

**Zeitschrift:** SPELL : Swiss papers in English language and literature  
**Herausgeber:** Swiss Association of University Teachers of English  
**Band:** 6 (1992)  
  
**Artikel:** Readings of Melville : the difference(s) that Culture makes  
**Autor:** Blair, John G.  
**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-99891>

### **Nutzungsbedingungen**

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

### **Conditions d'utilisation**

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

### **Terms of use**

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

**Download PDF:** 09.07.2025

**ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>**

## Readings of Melville: The Difference(s) that *Culture* Makes

John G. Blair

There have been many Melvilles over the years. There was the man "who lived among cannibals" who proved to be, as a horrified Melville himself predicted, the most memorable of his contemporary images. More relevant to us are those Melvilles who have succeeded each other in the marketplace of literary canonization since the 1920s. There was Melville-Shakespeare whose profoundly tragic vision of life corrected for the superficiality and shallow optimism of most Americans (a Melville who flourished especially from the 1920s through the 1940s). There was Melville-the-democratic-genius, who virtually without formal education taught himself everything he needed to know to become a great spokesman for American democracy. There was Melville-the-world-class-artist, praised for the organic complexity that made his masterpiece a classic of literary art. More recently we have Melville-the-ironist who found means to undercut every pious and philosophical pretension he came across. Not to forget Melville the sensitive barometer of the social and political issues of his time. *Et j'en passe*. Obviously the list could go on for as long as one is willing to multiply distinctions in line with the undiminishing production of literary commentary on this author (or perhaps all major authors).

Beginning with this selective and not at all exhaustive list is itself a Melvillean tactic that I use to introduce the idea of yet another Melville, the portrait of an author as his work might be reconceived in the light of *culture* as a touchstone concept in literary studies. Rather than launching into a comparison of competing conceptions of *culture*, a process that could easily yield another extended list of alternatives, I will simply assert that the relevant concern here is an encounter with a cultural Other and its consequences for a major American author.

When Herman Melville encountered his cultural Other, he was already in his twenties, that is, as enculturated as he was likely to become in the way of life into which he was born. By comparison with what he was used to, the

Typees of the Marquesas Islands in the South Pacific were radically Other.<sup>1</sup> Young Herman was not at that point a writer, not even by aspiration, but simply the impoverished offspring of a once-prominent New York family, one who had taken to a whale-ship as a make-work. When he and a companion jumped ship to escape over-bearing discipline, he found himself for a time altogether outside any Western frame of reference — except, of course, that inescapable primary enculturation he carried within him. My thesis is that this encounter generated not simply Melville's first venture into writing in 1846 but his entire output of fiction and its complex (and increasingly disillusioned) philosophical search for an understanding of the world. Reconsidering Melville's work in the light of *culture* generates another narrative than we are used to.

*Typee: A Peep at Polynesian Life*<sup>2</sup> sets up dramatic movement into the land of the Other, but in a way that often echoes familiar romance motifs: departure from an intolerable present (brutal whaling captain), passage through trials and dangers in an intermediate zone (Gothic mountains), arrival amidst a strange and reputedly dangerous otherworld. The world of the Typees is partly the mythical fantasy world the preliminaries lead us to expect. It is so edenic that sexuality entails no guilt, and Typee taboos are conveniently bent to accomodate Tommo's boating adventures with his blue-eyed beauty, Fayaway. On the other hand, it is also a very earth-bound ethnographical world inhabited by a tribal people with customs curious, strange and occasionally threatening. What the book offers is not just exoticism but a persistent inability to settle on one or the other of these divergent perspectives. The rival claims of attraction and repulsion are never satisfactorily resolved.

<sup>1</sup> For a recent anthropological study of the islands and their peoples, see Denning (1980). From the perspective of the Marquesans, of course, Melville was a minor visitor. The Typees, sadly, did not survive the 19th century as a distinguishable group, though they were reported to have had 2000 warriors as of first contact in 1798 (Denning:78).

<sup>2</sup> I adopt the form of the title given in the Library of America edition (1982), which provides all my references. The full American title, which Melville preferred to the British title cited below, was *Typee: A Peep at Polynesian Life. During a Four Months' Residence in a Valley of the Marquesas Islands*.

It is important to recognize how atypical Melville's wavering was among travel writers of the time. André Kaenel shows in his recent doctoral thesis on Melville's troubled relationship with authorship that the best-selling model for the kind of travel writing he produced in *Typee* was Richard Henry Dana, Jr.'s *Two Years Before the Mast* (1840), in which a young man of proper family also goes to sea as a common sailor, ostensibly to get back his eyesight. But this young man tells his story without ever violating the frame of reference he shares with the folks back home. With an inflexible New England eye, he judges the Hawaiians, Hispanics and others he sees in California as lazy and inattentive to duty. As Kaenel puts it:

where Melville almost goes native when held captive by the Typee tribe, Dana maintains a critical distance vis-à-vis the "shiftless" Californians. Unlike Melville's, in short, Dana's authorial persona is firmly rooted within the ethos of Protestant New England. (109)

These Others remain so safely indifferent that their ways never challenge the values presumed to be held in common between writer and reader.

Melville had more sensational and exotic material than Dana, but more importantly his chief character finds much of value in the Other world. Tommo might well consider staying on indefinitely if it were not for the Typee's insistence that he ought to be tattooed along tribal lines. Since this is the issue which sends Tommo fleeing back to the less than welcoming arms of the Western world, it is worth pausing a moment over the grounds of his revulsion at this prospect. The first explanation puns on "face":

I now felt convinced that in some luckless hour I should be disfigured in such a manner as never more to have the *face* to return to my countrymen, even should an opportunity offer." (255, Melville's italics)

If he were to accede to such disfigurement, he would quite literally and irreversibly lose *face* before people of his own kind.

The second ground of refusal is that his very personhood would be threatened as he goes on to impute dehumanizing motives to Karky, the tattoo artist: "What an object he would have made of me!" (255) Here again the appeal is to the sympathy of the reader who is invited to shudder at such dire consequences.



His third objection shows him retreating still further inside the protective fabric of cultural self-justification provided by his civilization of origin:

I was fairly driven to despair; nothing but the utter ruin of my "face divine," as the poets call it, would, I perceived, satisfy the inexorable Mehevi and his chiefs, or rather, that infernal Karky, for he was at the bottom of it all.  
(256)

By this locution Tommo effectively redefines himself as Tom, the person who feels protectively at home within the aegis of a platonizing poetic tradition which contrasts sharply with the "infernal" motivations of the Typee tattooer. Here again he appeals less on personal grounds than on the basis of a vaguely religious sentiment of selfhood authorized in the poetic tradition of his own culture. Taken cumulatively, these three justifications for withdrawal invite the Western reader to find his reaction credible yet they do little more than reconfirm that Tommo underneath it all is really still a Tom.

This turning away from the Typees does serve a crucial narrative function. It occurs in Chapter 30 and redirects the action toward the escape which ends the story shortly thereafter in Chapter 34. Nonetheless the fundamental issues have not been resolved by merely asserting the primacy of Tommo's Western enculturation. The faults of the Western way of life which have been so vividly described, largely associated with money and the ills associated with it, remain unrefuted, and the substantial appeal of the Typee alternative is only diminished without being demolished.<sup>3</sup>

In effect Melville found a way to end the text but not to lay the issues to rest. From Tommo's perspective there is no conceivable middle ground between the two ways of life. They seem simply *incommensurable*, leaving Melville facing an awkward dilemma.<sup>4</sup> He could send Tommo back as a

<sup>3</sup> In larger cultural terms the appeal of the South Pacific has only been postponed, to be taken up again by Paul Gauguin, Robert Louis Stevenson and other Westerners in quest of island paradises.

<sup>4</sup> The most resonant exploitation of incommensurability as a concept in recent intellectual history occurs in Thomas S. Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2nd ed., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970, esp. Chapters X

function of his instinctual reluctance to cut his ties to home, but he could imagine no grounds beyond familiarity for asserting the superiority of life back home.

*Typee* presumed that back home there was basically only one way of life, OURS, understood as Anglo-American or more inclusively Western.<sup>5</sup> But by Melville's own experience Typee-land was appealing, and he found no adequate argument for dismissing it. From the reader's perspective the Typee narrative takes place inconceivably far from what is familiar, but that the distance does not lead to automatic dismissal of the exotic way of life. The cultural boundary seems ambiguous not because of insufficient difference between ways of life but from the lack of a clear locus of judgment to confirm US over THEM. The unambiguous hierarchy of values enjoined on Melville by his native culture no longer seemed viable, so he was left still searching to ground the choices that he imagined Tommo as making by mere instinct.

Small wonder that this text disturbed numbers of its original readers. Tommo values the Typees for values derived from Christian premises to the extent that the effects of Western missionary efforts are condemned as inconsistent with the values of *civilization* itself. The narrator encourages the view that disruption of the South Sea islanders' way of life and those of primitive non-Westerners in general is brutal and unjustified once the West's own standards are applied equitably.<sup>6</sup> In short, the Other ultimately

---

and XII. Kuhn sees the incommensurability between scientific paradigms as resolvable by conversion when scientists abandon an outmoded explanatory frame. He sees conversion as possible because science, though often complicated by personality factors, is basically a cognitive matter. "Conversion" seems inapplicable to the context of cultures since it would require an individual to abandon his or her primary enculturation, namely the basis of a person's definition of reality. At best human individuals can change cultures, adapting more or less rapidly or well to alien circumstances.

<sup>5</sup> The appeal to Anglo-American sympathies is evident in the anti-French sentiments that recur throughout the text. Back home, of course, besides these nationalistic rivalries there were regional and other internal conflicts, but they were in-house quarrels compared to the gulf that separated "civilized" and "savage."

<sup>6</sup> Melville is effectively going the missionaries one better. They claimed that the

functions as a penetrating mirror to show up contradictions within Tommo's own native culture.

In retrospect it is clear that the Typees were doubly exploited in the sense that Tommo as Western spokesman serves less to tell us about what the Typees have to offer on their own terms than to dramatize the characteristics that would be desirable in Western culture. They authorize sex without guilt, a source of fascination for European explorers from the very first, yet Tommo's great love object, Fayaway, is explicitly praised for her Western-style beauty, making his ethnocentrism transparently clear. Similarly the Typees attract him because their world has no use for money and hence suffers none of the distopian consequences that plague Western life.<sup>7</sup> Once the West by its limitations defines what Tommo finds desirable among the Typees, Tommo identifies with THEM in order to criticize the effects of Western imperialism by applying on another level values to which the Western world gives little more than lip service.

The Typees themselves contribute local color and exoticism to the text, but its locus of judgment is from first to last Western. Melville discovers, as if for the first time, internal inconsistencies within the world of his cultural origins. I believe that Melville's discovery emerged more from the writing of his account than from his experiences themselves. This I take to be one major implication of his famous comment in a letter to Hawthorne of early June, 1851:

Until I was twenty-five, I had no development at all. From my twenty-fifth year I date my life. Three weeks have scarcely passed, at any time between then & now [i.e., 1845—1851], that I have not unfolded within myself."  
(Leyda:1:413)

Melville was twenty-five when he wrote *Typee*; he had been in the Marquesas in 1842 when he was twenty-three. The act of writing required him to go beyond mere *racontage*, entertaining oral story-telling; he discovered that the shape of his narrative proved neither as conclusive nor as reassuring as his publishers and many readers would have liked. Tommo

---

West's God had created the natives as well, but typically they neglected to apply "Christian" standards to evaluating their own behavior towards the "savages."

<sup>7</sup> Therein lurks, of course, one of the typical utopian motifs as of Sir Thomas More.

feels obliged to opt for a rejection of the Typees and a return to the West, but in crucial senses he never left the West. Nor did he find a way to resolve Melville's critique of Western values. These unresolved issues, figured in the incommensurability between two ways of life, pushed Melville on to further reflections, that is, to more writing. It became his vocation.

In my cultural reading of Melville, his second most important book was *Mardi and a Voyage Thither* (1849). The incommensurability between cultures is still there but the Other is replicated many times over by providing the observer with an openended succession of islands to visit without any inherent limit in their number or variety. The book at first follows the *Typee* frame by depicting the young American sailor as chafing at the discipline of his whaling captain. But once the hero jumps ship with a faithful companion, he is soon redefined in adventurous ways. By seeking to rescue a beautiful damsel in distress, named Yillah, our hero casts himself in a familiar chivalric role. With self-assurance he disrupts the rituals of some natives and kills their elder in the name of acting out a Western cliché of chivalry. Once on shore he is rebaptized: not as Tommo, with echoes of a Western name, but Taji, a figure from island mythology, like Captain Cook in Hawaii a god returned to earth in accordance with a venerable legend. He briefly lives with the lovely Yillah, gradually losing his divinity in her eyes.<sup>8</sup> When his beloved disappears, Taji vows to find her with help from the locals, no matter how many islands he must visit in the archipelago of *Mardi*. The picaresque plot is weakly motivated but that is hardly the point. What interests Melville more is a frame for taking his reader to all kinds of -topias, u- and dys-.

The "chartless voyage" takes us to societies with all kinds of structures, many fanciful, some offering quite recognizable parodies of major Western nations. Melville gets carried away by his latest discovery about writing: that there is nothing to stop him from including all kinds of things that pass through his consciousness. *Mardi* seems to function as if a precursor to "action writing," as we might call it, joining aesthetic elements from Jackson Pollock and Jack Kerouac. This newfound freedom — perceived by many readers both then and now as self-indulgence —

<sup>8</sup> Yillah turns out to be a white girl raised and enculturated by the exotic Mardians, a figure of cultural border-crossing that has fascinated Westerners from the 17th century up to and including Hollywood's latest on the subject, *Dances with Wolves*.

Melville opened up when he ceased pretending to write "factual" narratives in favor of "romance" as explicitly announced in the preface to *Mardi*.

Now Melville was already in the habit of reading widely to see what his predecessors had to say on whatever subject he was writing about. In relation to *Typee* he had been pushed to this course by his decision to stretch his actual stay of one month with the tribe into a claim of four months of residence.<sup>9</sup> Here he borrows from reading as voracious and various as ever, but also from current events and from unlikely sources such as his wife's book on the social language of flowers.<sup>10</sup> These disparate elements were subjected to limited control. When the impulse comes, the protagonists simply ship off to another island where another momentary social-cultural fantasy of the author can be indulged. Not surprisingly the succession of visits seems directionless and inconsequential: adding any number of Typee-lands together end to end adds to the variety of options but resolves nothing essential. The book ends with a gestural pursuit off in the direction of eternity.

Nonetheless Melville made one capital discovery in the process of constructing this wild-goose chase, one that would dominate the concerns in his next major book, *Moby-Dick*. Since Taji could not readily be imagined as voyaging around the Mardi archipelago all by himself, he is supplied with companions, four of them, who gradually take over the stage. Each of these four functions as a mouthpiece for one more or less coherent discipline which has been developed by humankind in search of knowledge. These characters, then, represent four cognitive orientations which human beings in the West, if not elsewhere, have come to rely on for guidelines to human existence.

Mohi is the name of the historian-archivist who can supply background at any moment. Yoomy is the poet who renders legends and supposedly

<sup>9</sup> This claim was particularly prominent in the first British edition, brought out by John Murray in Murray's Home and Colonial Library, a popular series which claimed to print only factual accounts. Bentley's title was *A Narrative of a Four Months' Residence among the Natives of a Valley of the Marquesas Islands; or, a Peep at Polynesian Life*. Melville's travails in trying to quiet Murray's fears that "the facts" had been misrepresented are recounted in compact form by Merrell Davis (1967 [1952]:3-32).

<sup>10</sup> Merrell R. Davis was the first, many years ago, to point out the use of Elizabeth Melville's flower books.



inspiring songs whenever he is given a chance. Melville gives more time to Babbalanja, the philosopher, who discourses inconclusively on issues of knowledge and value. The fourth is King Media, who functions on a somewhat different level, representing not just worldly authority around Mardi but also as a spokesman for political/power perspectives. The interactions between these four, as we come to expect with Melville, are inconclusive. The author belabors their interactions with a heavy-footed humor that is barely readable today (it did not seem much more attractive to readers in its own time).

Nonetheless an important transfer has taken place. The issues of cultural incommensurability originally broached in *Typee* are now transferred to the more manageable and perhaps more promising grounds of contest within the value structures of Western world itself. These confrontations are now figured between different ways of making sense of the world, whether we call them disciplines, philosophies, religions, or whatever. These alternatives will provide much of the substance Ishmael pulls together out of his researches on whales for *Moby-Dick*.

This book as well will offer no conclusive way of choosing between its new set of incommensurables, but the cultural Other has been transubstantiated into a metaphysical Other, a presence more familiar within the Western tradition though no less elusive. *Moby-Dick* seems to embody the powerful realities behind appearances but remains perfectly inscrutable. Hence the quest to penetrate his mysteries yields no insight into the "problem of the universe," (960) the nature of the real, the true priorities. Nature as the Unified Other on the basis of which all uncertainties can be resolved is, of course, a creation of Western civilization, particularly prominent in its 19th-century phase, but once again Ishmael is failed by this civilization. The unity, as far as he can tell, proves to be an unsubstantial promise that he cannot grasp. Hence he is left with another batch of incommensurables as inconclusive as those tested against another culture in *Typee* and multiplied in *Mardi*.

The urgency behind Ishmael's quest is evident from Chapter One, paragraph one, where the situation behind the announcement of his name is explicitly identified as suicidal, implying a lack of certainties substantial enough to live on or live for.<sup>11</sup> There is not time here to follow the ups and

<sup>11</sup> In a provocative article Edwin S. Shneidman asserts: "*Moby-Dick* is about suicide,



downs of Ishmael's exploring consciousness which tests and finds wanting all the human means to understanding he can get his mind around. For the moment I will simply assert that hopeful voyaging keeps this consciousness going, even beyond the confines of the narrative itself.<sup>12</sup>

To epitomize the way this text arrays its evidence and its conclusions, I will focus briefly on the implications for incommensurability of the very first figure the reader encounters in reading the text, the "late consumptive usher to a grammar school."

The pale Usher — threadbare in coat, heart, body, and brain; I see him now. He was ever dusting his old lexicons and grammars, with a queer handkerchief, mockingly embellished with all the gay flags of all the known nations of the world. He loved to dust his old grammars; it somehow mildly reminded him of his mortality. (781)

Here as often in Melville, the give-away is the word *all*.<sup>13</sup> There are *all* kinds of grammars and lexicons, but not one gives a definitive name for the

---

specifically about suicide *as an alternative to murder*" (544, original emphasis). Though this article is vitiated by inattentive errors, like implying that "European" is a language, it has the merit of focusing attention on Melville's manipulation of Western logic.

<sup>12</sup> Unlike many critics I find convincing evidence that Ishmael must be understood to have returned to whaling at sea even after his Pequod experience, though he acknowledges at the end of "The Albatross" (Chapter 52) that such postponements "either lead us on in barren mazes or midway leave uswhelmed." (1046) My interpretation is based on assertions by Ishmael in "The Town-Ho's Story" and elsewhere about encounters which could only have taken place if he returned to the Pacific as a whaleman after the Pequod experience.

<sup>13</sup> Another high point is Ishmael's clearest statement of this text's aspirations in "The Fossil Whale": "For in the mere act of penning my thoughts of this Leviathan, they weary me, and make me faint with their outreaching comprehensiveness of sweep, as if to include the whole circle of the sciences, and all the generations of whales, and men, and mastodons, past, present, and to come, with all the revolving panoramas of empire on earth, and throughout the universe, not excluding its suburbs." (1279–80) Given such an aspiration, extending the evidence to include

whale. By implication acquiring some more lexicons or grammars for unrepresented languages would resolve nothing. The Usher is reminded of his mortality for at least two reasons: after his labor they will only get dusty again and besides they have contributed nothing conclusive to the quest for understanding.

In case the reader has missed the point, the Etymology will then demonstrate it in list form: there is a list of words for whale, one which could easily be extended, but none of the words can be affirmed as more appropriate than any other. The structure of the list can be stated mathematically as 1, 2, 3, . . . n.<sup>14</sup> Melville replays the same game on the following pages using more than a hundred quotations about whales assembled as Extracts, none of which we can unreservedly take as "veritable gospel cetology." These preliminaries prefigure the process of Ishmael's knowledge of the whale, i.e. testing one after another all sorts of attempts at human knowledge. The results are inconclusive; nothing adds up.

Here is another approach to the incommensurability that began in Melville's work with the account of the Typees. Differences between languages and views of the world are now acknowledged and exemplified at length, but no grounding for value judgments has been affirmed. The locus of incommensurability has evolved markedly in content but not in basic structure or implications. Despite Ishmael's earnest efforts, he locates no locus of judgment that would satisfy him as grounds for preferring one set of values, one culture, over another.

The climactic development of this fundamental concern of Melville's is in fact catastrophic. In *The Confidence Man: His Masquerade* (1857), the locus of incommensurability is situated within the boundaries of the USA but kept carefully off by itself on a Mississippi River steamboat sailing downstream on April Fool's Day. What is dramatically different about this

---

everything he can get his mind around offers no more in the way of resolution than was available in the original Typee situation or its Mardi extension.

<sup>14</sup> Readers of my articles on *Moby-Dick* in *Spell 3* will recognize this formula as already in use there. That was a structural analysis of a single work whereas the shift in conceptual gears required me to rethink that work in terms of culture pushes me here to conceive of Melville's *oeuvre* as a whole. See Blair (1987).

text is that all possibility of a locus of judgment has been exploded. In earlier works, Western values were often seen as contradictory, as when, for example, some affirmations of Christianity were shown as contradicting those of Capitalism. In this text, however, there are no longer realities sufficiently definite to attach any values to. The text does not even provide grounds sufficient to determine for sure if those passengers who approach other passengers asking for their confidence (and often some of their money) are or are not confidence men in the criminal sense of the term.<sup>15</sup> Melville has come to understand that all human beings (except perhaps a Bartleby) must be imagined as placing their faith somewhere and hence as subject to possibly having misplaced their confidence. Each character — and by implication each reader — is personally responsible for the choices he or she makes. Conceptually speaking, all are subject to one confidence or another; whether cynical or naive, it hardly matters in a world turned masquerade.<sup>16</sup>

Melville, like most human beings, began by taking his culture as given, but as a writer he became over time deeply involved with trying to sort out its contradictions, its ambiguities, and its grounding. In his eleven years of intensive productivity between 1846 and 1857 this process of testing judgments against personal experience and imaginative encounters led him to the devastating conclusion that there is nothing certainly *there* to which he could look as a ground for resolving basic conflicts between values. In the world dominated by a confidence man all see only their own convictions reflected back at them. There is no longer any hope that an Other will constitute a "reality" on the basis of which we can hope to sort out what is worth believing in the mixed bag handed to us by our heritage.

The second level of discourse in *The Confidence Man*, the self-reflective meditations on the nature of fiction itself, simply reiterate the issues on a higher level of abstraction: we shift, in Melville's words, from "the comedy of action" to "the comedy of thought." (915) Aesthetically as well as philosophically the reader has nowhere to turn outside of personal

<sup>15</sup> This interpretive issue has been the cause of a great deal of scholarly controversy. My own conclusions remain unchanged from my book on the subject; see Blair (1979).

<sup>16</sup> Hence the textuality appropriate to such principles depicts only surfaces, a characteristic we tend to think of in contemporary texts as "post-modern."

convictions to guess at the nature of reality, the truly preferable values, or anything comparable. The tensions between values in *Typee*, the inconclusive arguments among advisers in *Mardi*, the bootless accumulation of what passes for knowledge in *Moby-Dick*, now disappear. In retrospect they seem like fond fictions in the face of the new reality: that there is only one world, the one we choose to believe in, and believing in anything means that one dances to the tune of the only deity at home in such a world, the Confidence Man.

Along with the difference, *culture* has disappeared from the world depicted in this last and most devastating fiction of Melville. Indirectly we still get a glimpse of the Western civilization which provides the range of options that Melville depicts, the range from cynicism to blind optimism. Of course, cultural history may be seen as relevant in the sense that the term "confidence man" was first used to describe certain impostors in New York and elsewhere as of the 1840s, but I am concerned here with *culture* as tied to a concept of the Other. Melville's attempt to understand the significance of the Typee encounter ultimately led back to attempts to weigh Western values and to discriminate between the trustworthy and the untrustworthy.

The contradictory quality of Western values that surfaced at the very beginning, in *Typee*, has now nullified Western enculturation in any positive sense. Every reader must make personal commitments without help from the source cultures usually rely on to affirm the importance and worth of their way of looking at things, namely some REALITY affirmed to be binding because real. The world according to the confidence man tautologically reflects back whatever presumptions characters have placed their confidence in.

Even stylistically this fiction seems consistently to defeat any implication of a reliable real. Every sentence is so undercut with qualifiers or indirections that the reader cannot locate clear affirmations. R. W. B. Lewis, even after a quarter of a century, still has the best single adjective to characterize this prose; it is "self-erasing." (71) As one representative sample, here is the introduction of a certain Charlie Noble:

But, upon the whole, it could not be fairly said that his appearance was unprepossessing; indeed, to the congenial, it would have been doubtless not uncongenial; while to others, it could not fail to be at least curiously

interesting, from the warm air of florid cordiality, contrasting itself with one knows not what kind of aguish sallowness of saving discretion lurking behind it. Ungracious critics might have thought that the manner flushed the man, something in the same fictitious way that the vest flushed the cheek. (989)

Most readers will presumably sense some unwholesomeness in Charlie Noble but, strictly speaking, the narrator has asserted nothing. Instead he has reiterated on the levels of sentence and character the overall implication of the text as a whole: what you see is what you want to see. No one and no thing is distinguishable except on the basis of prior commitments of confidence and belief.

We are already familiar from *Moby-Dick* with Melville's multiple discrediting of the means available to certify human knowledge, but until fairly recently it has proved difficult even for professional readers to acknowledge how thoroughly this text works to undercut interpretability. Elizabeth Foster, for example, who did a great deal to call attention to the book through her Hendricks House edition of 1954, fell into the trap of approving Pitch, the Missouri farmer, who is the clearest spokesman for rationality among all the characters. The moment when he feels sure that the Philosophical Intelligence Officer was after all a confidence man comes when he meditates on the malarial swamps on the river bank around Cairo, Illinois. On the other hand, no matter how sympathetic Pitch may seem, Melville's narrator goes out of his way to demolish metaphor as a source of knowledge: "The doctrine of analogies recurs. Fallacious enough doctrine when wielded against one's prejudices, but in corroboration of cherished suspicions not without likelihood." (979) Hence we are left, as before, with grounds for suspicion but nothing more. In more recent time Hershel Parker performs a different but comparable oversimplification in his notes to the Norton Critical Edition (1971) which reduce all the text's complexities to a barely veiled anti-Christian parable.

*The Confidence Man* is such a devastating text precisely because it leaves no ground of belief to rely on. On every level of fiction and discourse, the same inescapable solipsism remains. One can perhaps sympathize with Melville himself who completed the manuscript in a state of virtual nervous breakdown. The conscientious imaginative search for a grounding to human choices resulted in powerful, sometimes tortured, books, but not in peaceful resolutions.



Briefly I want to return to the initial context: the concept of *culture* and its uses in literary studies. In this context as in others Melville is unique among his American contemporaries. He has *thematized* issues of culture, first explicitly in the South Pacific narratives, and then indirectly through the incommensurabilities that fracture human knowing. These concerns continued to preoccupy him as long as he wrote fiction.

Melville is unique in another way as well in that his experience of the cultural Other quite directly launches him into writing. Thereafter the drive to accommodate the issues of incommensurability and judgment pushed him on to book after book for those eleven intense years that ended in 1857. Through *Moby-Dick* he was able to imagine time and space sufficient for his narrator to explore these elusive issues still further in other settings. Until *Pierre*, that is, and the titanic disaster that results when he tries to domesticate the matters which concern him. The opening idyllic chapters sound a distant echo of Typee-land because the Glendinning property houses a kind of edenic world: incest taboos weigh lightly, sexuality and innocence seem to cohabit unthreateningly. But into this paradisaal setting breaks a very Christian presence, inherited guilt, which in the long run demolishes everything. Unable to live with ambiguities, with mixed states of partial purity, Pierre sets out to compensate by writing the TRUTH, but of course no one finds it readable, paving the way for an all-inclusive disaster. *The Confidence Man* reestablishes the appearances but at a colossal cost: the belief that we can credibly presume that there is something which lies beyond them.

My rereading of Melville is far from offering the last word on this subject. James Clifford once half jokingly contrasted two ranges of application of cultural concepts to literary texts: a *soft* option and a *hard*.<sup>17</sup> He would classify my remarks as a sketch of the *soft* approach because I have chosen an author who after all had direct personal experience of a radically Other culture and who directly thematizes *culture* in a number of works.<sup>18</sup> What my present approach generates is an additional reading

<sup>17</sup> This was an off-hand remark, not at all to be compared to his important contributions to cultural studies in Clifford (1988).

<sup>18</sup> How important direct experience can be surfaces in comparison with Hawthorne's orient, which Luther Luedke (1989) shows to be readerly and imaginative. Melville's was on the contrary disturbing and stimulating.



which extends the pre-existing range, the  $n$ th reading in a series which begins 1, 2, 3, . . .

The *hard* option in cultural readings of literature I can only point toward as a possible future. Under this sponsorship literature would appear as just one medium among a multitude of others through which cultures manifest themselves. Literature like every other domain of cultural production would be examined for how its artifacts reflect and perhaps deflect the modalities of the culture which gave rise to them. Canonicity and the relative marginalities of authors and texts would have to be recalibrated according to a scale never yet defined as far as I know. This scale of value and importance should be properly *cultural* rather than simply reencoding earlier keys to explanation. In imagining the modalities of such a new discipline, I prefer to think of it as "comparative culture studies." The emphasis on comparison presumes that cultures reveal themselves best across the lines which distinguish one from another. The operative interpretive premise would be that culture is primary, that the root concept in cross-cultural comparisons is *culture*. Though such an assertion may seem merely tautological, it does relegate to subordinate uses alternative terms such as class or socio-economic system or power structure or ideology.

The failure to go beyond divisive discourses based on such terms is the chief limitation in what has so far been called "cultural studies." That is, *culture* has most often been employed as a code word for something else, as in the many books published in England on Thatcherism. A more focused study of cultures would result in a new discipline whose outlines are not yet clear if indeed they are destined to become so. The discourse of this discipline would not rephrase established patterns of explanation which are variously aesthetic, economic, social, political, ideological, philosophical, religious or whatever. Instead it would generate its own recognizable emphases by way of privileging *culture* as a concept which in theory excludes none of the above from its concerns.

At the risk of being accused of sheer utopian fantasies, I can at least sketch out what the parameters of such a discourse might be. As I see the concept of *culture*, it differs from the key terms and discourses just mentioned by serving a more inclusive function. There is no aspect of life which can justifiably be excluded from consideration when one wants to understand that culture. *Culture*, in this sense, is a second-order concept that englobes diverse phenomena traditionally parcelled out to some of the

existing disciplines of the human sciences. It is less a meta-discipline than a composite endeavor. *Culture* under such considerations becomes a master trope unique in its exclusiveness. Instead of interpretations subjecting all phenomena to a single touchstone, say ideology or power or society, comparative culture studies would claim credibility precisely because any of these may enter its discourse whenever they seem relevant to making sense of one culture in relation to its fellows.

The arguments in favor of such a discipline boil down to two, which I might summarize as plenitude and timeliness. Plenitude in the sense that comparative culture studies extend the range of our tools for understanding and some insights into our world become available only when *culture* is treated as a (composite) master trope. Timeliness in the sense that in these declining years of the 20th century we are witnessing the decay of nationhood and nationalism as the working basis of our world order. As ethnic groups proclaim ever more loudly their specificity and their felt need for independence, cultures, approached comparatively, offer hope for a constructive rethinking of humanity and its world on earth.

The implications for literary study are many but their future remains unclear. Under pressure from various dissenters, who include culture theorists, it may be that we are entering a historic phase of redefinition of "the discipline." To even speak of THE discipline may imply more of unity and coherence than is perhaps justifiable, but if *Culture* with a capital-C à la Matthew Arnold does give way to a more ethnographical usage, the kind of rereading I have been trying out on Melville's work will become more common, notably for writers who, by experience or by imagination, attend explicitly to cultural issues and perspectives. In the interim, no matter what the future of literary studies portends, attentiveness to *culture* does help us to fresh understandings of familiar and canonical writers like Herman Melville.

*Works Cited*

- Blair, John G. "*Multum in parvo: Moby-Dick, the Swiss Army Knife and the Poetics of Infinity*," in *The Structure of Texts*, ed. Udo Fries, Tübingen: Gunter Narr, 1987, 209–20.
- . *The Confidence Man in Modern Fiction: A Rogue's Gallery With Six Portraits*. London: Vision Press, 1979.
- Clifford, James. *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature and Art*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988.
- Davis, Merrell R. *Melville's Mardi: A Chartless Voyage*. N.p.: Archon Books, 1967 [first publ. 1952].
- Dening, Greg. *Islands and Beaches: Discourse on a Silent Land, Marquesas 1774–1880*. Chicago: Dorsey Press, 1980.
- Kaenel, André. "Words Are Things: Herman Melville and the Invention of Authorship in Nineteenth-Century America." Unpubl. doct. diss., University of Geneva, defended March 1991.
- Kuhn, Thomas S. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2nd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970.
- Lewis, R. W. B. *Trials of the Word*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965.
- Leyda, Jay, ed. *The Melville Log*, 2 vols. New York: Gordian Press, 1969 [1951].
- Luedtke, Luther. *Nathaniel Hawthorne and the Romance of the Orient*. Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1989.
- Melville, Herman. *Pierre, Israel Potter, The Confidence Man, Uncollected Prose, Billy Budd*. New York: Library of America, 1984.
- . *Redburn, White-Jacket, Moby-Dick*. New York: Library of America, 1983.
- . *Typee, Omoo, Mardi*. New York: Library of America, 1982.
- Shneidman, Edwin S. "Melville's Cognitive Style: The Logic of *Moby-Dick*" in *A Companion to Melville Studies*, ed. John Bryant. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1986, 543–64.