“That Contemptible Man (Tho’ Good Poet, in His Department)”: Examining Melville's Complex Relationship with Wordsworth

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Abstract
Herman Melville’s marked and annotated copy of The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth, which is preserved at Georgetown University, contains unique biographical and intellectual significance that has gone largely unexplored by scholarship. Melville’s marginalia demonstrate an ambivalence towards Wordsworth’s personal character that is sometimes at odds with his respect for the literary aspects of his writings. To investigate this, we analyzed the marginalia alongside additional primary resources and contemporary documents to find possible explanations of Melville’s ambivalence and its significance in relation to his broader work. Using visualizations of the marginalia made possible with our recently completed XML encoding of the volume, investigation of Melville’s reading reveals a particularly conflicted response to Wordsworth’s great Romantic ideals, the pre-eminent impact of his writing on Melville’s conception of the natural world, and the role of poetry in both art and life. In a manner similar to Melville’s conflicted idea of Wordsworth the man, Melville’s marginalia reveal complex and sometimes contradictory responses to themes such as nature, wisdom, death, and spirituality. The interaction of these two eminent minds on the pages of Melville’s surviving copy offers vivid evidence of Transatlantic literary influence in the age of Romanticism.

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Melville and Wordsworth ‘the man’

William Wordsworth was an early standard bearer for Romanticism, and Herman Melville’s annotations display a keen appreciation of his writing. In contrast are Melville’s annotations where he directly strikes at Wordsworth as a person, and sharply differentiates between Wordsworth’s early ‘inspired’ work and later writings. After the 1970’s discovery of Melville’s annotated copy of Wordsworth, scholar Thomas Heffernan noted that Melville’s reaction to Wordsworth ‘was more extensive, more critical, and more sympathetic than anyone could have affirmed up to now’.

Wisdom, Nature, and Power

Melville consistently and most frequently highlights classic Wordsworthian concepts that are associated with the poet as a touchstone of the British Romantic movement. This is evidenced by the emerging presence of terms like “nature”, “life”, “man” and “power”. These terms are constant among literary Romantics, and are applied in common Romantic ways here. These include associations such as:

- Defic - Simplicity
- Spiritual Guide - Introspective
- Source of wisdom/truth - Wisdom
- Nature - Life
- Love - Death
- World - Poetry
- Heart - Man
- Good - Power

See fig. 7 below for terms linked to nature in passages by Melville.

Wordsworth’s Influence on Melville

And when these words unite in a man of greatly superior natural force . . . realizing all nature’s sweet or savage impressions fresh from her own virgin voluntary and confiding breast . . . ’’ Moby-Dick (Ch. 16)

Melville’s major writings show that he was drawn powerfully to ideas that are commonly associated with Wordsworth. One of these ideas is “Transcendence” through Nature. But Melville did not adopt these themes without reservations, as revealed by the following examples from his novels:

- “There is no life in thee, now, except that rocking life imparted by a gentle rolling sleep, by a trembling from the strong wind, from the insensible ticks of God. But while the sleep, this dream is on, even when your foot or hand, or arm, til your face and all your body comes back in horror. Over Desartian you venture now. And perhaps, in all, in the fastest weather, with one vendor’s yearning, you go up in your small and tender summer sea, no more to lie serene. Held in, wet, on Particular”

Poltical explanations

Melville’s strong condemnation of Wordsworth as a person may be rooted in Wordsworth’s switch from Republicanism to Conservatism. Melville thoroughly annotated his copy of William Hazlitt’s Lectures, who was an outspoken critic of Wordsworth’s political shift. Juliet Barker’s biography of Wordsworth notes how Hazlitt called him an ‘apostate’ as early as 1806 in a political pamphlet. Melville’s conviction was that people should stay true to their youthful ideals, and purportedly kept this quote from Friedrich Schiller he uses here in the marginalia on his writing desk up until the end of his life.

Descriptive and Thematic Parallels in Pierre

The passage above depicts a moment of “Transcendence” through Nature. But Melville did not adopt these themes without reservations, as revealed by the following examples from his novels:

- “A better state than waking: death than sleep: Peelying sweet is stillness after storm, Though under covert of the wormy ground”
- “Sleuth after toyle, port after stormie seas, Ease after war, death after life, does greatly plea[s]”
- “Sleepe after toyle, port after stormie seas, Ease after war, death after life, does greatly plea[s]”
  - Spenst, Faerie Queene

Singular Coincidence

In the Wordsworthian marginalia, Melville emphasizes themes that are specific to “Wordsworthian” poetry in contrast to other poets such as Shakespeare—themes such as mankind as close to nature, celebration of common humanity, and secular spirituality.

Three words named in common with:

- Man
- Life
- Power
- World
- Nature
- Good
- Soul
- Thought
- Poetry

Despite being best remembered for his prose works, Melville spent the latter half of his life dedicated to poetry, the culmination of which was Clare, among the longest poems in the English language. Melville’s interest in Wordsworthian poetry stemmed from a sincere admiration for Wordsworth as a poet, and for the reputation that he had as a monumental figure of British Romanticism. He wanted to expand upon the core themes of Wordsworthian poetry, and write the type of poetry that he admired.

In Melville: The Making of a Poet Hershell Parker expands on this desire, noting that Melville recognized many thematic similarities between himself and great poets of prior movements like Wordsworth (recognized formally in fig. 11) and Spenser (referenced in fig. 12). Parker writes that Melville “knew he stood on equal footing, recognizing, more than once, singular coincidences between his thoughts and experiences and theirs” (100).