

# Melville's Robot: On Teaching "The Bell-Tower" in Japan

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## Abstract

Despite the great separation in period and culture, "The Bell-Tower" is as relevant to today's Japanese student as it was to Melville's mid-19<sup>th</sup>-century American audience. The essay explores this through the theme of technology-versus-humanity.

## Introduction

"The Bell-Tower," Herman Melville's final story from *The Piazza Tales*, is an oddity, called "the most untypical of Melville's stories" by one reviewer (Newman 92). Melville's choice of a high-flown yet ponderous style and his almost appallingly obvious final lines made Warner Berthoff exclaim that it "makes you wish it might be proved that somebody else was the real author" (223).

But in recent years critics have tended to be more charitable than Berthoff—more charitable or more insightful. Some have thought that Melville was angling for greater acceptance by attempting to imitate the

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style of authors more popular among readers of *Putnam's Monthly Magazine*, where Melville enjoyed his greatest success since his early days of celebrity as the author of *Typee*, publishing a string of eight stories there in the 1850s. Hawthorne and Poe are most often cited as influences (Newman 81-82), although one critic mentions an intriguing possibility: Longfellow, whose "pious verse, formula fiction, and glimpses of interesting historical anecdote" were all the rage (Fenton 231). There is, however, a higher reason for such imitativeness: as with "Bartleby" and "Benito Cereno," Melville knew that an unpalatable message is easier to deliver past tightly locked conceptual gates if it is hidden in a conventional package.

For "The Bell-Tower" is another of Melville's consciousness-altering stories, containing far more than it initially appears to, and—from the distance of a century and a half, at least—seemingly designed to subtly infect and then destroy the complacent assumptions of its mid-19<sup>th</sup>-century readers.

But what it had to teach Americans on the doorstep of the Civil War is of less importance than what it has to offer us today. This essay will examine the way the story reflects the struggle between humanity and technology in Melville's time, alternating with discussion of the same theme in modern Japan. In the process, I hope to demonstrate that this "most untypical" story has much to give us beyond the most important thing of all: a delightful and fascinating reading experience.

## Synopsis

The story opens with a scene of a ruin: An unnamed Renaissance city-state, once rich, now gone, its most remarkable feature the fallen

Bell-Tower, pointing west across the plain. Then we are back in the days of the town's vitality, when the state appoints its citizen Bannadonna, the greatest architect of his time, to build "the noblest Bell-Tower in Italy." Bannadonna proudly stands atop the rising structure, dreaming of creating "other and still loftier piles," drinking in the adoration of the people. He decides to combine bell-tower and clock-tower, a violation of architectural and aesthetic principles (Ryan 79). He decides that the bells "must correspond with their receptacle," and so in addition to a number of smaller ones, he casts one enormous bell, too heavy to be safely suspended in the tower. Bannadonna defies even the laws of physics in order to achieve his desires, and his audacious dream wins over his doubters, who even contribute their plate to the forging of the great bell. During the forging, however, disaster strikes:

The unleashed metals bayed like hounds. The workmen shrunk.

Through their fright, fatal harm to the bell was dreaded. Fearless as Shadrach, Bannadonna, rushing through the glow, smote the chief culprit with his ponderous ladle. From the smitten part, a splinter was dashed into the seething mass, and at once was melted in.

The smitten workman dies; Melville never clarifies whether the splinter that flaws the bell is from the murder weapon or the man's skull, and critics make differing assumptions (i.e. Fenton 226 and Miller 164). Bannadonna covers up the visible flaw "by some preparation none knew better to devise" after the casting is finished, violating safety and common sense in favor of appearance; similarly the magistrates cover up the murder in their own

way by likening it to a "kick from an Arabian charger: not sign of vice, but blood," absolving Bannadonna by making him out to be a force of nature, beyond human law. Thus the laws of the State are also waived for Bannadonna, and when a priest gives him absolution, even the laws of God are set aside.

After this the architect retreats into "months of more than usual solitude" as he works on a secret project. Later, he hoists a heavy, shrouded object into the tower, which he keeps secret from the curious magistrates. During their inspection, the magistrates are repeatedly disturbed by mysterious sounds and a sense that the shrouded, anthropomorphic object is somehow alive. While Bannadonna tries to encourage them to leave, one magistrate notices that the face of one of the Hours—images of garlanded girls on the great bell—is different from the others: Una, or one o'clock, has a "fatal" smile rather than a "jocundly abandoned" one like the others. Bannadonna claims that this follows a "law in art" that makes perfect duplication impossible, and that he, the ultra-precise mechanic and defier of laws, for whom human life is less important than perfection, quite likes "this law forbidding duplicates."

As Douglas Fischer points out, this is utterly at odds with Bannadonna's "absolutist streak" (198). Caught in error, he dissembles to get rid of his intruders, so that he can rob Una of her imperfect humanity before the first ringing of the bell, scheduled for one o'clock the next day.

When the time arrives, the assembled crowd hears only "a dull, mangled sound." Breaking into the locked tower, the magistrates discover Bannadonna dead, slain by a mechanical bell-ringer, a clockwork, manacled slave, "a new serf" of Bannadonna's invention. The mechanic had been

working so intently on making Una over to look precisely like her sisters that he failed to notice the automated approach of his "elephantine Helot," which did just what it was supposed to do, unfortunately smiting the "intervening brain" which obstructed the bell.

The magistrates call for a gun and have the mechanical man shot, then secretly taken out to sea and buried beneath the waves. The innocent creation absurdly pays for the sins of its master. Then the magistrates declare a state funeral, at the climax of which "the most robust man of the country round" is to ring the great bell. But the flaw finally gives way, and the bell falls through the tower to the ground, taking the ringer with it, compounding death with death.

Still refusing to acknowledge the unreliability of Bannadonna's creations, the city repairs the tower, and recasts and replaces the bell. But a year later the tower falls in an earthquake, and as we know from the beginning of the tale, the city-state itself does not long thrive afterward.

### **Technology and Humanity**

One of the most common critical approaches to this story is to look at it as symbolic of the dangers posed by technology to human dignity, society, and even life itself (Fischer 185). Though it has become almost trite to say that technological advances threaten our humanity, this approach seems quite apt when we consider the effects of the nascent Industrial Revolution on America in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. As Inger Hunnerup Dalsgaard puts it,

In the 1850s machines were maiming both [railroad] passengers and

factory workers, and it could look as if tolerant authorities were allowing this in the interest of economy, industrial advance, or—ultimately—in the name of "Progress." (245)

In fact, after well over a century's worth of stories warning of the dangers of technology, it is worthwhile to take a good look at one of the early ones, from a time when such stories were not yet cliché.

Bannadonna is, of course, one of those who cares less about human life than completing a huge project. The authorities are complicit in his crimes, not only in the murder of the workman, of which they knowingly work to absolve him, but also in the installing of an unsafe, overweight, flawed bell. By failing to force Bannadonna to comply with their demands to limit the bell's size, and then failing to inspect the bell themselves, trusting a craftsman who had already proven dangerously careless of human life, the magistrates show that they are more concerned with their city's—and thus their own—status. Then, after Bannadonna's death, instead of admitting that his unstable genius had caused his own accidental death, the magistrates treat him as a fallen hero, because to admit the truth would be to admit that the Bell-Tower was flawed in many ways. They "kill" an unliving construct because they need to punish something, and secretly dispose of it because it could cause them embarrassment. They still fail to inspect the bell because that would be admitting their fallen hero could be imperfect, and thus another man dies. Clinging to the symbol of their city past all reason, they reforge the bell and hang it once again, despite knowing full well that it is too big for safety. Though many critics seem to think the subsequent earthquake is some sort of sign from God, there is

nothing supernatural about it in quake-prone Italy; the damaged tower, superstructure weakened, far too tall and overbalanced with an enormous weight in its belfry, is far from quake-proof, and quite naturally falls.

When Melville writes in the end that "pride went before the fall," he is not merely piously paraphrasing Proverbs 16:18, as his readers may imagine. All the manifold tragedies in the tale do not, in fact, come about as some punishment from God, reaching His hand down from Heaven; they are direct results of a fetishizing of technology over humanity, and repetitive ignoring of common-sense safety rules and laws of physics. These rules are ignored because of pride. God has only to sit back and watch it all inevitably unfold.

Examples of this abound in modern Japanese society. The belief that "Japan is a safe country," a great source of pride, has led to several notable tragedies. The 1999 Tokaimura nuclear accident largely came about because the authorities failed to inspect the plant, while the nuclear-plant management, Bannadonna-like in their arrogance, rewrote the safety rules to suit themselves with no regard to the safety of their workers or the surrounding residents. And in the mid-1980s, Green Cross and a consortium of other pharmaceutical companies pressured the Health and Welfare Ministry to ignore its own reports on the dangers of unheated blood products and allow them to continue selling such products, knowing full well the danger. Nearly 2000 hemophiliacs were infected with HIV; hundreds have died of AIDS since. The men responsible received light punishments or none at all. And the April 2005 JR West train crash echoes Dalsgaard's reference to 1853's *Annus Horribilus* of American Railroads when major accidents totaled more than one hundred, killing 234 passengers and seriously

injuring another 496" (244). A major factor in that crash appears to have been management's subordination of safety to the all-important need to keep the trains running on time.

Technology's threat to human society is more subtle than its threat to life itself. Concentration of people into cities creates a separation from nature; concentration into huge *danchi* apartment buildings paradoxically creates a separation from neighbors as many residents retreat inward, desperate for some degree of privacy in a situation where privacy is nearly impossible to maintain. The extreme attachment to mobile phones resembles an addiction in many cases; looking around campus between classes, so many students are stumbling around while staring raptly into mobile phone screens that a visitor from the 19<sup>th</sup> century would surely wonder which was the master and which the servant. But the most important connection with "The Bell-Tower" is that of time.

Before the advent of reliable clocks, life was regulated by nature: the position of the sun in the sky, the weather, the rumbling of an empty belly. Once a town is dominated by a huge clock tower, all that changes. The ringing of the bells takes over from nature. The new work rules require one to rise at the same time each day, whether the sun has risen or not. School lunch is eaten when the correct bell rings, not before or after. Rather than common-sensically aligning lessons with the rising and setting of the sun, young students in their black uniforms are sent home well after dark; rather than addressing the problem at its root, safety is given a nod when the schools add a reflective strip to the official school bag. A society of exhausted caffeine addicts results.

If this sounds like sentimentalism for a nonexistent perfect past, I beg



forgiveness. But the rigidity of the modern regimented life does result largely from the worship of time. Seconds and minutes dominate our lives, and patience rapidly disappears.

Finally, let us examine what the story says of individual human dignity. It is here that we can look at Melville's robot, officially named Talus by its creator, but familiarly referred to by him as Haman. Talus is a character from mythology, a bronze servant who guards Crete (Newman 84). "Haman" is more suggestive, having three meanings. As many critics have noted, it is related to Ham, one of Noah's sons and supposed ancestor of Africans according to Southern slaveholder propaganda—the name of the tribe of Hamo from Melville's *Mardi* has the same origin. Hamon is also a biblical character in his own right, the villainous vizier in the Book of Esther (Newman 83-84), but since the biblical Hamon is the opposite of a slave, the former cognate is more apt. Ryan, in a parenthetical aside, makes an interesting suggestion, that Haman may stand for "half-man," a modern man with no conscience (80).

In Melville's time, Haman could be seen everywhere. Haman represents the black slaves of the South as well as the white semi-slaves of the North; at the same time, he represents the new machines rapidly replacing human labor. Humans as well as machines are expected by their superiors not to think, just to perform their dull, repetitive duties. Thus humans and machines become equivalent and interchangeable. In many cases, the machines dominate—they are more expensive to replace than human workers, and so humans "serve" them, and at the slightest lapse of caution are often maimed or even killed by the capricious machines, as Bannadonna is through inattention destroyed by Haman. Of course the machines are not

evil—they are worse, in a way, ruled only by their design, relentless in their duty, impersonally destroying anything in their way.

But in today's Japan, we are no longer in the throes of the Industrial Revolution. Despite worries expressed in popular films like *The Matrix*, machines are no longer felt to be our masters, but our servants, and even, recently, our companions. Even baths and washing machines speak to us in a pleasant, feminine voice, politely letting us know when they have carried out our orders. Voice recognition is becoming more refined and widespread, allowing us to speak with our servants, and thus feel a greater affinity for them. On television, we see anthropomorphic (and canimorphic) robots dance and perform other silly stunts—but while they may be shockingly expensive and useless toys now, if prices fall and practical purposes are found, they may well become as ubiquitous as computers.

In this respect, does "The Bell-Tower" have much to say to us beyond the oft-repeated "rise of the machines" fears of modern literature and film—fears that we are rapidly leaving behind? It does. In the story, Melville recounts the townsfolk's perception of how Bannadonna conceived the idea for Haman:

Perched on a great mass or spire, the human figure, viewed from below, undergoes a reduction in its apparent size, as to obliterate its intelligent features. It evinces no personality. Instead of bespeaking volition, its gestures rather resemble the automatic ones of the arms of a telegraph.

Bannadonna's distance from other people, literal and figurative, destroys

his ability to see their humanity, thus allowing him to commit inhuman, immoral acts against his employees and fellow citizens. When we are so separate from each other that we cannot recognize each other's humanity, we have no trouble treating each other in inhumane ways.

We can also destroy our own humanity by destroying our natural individuality in pursuit of perfection, or by allowing others to do so. Despite his protests to the contrary, Bannadonna attempts to make Una perfect by making her identical to her sister images. Today's fashion magazines teach young women how to smile "correctly," how to widen their eyes to project naivetè, to stand pigeon-toed in order to appear childishly unmannered—experience in pale imitation of innocence. Plastic surgery is turned into a game show. Confused students in the classroom remain silent rather than asking questions, for fear of being marked as "different." Even rebellious youths all wear the same falling-down oversized blue jeans, one leg rolled up in symbology taken from the American prison system. Rather than learning who we really are, we tend to hide behind a required "jocundly abandoned" smile, laughing at things that aren't really funny, avoiding potentially disturbing self-exploration by putting on prepackaged masks and calling them ourselves.

## Conclusion

Despite the separation of half a world and a century and a half, "The Bell-Tower" has much to say to the modern resident of Japan. Although the prose is at first difficult and the story arcane, it is in many ways as relevant today as it was in 1855. Japanese students, on encountering it, should be able to find a variety of ways to approach the story through

discussion and essay.

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