

Reading Melville Cross-Culturally

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One of the most provocative and illuminating approaches to Herman Melville's first published work lies in T. Walter Herbert's historically informed and ethnographically informative study of *Typee*.¹ His comparison of Melville's account of his initial contact with the Marquesan islanders with the written accounts of two other Americans (one a naval officer whose book was dated 1815 and the other a clergyman's dated 1831) demonstrates how much cultural and professional perspective shapes style and governs meaning, especially when describing an unfamiliar culture.

My recent experience provides two more dramatic instances of cross-cultural encounter: instances in which Melville's texts were what was encountered and the observers who reacted were themselves the products of diverse cultures, one Third World, the other Old World, for whom *Typee* and *Billy Budd* constituted a new world of literary experience.²

Ben-And Makele, who was educated by Belgian Catholic missionaries in Zaire, experienced at first hand the indelible vestiges of political and cultural colonialism, and studied Shakespeare in a university classroom where only the teacher had a text, avidly seized the topic of "Primitivism and Colonialism . . . in Melville, Conrad and Achebe." Of the two white writers, he found that Melville's *Typee*, *Omoo*, and *White-Jacket* spoke more directly to his experiences and attitudes in regard to caste, class, and the culture of the other. Whereas Conrad, writing about Makele's own Congo, earned exceedingly poor marks for his depiction of Congolese primitives.³

Heart of Darkness has long been a staple of introductory literature classes, the source of what many of us think about the European exploitation of Africa, and the basis of cultural self-criticism from T.S. Eliot to Francis Ford Coppola. To a contemporary African reader, Conrad clearly loathes the greed and

¹ *Marquesan Encounters: Melville and The Meaning of Civilization* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980).

² This paper draws upon discussions with and written assignments from two former students in Melville seminars, one from Zaire and the other from what was then West Germany. After completing a dissertation at Arizona State University in 1988 on "Primitivism and Colonialism in Selected Works of Melville, Conrad, and Achebe," Ben-And-Bar-a-Bar Makele returned to teach at the National University of Zaire. In 1988-89 I taught a Melville seminar at the University of Tübingen to approximately twelve students, most of whom had read nothing by Melville. In most cases I tried to use what I knew to direct their reading. In the instance from which I subsequently draw, I was moved to insight and admiration by the comments of Petra Engst, who read Melville en route to completing doctoral studies in Slavistik. Both showed remarkable sophistication in recognizing how their experience and historical perspective influenced their reading and shaped its significance. Through their own cultural lenses they perceived and reached conclusions that sometimes differed markedly from what I had been accustomed to in many years of American university teaching.

³ In a required class in Old English, Makele recognized how English and American scholars eulogize Beowulf "for the very qualities that are scorned in the European depiction of the African."

hypocrisy of imperialism, seems more equivocal about colonialism, but he is despised for the distorted and culturally stereotyped depiction of the Congolese as brutal, violent, ferocious, and "prehistoric."

Melville visited the Marquesas nearly fifty years before Conrad visited the Congo but, from a contemporary African perspective, Melville's egalitarian attitudes toward the Polynesians seem a century ahead of Conrad's. Melville's Tommo in *Typee* participated more fully (despite symptoms of culture shock) than did Conrad's Marlow in native society, and he experienced far greater hospitality than Marlow.

Hospitality and generosity can seem wicked and licentious to a cultural moralist but not to Tommo, who recognizes that cultural difference is not cultural failing. Describing the young women who had been assigned to bring food and look after himself and Toby, Tommo writes: "These lively young ladies were at the same time wonderfully polite and humane; fanning aside the insects that occasionally lighted on our brows; presenting us with food. But in spite of all their blandishments, my feelings of propriety were exceedingly shocked, for I could not but consider them as having overstepped the due limits of female decorum."⁴ Tommo is later offered Kory-Kory for guardianship and Fayaway for companionship. Kory-Kory becomes his *Tayo*, a Marquesan word for friend and friendship that Melville defines in *Omoo* as the custom of one man accepting another as his equal and sharing the best and the worst that this friendship offers. Noting that in *Omoo*, a troop of would-be Tayos welcomed the arrival of the narrator's ship at Tahiti by offering their wives to the sailors in an act of uninhibited friendship, Makele wonders what Conrad and other literary representatives of colonial powers might have written about the bestiality of Africans prostituting their wives if a similar custom had existed. Melville seems to him, despite his cultural preconceptions, more capable of objective comparison and less given to ethnocentric bias than his antecedents, contemporaries, and immediate successors.

Our African reader also notes how readily Melville admires the appearance of the Typees, their art and artifacts, even their tattooing. Conrad and other European visitors to Africa accorded the darker-skinned African far lesser human status. The Typees shared most features or primitivism with many African societies, and while their lighter skin may have been more acceptable to Westerners, this pigmentation does not account for Melville's admiring description of their art, cuisine, cosmetics, and personal ornamentation. He is a more cosmopolitan critic and anticipates the twentieth-century discovery of primitive art. From *Typee* we learn much about the islanders' economy and their adjustment to and utilization of their environment, but we gain no such cultural understanding from Conrad's account of the Congo. Furthermore, Melville's conception of colonialism and its cultural agents is broader than Conrad's, especially in regard to the role of the missionaries and the military, even though both writers are critical of civilization and its consequences. Melville emphasizes the cruelty of colonialism in its dealings with the Third World, the lack of Christian principle and humanitarian concern in its

⁴ *Typee: A Peep at Polynesian Life* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968) 77.

evangelical policies. Conrad seems more concerned with exposing the incompetence of colonial representatives whose inefficiencies lead to wastefulness and suffering, but in addition to the callousness of capitalism he emphasizes those qualities of the Third World that kindle the cruelty and spark the latent evil in civilized man. To an African reader the difference is very significant indeed, far more than to an American or an English reader, for the African sees Conrad blaming the victim for the depravity of the colonial oppressor.

Melville, however, was no self-appointed publicist for the superiority of Polynesian primitivism, and Tommo's restiveness and desire to escape not only heighten the narrative qualities of *Typee*, they also suggest the threat to identity and the difficulty of self-fulfillment within Typeean culture. The West's deepest fear of primitivism is that of cannibalism, as Tommo and Toby indicate in their dialogue, but their fears are unfounded. Even Tommo does not realize his value as an intellectual resource. The Typees want to keep him not only for his potential help against the French but for reason of his presumably unlimited knowledge. The toy popguns he makes delight young and old alike. No wonder that Mehevi is disappointed when Tommo cannot fix his broken rifle. Tommo has the status of such a highly valued intellectual resource. They assume that all Western technology lies within his ken, and they would rather pick his brain than pick his bones.⁵ Despite his sensitive appreciation of their society and its admirable simplicity, Tommo, like Thoreau, had other lives to lead, or, more accurately, he needed to be able to meet the standards of manhood, maturity, and achievement that had been culturally programmed into his character.

While teaching a Melville seminar at the University of Tübingen in 1988-89, I noticed that by and large German students seemed more sensitive to the military paradigm of *Billy Budd* than American students. Appalled by their reading of the events of fifty years ago in Europe, they read *Billy Budd* (in the words of one young woman) as "a moral inquiry into the consequences of militarism, an issue of great importance that remains unresolved today." More than American students they connected the world in a man-of-war in *White-Jacket* and the consequences of life in a man-of-war world in *Billy Budd*. West Germany had universal conscription but offered an alternative of social service, such as working with cancer patients in a hospice, that was chosen by more than sixty percent of male gymnasium graduates. I suspect that the percentage of university students who opted for alternative service formed an even greater majority. The present generation of university students is probably the best informed about the policies of the Third Reich and the most capable of detached criticism, even in such a case as the young graduate student who told me that those policies constitute "the one subject I cannot discuss with my father." Significantly, the same student had just coproduced with a Jewish-American faculty member a video documentary on the Vietnam War.

⁵ Makele recalls the dissatisfaction and frustration of his tribesmen when the Father Superior or another white missionary could not repair their broken clocks or radios. So great was their expectation that all Europeans should be able to repair such white man's items, that they viewed any lack of ability with disappointment and disbelief.

In a country like Germany that goes to such extremes to protect the individual's right to privacy, where even universities maintain no centralized students' records office, I should not have been surprised when a student drew a connection between the innocence of Billy Budd when he served on the *Rights-of-Man* and the innocent Typees whose communal harmony required no police force or civil coercion before the missionary arrival. Billy's impressment and the abolition of his human rights on the *Bellipotent*, the military imperialism and discipline of the king's law and measured forms, she argued, had their counterparts in the cultural imperialism and "oppressment" imposed on the Typees in the forms of theology and morality. Never before, I must admit, had these Christian soldiers seemed to march to a goosestep, nor had their musical hymns assumed so martial an air. And never before had the dedication to Jack Chase, the gallant champion of the rights of man in *White-Jacket*, seemed so overtly ironic as when this German student pointed out that his desertion, which had gone unpunished in the earlier book, would certainly have called for execution in the world of the *Bellipotent*.

This same student marvelled at the number of critics who viewed Vere in positive and heroic terms. To her his action was more provocative than preventative of mutiny, he was representative of a society that had lost its heart in upholding the harshness of its laws, and even more than Claggart, he was involved in "the mystery of iniquity" and capable of directing "a cool judgement sagacious and sound" toward a malevolent aim. For Billy in his innocence and naivete to bless Captain Vere heightens the irony of the story. But what of those critics who prefer a fleecy spun confection to Melville's bitter pill? Are they, like others we have known, stubbornly unwilling to believe the amorality and cruelty of their leaders and their country? She did not quite phrase this question so as to insist that some good Americans might be as blind as some good Germans, but the implication is there as she identifies her perspective and uses it to interpret Melville's last work: "I am a reader of the late 20th century. I didn't live under the Nazi regime, but I know about the terrible consequences of the Third Reich. The system was established in perfect order and was at the same time totally insane. With the help of many Claggarts and Veres it was possible to maintain such a devastating system and to make crime against humanity a method perfectly rational. To me those who established and maintained the tyrannical system are proof of the danger of national ambition in a war policy, of intellectuality as an instrument of oppression, and of the rational justification of injustice and cruelty."

In her view, Billy the peacemaker is doomed in a society where peacekeeping is the function of military force. In a literal sense he is guilty of Claggart's death, but the instrumentality of law cannot so clearly deal with the guilt of Claggart's bearing false witness or Vere's rational malignity. What does seem clear to her is that submission and obedience to military powers co-opt and corrupt us all and that in the short run or in the long run we may all be victims of our trust in military peacekeepers.

These two readers view Melville's work in the light of their own experience and culture, and in the process they have illuminated areas of significance that

Americans cannot as easily recognize. Despite their differences, he speaks to them from another century and in another language, but they find his thought strikingly contemporary and painfully relevant. Were he able to glimpse the view from their respective piazzas, he might well feel greater fulfillment than he otherwise knew.