Camerado, this is no book,
Who touches this touches a man

is Lawrence Buell's favorite quotation from the Leaves. His essay salutes Whitman the hearty seeker after warm-blooded companions. "What impresses me most about him," Professor Buell of Oberlin College has said, "is the way in which he attempted to live up to the ideal self-image projected in his work."

Who can imagine how much has been lost to literature because Whitman could not (or dared not try to) penetrate the aloofness of Henry Thoreau! But their relationships, unlike those between Thoreau and Emerson, began too late in their lives to make a dent in one another. However, it is good to know that these two opposite-mannered centers of New World radiance met and that they respected.

WHITMAN AND THOREAU

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The relationship between Henry Thoreau and Walt Whitman is one of the twice-told tales of American literary history: well-known, often repeated, but never fully told. Critics and literary historians have been interested mainly in the symbolic importance of the relationship, as a way of ordering the American tradition into a coherent mythology. Biographers of Whitman and Thoreau have naturally viewed the other man from the vantage point of their subject, as one among many chapters in his life. As a result, no single account has made full use of the available source materials, though Walter Harding, in *The Days of Henry Thoreau,* comes close.

My purpose here is to trace the reactions of Whitman and Thoreau to each other as persons and as writers, from the time they met until their deaths, and to give some common-sense explanations as to why each reacted the way he did. Insofar

as possible I shall tell the story in their own words and stick to biographical fact, avoiding speculation about influence on the basis of stylistic and thematic echoes.

For information about the Whitman-Thoreau relationship, one naturally turns first to Bronson Alcott's journal account of their first meeting; the letters Thoreau wrote about it shortly thereafter; and Whitman's old-age recollections as recorded by his disciple Horace Traubel. Further light is shed by a number of other sources, but the three just named are the principal ones. Thus the record is more limited than one would wish. We do not know Whitman's *first* reaction to Thoreau, for example, or Thoreau's deathbed opinion of Whitman; and a good many of their remarks about each other come to us second- or third-hand. Still, what information we do possess is full and consistent enough to suggest a pretty definite picture of their relationship.

Walt Whitman first made himself known to the Concord transcendentalists when he sent Ralph Waldo Emerson a copy of the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* upon its publication on or about Independence Day of 1855. Emerson responded with the most famous letter in American literary history, greeting Whitman "at the beginning of a great career;" and he proceeded to spread the news of the new poet among his friends, including Henry Thoreau.

Thoreau's letters and journal do not show any reaction to Whitman, however, until the two men met the next year. In the fall of 1856, Thoreau travelled to New Jersey on a surveying assignment, followed by an excursion to New York City, the high point of which was a visit to Whitman. Together with fellow transcendentalist Bronson Alcott, who already knew the poet slightly, Thoreau called at the Whitman house on Sunday, No-

vember 10, but found only Walt's mother at home. According to Alcott, she filled their ears with praises of Walt, "telling us how good he was and wise as a boy, how his four brothers and two sisters loved him, and how they take counsel of the great man he is grown to be now."

At Mrs. Whitman's invitation, Thoreau and Alcott returned the next morning, along with another acquaintance who was also curious about the poet, a Mrs. Sarah Tyndale (described by Alcott as "a solid walrus of a woman spread full many a rood abroad.") Somewhat to Alcott's discomfiture, they were ushered up to Whitman's "attic study—also the bedchamber of himself and his feeble-[minded] brother, the pressure of whose bodies was still apparent in the unmade bed standing in one corner," the chamberpot "scarcely hidden underneath. A few books were piled disorderly over the mantel-piece, and some characteristic pictures—a Hercules, a Bacchus, and a satyr—were pasted, unframed, upon the rude walls." Alcott asked Whitman which of the three he fancied himself most like, whereupon Whitman "begged me not to put my questions too close, meaning to take, as I inferred, the virtues of the three to himself unreservedly."

After this repartee, they descended to the parlor, where Alcott tried to get a conversation going between Thoreau and Whitman, but with little success. "Each seemed planted fast in reserves, surveying the other curiously,—like two beasts, each wondering what the other would do, whether to snap or run; and it came to no more than cold compliments between them." Alcott wondered, tongue-in-cheek, whether "Thoreau was meditating the possibility of Walt's stealing away his 'out-of-doors' for some sinister ends, poetic or pecuniary," or if "Walt suspected...... that he had here, for once, and for the first, time, found his match

and more at smelling out 'all Nature,' a sagacity potent, penetrating and peerless as his own...... At all events, our stay was not long."

Alcott's guesses as to why the encounter was so strained were likely ones, but had he been able to see into his companions' minds, he would have been in for some surprises. Nature was not the main point of issue between them, but people. They agreed on the nature of Man, but not on the nature of men. Whitman, as usual, made much of his proletarianism, telling his guests how "he loved to ride up and down Broadway all day on an omnibus, sitting beside the driver, listening to the roar of the carts, and sometimes gesticulating and declaiming Homer at the top of his voice," dining afterwards with the whipsters. Thoreau, as usual, had little good to say about the mass of men and society in general. "Among the few things which I chanced to say," he remembered, "one was, in answer to him as representing America, that I did not think much of America or of politics, and so on, which may have been somewhat of a damper to him." Years later, Whitman still recalled his resentment at hearing Thoreau say on another occasion: "What is there in the people? Pshaw!" "I did not like my Brooklyn spoken of in this way," huffed Whitman.

Underlying this ideological dispute, differences in temperament made it hard for Thoreau and Whitman to communicate in a first, brief encounter. Whitman struck Thoreau as rather crude and bumptious, "very broad" but "not fine". Thoreau struck Whitman as "a very aggravated case of superciliousness;" and Thoreau, for one, found it hard to converse with two other people present.

Nevertheless, their main reaction to each other was not so

much hostility as a qualified respect, qualified by puzzlement as much as disapproval. Thoreau in particular seems to have been fascinated by the encounter for at least a month afterwards. "That Walt Whitman ...... is the most interesting fact to me at present," he wrote to a friend.

> He is apparently the greatest democrat the world has seen. Kings and aristocracy go by the board at once, as they have long deserved to. A remarkably strong though coarse nature, of a sweet disposition, and much prized by his friends. Though peculiar and rough in his exterior, his skin (all over (?)) red, he is essentially a gentleman. I am still somewhat in a quandary about him,—feel that he is essentially strange to me, at any rate......

On the subject of Whitman's poetry, Thoreau is more wholeheartedly enthusiastic. "I have just read his 2nd edition (which he gave me) and it has done me more good than any reading for a long time." "Song of Myself" and "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" were Thoreau's special favorites. "To be sure," he reflects, "I sometimes feel a little imposed on. By his heartiness & broad generalities he puts me into a liberal frame of mind prepared to see wonders—as it were, sets me upon a hill or in the midst of a plain—stirs me well up, and then—throws in a thousand of brick." Still, *Leaves of Grass* "sounds to me very brave & American after whatever deductions." "Though rude & sometimes ineffectual, it is a great primitive poem,—an alarum or trumpet-note ringing through the American camp." "I do not believe that all the sermons so called that have been preached in this land put together are equal to it for preaching." Coming from a transcendentalist, that is perhaps the ultimate compliment.

The squeamish side of Thoreau's reaction to Whitman comes

out especially in his remarks about the sexual references in *Leaves of Grass,* the point about Whitman hardest for New Englanders to appreciate. (It is said that Thoreau, Emerson, and Alcott once decided to invite Whitman to visit Concord, but their womenfolk vetoed the proposal on the grounds that Whitman was indecent.) Thoreau himself complained that "there are 2 or 3 pieces in the book which are disagreeable to say the least, simply sensual. He does not celebrate love at all. It is as if the beasts spoke. I think that men have not been ashamed of themselves without reason."[1] But even on the subject of sex, Thoreau admitted, "he has spoken more truth than any American or modern that I know." The so-called "sensuality" of the poem "may turn out to be less sensual than it appeared—I do not so much wish that those parts were not written, as that men & women were so pure that they could read them without harm, that is, without understanding them." After all, Thoreau concludes transcendentally, "Walt Whitman can communicate to us no experience, and if we are shocked, whose experience is it that we are reminded of?"

Thoreau seems to have expressed this mixture of admiration and scruple to Whitman himself at their meeting. Years later, Whitman recalled Thoreau as declaring that "there is much in you to which I cannot accommodate myself: the defect may be mine: but the objections are there." But at the same time,

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1) It may be that Thoreau was even more Victorian on this subiect than Emerson, who tried to persuade Whitman not to publish the "Children of Adam" poems in 1860. Whitman, at any rate, remembered Emerson as telling him that "strange as it may seem, Henry being an outdoor man......—he shrinks from some formidable things in you—in your book, in your personality—over which I rejoice!" Of course, Emerson might not have been speaking of sex in particular.

Thoreau excoriated Whitman's critics as "reprobates." "Would you apply so severe a word to them?" asked Whitman. "Do you regard that as a severe word?" Thoreau said in surprise. "Reprobates?......I thought I was letting them off easy."

For all his reservations about Whitman, Thoreau concluded that "he is a great fellow." His opinion seems not to have changed for the rest of his life, though his letters and journals make no mention of Whitman after 1856. Emerson later reported to Whitman that "Henry carried your book around Concord like a red flag—defiantly, challenging the plentiful current opposition there!"

Whitman, on his part, liked Thoreau's plain and independent manner, though with strong reservations. Being a more gregarious and affectionate person than Thoreau, he could not overcome his dislike of Thoreau's aloof and "bookish" air. "Even his love of nature seems of the intellectual order—the bookish, library, fireside—rather than smacking of out of doors." Whitman habitually measured Thoreau by the standard of Emerson, on the one hand, and the nature-writer John Burroughs (a close friend of Whitman's) on the other. Thoreau, he told Burroughs, was "a very sweet, pure soul, but by no means a number one man, as Emerson is. He was too timid and afraid of the world; did men and things injustice; was too exclusive; and not enough of a cosmopolitan." Again, Whitman thought that Burroughs "had better learned the lessons of the open air" than Thoreau, because he had "a rather better concrete feeling towards men than Thoreau had." The outdoors, pronounced Whitman, "taught Burroughs gentle things about men—it had no such effect on Thoreau." Whitman even suspected that Thoreau was drawn to nature not so much for love of her "as from a morbid dislike of

humanity." Still, Whitman had a definite sense of Thoreau's significance. "He was a force," Whitman declared late in life: "he looms up bigger: his dying does not seem to have hurt him a bit: every year has added to his fame. One thing about Thoreau keeps him very near to me...his lawlessness—his dissent —his going his own absolute road, let hell blaze all it chooses."

As for Thoreau's writing, Whitman's favorite part, interestingly, seems to have been the translations of Anacreon's homosexual love lyrics in *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers.* Burroughs reports that he tore the pages which contained them out of his copy of the book and "put them among his choice tidbits." About *Walden* he evidently had mixed feelings, judging from the one comment he is known to have made about it. Burroughs called upon Whitman one morning in 1864, as he was reading *Walden.* "My impression of the book last night," Walt remarked, "was rather, poor; I thought it puerile. But this morning, after I had sipped my coffee, I found it more satisfying. I opened near the end and found it so good I turned back and commenced again." Thoreau would have been pleased to learn that he had appealed to Whitman in his morning mood.

In the long run, Thoreau remained something of a mystery to Whitman, just as Whitman was to Thoreau: "such a man as it takes ages to make, and ages to understand," to quote an aphorism from Thoreau which Whitman copied into his commonplace book. They lived too far apart for their relationship to develop in the five years before Thoreau was taken with his last illness. We cannot even be absolutely sure that they met again, though they probably did, since years afterward Whitman recalled that they had had other conversations during Thoreau's later visits to New York. Some twenty years after Thoreau's death,

Whitman finally did visit Concord to see Alcott and Emerson and the sights of the town, including Thoreau's grave and Walden Pond. Pausing at the side of the cabin, Whitman added the customary stone to the cairn in tribute to Thoreau's memory.

Today one thinks of Whitman and Thoreau as having more in common with each other than with most other men of their times, as shapers of their country's art and spirit. Indeed their mutual friend Bronson Alcott was inclined to see them as *the* two archetypal figures among his countrymen. "Of New England men," he declared, "Thoreau came nearest to being indigenous;" and as for Whitman, "Were New York City American, it were proper to name [him] the representative American."

This rather backhanded compliment may be a final clue as to why the two men never fully realized how much they had in common. The diversity of America which Whitman saw and celebrated put them at odds. Each was a bit too much the product of his region to warm up to the other. Thoreau could not be comfortable for long in Whitman's roisterous milieu though he tried the experiment for several months in 1843. Whitman, on the other hand, lumped all the Concordians together as a rather chilly lot. "They all had the same manner—a sort of aloofness: as though they meant me to see they were willing to come only so far: that coming an inch beyond that would mean disaster to us all." Thoreau seems to have approached Whitman in somewhat the same way that he approached his wood-chopper friend in *Walden* or his Indian guide in *The Maine Woods*—as a fascinating ethnic phenomenon, to be romanticized, to be identified with vicariously, but ultimately to be added to his collection of primitive types. Witness his description of Whitman as a "most interesting fact." Whitman, like many new

authors, was quite willing to be patronized to some extent; but when it came to personal relationships, he looked for comrades, and comradeship was not one of Thoreau's strong points. "As for taking Thoreau's arm," Emerson wrote, "I should as soon take the arm of an elm tree."

The problem of communication between Whitman and Thoreau seems the more ironic in view of the fact that their colorful, charismatic literary presences were partly masks for personal loneliness. Both men, at the time of their meeting, were meditative, introspective bachelors, verging towards middle age; both were second sons of weak fathers and strong mothers, to whom they remained closely tied throughout their lives. These common and narrowing emotional circumstances no doubt had a lot to do with their decision to celebrate their own inward experiences (and dreams) in their works. By acts of will, they created life-styles for themselves which they projected in their writings and gradually grew into life to the point that they could not have disengaged themselves from these roles even if they had wanted to. Small wonder, then, that when it came to relating to each other they were able to do so only in terms of their images of each other and themselves. Thoreau cast himself in a slightly updated version of the New England role, that of "bachelor of Nature," in Emerson's phrase; Whitman struck the cosmopolitan pose of universal affability. We have long been accustomed to seeing these facades in their writing; it is a little sad to discover that they used them on each other in life.

Still, Thoreau and Whitman *did* recognize each other and in the long run that is what counts. Unlike Emerson, Thoreau was not at all impressed by the popular reaction against *Leaves of Grass*. Whitman was surprised, but not at all contentious,

when the transcendentalist historian Franklin B. Sanborn told him that not Emerson but Thoreau, "of all men of Concord was most likely to last into the future." This basic faith which each man put in the other is what ultimately makes the Whitman-Thoreau relationship one of the more heartening chapters in American literary history.