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HERMAN MELVILLE SEES A VERB ON MAUI

CALL IT *ALOHA*.

Herman Melville experienced it on Maui and he recorded the feeling with all the insouciance of a modern tourist. In an insensitive gag about the complexities of the Hawaiian language, he wrote: “In the Missionary College at Lahainaluna, on Mowee, one of the Sandwich Islands, I saw a tabular exhibition of a Hawaiian verb, conjugated through all its moods and tenses. It covered the side of a considerable apartment.”¹ If you like, you can retrace Melville’s steps today to see the same wall he saw at Lahainaluna School. But, as will be seen, that wall today is a blank, neatly white-washed wall—literally and figuratively. And the verb he saw there—complex, public, even beautiful in its demonstrative spirit of greeting, generosity, sympathy and love? I believe it was *Aloha*.

Like Herman Melville, I have no idea what it means.

But, unlike Melville, I wish I did.

Everyone knows that the famous author of *Moby-Dick* was a sailor himself, a whaler, world traveler, sometimes deserter, and longtime deep observer of what used to be called the “human condition” in relation to what might be called the “eternal.” But he wasn’t always so deeply observant. In April 1843, having deserted the cruelty of a whaling ship some ten months previously, wandered the Marquesas Islands and lived among the natives there, Herman Melville arrived at the remote port of Lahaina on Maui.

Of course he wasn’t really “Herman Melville” yet. Skinny, sharp-eyed, and judgmental at twenty-four years of age, he was on the run, away from home, and probably digested the word *Aloha* with a Yankee smirk. He may have even tried saying it himself. If he momentarily wondered about the meaning of what he said, he was so sadly mistaken about so much else

¹ Herman Melville, *Typee, a peep at Polynesian Life* (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 255.

in Hawaii that he no doubt failed to appreciate the cultural nature of Aloha as well. As a young white man from 1840s New York, he could hardly do otherwise.

Melville was probably as unconscious of that remarkable three-syllable word as he was of the significance of what was happening in Lahaina on the very evening of the day that he arrived. For on that evening, Thursday April 27, 1843, at the six-month anniversary meeting of the Lahaina branch of the Temperance Society, the Reverend Samuel C. Damon, chaplain of the Seaman's Bethel in Honolulu and editor of the *Temperance Advocate and Seaman's Friend*, renewed his vows as an abstainer, and King Kamehameha III of Hawaii condescended officially to sign the pledge himself.

A thousand tiki torches illuminated the palm trees above the beach and around Kamehameha's palaces of brick and grass, turning the night sky into forever and uniting the many witnesses and well-wishers in attendance. The royal town of Lahaina already had a permanent population of some three thousand people. Resident missionary Dwight Baldwin and family would have been there as would William Richards, former missionary turned personal chaplain and political advisor to the King. The ceremony itself would be seen and heard from the piers nearby as well as by ships anchored offshore in the Lahaina Roads. With voices lifted in great rhetoric and song, the loving spirit of *Aloha* would be every bit as present and available as the eternal transcendental spirit of the God of the Congregationalist missionaries. No one—from the merchants on Front Street, to farm labourers nearby, their wives, their children, local fishermen, sailors and whalers ashore, even the students and teachers at Lahainaluna—would miss the significance of the King's complicated public gesture.

He demonstrated—in the official presence of those missionaries and perhaps even of Herman Melville—the spirit of *Aloha*.

Melville, however, missed the point. With all the simple racist satire of a teenage bad boy, he indulged himself in the following detestable description of the King:

His "gracious majesty" is a fat, lazy, negro-looking blockhead, with as little character as power. He has lost the noble traits of the barbarian, without acquiring the redeeming graces of a civilized being; and although a member of the Hawaiian Temperance Society, is a most inveterate dram-drinker.²

² Melville, *Typee*, 189.

Rather, King Kamehameha—a huge man of huge appetites, visions and power, with responsibilities encompassing all the Hawaiian islands through his establishment of a Hawaiian-language constitution—took the pledge of abstinence in Lahaina as his final public act before moving the ancient capital to Honolulu. There, he would negotiate between English and American political interests. Melville, as a callow youth from New England, was inadequate to the situation. Later, much later, he would be more open and sensitive, as in *Moby-Dick*, where he observes: “An ancient Hawaiian war-club or spear-paddle, in its full multiplicity and elaboration of carving, is as great a trophy of human perseverance as a Latin lexicon.”³

Kamehameha’s public act of perseverance and temperance likewise required interpretive sensitivity. One could easily reduce the King’s gesture to cultural appeasement or surrender. If surrender, it was to a shared higher good easily reduced and misunderstood as restriction. After all, Temperance in 1843 had more to do with health and well-being than with current caricatures of twisted self-denial.

The loud and crowded glitzy nighttime hustle of Lahaina these days knows nothing of self-denial. And yet the place comes nowhere near its reputation for drunken debauchery in the age of whale and sail. The lockup near the main pier could hardly contain the drunks, deserters, and felons—violent and otherwise—that lurched about the streets at closing time. A decade later, the coral-block walls of the old fort would be dismantled and rebuilt as a large prison that still stands today in museum condition at the corner of Prison and Waive’e streets. Newly arrived New England whalers took their boisterously cynical creed to heart: “There’s no God west of Cape Horn!” Ashore at Lahaina, they lived that creed with the intensity of teenagers. Man, were they horny! After weeks at sea surrounded by water, man, were they thirsty! And flavorless water wasn’t going to quench the lust in their throats. But drinking the unregulated grog available in 1843 on Front Street in Lahaina or on any street in Boston or New York could kill. The King’s public gesture against alcohol demonstrated a preference for self-control and life.

It’s complicated. Like the spirit of *Aloha*.

Inspired on the morning after the King’s momentous demonstration, the Reverend Sheldon Dibble, Lahainaluna historian and mathematics teacher, proudly concluded the preface to his *History of the Sandwich Islands*,

³ Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick*, ed. Elizabeth Renker (New York: Signet Classic, 1998), 264. Further references to this work will appear in parentheses in the text.

dated it April 28, 1843, and published the book at the Hale Pa‘i printing press later that same year.

Like those Congregationalist missionaries then, and us sun struck *haole* tourists now, Melville was both certain and ironic in his observations about Hawaii and the Hawaiian language. Granted, Hawaiian spelling is as long and tiring and twisted as the uphill two-mile walk to the Hale Pa‘i printing press—now a museum—still is, but you pronounce it one, syll-, a-, ble-, at-, a- time. You walk uphill the same way. Halfway up, gravity pulls at your backside and your lungs begin to call. You turn around into a clean warm wind so gentle and true that you feel you might truly live forever. Or, even if you don’t, that’s okay too.

Those early missionaries at the Hale Pa‘i printing press, having transcribed Hawaiian as written language and now developing a Hawaiian-English dictionary, were having a hell of a time with the work of God and the pleasures of man even without Melville’s satirical squib about a big verb on the wall of their printing house. But like their work, that walk uphill on a warm and sunny afternoon in January declares itself as valuable in itself. Pause to catch your breath and to gaze out over the palm trees and hedges of Lahaina stretching away below you to the sea. A huge visual field of vegetation, rooftops, and liquid horizon washes back through your consciousness in a comforting profusion of blues and greens and life without regret. It awakes a traveler to the nourishment of winter warmth, the surrounding sea punctuated by the islands of Lanai and Molokai, and the channel before you as wide as the sky itself calling to you by its own name: Kee-al-a-ee-ka-hi-ki. It feels like *Aloha*. The hillside levels off effortlessly, leading up to the Hale Pa‘i, the very building wherein they printed the first Hawaiian-English dictionary, and the very “apartment wall” whereon Melville read that verb.

I saw the place last year. White-washed, its blankness made me wonder about words and deeds and meanings. I walked back downtown to the Baldwin Home museum, paid the admission fee, and asked the tour guide, Lois, if Kamehameha III had signed that temperance pledge in the very house in which we now stood.

She paused.

Tall, brown, and impressively heavy, looking much like a ruling *ali‘i* herself in red and orange patterned muumuu, Lois, with a little gasp and shake of her head, said “no” and gestured with certainty and a smile across

the street toward the excavated “Brick Palace” location marking the royal capitol of the Hawaiian kings. I crossed the 10-mph bumper-to-bumper traffic of Front Street, joining and jamming along with the heavy tourist foot-traffic of the narrow sidewalks. Strolling quietly down Papelkane lane, I passed a red chicken dusting itself in a pothole. Two blond and sunburned college guys from Minnesota aimlessly looked on, licking ice-cream cones the size of footballs. I moved on past the back of the old Pioneer Hotel, taking a green detour over the location of what was once the royal taro patch—traces of which were still visible in the 1950s—wherein Kamehameha himself worked in the mornings to demonstrate by his own example the dignity of human labour.

Years later Melville’s words, perceptive and reconsidered through his Pacific voyages, would shape his prose with the dignity of human labor. Matured, cut and sea-washed, his words now operate with a self-consciousness that is open to surprise and capable of conveying new shapes from within the ocean and around the world. Consider the generosity inherent in reading the tattoos on Queequeg’s body from Chapter 110 in *Moby-Dick*:

This tattooing had been the work of a departed prophet and seer of his island, who, by those hieroglyphic marks, had written out on his body a complete theory of the heavens and the earth, and a mystical treatise on the art of attaining truth; so that Queequeg in his own proper person was a riddle to unfold; a wondrous work in one volume; but whose mysteries not even himself could read, though his own live heart beat against them. (464)

Unlike the author of *Typee*, the writer of these words conveys powerful non-judgmental sensitivities. He has reached out and worked with others. He has encountered indelible bodily meanings that go beyond misunderstood compressions of race and authority such as those he produced years before in his ill-considered lampoon of Kamehameha. He now admits misunderstanding and discovers a warm place beyond the self to embrace a significant other. Like the endless Pacific or the great god Pan or the tide-beating heart of earth, the mysteries of existence float out there beyond the horizon of limited self experience—like the spirit of *Aloha*.

In the face of *Aloha*, Melville was no less a failure than the *Oxford English Dictionary*. It identifies *Aloha* as an interjection, or intransitive verb, or even a noun, as a Polynesian “greeting or valediction” related somehow to “love, affection, and pity.” It cites as first use, George Vancouver’s *Voyage of Discovery to the North Pacific Ocean and round the World*, wherein the

great explorer recounts, at second hand, the story of a bloody fracas between American sailors and Hawaiian natives off the big island of Hawaii in 1790. The entire American crew but one was killed, and that one man, Isaac Davis by name, survived through direct appeal to the merciful sensitivities of his assailants. Looking up at one of them, Davis uttered “mytie” meaning “good.” Then, according to Vancouver, “The man instantly replied ‘arrowhah’ meaning that he pitied him.”⁴ In Hawaiian, *mai-tai* still means “good” (try drinking just one). Likewise *aloha*, through a sense of human empathy, still grants life—as it did in the case of Isaac Davis.

In fact it was Davis himself who told Vancouver the story, from which the OED cites its authority. He and another sailor John Young were, by the time of Vancouver’s arrival, long-time residents of Hawaii, married to native women with extended families, fully bilingual and employed as government officials by the first Kamehameha, known as “The Great.” Vancouver offered free passage “home” to the two white men, but they gently declared that they were at home, at peace with themselves and at home in Hawaii. Vancouver credited their decision and may have felt a touch of *Aloha* in doing so.

A monument to Vancouver stands today on Maui, just above the beach at Kihei shadowed under coconut palms. Hundreds of barefoot beach walkers pass by every day and never notice this weatherworn cairn of coral and concrete. Concentrating on the two-way stream of traffic, motorists slip by without notice on their way to the Azeka Shopping Center or the beach park off Uluniu Road. And yet, as inscribed, this humble little memorial quietly celebrates “the spirit of *Aloha*” between Canada and Hawaii and the British sailor who first connected them both. It was rededicated in December 1968 by Canadian Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau—he who introduced multiculturalism as an official feature of Canadian society. At the center of the Pacific, connecting waterways to the world, Hawaiians had been living multi-culturally all along. They needed no monument to *Aloha*—they lived it every day.

Herman Melville, like most white Americans of his time, would neither understand nor credit multiculturalism. Like *Aloha*, it’s more of a felt perception or lived experience than official pronouncement. A week after his arrival on Maui, Melville was officially paid off and discharged from ship at the office of the US commercial agent at Lahaina. To that point, he would

⁴ George Vancouver, *Voyage of Discovery to the North Pacific Ocean and around the World* (London: Hakluyt Society, 2004), III.v.822.

have been busy, cooping whale oil, helping with ship repairs, and loading provisions. So he may not have attended that significant Temperance meeting of the week before, although plenty of other sailors were there according to the Reverend Samuel Damon's report in the *Temperance Advocate and Seaman's Friend* for May 20, 1843: "The two Sabbaths spent at Lahaina are associated with many pleasing recollections. It was refreshing to meet at the Chapel and in the street many warm hearted Christians among the sons of the ocean."⁵

Melville spent two Sabbaths there as well. With money in his pocket but little to do, he might very well have met Reverend Damon at the chapel or on the street. An officers' club already existed on Front Street next door to the Baldwin House. It had a reading room even then. The small coral block building itself now houses the Lahaina Restoration Foundation. Then, as now, it shelters under the shade of spreading kukui and koa trees. Today, an enormous banyan tree planted in 1871 spreads over and around most of the courthouse area, covering almost an acre of the historic downtown. All that shade is welcome and necessary. Lahaina (the Heat) comes by its name honestly. Melville felt it and wondered what to do as he aimlessly passed the dusty storefronts on Front Street or the customs offices at the pier. He might even have considered gaining employment locally. Of course, local authorities generally discouraged sailors from settling at Lahaina.

But who wouldn't want to settle here? One can look *mauka*, toward the land, and marvel at the lower porches of the West Maui Mountains, once planted with sugar cane, but now sporting groves of coffee. Lahaina is crowded, front and back with bushes and blossoms that wander along unplanned through narrow alleyways, around dwarf palms and banana trees, over tin roofs and old cars. Enjoy the profusion. Breathe in a hit of warm, spicy sweet plumeria. Ginger blossoms poke out red as fire truck lights. A tiny gecko perches in one of them, long and green as a pea pod.

Or, look *makai*, toward the sea, and see the whales. Melville certainly did so. The hills of Lanai rise out of the water like gently crumpled green velvet. Northward, Molokai juts out of the water like a shield. And between these lovely islands, in an ocean of warmth and life, the humpback whales swim and surge and mate and frolic through the winter as they have done

⁵ Samuel C. Damon, *Temperance Advocate and Seaman's Friend*, May 1843; quoted from Jay Leyda, *The Melville Log: A Documentary Life of Herman Melville* (New York: Gordian Press, 1969), 165.

since time began. Fully synchronized, a mother whale and calf break the surface of the sea and then dive away again to their secrets. Half a mile away, a huge male the size of a school bus lunges up out of the water like a missile, waving a pectoral fin the size of a lifeboat. People onshore point back at him and children shout. Melville describes the contact in that curious chapter “Cetology” in *Moby-Dick*, where he declares of the humpback whale: “He is the most gamesome and lighthearted of all the whales, making more gay foam and white water generally than any other of them” (132).

Of course one can hear the whales too. Underwater they register a curious whine so high-pitched it could trigger a migraine. Then a deeper alto replies. Then silence. The deep aquatic silence of time. Then that voice of the whale again—delicate, whining, imploring. To hear that voice even once is to make contact with something distant, something huge and deeply inter-fused with power and meaning beyond the petty concerns of the diurnally human. It sounds primeval, outside of time and helplessly, playfully loving in its contact with water, earth, and sky and the otherness of life—internal, aquatic, intelligent, and soulful.

Aloha exists as a spiritual motion as well as a physical location. Today on Maui, you see it everywhere: Aloha Motors, Aloha Pizza, Aloha Plumbing. Every license plate proclaims the place to be “The Aloha State.” But it’s probably only Hawaiians themselves who know the state of Aloha. It is a state of mind and a curious life-truth. Aloha, like Queequeg’s birthplace in *Moby-Dick*, “is not down in any map; true places never are” (53).

Melville on Maui, saw the writing on the wall. But young and arrogant like an Old Testament king he could not understand it. So he ridiculed it instead. Many years and millions of words later, he would find himself in touch with deeper and more generous feelings. Outside his consciousness, in Hawaii the flowers forever bloom, the surf roars against the shore, and the whales sing out their cryptic messages at the edge of human perception. Call him Ishmael if you like, but Melville managed to reconcile his outcast state with a wonderful book about whales—and many other important things. Complicated things. But simple too.

And honest.

Like *Aloha*.