaintance with Thoreau came about. His studies, however, always

fitful and against the grain, had suddenly come to an end, smothered as it were or at least displaced by one of those high tides of inward unrest which visited him at intervals throughout his life. He had gone home to New York and prepared himself for baptism into the Church which appears to have been his destiny quite as much as his choice, when the notion came to him of the adventurous trip to Europe proposed to Thoreau on the spur of the moment in these letters.

This was in 1844, when Hecker was twenty-five. Thoreau, two years his senior, had graduated at Harvard seven years before, had taught school a little, and had tried his hand with effect at literary work. He too, like Hecker, was nearing a crisis in his life; namely, the hermit episode at Walden. For although that "experiment," as he himself called it (for Thoreau knew what he was about), lasted in its original form but little more than two years, it was distinctly the point of departure of his career, and laid out the course from which he never afterwards swerved.

The significance of this correspondence, slight as it is in form and manifestly unstudied in its content, lies in a certain prophetic note, all the more impressive from its unconsciousness, which especially in the case of Thoreau discloses the clearness of his self-knowledge and the consistency and firmness of his self-determination. Curtis, writing of young Hecker as he knew him at Brook Farm, says, "There was nothing ascetic or severe in him, but I have often thought since that his feeling was probably what he might have afterward described as a consciousness that he must be about his Father's business." While such a feeling is but vaguely if at all expressed in his two letters to Thoreau, it constitutes the very core and essence of Thoreau's response. Young as the latter was, unengaged as he seemed even to his intimate friend Channing (his best biographer), he had already heard and heeded the call of his Genius, and his vocation was thenceforth fixed.

In his ripest years, in his most considered utterance, he does but reiterate in substance the declaration of these letters when he says, in that masterpiece of his essays, "Life without Principle,"—"I have been surprised when one has with confidence proposed to me, a grown man, to embark in some enterprise of his, as if I had absolutely nothing to do, my life having been a complete failure hitherto. What a doubtful compliment this is to pay me! As if he had met me half-way across the ocean beating up against the wind, but bound nowhere, and proposed to me to go along with him! If I did, what do you think the underwriters would say? No, no! I am not without employment at this stage of the voyage. To tell the truth, I saw an advertisement for able-bodied seamen, when I was a boy sauntering in my native port, and as soon as I came of age I embarked."

On Hecker's side there was undoubtedly far less of serious purpose; his mood seems youthful, almost boyish; but the glow of it is genuine and characteristic, and I think his biographer, Father Elliott, misses its import when he turns the affair off lightly as "but one of the diversions with which certain souls, not yet enlightened as to their true course, nor arrived at the abandonment of themselves to Divine Providence, are amused." To my mind, these two letters of Hecker's clearly reveal the temperament, at once impetuous and volatile, that went with the man through his troubled life and gave him much of his influence and distinction, as well as cast him oft-times into the fire and oft into the water.

But it is time to let the correspondence speak for itself.

HECKER TO THOREAU.

HENRY THOREAU:

It was not altogether the circumstance of our immediate physical nearness, though this may have [been] the consequence of a higher affinity, that inclined us to commune with each other. This I am fully sensible [of]

since our separation. Oftentimes we observe ourselves to be passive or co-operative agents of profounder principles than we at the time even dream of.

I have been stimulated to write to you at this present moment on account of a certain project which I have formed, which your influence has no slight share, I imagine, in forming. It is, to work our passage to Europe, and to walk, work, and beg if needs be, as far when there as we are inclined to do. We wish to see how it looks, and to court difficulties; for we feel an unknown depth of untried virgin strength which we know of no better way at the present time to call into activity and so dispose of. We desire to go without purse or staff, depending upon the all-embracing love of God, Humanity, and the spark of courage imprisoned in us. Have we the will, we have the strong arms, hard hands to work with, and sound feet to stand upon and walk with. The heavens shall be our vaulted roof, and the green earth beneath our bed and for all other furniture purposes. These are free and may be so used. What can hinder us from going, but our bodies, and shall they do it? We can as well deposit them there as here. Let us take a walk over the fairest portions of this planet Earth and make it ours by seeing them. Let us see what the genius and stupidity of our honored forefathers have heaped up. We wish to kneel at their shrines and embrace their spirits and kiss the ground which they have hallowed with their presence. We shall prove the dollar is not almighty, and the impossible, moonshine. The wide world is before us beckoning us to come, let us accept and embrace it. Reality shall be our antagonist, and our lives, if sold, not at a good bargain, for a certainty. How does the idea strike you? I prefer at least to go this way before going farther in the woods. The past let us take with us; we reverence, we love it; but forget not that our eyes are in our face, set to the beautiful unimagined future. Let us be Janus-faced, with a beard [-ed] and [a] beardless face. Will you accept this invitation? Let me know what your impressions are as soon as it is your pleasure.

Remember me to your kind family. Tomorrow I take the first step towards becoming a *visible* member of the Roman Catholic Church. If you and your good family do

not become greater sinners, I shall claim you all as good catholics, for she claims "all baptised infants, all innocent children of every religious denomination; and all grown up Christians who have preserved their baptismal innocence, though they make no outward profession of the catholic faith, are yet claimed as her children by the Roman Catholic Church."

Yours very truly,

ISAAC HECKER.

N. Y., Thursday, July 31, 1844.

THOREAU TO HECKER.

Concord, Aug. 14, 1844.

Friend HECKER,—

I am glad to hear your voice from that populous city, and the more so for the tenor of its discourse. I have but just returned from a pedestrian excursion somewhat similar to that you propose, *parvis componere magna*, to the Catskill mountains, over the principal mountains of this State, subsisting mainly on bread and berries, and slumbering on the mountain tops. As usually happens, I now feel a slight sense of dissipation. Still, I am strongly tempted by your proposal, and experience a decided schism between my outward and inward tendencies. Your method of travelling, especially—to live along the road, citizens of the world, without haste or petty plans—I have often proposed this to my dreams, and still do. But the fact is, I cannot so decidedly postpone exploring the *Farther Indies*, which are to be reached, you know, by other routes and other methods of travel. I mean that I constantly return from every external enterprise with disgust, to fresh faith in a kind of Brahminical, Artesian, Inner Temple life. All my experience, as yours probably, proves only this reality. Channing wonders how I can resist your invitation, I, a single man—unfettered,—and so do I. Why, there are Roncesvalles, the Cape de Finisterre, and the Three Kings of Cologne; Rome, Athens, and the rest, to be visited in serene untemporal hours, and all history to revive in one's memory, as he went by the way, with splendors too bright for this world—I know how it is. But is not here too Roncesvalles with greater lustre? Unfortunately, it may prove dull and desultory weather

enough here, but better trivial days with faith than the fairest ones lighted by sunshine alone. Perchance my *Wanderjahr* has not arrived, but you cannot wait for that. I hope you will find a companion who will enter as heartily into your schemes as I should have done.

I remember you, as it were, with the whole Catholic Church at your skirts. And the other day, for a moment, I think I understood your relation to that body; but the thought was gone again in a twinkling, as when a dry leaf falls from its stem over our heads, but is instantly lost in the rustling mass at our feet.

I am really sorry that the Genius will not let me go with you, but I trust that it will conduct to other adventures, and so, if nothing prevents, we will compare notes at last.

Yrs. &c.,

HENRY D. THOREAU.

HECKER TO THOREAU.

I know not but I shall receive an answer to the letter I sent you a fortnight ago, before you will receive this one; however, as the idea of making an indefinite pedestrian tour on the other side of the Atlantic has in all possible ways increased in my imagination and given me a desire to add a few more words on the project, I will do so, in the hope of stimulating you to a decision. How the thought has struck you I know not; its impracticability or impossibility in the judgment of others, would not, I feel assured, deter you in any way from the undertaking; it would rather be a stimulus to the purpose, I think, in you, as it is in me. 'Tis impossible; sir, therefore we do it. The conceivable is possible; it is in harmony with the inconceivable we should act. Our true life is in the can-not. To do what we can do is to do nothing, is death. Silence is much more respectable than repetition.

The idea of making such a tour I have opened to one or two who I thought might throw some light on the subject. I asked the opinion of the Catholic Bishop [McCloskey] who has travelled considerably in Europe. But I find that in every man there are certain things within him which are beyond the ken and counsel of others. The age is so effeminate that it is too timid to give heroic counsel. It neither will enter the kingdom of heaven nor have others

to do so. I feel, and believe you feel so too, that to doubt the ability to realize such a thought is only worthy of a smile and pity. We feel ourself mean in conceiving such a feasible thing, and would keep it silent. This is not sufficient self-abandonment for our being, scarce enough to affect it. To die is easy, scarce worth a thought; but to be and live is an inconceivable greatness. It would be folly to sit still and starve from mere emptiness, but to leave behind the casement in battling for some hidden idea is an altitude beyond conception, a monument more durable than the chisel can sculpture.

I imagine us walking among the past and present greatness of our ancestors (for the present in fact, the present of the old world, to us is ancient) doing reverence to their remaining glory. If, though, I am inclined to bow more lowly to the spiritual hero than to the exhibition of great physical strength, still not all of that primitive heroic blood of our forefathers has been lost before it reached our veins. We feel it swell sometimes as though it were cased in steel, and the huge broad-axe of Cœur de Lion seems glittering before us, and we awake in another world as in a dream.

I know of no other person but you that would be inclined to go on such an excursion. The idea and yourself were almost instantaneous. If needs be, for a few dollars we can get across the ocean. The ocean! if but to cross this being like being, it were not unprofitable. The Bishop thought it might be done with a certain amount of funds to depend on. If this makes it practicable for others, to us it will be but sport. It is useless for me to speak thus to you, for if there are reasons for your not going they are others than these.

You will inform me how you are inclined as soon as practicable. Half inclined I sometimes feel to go alone if I cannot get your company. I do not know now what could have directed my steps to Concord other than this. May it prove so.

It is only the fear of death makes us reason of impossibilities. We shall possess all if we but abandon ourselves.

Yours sincerely,

ISAAC.

N. Y., August 15, '44.
To HENRY THOREAU.

THOREAU TO HECKER.

I improve the occasion of my mother's sending to acknowledge the receipt of your stirring letter. 'You have probably received mine by this time. I thank you for not anticipating any vulgar objections on my part. *Far* travel, very *far* travel, or travail, comes near to the worth of staying at home. Who knows whence his education is to come! Perhaps I may drag my anchor at length, or rather, when the *winds* which blow *over* the deep fill my sails, may stand away for distant parts—for now I seem to have a firm *ground* anchorage, though the harbor is low-shored enough, and the traffic with the natives inconsiderable—I may be away to Singapore by the next tide.

I like well the ring of your last maxim—"It is only the fear of death makes us reason of impossibilities." And but for fear, death itself is an impossibility.

Believe me, I can hardly let it end so. If you do not go soon let me hear from you again.

Yrs. in great haste,

HENRY D. THOREAU.

(Subjoined note, apparently in Hecker's handwriting:—"The proposition made to Thoreau was to take nothing with us, work our passage across the Atlantic, and so through England, France, Germany and Italy. I. T. H.")

It was not permitted the youthful enthusiasts to "compare notes at last." From that hour their paths widely diverged. In a twelvemonth the Atlantic, and more than the Atlantic, lay between them. The novitiate had joined the order of the Redemptorist Fathers at St. Trond in Belgium; and the hermit, "the bachelor of thought and Nature," as Emerson calls him, was in his cabin on the wooded shore of Walden Pond. Neither ever looked back, and it is doubtful if they ever met again. The ardent propagandist did indeed pursue Thoreau, as he pursued Curtis, with kindly-meant letters of fervent appeal to enter with him the labyrinth of the Catholic Church; but he might as well have called after a wild deer in the forest or an eagle in the upper air.

The work which these men did in after years cannot, it seems to me, be profitably compared. It will inevitably be judged from opposite points of view. It is idle to talk of more or less where the difference is one not of degree but of kind.

However, with aims and means so diverse and exclusive as to be distinctly antagonistic, Thoreau and Hecker possessed in common one predominant characteristic, namely, a redoubtable egoism—using the term in no disparaging sense, something that suggests what is called in physics the hydrostatic paradox, in virtue of which the smallest single drop of water holds its own against the ocean. The manifestation of this quality, however, as a trait of character was wholly unlike in the two, even apparently to the point of diametric opposition. In Thoreau its development was outward and obvious, in rugged features of eccentricity and self-sufficiency sculptured as it were in high relief against the background of society and custom. He was well practised in the grammar of dissent. As Emerson says, "It cost him nothing to say No; indeed, he found it much easier than to say Yes." It was nothing for him to declare, and to repeat in one form or another on almost every page of his writings, "the greater part of what my neighbors call good I believe in my soul to be bad." This he says without emphasis as if it were a matter of course, scarcely calculated to provoke surprise or dissent. The selfsame quality in Hecker, on the contrary, took the subtle and illusive shape of obedience to an Inward Voice, never suspected of being his own, always projected as a Brocken spectre upon the clouds, not unlike the *dæmon* of Socrates, and which thus wore the guise of self-effacement and pious submission to the immediate and almost articulate behests of a divine authority. The figure of Hecker's egoism was engraved in his nature like a die or an intaglio, while in Thoreau, as I have said, it was reversed and stood out with the bold relief of a cameo. But the

lineaments were the same in both, with only this difference, that Thoreau's personal pronoun was *I*, and Hecker's was *It*.

The late Professor Clifford was wont to maintain that there is a special theological faculty or insight, analogous to the scientific, poetic, and artistic faculty; and that the persons in whom this genius is exceptionally developed are the founders of religions and religious orders. It is apparent that Isaac Hecker's nature from his youth partook largely of this quality. He early showed an affinity with the supersensible and the supernatural, was easily "possessed," his mind on that side being primitive and credulous to a degree. Such logic as he had—and his writings are full of it—was the logic of instinct and feeling, not of fact. To him, possibilities, if conceivable and desirable, easily became probabilities, and probabilities certainties. With this temperament, which Curtis mildly characterizes as "sanguine," it is not difficult to understand why the paramount purpose of his life should have been to establish in this country a propaganda of such persuasive power as to sweep the American people *en masse* into the Catholic Church, and it was upon this object that all his energies and hopes were centred in a burning focus of endeavor.

The genius of Thoreau moved in a totally different plane. He was preëminently of this world, both in its actual and ideal aspects, and he found it so rich and satisfying to his whole nature that he yearned for no other. Channing aptly names him "poet-naturalist," for he united in harmonious combination accurate perception of external facts and relations, with an imaginative insight and sympathy that easily and habitually transcended the scope of mere science and ratiocination. He possessed not only feet, but wings, and was equally at home on the solid ground of natural law and in the airy spaces of fancy. Time, which he said was the stream he went a-fishing in, time and the world about him,—these were the adapted and sufficient

habitat of his soul. He held it but poor philosophy to make large drafts on the past or the future or the elsewhere. Nature was his heaven, and the present moment his immortality. Hear what he writes in his Journal, under date of November 1, 1858, less than four years before his death: "There is no more tempting novelty than this new November. No going to Europe or to another world is to be named with it. Give me the old familiar walk, post-office and all, with this ever new self, with this infinite expectation and faith which does not know when it is beaten. We'll go nutting once more. We'll pluck the nut of the world and crack it in the winter evenings. Theatres and all other sight-seeing are puppet shows in comparison. I will take another walk to the cliff, another row on the river, another skate on the meadow, be out in the first snow, and associate with the winter birds. Here I am at home. In the bare and bleached crust of the earth, I recognize my friend. . . . This morrow that is ever knocking with irresistible force at our door, there is no such guest as that. I will stay at home and receive company. I want nothing new. If I can have but a tithe of the old secured to me, I will spurn all wealth besides. Think of the consummate folly of attempting to go away from *here*. . . . How many things can you go away from? They see the comet from the northwest coast just as plainly as we do, and the same stars through its tail. Take the shortest way round and stay at home. A man dwells in his native valley like a corolla in its calyx, like an acorn in its cup. Here, of course, is all that you love, all that you expect, all that you are. Here is your bride-elect, as close to you as she can be got. Here is all the best and the worst you can imagine. What more do you want? Foolish people think that what they imagine is somewhere else. That stuff is not made in any factory but their own."

To clarify and keep sane his vision, bodily and spiritual ;

to observe, to record, to interpret; to glorify and enjoy to the full the life that here and now is,—this was Thoreau's mission; and he fulfilled it to the end, through evil report and good report, "more straining on for plucking back." Nor did his determination waver or his ardor blanch in the very face of death, as the following incident strikingly attests:—

A few days before he died his friend, Parker Pillsbury (of anti-slavery fame), made a brief farewell call at his bedside, and he closes his scrupulous account of the interview in these words: "Then I spoke only once more to him, and cannot remember my exact words. But I think my question was substantially this: 'You seem so near the brink of the dark river, that I almost wonder how the opposite shore may appear to you.' Then he answered: 'One world at a time.'"

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