

melville's post-meridian fiction

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In recent years there has been a gradual but steady shift in Melville scholarship away from the two big books, *Moby Dick* and *Pierre*, and toward what we might call the post-meridian fiction. Partly, of course, one can account for this shift because so much has been said so quickly about these two major works since their rediscovery in 1924, though there will always be something to say about fiction as rich as this; but partly the shift represents a collective exercise in metacriticism: what would Melville have gone on to had his two masterworks received the sort of reception he had hoped they might? True, those who have concerned themselves with the post-meridian fiction have not always been aware that this was in fact what they were engaged in, but this does not alter the effect of their work, and it does serve to explain an increased fascination with a group of works at first denigrated as inferior products of a great talent gone mossy and misanthropic. The continuing reassessment of Melville's work from *Bartleby* through *The Confidence-Man* has discovered in these short novels hidden excellences which rival in new ways those of *Moby Dick* and *Pierre*.

But with very few exceptions the studies of the post-meridian fiction have been heuristic rather than nomothetical; that is, they have been for the most part interesting and often brilliant studies of the individual works but have not been concerned with the relationship of these works one to another and of the whole body to the two major works.¹ To make that concern our central one is to see that the five short novels stretching between 1853-1857 are individually and collectively explorations into the problem of why *Moby Dick* and *Pierre* were so poorly received. Such explorations take the form of often brilliant studies of American culture and national character culminating in *The Confidence-Man* (1857).

If one begins from the sound anthropological premise that a culture's arts are the primary manifestations of its norms, values and assumptions, it is less of a giant leap to the assertion that a culture's major artists intend to comprehend the totality of their culture than it might be if we began without such a premise. And if to this basic premise one adds the historically verifiable observation that in America artists have been particularly concerned with the culture out of which they were creating, we have an adequate context within which to view Melville's attempts at cultural comprehension.

In America, almost from the beginning, the art/culture relationship has been uneasy, difficult, often threatening. Thus there has been a corresponding felt necessity on the part of the American artist to understand this relationship, to discuss it in his works, to know the culture which seemed in many fundamental ways hostile to him and his work. In fact, it might be claimed with some justification that the real subject of American art has been just this, and certainly in the fertile 1850's it is very much to the forefront in the works of Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne and Whitman. The only one of these who came to the kind of conclusion capable of sustaining his art was Whitman, who accepted the culture into which he had been born and which he discovered early in his poetic career he could not change.

One does not sense in Melville's earliest work any very abiding interest in American culture and national character. By the time of *White Jacket* (1850), however, this concern has surfaced and become an important one as the writer felt his way towards a voice and a style distinctively his own. For in the very process of discovering himself, Melville was creating a yawning gap between the kind of work that self would produce and the culture which must consume it. By the time he was at work on *Moby Dick* it is clear from his letters to Hawthorne (particularly in the famous "Dollars damn me" letter) that Melville was thoroughly aware that what he was engaged in was likely to be a popular failure.

Yet to have a presentiment of failure and to know it by bitter experience are two different kinds of knowledge, and to Melville the shock of failure was proportionate to the effort he had expended in writing *Moby Dick* and *Pierre*. There seems to be enough thematic evidence to support the notion that it was *Pierre* rather than *Moby Dick* which was the big book Melville had in him, but the reception of the latter spoiled *Pierre* and made it a lesser work than its immediate predecessor. Still, the two works belong together, for they were written by a man who had come to know for the first time the maturity of his creative powers. The frustration of these powers accounts for the muddiness of *Pierre*, and the silent contempt accorded both books by the public accounts for the change in direction and form of Melville's fiction

after 1852. With *Bartleby the Scrivener* Melville embarked upon a series of short novels examining his culture and the kind of people it produced so as to explain his failure to himself, and when he had done so to his own satisfaction he abandoned fiction for poetry where his failure in an anti-poetic culture would be taken for granted.

I do not propose here to write a detailed study of Melville's fiction from *Bartleby* through *The Confidence-Man*, even were that possible within the brief space I have set for myself. It is not necessary to do so, however, for all the major points and questions running through these five short novels are summed up in some form in the last of them. All that is necessary is to indicate some of the questions posed by Melville about American culture in these works and to suggest in the briefest possible manner the ways in which they are posed so that when we come to *The Confidence-Man* we are prepared to see it as the logical conclusion of the series.

Here are the questions which seem to me the crucial ones in these books: Are Americans really new? Are they really innocent? Are they on the right path? Are they really shining examples to the rest of the world? Do Americans have genuine cause for optimism? Are Americans chronically hypocritical about real standards and professed standards? (Melville's description of hypocrisy in all its forms reminds us that this has been a persistent concern of writers in Western culture ever since the passing of the primitive Christian era when belief and practice were necessarily one.)

In *Bartleby* we are given a picture of American culture as polarized between the "bright silks and sparkling faces" of the "Mississippi of Broadway" and the "misery which hides aloof." Within the context of the fiction, of course, this polarization has to do with the law clerk and the big city in which he lives, but as in all these works, such situations are capable of expansion into the widest cultural context, and so here the writer discusses that which a later novelist, Theodore Dreiser, would call the essential drama of American life: the tremendous extremes of wealth and national prosperity and grinding individual poverty; it does not take much mental footwork to see that this is hardly an ephemeral concern of the 1850's, but it was in these years of the "takeoff" into modern industrial capitalism that these extremes first became readily apparent to all who would see them. *Bartleby* as writer (his occupation can hardly be incidental) sees the misery and experiences it at first hand, but America at large goes unheeding on. In the midst of the carnival atmosphere a little dark procession makes its way to the Tombs. Melville seems here to be questioning specifically whether a writer like himself, fully aware of the misery which hides aloof and of the darker aspects of existence, could not through books like *Moby Dick* and *Pierre* supply a corrective influence to an excessive and ill-founded national confidence.

In *The Encantadas* (1854) Melville deliberately presents a blasted image of nature to contrast with the regnant optimistic notions of the Transcendentalists, whose beliefs about nature and man were so admirably suited to the age. In the second of these ten sketches the writer uses his famous tortoise image to suggest the falseness of the American world-view, and as he does so he indicates why books like his two big ones which explore the dark side of reality must meet with contemptuous neglect. But, cautions Melville, to ignore the dark side is to fundamentally misunderstand the nature of the world and the universe in which we live, and this is potentially fatal as he would later show in *Benito Cereno*.

The seventh of the sketches in *The Encantadas* is, of course, an imaginative meditation upon the totality of the American experience. Here Melville concludes that the history of this island "furnishes another (my italics) illustration of the difficulty of colonizing barren islands with unprincipled pilgrims." It is not so much that Melville wishes us to consider America as a "Riotocracy which glorified in having no law but lawlessness," though there is this implication and though this is a major consideration in *The Confidence-Man*, but rather that it is difficult, if not impossible, to discover what the laws are which bind together nineteenth-century America. What were the basic assumptions and principles which knit the culture together, and how could the artist create meaningfully in the absence of these? In the desolate end of the Charles's Isle experiment Melville predicts a bleak future for America if it does not discover for itself some binding, cohesive and viable cultural principles; seventeen years later Whitman was still sounding the same warning in *Democratic Vistas*, and Americans in the twentieth century have lived to experience the profoundly uncomfortable truth of these warnings.

Benito Cereno (1855) explores New World history from the period of the Hispanic colonizations to the novelist's own day. What is discovered is that this is *not* the New World, but rather the Old with all the somber shadows of the past etched upon its surface. Captain Delano as Innocent American must be educated about time past and present as Melville takes his part in what R. W. B. Lewis defined as the major cultural debate of nineteenth-century America. If the past is passed, then men might truly begin again and perhaps get it right; Adam might in this New World escape the Fall. But if the past (here represented by the blacks) cannot ever be escaped, if it is always present in the living moment, then the idea of the New World and of its great experiment were cruel delusions and its subscribers were foredoomed to disappointment. The dream was already in the past, it was of the past, back in what Fitzgerald would later describe as "that vast obscurity beyond the city, where the dark fields of the republic rolled on under the night."

Melville leaves *Benito Cereno* with a question for which the book

is a partial answer: what will be the future of a culture which fosters Amasa Delanos with their almost fatal innocence? Can such a culture, producing such characters, sustain itself in a world which it refuses to understand? Melville had experienced in his own professional career America's refusal to understand the world as it was, but here as elsewhere in these five works the novelist widens his horizons beyond the narrowly personal to speculate on the fate of a nation.

Israel Potter, as I have elsewhere indicated, is Melville's broadest survey of national culture and character.² Therein the novelist finds America to be "intrepid, unprincipled, reckless, predatory, with boundless ambition, civilized in externals but a savage at heart . . ." He concludes that America seems destined to be the "Paul Jones of nations;" that is, a nation imbued with all the qualities previously enumerated. The character of John Paul Jones then flows into that of Ethan Allen whom Melville characterizes as a Westerner as the writer restates the Berkeleyian thesis that the future of America lies in the West. Unfeatured, barbaric and inhospitable to artists at it may be, the West, writes Melville, *is* America. In such a cultural environment the writer may be like Israel Potter forced into literal or metaphoric exile, but Melville at this point offers no hope of solution to an art/culture antagonism he has now come to understand through the writing of these shorter works. It remained for him then only to sum up the results of his cultural investigations in *The Confidence-Man* and then to have done with fiction.

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Having brought himself to a consideration of the West as myth and symbol in *Israel Potter*, Melville in this last novel considers it at first hand, not as future but as real present. In *The Confidence-Man* the emphasis is plainly and steadily upon national character, almost as if the writer considered the previous four works to have made an adequate survey of the culture as a whole. Indeed, so outstanding is Melville's emphasis on national character in this last novel that many critics have in passing noted this element of the book.³ None, however, has seen this novel as the logical last step in a process which had been going on since 1853, and none, with the notable exception of Richard Chase, has really explored the concept of national character as it is described in this work. To do so is to be led straight to the heart of *The Confidence-Man* and to the whole of Melville's post-meridian fiction.

In this novel Melville sets a heterogeneous group of characters in motion upon a steamer which is going down the Mississippi River to New Orleans; his purpose in so doing is to lay out for himself (and ultimately for the reader) like face cards a series of individuals who together make up a composite portrait of the type of person produced by American culture. To see such a person as cultural type is to come

as close as may be possible to an understanding of the culture and of the artist's place in it.⁴

Within this context it is clearly more than the literary convention of the modern picaresque that suggested to Melville the use of disguises for his characters. And it is clearly more than a simple plot device to mask the machinations of the Confidence-Man, for *ALL* the characters are in disguise. Disguise as Melville sees it here is in several fundamental ways part of the American experience. Looking at the world he saw around him and then casting his glance back over the brief span of American history, Melville is moved to wonder whether the real and essential America (n) had ever been truly revealed. Change and successive incarnations seemed the rule for the country rather than stability. Change and successive incarnations likewise seemed the rule for the American as cultural type; our national heroes like Benjamin Franklin were worshipped in part *because* of their multiformity, as Melville had occasion to note in *Israel Potter*: on the ladder of success a man was required to play many parts. But, the writer asks, who and what is he at bottom? Is he anything other than a kind of Confidence-Man appearing and reappearing in successive guises but never appearing unmasked? So it is that all the characters in the novel have various guises: even the small stories-within-the-story show us characters in various guises, as in the stories of Colonel Moredock, Charlemont and China Aster.

The disguises of these characters and of the Confidence-Man himself introduce the major theme of the novel—the crucial difference between appearance and reality and the difficulty of distinguishing between them—while at the same time they serve to place this theme in a firm cultural context. Not only is the American like the Confidence-Man in his various masquerades, but he is also a seriously divided personality, and it is this aspect of the national character which finally occupies the novelist's attention.

Basically the division as Melville sees it is between subscription to romantic nostrums, notions of the millennium and large-minded egalitarianism on the one hand, and mean, crafty, close-fisted practicality on the other. Chapter One introduces the reader to this division as the man in cream-colors steps abroad with his slate reading "Charity thinketh no evil," while on the opposite side of the deck the barber, William *Cream*, hangs up his sign reading "No Trust." The implications are clear here, and they are even clearer when in Chapter Thirty-Nine the regnant philosophy of the day is shown to have a similar division. Mark Winsome and his disciple Egbert are practitioners of a philosophy which professes love and concern for mankind, but that very philosophy issues forth in cruel and inhumane actions towards real men in the real world.

Looking with Melville back over the history that Americans have made, it is not difficult to discern the roots of such a division in the first days of the colonies, for many of those who settled this country were middle class men of the Renaissance who were mixtures of piety, idealism and optimism, and who were also strongly selfish individuals with instincts for the main chance. In fact, it might be said that to some extent the piety and idealism were attitudes accepted and assumed by these men because such attitudes augured well for the kind of personal success and advancement which they coveted and in hopes of which they immigrated.⁵ Such a division is to be found in the characters of the Puritans and the Quakers of colonial days; it takes the form of the Jefferson-Hamilton opposition of the early days of the Republic, and in Melville's own day it was to be seen in the opposition of the reformers and the rising capitalist speculators.

And it is this division in the novel which makes the passengers (Americans) easy prey for the Confidence-Man, for they are not really certain of what they believe and of what they should, as Americans, believe. They are not whole men and so they are vulnerable. By extension, then, the nation is divided and thus vulnerable, and that half-suspected state has in the novelist's view resulted in a rampant and widespread hypocrisy pervading every sinew and fiber of American life. Being by historical circumstances unable to resolve this division, the American has attempted to cover it up by continuing to pay lip service to the grand notions and ideals while at the very same time he lives as mean and grasping a life as any Old World merchant. He hides behind the disguise of The American as Savior and Saved, but the real American motto seems closer to Me First. What seems to many American innocence is from this point of view merely vulnerability born out of a lasting identity crisis.

Clearly for such a cultural type, fiction which set for itself the task of exploring the reality behind appearance, which attempted to expose the darkside of the tortoise, would meet with harsh treatment. No man so divided and so incapable of making whole his division would take kindly to the work of an artist whose task was to expose such divisions wherever they might be found. In this way Melville explained to himself the failure of his big books, for they had been more than anything else attempts to understand reality. Now five years and five works later he had traced the failure of *Moby Dick* and *Pierre* back to its source in the culture in which they found themselves, and having done so he could rest his case with some fewer misgivings than he might have carried with him had he stopped with *Pierre*. Whether such an accomplishment was any sort of continuing comfort for him in the long years which stretched from *The Confidence-Man* to his death none of us can say, but surely the record of that accomplishment as it is found

in these five short novels affords us a kind of satisfaction even while it may be singularly lacking in comfort.

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footnotes

1. Two notable exceptions are E. H. Rosenberry's *Melville and the Comic Spirit* (Cambridge, 1955), and Lawrance Thompson's *Melville's Quarrel With God* (Princeton, 1952).

2. "Melville and Thomas Berger: The Novelist as Cultural Anthropologist," *Centennial Review*, XIII (Winter, 1968), 101-121.

3. See, for example, Richard Chase, "Melville's *Confidence-Man*," *Kenyon Review*, XI (1949), 122-140; Nathalia Wright, "The Confidence Men of Melville and Cooper," *American Quarterly*, IV (1952), 266-268; and James E. Miller, Jr., "The *Confidence-Man*: His Guises," *PMLA*, LXXIV (1959), 102-111.

4. See Ralph Linton on national character in *Personality and Political Crisis*, eds. Stanton and Perry (Glencoe, 1951), 133-150. For a fuller assessment of the concept see Margaret Mead's essay in *Anthropology Today*, ed. Kroeber (Chicago, 1953), 642-667.

5. See Louis B. Wright, *Middle-Class Culture in Elizabethan England* (Chapel Hill, 1935).