

Herman Melville's Poetics / Politics in "The Encantadas"

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ABSTRACT

Melville's fictional narrative *The Encantadas* (1854) and his letter to his brother Gansevoort, a democratic politician who passionately supported U.S expansionism, will allow us to explore Melville's politics of action; i.e., his critique of the Mexican war and his doubts about Manifest Destiny. Simone De Beauvoir, French writer and feminist, insists that we are ethically compelled to do all we can to change oppressive institutions. De Beauvoir demonstrates the need to take sides, acting politically and with an ethical vision. Her action illustrates the links she sees between the embodied individual consciousness and political action. For her the alternative is simple and clear-cut. Either you align yourself with the "contemporary butchers rather than their victims" (1962: 20) or reject their atrocities and stand against them through active fights. The idea of narrative secrecy - Hunilla's rape - is gradually revealed to the reader through Melville's narrative omission revealing the female character as a practitioner of narrative secrecy as her right. This paper explores the female character's twofold otherness, the native and female as distinguished from the civilized and male, which designates her as the living embodiment of these dualities, the binary oppositions upon which Western Civilization rests. Her 'double otherness' is expressed in the figure in which race and gender emblematically intersect. The racial and sexual differences are equated to dramatize the power relationship between the native and the colonizer where the white male colonizer has both racial and sexual superiority. Hunilla's otherness is most fully articulated by textual interruptions. The denunciation of rape through a narrative strategy - elision - mediates Melville's politics as action.

Keywords: Melville, Politics of action, poetics, otherness, elision

INTRODUCTION

Herman Melville's Poetics / Politics in *The Encantadas*

Melville is a restless subject who is always on the move regarding his concrete experience as a voyager across the seas and considering his quest of truth about man in his fiction. He experienced a life of restlessness - the loss of his father at an early age, and social and economic demotion of his family - which might explain the perpetual search

for identity and selfhood in his narratives. His time was turbulent because of the rapid changes in various domains: social, political, cultural and economic. These domains have changed man's vision of man and have determined his image and behavior towards other men and cultures. Therefore, what could be viewed as revolutions in society, culture, and economy had developed, in the author, the impulse towards a cultural fantasy in whose heart is the Other. It was no easy matter during his time to identify with particular ideas without being alienated. Being himself "Otherized" by his society through his non-conformism, he looked at the external Other differently. Melville, as a sea writer, could have neglected political issues and felt not prepared to engage in their concerns. However, we shall argue that his correspondence to his brother Gansevoort and the fictional work under study suggest an astute and complex exploration of these issues. The study of Sketch Eighth of *The Encantadas* (1854) has shown oppositions which are deployed to repress or allay fears about the wholeness and stability of America in the face of Native American, African American and diverse ethnic immigration presences, and political issues, like empire and nation building. Melville deals narratively with racial and national anxieties about the 'New Nation' by displacing it into Hunilla's otherness. Thus, the Indian woman, in this Sketch, is a prominent female figure who stands as a significant critique of imperialism.

HUNILLA'S NARRATIVE SECRECY

The Sketch Eighth under study reveals that the female muteness destabilizes the masculine world of the narrator. It raises the question about the power of a confident male narrator to contain his story within the convention of language itself and the masculine world in general. The linguistic phenomenon makes us think of Frank Kermode's notion of secrecy in a narrative. For him, secrets emerge in the course of our interpretation of it. Speech breaks down in this fictional work. Hunilla abdicates her storytelling whereby her muteness creates a space for Melville to question contemporary issues about the American Nation. She stands as a principled and active response to the wreckage of masculine dreams of heroism - often a mask for oppression and cruelty. In this context, the gender issues extend into colonialism and mastery. Hence, silence in the face of the unspeakable in the narrative suggests a powerful ethical and political position of the writer on the dominance relations that enforced gender and class subordination as well as racial differences.

The Encantadas consists of a group of sketches of the Galapagos Islands. "Encantadas" is the name given by the Spanish when they discovered the islands in 1535; it means bewitched as much as enchanted. The double meaning of the name of the isles suggests Melville's symbolic reference to race and gender. Sketch Eighth, opens with:

*'At last they in an Island did espy
A seemly woman, sitting by the shore,
That with great sorrow and sad agony
Seemed some great misfortune to deplore,
And loud to them for succor called evermore'.*

(1986: 106)

From the beginning, the woman is associated with “sorrow” and “sad agony” and stands as the oppressed. Hunilla, a native woman, is discovered by the narrator’s fellow seamen. Aboard the ship, she tells her story. A French captain has left her with her husband and brother on the island to gather tortoise oil; but, the captain never returns for them. More dramatically is the fact that she has watched her husband and brother drown while fishing. So, widowed by a boating accident that she had witnessed, she spent time counting the days after her husband’s and brother’s death. Melville would, probably, agree with Frantz Fanon, who revises Friedrich Hegel’s dialectic, to suggest that the concept of Master and Slave dialectic underestimates the white master’s dominance over the natives since the master differs basically from the master described by Hegel. Fanon considers that in Hegel’s dialectic “there is reciprocity; here the master laughs at the consciousness of the slave. What he wants from the slave is not recognition but work” (1967:220). Hunilla, her husband, and her brother are used by the French Captain to collect tortoise oil. This oil dramatizes trade as a means of exploitation. The complexity of this narrative is the female character’s profound secrets, which the narrator refuses to unfold, and his frequent exclamation of pity confirms that the woman is sad, helpless, and mournful.

Melville imbues this Indian character with complexity and mystery. The narrator admires her stoicism in the face of this tragedy. She is described as a proud and resolute woman. She shows little emotion when she leaves the island - making a final visit to the grave she dug for her husband. Her story is dominated by the word “cross” as the symbol of her suffering and endurance. The latter is used five times in suggestive contexts and more if we consider less direct references. First, Melville cites the “rude **cross**” she planted “of withered sticks no green ones might be had at the head of that lonely grave” (1986: 111) where she buried her husband, and then he reinforces the image by referring to “another **cross**,” the invisible one of “dull anxiety and pain touching her undiscovered brother” (Ibid.112). The crosses gain further meaning as the narrator watches Hunilla’s tender farewell to the grave site of her husband. Thus, Melville makes a point of the story by setting the quality of her singular endurance against the desultory condition of man and of life. And, she appears at the end as “lone Hunilla [...] riding upon a small gray ass; and before her on the ass’s shoulder, she eyed the jointed workings of the beast’s armorial **cross**” (Ibid.121). The meaning becomes more symbolic and allows us to refer to her as the Other. She stands as a woman, but more as a native woman that is subjected to both gender and racial otherness expressed through textual elisions and omissions.

Critics state that Sketch Eight was exposed to the publisher’s censure which forced Melville to omit parts of it. In fact, there is stronger textual evidence in the form of elision and cryptic remarks in the text. The elisions begin as Hunilla gives her account of what happened to her on the island. Note this series of elisions and the narrator’s commentary:

What present day or month it was she could not say. Time was her labyrinth, in which Hunilla was entirely lost.

And now follows -

Against my own purposes a pause descends upon me here. One knows not whether nature doth not impose some secrecy upon him who has been privy to certain things. At least, it is to be doubted whether it be good to blazon such...

When Hunilla -

Dire sight it is to see some silken beast long dally with a goden lizard ere she devour. More terrible, to see how feline fate will sometimes dally with a human soul, and by nameless magic make it repulse a sane despair with a hope which is but mad...

(Ibid. 113)

The implication in the above quote shows that the protagonist is a victim in some way, and that the malicious acts perpetrated against her are dangerous to be announced in public. Melville later gives us a clue about the nature of these acts, intermingled with more elisions. When the Captain wondered if other ships had passed on in the island, she just replied, "Senor, ask me not". What follows is full of interruptions that the narrator explains, "those two unnamed events which befell Hunilla on this isle let them abide between her and her God" (Ibid. 115). What she could not tell the "Captain...shall... remain untold" (Ibid). These interruptions in the narrative that we have tried to report in the above quotation suggest that Hunilla was raped by a group of seamen, who then left the island without saving her. Melville's omissions may refer to the American seamen. So, to identify the American crew as participants in the rape who, then, abandoned her victim on the island could not be accepted by any publisher even if it was for the sake of truth. The fact that the woman was Indian and Spanish may have made it more problematic to reveal the truth in public at that time. These could have been some of the reasons why Melville left the story "half" told. The protagonist's secret becomes a recognizable reality, and her unspoken words stand as words with secrets. Frank Kermode, a British literary critic, considers that narratives are interpretation of reality. So, interpretation of this narrative, i.e., the spoken and unspoken words that generate secrets about Hunilla refers to a contemporary reality. Her secret is fascinating not because it is hidden, but because it is a recognizable reality, and her rape is registered as a colonial fact referring to the violation of the Mexican territory by US imperialism. To clear up the mystery of what happened in the island through these omissions means reading Melville's novel according to the narrative demands of the American policy of the time. To read the mystery itself as an effect of the American expansion is to see in it the imprint of a racial and gender issue that the writer strategically introduced through language.

The racial and sexual significance of rape in this fiction is articulated in the confrontation of Hunilla and the Captain of the ship who rescued her. Her mystery is introduced through a multiplicity of omissions and elisions. The narrator's description of her reinforces the theme of otherness where she stands as the Other because she is a woman. Her twofold otherness, the native and female as distinguished from the civilized and male, designates her as the living embodiment of these dualities, the binary oppositions upon which Western civilization rests:

Hunilla was partly prostrate upon the grave; her dark head bowed, and lost in her long, loosened Indian hair; her hands extended to the cross-foot, with a little brass crucifix clasped between; a crucifix worn featureless, like an ancient graven knocker long plied in vain.

(1986: 119)

Her 'double otherness' is expressed in the figure in which race and gender emblematically intersect. Thus it dramatizes the power relationship between the native and the colonizer where the white male colonizer has both racial and sexual superiority.

HUNILLA'S RAPE: GENDER AND RACIAL OTHERING

Reading this fictional work using postcolonial critics may reveal other meanings. Melville's use of rape may be seen as a tactic and metaphor to describe America's guilty practice with the natives of America - the Indians. Authors and critics as Frantz Fanon, Edward Said, Jenny Sharp, and Malek Alloula have identified rape as a master trope of colonial discourse and a sign of the colonizer's bad faith. In *Orientalism*, Said uses rape as a discreetly understated metaphor to describe the relationship between West and East. He argues, "A certain freedom of intercourse was always the Westerner's privilege: because he has the stronger culture, he could penetrate, he could wrestle with, he could give shape and meaning to the great Asiatic mystery, as Disraeli once called it" (1979: 44). In the above passage, he invokes rape to characterize the Occident's relation to the Orient; the one based on violence and domination.

Hunilla's otherness, as we have seen above, is most fully articulated by Melville's elisions and textual interruptions, like when the captain requests her, "You saw ships pass, far away; you waved to them; they passed on; - was that it Hunilla?" (Ibid. 115); she replies, "Senor, be it as you say" (Ibid) as if words could not express what happened to her on the island. Her otherness shows her vulnerability as a woman, the one that is subjected to rape. So, she feels embarrassment, and she could not tell the captain about her disgrace. Equated with the wilderness of the enchanted islands, she looks "much as the world at large, might, after a penal conflagration", is cursed and that "to them change never comes; neither the change of seasons nor of sorrows" (Ibid. 70). Although she couldn't recount all the events, the native woman is not without purpose - since "during the telling of her story the mariners formed a voiceless circle round Hunilla and the Captain" (Ibid.116). Throughout his account, the narrator highlights her power, revealing her courage to survive on the island. Her importance amplifies throughout her rape. The latter may symbolize the whole colonial enterprise that takes the land by force to exploit and abuse their legitimate proprietors. Melville makes her stand as the Other which is ultimately penetrated but not destroyed.

The distinctions between knowing, acknowledging, and recognizing the woman as the Other is quite important. Knowing someone's pain is a different thing from acting in response to it. In *The Encantadas*, at first sight, there is not the urgency to take action against oppression. Even if the American crew have saved Hunilla and are compassionate with her suffering, they do not act to denounce the atrocities abided to her in the island. Simone De Beauvoir, a French writer and feminist, insists that we are ethically compelled to do all we can to change oppressive institutions. Referring to Djamila Boupacha, the young Algerian woman raped and tortured during the Algerian Revolution war, De Beauvoir demonstrates the need to take sides, acting politically and with an ethical vision. Her action illustrates the links she sees between the embodied individual, consciousness, and political action. For her, the alternative is simple and clear-cut. Either you align yourself with the "contemporary butchers rather than their victims" (1962: 20) or reject their atrocities and stand against them through effective fights.

Melville was relatively unengaged with the day-to-day workings of the political world. The letters Melville wrote to friends and family during the 1840s and 1850s are for the most part without political content. But, a letter written in May 29, 1846, to his brother Gansevoort, a democratic politician who passionately supported U.S expansionism, shortly after President James K. Polk declared war on Mexico, provides a significant

exception that will allow us to deduce Melville's politics of action in *The Encantadas*. He writes:

People here are all in a state of delirium about the Mexican War. A military ardor pervades all ranks -- Militia Colonels wax red in their coat facings -- and 'prentice boys are running off to the wars by scores. -- Nothing is talked of but the "Halls of the Montezumas" And to hear folks prate about those purely figurative apartments one would suppose that they were another Versailles where our democratic rabble meant to "make a night of it" ere long.... But seriously something great is impending.

(Robert S. Levine, 2008:148)

Melville poked fun at the military pomp and self-righteousness attending the "state of delirium about the Mexican war", reminding Gansevoort of war's ultimate reality: "Nothing is talked of but the "Halls of the Montezumas". The sarcastic tone of this letter shows Melville's disapproval of the Mexican war,

The Mexican War (tho' our troops have behaved right well) is nothing of itself -- but "a little spark kindleth a great fire" as the well known author of the Proverbs very justly remarks. -- And who knows what all this may lead to -- Will it breed a rupture with England? Or any other great powers? -- Prithee, are there any notable battles in store -- any Yankee Waterloos? -- Or think once of a mighty Yankee fleet coming to the war shock in the middle of the Atlantic with an English one. -- Lord, the day is at hand, when we will be able to talk of our killed & wounded like some of the old Eastern conquerors reckoning them up by thousands; when the Battle of Monmouth will be thought child's play -- & canes made out of the Constitution's timbers be thought no more of than bamboos.

(Ibid)

He is comparing the American soldiers to Eastern conquerors and stressing the negative 'orientalist' image of the moors, which may stand as a criticism to Manifest Destiny; the belief that the expansion of the United States throughout the American continent, and later overseas was both justified and necessary to expand the Anglo-Saxon civilization.

In this narrative, the author is denouncing not only the literal rape of the Indian woman but also the economic rape of South America. Thus, Hunilla's rape mediates Melville's politics as action even if it has been done through elisions. In other words, this narrative is an audacious act since it challenges the prevailing capitalist relations of the period. The word "rape" in English initially referred to the theft of goods or the abduction of a woman when it began to circulate in the early 1400s, and it only gradually acquired its most common modern meaning denoting a woman's sexual violation in the 1580s, usages that Shakespeare employed in the *The Rape of Lucrece* (1594).

CONCLUSION

South America in *The Encantadas* is the site of a vast colonization scheme that forms the core of Melville's fictional work where the female character plays an important role. The

author draws a heroic stature to the female character who appears as a Christ figure symbolizing humanity's suffering and woe. "To Hunilla, pain seemed so necessary, that pain in other beings, though by love and sympathy made her own, was unrepiningly to be borne" (1986: 121). The deployment of Hunilla's silence, with its different meanings, can be read as Melville's strategy to draw the possible implications and significance of the male discourse of superior/ inferior dialectic process in relation to colonial enterprise. The woman as the Other in this tale, has shown the author's 'politics' about the American imperial expansion. This narrative is molded within the convention of adventure fiction; however, it stands as criticism on those conventions, since the hero is a woman, not a man. Melville has achieved to narrate a woman's experience of sexual violation without demeaning her making her keep her dignity and using her silencing as a strategy to introduce racial and gender issues.

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