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SUSPICIONS, SECRETS, AND THE AMERICAN PSYCHE: MELVILLE'S *THE CONFIDENCE-MAN* AND POST-9/11 PARANOIA

Diana Curtis

Within hours of the destruction of the World Trade Center on September 11th 2001, public opinion polls showed that Americans overwhelmingly favored a swift and forceful retaliation (Schmitt and Shanker 15). By September 14th, when Colin Powell told America: "The enemy is hidden. The enemy is, very often, right here within our own country" (Purdum 16), Middle-Eastern and Asian residents had already become victims of public wrath (Goodstein and Neiburh 14). President Bush told the country: "No one should be singled out for unfair treatment or unkind words because of their ethnic background or religious faith" ("Statement" 4), yet by the end of October more than a thousand people of mostly Middle-Eastern descent had been detained, and by December even more were being held with no idea of whether or not they might eventually be charged. Few Americans objected, and as many commentators have noted, the suspicion with which Muslims were treated was reminiscent of the way Communists were looked upon during the McCarthy witch hunts of the 1950s. At that time too, thousands of alleged sympathizers were investigated, and roughly six million lives were disrupted although there were very few prosecutions (Miller and Nowak 14, 26).

Four and a half years on from 9/11 we have invested billions in the chase for Osama bin Laden, who remains at large. We have caught Saddam Hussein—who had nothing to do with 9/11—and we're currently occupying an Iraq that every day moves closer to civil war. More than 2,000 U.S. soldiers have been killed since the start of Operation Iraqi Freedom and more than 17,000 have been injured. We don't count the Iraqi dead, but a UN Report carried out by the *Lancet* in 2004 estimated they numbered around 100,000 (Boseley). Many more deaths have occurred since then. Relatively few people in the United States seem overly concerned. Perhaps, as Indian-born Arundhati Roy points out, we believe that:

> [d]eath is a small price for people to pay for the privilege of sampling . . . [d]emocracy . . . [P]erhaps chinks, negroes, dinks, gooks, and wogs don't really qualify as real people. Perhaps [their] deaths don't qualify as real deaths. [Their] histories don't qualify as history. They never have. (3)

Herman Melville would have agreed—and would have grieved—with Arundhati Roy. Melville's whaling trips—necessitated by his father's early death, which left the formerly privileged family virtually penniless—allowed him to spend time between voyages in the primitive communities of the Marquesas and the Sandwich Islands (now Hawaii), where he witnessed and enjoyed the native lifestyles. The experience broadened his mind, so much so that he later admitted: "Until I was twenty-five, I had no development at all. From my twenty-fifth year I date my life" (*Correspondence* 193). After returning home aboard a U.S. frigate, Melville began to write.

Many of his books draw attention to the disparity between the way in which we regard acts of violence carried out on our behalf, and those that are perpetrated against us. In his first book, *Typee*, the narrator comments on the way in which the atrocities we commit are:

> seldom proclaimed at home. . . . Sometimes vague accounts of such things reach our firesides, and we coolly censure them as wrong, impolitic, needlessly severe . . . [But how] different is our tone when we [are attacked]; how we sympathize for the unhappy victims, and with what horror do we regard the diabolical heathens, who, after all, have but avenged the unprovoked injuries which they have received. We breathe nothing but vengeance, and equip armed vessels to traverse thousands of miles of ocean in order to . . . burn, slaughter, and destroy . . . [and we] call upon all Christendom to applaud their courage and their justice. (26-27)

Many reviewers objected to such comments. The *Christian Parlor Magazine* accused Melville of "palpable ignorance" and "flagrant outrages against civilization" (Higgins and Parker 57). And when the revised American edition appeared some five months later, several didactic passages had been removed—at times completely reversing Melville's intended effect. In his next book, *Omoo*, Melville opted for satire in an attempt to convey the same ideas less offensively. His naïve American narrator visits native cultures, witnesses and records multiple acts of oppression, and manages to remain blissfully ignorant of his own contribution to it. The book was well received, probably because few readers understood its ironies, for as Jonathan Swift pointed out in "The Battle of the Books," "satire is a sort of glass, wherein beholders do generally discover everybody's face but their own."

In *Moby-Dick*, Melville depicts native exploitation through the

ship's harpooners, whose dangerous work supports the rest of the crew, and as the *Pequod* sinks in the final scene, Tashtego, the faithful American Indian, is still loyally attempting to nail Captain Ahab's doomed flag to the mast. Melville had by this time discovered the Indian history of Pittsfield, Massachusetts, where he lived on a farm he'd renamed "Arrowhead" after the Indian relics he found there. He'd also begun to think more about his grandfather, Colonel Peter Gansevoort, the illustrious hero of Fort Stanwix, site of the infamous treaties that took so much land away from Indians. In *Pierre*, the Colonel is represented by General Pierre Glendinning, whose grandson Pierre is Melville's protagonist—and also his antithesis because unlike Melville, Pierre is afraid to examine his origins and prefers to leave the reputations of his ancestors intact, electing instead to glorify the dead, which has dire consequences for the living. Melville presents Pierre as the personification of America, doomed by its unwillingness to confront the reality of its history.

In *Israel Potter*, his next book, Melville expands this theme as he satirizes other folk heroes, depicting Ethan Allen as an imposter who pretends to be a "braggart barbarian" (150), and John Paul Jones as equally disingenuous since he presents himself as a gentleman but behind the façade is "unprincipled, reckless, [and] predatory" (120). Melville likens Jones to America, but, as others have noted, he meant no compliment. The book's reception, though, is troubling and suggests, as Benzanson notes, a deep denial on the part of the reading public, for it "won praise for its masculine style . . . and alleged patriotism" (Melville, *Israel Potter* 216), while the ironic sections on Ethan Allen, who is described by one blind critic as "the true guide and unimpeachable man and American" (72) proved to be particularly popular and were reprinted at least twice (202).

In *The Confidence-Man*, Melville consolidates the foregoing themes and predicts the consequences. The book is set aboard a Mississippi riverboat ironically named the *Fidèle*, which means "the faithful." The book is a microcosm of America, and most critics agree that its heart lies in chapters 25-28, which tell the story of Colonel John Moredock, a renowned Indian-killer who—like General Pierre Glendinning and John Paul Jones—is "civilized in externals but a savage at heart" (Melville, *Israel Potter* 120).

After his family is massacred by Indians, Moredock seeks revenge and eventually tracks down the killers, but in the process he becomes more duplicitous than his foe, and develops a liking for the hunt—in fact, we're told that he "never let pass an opportunity of quenching an Indian" (134). Described as a "true patriot," Moredock is "admired

and loved" (134) by his community and is even invited to run as governor but declines because the responsibilities might interfere with his hunting expeditions. Instead, he becomes a folk hero.

Melville borrowed Moredock's story from James Hall's *Sketches of History, Life, and Manners, in the West*, but he made significant changes, removing "Hall's references to the initial aggressions of the whites," as Foster notes in her introduction to the Hendricks House edition (lxvii). In Melville's version of Moredock's story, the Indians appear to be the villains of the piece. But as Joyce Adler pointed out in 1972, Melville's version is told by Charlie Noble, who claims to have heard Hall tell Moredock's story so many times that he can relate it "almost word for word." Since the omission of all the initial acts of white aggression originate with Hall but are repeated by Noble, Melville depicts both men as unconsciously racist. They perceive Moredock as a good person at heart, heroic, and engaged in an honorable activity, rather than as a man who has developed a taste for killing human beings. In their view, as Adler points out, "Indian killing by [Moredock] is the killing of a wild animal [while] the killing of whites by Indians is [looked upon as] fratricide" (428).

Since Melville's text refers to Hall as the judge, a pillar of society, he represents what Deleuze and Guattari refer to as the "signifying regime" (114-148)—the social apparatus that informs our ideas. But the judge's "truth" is selective; he does not tell all of Moredock's story, and as Adler points out, by naming Moredock's action "vengeance [while] ignoring the real origins of the conflict," Judge Hall allows his audience "to hide from the knowledge of what is being done in its name" (Adler 438).

When President Bush addressed the nation on September 11, 2001, he recalled "pictures of airplanes flying into buildings, fires burning, huge structures collapsing," and he added that they "have filled us with disbelief, terrible sadness, *and a quiet, unyielding anger"* [emphasis mine] ("Statement" par. 2). He did not, as Susan Sontag pointed out, suggest that "this was . . . an attack on the world's self-proclaimed superpower, undertaken as a consequence of specific American alliances and action" (Sontag 32). Like Judge Hall, whose omissions created a false history and aroused his listeners' sympathy and admiration for Moredock, the President's omission presented a false account of U.S. foreign policy, and within hours "[p]eople of Middle Eastern and South Asian descent . . . [had become] the targets of harassment and violence by civilians" (Goodstein and Niebuhr par. 1).

Similar omissions preceded the invasion of Iraq, supposedly to

find Saddam Hussein's mythical weapons of mass destruction. "Nuke 'em all," fearful Alabama students yelled as they rallied in support of the invasion, oblivious to the fact that the greatest weapon of mass destruction had been created and used (not just once) by the United States, or that the tragic deaths of almost three thousand people on 9/11 constituted only a tiny percentage of the 200,000 who were killed and injured in the equally swift attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Did these students not know that British and American planes had bombed Iraq on a regular basis throughout the ten years since the first Gulf War, or that the government had acknowledged half a million Iraqi children probably died as a result? Perhaps not, because the President mentioned none of this, and as U.S. Supreme Court justice Louis D. Brandeis once pointed out: "Our government is the potent, the omnipresent teacher. For good or ill, it teaches the whole people by its example" (1). And since the U.S. government, as Arundhati Roy points out, "displayed in no uncertain terms the range and extent of its capability for paranoid aggression" (12), it is hardly surprising that it found so much support.

The Confidence-Man describes John Moredock as representative of "the class to which he belonged" (124), which as Adler suggests means that Melville's "Indian-killer is *openly* what the civilization is *in disguise*" (Adler 440), but he "acts in far-off places so the rest of society can keep its hands clean" (426); thus: "[i]n accordance with the spirit of this whole masquerade, the judge, the society's spokesman, can then proceed to conceal, not the actions of the Indian killer but their nature—the original cause of Indian-killing" (441). In terms of the present war in Iraq, as James Carroll points out, the evasion of truth allows us to "cloak ourselves in cold indifference to the unnecessary suffering of others—even when we cause it. We don't look at any of this directly because the consequent guilt would violate our sense of ourselves as nice people" (Carroll 1). So the Iraqi dead are not counted and pass virtually unnoticed, while the infamous Abu Graib and Guantanamo Bay—where hundreds of prisoners, including boys aged between 13 and 15, have been denied "what most democracies consider a fundamental human right: a fair trial" (Mitchell)—are barely mentioned in the United States though they receive full press coverage abroad. As Melville noted in *Typee*: "These things are seldom proclaimed at home" (26).

The Confidence-Man marked the end of Melville's career as a writer; once it was finished, he fell into a deep depression, embarked on a lengthy sea trip, and returned to work as a customs inspector for the remainder of his life. The book offers no hope for change, for the status quo is maintained by representatives of the law, like the judge,

who regard Indians as savages, and savage Americans as heroes. And since the United States still regards itself as the city on the hill, destined to shine its beacon for the rest of the world to follow, how can it not regard itself as superior to the rest of the world's relative "savagery"?

"Indian-hating still exists," Melville warned through Charlie Noble in *The Confidence-Man*, "and no doubt will continue to exist, so long as Indians do" (124). Most of the North-American Indians were extirpated during Melville's time, but have we—like the Puritans, who saw themselves as God's people creating order in a satanic landscape—simply shifted our focus from the North American Indian to other brown-skinned people, using the dubious benefits of our electronic age to more rapidly disseminate misinformation and to incite fear? As the *Arab News* pointed out on the third anniversary of 9/11, "millions of people across the world who knew nothing about Islam before Sept 11 now wholly associate it with killing and hate, and fear and hate in return" ("Arab" 2).

Have we now entered phase two of Indian extirpation? Are we those passengers on Melville's *Fidèle*, "[m]asquerading as civilization, [but living] the law of the jungle" (Adler 440), revering those who kill on our behalf so that we can keep our hands clean? Are we still the society that forced Melville's despairing retreat to the Customs' House, ever moving in circles as we reenact a violent history that we still can't bring ourselves to acknowledge? *The Confidence-Man* closes with the hitherto ambiguous: "Something further may follow this Masquerade," but given the reality of our history and our present circumstances, the ambiguity disappears as more and more it seems likely that we are the sad fulfillment of Melville's eerily accurate prophecy.

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