

Excerpted from Sterling Stuckey, *African Culture and Melville's Art: The Creative Process in Benito Cereno and Moby-Dick* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009). Reprinted with the permission of Oxford University Press (<http://www.oup.com/us/>).

Introduction

Like the paintings in the Ajanta caves, the beauty of *Moby-Dick* can be known only to those who will make the pilgrimage to it, and stay within its dark confines until what is darkness has become light, and one can make out, with the help of an occasional torch, its grand design, its complicated arabesque, the minute significance of its parts.

Lewis Mumford, *Herman Melville*, 1929

To an astonishing extent what Mumford says of *Moby Dick* applies to *Benito Cereno*. Indeed, his reference to particular angles of light, as from a torch, illuminating previously dark areas of understanding applies to both masterpieces. By warning us that much of *Moby Dick* remains to be understood, Mumford posits a great animating principle of Melville's art, that neither the sweep of his creative imagination nor the depth of his probing of the human condition are meant to be exhausted in particular lifetimes. That Melville searches out and examines cultural resources that appear least likely, when transmuted, to garland his art deepens the darkness and extends the time required for much of it to be cast aside. But he is equally good at taking that which is before our eyes and working a subtle magic that long makes it invisible.

Attention is directed at criticism that at times denies Melville's skills as a novelist. In such instances, critics who view his work unfavorably are responded to because they touch on areas of Melville's alleged inadequacies that are, in light of new findings, greater strengths than critics, past and present, have imagined. These findings illuminate

so much about the works themselves that they enable us to answer questions never before posed about Melville's creative process. To this end, my purpose is to show how he used sources never before read by critics to fashion strikingly intricate and subtle techniques of craft, heretofore unexplored, in creating two of his greatest works, *Benito Cereno* and *Moby-Dick*.

The introduction sets the stage for sustained consideration of how Melville used such sources to form his aesthetic. What follows is a chapter-by-chapter *demonstration* that he was a far more subtle and inventive writer than even the most fervent admirers of the works under consideration claim. In other words, what is at issue is the degree of Melville's indebtedness to previously unknown sources for extraordinary technical advances that expanded both the range and depth not only of particular works but of the aesthetic that gave birth to them. Put another way, since most critics now agree that Melville was a great novelist, that criticism, except in rare instances, is not under examination in this work.¹ Rather, this work is almost exclusively about veins of Melville's art, subterranean and interconnected, that are being examined for the first time.

I emphasize, especially, the book's attention to aspects of Melville's aesthetic in *Benito Cereno* and *Moby-Dick* that have gone unexamined. How the one work relates to the other, not a particular concern of previous criticism, is a principal concern of this book. Moreover, the novella and *The Encantadas* are joined in ways never before written about and bear an interconnectedness similar to what the novella bears to *Moby-Dick*, which means that these works, taken together, reveal exquisitely subtle-- and broadly resonating-- qualities of Melville's art. In both *Moby-Dick* and *Benito Cereno*, larger structures of creation than previously imagined are now perceived.

I

So inventive is Melville's creative process that, to be believed, it must indeed be *demonstrated*, which is the challenge before me here. He repeatedly and dazzlingly inverts historical reality for artistic effect, sometimes leaving no trace of his sources. Moreover, when there are few or no clues to how he created, no answer to that "problem" in criticism, the solution might be found continents away, or in places at home where one would least expect to find it. This means that numerous problems are first known *after* they have been identified and solved, accounting for the length of time it has taken for us even to consider them. No other writer risked hiding vital aspects of his creative process, and thereby affecting his critical reception, to the extent Melville did. One wonders why he decided on this strategy of creation.

A classic feature of Melville's art is its astonishingly layered nature. One or more cultures may be concealed, contributing to the formation of symbols, characterizations, and scenes on the printed page. Even with an understanding of much of this process, such features of his art, though widely appropriated, shine through as entirely of his own making. The skill with which he carries out this layering does not prepare the reader to expect it repeatedly, heightening the wonder of the process. For this reason, much that is vital in his work is not the object of discussion, and his very talent can militate against the admiration his gifts merit. Nevertheless, as problems are identified and solutions reached, new and radiant light is cast on otherwise familiar features of *Moby Dick* and *Benito Cereno*. On occasion, entirely new symbols appear before us.

Much that would be forgettable in the hands of a less talented writer glimmers thanks to Melville's genius. We may especially savor small details that result in

unforgettable artistic triumphs, such as Babo being dragged to the gibbet and the use of the Rimac Bridge in the last sentence of *Benito Cereno*. A certain fluidity of cultural thought and practice occurs when Melville relates one culture to another, enabling him to imagine the flow of influences, to layer one beneath, or above, the other. His is not universality as abstraction, devoid of cultural specificity and content, but the reverse: particular human beings from different parts of the world, at times nameless, are lifted from the mundane circumstances in which Melville finds them to the dazzling heights of his art. A curious sort of immortality results from his artistry as he works from most of the world's continents.

But Melville's skill at characterization is profoundly revealed when one is examining principal figures in his work. In ways that catch one completely off guard, that can be stunningly impressive, the discovery is made that he has, in the act of creating, actually fused characters into being, both in *Moby-Dick* and *Benito Cereno*. Especially in *Benito Cereno*, this genius at characterization is revealed, and one wonders, for this alone, if he has received anything like the credit he deserves as an avant-garde artist. Once again, questions about this method of characterization, certainly in *Benito Cereno*, were not posed because Melville's method, in this realm, is but now being recognized in relation to the novella. Accordingly, what was not considered a problem is identified today as one after its solution has been carried through..

Melville appropriated and transformed material from writers who were well known in his time but not previously thought to have influenced him artistically. This form of intertextuality, of which the reader is innocent, is pivotal to his method of creating. And there are resonances between his own works: for example, between *Moby*

Dick and *Benito Cereno*, between *The Encantadas* and *Benito Cereno*, between *Redburn* and *Benito Cereno*. The depth of the interplay is still more pronounced for *Moby-Dick* and *Benito Cereno*, for they are anchored by a common source on which Melville, creating art largely through the prism of history far more than previously thought, forever links his two greatest works in characterizations, symbolism, and scenes. *The Encantadas* fits in here as well.

Charles Dickens was a writer of Melville's own time, and Melville drew on him in writing *Moby Dick*. His presence in America, and in Melville's hometown of New York City, might have motivated critics to look further than they have at Melville's writing for ways in which he might have been stirred to still more creative effort, especially since it was said that Melville admired Dickens and was influenced by him.² Even though "New York," a chapter of Dickens's *American Notes for General Circulation*, figures prominently in the creation of "Forecastle—Midnight" of *Moby-Dick*, critics have not noticed dance and other connections in that work with Melville's art.

When looking at *American Notes*, instead of trying to determine how Dickens may have influenced Melville's writing, critics have focused elsewhere—on how, for example, Dickens conducted himself while he was in America. Concern about how Dickens related to Americans continues to have primacy, even in relation to Melville, when *American Notes* is discussed. This critical stance is taken in Hershel Parker's *Herman Melville*: "At least Charles Dickens, the ungrateful author of *American Notes*, had behaved politely as long as he was in the United States."³ Not even Melville's considerable interest in and mastery of dance was enough of a clue to bring the two

together.

A principal reason it has taken time to discern the literary value of dance and music in Melville's work is that those artistic forms are at a discount in literary criticism despite the fact that Melville is unsurpassed at using them in literature. But this has gone virtually unnoticed in his work, and one is not likely to go to American fiction expecting music and dance, or the two together (which is Melville's style), to greatly aid in understanding a particular work of fiction. Hence, music and dance are not treated as important elements of the American writer's craft, yet both were of utmost importance in the creation of *Moby-Dick* and in understanding *Benito Cereno*.

Emory Elliott provides a useful context: "Since the rise of the New Criticism in the 1950s, which focused attention of critics and readers upon the text itself—apart from history, biography, and society—there has emerged a wide variety of critical methods which have brought to literary works a rich diversity of perspectives: social, historical, political, psychological, economic, ideological, and philosophical." But growing insight into a writer such as Melville, who was preeminently concerned with ranging beyond known sources and means of craft to enrich the creative work, continued, in certain areas, to be forestalled. In particular, music and dance are not among the critical methods that "have opened up possibilities for new readings and new meanings."⁴

It is not surprising, therefore, given Melville's interest in such arts, that so little has been written on how he, relating the one to the other, came to hone this major aspect of his art. An examination of slave art, of music and dance in New York City and Albany during Melville's time tells us much about what he was exposed to artistically. Despite

the fact that historians of slavery have been practically silent on this, we know, for example, that circular dance and juba-beating, both widespread in slavery, were prevalent among blacks in New York and in other northern states. But such silence, it will be demonstrated, has not carried over to students of dance and music who have studied antebellum America. Moreover, a means of mapping Melville's exploration of the music and dance that inform his work is to study the various addresses of the Melville family in New York City in relation to the parade routes of marching black bands.

Perhaps unsurpassed as an influence on Melville's art is Albany, New York, the Melville family's ancestral home. Dance and music concerts were unavoidable there in the summer months. Young Herman Melville visited Albany, one of the great centers of dance culture in America, in the summers, and he later lived there for nearly ten years. The Pinkster festival tradition was strong there; one of America's greatest dancers, King Charley, performed there. His style, almost certainly known to Melville, is said to have influenced that of John Diamond, the superb white dancer who challenged William Henry Lane, "Master Juba," the black dancer who is treated at length in the chapter on New York in Dickens's *American Notes*.

Melville's Albany experience, crucial to his vision of slave art in America, made him one of the few whites in the country with a sense of how the music and dance of the slave North at times dovetailed with that of the slave South, forming a sort of cultural bridge that helps explain the appearance of free black artists who preside over celebrations at sea in *Moby-Dick*. And it is to his credit that in time he was so serious a student of black culture that he made no more cultural distinction between Africans and descendants of Africans in America than between Southern and Northern blacks. This we

see in *Moby-Dick*: Pip, for example, is at one time referred to as an Alabama boy, and at another as a native of Connecticut. Because Melville was very young when he first visited Albany, what he experienced there became a part of his consciousness, from which he later drew for artistic purposes. Thus he was being prepared for mastery of black musical and dance forms from which he was later able to derive social meaning. Important aspects of *Moby-Dick*, in fact, are based on his intimate knowledge of descendants of Africans in America. Particularly stunning is his depiction of African-derived music and dance of American blacks, who provide the dominant musical and dance forms in *Moby-Dick*. His depiction of their music in that work reflects its continuing character deep into the twentieth century and establishes him as a preeminent student of the subject.

Slaves and ex-slaves were very much a part of Melville's life in both New York City and Albany. In both places, his family lived within reach of black artistic expression, from which Melville greatly benefited. He studied slave music and dance seriously, and his uses of the two, and of African music and dance, are not easily matched. As his handling of music and dance shows in *Moby-Dick* and *Benito Cereno*, he became sufficiently skilled to commune at the highest level with Frederick Douglass, the greatest authority on black music.

Douglass directed Melville's attention to America's richest musical and dance tradition in which Melville works with great powers of imagination. Inspired by Douglass, Melville builds on a major premise of the black musical aesthetic set forth in *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, which appeared in 1845, six years before the publication of *Moby-Dick*. Though blacks were not far away from Melville

geographically, they were continents away from him socially, which is probably a factor in principal forms of slave art being as subtly wrought in *Moby-Dick* as any feature of Melville's art. Before his reading of Douglass, Albany and New York City helped prepare him for this ambitious musical and writing effort in *Moby-Dick*.

In that work, some creative gifts of blacks are obvious with Melville calling attention to them, whereas others, though profoundly influential in the novel, are hidden from us. Particular influences of slave culture dominate portions of the work, providing its tragic musical theme, a theme that at once gives voice to and is indistinguishable from qualities of Melville's writing style. For a novel long regarded as deeply American to be inspired in this way by the music and dance of a despised segment of the population is a revolutionary move artistically. Beneath much of the splendid surface of *Moby-Dick*, slave music and dance are subterranean forces, heightening its complexity and quality overall. The last half of the novel, especially, is written with slave art functioning as a kind of spiritual compass for the *Pequod*. Melville's use of Douglass's *Narrative* makes slavery a theme of great importance in both *Moby-Dick*,

Douglass writes of music that is a deep force in Melville's imagination, causing him ultimately to make unique use of certain tools of his craft. As formulated by Douglass and re-imagined by Melville, slave music allows Melville to use language in ways seldom if ever before employed. And like Douglass, a master writer in his own right, Melville uses music as an emblem or metaphor of social status of individuals and of groups—perhaps, in the end, of the American nation. In a long moment of revolutionary daring, through music he brings forth the travail of slavery as a sub-theme on which *Moby-Dick* takes flight. But there is a problem: it is virtually impossible for the reader to

discover that music, as much as the wind, propels the *Pequod*.

Douglass lays indispensable groundwork for an avant garde experimentalism that has been missed in Melville's work, an experimentalism in which Melville demonstrates the uses to which music is put even when he is not referring to music. In the process he encompasses much more than music as he brings the blues to life in *Moby-Dick* without leaving overt clues. His strategy is as hidden as the varied materials on which he draws to give life to his art. Again the strategy is layered, interconnected. If uncommon subtlety and irony in the use of materials in radically new ways is to be valued in a writer, then Melville's art is greatly undervalued. This is more evident than ever as Douglass helps us see rich dimensions of another cultural and spiritual world opening before us in *Moby-Dick*.

In *Moby-Dick* we have the principal ritual of slave life in the American South, possibly the principal ritual of nineteenth-century America, for the major musical forms of the nation—the Spirituals, the Blues, and Jazz-- all benefited from association with the sacred Ring Shout dance.⁵ Melville offers one of the earliest depictions of what the blues experience, in relation to the Ring Shout, began to mean not only to Americans, including Ahab, but to sailors from different points on the globe. Not only that, but jazz dance is called to mind in relation to the Ring Shout and the sound of the blues. In Melville's mind, the music of the blues is associated with various forms of suffering and not confined to blacks. Perhaps he was the first American to present the blues as the American national music.

Melville had to have known blacks in America extremely well to have written with such understanding. Learned critics must ponder his achievement and determine if

there is anything quite like it among great writers born into and working in dominant cultural environments. Have any others crossed over into a submerged and reviled culture with comparable insight? A great truth of *Moby-Dick* is that the art of blacks is a chief means by which problems of the profoundest sort are acted out by people of many cultures, dramatically extending the reach of slave culture well before its music and dance received recognition in the coming century. As Fred Bernard called to our attention, slavery is an important, though neglected theme in *Moby-Dick*

Hegel is important to Melville and Melville wisely invokes him in relation to slavery. Because Hegel's thought applies so certainly to the resistance of slaves in *Benito Cereno*, Melville was ahead of his time in deciding that Hegel might give his fictional account of the slave revolt added resonance and complexity. But oddly, the historical revolt was indistinguishable from art itself, capturing Melville's interest for that reason and, consequently, demonstrating the limits of Hegel's thought. In fact, Hegel's thought is seldom so limited as when applied to the souls of blacks, as the young W.E.B. Du Bois, writing with Hegel and Schopenhauer in mind, noted in 1888: "A quarter of a century ago, these people were slaves and truly learned philosophers cleverly declared they had no souls..."⁶

For African slaves, in *Benito Cereno*, to rise in revolt, demand to be taken back to West Africa by a slave trading captain, and demand that the whites on the slave ship act as though they are still in control when another captain boards raises all sorts of Hegelian issues, some beyond the scope of Hegel's thought. Not the least of the issues is that the consciousness of the supremely confident African leader, who is convinced that the visitor will not discover that the blacks are in control, was hardly as yoked to the will of

his original captor as Hegel might posit. Elaborate artistry with illusion the face of reality is the principal weapon of African defense. This much Melville knew from reading Amasa Delano's *Narrative of Voyages and Travels in the Northern and Southern Hemispheres*, which is why he depicts Babo, the African leader in *Benito Cereno*, as all-brain. This was no typical slave revolt that easily lends itself to Hegelian analysis, or to easy conclusions about African emphasis on inflicting punishment. Neither is *Moby-Dick*, in which African influences are carried over into the Americas, cut and dried with respect to Hegel, who did not focus on modern slavery.

Melville was probably exposed to the dialectic from reading Douglass some years before his extensive discussions of Hegel, in 1849, with German philologist George Adler. The dialectic appears to have come to Douglass on his own or from an undetermined source. In any event, he felt philosophy failed to provide sufficient insight into the anguish of soul, as expressed musically, of the African slave.⁷ Neither Douglass nor Melville suffered Hegel's ignorance of slave spirituality, a spirituality from which the blues were born. Without Melville's awareness of that heritage, chapter 40 of *Moby-Dick* could not have taken the pivotal turn that it takes in determining the course of much that follows.

Thanks to Douglass, we know of Hegel's almost certain influence in *Moby-Dick*; otherwise the novel can be read, as it has been for generations, without the reader sensing a Hegelian presence. The dialectic helps explain Douglass on slave music, but so evident are artistic resonances between Douglass and Melville that we don't need a particular philosopher to detect Douglass's influence on Melville. This is the case mainly because no philosopher works with the dialectic of contrasting yet melded musical tones in a way,

if at all, approaching Douglass. Consequently, Melville's creative response to Douglass, which amounts to some of the most experimental writing ever undertaken by a novelist. This is encouraged by Douglass having adorned the dialectic in the music of the blues. Although Melville uses the dialectic, it is Douglass's language that he uses in applying it to music, the form in which it finds its finest artistic expression. As philosophy is not generally expected to appear in American fiction, Melville's readers cannot as easily be faulted for not recognizing the dialectic, from whatever source, in *Moby-Dick*.

It would seem unwise, however, to rule out the possibility that Melville, like Douglass, was familiar with dialectical thought before reading a philosopher. Fine poets, in their command of irony, know something of dialectical thought and Melville's command of the dialectic, whether it was so designated in his circles, is likely. If the dialectic has been used more powerfully than by Melville in chapter XLII, "The Whiteness of the Whale," then one would want to know where and by whom. This chapter assures us that Melville was ideally suited to take Douglass's dialectic, even in music, and to make it his own. Here is but one of several instances in that chapter in which he uses dialectical thought:

With reference to the Polar bear, it may possibly be urged by him who would fain go still deeper into this matter, that it is not the whiteness, separately regarded, which heightens the intolerable hideousness of that brute; for, analyzed, that heightened hideousness, it might be said, only arises from the circumstances that the irresponsible ferociousness of the creature stands invested in the fleece of celestial innocence and love; and hence, by bringing together two such opposite emotions in our minds, the Polar bear frightens us with so unnatural a contrast.

But even assuming all this to be true; yet, were it not for the whiteness, you would not have that intensified terror.

These are not concerns to Harold Bloom. There is no apprehension by Bloom of remote associations that yield spiritual/musical emphasis in Douglass's *Narrative*, of an artistic underground theme as powerful and pervasive as it is subtle. But Bloom thinks of *Narrative* as principally concerned with brute force. Consequently, he is unaware that Douglass is explicit about the spiritual cost of slavery being inestimable. In that spirituality and art one finds Douglass's finest expression, his magnificent portrait of his grandmother, Betsey Bailey, perhaps at once the most moving—it has more than a touch of the blues about it—and gracefully expressed prose in the *Narrative*. But Bloom finds Douglass's "rhetoric, though a touch uncontrolled" having "just enough irony to qualify as authentic literary language..."⁸ Actually, irony is the chief feature of Douglass's thought and prose, perhaps as much a part of his writing style as of any 19th century writer, including Melville, who focuses on precisely that quality of style in *Narrative*.

Had Melville come to mind or, say, Plato or Aristotle, the dialectic in *Narrative* might have been identified by Bloom together with ironies related to the creative act that Douglass and Melville immortalize in these pages. With Bloom even comparing Douglass to James Baldwin, who clearly read Douglass, without recognizing this, it is small wonder that critics in his tradition have given little attention to music and dance in American literature. Bloom contends that *Narrative* is "wildly uneven" but, not

surprisingly, fails to show us where and how this is so.⁹

A problem of a different order occurs when Melville, in writing *Benito Cereno*, transforms accounts of events from numerous chapters of a book long associated with him, from chapters, however, that are unfamiliar to the reader. This has been a major obstacle to understanding since even most critics seem aware of only a single chapter from the book in question, Delano's *Voyages and Travels*. Consequently, the problem is compounded by Melville's multiple transformations of material from *Voyages*. First surprised to find additional material in *Voyages* that Melville had worked into the novella, some years later I realized that I might have begun with the assumption that Melville, finding chapter XVIII of *Voyages* important, almost certainly read the book in its entirety. The problem is that so few Melville scholars have read beyond chapter XVIII of *Voyages*.

In time, my students and I at Northwestern University in the late 1970s, began reading the Delano volume, in History classes, a bit more systematically. We also read *The Encantadas* together with the Galapagos chapter of *Voyages* and had stimulating discussions of *The Encantadas*' "Sketches," which were mainsprings to Melville's creative process in fashioning the African warriors, the hatchet-polishers, in *Benito Cereno*. Readings from *Voyages and Travels*, as the years went by, led to discoveries central to how Melville created *Benito Cereno*.

Given the genius of the leaders of the historical revolt, and the level of performance of those under their direction, is it any wonder that the distinguished Harrison Hayford writes that, while creating *Benito Cereno*, Melville kept chapter XVIII of Delano's *Voyages and Travels* before him? Certainly the historical event recounted by

Delano was suggestive enough to stir Melville's imagination. But as true to the historical account as Melville is, and as surely as he discovered, in *Voyages and Travels*, revolution hidden in the folds of art, his inventions, based on re-imaginings of chapters of *Voyages*, have been greatly underestimated.¹⁰

Without any mention of Ashantees among the Africans who revolt at sea, *Voyages and Travels* contains the clue to their cultural world, with which Melville is deeply concerned. In the attachments to chapter XVIII, Melville discovered the Ashantee influence that drove the revolt, and that led him, working with that influence in a boldly experimental way, to join *Moby-Dick* and *Benito Cereno*. At the same time, he places the Ashantee's cultural world below the horizon of the reader, thousands of miles away, one might say in darkness. Even so, that he refers specifically to Ashantees in the novella is the surest evidence that Melville wanted the critic one day to discover how so much of his art came to flower.

Although it may not be fashionable in some literary circles to pay much attention to the plot of *Benito Cereno*, such a position, with respect to the Ashantee example alone, is now in need of reexamination. For well over a century, readers simply accepted an Ashantee presence in the novella because Melville made that presence an accepted fact in the tale. Relatively little seemed needed to build on that knowledge, and nobody posed the problem: How do we know there is an Ashantee presence in *Benito Cereno*? But the plot containing the dance and singing of the Ashantee women points to that influence as they use art to inspire their men to deeds of warrior valor. It should be emphasized that it is Melville himself who identifies Ashantees in the historical revolt and places them on the *Pequod*. There is no mention of them in Delano's *Voyages and Travels*.

So from crossing conventional boundaries of literary scholarship to enter the realm of music and dance a new approach to Melville is fashioned, enabling us ultimately to consider cultural influences that mark the novella as a work as deeply African as any to come out of the Americas. The arts, then, provide the key that unlocks larger mysteries, a possible whole new world of cultural influence in the novella. To a much greater degree, music and dance figure in *Moby--Dick* but as a function of both the African and African American experience. The music of the novel, thanks to Melville's re-imagining of some aspects of Douglass on slave music, is, at the same time, African and profoundly American. Moreover, the arts as much as any other quality of craft derived from them enable us to recognize, and to follow, the grand design of Melville's aesthetic—to follow the course of the *Pequod*.

Thanks to Mungo Park's *Travels into the Interior Districts of Africa*, the relationship between industry and pastime is evident in *Benito Cereno* and a first step in understanding how Melville created the African warriors on the *San Dominick* in *Benito Cereno*. In addition, examination of the Park volume not only reveals its subtle artistic influence on the novella but leads to the conclusion that the young Melville found Park's views on Africa in stark contrast to what Americans generally knew about that continent. Still, Park's impact on Melville's aesthetic, on how African culture is fused into the performance of the hatchet-polishers should not be discounted. But texts on Africa that are much more important than Park enable Melville to use cultural history, in remarkable measure, as a foundation and extension of art in *Benito Cereno*. Ashantee culture, in his hands, is indispensable to the grand design of the revolt. Indeed, the culture of the Ashantees is so much a part of the behavior of the Africans in the novella, we come to

understand, that main ingredients of the union of illusion and reality in the novella are formed from it. The Park volume, on a far more limited scale than other sources on Africa, is used for such purposes.¹¹ To get to Melville's creative sources, one must go deeper into sources on Africa as one does on Melville's creative process generally.

Frederick Austus Ramsayer and Johannes Kuhne's *Four Years in Ashantee*, though published after the appearance of *Benito Cereno*, helps one interpret the dance and behavior of the women in the novella. More precisely, it explores the relationship of dance to warfare in Ashantee culture, an aspect of the novella that might otherwise pass without particular notice unless more is known of Ashantee culture. This volume, published after *Benito Cereno* appeared, was not available to Melville. R. S. Rattray's *Religion and Art in Ashanti* was found to contain needed information about Ashantee burial rites of kings that help us understand what was done to the body of the owner of the slaves, Alexandro Aranda, after he is slain by the Africans in *Benito Cereno*. But the Rattray study was also published after the appearance of the novella.¹²

Sources available during Melville's lifetime were needed. Actually, a number of sources were read by him, enabling him to probe in-depth Ashantee burial and other practices. Accounts of Dutch and British travelers representing their governments in West Africa in areas where an imperial foothold was gained or sought were the ones on which Melville drew. The works referred to are Joseph Dupuis's *Journal of a Residence in Ashantee*, T. E. Bowdich's *Mission from Cape Castle to Ashantee* and Willem Bosman's *A New and Accurate Description of the Coast of Guinea*--all immensely important to Melville studies.¹³ The Bowdich volume achieves what the Rattray volume does not in having appeared a few years after Melville's birth, providing still more evidence of how

Ashantees reduced bodies to skeletons. As we know, some of Melville's finest writing projects the image of Aranda's skeleton on the *San Dominick* from beginning to end. The Bosman account of the Ashantee provides the evidence we were seeking for the *Follow Your Leader* legend that appears beneath Aranda's skeleton at the prow of the *San Dominick*.

Considering the place of Africa in the estimates of Americans and the reading habits of Americans, Melville was assured that few of his contemporaries knew of the Dupuis book. Well into the second century since the publication of *Moby-Dick* and *Benito Cereno*, *Journal of a Residence* is still not included in studies that list the books it is thought Melville read. The same applies, sadly, to the Bowdich and Bosman volumes. In this regard, one might turn, for example, to Mary K. Bercaw's *Melville's Sources*, published in 1987, which does not mention the volumes just discussed.¹⁴

Journal of A Residence is the common source from which Melville worked in linking *Moby-Dick* and *Benito Cereno* and is one of the most important books ever in influencing Melville's art. Without knowing that Melville reworked passages from this book, the startling connection between the novella and *Moby-Dick* would be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to perceive. In other word, with there being no comparison of the *Journal* with what Melville makes of it, the window onto the vital connection between the novella and *Moby-Dick* would not be available to us. The method of creation would simply be attributed, once more, to Melville's extraordinary imaginative gifts, which have a way of quieting questions about his process of creation. Actually, numerous creative acts in the novella that resulted from Melville's reading of *Journal of A Residence* remain concealed until the *Pequod*, it might be said, sails beyond the horizon

and West Africa comes into view. I intend to demonstrate that as complicated a process of symbolic interrelatedness as one is likely ever to encounter results from Melville's work with African sources. In the process, interlacing lines of creation are witnessed as he brings together his findings from Bowdich, Dupuis and Bosman.

NOTES

¹ The work of two scholars, however, is very much related to my own. Fred Bernard was the first to posit slavery, as I do in this work, as a major theme in *Moby-Dick*; and Joyce Adler suggests, with much prescience, creative riches, revealed and hidden, especially in *Benito Cereno*. The focus of both critics on hidden aspects of Melville's art resonates in unusual measure with the theme of this book. See Fred Bernard, "The Question of Race in *Moby-Dick*," *The Massachusetts Review*, Autumn 2002, XL111, No. 3, 384-404; and Joyce Adler, *War in Melville's Imagination* (New York University Press, New York and London, 1981), especially page 89.

² The fact that Melville did admire Dickens might have led critics to search harder for possible influences beyond those in "Bartleby," whose character sketches and peculiarity of style were thought to resemble closely work from the pen of Dickens. See Harrison Hayford, Alma A. MacDougall, G. Thomas Tanselle, et al., editors, *The Writings of Herman Melville: The Piazza Tales* (Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern University Press and The Newberry Library, 1987), 508.

³ Hershel Parker, *Herman Melville* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 609.

⁴ See Emory Elliott's *Series Editor's Preface* to Richard H. Broadhead, ed., *New Essays on Moby-Dick* (Cambridge University Press, 1986), vii. ----

⁵ Marshall Stearns writes, about the Ring Shout:

The dancers form a circle in the center of the floor, one in back of another. Then they begin to shuffle in a counter-clockwise direction around and around, arms out and shoulders hunched. A fantastic rhythm is built up by the rest of the group standing back to the walls, who clap and stomp on the floor. Wave after wave of song is led by the shouting preacher, whose varying cry is answered by the regular response of the congregation. Suddenly, sisters and brothers scream and spin, possessed by religious hysteria.... The continued existence of the ring-shout is of critical importance to jazz, because it means that an assortment of West African musical characteristics have been preserved, more or less, intact in the United States—from rhythms and blue tonality, through the falsetto break and the call-and-response pattern, to the songs of allusion and even the motions of the

African dance. And an entire way of life has survived with it.

Marshall Stearns, *The Story of Jazz* (London, Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1956), 12 and 13.

⁶ See W.E.B. Du Bois, “The New Fatherland,” in the Du Bois manuscript collection at the University of Massachusetts. I am indebted to German historian Kenneth Barkin for bringing the Du Bois essay to my attention. Barkin writes in a forthcoming paper, that “Hegel’s comments were shocking. He termed Africa as a ‘land of gold and a land of children.’” We learn further from Barkin, quoting David Farrell Krell, that Hegel wrote that “the Negro represents ... the natural human being in all its untamed nature and abandon.” Further, Krell argues that Hegel thought that in the Negro’s “character there is not a single intimation of the human.” See David Farrell Krell, “The bodies of Black Folk: From Kant and Hegel to Du Bois and Baldwin,” in *Boundary 2, International Journal of Literature and Culture* 27 no. 3 (Fall, 2000) 117.

⁷ History of Religion scholar Charles Long responded to a query from me about Douglass and the dialectic in the following way:

First of all, let me say that dialectical thinking, very much like comparative thinking, is a generic aspect of all human thinking. Hegel made and gave specific meaning to the dialectic but he did not create dialectical thinking. This capacity in a formal manner can be seen early in Plato and Aristotle and, of course, in the rhetoric of the Apostle Paul in the New Testament. So, long before Hegel there was dialectical thought. It may be that other forms of dialectical thinking after Hegel might be attributed to Hegel while they in fact were not at all dependent upon him as an origin... My favorite and most profound dialectic is from the Buddhist thinker, Nagarjuna, (150 CE), however. So, I am certain that a person as smart as Douglass in his circumstances came upon the dialectical thinking as an aid to his own thought—it may have been the Hegelian form or one of his own. For example, I could have invented the dialectic when I once said that “African Americans are a part of American culture by virtue of not being a part of it.” I later found that Derrida had made a formulation that went something like this, “Presence must of necessity encompass absence for the full expression of presence.”

The letter from Charles Long was received on June 3rd, 2006.

⁸ Harold Bloom, ed., *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (New York: Chelsea House, 1988), page 3). Douglass’s discussion of his grandmother is found in *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, Autobiographies* (New York: The Library of America, 1994) 48-49.

⁹ *Ibid*, page 1. Bloom does not mention, when referring to James Baldwin and Douglass, musical resonances in their writings, or that Baldwin and Douglass treat the Ring Shout. What we get from Bloom instead are unusually long, verbatim passages on the cruelties

of slavery that threaten to overwhelm his commentary, which begins: “A rereading of the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* gives the impression that the book could have been called *A Slave is Being Beaten*.” Ibid, p. 1.)

The dialectic—the unity of opposites-- is said to have originated with Heraclitus thousands of years ago, that it hardly began with modern thinkers. As a mode of thought, the dialectic must have been employed by numerous thinkers over the centuries since Heraclitus rather than by a simple handful. Charles Long, quoted in end note 6 is especially helpful here. Also see Howard Williams, *Hegel, Heraclitus and Marx* (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989), chapter I. Hegel’s thought was mainly accessible by word of mouth in Douglass and Melville’s time. In fact, Hegel was not particularly well known in the U.S. for quite some time. The formation of the St. Louis School of Hegelians did not occur until the 1860s, after the appearance of *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* and *Moby-Dick*.

¹⁰ Hayford’s words are worth quoting, for they reveal that he had no doubt that *Benito Cereno* is mainly about slavery. But his words are so strong that they seem to discourage probing beneath the surface of the novella to determine how much Melville built on the historical account of the slave revolt. Hayford writes: “Melville owned a copy of Delano’s *Narrative* ... and he must have written ‘Benito Cereno’ with Chapter 18 constantly open before him.” The reader will see, in these pages, that such was not so. Harrison Hayford, et al., *The Piazza Tales*, 582.

¹¹ Mungo Park, *Travels into the Interior Districts of Africa* (New York: 1971). Originally published in 1799.

¹² Frederick Augustus Ramsayer and Johannes Kuhne, *Four Years in Ashantee*, English trans. (New York: R. Carter & Brothers, 1975). Originally published in 1875. R. S. Rattray, *Religion and Art in Ashanti* (London: 1927).

¹³ Joseph Dupuis, *Journal of a Residence in Ashantee* (London: Frank Cass, 1966). Originally published in 1824. T. E. Bowdich, *Mission from Cape Coast Castle to Ashantee* (London: Frank Cass, 1966). Originally published in 1819. Willem Bosman, *A New and Accurate Description of the Coast of Guinea* (London, 1967). Originally published in 1704. Dupuis and Bowdich were British agents in Africa, Bosman a Dutch agent.

¹⁴ Mary K. Bercaw, *Melville’s Sources* (Northwestern University Press, Evanston, Illinois, 1987). Also see Merton Sealts, *Melville’s Reading: A Check-List Of Books Owned and Borrowed* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1966), which makes no mention of the Ashantee sources.