

## Commentary on “Thoreau’s Beard” and “The Flag Attractiveness Scale”

Though Herman Melville has no direct bearing on the subject matter of the two poems, I believe I can attribute the impulse to write “Thoreau’s Beard” and “The Flag Attractiveness Scale” to a research project on *Moby-Dick* I was working on between 2014 and 2015.

During that timeframe, I was writing a paper to present at the International Melville Conference at Keio University in Tokyo; the title: “Cultural Narcissism as a Basis for Racial and Cultural Distinctions in *Moby-Dick*.” Whenever I steps aboard the *Pequod*, I have to be prepared to confront problematic issues imbedded in American society, not to mention deal with the eerie spell the book casts over me. I wanted to understand how Melville viewed America’s problems, as more and more they seem relevant. As I researched psychologist Heinz Kohut’s take on narcissism, as well as Christopher Lash’s theory of cultural narcissism (I went back to the 1970s, the “Me Generation”), I began to connect the idea of in-group bias to discrimination and racism. As Melville’s 19th century observations began to resonate with me, the presidential race was beginning to heat up. Even in 2015 I began to hear the siren song of “Make America Great Again.”

The research and my immersion in Melville’s work appeared to affect my creative writing. I found myself wanting to write poetry about America, and, perhaps inspired by Melville’s way of understanding our country, satirized the way we mythologize and deify America’s iconic figures—from presidents to artists to writers. I liked the humorous tone of Ishmael’s narrative voice, too. I wrote quite a few poems about famous Americans as a result. For instance, I researched George Washington, especially the story of how he cut down his father’s cherry tree, but could not tell a lie about what he had done. The poem that arose (still incomplete) became a corruption of the exaggerated tale. I looked at Ben Franklin in depth, the genius’s inventiveness (you have heard of the Ben Franklin stove, how he developed the first fire department and the first lending library, but did you know he invented the urinary catheter, the first swimming fins, and bifocals?), and I also learned of his twenty or so mistresses, his illegitimate children, and the problematic relationships he had with his slaves. A poem titled “Ben Franklin’s Passion” resulted. Washington and Franklin—the faces of these men are on our *money*. Of course, I also examined iconic writers and thinkers, including Henry David Thoreau.

My interest in writing a poem about Thoreau bubbled up after I reread many of his essays (“Economy” made a strong impression) and began to research his personal life. In one famous photograph I became puzzled by his beard—which, specifically, was a neck beard. The whiskers of a neck beard are, well, grown only on the neck, all below the chin, and the remainder of the face (cheeks, sideburn and mustache areas) is shaved clean. I found the style of beard ostentatious and, to put it bluntly, rather hideous. My research on Thoreau repeatedly pointed out how he struggled with women, as they generally found him pedantic and physically unattractive. The neck beard, I felt, probably didn’t help his cause. In addition, I was struck by how proud and self-congratulatory Thoreau was when describing the acquisition of the secondhand materials (boards and nails) he used to build his cabin. Though I admired his recycling prowess, he came off to me as quite a braggadocio when describing the merits of what

he had accomplished. In a way he seemed as materialistic and narcissistic as the society he criticized.

Though I can't say for certain, Thoreau's isolation in his cabin at Walden (away from everyone, especially, I imagined, women) began to resonate, as personally I was going through a difficult separation and divorce. I had also simultaneously developed strong feelings for a woman who appeared to be happily married, and I believe I had started to fall in love with her. Though I detected she was fond of me, I knew there was absolutely no way she was going to act on whatever feelings she might have had. The end of my marriage and my attraction to an unattainable woman caused me inner turmoil and an acute sense of failure and isolation. Though I made no conscious attempt to do so, I think my interest in 19th century America, Melville, narcissism, American icons, and Thoreau—concurrent with the emotional upheaval I was going through—probably lead to the satirical, mildly humorous, and self-deprecating “Thoreau's Beard.” This probably (certainly?) accounts for the shift into the first person midway through the poem, as well as the prosy quality of the piece.

I wrote “The Flag Attractiveness Scale” not long after “Thoreau's Beard,” when I was visiting my brother in Denver, Colorado, days before my flight to the Melville conference in Tokyo. The poem seems to examine in a comical manner what it means to have a national identity. Again, my immersion in Melville and his exploration of identity (American and personal) appears to have blended with the circumstances of my visit to my brother. Several years ago, he came out as transgender, and this shook my Catholic family to the core. My brother came out boldly—by emailing the members of my family a photoshoot in which he wore a wig and Victoria's Secret lingerie. Subsequently, he legally changed his name from Patrick to Keira and began hormone replacement therapy—all while remaining married to his wife and raising two young children. My parents, who are both in their late 70s, still cannot process the transformation. Family arguments with and about my brother erupted. How could he do this to his wife? His children? I was initially sympathetic, but I, too, stopped speaking to him for a time. A veteran of the war in Afghanistan, he suffered from PTSD, and I thought his doctors were out to make money off his trauma, to sell him a way to change his identity through expensive hormone replacement therapy and surgery so he would feel better about himself. My rejection of my brother changed immediately, though, when I heard Pope Francis famously say, regarding sin and homosexuality, “Who am I to judge?” Indeed, who was I to judge my brother? So, with Francis's words in mind, I became the first member of my family to visit my brother since the transformation.

How, pray tell, did this experience—visiting a transgender sibling for the first time—lead to a poem about flags? Poems can arise out of a cracked logic, and as Keira and I were partaking of the best of what Colorado legally has to offer, I had a vibrant vision of the Japanese flag, which makes sense since I was excited about flying to Japan in a few days for the conference. Sitting on the balcony overlooking the Rocky Mountains, I began researching flags and their origins on my iPad, and, in a state of free association, tried to assess which flags were visually more striking than others, and to invent reasons why. Could there be some sort of scale in which we might measure their attractiveness? Which flag was best? Which one was the worst? What does a flag say (if anything) about its citizens? I began to think about national identity, nationalism, how flags are revered as national symbols, and so on. Simultaneously, I also began to think about my family surname, Brennan, which is Irish, and also of my crumbling marriage

(a constant preoccupation at that time), my former spouse being an Italian citizen from Milano. I was in the process of obtaining an Italian passport when we separated, I had been studying the Italian language for years, and I was distraught the process of obtaining dual citizenship would never reach completion. Echoing in my mind was the curious fact that save for a relatively slight change in color (the flag of Ireland has an orange band, the flag of Italy has a red band), the flags of the two nations are identical: green, white, red/green, white, orange. The Melville paper, my preoccupation with American and Italian identity, my brother's change in sexual identity, and my changing identity from married man to single man appears to have lead to the tensions I tried to resolve by writing "The Flag Attractiveness Scale." Interesting to me now—though I had no conscious awareness during the composition of either poem—both seem to confront the idea of attractiveness, isolation, identity, and narcissism, ideas at the core of the Melville paper I had been working on for over a year.