

WHITMAN AND MELVILLE

Those two great giants, Whitman and Melville, bestriding the 19th century, provide striking parallels when considered together. And perhaps even more striking contrasts.

The coincidences in their lives are astonishing. Both were New Yorkers, Melville of the city, and Whitman just outside, on Long Island. They were born the same year, 1819. Melville's heritage was aristocratic, and Whitman came from commoners; nevertheless, both men were of combined English-Dutch heritage--a mixture that seemed to produce more conflicts than one might expect. The English were a restless, adventurous people, settling and moving on, whereas the Dutch, at least in this country, were stable, rooted in the communities they established. I hope to point out that these varying degrees of restlessness--evidence, perhaps, of their mixed heritage--are keys to both men, providing both parallels and contrasts.

Another comparison involves their homosexual or bisexual drives. This is a well-known matter in Whitman's case--less clear cut, more open to speculation, in Melville. Nevertheless, Melville *did* write: "Nature, in no shallow surge / Against thee either sex may urge."

Another curious similarity, that I don't think has been heavily investigated, is the inability or unwillingness of either man to deal in any direct, human way with individual human beings. So many of the characters in Melville's novels are prototypes, or archetypes--representatives of human or philosophic positions that he wished to establish. The English critic, Ronald Mason, has written: "Having limitless sympathy with man, he had dangerously imperfect sympathy with men and their activities; his preoccupations

were with the elements, and the terrors and joys, the passions and speculations which close contact with those elements provoke." Similarly, Whitman wrote grandly of the "brotherhood" of man, but less well of individual, idiosyncratic human beings. (A sharp distinction should be pointed out here, in passing: Melville's characters were the product of his ideas--he was a philosopher; with Whitman, on the other hand, as John Jay Chapman has pointed out, "the revolt he represents is not an intellectual revolt. Ideas are not at the bottom of it. It is a revolt from drudgery. It is the revolt of laziness.") (This is not to demean Whitman, by comparison; laziness, in his hands, seems almost a positive energy.)

Nineteenth century scholars have speculated at some length as to whether the two men ever met. Apparently, they did not--although we know they were aware of each other, late in the lives of both. It is hard to imagine what they would have made of each other, at this stage . . . and it is not a surprise that neither left anything in writing about the other's work. There was, however, a critic, E. C. Stedman, who was personally acquainted with both men. He and his son, Arthur, visited them both, in Camden and New York. In a letter to Melville, the father mentions in passing, "as you said so much of Whitman . . ." That's all we know.

Finally, in the catalogue of similarities, it can be said that the two men contrived to die within a year of each other: 1891 and '92.

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Many of the distinctions between the two are obvious, while others are not at all clear. The discussion may be centered on the differences between the Gentleman and the Commoner, but the issue is confused by the changes that Melville went through during

his life. Early, seafaring Melville was a Whitmanic rebel, identifying with the common sailors . . . the Pacific became his "Open Road." Whitman may have been the great celebrator of vagabondage, but Melville actually traveled--throughout the Pacific, to Europe, the Near East, the Midwest--infinitely more than Whitman. And one of Melville's Pittsfield friends reported that his neighbors thought him something of a "beachcomber." Thus, as D. H. Lawrence pointed out, Whitman and the early Melville had much in common:

"The true democracy, where soul meets soul, in the open road. Democracy. American democracy where all journey down the open road. And where a soul is known at once in its going. Not by its clothes or appearance. Whitman did away with that. Not by its family name. Not even by its reputation. Whitman and Melville both discounted that."

But Melville grew older, made a "white" marriage, bought property, became a father--and failed as a novelist--the gentleman, the aristocrat in him came more and more to the forefront. Whatever was going on inside him, much of his exterior behavior became conservative.

Curiously enough, Henry David Thoreau may claim, or have thrust upon him, at least a portion of the paternity of both Melville and Whitman. Whether from inner nature or force of circumstances, Melville gradually converted to the very sort of cautious Yankee that Thoreau was and remained all his life. Manifestly, a juxtaposition of Walden Pond with the Pacific Ocean is absurd. Or is it? We are all amazed, sometimes appalled, by the outrageous behavior of our children.

Whitman's lineage, meanwhile, back to Thoreau, is well described by Wright Morris:

The word "saunterer," ill suited to Thoreau, slips onto the relaxed figure of Whitman like a glove.

It is left to Whitman, the democrat en masse, to spell out what Thoreau glossed over, to yawp out over the roofs what a respectable Yankee would keep to himself.

It is Whitman who carries to its conclusion Thoreau's admirable beginning. It is Whitman who *lives* the prevailing tendency.

With his usual accuracy, Thoreau described his romance with Walden as an experiment--it is the safe Yankee testing the ice to see if it will bear the load. Whitman does not test or experiment. At the risk of exclusion, that is, he does not discriminate. All roads lie open, all friends are good friends, and all journeys perpetual. As Thoreau is the archetypal honest man, the square peg in the world's round holes, Whitman is the archetype that lurks even deeper--the professional tramp. The man whose business is no business whose roof is the sky, whose house is the road, and whose law is the law of comrades.

Thoreau might risk the *experiment* of friendship, but he would flee like the plague the *movement* of brothership.

Having given sanction, if not birth to such a child, Thoreau would have been horrified to see it in operation.

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Whitman at one point sheds his clothes and takes a sun bath:

"So hanging clothes on rail near by, keeping old broadbrim straw on head and easy shoes on feet, haven't I had a good time the last two hours!"

One could never imagine Melville--even in his beachcomber phase--writing such lines! In fact, Melville, at no point in his life would have written something that he would call "The Song of Myself." He knew full well that writing is an act of self-revelation; nevertheless, even if one is an exhibitionist, there are proprieties to be observed. His most famous first-person narrator, the Ishmael of *Moby-Dick*, is as elusive a character as one could imagine.

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The Gentleman-vis-a-vis-Commoner issue has earlier roots in American history, much earlier, than Melville and Whitman. Consider, first, the dispossessed, displaced soldier-farmers, paid off in worthless scrip after the Revolution, striking out in what became known as Shay's Rebellion. Earlier than this, there were troubles in Massachusetts with uprooted citizens following King Phillip's War (1675). And, still earlier, there is Roger Williams and his difficulties with the authorities in Massachusetts Bay: and this is important because he *walked*, repeat *walked* from Massachusetts to Rhode Island--and this is the special, dignifying, characteristic activity of the rebel, the liberal, the beatnik, the hippie, the naturalist, conservationist and Indian-lover: he *walks*. (Still earlier, there were Cabeza de Vaca, and David Ingram).

Perhaps Whitman never got beyond his Brooklyn ferries, but in *Leaves of Grass* he strides--or, as Wright Morris has it, he *saunters*. Strider or saunterer, he was the unconscious publicist, front man for a tradition already established: the tradition of John Chapman, Johnny Appleseed--more than Thoreau, perhaps, Whitman's authentic parent and original.

Son of a Massachusetts carpenter and farmer, Chapman emigrated west, wandered about Ohio for three decades, an "apple missionary," moving with the shifting frontier. His clothes were ragged and ill-fitting, his hair long and beard scraggly, he wore his mushpan on his head for a hat, and his feet were knobby, horny and frequently bare. The Indians discovered that he had healing powers, and they often sought him out. They also thought him crazy, and therefore regarded his life as sacred.

If Johnny Appleseed is Whitman's antecedent in this tradition, Vachel Lindsay is one of his clearest successors. Lindsay was much taken with Johnny, wrote about him frequently, and emulated him: he went on walking tours in the country, begging food and lodging, offering poems in exchange instead of apple seeds. Avoiding cities, he walked through villages and farms, from Illinois to Colorado, speaking of something he called "the Church of the Open Sky."

" . . . thanks to the Good St. Francis who marks out my path for me, I start tomorrow morning to trot unharnessed once again."

Others in this tradition would include the two Bartrams--and George Catlin. Catlin is best known for the paintings that resulted from his trudging across the Plains to the Indian villages; less well known is the fact that he hiked across much of South America!

Finally, closer to our own time, we come to the Beat Generation, the Kerouacs and Ginsbergs, and their descendents, the Hippies: the scores of backpackers, hikers and hitch-hikers of the Sixties.

Opposed to all these are those whom we may call the Conservatives, or the Gentlemen, or the Insiders-- they stayed *inside*, wrote from what they carried within them, rather than risking the weather *outside*. Theirs was the sense of history, the cultural tradition, generally European--immaculate survivals of the Atlantic crossing. As already indicated, Melville is hard to pin down, depending on what stage of his life one deals with; but he certainly wound up an Insider. Following in this tradition are Pound (a line of descent from Melville to Pound would please Pound not at all, but it can be found); and Pound's satellite, Eliot. Olson and Creeley probably belong here; they are perhaps bohemian, but nonetheless conservative. . . the bohemian and the beatnik are different creatures, the former a transatlantic tradition, the latter Chapman-Whitman resurfacing.

American culture began as the transplanting of foreign seed in virgin soil. To the conservative, the emphasis is on the seed and its growth; to the beat, it is the soil itself that matters, the loss and flourishing of the altogether altered seed becomes secondary; so that the soil, the land, ultimately outweighs the crop in value. Thus, it is through the liberal-beatnik that Nature comes in: our passion for land and conservation. The conservatives are concerned with man and culture, and find Nature, per se, uninteresting. Pound is not exactly a liberal-beatnik, nor is Olson what one would call a Nature poet.

The liberal-beatnik lets in *all*, there can be no exclusions. On the other hand, Eliot fled Missouri,

and finally even New England wasn't cultured enough for him . . . Pound slammed the door on the Jew . . . as Olson on extra-New England America . . . and Melville on all 20th-century life (see "Clarel").

But as surely as the door is slammed, some nut, daft in the head, skips out the window, pocket full of seed, and starts *walking* . . . the tradition surfaces anew.

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One of the fascinating aspects of this Melville-Whitman dichotomy, conceived as a valid double tradition, is the fact that hardly any of the major figures fits neatly into either slot. Cross-fertilizations abound. I have spoken of a line of descent from Melville to Pound, but there was also a good deal of Whitman in Pound. Olson and Ginsberg were good friends, had great respect for each other. And many a bearded backpacker is shrewd and knowledgeable, behind that cloud of grass. It is often difficult to untangle the threads. But the capacity of a tradition to leave its own limits, to interweave itself intimately with its own opposite, is testimony, it seems to me, to its enduring validity.

#### SOURCES:

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