

Melville and *Kotonakareshugi*: More Thoughts on Teaching "The Bell-Tower" in Japan

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Abstract

Herman Melville's "The Bell-Tower" can be understood as a call for citizens to re-examine their national history and resist the urge to shy away from uncomfortable truths.

Introduction

Writing on the eve of the Civil War, it is not surprising that Herman Melville should cast a critical eye on American history in his story "The Bell-Tower." Published in 1855 amid the clamor of a nation at odds with itself (Newman 79), it tells the story of a fictional Renaissance-era Italian city-state that serves as a representation of America in miniature. Too proud to face up to their own sins, the leaders and citizens allow their city to fall into decay rather than admit error.

This is of course the story of America, from Melville's perspective, and as I demonstrated in a previous paper that examines teaching the story

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from the theme of technology-versus-humanity, the story is reflected in modern Japan as well as pre-Civil War America. This is not meant as a criticism of Japan as much as it is a demonstration of the universality, temporal as well as geographical, of Melville's genius. As this paper will show, teachers of this story can use it as a way of exploring with their students the causality of history of any nation, using America and Japan as examples.

事勿れ主義

Kotonakareshugi is a Japanese term meaning "to ignore problematic facts," with the implication that, with time, problems will resolve themselves or simply go away. Unfortunately, as we all know, problems are rarely resolved through being ignored. For example, the problem of New Orleans' lack of preparation for a major hurricane was recognized many years ago, and has been well publicized, but as we have seen recently, those with the power to do something chose instead to ignore the problem, with devastating results.

Japan has its own examples currently in the news. One of them is the case of Takeshima, a group of tiny islands in the Sea of Japan also claimed by South Korea. At the core of the current dispute is not the islands themselves but the confusion over who has fishing rights in the islands' vicinity. Korea stationed troops on the islands and prevented Japanese fishing boats from approaching. Shimane Prefecture was hit particularly hard by this problem. "Fishing being a major industry in Shimane, local fisheries petitioned the authorities in Tokyo several times for help in gaining access to the fertile seas around Takeshima, but...they were advised

each time not to stir up trouble" (Park 27).

Recently the Shimane Prefectural Assembly passed a resolution declaring February 22 "Takeshima Day." This has created an international incident, partly because of the unfortunate choice of date: "Takeshima was placed under the jurisdiction of Shimane Prefecture on February 22, 1905, in the course of the Japanese preparations to make Korea a protectorate" (Park 24). Korea's current administration has used this issue to consolidate its power, playing upon anti-Japanese sentiment. The incident was preventable; as Park II describes it,

If the Japanese government, upon hearing the complaints of these fishers, had entered into talks with the Korean government to seek a solution...the prefectural assembly might never have bothered to designate a Takeshima Day. The authorities in Tokyo need to think deeply about how their passive approach, though it may have been taken out of a desire to avoid trouble, caused the situation to grow worse. (27)

This is not the only case of official *kotonakareshugi* causing problems for Japan. Currently China and Korea are upset with Japan over the government's approval of a junior-high-school history textbook written by Tsukurukai, a right-wing nationalist group.

That their version of history is distorted is often not even denied by Tsukurukai leaders. As Nishio Kanji said in 2001, when the first Tsukurukai textbook made its debut, "Why should Japan be the only country that should teach its kids—12- to 15-year-old kids—bad things about itself? ... I think it is ridiculous, and very sad and tragic that Japan cannot write its own patriotic history" (French). But a "patriotic history,"

which may sound appealing at first blush, will often be at odds with a complete and truthful history. Fujiwara Kiiichi forcefully dismantles the idea of a patriotic history:

The school of thought that regards history as the story of a nation and seeks to restore this nation to its "rightful" place in history enjoys considerable support.

This "story" only makes a mockery of scholarship. It is a compendium of carefully selected historical facts calculated to soothe the ear and boost the ego, a collection of absurdly flattering self-portraits tastelessly adorned with pretentious adjectives.

"The story of the nation" is not history; it is an ideology that lies at the opposite pole from history.

He goes on to say that "the cosmetically enhanced story of the nation offered people a sense of self-satisfaction, a feeling that they were perfect just as they were." It lulls citizens into an uncritical acceptance of an artificial reality, a *status quo* that is "patriotic" or at least ego-boosting and therefore more attractive than true reality. This can serve the purposes of those in power, or those who wish to return to power. Fujiwara continues, "By believing in the state that killed one's husband or son, one is able to accept that husband's or son's death. This intense self-deception reveals how nationalism today often fills the role of a secular religion."

Would any real patriot prevent teaching the hard truths of the past? Nishio seems to claim that Japan is "the only country" in which children are being taught "bad things" about the nation's history, as if this were an astonishing aberration. This is simply not true. Many nations confront the past in middle-school history courses, some better than others. Although

there is much less consistency in American courses, most American children learn about the wrongs of slavery and the genocide of Native Americans. German children certainly learn about the Holocaust. On the other hand, there are German groups who want less emphasis on the darker episodes of their past, and there are many cases in America of teachers and textbooks that could do a much better job. Japan is not the best at this, nor is it the worst; the point is that teaching citizens the truth is a good thing, and teaching them lies is not.

In an open society, attempts like Tsukurukai's to conceal the sins of the past can result in their own corrective. Cho Kyu-cheol points out that, "since the establishment of Tsukurukai in 1997 and the start of a debate on history textbooks under its initiative, it is clear that Japanese citizens have become more interested in the problem of historical awareness." But he cautions that the governments involved are more interested in pursuing their own agendas than getting at the truth, and calls for "a network of cooperation between Korean and Japanese citizens through which we can solve problems with patience...."

As with the dispute over Takeshima Day, if the government had taken a stance against this textbook, rather than passively allowing it to go forward, the recent riots in China and Korea could have been avoided, and the current state of relations between the three countries could be much better.

A Refusal to Ignore Uncomfortable Truths

One of the main questions history helps us understand is "How did we get to where we are today?" This is a question we can ask with an air of

detached interest, but it seems we more often ask it in a voice of despairing bewilderment. After the 9/11 terrorist attacks four years ago and the devastation of Hurricane Katrina more recently, American headlines have asked and continue to ask a thousand variations of "How could this have happened?"

During and after the Civil War, Americans asked the same questions. And like 9/11 and Katrina, hindsight provided no shortage of prophets who had warned of a looming disaster. Herman Melville was one of them. His writing of the 1850s and earlier is filled with predictions of a coming conflagration. And he places the blame for it on America's failures to live up to its lofty ideals, particularly in the case of slavery: the failure to fulfill the promise of freedom to all its people. In his third novel, *Mardi*, Melville writes of the inscription on the arch at the approach to Vivenza:

Studying those immense hieroglyphs awhile, antiquarian Mohi still eyeing them, said slowly:—

"In-this-re-publi-can-land-all-men-are-born-free-and-equal."

"False!" said Media.

"And how long stay they so?" said Babbalanja.

"But look lower, old man," cried Media, "methinks there's a small hieroglyphic or two hidden away in yonder angle.— Interpret them, old man."

After much screwing of his eyes, for those characters were very minute, Champollion Mohi thus spoke—"Except-the-tribe-of-Hamo."

"That nullifies the other," cried Media. (1169-70)

Vivenza, as America, enslaves men of one tribe while claiming to be a land of equality for all. Later, after exploring the land of Vivenza, the travelers

debate what should be done about slavery:

"Pray, heaven!" cried Yoomy, "they may yet find a way to loose their bonds without one drop of blood. But hear me, Oro! were there no other way, and should their masters not relent, all honest hearts must cheer this tribe of Hamo on; though they cut their chains with blades thrice edged, and gory to the shaft! 'Tis right to fight for freedom, whoever be the thrall."

"These South savannahs may yet prove battle-fields," said Mohi, gloomily... (1190)

And King Media says,

And if to every Mardian, conscience should be the awarder of its own doom; then, of these tribes, many shall be found exempted from the least penalty of this sin. But sin it is, no less;—a blot, foul, as the crater-pool of hell; it puts out the sun at noon; it parches all fertility; and, conscience or no conscience—ere he die—let every master who wrenches bond-babe from mother, that the nipple tear; unwreathes the arms of sisters; or cuts the holy unity in twain; till apart fall man and wife, like one bleeding body cleft:—let that master thrice shrive his soul; take every sacrament; on his bended knees give up the ghost;—yet shall he die despairing; and live again, to die forever damned. (1192)

In later writings, Melville became more subtle in his criticism of America's national myopia with regard to its injustices. After creating controversy and condemnation with his blatant attacks on missionaries and other aspects of Western culture in his early novels, he seemed to have learned the value of hiding an unpalatable message under an

uncontroversial wrapping in stories such as "Bartleby," "Benito Cereno," and "The Bell-Tower."

On first reading "The Bell-Tower," it is difficult to detect a specific criticism of America. As Douglas Fischer writes, "nearly all critical interpretations...emphasize its allegory on technology, many specifically claiming that Melville is warning of dire consequences to follow from the rise of science in the nineteenth century" (185). Since Fischer wrote that thirty years ago, there have been a few alternate takes, however. Fischer himself, for example, examines the story as an allegory of absolutist support of an idealized-but-flawed system versus a more-realistic relativism that adapts to actual facts. Bannadonna's ideals are more important than any human life, and thus he slays a workman to preserve the casting of his too-heavy bell. This in turn causes a flaw in the bell which Bannadonna covers up, to preserve his ideals in the face of facts. This flaw reveals itself in the individualized, "fatal" expression on the face of Una, one of the Hours decorating the bell. In his attempt once again to hide the flaw, Bannadonna loses track of time and is slain by Talus (or Haman), a robotic bell-ringing slave of his own creation.

The chain of tragedies does not end with Bannadonna's death. The magistrates and citizens of the city-state, also invested in and mesmerized by Bannadonna's great monument, have already waived any punishment for the murder he committed. He is even forgiven by the Church.¹ As

¹ Interestingly, Robert Morsberger puts forward a case that Bannadonna is based on an actual Renaissance architect, Benvenuto Cellini—a name remarkably similar to the equally nonfictional Benito Cereno. Cellini also built a too-large bell, and was absolved by the Church of a murder, by no less than the Pope himself: "During the casting crisis, Cellini stopped short of murder, but earlier...he stabbed to death a

Marvin Fisher writes, "The community, in forgiving this violation, is tacitly linked to the criminal policy that humanity is expendable in the course of gratifying personal ambition and marking national achievement" (206). To give up on the Bell-Tower even after its creator's death would be to admit they were wrong, thus implicating themselves in his crime. And so, knowing the bell is over-heavy and poorly supported, they have it rung on Bannadonna's funeral day. It falls, killing the ringer and severely damaging the tower. Three pointless deaths are still not enough for them to give up on their flawed project: they reforge and rehang the bell in the damaged tower, which is knocked down by an earthquake a year later. As the opening of the story implies, this is the beginning of the end for the once-successful city, which is but a ruin centuries later.

According to Fischer, "The message of Melville's apocalypse is the fall of absolutism through a self-destructive mechanism built into the System itself" (194-5). This mechanism is "the internal flaws of mechanization and dehumanism" (204). By indulging in the false pride of the ideal (the monument and the technology required to build it) over the real human lives of its citizens, the state dooms itself.

As has been pointed out by several critics, Bannadonna's too-massive bell, like the flawed ship's bell of "Benito Cereno," symbolizes America's Liberty Bell. Although Americans generally take pride in the cracked Liberty Bell as a national symbol of freedom, "For Melville the crack in the

man named Pompeo. Pope Paul III, before whom he was charged, absolved him, proclaiming, "Know then that men like Benvenuto, unique in their profession, stand above the law..." (462), words that may have inspired Melville's own words: "...that deed was but imputed to sudden transports of esthetic passion.... A kick from an Arabian charger: not sign of vice, but blood" (821).

bell was a portentous symbol of the weakness of a Union which cast into law the subservient status of its Negro population" (Lorant 142). According to popular myth, the bell is supposed to have rung in Philadelphia to summon citizens to the first public reading of the Declaration of Independence, and then cracked seventy years later on 22 February² 1846, Washington's Birthday, although the actual dates of both incidents are at best questionable (Independence Hall Association). But if the Bell is a symbol of freedom, then to Melville it is ironically appropriate that it cracked; the freedom it proclaimed was flawed, as flawed as the Bell itself. Whatever the exact date, its cracking occurred in Melville's very recent past, and to him it must have been a physical manifestation of the cracks that were beginning to show in the national edifice as war approached.

Ray Browne wrote of the story that "Melville here is emphasizing his great belief in humanism, that the human being is much more important than the machine ordering him around" (249). By "the machine," Browne refers to the robotic slave Talus. However, could not "machine" also refer to the blind machine of the State—another manifestation of Fischer's System? In this case it is not merely technology or even slavery that blindly kills its creator, but the State machine itself, which may have originally been by, of, and for the People, but which easily assumes supremacy over the People the moment they let their guard down and, through sloth or fear or ignorance, allow it to abnegate their autonomy. Bannadonna, nationalistic Founder and Citizen, creates his machine, and is slain because he is too busy covering up its flaws.

² Coincidentally, also the date of Shimane Prefecture's Takeshima Day.

An interesting link between Bannadonna and America's Founding Fathers is described by James Emmett Ryan. He argues that Bannadonna is a "corrupted" and "self-serving" architect, a dark reflection of the pure, spiritually inclined Masonic architect (77). In contrast to the Freemason, who follows a spiritual path in his art, Bannadonna is "a 'practical materialist,' devoted to neither alchemy nor theosophy" (Miller 164-5). Too arrogant to take any spiritual guidance from a Brotherhood, the orphan Bannadonna—whose name yet reflects a masonic rejection of the company of women—loses his way. Thus, "Melville's story...can be understood as a variant history of freemasonry" (Ryan 77). Bannadonna is a sort of dark Mason, created by an author living in a nation largely founded by Masons: "Freemasonry in America can be dated to 1730, with the first masonic lodge being constructed...in Philadelphia...where Benjamin Franklin was an avid life-long Mason (as were George Washington and Thomas Jefferson)" (Ryan 74). Ryan also points out that Melville's society was one in which masonic and pseudo-masonic gentlemen's clubs are popular and highly influential in business and government, but the linking of Bannadonna the founding to the Founding Fathers is clear.

These connections show that, while Melville was clearly criticizing his own era and society, he was equally critical of American history, and refused to ignore the flaws built into the high ideals of America's foundation. As Russ Castronovo puts it in one of the most inspired and original examinations of the story, "Melville keeps his attention focused upon the founding moments, refusing to digress from his interrogation of the past with a denunciation of the present...he does not affect a purposeful ignorance about the foundations of a legacy in order to conserve its

sanctity" (535). Castronovo demonstrates through this and other writings that Americans of the period tended to enshrine the past in a myth of "sanctity" while denouncing their present as a fallen era and seeing salvation in a renewed and uncritical adherence to the sacred ideals of the past. "The Bell-Tower" is a tale of the dangers of doing so:

The republic shares in both the guilt of the founder's crime and the glory of his creation. It forgets the scandal of the past to triumph in a ritual of the present. Caught up in a narrative of denial, the republic ineluctably continues to erase the flaws within its history; it accords the murderer-founder a state funeral while, under cover of night, it hustles the 'rebellious slave' out of its dominions and sinks it in the depths of the ocean...exiling unpleasant memories to the realm of amnesia by repairing the ruined tower and recasting the defective bell. (536)

Blindly restoring the unexamined ideals of a flawed past and separating sacred past from profane present will solve nothing: "The narrator works against Bannadonna's and the republic's construction and again insists on a temporal continuity, even though that continuity jeopardizes ideological cohesion. A legacy of violence resonates within a tradition of republican glory" (537). Castronovo compares Melville with William Wells Brown, escaped and self-educated slave and the first African-American novelist:

Throughout his writings, [Brown] critically remembers the sacred founding principals of America. He pledges himself to civic virtue without paralyzing himself with a docile acceptance of ideological consensus. Brown understands the lesson of Melville's *Israel Potter*—

that a citizen must actively interrogate America's monumental legacy if the ideals of participation and independence are to be preserved. (527)

Resisting Narratives of Denial

While civil war does not loom, we can yet find numerous parallels between Melville's America and today's Japan, which are usefully explored through "The Bell-Tower." Like all former colonial powers, Japan has "a legacy of violence" that many today are taking great pains to exile "to the realm of amnesia." But just as Bannadonna, the city fathers, and the citizens of the story only make things worse the more they try to forget past crimes, Japan can never be free of its past without exploring it realistically and honestly. As pointed out in an article about recent attempts by the American administration to "prettify" its own history, "Sometimes the public needs to hear unpleasant truths, even if those truths make them feel worse about their country" (Krugman).

Though clearly many disagree with this statement, in America, Japan, and every country, Melville's story serves as a warning for every former colonial nation that failure to deal with past sins will result in future sins, which will compound tragedy with further tragedy. Democracy cannot function with a poorly educated citizenry. Those who truly love their nation will unflinchingly, skeptically, and open-mindedly embrace its history, in all its glory and shame, to learn from it.

Although it is considered one of Melville's most difficult and uncharacteristic tales, "The Bell-Tower" can serve as a starting point for exploring contemporary issues and drawing parallels with other times and nations.

By grounding the story in current events, students can see the relevance of this odd but deeply insightful story.

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