

THOREAU'S STOICISM IN *LETTERS TO A SPIRITUAL SEEKER*:
THE SPIRITUAL DIRECTION OF HARRISON BLAKE

CONTEXT OF THE CONTRIBUTION

Only a few days after Henry David Thoreau's untimely death on the 6th of May 1862, his former mentor and spiritual father of the American Transcendentalism movement Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote a brief obituary of him to be published on a Boston newspaper. The day after, on the occasion of Thoreau's funeral, Emerson also took upon himself to deliver an eulogy for his deceased friend, a revised and expanded edition of which eventually appeared in August on the pages of the *Atlantic Monthly Magazine* with the simple title 'Thoreau.' The last (and, as we shall see, eventually also lasting) picture by which Emerson decided to consign his pupil's myth to posterity in both these addresses, as Myerson, who edited their newest edition, noted, was the unflattering one of "a humorless stoic."¹ As a matter of fact, Emerson's obituary presented Thoreau as "a man of stoic temperament" that "led the life of a philosopher,"² and his final commemorative essay depicts him as fundamentally a "hermit and stoic" – although one "fond of sympathy" for the younger generations.³ Any "tenderness" in Thoreau's character, as it transpires from his poem 'Sympathy,' Emerson tells us, must be sought well "under that triple steel of stoicism, and the intellectual subtlety it could animate."⁴ If Emerson's posthumous characterization of Thoreau as a modern-day Stoic proved eventually a fortunate one, amongst his harshest critics and close friends alike⁵ – so

¹ Joel Myerson, "Emerson's" Thoreau": A New Edition from Manuscript," *Studies in the American Renaissance* (1979): 17. Similarly, also R. N. Hudspeth, "General Introduction," in *H. D. Thoreau, The Writings of Henry D. Thoreau - The Correspondence, Volume 1: 1834-1848*, ed. R. N. Hudspeth (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 411. According to the latter scholar: "In each of his assessments of Thoreau, Emerson had described his friend as a Stoic, a term that for Emerson denoted a manner of perceiving and living that he though exemplary."

² Myerson, "Emerson's" Thoreau": A New Edition from Manuscript," 18.

³ *Ibid.*, 39. Moreover, as Myerson reports, in the original unedited manuscript of the essay, at 37.30, Emerson had originally introduced Thoreau, once again, as "A stoic," but then deleted it. *Ibid.*, 63.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 51. Interestingly, as Myerson shows, the original unedited manuscript, at this passage (51.13-14), reports the following: "tenderness [in a stout heart' *del.*] under that triple steel of [obdurate' *del.*] stoicism [*intrl.*]." *Ibid.*, 87.

⁵ Brooks Atkinson refers to Thoreau's "stoical, boorish and provincial" behaviour. J. Brooks Atkinson, *Henry Thoreau, The Cosmic Yankee* (Folcroft Library Editions, 1927), 140. According to Alger, Thoreau "put on stoicism and wrote it until the mask became the face." William Rounseville Alger, *The Solitudes of Nature and of Man; Or, The Loneliness of Human Life* (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1867), 337. With some dissatisfaction Marbel noted in 1902 that: "Until very recent years it has been the honest opinion of the general world of readers that Thoreau was a stoic and a hermit." Annie Russell Marble, *Thoreau: His Home, Friends, and Books* (New York: T. Y. Crowell & Co, 1902), 103. Among Thoreau's close friends, Bronson Alcott noted that: "there is in him an integrity and sense of justice that makes possible and actual the virtue of Sparta and the stoics." Samuel Arthur Jones, *Pertaining to Thoreau* (E. B. Hill, 1901), 109. In the same volume, Samuel Storrow Higginson considers Thoreau's plain dress as "consistent with this stoical principles." *Ibid.*, 118. For Channing, Thoreau was "a natural stoic, not taught from Epictetus nor the trail of Indians." William Ellery Channing, *Thoreau: The Poet-Naturalist* (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1873), 6. It is worth noting that, even at this early stage of his reception, however influential, Thoreau's standing as a Stoic was often challenged. Robert Louis Stevenson, while not failing to register the parallel between Thoreau and the Stoics, claims that the latter was "no ascetic, rather an Epicurean of the nobler sort." Robert Louis Stevenson, (London and Glasgow: Collins, 1856), 95. Thoreau's joyful naturalism, according to Bradford Torrey, one of the early editors of his journal, made him "a pretty stoical sort of Epicurean." Bradford Torrey, *Friends on the Shelf* (Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1906), 124. More radically, according to Van Doren, "Thoreau is out-and-out Epicurean." Mark Van Doren,

much so that, by the time Cochnower's dedicated study 'Thoreau and Stoicism' appears in 1938, "Thoreau's stoicism has come to be one of those facts that 'go without saying'"⁶ –, this image encountered right from the beginning the stark opposition of Thoreau's sister, Sophia. "Mr. Emerson's article in the 'Atlantic' I value very highly," she wrote to Daniel Ricketson in February 1863,

But you know that he always eschewed pathos, and reading it for consolation as a stricken mourner, I felt somewhat disappointed. Henry never impressed me as the Stoic which Mr. E. represents him. I think Henry was a person of much more faith than Mr. Emerson.⁷

These initial divergences of perspective between Emerson and Sophia eventually developed into a actual battle over Thoreau's memory when it came to edit the first posthumous volume of his correspondence, with which Emerson, after many vicissitudes, was in the end entrusted.⁸ The first proofs of the edition arrived to Concord for correction in February 1865 show that Emerson had eventually decided to go through with the same editorial project centered around Thoreau's correspondence with his pupil Harrison Blake that, before his refusal, he and Bronson Alcott had in September 1863 initially hoped to assign to Blake himself.⁹ In addition to nine of his best poems – including the already cited 'Sympathy' –, the volume counted sixty-five *Letters to Various Persons*, as per its title, twenty-nine of which (more than to any other correspondent) were directed to Blake. If we count also the twelve letters to Daniel Ricketson, another of Thoreau's most close disciples, the overwhelming majority of Emerson's collection – up to two-thirds of it – was occupied by Thoreau's philosophical epistolary with his *protégés*, rather than letters to his friends and family. "In *Letters to Various Persons*," as it has been noted, "Emerson presented an image of Thoreau that was consistent with the Stoic ethic he had attributed to his friend in 1862," that is, in both his obituary and essay for the *Atlantic*.¹⁰ Emerson's project did not fail to provoke also this time Sophia Thoreau's discontent, of which she speaks again to Ricketson on the 17th of July 1865: "Mr. Emerson was very kind in assuming the task of editing the letters, and I do not like to express any dissatisfaction in relation thereto, but I despair of justice being done to Henry's character by any one."¹¹ And Emerson, having edited out of the collection many of the most affectionate passages of

"The Solitude of Henry David Thoreau" (A. B. University of Illinois, 1915), 60. The most recent characterization of Thoreau as "half Stoic and half Epicurean" is that of Pierre Hadot, "There Are Nowadays Professors of Philosophy, but not Philosophers," *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 19, no. 3 (2005): 233. *Contra* Hadot, see Toby J. Svoboda, "Thoreau's Walden: Epicureanism or Stoicism?," *The Concord Saunterer* (Forthcoming). A reference to this contemporary debate can be found in Kenneth S Sacks, "Stoicism in America," in *The Routledge Handbook of the Stoic Tradition* (Routledge, 2016), 335.

⁶ Mary Edith Cochnower, "Thoreau and Stoicism" (University of Iowa, 1938), 3, n4.

⁷ Daniel Ricketson, *Daniel Ricketson and His Friends: Letters, Poems, Sketches, Etc.* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1902), 155. Myerson, as well as many other contemporary commentators, as we shall see, shares Sophia's worries: "his essay ['Thoreau' in the *Atlantic*] more often than not reveals, by what it stresses and by what it omits from Thoreau's life and personality, more about its author than its subject." Myerson, "Emerson's" Thoreau": A New Edition from Manuscript," 17.

⁸ For a full chronicle of the troubled path by which Thoreau's *Letters to Various Persons* reached the public, see Hudspeth, "General Introduction," 409ff.

⁹ "See Emerson and talk about Thoreau's letters to Blake, which we agree Blake should edit. There are some forty or more, and, as Thoreau wrote always with consideration on his own themes, these must all be good for printing. A few might be added to the collection, written by him to Emerson, [Thomas] Cholmondeley, Ricketson, and perhaps other persons." Amos Bronson Alcott, *The Journals of Bronson Alcott* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1865), 357.

¹⁰ Hudspeth, "General Introduction," 412. "In the letters he chose to include, Emerson naturally emphasized the characteristics of Thoreau he most valued: his Stoicism, his Idealism, his life as a seeker. [...] So Emerson used very little of the letters Thoreau wrote to him and his family, concentrating instead on the long, philosophical letters to Blake and Ricketson." *Ibid.*, 413-4.

¹¹ Ricketson, *Daniel Ricketson and His Friends: Letters, Poems, Sketches, Etc.*, 165.

Thoreau's correspondence, arguably to not undermine Thoreau's stature as a modern Stoic philosopher,¹² inexcusably failed to do so, according to Sophia:

I was disappointed to find that some passages betraying natural affection had been omitted. I consulted Mrs. Emerson, who said that her husband was a Greek, and that he treated his own writings in the same manner. I expressed my desire that the passages should not be left out – it did not seem quite honest to Henry not to print them. I presume that the sentences to which I refer seemed to Mr. Emerson trivial.¹³

Sophia thus proceeded to restore many of these omitted passages from the proofs of *Letters to Various Persons* – such as the affectionate close to Thoreau's letter to Mrs. Emerson "Shake a day-day to Edith, and say 'good-night' to Ellen for me"¹⁴ – in Emerson's absence. Upon his return to Concord, while eventually retaining Sophia's amendments to the manuscript, Emerson did not involve her anymore in the editorial process before the publication, evidently displeased by her initiative and interference with his plans: "I did not see any of the proofs after Mr. Emerson's return," Sophia wrote Ricketson in the same letter. "He told me that he had *bragged* that the coming volume would be *a most perfect piece of stoicism*, and he feared that I had marred his classic statue."¹⁵ The first posthumous writing by Thoreau, *Letters to Various Persons*, when it finally reached the public in July 1865, was "something of a compromise" between the two contenders to Thoreau's memory.¹⁶ However, if Emerson declared himself all in all satisfied with his volume – so much so that he considered *Letters to Various Persons* "thus far the most important of [Thoreau's] printed books, though the least in size"¹⁷ –, as we shall see, Sophia Thoreau couldn't say the same.

In the introduction to his expanded edition of Thoreau's correspondence published in 1894 with the explicative title *Familiar Letters*, Sanborn comments thus on Emerson's original collection. "The Letters of Thoreau, though not less remarkable in some aspects than what he wrote carefully for publication, have thus far scarcely had justice done them. The selection made [by Emerson] for a small volume in 1865 [*Letters to Various Persons*] was designedly done to exhibit one phase of his character, – the most striking, if you will, but not the most native or attractive":¹⁸ namely, the philosophical or stoic aspect of it.¹⁹ After interposing a long quotation by Ellery Channing, in which Thoreau is characterized as a "household treasure," Sanborn confesses that it

¹² "In letters to his own family member Henry was playful, punning, and imaginative; in those to Emerson himself he often wrote at length about the Emerson household. The good humor and occasional high spirits displayed in these letters would have softened the Stoicism and diluted the Transcendentalist rigor that Emerson sought to highlight." Hudspeth, "General Introduction," 414.

¹³ Ricketson, *Daniel Ricketson and His Friends: Letters, Poems, Sketches, Etc.*, 166. "On Jan. 28 1865, Ellen Emerson wrote to her father that miss Thoreau had called that day, anxious about the proofs, and 'desires that you should know that all kind beginnings and endings of Mr. Thoreau's letters, and little messages to friends, being left out give a too cold idea of him, agreeing with the popular notion that he wanted affection.'" Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson* 5. 5 (New York, NY: Columbia Univ. Pr., 1939), 314, n67.

¹⁴ Ricketson, *Daniel Ricketson and His Friends: Letters, Poems, Sketches, Etc.*, 166.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* Second emphasis mine.

¹⁶ Robert D Richardson, "A Perfect Piece of Stoicism," *The Thoreau Society Bulletin*, no. 153 (1980): 1.

¹⁷ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990-1995), 9: 186.

¹⁸ F. B. Sanborn, *Familiar Letters of Henry David Thoreau* (Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1894), vii-viii.

¹⁹ As Sanborn makes clear later on in the collection: "These letters for the most part explain themselves, with aid of several to Thoreau's family, which the purpose of Emerson, in 1865, to present his friend in a stoical character, had excluded from the collection then printed." *Ibid.*, 123. Also Henry Salt sided with Sophia Thoreau on this one: "It seems that Emerson, in selecting them [the letters], made it his object to exhibit a 'perfect piece of stoicism,' and therefore inserted only a very far of the domestic letter, which showed the other and tenderer side of Thoreau's character – an arrangement which was justly described by Sophia Thoreau as not quite fair to her brother." Henry Stephens Salt, *The Life of Henry David Thoreau* (London: Richard Bentley & Sons, 1890), 276.

was none other than Sophia Thoreau's dissatisfaction with Emerson's criteria of selection of the letters that went into making *Letters to Various Persons* that prompted him to prepare his new edition.²⁰

This [referring to Ellery Channing's testimony of Thoreau's domestic charm] is preeminently true; and the affectionate conviction of this made his sister Sophia dissatisfied with Emerson's rule of selection among the letters. This she confided to me, and this determined me, should occasion offer, to give the world some day a fuller and more familiar view of our friend.²¹ For this purpose I have chosen many letters and more notes, illustrating his domestic and gossipy moods – for that element was in his mixed nature, inherited from the lively maternal side, – and even the colloquial vulgarity (using the word in its strict sense of 'popular speech') that he something allowed himself. [...] Thus I have not rejected the common and trivial in these letters; being well assured that what the increasing number of Thoreau's readers desire is to see this piquant original just as he was – not arrayed in the paradoxical cloak of the Stoic sage, nor sitting complacent in the cynic earthenware cave of Diogenes, and bidding Alexander stand out of his sunshine. He did those acts also; but they were not the whole man.²²

Unlike Emerson's *Letters to Various Persons*, which essentially divided the critics – in it "those who were sympathetic to [Thoreau] found much to admire, while those who thought him overrated scoffed" –, as Hudspeth reports, the reception of Sanborn's *Familiar Letters* was "almost uniformly positive."²³ Reviewers for the most part seem to have appreciated "the more relaxed nature of the book," and the new light which the latter shed on its author,²⁴ which, as one reviewer noted, is here "entirely different from the personality expressed in his books": that is, "social, friendly, human, and takes a large interest in life."²⁵ The superseding of Emerson's *Letters to Various Persons* by Sanborn's *Familiar Letters* not only set an important precedent for future

²⁰ Sanborn writes elsewhere that "Emerson chose to consider him [Thoreau] a Stoic and little else – a classification his family would not accept." F. B. Sanborn, *The Life of Henry David Thoreau* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1917), 347. Cochnower "cannot agree with the spirit of Sanborn's remark." Cochnower, "Thoreau and Stoicism," 11.

²¹ As Cochnower noted: "These [letters from Sanborn's edition] show Thoreau almost needful of sympathy, are far less lofty than the others [those of Emerson's edition], spoke *ex cathedra* to a disciple, not at all unlike the epistles of Seneca." "Thoreau and Stoicism," 12, n11. Also according to Marble: "The earlier volumes [of Thoreau's journal and letters], which seemed to show 'the perfect Stoic' only revealed a part of his character." Marble, *Thoreau: His Home, Friends, and Books*, 327.

²² Sanborn, *Familiar Letters of Henry David Thoreau*, viii-ix. See also Emerson, *The letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson* 5, 314, n67. There it was noted that "Sophia's feeling seems to have prompted Sanborn's purpose to prepare a new edition, to include particularly 'familiar' letters." Elsewhere in the collection, Sanborn reiterates this idea: "The letters that follow are among the longest Thoreau ever composed, and will give a new conception of the writer to those who may have figured him as a cold, stoical, or selfish person, withdrawn from society and its duties." Sanborn, *Familiar Letters of Henry David Thoreau*, 158. Also Salt welcomed Sanborn's re-edition of Thoreau's correspondence: "It is satisfactory to know that Mr. Sanborn will probably some day edit another batch of the letters, consisting chiefly of those addressed to Thoreau's own family and to Emerson. This will be a valuable corrective of the partial impression created by the earlier volume." Salt, *The Life of Henry David Thoreau*, 276. Channing's remarks are also telling: "His [Thoreau's] letters – of which more might have been printed – are abominably didactic, fitted to deepen the heroic drain." Channing, *Thoreau: The Poet-Naturalist*, 257. According to Hudspeth, Sanborn's edition of Thoreau's correspondence in many respects succeeded in respecting Sophia's wishes: "By including Thoreau's letters to his parents and siblings and those to Emerson, as well as letters to Blake and Ricketson that had not been made available before, Sanborn offered evidence to complicate the Stoic persona that Emerson presented in 1865." Hudspeth, "General Introduction," 425.

²³ "General Introduction," 427.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 427-28.

²⁵ Gary Scharnhorst, *Henry David Thoreau: An Annotated Bibliography of Comment and Criticism before 1900* (New York: Garland, 1992), 324, n1824.

editions of Thoreau's correspondence,²⁶ but marked an important turning point for Thoreau studies as a whole. Since the end of the editorial controversy surrounding Thoreau's correspondence, contemporary scholars did not lose any chance to revive Sophia Thoreau's early attempt to deconstruct Emerson's final characterization of his pupil as a Stoic philosopher, promoting what Gross called "a campaign to humanize Thoreau"²⁷ – "that terrible Thoreau," to pick up Emerson's own expression in Thoreau's funeral eulogy that also serves here as the title of Gross's contribution. In this vein, scholars have either tried to establish, as Harding did, that Thoreau "was not the cold, unemotional stoic that some have believed," or, like Furtak, have qualified that, if "Thoreau [was] basically in accord with ancient Stoic ethics," his is however an "unorthodox neo-Stoicism": that is, to refer to the paradoxical title of the scholar's contribution, an 'emotional stoicism.'²⁸

If that of transmitting to posterity an image of Thoreau's character as complex and variegated as possible might certainly be considered as a valuable task for purely biographical purposes, systematically deconstructing Emerson's characterization of his pupil as a Stoic philosopher has actually done a disservice to Thoreau's memory, delaying the recognition of what is easily his most distinctive contribution to nineteenth century American philosophy for a long time: namely, his revival of the ancient metaphilosophical conception of philosophy as a way of life.²⁹ As Cochnower most aptly noted, in fact, "Emerson was as well aware as anybody of the warm side of Thoreau's nature" and was actually "much better informed than most regarding the meaning of the term Stoic, that it extended beyond merely negative values," such as aloofness, emotional frigidity and the stereotypical stiff upper lip.³⁰ In a pivotal contribution to the topic appeared some forty years ago, Richardson convincingly made the case, more recently re-proposed also by Risinger, that "for Emerson and Alcott and the Transcendentalists generally, stoicism meant much more a body of ideas than it did a personality stereotype. Stoicism, like Zen, is a body of philosophical doctrines, a

²⁶ For a detailed reconstruction of the editions of Thoreau's correspondence since Sanborn's *Familiar Letters* up to the contemporary Princeton edition, see Hudspeth, "General Introduction," 428ff. Suffice it here to note that, starting from Sanborn's edition, the editorial principle that guided all successive publications of Thoreau's correspondence has been that of including as many letters from as many correspondents as possible to complicate and nuance even further Thoreau's image. An important turning point in this regard, as Hudspeth notes, was represented by the 1958 New York University Press edition of *The Correspondence of Henry David Thoreau*: "For the first time readers had access to documents representing the entire range of Thoreau's life, from his college days to his final weeks. He is seen at the center of his family, as part of a circle of friends, as a businessman and as a surveyor." *Ibid.*, 432.

²⁷ Robert A. Gross, "That Terrible Thoreau: Concord and Its Hermit," in *A Historical Guide to Henry David Thoreau*, ed. William E. Cain (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 185. On the futility of these scholarly endeavors, see early on Mark Van Doren, *Henry David Thoreau, a Critical Study* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1916), 4-5.

²⁸ Rick Anthony Furtak, "Thoreau's Emotional Stoicism," *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 17, no. 2 (2003): 122 and 23.

²⁹ I'm here in full accord with Risinger, according to whom: "This salvaging of [Thoreau's] character from caricature seems a vital operation, a prerequisite for any good biography. And yet delivering Thoreau from his own Stoicism might be less revelatory, or even less radical or biographically interesting, than rethinking its ambit and aims." Jacob Risinger, "Reframing Thoreau's Stoic Biography," *The Concord Saunterer* 27 (2019): 120. Note that the first volume explicitly intended to recognize Thoreau's philosophical relevance appeared as late as in 2012: Rick Anthony Ellsworth Jonathan Reid James D. Furtak, *Thoreau's Importance for Philosophy* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012). The claim that Thoreau deserves to be reinserted at full rights in his ancient metaphilosophical tradition can be found in much of contemporary literature. See Sandra Laugier, "Pierre Hadot as a reader of Wittgenstein," *Paragraph* 34, no. 3 (2011). Richard Shusterman and Pierre Lauret, "La philosophie comme vie éveillée chez Emerson et Thoreau," *Cahiers philosophiques*, no. 4 (2009). But also in the interesting works by Onfray: Michel Onfray, *Vivre une vie philosophique: Thoreau le sauvage* (Le Passeur, 2017). And also the second chapter of *Schopenhauer, Thoreau, Stirner: le radicalità esistenziali* (Milano: Ponte alle Grazie, 2013). Similar considerations can be found also in Xavier Pavie, *Exercices spirituels: leçons de la philosophie contemporaine* (Les Belles Lettres, 2013). On the topic, from a Foucaultian perspective, see Kenneth W Stickers, "The 'Art of Living': Aesthetics of Existence in Foucault and American Philosophy," *Radical Philosophy Review* 12, no. 1/2 (2009).

³⁰ Cochnower, "Thoreau and Stoicism," 12, n11. Cf. Van Doren, "The Solitude of Henry David Thoreau," 59-60. According to the latter, "Emerson was as unqualified to recognize a perfect piece of Stoicism as was Thoreau himself."

group of perceptions, and, also like Zen, it is more than that. It has aspects of a religion, and is in fact *a way of life* with a certain perennial attractiveness."³¹ It is my contention that it is precisely in this existential perspective, popularized in the last decades by the works of Pierre Hadot,³² that we should understand the 'perfect piece of Stoicism' that Emerson wanted to make out of Thoreau's philosophical correspondence with his disciples in *Letters to Various Persons*: a perfect example of spiritual direction on the model of Seneca's *Letters to Lucilius*.³³

If this was what Emerson understood by the term Stoicism which he systematically tried to associate with his pupil since 1862 – an entire way of life, rather than some stereotypical personality traits –, there remain to ascertain how faithful to the intentions motivating Thoreau's correspondence with his pupils Emerson's editorial framing of Thoreau's *Letter to Various Persons* as a 'perfect piece of Stoicism' can now retrospectively be assessed to have been.³⁴ A comparative analysis of Thoreau's correspondence with Blake – as most recently collected by P. Dean in *Letters*

³¹ Richardson, "A Perfect Piece of Stoicism," 2. Emphasis mine. Similarly, also Robert D. Richardson, *Henry Thoreau: A Life of the Mind* (University of California Press, 2015), 189. In his biography of Emerson, Richardson writes: "Emerson knows what the Stoic has always known. Real knowledge may be unattainable; the question therefore is not 'What can I know?' but 'How should I live?'" *Emerson: The Mind on Fire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015), 403. Following Richardson, also William B. Irvine, *A Guide to the Good Life: The Ancient Art of Stoic Joy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 211-12. Sometime the term 'Stoicism' seems to be used by Emerson not in reference to the Stoic way of living but to philosophical living itself. In his conversations with Woodbury, in fact, Emerson refers to Thoreau as "a greater Stoic than Zeno or Scaevola or Xenophanes" – greater not because he adhered more closely than Zeno, Scaevola or Xenophanes to the Stoic way of life – relevantly, the latter of the three, is not even a Stoic but a pre-Socratic! –, but, as he puts it, "because nothing of impurity clung to him, a man whose core and whose breath was conscience." Charles Johnson Woodbury and Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Talks with Ralph Waldo Emerson* (New York: The Baker & Taylor Co., 1890), 79. We find the same intuition in John Burroughs' *Last Harvest*, according to which: "He [Thoreau] was stoical, but not philosophical." John Burroughs, *The Last Harvest* (Cambridge: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1922), 122. By the latter formula it was meant that "Thoreau did not give us a philosophy, but a life." *Ibid.*, 108. Also according to Cochnower, "Emerson practically identified Stoicism with ethics," that is with the philosophical way of life. Cochnower, "Thoreau and Stoicism," 10. Similarly, see also Risinger: "we might think of Thoreau's Stoicism as not so much an attainment or a strict affiliation, but a way of life, an exercise or practice enacted – habitually or haltingly – in a sequence of moments. [...] Philosophy is not wisdom, but the life one lives in pursuing wisdom. In this sense, thinking about Thoreau as a Stoic would entail not a question of what he read [...] but a thick description of his practice of regimen, his way of seeing or even feeling the world." Risinger, "Reframing Thoreau's Stoic Biography," 121.

³² That Thoreau lived according to the Stoic (but importantly also the Epicurean) mode of life was also Pierre Hadot's take. Hadot, "There Are Nowadays Professors of Philosophy, but not Philosophers," 232. Following Hadot on this point, among many, see Jon Borowicz, "Philosophy as conversion," *Inquiry: Critical Thinking Across the Disciplines* 17, no. 3 (1998): 77ff. Also Brian Walker, "Thoreau's alternative economics: Work, liberty, and democratic cultivation," *American Political Science Review* 92, no. 4 (1998): 850. *Contra* Walker, Mason Marshall, "Freedom through critique: Thoreau's service to others," *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society: A Quarterly Journal in American Philosophy* 41, no. 2 (2005): 418, n4.

³³ Cf. with Richardson, according to whom, I think erroneously, Emerson edited *Letters to Various Persons* under the influence of the most recent editions of Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations*. Richardson, "A Perfect Piece of Stoicism," 4-5. "In 1862, the year of Thoreau's death, appeared George Long's translation of the *Meditations of Marcus Aurelius*. It was an important and influential book; it has been described as the book responsible for first introducing Marcus Aurelius to a wide English speaking public, and for generating a wide-spread revival of interest in ancient stoic thought. A year later Matthew Arnold wrote a major essay on Marcus Aurelius, and the year after that, 1864, the American edition came out from Ticknor and Fields and copy was sent to Emerson. It is an attractive little book, and it seems possible that when Emerson came, very shortly thereafter, to do a volume of Thoreau's letters [*Letters to Various Persons*], the example of Long's Marcus Aurelius came to mind and he set out to produce a similar kind of volume." Similarly, also Richardson, *Henry Thoreau: A Life of the Mind*, 188-89. Our text of reference, concerning Seneca's *Letters to Lucilius* and the practice of spiritual direction will be Ilsetraut Hadot, *Sénèque : Direction spirituelle et pratique de la philosophie* (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 2014). On the latter, see the commentary by Matthew Sharpe, "Ilsetraut Hadot's Seneca: Spiritual Direction and the Transformation of the Other," *Ethics and Self-Cultivation: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives* (2018).

³⁴ According to Van Doren: "Emerson, who knew him [Thoreau] best, cannot always be relied on to give a fair account of the man, because Emerson's interest in him was the interest of a philosophic father in a philosophic son." Van Doren, *Henry David Thoreau, a Critical Study*, 5.

to a *Spiritual Seeker*³⁵ – and Seneca's *Letters to Lucilius* will help us understand, firstly, in precisely which way Thoreau's letter-writing itself can be considered as having been informed, as one scholar recently made the case, by "Thoreau's interest in the Stoic tradition"; secondly, to what extent this was consciously modeled on the "Stoic practices in sincerity and self-elevation."³⁶

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³⁵ Henry David Thoreau and Harrison G. Blake, *Letters to a Spiritual Seeker* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2006). See also the excellent Italian edition by Stefano Paolucci: Henry David Thoreau, *Se tremi sull'orlo: lettere a un cercatore di sé* (Roma: Donzelli, 2010).

³⁶ Michael Jonik, "Will You Live?": Thoreau's Philosophical Letters," in *Edinburgh Companion to Nineteenth-Century American Letters and Letter-Writing*, ed. Celeste-Marie Bernier, Judie Newman, and Matthew Pethers (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 293 and 98.

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