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# Herman Melville and Imperialism

A Cultural Critique of Melville's  
Polynesian Trilogy

Yang Jincai    Nanjing University Press

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南京大学博士文丛

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## 总 序

洪银兴

21 世纪是一个充满机遇与挑战的时代,随着科学技术的突飞猛进,知识经济初见端倪,综合国力的竞争日趋激烈。从根本上说,21 世纪的竞争最重要的是人才的竞争。高等学校承担着培养高层次人才的使命,博士是高层次人才的代表。如何培养大批具有博士学位的高层次人才,使他们在下世纪成为知识创新的主力军,无论是对高校本身还是对国家来说,这都是一件至关重要的事情。

为了展示南京大学青年教师的学术风采,加强学科与学术队伍的建设,促进新生学术力量的成长,经过长期酝酿与充分准备,我校编辑出版了《南京大学博士文丛》。此次编进《博士文丛》中的论著,大多是获得博士学位并在我校任教的青年教师的博士论文,是在广泛动员、严格把关的基础上,根据质量第一、公平公开、规范

## **《南京大学博士文丛》总序**

运作的原则认真遴选出来的,同时坚持基础研究与应用研究并举,特别注重对我国现代化建设和改革开放,对南大学科建设和发展具有重要理论价值与实践意义的最新研究成果。可以说,这套《博士文丛》虽然也可能有这样或那样的不足,但基本上反映了南大青年学者丰富而活跃的学术思想,代表了南大青年学者的学术水平。此次我校组织编辑出版《博士文丛》,就是从人才培养的战略高度,并着眼于下世纪发展的需要,在学术研究与人才培养领域采取的一项重要举措。相信《博士文丛》的出版对于扩大我校的学术影响、培养青年学术骨干、推动学科建设,一定能起到重要的作用。

长期以来,南京大学在人才培养、科学研究、社会服务、国际交流等各个方面都致力于追求卓越,为国家和社会培养了大批杰出人才。一届又一届的学生在这一人才摇篮里茁壮成长,一代又一代的学者在这块科学沃土上勤奋耕耘。近百年的办学实践塑造了南大师生热爱祖国、振兴中华的爱国精神,追求真理、实事求是的科学精神,博采众长、汇融百家的开放精神和兢兢业业、无私无畏的奉献精神,培育了南京大学严谨、求实、勤奋、创新的学风。近百年的历史,尽管世事沧桑,但这样的精神和学风一直在南京大学传承延续,并不断发扬光大,历久弥新。正是这种优良的传统和学风,使南京大学深深植根于传统与现代的沃土中,不断从本民族和世界文化的宝库中吸取新的营养,形成了南大特有的深厚的文化底蕴与学术氛围,使南大在近百年的进程中始终保持着永不衰竭的青春活力,使学校的各项事业不断发展壮大,形成了自身的发展特色,取得了令人瞩目的成就。如今,南京大学已成为学科门类齐全、师资力量强大、科研实力雄厚并具有一定国际影响的重点综合性大学。

一流的大学离不开一流的学术大师,一流的学术大师又离不开一流的学术环境。在迈向建设世界一流大学的进程中,南京大学将一如既往,继续改善条件,为广大教师创造更好的学术环境。

## **《南京大学博士文丛》总序**

同时我也衷心希望全校教师尤其是广大中青年教师,发扬我校优良传统与学风,在南大优良的学术环境里锐意进取,不断创新,为进一步提高我校的学术水平,繁荣我国科学文化事业作出更大贡献!

1999年5月20日

# Abbreviations

When parenthetically citing Herman Melville's works I will use the following abbreviations:

<i>C</i>	<i>Correspondence</i>
<i>L</i>	<i>The Letters of Herman Melville</i>
<i>M</i>	<i>Mardi</i>
<i>MD</i>	<i>Moby-Dick</i>
<i>O</i>	<i>Omoo</i>
<i>R</i>	<i>Redburn</i>
<i>T</i>	<i>Typee</i>
<i>WJ</i>	<i>White-Jacket</i>

The editions used are those that will appear in the Works Cited. Citations of secondary sources in the text use the page system, which also is keyed to the Works Cited.



# Acknowledgments

Acknowledgments never shield an author's fallacies, faults, and flaws. Thus the ideas, observations, conclusions, and scholarship in this study are my responsibility. But many along the way have helped me, and their faith and generosity deserve recognition.

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## Abstract

Herman Melville (1819—1891) is generally known as an author of the 1840s and 1850s, but his works are certainly of modern significance. This is especially true of his early South Sea narratives. Those with the time to give them attention for more than their adventure yarns or their biographical information will find the books full of humor, beauty, and rhetorical adventure. Whatever the “facts” of Melville’s observation as a rover in the South Seas, he experienced a society radically different from his own.

Melville’s vision of difference between the Pacific and the Atlantic worlds is entrenched in political, racial, cultural, and ethnographic considerations despite his aesthetic pursuits. Melville’s construction of the colonial South Sea world is by no means a mere romance that has little to do with the political or economic conditions of the society in which his texts were produced. Behind their ahistorical appearance, Melville’s South Sea tales were so acutely addressed to the political life of the nation that a failure to understand their politics becomes a failure to understand their cultural significance. This dissertation is meant to be a cultural critique of Melville’s Polynesian Trilogy: *Typee*, *Omoo*, and *Mardi*.

## Herman Melville and Imperialism

This study positions Melville in the complex process of both critiquing mid-nineteenth century ideologies of racial and colonial thinking and retaining a dubious relation with colonial ideology, which constitutes the particular set of historical realities during the time of colonization in the South Seas. Melville's work, built on his own sea experience, is embedded in history, which mirrors the complex social formations of Antebellum America. In this regard, Melville is no less than a historian. His reconstruction of the Euro-American South Sea colonial experience, like every cultural practice, is an ideological art that is socially produced.

Melville was cold about American meddling in the South Seas. He disliked French invasion, and thought missionary expansion horrible. His *Polynesian Trilogy*, with its racial stereotypes, ingratiating generalities on alien customs and the native mind, and its tendency to attach moral valuations to cultural particulars, does have affinities with what he despised. In his works, the native Polynesian islanders are the consummate figures of the Other.

An ideological analysis is used as a method of investigation. The methodology reflects a recent trend in American literary scholarship toward cultural studies from which the present dissertation draws on such critical approaches as the feminist, the Marxist, and the New Historicist. In accordance with these approaches this study chooses to maintain a certain methodological openness out of the realization that one's work can benefit from the application of a variety of conceptual and analytical methods.

Research convinces the present author that in Melville one encounters both a harsh critic of the dominant American ideology and an ardent promoter of American democracy. To investigate this

subject is to address a central issue of modern literary theory: the bearing that exterior circumstances and the social world have upon the literary text. This dissertation attempts to bring together literary and social analysis by showing that the special richness of major literary works is, to a great degree, historically determined. It studies Melville's trilogy as products of a sudden fluidity of textual modes and strategies he perceived and recorded. It is also argued that the trilogy enacts the narrative of the new empires claimed by the United States in the West and the Pacific. Melville's reliance upon the hierarchies of colonial discourse and his narrative strategies of managing the natives display the persistence of empire building in the literary imagination of nineteenth-century America.

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## Introduction

Two indispensable aspects may have inspired this study. The first is a growing recognition that ideological readings have projected both new interpretations and new methods in literary research. The second is an increasing wealth of scholarship on Herman Melville (1819—1891) which has developed alongside these new interpretations and methods. Obviously, the twentieth century has witnessed a rapid development of literary theories, each of which has brought about a vast collection of literary studies. The present-day comprehensive studies of Melville have been largely due to the rise of various schools of literary and critical theory. My exploration of Melville's fiction has benefited a great deal from these competing views.

Around the late 1970s there began to appear a gradual and yet decisive swing away from a concern with judgment toward a concern with meaning and interpretation. It is this shift of concerns that provides an institutional identity for the salient diversity of the forms of contemporary critical theory. As a result of this diversity, the



ideological approach has acquired its footing. It represents a special coincidence between a notion that "social context" was both illuminating and problematical in the study of literature and the development of an analytical method that rendered ideology as an interpretive construction in many ways analogous to literature itself (Bercovitch and Jehlen 5).

Though it is risky to argue that there is an analogy between literature and ideology, the two concepts are in fact intimately related. Literature, in Mary Jehlen's words, is "a vehicle for abiding truths," and ideology (of literary works), "a system of interested deceit" (5). In this kind of criticism, the ideological aspects of a literary work will be felt as at best irrelevant to, and at worst detracting from, its aesthetic values. In terms of such criticism, ideology is an unfortunate irruption of opinions and doctrine within what should be a fully "creative" or "imaginative" work. However, such is not the case. What is of ideology is usually a systematic and comprehensive set of ideas relating to and explaining social and political life. Ideologies explain to people why things happen and in so doing, try to justify the status quo. As any conception of ideology implies that class and convention combine to constitute individual behavior, ideological analysis unavoidably involves a study of the limits of self-definition. Our interest in ideology is, then, connected to our identification with a group of thinkers and theorists who believe that ideological considerations are of great importance, and that revealing the ideological aspects of cultural practices and the ideological messages found in some traditional texts is a means of reevaluation. Nearly all writers involve themselves in an ideological choice when they are making a generic choice (Cohen 214). The work of Hayden White