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The Two Handles of Israel Potter

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The Two Handles of "Israel Potter"

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The Two Handles of *Israel Potter*

K R I S L A C K E Y

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Israel Potter: *His Fifty Years of Exile*, first published serially in Putnam's between July 1854 and March 1855, holds a place among those works that mark Herman Melville's temporary return to critical favor after the debacle of *Pierre*. As such, it is likely to reveal at least one species of alteration in Melville's dealings with his audience. To parse these dealings we must examine both Melville's professed strategy for packaging *Israel Potter* and his management, within the novel, of its primary source, *The Life and Remarkable Adventures of Israel R. Potter*, an "autobiography" written by its printer, Henry Trumbull.¹ Central to both problems is Melville's treatment of the Revolutionary myth, which allowed him to recreate symbolically the conflicting demands on his imagination—the demand to confirm the myth and sell books, and the desire to follow his "humors" (as one reviewer put it) and as a critic of the Revolutionary legacy debunk the myth.² Clearly Melville wrote the book under both impulses, which is the same thing as saying that *Israel Potter* must in some manner resolve the ideological tensions that fueled its creation, for writing tends to create a fictive resolution by evading or dissipating the "disorderly" anxiety from which it emerges.

Still, the terms of such a resolution cannot be called monadic, because readers create their own resolutions, a truth nobody knew better than the fashioner of *The Confidence-Man*. Thus the "resolution" we speak of need not be solely applicable to conflicts arising within the

work, but may extend to conflicts between the work and its imagined audience—between the author and his readers. Melville's anxiety over the reception of *Israel Potter*, for instance, would prompt him to seek, on the part of the audiences he imagined, resolutions that themselves would find some sort of reconciliation with content he suspected would offend his readers.

In the end Melville successfully gained his rapprochement by creating a "conventional" text whose irony is so opaque it virtually obscures the corrective message it implies—a quality *Israel Potter* shares with "Benito Cereno," published just a few months later in the same magazine. While this essay treats primarily Melville's management of irony in the Revolutionary tale, the latent anti-slavery message of "Benito Cereno" stands in much the same relation to its melodramatic scaffolding as Melville's debunking of the Revolutionary myth stands to derring-do in *Israel Potter*. Thus a good many generalities advanced in this discussion apply as well to the better-known story, to which I shall briefly return in closing.

A useful paradigm for reckoning the dynamics of Melville's dealings with his audiences in *Israel Potter* is provided by Terry Eagleton in *Criticism and Ideology*. Employing several of what Eagleton labels "categories for a Marxist theory of literature" (45), we can approach in an orderly way the ideological solutions generated by Melville's attempt to write popular historical fiction, and examine the implications of these solutions. Perhaps the most crucial of the historical forces operating in Melville's composition of *Israel Potter* (and, by extension, readers' construction of the book) is what Eagleton calls the "literary mode of production," which "is constituted by structures of production, distribution, exchange, and consumption" (47). As a commodity, *Israel Potter* must bear the marks of its mode of production. It must, in Eagleton's words, internalize "its social relations of production" so that it "intimates by its very conventions the way it is to be consumed, encodes within itself its own ideology of how, by whom, and for whom" it is produced (48).

For the purposes of discussing *Israel Potter*, the literary mode of production incorporates a second historical force, "general ideology," in at least two ways. First, the literary mode of production bears the imprimatur of the prevailing economic system: as a capitalist enterprise it reproduces and extends the power structures of a capitalist economy. Second, when literature is a commodity, its value rides to a great extent on its confirmation of "a relatively coherent set of 'discourses' of values, representations, and beliefs" (54). In other words, a salable work recommends itself at least partly by inhabiting general ideology, by reaffirming, for instance, pervasive political and cultural beliefs. In the case of *Israel Potter*, the primary ideological touchstone is the Revolutionary myth, wherein lies a national yearning for consensus, a nostalgic projection of national difference and election. Among its particular manifestations dramatized in Melville's historical novel, we discover in Potter an enterprising yeoman farmer and fur trader whose frontier skills and independence fit him for a hero's role at Bunker Hill,³ and whose cunning and determination set him apart from the blundering common British soldiery; in Franklin a mix of prudence and technological genius; in Paul Jones courage and naval effrontery; in Ethan Allen a stalwart backwoods pride. This array of national traits is often set off in relief against British ineptitude, apathy, and

class coercion in such a way as to satisfy the reader who seeks affirmation of the vigor of a “classless” society.

At the same time, a number of passages in *Israel Potter* flatly deplore the barbarity and greed that infect American energy, and Melville omits references in his primary source to differences between British and American class organization so as to weaken this political contrast. Here we are concerned with what Eagleton designates “authorial ideology,” “the effect of the author’s specific mode of biographical insertion into [general ideology]” (58). Melville carried to his writing of *Israel Potter* a range of experience that bore directly on the political issues raised in the novel. His father, the son of a Revolutionary hero, had been destroyed by the vagaries of the fur business. His oldest brother had gone bankrupt trying to salvage his father’s failing enterprise. And Melville himself, though solvent in 1854, had suffered hard times in the literary marketplace. Such failures had bred in Melville an abiding suspicion of claims for the comparative benevolence and egalitarianism of the American economy, such as those made indirectly by Blandmour in “Poor Man’s Pudding and Rich Man’s Crumbs.” The portraits of both Franklin and young Israel Potter in Melville’s historical novel register this distrust, directly through satire, and indirectly through Melville’s elision of his main source. Melville’s military experience as a seaman aboard the *United States* in 1843-44 had introduced him to the brutalities of the American war machine, and his brooding over the year’s service culminated in a spirited indictment of institutionalized cruelty and national hypocrisy in *White-Jacket*. The terms of this diatribe find their way into Melville’s treatment of John Paul Jones’s naval exploits in *Israel Potter*, as one of the Revolution’s most imposing military figures is often depicted as the very embodiment of savagery.

In sum, while Melville took his quarrels with contemporary society to his fictional recreation of Revolutionary heroes, qualifying their virtues to highlight incipient flaws in American ideology, he conceded to the demands of the marketplace by obscuring his criticism with a built-in alternate reading that permits a fairly orthodox interpretation of Revolutionary figures and events. This technique, a familiar one to Melville students (Lawrance Thompson called it “contriving equivocations” [107]), must assume a place within authorial ideology as one political response to the operative literary mode of production. In other words, when Melville camouflaged or mitigated his cultural indictments and wrote cooperative subversive and conventional texts, he chose to bow to the demands of the literary marketplace and effectively encourage ideological complacency in the interest of reaching a fit audience for his criticisms. Clearly such an observation does not apply to works in which Melville forthrightly attacked prevailing political assumptions—*Typee*, *Omoo*, and *White-Jacket*, for example—while it bears directly on *Moby-Dick*, *Pierre*, “Benito Cereno,” and *Israel Potter*. As this list suggests, Melville’s openly subversive books, informed by polemic and lucid irony, often sold well.⁴ In these plainly subversive books, as Larry Reynolds has recently demonstrated in *Beneath the American Renaissance*, Melville was working in the mainstream traditions of the reform and dark reform novel. Reynolds characterizes the mode of *Typee*’s attack on Western cultural imperialism as “benign-subversive” (140) and notes that *White-Jacket* “was read in its own day as a straightforward reform novel” (147). I do

not wish, then, to impute a general false dilemma to the conditions of Melville's career as an author—that is, to suggest that he either veiled his social criticisms or lost his market—but rather to examine, in the particular case of *Israel Potter* (and its sources), how Melville viewed his authorial predicament and the consequences of the strategies he chose for dealing with it.

In proposing *Israel Potter* to the editors of *Putnam's* Melville studiously promised to resist the two impulses that had cost him his audience in *Pierre* and *Moby-Dick*, respectively: "I engage that the story shall contain nothing of any sort to shock the fastidious. There will be very little reflective writing in it; nothing weighty. It is adventure" (Leyda 488-89). The proposal registers Melville's contempt for the business of magazine writing as something less than a literary endeavor, undertaken for a very broad readership. Writing to Richard Bentley about international copyright three years earlier, he complained:

This country and all its affairs are governed by sturdy backwoodsmen . . . not at all literary, & who care not a fig for any authors except those who write those most saleable of all books nowadays—i e—the newspapers, & magazines. And tho' the number of cultivated, Catholic men, who may be supposed to feel an interest in a national literature, is large & every day growing larger; yet they are nothing in comparison with the overwhelming majority who care nothing about it. (Leyda 417)

At about the same time (1851), Melville had congratulated Nathaniel Hawthorne, whose "Unpardonable Sin," as Melville called it ("Ethan Brand"), had been republished in *The Dollar Magazine*, for being "responsible for many a shake & tremor of the tribe of 'general readers'" (Leyda 412). Taken together, these three statements sketch in one region of authorial ideology: there are two classes of readers, a coterie of cultivated men with broad interests and liberal tastes who consume reflective and weighty writing of a sort seldom found in magazines, and a large tribe of uncultivated readers who consume unreflective and titillating writing of a sort found abundantly in magazines. Melville identifies with the former class, the intellectual aristocracy, and covets its attention, but he will become a crossover writer when this connection denies him a living, just as he had written *Redburn* and *White-Jacket* in the wake of *Mardi's* failure: "They are two *jobs*," he wrote to his father-in-law,

which I have done for money—being forced to it, as other men are to sawing wood. . . . Being books, then, written in this way, my only desire for their "success" (as it is called) springs from my pocket, & not from my heart. So far as I am individually concerned, & independent of my pocket, it is my earnest desire to write those sort of books which are said to "fail."—pardon this egoism. (Leyda 316)

The metonymic dichotomy—heart and pocket—expresses both Melville's frustrations with the terms of his surplus-labor and the larger rationalization and abstraction of intellectual labor growing out of an industrial and capitalistic mode of literary production. Yet he directs his ire at the vulgar consumer who (through the publisher) extorts his labor and estranges him from the esoteric metaphysical investigations he finds personally satisfying. The democratic spirit Melville celebrates in "Knights and Squires" in fact withers before his disdain of the benighted "tribe of 'general readers'" who thwart his self-admittedly egoistic concerns.⁵

This interaction between authorial ideology and the literary mode of production may produce in Melville's work one or both of the following effects (among many others): he may fashion a rhetorical "comradeship" between reader and narrator that reproduces an ideology Melville projects onto his "general" audience, as Larry J. Reynolds has demonstrated in a study of *White-Jacket* (298), or he may contrive equivocations that permit readers from both "classes" to construe a text as light or "weighty," as the case may be. In *Israel Potter* Melville makes use of the second tactic, creating for his general readers what most contemporary reviewers praised as a delightful adventure, "thoroughly saturated," as one put it, "with American sentiment" (Bezanson 217), and for the coterie what only one reviewer, in the *Albion*, recognized as an attack on the righteous arrogance and barbarity of America's political spirit, a spirit most recently exerted in the United States government's bellicose insistence, in "The Ostend Manifesto" (1854) on its moral right to possess Cuba (Bezanson 217). In this manner, as I hope to show, *Israel Potter* sanctions contradictory politics: its schizophrenic narrative, reproducing the conflicting demands on Melville's imagination, demonstrates how a writer who resented the debasement of his talents by a culture presided over by "backwoodsmen" could in fact revenge himself on that culture by indulging its collective utopian desires while whispering its delusions to the cognoscenti.

* * *

Melville's depictions of the miscellaneous employments of young Israel in the early pages of the narrative establish a political tension that underlies subsequent episodes. On the one hand, Israel embodies the resourcefulness, independence, and versatility of a mountain-born Yankee: like Emerson's "sturdy lad" of the self-reliant spirit, he "*teams it, farms it, peddles*" (Emerson 161). He also hunts, traps, surveys land, and sails as a harpooneer on a whaling ship. He is one of the "hunter-soldiers, whom Putnam bade wait till the white of the enemy's eye was seen" (9), and like Emerson's "embattled farmers," "From the field of the farmer, he rushed to that of the soldier, mingling his blood with his sweat" (13). It is not surprising that such an assembly of clichés would conceal Melville's ironic commentary on Potter's vocations. As Israel enjoys success as a hunter, "it never entered his mind, that he was thus qualifying himself for a marksman of men" (9), and that he would join with other hunters at Bunker Hill, who "fought their way among the furred grenadiers; knocking them right and left, as seal hunters on the beach, knock down with their clubs the Shetland seal" (13). In fact, such passages are easily construed as demonstrations of patriotic zeal. Likewise, Potter's lucrative commerce with Canadian Indians would seem to recommend his shrewdness and business savvy, as Melville's critical insinuations virtually dissolve into praise for Israel's bartering talent:

He conveyed his skins and furs to Charlestown, on the Connecticut . . . where he trafficked them away for Indian blankets, pigments, and other showy articles adapted to the business of a trader among savages. . . . Selling his glittering goods [in Canada] at a great advance, he received in exchange valuable peltries and furs at a corresponding reduction. Returning to Charlestown, he disposed of his return cargo again at a very fine profit. (9)

The damning judgment of Israel's enterprise is delivered with a poker face: "In this way was bred that fearless self-reliance and independence which conducted our forefathers to national freedom" (9). Further proof that the statement is indeed ironic may be found in Melville's alteration of his major source. Trumbull's Potter names his wares as "Indian blankets, wampeag, and other such articles" (295); Melville's addition of "glittering goods" and "showy articles" points to a gyp. Thus very early in *Israel Potter* Melville is double-dealing: securing, on one hand, the connection between enterprise and the "fearless self-reliance" of the Revolutionary spirit, and intimating, on the other, the complicity of greed and exploitation in the motives of the frontier soldier.

Melville's treatment of Franklin, a fictitious extrapolation of the brief meeting between Potter and the sage in *The Life*, sends the same mixed signals.⁶ The Parisian apartment in which Potter encounters Franklin is littered with talismans of the Doctor's sensibility—scientific instruments, maps, models of inventions, and a variety of documents and books. Though Franklin is old, "Not the years of the calendar wholly [seemed his], but also the years of sapience. His white hairs and mild brow, spoke of the future as well as the past" (39). The future over which Franklin will preside is that of his burgeoning homeland: on a map of America hung among "trigonometric charts" and "drawings of surprising inventions," he has with a broad stroke of his pen cancelled the word "DESERT" printed over "vast empty spaces in the middle" (38)—an image foreshadowing the technological conquest of the west.

Amid the clutter of his intellectual pursuits sits Franklin, "neat and hale." His chamber "buzzed with flies. But the sapient inmate sat still and cool in the midst. Absorbed in some other world of his occupations and thoughts, these insects, like daily cark and care, did not seem one whit to annoy him" (39). And when the bedraggled fugitive Potter arrives to present intelligence from English sympathizers, "the sage's back, not his face, was turned to him" (39). In the men's subsequent conversations Melville sustains and elaborates this sense of Franklin's withdrawal from the world of "cark and care." The stock of honorific epithets ("the wise man," "the grave man of utility," "the venerable sage," "the mild sage," "this homely sage") mounts absurdly while Franklin's sentences cumulatively obscure Potter's acute misfortune. Chiding the fugitive for striking a bootblack he suspects is after his concealed missive, Franklin declares, "An indiscriminate distrust of human nature is the worst consequence of a miserable condition" (41). Yet Franklin's treatment of Potter suggests that he is trying to remove the effects rather than the causes of Israel's distrust. Methodically removing from Potter's room all the refreshments that might have been afforded the exhausted traveler, Franklin cautions him against expensive indulgence. Potter is moved to exclaim, "Every time he comes, he robs me" (53). And the Doctor's allowance for Israel's return to England is so scant—a *loan* of a quarter of a dollar—that Potter returns it immediately, ironically begging off the interest. "My good friend," Franklin replies, "never permit yourself to be jocose upon pecuniary matters. . . . The affair between us two, you perhaps deem very trivial, but trifles may involve momentous principles" (43).

For Melville's purposes, such "momentous principles" may be found in the pages of the *Almanac* that Franklin presents to Israel. In it Potter reads that

"*There are no gains, without pains*" and quite sensibly responds, "Oh confound all this wisdom! It's sort of insulting to talk wisdom to a man like me. It's wisdom that's cheap, and it's fortune that's dear. That ain't in Poor Richard; but it ought to be" (54). Throughout these interviews Melville has taken Potter's character down a notch and made him a darker cousin of Stubb in order to mitigate the satire of Franklin—to shade it off into the gentler Horatian mode. The interpolated exposition of Franklin's character likewise first identifies him as an opportunist, a jack of all trades, and a tranquil philosopher who blinds himself to spiritual maladies—"the type and genius of his land" (48), only to close with a genial apology: "very little indeed of the sage's multifariousness will be portrayed in a simple narrative like the present. This casual private intercourse with Israel, but served to manifest him in his far lesser lights" (48). In his native land Israel had successfully pursued the Franklinian program, but reverses in fortune, brought about by the military sacrifices he has made to preserve that way of life, have deprived him of control over his circumstances. Franklin, the type and genius of his land, does not tolerate this brand of powerlessness. He interprets such a declension as the failure of individual character and seeks to repair the flaw with aphorisms directed at restoring the individual's power over his environment.

Melville's apology creates an artificial distinction between Franklin's treatment of a single unfortunate man and his broader diplomatic achievement, as if the politics of the latter were not grounded in the former. Moreover, this differential gesture, because it preserves for the general reader Franklin's official reputation by "solving" the problem of his callous behavior, effaces the important thematic connection between Potter's reception and that of John Paul Jones. The obstreperous Captain, who wants to make a fetish of the *Almanac* and wear it around his neck (61), instantly wins the approval of Franklin, who does not "disguise his admiration of the unmistakable spirit of the man" (57), though he does wish to introduce a little method into Jones's resolve to "rain down on wicked England like fire on Sodom" (56). If Franklin blames misfortune on imprudence in Potter's case, he courts the predacious egotism of Jones as the military extension of his own maxims.

Depending on how one reads chapters 9-11, the meeting between Franklin and Jones is either a sort of docudrama featuring two Olympian figures of the Revolution, whose stature as cultural heroes remains intact, or a council of Moloch in which the Doctor lends his material wizardry to the errand of a savage. Israel, whose ready and almost incredibly childlike admiration for Jones prefigures his military involvement with the Captain, serves throughout the interview as a silent partisan chorus. He is "rapt at the volcanic spirit" of Jones, "Fired by the contagious spirit of Paul," "his heart swelling with the thought of being privy to the consultations of two such men" (57-59). The meeting showcases the distinct and complementary brands of power inherent in the sensibilities of Franklin and Jones—power secured by palpable charisma and refined by unrelenting individualism. Franklin characteristically urges Jones to undertake a modest but effective covert naval action against the Jersey privateers. Enraged at this proposal, Jones demands "something honorable and glorious to do," with "no leader and no counsellor but himself" (57). Conceding to the implacable Captain on this point, Franklin turns from tactics

to weaponry in order to clearly delineate the division of genius in this interview. He demonstrates the faults of structural alterations in warship construction proposed by Jones and proceeds to reveal the superior issue of his own powers of invention—improved designs for a keel and a ventilation system. In this arena Jones defers to Franklin, “having unbounded confidence in whatever the sage might suggest” (59). Thus each hero begrudges his purview but not his admiration for the other, and the peculiar individualism of American Revolutionary leadership is retrospectively affirmed as national power is symbolized by, and located in, personality.

In this episode the eccentric charms of Franklin and Jones counteract Melville’s manipulation of irony to discredit the species of power sought by these heroes. Jones, variously described as “a disinherited Indian chief,” “an Iroquois,” and “not . . . altogether civilized” (56), is motivated not by ideals but by vengefulness and barbaric egotism. He chafes at “vacillating councils,” exclaiming, “My God, why was I not born a Czar!” (57). Franklin will contribute his own mechanical genius to Jones’s mission by designing the tools of destruction. Upon presenting the captain with a “little skeleton” of a warship model, Franklin assures him that the model will soon be clothed with a body, “For you can’t improve so well on ideas, as you can on bodies” (59). With this startling pun Melville resituates the Doctor’s cool pragmatism, earlier demonstrated in the encounter with Potter, in the theater of war, and Franklin’s genius takes on a grim cast indeed: his dispassionate mechanical skill finds a perfect counterpart in Jones’s unprincipled violence in the forging of a very effective war machine.

The appeal of historical fiction lies partly in satisfying a yearning to witness mythicized events reinvested with suspense and complex motivation so that the reader can feel a kinship with historical figures and participate in the myth as it ineluctably unfolds. The pleasure is discovering that cultural myth, whether soundly based in fact or not, finds its ultimate source in personality and exigency. When national heroes are numbered among the characters in an historical fiction—Lincoln in Gore Vidal’s novel or Endicott in Hawthorne’s “Maypole”—we are eager to find in them some elements of our own character (and traits radically different, too) in order to reassure ourselves that the myth is plausible. Our satisfaction, in terms of the writer’s purpose, derives as readily from iconoclasm as from idolatry, for both purposes depend upon the fixture of the myth: both ends of historical fiction fulfill our desire to recover, in the present, a dramatic sense of the consolidation of power, for good or ill, which in its ordinarily naturalized and determined form constitutes so much of our cultural identity. Both ends are, in other words, solutions projected upon the chaos of history. As an exegetical goad, Melville’s iconoclasm in *Israel Potter* depends for its force on provisional satire and ironic imagery and allusion: it assumes the form, I think, of incidental qualification, and it does not finally override the utopian impulse to view the confederation of Jones and Franklin as an example of providential force entrusted to the Revolutionary cause—unless, of course, the political predisposition of a reader like William Young (the *Albion* reviewer) sensitizes him to the heritage of America’s gunboat diplomacy.

The exploits of John Paul Jones, which consume six of the novel’s 26 chapters

(14-19), generate the same interpretive tension, as derring-do vies with denunciatory imagery for meaning. In most of these chapters Potter serves merely as Jones's factotum or sidekick, but in the transitional Chapter 14, which takes Israel to sea as an impressed British sailor, first in a seventy-four and then in a revenue cutter, it is Potter, inspired by the voice of Jones from a pursuing ship, who commences the naval violence. Aboard the sparsely-manned cutter, which is under fire from Jones, Potter finds himself in a position to capture the ship single-handedly:

At this juncture, Israel, running towards the captain [of the cutter], who still held the splintered stump of tiller, stood full before him, saying, "I am an enemy, a Yankee; look to yourself."

"Help here, lads, help," roared the captain, "a traitor, a traitor!"

His words were hardly out of his mouth when his voice was silenced for ever. With one prodigious heave of his whole physical force, Israel smote him over the taffrail into the sea, as if the man had fallen backwards over a teetering chair. By this time the two officers were hurrying aft. Ere meeting them midway, Israel, quick as lightning, cast off the two principal halyards, thus letting the large sails all in a tumble of canvass [sic] to the deck. Next moment one of the officers was at the helm, to prevent the cutter from capsizing by being without a steersman in such an emergency. The other officer and Israel interlocked. The battle was in the midst of the chaos of blowing canvas. Caught in a rent of the sail, the officer slipped and fell near the sharp iron edge of the hatchway. As he fell, he caught Israel by the most terrible part in which mortality can be grappled. Insane with pain, Israel dashed his adversary's skull against the sharp iron. The officer's hold relaxed; but himself stiffened. Israel made for the helmsman, who as yet knew not the issue of the late tussel. He caught him round the loins, bedding his fingers like grisly claws into his flesh, and hugging him to his heart. The man's ghost, caught like a broken cork in a gurgling bottle's neck, gasped with the embrace. Loosening him suddenly, Israel hurled him from him against the bulwarks. . . .

With a loud huzza, Israel hauled down the flag with one hand. . . .

In a few moments a boat was alongside. As its commander stepped to the deck, he stumbled against the body of the first-officer, which owing to the sudden slant of the cutter coming to the wind, had rolled against the side near the gangway. As he came aft, he heard the moan of the other officer, where he lay under the mizzen shrouds. . . . the officer looked narrowly at the body by the shrouds, and said, "this man is as good as dead; but we will take him to Captain Paul as a witness on your behalf."

"Captain Paul?—Paul Jones?" cried Israel.

"The same."

"I thought so. I thought that was his voice hailing. It was Captain Paul's voice that somehow put me up to this deed."

"Captain Paul is the devil for putting men up to be tigers." (88-89)

This episode cements the alliance between Jones and Potter. It demonstrates their shared determination to "flog the British nation to death" (91), and, more importantly, it establishes the metaphorical climate for ensuing battle scenes: displays of aggression are recounted with flurries of sexual, predatory, and demonic imagery. In some instances the sexual imagery is comparatively light, almost droll, as when Jones, preparing to fight the *Drake*, tells Israel, "I am engaged to marry her tonight. . . . She has a nice tapering waist. . . . I will clasp her to my heart" (98). In a subsequent battle the *Serapis* behaves "not unlike

a wheeling cock about a hen, when stirred by the contrary passion" (122); jockeying for position, the *Richard* and the *Serapis* are "chasseing to each other like partners in a cotillon [sic]" (124). But the pitch of battle may witness a fusion of violence and erotic passion: "[Jones's] frenzied manner was . . . intended to inspirit and madden his men, some of whom, seeing him, in transports of intrepidity stripped themselves to their trowsers, exposing their naked bodies to the as naked shot. The same was done on the *Serapis*, where several guns were seen surrounded by their crews as by fauns and satyrs" (126).

The *Serapis* episode likewise yields a spate of demonic images. Dollying toward the battle cloud hovering over the "Lethean canal" (125), the narrator says that in order to describe the events transpiring therein, "it will be necessary to enter it; to go and possess it, as a ghost may rush into a body, or the devils into swine" (124). This New Testament allusion clearly implicates the reader who has an appetite for patriotic gore, even as it anticipates the satanic similes attending the action of Jones and Potter. The captain rallies his crew with "fierce gestures" of his tattooed arm, "cabalistically terrific as the charmed standard of Satan" (126). And Israel becomes the apocalyptic "angel of the bottomless pit" (Rev. 9.11) when at Jones's bidding he kills twenty men by hurling a grenade down the hatchway of the *Serapis*: "begrimed with powder, sixty feet in air, he hung like Apollyon from the extreme tip of the yard over the fated abyss" (127).

At the conclusion of the battle, the *Richard* (named for Poor Richard), "gorged with slaughter . . . blasted by tornadoes of sulphur, slowly sunk, like Gomorrah, out of sight" (130). Appended to this chilling allusion, Melville's final comment would seem to leave little doubt that the God who helps them that help themselves is blasphemously invoked: "In view of this battle one may well ask—What separates the enlightened man from the savage? Is civilization a thing distinct, or is it an advanced stage of barbarism?" (130).

Yet these disclaimers, metaphorical and declarative, practically dissolve into the sweep of battle. Demonstrations of heroism and cunning abound, the advantage shuttles suspensefully between British and American forces, and Jones is permitted his legendary exclamation at the climax. When Yvor Winters labeled *Israel Potter* "pure adventure" (233) he apparently was not reading its battle scenes as anti-war copy or as indictments of American barbarity. The figurative counter-text in these passages simply fails to stall a conventional interpretation of events: the imbedded ironic pattern of metaphor may indeed be extracted from the narrative, and its message made plain enough, but such an operation violates the cumulative effect of the narrative for readers unattuned to Melville's irony.

Of course in order to communicate effectively the pathos of Israel's fate, the novel's denouement requires that Potter have made a worthy contribution to the Revolution. Despite Israel's subsidiary role in a large portion of the book, his association with Revolutionary heroes, some of whom played no part in the historical Potter's life, magnifies by association his contribution to the cause and therefore increases the blame on the government that abandons him. In a dramatic sense, then, it was in Melville's interest to minimize his attack on the Revolutionary fathers in order to preserve the sense that Potter, as an embodiment of the old spirit, is betrayed by a culture given over to a demonstrative

but hollow allegiance to Revolutionary principles. The subversive counter-text of caustic metaphor in fact poses a threat to our sympathy for Potter: if the critical metaphors that indict him as an unscrupulous capitalist and an unprincipled barbarian were not counteracted by events and tableaux amenable to utopian projection by virtue of their iconographic familiarity (paintings of Putnam leaving his plow come to mind [Kammen, fig. 28-30]), Potter's fate would be a matter of indifferent concern.

Yet Melville rejected a potentially more affecting source of sympathy for Potter and abated the sense of national declension from Revolutionary ideals in the bargain: in his own treatment of the soldier's life, he withheld from his readers the constant insistence of Trumbull's Potter that America offered a society categorically different from Britain's:

Let those of my countrymen who thus imagine themselves miserable amid plenty, cross the atlantic [sic] and visit the miserable habitations of real and unaffected woe—if their hearts are not destitute of feeling, they will return satisfied to their own peaceful and happy shores, and pour forth . . . ejaculations of gratitude. (Trumbull 362)

Trumbull's Potter makes it clear that he has fought to preserve a way of life free from the excesses of "wealth and misery" (348) he finds in London, where he struggles as a chair caner for forty years, dogged by landlords and creditors in a swirl of rogues and thieves. Fully half of *The Life and Remarkable Adventures* is a catalogue of the horrors of poverty in London—children kidnapped and sold, fathers hanged for stealing bread, families starved to death.⁷ But Melville condenses Potter's London sojourn into a dozen pages at the end of the novel. Moreover, he depicts Potter's entry into London in Chapter 24, "In the City of Dis," with stylized and heavily allusive tableaux that displace the tales of horror in the *Life* with painterly evocations of Dis, Hades, Pompeii, and the Cities of the Plain. With a feebly apologetic gesture Melville elides the worst of Potter's torments: "these experiences, both from their intensity and his solitude, were necessarily squalid. Best not enlarge upon them. For just as extreme suffering without hope is intolerable to the victim, so, to others, is its depiction, without some delusive mitigation" (161). Melville provides some "delusive mitigation" of Potter's misery with an invented accident that renders the old man half crazy and prone to hallucinations involving his mother's favorite horse, Old Huckleberry.

In the first installment of the novel Melville had in the same fashion edited a passage in the *Life* in which Potter contrasts the state of the poor in Britain and America. The fugitive Potter's encounter with the ditcher is retained in the novel, but not his observations on the old man's destitution:

we soon reached and entered [his house], when a scene of poverty and wretchedness presented, which exceeded every thing of the kind that I had ever before witnessed—the internal appearance of the miserable hovel, I am confident would suffer in a comparison with any of the meanest stables of our American farmers. . . . I had heard much of the impoverished and distressed situation of the poor in England, but the present presented an instance of which I had formed no conception. (Trumbull 313)

In Melville's novel Potter exchanges outfits with a "friendly old ditcher" whose

“clothes were tatters” (19). Thus quite early in his tale Melville, by eliding his source, demonstrates his intention to avoid contradicting the central insight of “Poor Man’s Pudding and Rich Man’s Crumbs”: “The native American poor . . . though unreduced to the physical degradation of the European pauper they yet suffer more in mind than the poor of any other people in the world” (Berthoff 172).

If Melville allowed his readers brief glimpses of class inequities in Britain—impressed soldiers, ignorant peasants, “hoardes of the poorest wretches” making bricks in London (154)—he denied them the full and explicit political contrast that would lend polemical support to the Revolutionary program of Franklin and Jones by further indulging the utopian wish for national difference. But Melville’s strategy is omissive: it withholds the explicit political “solution” of the *Life* without either forthrightly condemning it or replacing it with another. The consequence once again is that the conventional interpretation of national difference, plainly stated in the *Life*, remains unimpeded. It can easily be read into Melville’s text.

Israel Potter clearly bears the mark of its literary mode of production. The novel’s ideologically contradictory messages grow out of Melville’s perception of an audience divided according to political *predisposition*. This division, which as I say is not created by the work (as it might have been by *White-Jacket*) but instead presides over its creation, incorporates an economy of production: adventure for the “tribe of ‘general readers’” (who want neither the “weighty” nor the “reflective”) subsidizes ironic social criticism for the “cultivated, Catholic men” (who want both).

What are we to make of this practical arrangement? Does it mirror the predicament of the Romantic artist who is forced by a doltish public to conceal his subversive message with artistic strategies? Does it bolster Melville’s reputation as a skilled craftsman of irony? Does it taint Melville’s social criticism with anti-democratic sentiment? Before approaching some sort of response to these questions I would like briefly to consider “Benito Cereno” in the same light. Anyone who has taught this story knows that most, if not all, of her students initially conclude that the title character and his crew are sympathetic victims of a band of fiendish blacks who have betrayed the trust of their keepers. If the tale is examined for its broader social implications, it often follows that Melville is warning his readers that beneath the genial and patient deportment of slaves lurk ruthless savagery and malign intelligence. Cereno’s slaves, and by extension all slaves and black freedmen and women, bear closer watching. But Melville’s strategy is of course to restrict point of view so that the only interpretive access to the slaves’ motives is through the two white figures of power—Delano and Cereno. In so doing, he compels his readers to go the circuit of interpretations of black behavior from the standpoint of vested interests. All these interpretations have one thing in common—the repression of the slaves’ perspective. With masterful irony (it is exactly that) Melville effectively impedes our sympathizing with Babo and his fellow Africans because he is demonstrating how words consolidate power. In other words, the reader who must be told to champion the cause of the slaves—the reader who cannot get outside the narrative—is lost to the plot’s resolution of political tensions.

Both *Israel Potter* and “Benito Cereno” attest to Melville’s subtlety and sophistication as a satirist and ironist, and a good many studies have detailed

complex patterns of imagery and allusion in these works. Though structurally flawed, *Israel Potter* is no formal embarrassment, and “Benito Cereno” is often compulsory Melville reading. Yet it strikes me that in both works Melville’s appeal for the sophisticated reader lies in the conspiratorial nature of his imbedded social criticism. Formal intricacy and unobtrusive irony, coding tactics of private address, prompt the necessary suspension of both vulgar sentiment and inordinate susceptibility to plot and action to ensure that the “cultivated and Catholic” man can realize his difference, as a reader, from the naïve reader whose sympathies align with attitudes that in both tales are the objects of Melville’s criticism. In view of this strategy, Melville invites a complacency akin to that of Vere, who reads to find “confirmation of his own more reserved thoughts” (62). The “misread” text of *Israel Potter* can be distinguished from the “correctly read” text only if the reader denies the political impact of both and maintains that art occupies a sphere apart for the aesthetic and intellectual communion of like minds.

NOTES

¹David Chacko and Alexander Kulcsar have unearthed fascinating information about the “historical” Potter, who took money from Franklin for an American passage and lived on it in England, probably worked as a double agent during the war, and never fought at Bunker Hill. They examine Trumbull’s complicity in Potter’s efforts to gain a pension.

²In a very recent study of Melville’s use of sources in his historical fiction, John Samson examines his critique of the American Revolutionary myth in *Israel Potter*, concluding that “in America’s hero worship grow the seeds of the very monarchism that the heroes fought against” (189). Samson argues—correctly, I think—that *Israel Potter* illustrates how a “tradition of radical egalitarianism produces a conservative class system unresponsive to the poor” (191). Although Samson’s interpretation parallels my own on this point, his emphasis lies not so much on Melville’s creation of a split text as on his attacking the “secure, integrative system of Providential history [such as Bancroft’s *History of the United States*] and typological meaning” (209). With regard to Melville’s readers, Samson asserts that *Israel Potter* “breaks narrative conventions and frustrates audience expectations, turns them against themselves” (209). I am arguing that Melville wrote for two audiences and concealed this subversive text from one of them. The obscured text, therefore, need *not* frustrate audience expectations.

³See Richard Slotkin’s treatment of the yeoman farmer myth in Crevecoeur and Jefferson (294, 336-37).

⁴Though these books are “openly subversive” in the sense I have noted, Christian humanism, often explicitly invoked with New Testament allusions, grounds their polemics, providing the tie with “general ideology.”

⁵Michael T. Gilmore examines this paradox with careful attention to “Hawthorne and His Mosses.” According to Gilmore, “Regarding the literary text as a commodity, Melville vacillates between seeing his books as affirmations of democratic community and as alienated objects expressing little or nothing of himself” (61).

⁶Chacko and Kulcsar point out both Franklin’s generosity to Potter and his suspicion that Potter was acting as a dubious agent (380-81).

⁷Hennig Cohen characterizes Melville’s elision as a missed opportunity to include sensational matter, “since the annals of the poor can have a certain morbid appeal” (306). Robert Zaller argues that the “intensified . . . vision of Dis” answered the problem of “how to brake the momentum of his story without creating a letdown” (621).

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