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## Melville's *Battle-Pieces* and Warren's *Wilderness*

Mary Cuff

Robert Penn Warren had been reading Herman Melville's poetry for decades by the time he began writing *Wilderness* in 1960 and developing notes for his *Reader's Edition* of Melville's poetry (Blotner 387). Melville's *Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War* must have been on his mind often in the 1950s and '60s as he wrote *Wilderness* and *The Legacy of the Civil War*. James Justus suggests that the "clash between common humanity and lofty idealism, between the individual and ideology" that Warren identified as "the major thrust in Melville's Civil War poetry is the intellectual matrix of *Wilderness*" (Justus 349). When read in light of Melville's *Battle-Pieces*, *Wilderness* becomes a fascinating prose development of two of Melville's poems which, significantly, are located right next to each other in Warren's *Reader's Edition*. The two poems are "The House-top: A Night Piece" and "The Armies of the Wilderness." Structurally speaking, Adam Rosenzweig's entire experience in America can be bookended by these two poems.

Melville's poem, "The House-top" is a brooding reflection of the New York draft riots of 1863. In those riots, whole sections of the city were overtaken by rioters who looted and burned millions of dollars in property and murdered black Americans to protest the draft. The riots only ended after four days when Union cannon fired into the crowds. Melville's poem reflects on the dark implication that the Founding Fathers' faith in human nature and democracy were misplaced. The poem ends cynically as the nation does not heed the troubling lesson of the riots, which cannot be stopped by democracy:

Wise Draco comes, deep in the midnight roll  
Of black artillery; he comes, though late;  
In code corroborating Calvin's creed  
And cynic tyrannies of honest kings. (lines 19-22)

In Warren's *Wilderness*, when Adam arrives in New York, he enters the world of "The House-top." With the help of a shred of newspaper, Warren lets us know the month and year, July, 1863, which date Melville also includes below the title of his poem. More specifically, it is the day before the draft riots were quelled, and Adam finds himself a firsthand witness to what Melville's poem describes as the "Atheist roar of riot" as "man rebounds whole aeons back in nature" (Melville "House-top" 8, 16). In the poem, Melville remains darkly cryptic about the happenings of July 13-16, 1863, even in his own personal note on the poem, where he quotes an equally vague description of another historical outrage: "I dare not write the horrible and inconceivable atrocities committed," says Froissart, in alluding to the remarkable sedition in France during his time. The like may be hinted of some proceedings of the draft-rioters" (*Reader's Edition* 367). Writing some 100 years after Melville, at a time when most Americans had never learned of the events, much less the lesson Melville presents, Warren clearly felt the need to bring the grisly particulars to his readers' eyes, both in his notes on Melville's poem in his *Reader's Edition* and, even more fully, in *Wilderness*.

In "The House-Top," Melville insists that the horrible events of the race riots are a "grimy slur on the Republic's faith" (25) -- a faith Warren has Adam's devout uncle point out resides in Man rather than in God. Adam hears artillery and thinks of his father's defining moment when he fought for freedom in Germany. The artillery, he believes, links him to his

father: “*That is what my father heard*” (*Wilderness* 43). What he does not understand is that this artillery is echoing the bitter lesson his father had learned years before about human nature, a lesson that lends credence to the “cynic tyrannies of honest kings” from “*The House-top*” (22). The artillery is not firing on Confederate insurgents, as he mistakenly believes, but on rioting citizens who are lynching black people and destroying property because they, unlike Adam, do not wish to “fight for freedom.”

While Melville ends “*The House-top*” with no glimmer of hope for “*The Republic’s* faith,” Warren gives us the potential for insight when Adam comes upon a lynched man (25). An essential insight Warren gleaned from Melville’s ruminations on human nature and democracy is the concept of the cross-bearer. As he explains in his *Reader’s Edition*:

Transcendence is made possible by...the redemptive recognition...of the human bond. Only by pressure and in pain is man “routed” into a knowledge of his fate, and into whatever triumph, however limited and qualified, is possible in it. We remember the shared experience of the soldiers in *Battle-Pieces*; and the motley crowd of Jew, Christian, Arab, and Turk on the Via Crucis, in their “varied forms of fate,” whom Clarel recognizes as “cross-bearers all.” (*Selected* 69-70)

At first, Adam experiences a fleeting moment of the sort of democracy that comes from being a cross-bearer: “He stared up into the face, and in the sympathy of blood beating in his head and the stoppage of his own breath, he felt the agony that had popped those eyes and darkened that face” (*Wilderness* 44). For one moment, sorrow and pain unite the two men before fallen human nature rears its ugly head and the unity is lost: Adam realizes the man is black. Of course, Adam recognizes the vileness of his reaction, but that is not enough to eradicate the

very real feeling of emotional disconnection. Warren connects this scene to a memory Adam has of his childhood in order to draw an overt connection between the hanged man and the original cross-bearer, Christ. Adam recalls watching an old man kneel for an hour before a wayside crucifix before kissing the wounds on the corpus. Not understanding at the time, Adam now realizes that “the old man had been waiting for something to happen in his heart. He wondered if something had happened in that old man’s heart. But nothing, now, was happening in his own. Nothing but the dry, grinding shame at the fact that nothing was happening” (*Wilderness* 46). Unfortunately, Adam is not ready for the transformative revelation of the “cross-bearers,” because he is still far too committed to an uncomplicated faith in humanity, and he cheers himself by deciding that the Rebels must be to blame for the lynching. By evading the horrible truth, Adam separates out those Americans chosen for freedom (the Union) from the betrayers of freedom (the Confederates) -- a facile dichotomy that does not account for his own guilty reaction to the dead man’s blackness. Adam is just as willfully naive as the inhabitants of the town at the end of “The House-top,” who refuse to acknowledge humanity’s more complicated nature.

Of course, while Melville’s townsfolk end the poem with their unexamined faith maddeningly unshaken, Warren does not let Adam continue in his simplistic rationalization of the lynching. The rioters embody the grossest parody of democracy even as they lend credence to Draco and Calvin against Jefferson. Adam accidentally gets between the mob and its latest prey, and a woman, mistaking Adam’s attempts to stop them, is offended by the “injustice” that not everyone gets an equal chance to stab the victim (*Wilderness* 51). Democratic equality

has been reduced to a sectarian-based equality of evil exercised in defense of the ultimate disunity of racism and murder.

The final significant connection between “The House-top” and *Wilderness* can be found in Aaron Blaustein’s conversation with Adam after the riot’s conclusion. Aaron fills out the picture of the riots that Melville’s cryptic poem and Adam’s limited view did not capture. Through his remarks, Aaron essentially provides the same footnotes and commentary that Warren himself would in his notes on the poem in the *Reader’s Edition*. For instance, both make sure to note that the troops who quelled the riot by firing grapeshot had come straight to New York City from Gettysburg (*Wilderness* 69 and *Reader’s* 367). Additionally, while Melville shied away from details, both Aaron and Warren provide the particulars. Compare Aaron’s description: “they have gutted conscription offices, killed all the black people they could lay hand on, burned the Colored Orphan Asylum--and would have killed the orphans but for luck -- killed police, fought the troops, and looted and burned a big part of town” (*Wilderness* 69) with Warren’s notes on the poem: “The most obvious targets for resentment were Negroes. A number were tortured and lynched in the streets, and a Negro orphanage was burned. But several parts of the city were occupied by the rioters, and there was widespread property damage with large-scale looting and arson” (*Reader’s* 367). Both content and organization are the same, with only wording and tone changed between the two accounts. Finally, and most importantly, both Aaron in the novel and Warren in his notes on “The House-top” emphasize that, while there was some pro-Confederate sentiment at work, the riot was largely motivated by class rather than sectional sympathies or politics. In his notes, Warren explains that the riot was sparked by the Conscription Act of 1863, which had a built-in class exemption: immunity

from the draft could be purchased for \$300, giving rise to the slogan, “a rich man’s war and a poor man’s fight” (*Reader’s* 267). For his part, Aaron clues Adam into this class dynamic when he explains that the mob attacked his house and shattered a window before being driven off: “You know,’ he said, ‘it is rather refreshing to be attacked by the mob merely for being rich. Not for being a rich Jew. It makes all the trouble of coming to America seem worthwhile.” And then, upon reflection, he adds, “Most of the mob, they had come to America, too. But they had not got rich. You know, there’s always a reason” (*Wilderness* 73).

Aaron Blaustein offers Adam the insight that a cross-bearer would use to reaffirm democracy, though he himself struggles to accept the wisdom, and the insight escapes Adam entirely at this juncture. When Adam exuberantly declares that the South will be beaten, Aaron sadly reminds us that, “The hardest thing to remember is that other men are men . . . but that . . . is the only way you can be a man yourself. Can be anything” (*Wilderness* 67). What is lacking, both North and South, rich and poor, white and black, is the recognition of our complex human bond.

While the first part of the novel fleshes out scenes from Melville’s “House-top,” the final part of *Wilderness* bears uncanny similarities to Melville’s poem, “Armies of the Wilderness.” In that poem, Melville complicates an easy acceptance of the “good” side and the “bad” side in the Civil War. While Melville was a staunch Unionist, Warren argued that “the making of distinctions . . . is the very center of Melville’s poetry, and of Melville’s Unionism” (*Reader* 29). In other words, as Warren explained, Melville supported the more inclusive side that would “do justice to the ideals in which the vanquished interests lay” by means of “analysis to locate first

principles, and by dialectic" (*Reader* 30). The distinctions in "The Armies of the Wilderness" in particular acknowledge that while there is a right side, its victory is problematic:

But Heaven lent strength, the Right strove well,  
And emerged from the Wilderness.

*Emerged, for the way was won;*

*But the Pillar of Smoke that led*

*Was brand-like with ghosts that went up*

*Ashy and red. (213-18)*

The heaven-sent aid to the victorious North is thrown into doubt by the Pillar of Smoke that will lead the American Chosen People to the Promised Land, for it is the byproduct of cannon fire and death -- one of Melville's distinctions about Unionism. Elsewhere in the poem, Melville questions the wisdom of the Founding Fathers (21-4) as he examines the horrors of the war and admires the bravery and loyalty of the Southern soldiers to their cause (6-7, 27-46).

Like Melville, Warren also largely remains in the Northern camp in *Wilderness*, and, like Melville, he is primarily interested in undermining a too-easy acceptance of the North as an uncomplicated force for good. Part of Melville's description of the Northern camp called it "a site for the city of Cain" (90) and, as in "The House-top," a site where civilization is being torn up by men who are "rebounding" back in nature (99-110). Warren's depiction of the camp is much the same. He describes soldiers essentially becoming animals, who,

had the need to visit violence or defilement on the place that had been a shelter, and sometimes a pride. Here and there, against all regulations of sanitation, a man would



relieve himself in his abandoned hut. Sometimes, having done so, the man would stand brooding, in sad puzzlement because he did not understand his own action (*Wilderness* 210).

And, in the murderous tradition of Cain, men in the camp brutalize their fellow camp-dwellers until the crescendo comes in Mose's murder of Jedeen Hawksworth.

At the conclusion of Melville's poem, the reader is left with three images that resonate with the end of Warren's novel. First, Melville describes the crippled hobbling "from the sight of dead faces--white as pebbles in a well" (201), and then second, mourns that,

*Few burial rites shall be,*

*No priest with book and band*

*Shall come to the secret place*

*Of the corpse in the foeman's land. (203-6)*

And finally, further undercutting the image of the Pillar of Smoke leading the Right from the Wilderness, Melville suggests that the strife contains a "riddle of death, of which the slain/ Sole solvers are" (225-6). Warren notes that this conclusion reminds him of Melville's poem "Shiloh" (*Reader* 369), which has the ominous line, much-loved by Warren, "What like a bullet can undeceive!" (16).

Warren adjusts Melville's images in the conclusion to *Wilderness*. Adam becomes the cripple in the wilderness, but instead of limping away from the sight of dead men, he limps toward them to seek the enlightenment that comes with suffering. Adam wants to join the fight in the Wilderness because "you have to know if there is a truth in the world," a truth that

lasts after deluded political and ideological views are stripped away by lived experience (*Wilderness* 289) The bullet undeceives Adam, allowing him to recognize his culpability in Jedeem's murder, as well as his own participation in flawed human nature (*Wilderness* 302). Only after this bullet-given enlightenment can Adam understand his father's death-bed betrayal of democratic faith for what it is. As Adam wonders "if every man is, in the end, a sacrifice for every other man," we should be reminded of the memory of the cross in the lynching scene (*Wilderness* 302). Then, Adam had been ashamed because nothing had happened to his heart. Now, Adam can finally understand and participate in the reality of Melville's cross-bearers. John Burt explains that these moments of "recognition of complicity" in Warren's fiction led to communion: "what it causes one to recognize is how deeply one is one's self implicated in the transgressions of one's enemies. The moments in Warren's fiction where these recognitions are made look like moments of reconciliation" (Burt 47).

It is at this point that Adam can become the priest with the book and band, bringing the burial rites into the Wilderness whose absence Melville had noted in his poem. Randy Hendricks reminds readers "throughout his adventures in America, Adam carries with him the physical reminders of that tradition: phylacteries, *talith*, and *seddur*. These seem just so much excess baggage until, near the novel's end, he discovers that their true significance for him lies in the possibility of human communion that they represent" (Hendricks 203). In the wilderness, these religious articles facilitate Adam's communion with the dead soldiers around him. After noticing his neglected religious belongings, Adam

was on his knees in the ferns, eyes shut. He was saying the words: "What dost Thou? O Thou who speakest and doest, of Thy grace deal kindly with us, and for the sake of him who was bound like a lamb. O hearken and do--"

He had last heard those words on that winter afternoon, long back, across the ocean, in Bavaria, over the body that was being deposited in the earth, the body of Leopold Rosenzweig, and he was saying them now, and as he said them that place and this place, and that time and this time, flowed together. He was saying the words: "Just art Thou, O Lord, in ordering death and restoring to life--"

He was saying: "Far be it from Thee to blot out our remembrance--"

And at last, he was saying: "Have mercy upon the remnant of the flock of Thy hand, and say unto the Destroying Angel, Stay thy hand." (*Wilderness* 309)

The words Adam recites are part of the traditional Jewish burial rites (Lamm). In a way, he is conducting a burial for the bodies that surround him. Additionally, this prayer unites Adam with his father as both reformed humanists who acknowledge that one's faith is best not placed entirely upon the goodness and nobleness of humankind. As Barnett Guttenberg says, "Reborn, he will no longer try to deny man's defect as he has previously done with his cunning boot and his idea of man's nobility. But neither will he exult in darkness and the license it implies" (Guttenberg 116-117). Finally, Adam's prayer mentions the Old Testament figure Isaac--"he who was bound like a lamb" (*Wilderness* 309). Isaac is the prototype for the sacrificial victim, evoking the lamb sacrificed at Passover and, for Christians, Christ's sacrifice as the Paschal Lamb on the Cross. In other words, by his prayer, Warren has Adam evoke the concept of Melville's cross-bearer, albeit in more Jewish terms.

In its American context, Adam's recitation of the *Tzidduk H'din* is a humble counter-hymn to Julia Ward Howe's jubilant "Battle Hymn of the Republic." Leaving the Wilderness, Adam acknowledges that he would do it all again, "*but oh, with a different heart*" (*Wilderness* 310). Such an ending is not a cynical rejection of the Founders' dream or his deep-seated desire to fight for human freedom, but it is tempered by Melvillian distinctions that acknowledge that the American project is, like human beings themselves, flawed and limited. Such an attitude is far more in keeping with Warren who, despite his misgivings, affirms, "I'm in love with America. I want to believe and want to affirm, too" (*Talking* 226).

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