"THE MAN WHO LIVED AMONG THE CANNIBALS": MELVILLE IN MILWAUKEE

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Early in 1886, after years of literary silence, Herman Melville began writing his last book, *Billy Budd*. He died five years later, virtually unnoticed, because many people believed that he had died years before. In fact, in twenty years of employment as customs’ Inspector for the Port of New York Melville continued to write but published only a small volume of Civil War poems for public sale. He also wrote *Clarel* and another volume of poetry, both printed in limited editions for his family and friends. Therefore, the final phase of Melville’s public literary career—and his last work in prose before *Billy Budd*—was a brief attempt at lecturing, during which he once toured the Midwest and spoke in Milwaukee.

Melville met with decidedly-mixed success over these years, 1857-60, and it became clear to him that he would not make much money, nor would he revive his popularity as the author of adventure and travel narratives. The lecture tours were really his last efforts to maintain a career as a popular writer, and their ultimate failure probably accounted for his decision not to make a prose romance out of his last adventure, his trip to the Holy Land in 1856-57, but the philosophical poem *Clarel*, written for intimate acquaintances. His first lecture was “Statues in Rome,” adapted from this trip; his last was called “Traveling.”

Ironically, his nearest success on stage went back to the beginning of his career. The lecture he delivered in Milwaukee and elsewhere his second year on speaking tour was “The South Seas,” actually fitting the reputation he worked so hard to overcome as “the man who lived among the cannibals,” as he summarized his reputation in a letter to Nathaniel Hawthorne.¹ It became certain, finally, that he could not appeal to audiences as an entertainer, like the reigning stage star Bayard Taylor and the later star, Twain, nor could he be accepted as a philosopher or social commentator, like the reigning sage of New England Ralph Waldo Emerson.

Melville spoke in Milwaukee on February 25, 1859. By the time he appeared there, a late stop during the second lecture tour, he was working much harder to please local crowds than most critics have assumed.² His subject, content, and delivery were calculated for stage success. However, the Milwaukee performance was fairly typical in its dubious outcome. In books, Melville could be risqué, impudent, even raucoius. However, this character he found only through literary personae; Melville in person was urbane, often subdued, even shy and uncomfortable among strangers. He lacked Twain’s talent for embodying his literary characters. Melville in person was usually a New England gentleman who remembered his genteel roots. (With the possible exceptions of James Fenimore Cooper, James Russell Lowell, and Emerson, Melville had more claim to New England gentry than any of the prominent nineteenth-century writers.)³

Melville was thirty-seven when he decided to try lecturing, thirty-nine by the time he appeared in Milwaukee. He had been a writer for thirteen years and a farmer, too, for half that time; but now, with a chronic back problem that would plague him the rest of his life, he was forced to rely almost entirely on his father-in-law to support his family. Normally active and independent, Melville was irritated by the prospect of a
sedentary life and family charity. He had already realized what many other writers more salable than he had found: few people could earn a living as an author, but several supported themselves writing and giving live appearances, by traveling the lyceum circuit. Melville was now unusually pressed for money. He was overdrawn on his accounts with publishers. One publisher of two recent books had gone out of business and was selling its plates, and another had lost its stock of some earlier books in a warehouse fire. Melville had nothing new ready for sale, having just returned from his trip to the Holy Land. A series of lectures seemed a practical venture for turning his recent excursion into something immediately profitable. So Melville wrote "Statues in Rome," an analysis of the philosophy of art, with an added dose of gossip and personal anecdotes. He knew the subject would attract little interest in itself.

This first lecture, delivered through the 1857-58 lecture season (the winter months), generally received poor reviews. It was not a shrewd choice of topic for one whose forte was tale-telling rather than descriptive or critical analysis; moreover, reviewers generally agreed that Melville’s delivery was rather dry. He had hoped for publicity to generate invitations and was thus disappointed. In addition, the reviewers tended to focus on characterizing the man who lived with the cannibals, rather than the author of a piece of statuary. Audiences preferred a glimpse of an entertaining personality, rather than a systematic analysis of works of art which they could not see before them. Nonetheless, he was sufficiently encouraged, and paid, to plan a second season in a more business-like manner. He began a correspondence to arrange a professional circuit from New England, into the Southern states, and through the Midwest, rather than waiting for invitations.

An old family friend, William E. Cramer, editor and owner of the Milwaukee Daily Wisconsin, undertook the local publicity and might even have suggested Melville to the Young Men’s Association, which sponsored the Milwaukee appearance. Melville spoke in Albany Hall, appropriately named to suggest that the city’s cultural tastes were as refined as those of an eastern city, and Cramer appealed to civic pride, pointing out in advance notices that a well-attended lecture “always gives a stranger a good impression of the intellectual culture of the city.”

Melville had a promising field before him in Milwaukee in 1859; the city was growing and its affluent citizens eager to show their interest in things cultural. The Young Men’s Association was composed, like many similarly-named groups in the Midwest and across Wisconsin, of business and professional men who were accumulating a library, presenting lectures and debates, and offering educational courses from a variety of cultural topics. A Young Men’s Association or Young Men’s Library Association existed in Beloit, Columbus, Fond du Lac, Janesville, Kenosha, LaCrosse, Madison, Oshkosh, Portage, Racine, Sheboygan, Watertown, Waukesha, and Waupun. They shared the name and corresponded on arranging programs, although they had no state-wide organization.

In the 1850s, lyceums grew faster in the Midwest than any other part of the country and continued their popularity into the Civil War years. Chicago, Sheboygan, and Milwaukee were among the best stops for a speaker; the cities usually drew large crowds and offered good money—$50 a night was standard in eastern cities but only a few such stops existed in the West. Bayard Taylor once wrote from Milwaukee, “The people are infatuated. If I lecture next winter, I can spend three months in the West and have engagements for every night.” This was Taylor’s impression in 1854, when Milwaukee also heard such speakers as Emerson, Horace Mann, and Horace Greeley.

Nonetheless, the midwestern audience was a somewhat difficult one for New Englanders. Newspaper reviewers were antagonistic
toward any Easterner who showed the slightest trace of snobbery or disrespect for the culture of the West; in addition, the character of midwestern audiences and their expectations sharply differed from those in New England. The Young Men’s Associations attracted people with social expectations and pretensions, but these lyceum organizations in the West belonged to a second phase of the movement and lacked its original New England roots in the drive for popular literacy and free public education. By the standards of the time, Wisconsin had already accomplished such improvements in its first decade of statehood. Consequently, audiences in this state and others in the Midwest demanded as much entertainment as edification and were generally unresponsive to speakers who appeared as though they wanted to “school” the audience.9

For instance, Cramer’s paper pointed out that Melville’s lecture was “entertaining” and “also instructive” (emphasis added), suggesting the educational material was secondary. Cramer wrote that Melville “lay open a field of adventure and wanderings to which one rarely has his attention called” (emphasis added). Melville found out that reviewers were quick to bristle at the suspicion that they were being patronized or treated like uneducated backwoodsmen. Milwaukee’s literacy was accomplished in part by German immigration, half the city by 1860. The German population in particular regarded itself as better educated and cultivated than other nationalities, including the native Americans, and very much resented being considered a pioneer settlement.10

When Melville first published south-sea adventures like Typee and Omoo, he had been accused of romantic exaggeration of the exotic island life. His new lecture on “The South Seas,” however, now brought occasional complaints among midwestern reviewers that he was rehearsing well known material which any library could yield. For once, Melville found himself accused of a want of originality and a failure to be sufficiently exotic and entertaining.11 The Milwaukee Daily Free Democrat, for instance, commented, “On the whole, we think there are few who knew much more about the South Seas, after he concluded, than before he began.” Melville had said that this lecture was not to be a personal narrative—“a great mistake,” said the paper, “for had he stated some of the scenes which he had passed through himself, and thereby invested his lecture with some life, instead of telling us what the primary geographies told us in our schooldays, he would have created a better impression in Milwaukee.”

The starting time for Melville’s lecture was moved up a half-hour so that Albany Hall could offer a held-over performance of Father Kemp’s Old Folks Concert Troupe, a costumed choir and orchestra with a variety of sacred and patriotic music. The choir alone numbered thirty-seven people; the group was billed as “The Largest Concert Troupe in the World.” Melville was in competition with a musical extravaganza, and although the auditorium was reserved for him, he was obliged to defer to the more popular show. In fact, the newspaper advertisements for performances at Albany Hall and elsewhere indicate a demand for drama and musical entertainment. Other selections in the winter season included a “Grand Masquerade Ball” and “St. David’s Vocal and Instrumental Concert.” Melville’s competition on February 25th at Johnson’s Athenaeum was selections from The Merchant of Venice and Rob Roy. The Athenaeum was also booked for Uncle Tom’s Cabin, partly a musical on stage, and Ten Nights in a Barroom, starring the popular cracker-barrel comedian “Yankee” Locke. Such variety acts of the lyceum stage have been called “prevaudeville.”12

The advance publicity for Melville’s lecture billed him as the author of Typee, his first book of south-sea adventure—not as the author of any metaphysical allegories,
like *Mardi* and *Moby-Dick*, that were not selling now. Cramer had specifically reminded people that Melville had lived with cannibals and experienced episodes beyond the wonders of imagination. He did have exactly the kind of material that might keep an audience spell bound. Bayard Taylor was due in town for the Young Men’s Association the next week, and his stage personality suggests what the audience preferred. Taylor, popular as a world traveler, wore costumes of places he described; his best known outfit was a pseudo-arab costume complete with scimitar. He avoided being a moral observer and spiced up his lectures with exotic-sounding poetry. He avoided using a script and the appearance of delivering a packaged performance. The *Daily Wisconsin* called his manner “enthusiastic” and “eloquent,” noting his handsomeness made him popular particularly with the ladies. He spoke in Milwaukee on “Life at the North,” travelogues being among the most popular stage programs. Taylor had accompanied Commodore Matthew Perry in the Pacific and had also some claim to being an expert on far-western islands. Taylor was willing to make money as a specimen from unknown parts of the world, an entertainer with adventure stories. However, Melville, as everyone knew, had lived with cannibals and had experiences as wild as anything that Taylor might describe.

Nevertheless, Melville could not compete as a comparable entertainer, although he did make certain efforts to please his audience. He announced that this lecture was not to be an intellectual argument, but a collection of facts and impressions without a theme. Even his choice of material was a concession to popular taste. However, Melville’s Pacific travels were fifteen years old and his memory less vivid than Taylor’s. Melville had outgrown his former character. So he did not put all his material into the form of a personal narrative and actually opened with a summary of literary references on the South Seas and geographical information before recounting any of the “exceptional phenomena” that his audience had come for—indeed, was led to believe they would get, according to the advance publicity. In fact, there was little on cannibalism and no lewdness. Melville did attempt to appeal to the audience taste for the exotic and sensational with description of the bizarre “devil-fish,” the art of tattooing, and a sly reference to the “awful ceremony” of the taboo, a subject he said that he could not reveal in such a proper atmosphere as this, although it contained strangeness transcending the wildest romances of Mrs. Radcliffe. He spoke about Free Lovers, Mormons, and various utopian societies seeking asylums, all objects of public curiosity at the time. He recounted an anecdote of meeting a Professor of Moral Philosophy who had abandoned civilized life for the sylvan retreat of the islands and three wives, the kind of sailor’s yarn that the reviewers could question (in good nature) and appreciate for its romantic sentiments; overstepping the bounds of the probable and decent might be dubious history and morality, but good theater. He even worked in a reference to the Newall House, a stylish Milwaukee hotel, to contrast primitive culture to civilized society. Imagine, he said, a bare-limbed savage with awful tattoos appearing at such a proper place; this image might appeal to civic pride, and, at the same time, the touch of titillation made good theater.

On the whole, however, Melville was “packaged” more obviously than an audience would desire. For instance, one attempt at describing sea colors, which reviewers noted, has a consciously rhetorical and literary style. Here is Melville’s text, in an exaggerated gothic style with allusions to the Bible and *Paradise Lost*:

I have been in a whaleboat at midnight when, having lost the ship, we would keep steering through the lonely night for her, while the sea that weltered by us would present the pallid look of the face of a corpse, and lit by its spectral gleam we men in the boats showed to each
other like so many weather-beaten ghosts. Then to mark Leviathan come wallowing along, dashing the pale sea into sparkling cascades of fire, showering it all over till the monster would look like Milton’s Satan, riding the flame billows of the infernal world. We [theater audience] might fill night after night with that fertile theme . . . and tell of the adventurous sailors. (165-66)

However, Melville dropped the scene for that night and had nothing marvelous to develop from such supernatural portent. He made no real effort at suspense and delivered the description without any spontaneity or sensationalism in which the audience might participate. The Daily Free Democrat thus complained that Melville offered few illustrations beyond general comments, cut short the personal anecdotes, and then gave “word-painting” rather than anecdotes with “any inherent or thrilling interest.”

Melville was most emphatically himself in an ironic passage criticizing missionary work as personal gain, jingoism and colonialism, and Emersonian optimism:

[T]he result of civilization, at the Sandwich Islands and elsewhere, is found productive to the civilizers, destructive to the civilized. It is said to be compensation—a very philosophical word; but it appears to be very much on the principle of the old game, “You lose, I win” good philosophy for the winner. (179)

Although he announced no theme to his lecture, Melville had an explicit message: leave the islands alone. He told his audience that Americans should have no pretensions of civilizing other people until they civilized themselves. He meant no particular criticism of his audience here, although such a remark was ill-placed in Milwaukee, especially before people who subscribed to a lecture program chosen to represent a highly-refined, established culture, and who were also drawn to hear Melville by Cramer’s advice that they show interest in intellectual offerings. As in the reference to the Newall House, Milwaukeeans wanted to be compli-mented for their civilization. They may indeed have come principally for entertainment; however, they were not going to applaud heartily for someone who would lift the veil only slightly upon the voluptuary life of the South Seas they imagined, and who then told them that they had no right to gawk upon the rest from any superior perspective. Bayard Taylor encouraged audiences to imagine themselves in foreign lands; Melville told them to stay home and civilize themselves.

In the words of Cramer’s review in the Daily Wisconsin, adventurers had “no right” to interfere with existing cultures. The United States should leave Hawaii alone and thus keep it from “the demoralizing associations of modern civilization.” Even Cramer, who was determined to be sympathetic to Melville in his paper, did not comment on the sentiments his friend expressed. He would not criticize him, but Cramer could hardly tell the civilized people of Milwaukee that they were no better than naked savages and that the tattooed Polynesian would be as amused by the elegant functions in the Newall House as its patrons would be by him. Cramer did little more than summarize the lecture after some opening impressions of Melville as a speaker. He wrote favorably of Melville and his delivery, endorsing the lecture as a whole, but avoiding specific support for the themes.

The Daily Free Democrat had no restraint; the audience would have preferred, it said, “personal reminiscences . . . to such bombast.” So, “The lecture was attentively listened to,” noted the reporter, “but the appreciation of it, we think, was testified by the limited applause at the close. The Association, we think, received more profit from the lecture than the audience.” The snide remark that the audience had not gotten its money’s worth was about the worst judgment a reviewer could pronounce. People were not going to quibble too much about a speaker’s sentiments, so long as the speaker was entertaining. For this one ob-
server, at least, Melville had not passed the crucial test. The Daily Free Democrat said Melville had a "large audience . . . perhaps the most of whom were disappointed in the lecturer." He gave "a literary effort below mediocrity, unless he intended it as a reading. In fact, it seemed as though he had one of his romances before him, and had selected the most uninteresting passages to read for our edification." The audience listened "attentively," according to this report; however, newspapers invariably complimented local audiences so, sometimes the greater to criticize an uninteresting speaker. "[S] general were his remarks that they failed to create much interest in the minds of hearers," the paper said.

The Daily Sentinel agreed that Melville had "an unusually large audience" to hear him talk about the beauties of the tropics "in his own inimitable way." The Sentinel offered little actual review and principally summarized the lecture, as the Daily Wisconsin had done. Only the hostile Daily Free Democrat undertook a critique rather than a summary. Although the Sentinel would appear to have approved of Melville by its comment on his "inimitable" style, the compliment is hardly hearty and even has a certain irony. Familiarity with the idiom of newspaper reviewing in the nineteenth century suggests that the term was something of a cliche; it was often used in advance publicity in place of anything more precise, and in a review, it may mean only that the reviewer had not really observed anything remarkable. "As a lecturer," the reporter noted, "Mr. Melville sustains the idea we have formed of him in 'Typeer' [sic], a soft voluptuous ease is the predominant characteristic. . . . [T]he same drowsy enchantment that makes his writings so fascinating radiates from the speaker." The Sentinel's reviewer might have been a subtle reader of Melville, if indeed he had read Melville, for few critics would have called Typee "drowsy enchantment." The book

actually had been accused of lewdness, Munchausenism, and trumped-up criticism of colonial missionaries. Moreover, Melville read his new material from a script—only the Daily Free Democrat was unhappy for this—but, even though the Sentinel did not register any criticism of its own, its report of Melville's subdued manner was not generally an endorsement of stage skill. Audiences usually preferred a more animated speaker. In a sense, the Sentinel had called Melville "bookish," a term the Daily Free Democrat used as sharp criticism.

Cramer's review in his own paper was the only solidly-complimentary one that Melville received. The Daily Wisconsin, in fact, said a "very large and appreciative audience" heard Melville, although it did not judge the applause, as the Daily Free Democrat had done. The Daily Wisconsin denied that Melville read a "stilted lecture" nor indulged in "rhetorical flights," but instead spoke in "delicious literary languor . . . graceful and musical." Melville was not one for stage theatrics, but instead spoke "as one would like to sit down to a club room, and with the blue smoke of a meerschaum gracefully curling and floating away . . . dream for hours, even till the night wore away." Cramer's simile was appropriate; in fact, Melville was generally best in intimate surroundings.

Albany Hall seated about 800 people. The actual attendance can only be estimated—all papers called it "large"—but despite the Daily Free Democrat's insinuation about the Young Men's Association profiting at the audience's expense, the receipts do not suggest a tremendously successful booking or a capacity crowd. The Association actually lost money on the particular performance. The ledger records $50.45 received at the door, $50 for Melville's fee, and another $29.50 for expenses. The door receipts do not include subscribers to the season lecture program, but there is no estimate of exactly how many members attended. Ticket prices were 25¢, the standard charge for stage per-
formances (Father Kemp’s Troupe charged the same). At any rate, the “large” crowd did not draw enough from the public to meet expenses for the performance. A “large” audience was another standard comment in reviews and might often mean no more than an average crowd. For instance, the Sentinel specifically said that Father Kemp’s concerts were “fully attended. . . . The Hall will be hardly large enough to hold all who wish to hear them,” the paper predicted. The Daily Wisconsin complained that ladies were forced to stand. 16

So, it is doubtful if Melville had anywhere near a full house. The Young Men’s Association did not renew its invitation to Melville when he expressed interest in performing a third season. Melville did get bookings the next year in the East but received almost no response from places on his midwestern tour. Melville was not cut out to offer the kind of entertainment which inspired enthusiastic reviewers and return crowds, who had plenty of top-name talent to choose from. By estimates, Melville was only the sixth most popular of ten speakers on the Association’s 1858-59 program in Milwaukee. 17

Cramer’s review in the Daily Wisconsin was favorable; the Sentinel’s was essentially noncommittal; the Daily Free Democrat’s was hostile. The Daily Wisconsin and Sentinel put Melville on page one; the Daily Free Democrat put him back on page three. All told, Melville did comparatively well in Milwaukee. He also appeared in Chicago, Rockford, and Quincy, Illinois, but got few good reviews, most observers agreeing that he had no distinctive stage personality, seemed too rehearsed, and spoke too softly. The eastern reviewers had been generally favorable about “The South Seas,” but there was, ultimately, little encouragement for trying the midwestern states again. Melville only performed in ten cities during the 1858-59 season, and although he made more money than he had the year before in sixteen cities and was apparently becoming more comfortable on stage, he had not done well enough to expect a new career as a lecturer—particularly if he had to rely on pleasing western audiences. In Michigan, Bayard Taylor wrote a parody of “The Raven,” comparing the bird’s “nevermore” and the student’s vain efforts to escape, to fans and agents with speaking invitations rapping at his chamber door and allowing him sleep “nevermore.” Melville had no such troubles to complain of.18

In addition, Melville had not managed to generate any new demand for the once-popular south sea narratives. He was already working on poetry in the summer of 1859, and, without much enthusiasm, looking into possibilities for publishing a first volume of verse. He also prepared a third lecture, as a more practical venture. However, to cancel his debts to his father-in-law, which Melville had been accumulating ever since his marriage, he agreed to deed his farm property to his wife, amounting to an admission of his failure as head-of-family and provider. The consensus among the family—Herman’s too, probably, though he resisted it—was that he would have to find steady work and give up uncertain literary pursuits. He approved of efforts to find him a political appointment, although he did not actively pursue one.19

Lecturing was still his only immediate source of income, but his third season was the least profitable of all. Melville was so outwardly depressed and physically weak that family members suggested a vacation at sea again in 1860, as they had the year before he tried lecturing. He planned to go through the South Seas again; ironically, he became sea sick on the voyage out—the only time this had ever happened to him—and he cut short the voyage. When he landed in San Francisco, he decided to go home immediately. In fact, Melville received an invitation to read there, which he declined, although he had manuscripts with him.20 By coincidence, Melville’s final realization that he would
have to stay home and work at some routine came just before Mark Twain first lighted out for the western territories and began to find an idiom for himself as a world traveler and writer.

Melville's difficulties as a popular writer have been exaggerated and romanticized. He never was as much the deliberate outcast as some readers have thought; he never was an Edgar Allan Poe or Charles Baudelaire, writing what he thought profound to spite a public who never could appreciate him. Even Melville's most critically-condemned and publicly-ignored books, *Pierre* and *The Confidence-Man*, were disappointments because he had thought that they would sell. Melville did not imagine himself essentially at odds with the bourgeois reading public, although he did finally realize that what talent he had as a writer would never make him rich or even provide a sole means of support. His lecturing, like his last romances, was a disappointment to Melville because he believed that it might work. But he found out, once again, that he did not have what it took to please the crowd.

**NOTES**


2 Merrell R. Davis, "Melville's Midwestern Lecture Tour, 1859," *Philological Quarterly* 20 (1941): 57, suggests that Melville's South Sea lecture lacked spontaneity because he had no fresh observations on his experiences; and Merton M. Seals, Jr., *Melville as Lecturer* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1957) 100-01, 121-23, believes that Melville "was thoroughly tired" of trying to rework the popular subject and, furthermore, had "grown alien to mid-century America."


5 Howard 258-60; and Seals 58.

6 Newspaper reviews are taken from the collections of the State Historical Society, Madison.


8 Bode 168, 175.

9 Bode 98, 166-68; Davis 52-53; and Seals 61, 83-84.


11 See Seals 73-74, 94.


13 See Bode 217-19.

14 Seals 64.

15 The full text of "The South Seas" is reconstructed by Seals (155-60). Page references for passages quoted in the text of this essay are contained in parentheses.

16 Davis 47; Leyda 603; and Seals 76, 93.

17 Howard 261.

18 Bode 218-19; and Seals 92-93, 99-100.

19 Howard 262-67.

20 Howard 267-69.

21 Kazin calls Melville a "captive to the commercial capital," *New York City* (137), and recalls that Sam Melville, the "Mad Bomber" killed at Attica State Correctional Facility in 1971, took his name for Herman, whom he identified with revolution (158). In addition, Edwin Haviland Miller, *Melville* (New York: Persea, 1975) 295, says that Melville could not resign himself to giving audiences what they wanted.