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Chapter 11

Sands immense: a fool's errand

Jean Sprackland

Day one: Southport

The path is steep and the loose sand creaks and slips under the soles of my boots.

Something skitters away in front of me – rabbit, probably – and as it dashes to safety I see the grey-green heads of the marram grass flick aside and then back into place, like hair parted briefly in a breeze. Getting off the beach into the dunes is like escaping from a busy street into a maze of quiet lanes, where time seems to run more slowly. The traffic-roar of the sea, the hectic wind, the screaming of the gulls are still audible here, but softened and muted. Other sounds come into focus: the pebble-tap of a wheatear, the rhythm of my own breath, the sigh the dry sand makes as it collapses and fills my footprints. I leave little trace as I pass.

I'm following in the long-vanished footsteps of two men who took this path, or another like it, a hundred and sixty years ahead of me. One was wild-eyed and thickly bearded, unusually sunburnt for a winter day; the other was older, more wary-looking, sporting a fashionable moustache and wearing a frock coat, warm but rather formal for the beach. The first was Herman Melville, the second Nathaniel Hawthorne, and they were out for a walk together along the shore from Southport. It was a November afternoon, and there was a cold wind blowing in off the sea. Darkness would come on at about four o'clock, after a scant eight hours of daylight. They strode out, despite the weather and the shortness of the day; both were strong walkers, and they covered six or seven miles easily. "An

agreeable day,” wrote Melville in his journal that night. “Took a long walk by the sea. Sands & grass. Wild & desolate. A strong wind. Good talk. In the evening Stout at Fox & Geese”.ⁱ

What were they doing here, these two giants of American literature? They are unlikely figures here in this English watering-place, not yet fashionable, but beginning to acquire a few brisk attractions: donkey-cart rides, boat trips, draughty boarding-houses. It has the quality of myth, this double visitation. I lived here for twenty years, and in all that time I never heard anyone mention it, though small towns are generally proud of such associations.

It started with that good strong wind. Hawthorne had taken up the post of American Consul in Liverpool, a breezy enough place in its own right, but when his wife’s health faltered the medical advice was that she needed to be out of town, in the bracing air that swept in off the sea at Southport, clean and invigorating. So the family rented a suite of rooms in a terraced house on the promenade, and Nathaniel commuted by train to Liverpool each day to fulfil the duties of his office. His first impressions were not favourable. “It is the strangest place to come for the pleasures of the sea,” he complained, “nothing but sand-hillocks covered with coarse grass”.ⁱⁱ

Melville’s visit was a brief one, an early stop on a long tour which would take him through Europe and the Middle East. His in-laws had provided the money to pay for the trip, out of concern for his wife, who was finding it difficult to cope with his mood swings and unpredictable behaviour. He was eager to visit Liverpool and renew his connection with Hawthorne. To call this connection a friendship would be like calling the sea a big puddle; Melville worshipped Hawthorne and idealised the bond between them. He once wrote him a letter in which he said “Your heart beat in my ribs and mine in yours, and both

in God's...".ⁱⁱⁱ If Hawthorne welcomed this devotion to begin with, it grew increasingly uncomfortable as time went on. Melville was a turbulent and needy soul, and the relationship was out of balance.

I have come back to this town for the first time in several years, on a mission to retrace the two men's steps along the beach and into the dunes where they sat down and talked. I have three days in which to track them over the sand. During my years here I spent a lot of time doing as they did that day, sharing the very same spaces without knowing it. I'm responding to that powerful human impulse: the desire to locate the site of an event, to be physically present in the same spot where it happened, even if no visible trace remains. To stand in a field of corn which was once a battlefield, or in a city square where a revolution began, or in a pub where a rock star once propped up the bar. I feel it now, the longing of the pilgrim.

The row of terraced houses on the promenade where the Hawthornes lived was demolished long ago to make way for a hotel, and now that in turn has been replaced by a car park. Some of the other mid-nineteenth century houses still stand, however, with an air of bashed and weary grandeur. The prom remains a broad, sweeping highway, where people stroll, as Hawthorne once complained, "without any imaginable object".^{iv} But it has experienced a dislocation; it has lost its proximity to the seafront, and the houses here no longer command a view of the beach. By the early twentieth century the sea had receded so far that the decision was taken to reclaim some of the foreshore and use it to lay out parks, gardens, a large lake, fairground and floral hall. The house where Hawthorne's daughter Una liked to sit on the window-seat watching the sea on rough days is now a fifteen-minute walk away from the beach: through King's Gardens, across the ornamental bridge over the

lake, and past the model village with its ice-cream stand and narrow-gauge railway. I wonder what Hawthorne would have made of it. Even in 1856 he was claiming with grumpy hyperbole: “In all my experience of Southport, I have not yet seen the sea”.^v He and Una can’t both have been right. But he had a point: when I stood at the far end of the pier this morning, I gazed down and saw bare sand stretching away beneath.

From where I stood, beyond the pier cafe and the coin-slot telescope machine, near the place where fishermen gather when the tide is high enough, I looked back over the great flat expanse of the beach, south towards Smith’s Slacks where the embryo dunes are rising. There the beach is green with vegetation, which has acted as a system of traps for blown sand. The sand accumulates into tiny peaks, which grow and are colonised by marram and other plants and gradually become recognisable as sand dunes. Out of view from here, a couple of miles further down the coast at Ainsdale, you can see where this process leads. It’s one of the largest dune systems in Europe, a place where the same accumulation has been going on for centuries, resulting in a dramatic sandscape which provides a complex series of habitats for some of our most endangered plants and animals. That’s where I like to imagine that Hawthorne and Melville ended up, on their “good long walk”. In 1856 there wasn’t much of a village there, just a scattering of small farms, rabbit warrens and fishing boats. The sand dunes were not treasured and protected but characterised as “barren” and “unproductive”, and the main concern was to find ways to change and control them, so that they could be brought into cultivation. A few miles down the coast at Freshfield, an experiment was underway, using the new railway to bring human sewage from Liverpool to fertilise the soil there and raise potatoes and asparagus; close to the station there was even a special “manure siding” for the purpose. But at

Ainsdale the dunes were wild and remote and uncultivated, and they feel that way still.

Today is one of those sharp, ecstatic days you get here – the light and the wind and the flung-open sky, salt on my lips, blood fizzing in my veins. The pleasure of being here, with only the seabirds for company, and that sense of life as something not owned but coursing through me as it does through them. I love this place, I love walking here. But it wasn't always so. When I came to live here twenty-five years ago, I felt washed-up, beached, hopelessly out of place. This was not my idea of the seaside at all. The shore was bare and bleak, the sea distant and flat and grey. The sandhills just seemed empty and featureless. Looking back on that time, I can forgive Hawthorne, who complained that Southport was “as stupid a place as ever I lived in”.^{vi} No wonder the local tourist board doesn't try to make capital from the association. I was not much troubled, as he was, by the paucity of baronets in the town, or the “tradesmanlike air” of the promenade, but I do feel a flash of recognition when I read this entry from his journal: “I cannot but bewail my ill fortune, to have been compelled to spend these many months on these barren sands, when almost every other square yard of England contains something that would have been historically or poetically interesting. Our life here has been a blank”.^{vii} I felt a bit like that myself once. He lived here only for one year, and it took me much longer than that to learn how to look at the place. Then it was like seeing it through a different lens: what had seemed empty and barren was vividly and tumultuously alive, in ways I simply had not been able to understand.

I've scrambled up a steep dune and arrived at the summit. Look, Nathaniel! Can't you see how dynamic this place is? With the fervour of the convert, I want him to see it the way I do: stripped to the simplicity of three basic elements – water, air and sand – which

interact all the time in a continual state of flux. I want him to notice that the beach is different every time you go there: its surface ridged or smooth, sometimes with high berms you can climb and walk along, sometimes sliced through with deep channels of water. And the restlessness of the dunescape, shifting, settling, reconfiguring. I want him to get it, to recognise that this is a landscape with character: wild, mercurial, essentially unknowable. These are things you ought to understand, Nathaniel Hawthorne, with your dark romanticism, your fascination with that indeterminate space which lies between the dream and the material. I want you to see what I learned to see, when my love affair with this place began.

Day two: intimacies

A thundery darkness is beginning to gather at the edge of the sky; there's going to be a downpour. I'm walking barefoot, sandals in hand. In contrast to the cool, damp undertow you can feel when you walk where the tide has been, the sand here in the dunes is almost too hot to walk on.

Whatever can Herman Melville – who as a young man joined a whaling expedition, sailed the high seas, and jumped ship in the South Pacific – have made of this place? Walking where I walked today, with a broad vista of empty sand and a flat grey ribbon of sea on the horizon, he must surely have found it all very tame. At a squint, there might conceivably have been something to remind him of the island of Nantucket, which he has Ishmael describe as “a mere hillock and elbow of sand; all beach, without a background”.^{viii} His brief journal entry gives no clue. He notes only that the day was “agreeable”, the conversation “good”.

His visit seems to have taken the Hawthornes by surprise, but he was welcomed generously if not enthusiastically and spent a few days with the family in Southport, causing some ripples of concern with his inadequate luggage and relaxed attitude to personal hygiene. The walk along the beach was the first chance for the two men to talk at length, and even then the really significant stuff was kept back until they turned inland, found themselves a dip in the sand dunes and sat down to rest. There, at last, was the opportunity Melville had been hoping for, the moment in which he could unburden himself, share his clamorous thoughts with the man he thought of as his kindred spirit. "Sat down in a hollow among the sand hills (sheltering ourselves from the high, cool wind) and smoked a cigar," wrote Hawthorne in his journal. "Melville, as he always does, began to reason of Providence and futurity, and of everything that lies beyond human ken, and informed me that he had 'pretty much made up his mind to be annihilated'; but still he does not seem to rest in that anticipation; and, I think, will never rest until he gets hold of a definite belief".^{ix} It certainly wasn't the scenery Melville had come for – indeed he may scarcely have noticed it – but the chance to grapple with the questions and terrors that were obsessing him. The chance to say out loud, possibly for the first time, that all he could see ahead of him was oblivion.

As it happened, the hollow in the dunes provided just the right conditions for these painful confidences. Sand dunes offer shelter, protection and privacy. They adjoin the liminal, open space of the shore, but are fortified against it. A retreat here is an opportunity to escape or transcend the usual constraints of time and place. Sand is so mobile, and the dunescape so shifting and changing, that any peak or valley is inevitably temporary. I'm not talking about change over geological time, but a remaking of the landscape that can be

observed over the course of days, if the weather is rough. This gives the dip where you sit an ephemeral quality – it feels less like a *place* in the usual sense and more like a den, a tent, or perhaps a boat at anchor. While you are here you exist outside the current of human events. Meanwhile, all around you, events in the lives of everything else – natterjack toad, sand lizard, skylark – continue with the same urgency as ever. You feel a sense of continuity and an awareness of transience, and the two experienced together are the nearest I can get to a definition of *peace*.

When I lived here, I walked in these dunes three or four times a week, and on those walks I would often experience that sense of safe haven. I was usually alone, but not always. I sat once with a friend, sheltering from the wind just as Hawthorne and Melville did, not smoking a cigar but sharing an apple and some cheese. I was slicing the apple with a rather blunt penknife, and my friend suddenly said: “It’s like me hacking away at the prozac with a razor blade”. She was trying to ease herself down to a lower dose, she said, but things kept getting bad again. So she’d started customising the pills, shaving a little bit more off each day, experimenting, watching her own response to see what she could get away with. If she shaved off too much, she told me, she would think of killing herself not just at night when she was trying to go to sleep, which was normal, but also while she was washing up or eating ice-cream or watching TV with the kids. She could be laughing at *The Simpsons* and thinking of killing herself, both at the same time. I had no idea. I’d thought we were close, but she hadn’t told me any of this. I suppose she might never have told me, if we hadn’t been tucked away in this warm little booth in the dunes, walled off from earshot: a safe, intimate space like a confessional in which secrets could be shared.

I’ve used that same confessional many times myself, even when alone. During the

darkest times of my life, walking on the beach became more essential than ever, because I could talk to myself there. "Oh what joy for a shy man to feel himself so solitary that he may lift his voice to the highest pitch without hazard of a listener!" wrote Hawthorne,^x and out on the lonely, windswept shore I have been free to rage and weep and howl, overheard only by flocks of oystercatchers and sandpipers and the occasional dispassionate cormorant. Then to creep exhausted into the dunes and tuck myself away from the world, and to talk myself back into one piece, laying out the facts, going through the pros and cons, feeding myself little titbits of wisdom or comfort or resolve before I set off home to face the music again.

In these remote and private places there are sometimes intimacies of another kind. On one of my solitary walks a few years ago, I stumbled on a naked couple in the dunes, in a hidden dip where the wind couldn't touch them. They quickly scuffled together, rather than springing apart, and she hid her face against his shoulder. But he stared at me, fierce and straight. It was as if the place was under an enchantment, and I had blundered in and was caught there for a moment. I seemed unable to look away. I remember he was propped on his elbows above her, and the hairs on his arms were thick with sand. I was ambushed by the sight of the two of them, sunlit and archetypal, in the creel of warmth that sheltered them as such places must have sheltered many lovers over the centuries. I watched a damselfly dart in and pause on her discarded underwear, laser blue on faded black. Silence. Then a skylark started up like a machine. "Well?" he said, in a voice like a snapped twig, and the spell was broken and I stepped back and strode quickly away.

Now the first few huge drops of rain test the sand silently, splashing it with sudden contrast, so that it's not one thing but many: aggregate of ancient rocks, sea-creatures,

glitter of minerals, bright sift of plastic. The stuff of metaphor, reminding us, generation after generation, of the ephemeral nature of our lives, our insignificance in the context of geological time. The footprints we leave, or the name scratched with a finger and lost with the next tide. Here in the dunes, secrets are shared, lovers meet, and the unspeakable is spoken. The sand doesn't care, is on the move anyway. Whatever fragments or traces of those exchanges might remain, they'll be scattered and lost next time the wind blows. And now the rain is yanked down hard like a shutter. Smell of seaweed and petrichor, and the sand stained dark.

Day three: evidence

The wind pummels my back and rattles the hood of my jacket as I turn inland with relief. The sense of timelessness is tangible this afternoon; I half-expect to hear the two men's voices, and be able to track them down to where they are sitting in their heavy coats under the November sky, one talking on in melancholy loops and circles, the other smoking, shaking his head, uncomfortably aware of the cold in his bones and the afternoon light beginning to fade.

On the day of the walk, Herman Melville was thirty-five years old, and feeling finished. It was five years since the publication of *Moby Dick*; he had poured himself into that work and it had been a flop. In fact, his only real commercial and critical success was long behind him: his first novel, *Typee*, a tale based on the time he spent living on a Polynesian island. Now he was struggling, pulled in two opposite directions – feeling he was expected to replicate his youthful success with another crowd-pleaser, and wanting desperately to write the books that really mattered to him, knowing they were unlikely to

make any money or enhance his literary reputation. "All fame is patronage," he wrote. "Let me be infamous; there is no patronage in that".^{x1} They are brave words, but really he was afraid of ending up known only as "a man who lived among the cannibals". Meanwhile his inner life was tumultuous; he made himself and those around him miserable with moods and tempers and incessant questions of religious faith and doubt. "It is strange," wrote Hawthorne that evening, "how he persists – and has persisted ever since I knew him , and probably long before – in wandering to-and-fro over these deserts, as dismal and monotonous as the sand hills amid which we were sitting. He can neither believe, nor be comfortable in his unbelief; and he is too honest and courageous not to try to do one or the other".^{xii}

Deserts came to matter very much to Melville. After he left Southport and Hawthorne behind, he would travel on to the Holy Land, an experience which affected him deeply and gave rise to his 18,000-line verse narrative *Clarel*. The sandy landscapes of the desert, so important in the poem, are not seen as dismal or monotonous. At first they are perceived to have "a charm, a beauty from the heaven / Above them"; they are reminiscent of "Western counties all in grain / Ripe for the sickleman and wain". But this bucolic image is superseded by something much more characteristic of Melville. The desert, observed over time, starts to take on some of the power and significance that in his previous work has pertained to the sea:

Sands immense^[SEP]

Impart the oceanic sense:

The flying grit like scud is made^[SEP]

Pillars of sand which whirl about^[SEP]

Or arc along in colonnade,^{[L] [SEP]}
True kin be to the waterspout.^{[L] [SEP]}
Yonder on the horizon, red,^{[L] [SEP]}
With storm, see there the caravan^{[L] [SEP]}
Straggling long-drawn, dispirited;
Mark how it labors like a fleet
Dismasted, which the cross-winds fan^{[L] [SEP]}
In crippled disaster of retreat^{[L] [SEP]}
From battle.^{xiii}

Of course he's talking about the Egyptian desert, not the Lancashire coast. But Herman, look at this place today – the movement is just as you describe it, the flying and whirling scud of sand, like waves and spray and spume on a stormy day at sea. Sand, with its perpetual movement, its changing aspect, its restlessness and inscrutability, becomes in this strange poem of yours an element as contradictory and as terrifying as the question of faith itself. Can Clarel and his fellow pilgrims imagine religious faith surviving and coexisting somehow with science in the age of Darwin? Or are they now confronted with the reality of a godless universe, where “unperturbed over deserts riven, / Stretched the clear vault of hollow heaven”?^{xiv} Sand creates a landscape whose very emptiness is charged with meaning, just as the ocean is charged with meaning for Captain Ahab and his crew, even if ultimately what the meaning boils down to is *meaninglessness*.

The sand where they sat, Melville ruminating, Hawthorne fidgeting – where is it now? The wind has blown it, picked it up and flung it apart, over and over again, in the fifty-eight thousand days since. The dunes have grown and fallen, like houses, like empires. The

sea has retreated, and the place has been covered over with flowerbeds or tarmac. Their words were taken into the air and scattered, of course, but so was the location in which they were spoken. Even if Melville had written the co-ordinates in his journal, I would not be able to find the place. It is *nowhere*. On this coast, topographical change is not just something you read about in books, or extrapolate from the landscape; you observe it happening with your own eyes, sometimes literally overnight. It makes for a different experience of environment; nothing is fixed, nothing is stable. In the past, this instability was a recurring threat to homes, livelihoods and everything people had. Storms could bring inundation by water, but also by sand. Every so often a church, a farmstead, even a whole settlement was buried in a catastrophic sandblow. The houses and streets and middens of Argarmeols or Ravenmeols, both engulfed long ago, are buried somewhere under the dunes, maybe right beneath the spot where the two men sat. For the inhabitants of those lost villages, landscape change was not a matter of idle interest but an immediate preoccupation, a permanent state of crisis which they tried to mitigate by using all sorts of methods of holding the sand firm. The need to introduce a different texture and structure, to stop it blowing about, provided arguments for various enterprises over the centuries, from rabbit farming to the dumping of spent tobacco waste. "Star" or marram grass, which grows readily in sand and has tough roots that are good at trapping it, was so important here that watchmen were appointed to supervise its planting and to watch out for anyone breaking the law by cutting it. The experimental planting of pine trees to stabilise the dunes began at the end of the eighteenth century, and the plantations are now so well established that they seem to have been here forever. Those pine trees are, quite literally, rooted in the past: when the saplings were planted, the holes were filled with a rich growing medium

known as “sea slutch”. It was black silt, dug from the foreshore at Formby, now known to contain Neolithic human and animal footprints. Even prehistory was enlisted in the battle to bring the dunes under control, a battle which may have some local success for a time but which is ultimately a lost cause.

Lost causes and fools’ errands. No pilgrimage can be made to the place where Hawthorne and Melville sat and talked on that November day, because it no longer exists. When I say it’s nowhere, I mean it’s *everywhere*: atomised, spread like seed on the wind. I’m digging with my gloved hand as I sit and think about this, turning over the sand, as if in spite of everything I know I might find the evidence. Come on, let there be *something*. What the sand buries, it eventually disgorges, after all; what is concealed is in time revealed. This dynamic stretch of coast is now in a period of marine transgression. The sea is encroaching, breaking down the frontal dunes and exposing a buried landscape which has been sealed away for many years. Medieval trackways, Victorian shipwrecks, 1960s caravans – the past is being laid bare again, long after everyone had forgotten.

Did Melville, a man possessed by metaphor, see any of this? Did he recognise his own restlessness in this place, the concealment and rediscovery, the way his buried thoughts made their way again and again to the surface? A dirty glint, worked free, turns out to be a tiny pocket-knife, rust-pocked and with a faded green handle. I pick it up and rub the sand off it, wanting to kid myself it’s the one Nathaniel Hawthorne used to peel an apple, just as I did when I sat here with my friend a few years back. But the handle is plastic, stamped with the legend CONROY LTD. Besides, a knife is way too ambitious. I’d be happy with a lot less. A few shreds of tobacco from Herman Melville’s cigar, perhaps. A shell he picked up and admired. A grain of warm sand he held, with thousands of others,

and allowed to run away between his fingers. I scoop again, and examine my cupped palm.

ⁱ *Journals*, ed. by Howard C Horsford and Lynn Horth (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1989), p.51.

ⁱⁱ Passages from the English Notebooks <http://public-library.uk/ebooks/32/42.pdf> [accessed 2 December 2019]

ⁱⁱⁱ *The Life and Works of Herman Melville* <<http://www.melville.org/letter7.htm>> [accessed 2 December 2019].

^{iv} Passages from the English Notebooks

^v Passages from the English Notebooks

^{vi} Passages from the English Notebooks

^{vii} Passages from the English Notebooks

^{viii} Herman Melville, *Moby Dick* (London: Vintage, 2007), p68.

^{ix} Passages from the English Notebooks

^x Nathaniel Hawthorne, 'Foot-prints on the Sea Shore', in *Tales and Sketches* (New York: Library of America, 1982), p.568.

^{xi} *The Life and Works of Herman Melville* <<http://www.melville.org/letter3.htm>> [accessed 2 December 2019].

^{xii} Passages from the English Notebooks

^{xiii} Herman Melville, *Selected Poems*, (New York: Penguin, 2006), p.158.

^{xiv} Melville, *Selected Poems*, p.180.