(Re)Visions of History in Language and Fiction

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Edited by

Dorota Guttfeld, Monika Linke
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INTRODUCTION

DOROTA GUTTFELD, MONIKA LINKE
AND AGNIESZKA SOWIŃSKA

The present volume is an interdisciplinary collection of papers devoted to the issues of retelling, rewriting, and representation of the past in fiction and various text-types, including political discourse, digital and audiovisual media. Within the field of fiction, the papers revolve around postmodern perspectives on history, with special emphasis on alternative history and time travel. The issues analyzed are approached from both Polish and international perspectives, the pivotal question being the juxtaposition of modern and post-modern understanding of collective versus personal history.

The arrangement of the papers follows an order based on subject matter rather than academic discipline; thus, the collection opens with diachronic reflection on the general changes in viewing history that have occurred since the 19th century. The discussion progresses towards postcolonial, feminist and gender-related perspectives on history reflected in postmodern fiction, which reveal the power struggle around the depiction of the past. A further group of articles shifts the focus of attention to a revisionary presentation of historical breakthroughs in political and media discourse, which might consciously manipulate the recipients' perception. This links the argument to the issue of distorted visions of history involving alternative worlds and fantastic elements proposed in speculative fiction.

The contributors are scholars specializing in literary studies (e.g. postcolonialism and popular fiction), linguistics (e.g. critical discourse analysis) and cultural studies (e.g. media studies), bringing a wide spectrum of theoretical insights into the field. The volume is targeted at academics and students working within the paradigm of recently popular studies on discoursive manipulation, the formation and construction of identities, and the narrative character of historiography. The editors hope

that both they and the casual reader may find the following collection relevant and interesting. In imagining history one must inevitably rely on its textual representations, whether fictitious or supposedly "objective", yet always subject to the constraints and conventions of textuality. Still, it is precisely by exploiting and consciously relying on the textual in the presentation of the past that contemporary authors, including politicians and makers of history, strive to provide it with current significance, emotional impact and universal meaning. The study of such attempts benefits from a variety of perspectives, encompassing not only classical, but also popular texts and media.

The issue of the past bears special significance to the authors whose backgrounds have been, throughout history, variously defined as Eastern- or Central-European. Given the relatively recent "unfreezing" of the free and independent study of the past that Poland has experienced in the last decades, a multitude of problems are only now surfacing and commanding the attention of scholarly circles. Moreover, the complex history of the region and the pervasive influence that the past can be seen to exert on the present, encourages a discussion of possible metanarratives and rules that could be traced behind the tangled web of historical processes. Furthermore, the historical background has contributed to an enhanced sensitivity to the dangers of potential manipulative and totalizing attempts to make sense of the present by making sense of the past. Such issues seem especially worthy of investigation in an age that has been witnessing technological developments which have revolutionized traditional ways of cultural communication, facilitating the propagation of grand narratives and individual perceptions alike.

Although the collection by no means attempts to represent a comprehensive list of problem areas in the analysis of the changing perspectives on representing history, we firmly believe that it will constitute a point of departure for further discussion, as well as inspire scholars engaged in literary, cultural and linguistic research to introduce the issue of manipulations and revisions of the past into the scope of their studies.

EDITING THE HISTORY OF THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION: POSTMODERN DECONSTRUCTION *AVANT LA LETTRE* IN HERMAN MELVILLE'S *ISRAEL POTTER*

KURT MÜLLER

The Tradition of the Historical Novel and its Status in the Postmodern Age

The final decades of the 20th century have witnessed the powerful re-emergence of the historical novel, a development which goes along with a renewal of serious critical interest in this literary genre. The genre emerged in the 19th century, in a historical climate which was still largely dominated by a spirit of epistemological self-confidence and a belief in historical progress. Today, after the bankruptcy of dogmatic Marxism as the last powerful paradigm of 'objective' and 'progressive' historiography and under the auspices of postmodernism, poststructuralism, and deconstruction, the sense of the 'constructedness' of historical narratives is widely shared among writers, literary critics and even historians. In much of contemporary historical fiction, this 'crisis of representation', as several theorists and critics have called it, found its expression in various forms of "metafictional self-reflexivity and parodistic playfulness"[1]. Looking back from today's point of view, we can regard this situation as the culminating point of a gradual erosion of epistemological and ideological belief systems which started already in the early 19th century (cf. Müller 1994).

Sir Walter Scott's *Waverly* (1814), which combines the fates and developments of invented characters in a thematically significant way with the representation of documented historical figures and events, is generally

regarded as the prototype of the traditional form of the historical novel. Scott's work links the historical events of the Jacobite rebellion of 1745 to the individual fate of his fictional title hero in a way which suggests a meaningful connection between private and public history. Moreover, the historical events are embedded within a teleological pattern in which history appears as the manifestation of a divine 'master plan': as a continuous progression toward more and more advanced stages of socio-cultural development.

In the United States, the example of Scott was soon taken up by James Fenimore Cooper, who projected Scott's model upon the American situation. In Cooper's fictions, the historical material of the Revolutionary period and its contexts is arranged in a way which suggests the inevitability of the progress of American civilization, most conspicuously manifested in the westward expansion. It has to be added, however, that this basically affirmative idea is substantially undermined by a harsh civilization critique which distinguishes Cooper's position markedly from the nationalist 'Manifest Destiny' of many of his contemporaries in Jacksonian America.

The example of Cooper notwithstanding, the United States, a comparatively young nation held together by the collective myth of a 'new beginning' beyond the limitations of recorded history and tradition, and supposedly suffering from a "poverty of materials" (Cooper 1833, 108) which American writers notoriously complained of (or boasted about), was not a particularly fertile ground for the establishment of a tradition of historical writing along the lines of Scott's model. From this, post-World-War-II critics, such as Richard Chase in his influential study *The American Novel and its Tradition* (1957), following Nathaniel Hawthorne's famous distinction between *novel* and *romance*, constructed a view of American fiction that may be seen as a literary-critical version of American exceptionalism. According to Chase, the singularity of the American historical experience had led to a uniquely American literary tradition, which found its peculiar expression in the symbolical-allegorical mode of the romance, a mode less concerned with the specifics of a given social and historical situation than with more universal moral or existential issues. Whatever degree of plausibility this line of argument may have had, it has on the whole been convincingly disproved by more recent research in the wake of the new historicism. There can be no question today that, for example, the fictions of the three major figures of the American Renaissance, Poe, Hawthorne, and Melville, notwithstanding

the universal dimensions of their works, were at the same time deeply involved in the socio-historical and political issues of their times.

Herman Melville's 'Narratives of Fact' and the Tradition of the American Jeremiad

A case in point is Herman Melville. While Perry Miller, another leading figure of the post-World-War-II American Studies movement, in his book *The Raven and the Whal*e (1956) still regarded Melville as an ardent devotee of a nationalist cause, most critics today seem to agree that throughout his *oeuvre* be has been deeply skeptical about the development of American democracy, even if he voices his skepticism mainly by way of implication and irony.[2] Throughout, he exposes the gap between the inhumane tendencies within American society and its rhetoric of liberty, equality, and human progress. Fictional works, such as *Moby Dick* (1851), *Benito Cereno* (1856), and autobiographically inspired "narratives of fact" (Samson 1989), such as *Redburn* (1849) or *White-Jacket* (1850), can be read as bleak historical parables of the betrayal of the Republican ideals by the self-appointed 'redeemer nation' of the world. In the majority of these works, the Declaration of Independence, issued on the Fourth of July 1776, served as an important reference point.[3] It was this national founding document, the first and foremost among the "holy scriptures" of American Civil Religion, by which Melville could most effectively "call attention to the gap between the promise of America and its actual achievement" (Gilmore 1977, ix).

It can nevertheless be argued that the tone of Melville's early narratives, notwithstanding their bleak outlook on the socio-political realities of the time, was still basically affirmative in the sense that they can be located within the tradition of the jeremiad, a rhetorical mode in which, according to Sacvan Bercovitch, the evocation of doom is used as a strategy for a call for "spiritual renewal" (1978, xi). This seems to be true even for *Moby Dick* (1851), where the apocalyptic ending of the social microcosm embodied by Captain Ahab and the ship's crew is linked with the survival of the I-narrator Ishmael, who is thus established in the role of a prophetic voice calling for moral change (Duban 1983, 83). It seems, however, that in the period following *Moby Dick* such traces of historical optimism finally give way to a decidedly pessimistic view. That pessimism is particularly pronounced in *Israel Potter* (1855), a work which is unique

in the Melville canon in so far as it is the author's only piece of historical fiction in the precise meaning of the term.

Melville's Use of Literary, Biographical and Historical Source Material in *Israel Potter*

Among the majority of Melville-critics *Israel Potter*, "probably the least discussed of his novels" (Cohen 1986, 308) is still widely – and I would argue: undeservedly – considered as one the author's minor literary achievements.[4] In order to understand the reasons for this critical neglect, we have to have a short look at the circumstances of the novel's origin and composition.[5] After the publication of *Moby Dick*, which proved to be a financial failure, the reception of Melville's next novel *Pierre*, published in the summer of 1852, turned out to be a complete disaster. Reading audiences were so shocked about the style and content of that novel that they charged the author with "moral depravity and even insanity" (Bezanson 1982, 178). Looking for a way at least out of his financial troubles, Melville turned to magazine writing, and he found a connection with *Putnam's*, a magazine which started publication in 1853 and had a particular interest in contributions from American authors. Taking care of not offending the middlebrow tastes of the publisher and his readership, Melville offered Putnam the story of Israel Potter for serial monthly publication, reassuring his addressee with the following promise:

> 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. As for interest, I shall try to sustain that as well as I can […]. (Qtd. in Bezanson 1982, 182)

The original source for the book, which Melville had more or less accidentally found when browsing through a London bookstore, was an obscure book by the title *Life and Remarkable Adventures of Israel R. Potter*, a supposedly autobiographical document, ghost-written by a certain Henry Trumbull, who had published it in his own printing shop in Providence, Rhode Island in 1824. Trumbull's book is, in short, the life story of a patriotic American soldier who fought bravely at the battle of Bunker Hill, was taken prisoner by enemy troops, brought to England, spend 48 years of his life in the enemy's country and when he finally came home at the age of 79, his country refused him his deserved pension on the

grounds of a legal technicality (he had been absent from America at the time when the pension law was passed).

It seems that with the plot material of that source Melville had indeed hoped to have the stuff for a story that would appeal to the popular taste. Standing in a long tradition of personal narratives, such as the Indian captivity narrative or the slave narrative, the Potter-story belongs to the subgenre of the "veteran's narrative" (Bezanson 1982, 185), adhering to the conventions of that type of narrative in glorifying the heroic patriotism of the veterans and in celebrating the American Revolution and its values (Bakker 1989, 18). The vivid description of the primitive living conditions in England in Trumbull's book may have served as an additional stimulant for the patriotic pride of an American readership. In addition, the various stations of the protagonist's early biography contained all the ingredients of a tale about an archetypal American hero. The Israel Potter in Trumbull's narrative is a young man who leaves the home farm in revolt against his father. He goes west and helps in exploring the wilderness, lives temporarily as a trapper, hunter, and seaman on a whaling ship, and fights as a brave soldier in one of the most famous battles of the American Revolution, thus providing the best material for a heroic portrait of the 'common man'. Finally, the main body of the biography, with scenes of entrapment, flight and escape, violence and crime, bears the potential for the suspenseful adventure plot Melville had promised his publisher.

Melville's Subversive Play with Conventional Reader's Expectations

However, a closer look at Melville's handling of his source reveals that his promise to the magazine publisher was rather a disguise strategy which allowed him to pursue a far more complex artistic agenda.[6] This strategy is already evident in the author's dedication "To His Highness the Bunker Hill Monument" (vii)[7], by which he prefaces his novel. In this dedication, Melville poses mock-modestly as the "editor" of an only slightly revised version of the original:

> with a change in the grammatical person, it preserves, almost as if in reprint, Israel Potter's autobiographical story. […] From a tattered copy, rescued by the merest chance from the rag-pickers, the present account has been drawn, which, with the exception of some expansions, and additions of historic and personal details, and one or two shiftings of scene, may

> perhaps, be not unfitly regarded something in the light of a dilapidated old tombstone retouched. (vii)

In addition to his mock-modest disparagement of his own contribution, Melville also takes pains to lead the reader's expectations into the direction suggested by the original source. When the serial magazine publication started in July 1845, the patriotic agenda was emphasized by the subtitle "A Fourth of July Story" (Bezanson 1982, 208). The Fourth of July motif is also stressed in the dedication, in which Melville states his aim to rescue one of the forgotten heroes of the Revolution from oblivion, ranking the protagonist of his narrative among those who deserve what he calls a biography "in its purer form, confined to the ended lives of the true and the brave" (vii).

We have to be aware, however, of the ironic tone of the dedication (Dryden 1968, 142), which is addressed not to a living person, but to a dead stone monument (cf. Bezanson 1982, 186, note 11). This monument functions here as a symbol of the petrification of the ideals of democracy and equality for which the Revolution was fought. Moreover, the fictitious editor, assuming the subservient posture of a "Most devoted and obsequious" servant (viii), addresses the monument as "Your Highness", which, apart from alluding ironically to the monument's physical height, appears as the mock-imitation of an attitude that runs counter to the egalitarian spirit of democracy that the monument is supposed to symbolize. This betrayal of the Revolutionary ideals is furthermore underscored by the fact (highlighted by the "editor") that the official history books, such as "the volumes of Sparks" (viii), an eminent historian in Melville's time, pay heed only to the deeds of the 'great men'.[8]

Professing once more the story's "general fidelity to the main drift of the original narrative" (viii), Melville goes on to warn the reader not to expect a happy ending:

> I forbore anywhere to mitigate the hard fortunes of my hero; and particularly towards the end, though solely tempted, durst not substitute for the allotment of Providence any artistic recompense of poetical justice (viii)

By this, the reader is led to anticipate a story in the tradition of the jeremiad. Such expectations seem to be supported by the first and the final chapter, which function as a kind of narrative frame. Thus, in the first chapter we already have a significant deviation from the original source

when Melville changes the protagonist's place of origin from a town in Rhode Island to the wild Berkshire mountain region in Eastern Massachusetts, which is a more adequate setting for celebrating the tough pioneer spirit of the original settlers and which gives the author the opportunity to place the protagonist into a generational line of a race of people endowed with heroic stamina and patriotism. Sketching the achievements of these settlers in taming the wilderness, the narrator rhapsodizes:

> The very Titans seemed to have been at work. That so small an army as the first settlers must needs have been, should have taken such wonderful pains to inclose so ungrateful a soil; that they should have accomplished such herculean undertakings with so slight prospect of reward; this is a consideration which gives us a significant hint of the temper of the men of the Revolutionary era.
>
> Nor could a fitter country be found for the birthplace of the devoted patriot, Israel Potter.
>
> To this day the best stone-wall builders, as the best wood-choppers, come from those solitary mountain towns; a tall, athletic, and hardy race, unerring with the axe as the Indian with the tomahawk (4f.)

This evocation of the revolutionary spirit, however, stands in sharp contrast to the anticlimactic final chapter, which describes the protagonist's sad return to his home country (cf. Karcher 1980, 104). Arriving in Boston after almost 50 years of exile on the Fourth of July of 1826, it happens that

> half-an-hour after landing, hustled by the riotous crowd […], the old man narrowly escaped being run over by a patriotic triumphal car in the procession, flying a broidered banner, inscribed with gilt letters: –
>
> "BUNKER HILL.
> 1775
> GLORY TO THE HEROES THAT FOUGHT!" (167)

The incident highlights the discrepancy between the myth and the political realities in the first half of the 19th century. The ideals of the revolution "are celebrated in the abstract, but Israel Potter, the epitome of the 'common man' who helped to materialize them, remains unrecognized and is left to an uncertain fate" (Pütz 1985, 241, my translation). Returning to his father's homestead, he finds it burned down and deserted, the place now peopled by strangers who have lost all memory of its old inhabitants.

The book ends with a passage that is a peculiar mixture of laconic factual statement and elegiac lament:

> He was repulsed in efforts, after a pension, by certain caprices of law. His scars proved his only medals. He dictated a little book, the record of his fortunes. But long ago it faded out of print – himself out of being – his name out of memory. He died the same day that the oldest oak of his native hills was blown down. (169)

Deconstructing the Heroic Image of Revolutionary Leaders: Benjamin Franklin and John Paul Jones

While such passages may indeed suggest a reading along the lines of the jeremiad, a genre "designed to join social criticism to spiritual renewal" (Bercovitch 1978, xi), I would argue that there is strong evidence to suggest that this is only the surface which serves as a kind of 'cover story' for a profoundly pessimistic political as well as existential vision. Such evidence can be found, for example, in two of Melville's major revisions of the original source. While chapters 2 to 6 are still "a relatively simple rewriting of the first half of Trumbull's narrative" (Bezanson 1982, 187), from chapter 7 on, Melville allowed himself some major changes by giving extensive room for sharply satiric portraits of two celebrated 'heroes' of the Revolution, Benjamin Franklin and John Paul Jones.[9] Thus, in the original source there is a short account of Israel Potter being sent by English sympathizers with the American cause to Paris on a secret courier mission, in the course of which he has a brief encounter with Franklin. By the mid-nineteenth century, Benjamin Franklin, one of the co-signers of the Declaration of Independence, who served as American Commissioner to France between 1776 and 1785, had by the mid-nineteenth century become an American culture hero, the very epitome of national virtues, such as practical wisdom, honesty, plainness, modesty, and altruism, and his short description in the original source is very much in line with that public image. There, the first-person-narrator characterizes him as "that great and good man (whose humanity and generosity have been the theme of infinitely abler pens than mine)" (Trumbull 1824, 51).

Melville, in his portrait of Franklin, alludes to this public image, only to undercut it with sarcastic irony. Referring to him in a tone of mock-heroic praise as "the venerable Doctor Franklin" (38) "the man of gravity" (38), "this serene, cool and ripe old philosopher" (39), "this gravely ruddy

personage" (39), "the man of wisdom" (39), "the grave man of utility" (40), "the venerable sage" (40) etc., the narrative voice parodies all the popular clichés circulating around that figure. Yet, at the same time, the actual behaviour of Franklin, who preaches, for example, that "one remedy for mistakes is honesty" (41), exposes him as a sly, scheming, and ruthless politician. The supposedly "pastoral simplicity of his manners" (46) is likewise revealed as a false popular myth. While preaching the virtues of moderation and the simple life to others, Franklin himself leads a life in pomp and luxury, enjoying "the good opinion of even the voluptuaries of the showiest of capitals" (48). Moreover, the "man of wisdom" (64 and passim) is ridiculed as a sententious wiseacre who is continually quoting himself. Finally, Franklin's reputed altruism is exposed as a sham which covers a spirit of ruthless self-interest. This is ironically underscored in the episode when, under the pretence of teaching Israel the virtues of the simple life, he takes all luxury articles from his room in order to keep them for himself. In Israel Potter's own words: "'Every time he comes in he robs me, [...] with an air all the time, too, as if he were making me presents [...]'" (52). The episode thus uncovers the true meaning behind Franklin's famous maxim "God helps them that help themselves" (61 and passim).

Even more devastating is Melville's portrait of Captain John Paul Jones.[10] Born in Scotland as the son of a poor family, John Paul Jones went to sea at the early age of 12 and became captain of a merchant ship when he was 21. After some legal trouble when he was suspected of having flogged one of his sailors to death he left his home country in an embittered mood, joined the American Navy in 1775 as first lieutenant and fought in various battles during the Revolution. Between 1777 and 1783, the year of the Paris peace treaty, he was, by mutual agreement with American Commissioner in Paris Franklin, engaged in bringing the war directly into the enemy's territory with undeclared war actions against English ships and raids upon British territory, including an attack upon his former home town Whitehaven, which he had left in anger.

The battle which contributed most to his fame as a Revolutionary hero took place in September 1779, when under his command the *Bon Homme Richard*, a warship which he had renamed in honor of Benjamin Franklin's *Poor Richard's Almanac* (which also contains the before-mentioned self-help maxim), managed to defeat the English *Serapis*, a ship far superior both in firepower and in manpower, in a furious and bloody battle. Part of the legendary lore surrounding John Paul Jones's hero image is a famous anecdote according to which, in a seemingly hopeless situation, he replied

to the English captain's demand for surrender with the words "I have not yet begun to fight". In 1781 American Congress passed a vote of thanks to him for the way "he had sustained the honour of the American fleet", in 1887 it awarded him a gold medal[11], and if we search for his name in the internet today, it appears often under the informal title "Father of the American Navy" (although it has to be added that he shares that title with several others).

In the original version of Israel Potter's biography, John Paul Jones is only incidentally mentioned, and he is characterized along the lines of his public image as a celebrity of the Revolution:

> There was no one engaged in the cause of America, that did more to establish her fame in England, and to satisfy the high boasting Britains of the bravery and unconquerable resolution of the Yankees, than the bold adventurer capt. Paul Jones (Trumbull 1824, 59f.)

Again, Melville's revision of the original includes major changes. While Trumbull's autobiographical protagonist never encounters John Paul Jones in person, Melville invents a situation in which Israel Potter meets him at Franklin's residence in Paris and later another one in which he joins him in his coastal raids and attacks on English ships and even becomes his close companion. Placing the before-mentioned sea battle between the *Bon Homme Richard* and the *Serapis* into the center of a series of episodes, Melville uses Robert C. Sands's *Life and Correspondence of John Paul Jones* (New York, 1839) as one of his main sources (Bezanson 1982, 195). Yet while Sands's biography eulogizes Jones as an epitome of revolutionary fervor, Melville undermines this image by highlighting those of his character traits which disqualify him for the role of an exemplary democratic hero.

First of all, Melville stresses the totally private nature of Jones's motives for fighting. This is ironically indicated by his attraction to Benjamin Franklin's self-help philosophy (Samson 1989, 184). Moreover, his participation in the Revolutionary War is to a considerable extent grounded on a desire for personal revenge. Feeling rejected by his home town Whitehaven because of the flogging incident, he is even ready to burn it down (chapter 16). In several respects he is "a kind of Ahab" (Zaller 1976, 610), a veritable embodiment of diabolical despotism and violent destruction.

Throughout, Melville's characterization of Jones centers on the "oxymoronic figure of the civilized barbarian" (Bezanson 1982, 195). Outwardly civilized, he is inwardly a

> jaunty barbarian in broad-cloth; a sort of prophetical ghost, glimmering in anticipation upon the advent of those tragic scenes of the French Revolution which levelled the exquisite refinement of Paris with the blood-thirsty ferocity of Borneo; showing that broaches and fingerrings, not less than nose-rings and tattooing, are tokens of the primeval savageness which ever slumbers in human kind, civilised or uncivilised. (63)

The destructive quality of Jones's 'Revolutionary heroism' comes out most conspicuously in Melville's description of the battle between the *Bon Homme Richard* and the *Serapis*. "[C]elebrated in the annals of the American Navy as one of its most glorious victories" (Bakker 1989, 29), this battle is here depicted as an atrocious butchery: "[…] it was as if the Siamese Twins, oblivious of their fraternal bond, should rage in unnatural fight" (125).

It seems thus evident that in his sarcastic portraits of such famous Revolutionary heroes as Benjamin Franklin and John Paul Jones Melville wants to call attention to those aspects of the national past which the official history books tend to gloss over. It is in that sense that he comments:

> intrepid, unprincipled, reckless, predatory, with boundless ambition, civilized in externals but a savage at heart, America is, or may yet be, the Paul Jones of nations. (120)

Bon Homme Richard, the name of war ship given in honor of Franklin, establishes a symbolic connection between the savagery of the celebrated Revolutionary War hero and the more subtle inhumanity of the self-help-philosophy of America's most celebrated Revolutionary thinker. In conclusion, we can say that in *Israel Potter* Melville no longer laments in jeremiad-fashion the decline of the Revolutionary ideals, but identifies the very spirit which engendered the Revolution as the true source of corruption.

Deconstructing the Myth of the 'Common Man': The Satiric Portrait of the Title Hero

There are critics who hold against this view that Melville's debunking of America's canonized Revolutionary heroes is counter-pointed by a celebration of the 'common-man'-protagonist Israel Potter as the 'true hero' of the Revolution.[12] In my view, these critics tend to underestimate the all-pervasive irony of Melville's late work. Brian Rosenberg and others are certainly right in pointing out that Melville dramatizes Potter's exemplary role only in form of a harsh parody. Far from being a tragic victim of historical fate, he is a comically pathetic "Confidence Man whose changes in identity are dictated by others".[13] But this character's potential for being manipulated and molded by others has not only comic aspects. Under the influence of a charismatic 'leader', Paul Jones, the hero's patriotism turns into a savagery which almost equals that of his tutor (Gilmore 1977, 158). In several instances, he is "literally […] carried away by the warmaking spirit instilled in him by Jones" (Adler 1981, 83). And during the battle with the *Serapis*, when ordered to throw a grenade down the main hatchway of the enemy ship, Israel acts with the automatic precision of a cold-blooded killer:

> Watching his chance, he dropped one grenade with such faultless precision, that, striking its mark, an explosion rent the Serapis like a volcano. [...] More than twenty men were instantly killed: nearly forty wounded. (127)

Thus, in the late Melville's dark view of America's historical past, the central myth of the American Revolution is effectively deflated: the celebrated 'common man' is exposed both as a faceless 'mass man' and as a potential mass murderer.

Melville's Political and Metaphysical Pessimism and the Deconstruction of Traditional Modes of Historical Sense Making

The novel's deconstructive agenda[14], however, is not just focused on the political issue but has even more universal implications. First of all, *Israel Potter* conveys the author's pessimistic view of Western civilization and, in extension, of human nature in general. This pessimism comes out

most pointedly in the account of the sea battle between the two warships (chapter 19). Rather then presenting a realistic description of the battle, that chapter evokes a grotesque apocalyptic scenario of doom and destruction, and it summarizes the event with a rhetorical question:

> 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)

In a seemingly radical change of tone, the following chapter, entitled "The Shuttle", appears to offer some sort of comic relief when we see Israel Potter, due to his rashness inspired by his wild battle rage, suddenly find himself on an enemy ship. Pretending to be one of the crew, he is searching in vain for a place in the ship's society where he could be accepted as a member. The episode can be read as an extended metaphor of the absurdity and essential homelessness of human existence, a motif which is taken up again in the end when Israel Potter comes home only to experience his profound homelessness.

Another aspect of the novel's deconstructive agenda becomes evident when we have a closer look at the plot. As many critics have noted, the novel is a rather extreme case of genre mixing, containing, among others, elements of the captivity narrative, here in the particular variation of the 'veteran's narrative', the historical novel, the adventure story, and of the novel of development. While these genre patterns are intended to lead the reader to expect some sort of meaningful, teleological development, such expectations are continuously undermined by such subversive generic forms as farce, parody, satire or the picaresque, and last but not least by a course of events which is ruled by coincidence and blind chance.

The deconstructive agenda becomes particularly evident in view of the abundance of intertextual allusions. In a highly insightful study, Manfred Pütz has shown how the novel is interspersed in particular "with a multitude of allusions and references to Old Testament figures and events which can be understood in terms of traditional typology as instruments of an exegesis along the lines of a history and prophecy of salvation" (Pütz 1985, 228; my translation). As Pütz reminds us with reference to Ursula Brumm's path-breaking book on *American Thought and Religious Typology* (1970), typology is a method of biblical interpretation which explains figures or events of the Old Testament as "pre-figurations" of the New Testament. Thus, Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac in the Old Testament

stands as the "type" which prefigures the sacrifice of Christ as its New Testament "antitype". Originally confined to the purposes of biblical exegesis, the New England Puritans took a decisive new step by extending the typological method to figures and events of secular history. In particular, they "perceived the story of the exodus of the Jews from Egypt in search of the promised land as the 'type' or prefiguring of their own journey […]" (Elliott 1977, 206f.), thus providing their situation of exile with a sense of historical mission. In the period of the Revolution and the early Republic, this typological concept of history, undergoing a partial secularization, found its expression in a particular brand of 'Civil Religion' (Bellah 1967) in which religious typology and a sense of national mission were melted together in a peculiar symbiosis.

It is this ideological configuration, a configuration that has been shaping the American self-image until today, which is satirically exposed in Melville's *Israel Potter*. As an example, I will confine myself here to the typological references concerning the title figure. In chapter 23, entitled "Israel in Egypt", the fate of the hero in the slums of London, is explicitly linked to the fate of the Old Testament Israelites under Egyptian captivity. "Poor Israel! Well-named – bondsman in the English Egypt" (157). In chapter 25, that fate is additionally connected to the events which follow the Exodus:

> For the most part, what befell Israel during his forty years' wanderings in the London deserts, surpassed the forty years in the natural wilderness of the outcast Hebrews under Moses. (161)

There are, to be sure, "[unmistakable] parallels between Potter's fate and the fate of Israel in Egypt and its forty years of wandering through the desert" (Pütz 1985, 237; my translation). In the penultimate chapter, Potter's homeland America is described as "that Canaan beyond the sea" (166) and his homecoming as a "voyage to the Promised Land" (166), but, as Pütz (1985, 237; my translation) correctly observes, "Potter's life story turns out to be a drastic modification of the biblical model". As the final chapter indicates, he returns to a country that has become completely foreign to him, a country "in which all the traces of his past are radically erased" and where all the chances for a new beginning are lost (Pütz 1985, 237; my translation). With his parodistic inversion of the Promised Land-motif, Melville's novel deconstructs not only the most powerful national master narrative of America's special historical mission, but also the

teleological models of historical meaning construction in general. In summary, Melville's *Israel Potter* can be read as an early anticipation of that all-pervading skepticism about the "grand narratives" of human progress that has become the hallmark of the postmodern condition.

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Notes

[1] Engler 1994, 13; cf. also Hutcheon 1988, 105-140.
[2] For a critical discussion of Perry Miller's thesis cf. Gerlach 1972.
[3] Cf. Müller 1992. In the following, I take up and elaborate some arguments and ideas from this earlier study.
[4] The tone for the predominantly negative later reception of the novel was probably set by F. O. Matthiessen in his influential study *American Renaissance* (1941), which reads *Israel Potter* as a document of creative exhaustion, "produced by a man not at all able to write the kind of books he wanted to" (491).
[5] Cf. Bezanson 1982, 178ff. For a more comprehensive discussion of the novel and its composition, publication and reception history cf. also Cohen 1986 and the monographs of Keyssar (1969) and Rampersad (1969).
[6] For a discussion of this aspect from a Neo-Marxist perspective cf. Lackey (1994), who sees a tension between two opposing impulses at work: between "the demand to confirm the myth and sell books, and the desire to follow his 'humors' […] and as a critic of the Revolutionary legacy debunk the myth" (32).
[7] Quotations from and page references to refer to *Israel Potter* refer to the Northwestern Newberry Edition listed in the bibliography.
[8] In his Foucauldian reading of *Israel Poetter* William V. Spanos provides an interesting new perspective on the dedication by exploring its intertextual links to the two famous anniversary orations held by Daniel Webster on June 17, 1875, and June 17, 1834, interpreting the dedication as a "carnivalesque commentary" (60) on those orations. The overall focus of Spanos's approach is on the novel's radical deconstruction of the national myth of American exceptionalism, concluding with reflections on the topicality of Melville's agenda in view of 20th and 21st century events uch as the Vietnam War or Nine Eleven (cf. Spanos 57-103).
[9] In chapters 21 and 22 Ethan Allan, another famous Revolutionary War hero, makes a short appearance. As prisoner of war he eventually achieves his release by impressing his English captors by a strange combination of reckless ferociousness and gentleman-like manners. Although his (rather sketchy) portrait is less negative, those critics who tend to see him as a positive foil to Franklin and Jones tend to underrate its underlying ironic tone. Cf. Samson 1989, 185, who reads Allen's behaviour not as a case of true heroism but of clever impression management in the manner of Franklin.
[10] For the following, cf. Cooper, http://www.history.navy.mil/bios/-jones_jp_cooper.htm (retrieved 3. 11. 2010).
[11] "Life of John Paul Jones", http://www.jpj.demon.co.uk/jpjlife.htm (3. 11. 2010).
[12] Cf. Browne 1968; Gilmore 1977, 153.
[13] Rosenberg 1987, 184; cf. also Zaller 1976, 621, and Broncano 2008, 492.
[14] Using a Bakthinian approach, Manual Broncano (2008) comes to similar conclusions about the anticipation of "postmodern" techniques and issues in the text.

REVISIONS OF HISTORY: THE TASKS OF THE HISTORIAN ACCORDING TO CYPRIAN KAMIL NORWID

MAŁGORZATA RYGIELSKA

In modern times, following the turn of antipositivism and changes that have occurred in the perception of both sciences and humanities, we are aware that any vision of history, irrespective of whether it is presented by a historian or a writer, is a re-vision of history or an interpretation of the past made from a particular point of view. It is equally important to address the question of who a historian is and what challenges he faces. These issues approached today by many scholars, were also of extreme importance in the nineteenth century called the "century of history." [1] Back in that period expansive development of historiography took place. This discipline was gaining increasing significance in the area of humanities. It was contemplated whether history should be considered arts or a science.

> In contrast to [...] the Enlightenment, the new century did not give rise to merely one historiographical standard, but rather, offered a few models of history as a science, out of which almost each one in some way became a standard for some part of historiography of that time. Yet, none was widely accepted across Europe[2].

During heated debates regarding how history as well as writing and understanding it should be approached, Cyprian Kamil Norwid writes a poem called *Historyk* [*Historian*]. Apart from this poem there exist numerous other writings by Norwid, in which he raises the problem of understanding history and manners of its presentation. It was his following dramas that were very eagerly staged particularly in the twenty-year interwar period: *Cleopatra and Caesar*, as well as *Krakus* and *Wanda* referred to by the author himself as a national mystery play." Much

attention was also paid to the links of Norwid's views on history with Hegel's philosophy of history[3]. There is also a great number of writings concerning the significance of Christianity in Norwid's vision of history[4]. *Notatki z historii,* [*Notes on history*] in turn*,* are used by scholars mostly for confirmation of Norwid's theses propounded in other works. Moreover, it is comments on history found in Norwid's epistolography that are read to in a similar manner. Scattered opinions on Norwid as a "poet of history,"[5] are likewise encountered in anthologies of the history of Polish literature, or in foreign ones.[6]

I am inclined to believe that Norwid's artistic legacy the English reader is acquainted with through the translations of Adam Czerniawski[7], Jerzy Peterkiewicz[8], Agata Brajerska-Mazur[9], to name a few, is worth interpreting and reinterpreting. Thus, in this paper I suggest interpreting the poem called *Historyk* [*Historian*]. This piece, similarly to the poetry book called *Vade-mecum* it originates from, has not been translated into English thus far[10]. For this reason, I have decided to use the poem in original, i.e. in Polish along with the following German and French translations available to me.

I quote the Polish text of the poem after *Vade-mecum*, published in 2004 and compiled by Joseph Fert on the basis of manuscripts and previous editions of the volume (Roman numerals indicate the order of the poems):

XCIV. HISTORYK

Wiele jest – gdy kto pomierzył stary cmentarz
Albo i genealogiczny-dąb:
Wiele – jeżli *inwentarz*
Skreślił, zajrzał epokom w głąb
I upostaciował opis…

Ale… jeżli on w starca, w męża, w kobietę
Powrócił strach ów, z jakim dziad ich drżał,
Patrząc na *pierwszego kometę* –
Gdy po raz pierwszy raz nad globem stał:
. . . . . to – *dziejopis*![11]

XCIV.HISTORIAN

Well done – if he measured the old cemetery
Or so he did with the genealogy oak tree