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THOREAU'S STOICISM IN *LETTERS TO A SPIRITUAL SEEKER*:

THE SPIRITUAL DIRECTION OF HARRISON BLAKE

ABSTRACT

Henry David Thoreau's untimely death in 1862 inaugurated the beginning of a battle between Ralph Waldo Emerson and Sophia Thoreau over the image that should consign his myth to posterity – one that, more than a century and a half later, renders his philosophical relevance still highly debated. In the obituary, funeral eulogy, and, especially, in the first collected edition of Thoreau's correspondence that he edited, *Letters to Various Persons* (1865), Emerson authoritatively reclaimed for his pupil the label of a Stoic philosopher, while Sophia found the latter characterization so at odds with the tenderness of her brother's character that she prompted Franklin Sanborn to edit another collection, *Familiar Letters* (1894). The feat of deconstructing Emerson's final say on his pupil that has since then been taken over by many contemporary Thoreau scholar, we argue, has actually done a disservice to Thoreau's memory, delaying for a long time the recognition of what is easily his most distinctive contribution to nineteenth century philosophy: the revival of the ancient conception of philosophy as a way of life. In the present contribution I contend, firstly, that it is precisely from this existential perspective, popularized in the last decades by the works of Pierre Hadot, that we should understand 'the perfect piece of Stoicism' that Emerson wanted to make out of Thoreau's philosophical correspondence with his disciple Harrison Blake: a text-book case of spiritual direction on the model of Seneca's *Letters to Lucilius*. Secondly, I provide a comparative analysis of Thoreau's philosophical letters to his pupil, as most recently collected in *Letters to a Spiritual Seeker* (2006), and Seneca's epistolary with Lucilius, in order to ascertain precisely how Thoreau's letter-writing itself, apart from Emerson's framing of it, might have been informed by his knowledge and interest in Stoic spiritual practices of letter-writing.

KEYWORDS Thoreau, Blake, correspondence, spiritual direction, stoicism.