

Chapter 1

Melville's Specter

An Introduction

It is common knowledge that nomads fare miserably under our kinds of regime: we will go to any lengths in order to settle them.

—Gilles Deleuze, “Nomadic Thought”

In the last chapter of my book *The Errant Art of Moby-Dick: The Canon, the Cold War, and the Struggle for American Studies*, published a decade ago, I concluded that Melville's revolutionary novel

speaks resonantly across the great divide of time not to (American) Man but to the present historical occasion. It is not, to extend a resonant motif in Michel Foucault, simply a genealogy, a “history of [Melville's] present”: it is also a history of the American future of the present historical occasion that we precariously inhabit. This . . . is not only because Melville proleptically delegitimized the Cold War discourse of the founders of American literary studies—whom we can now call the Custodians of the American Cultural Memory. It is also and more importantly—if less discursively—because, in anticipating the self-destruction of the American episteme in the Vietnam War, it proleptically delegitimized the discourse of the New World Order.¹

Since then, the world has borne witness to the systematic effort of the American political elite and the culture industry that reproduces its truth to recuperate the American exceptionalist national identity, to rehabilitate the reputation of the American military establishment, and to reaffirm America's missionary “errand in the [global] wilderness,” all of which had been discredited by the arrogant incompetence of the Pentagon planners—“the best and the brightest”²—and the military command that executed their optimistic scenarios, the murderous excesses of violence perpetrated by the United States against a Southeast Asian colonial people

struggling for self-determination, the vulgar prevarications of its leadership to the American public about the progress of the war, and, of course, its humiliating defeat at the hands of an infinitely less powerful army of insurgents. This massive recuperative effort at rewriting history was realized between the dubiously decided presidential election of 2000, which brought an intensely nationalist president, George W. Bush and a neoconservative executive leadership to power, and September 11, 2001, when the attacks by Al Qaeda on the World Trade Center buildings in New York and the Pentagon in Washington consolidated the media and the American public and enabled the new administration to launch its “war on terror.” This initiative, it must not be overlooked, has also involved not simply the tacit, if unofficial, announcement of a state of national emergency, but, given the indefiniteness of the “enemy” in a “war on terror,” the making of the state of exception permanent, the fundamental purpose of which, to appropriate a phrase addressed by one of the custodians of American culture to the readers of Melville’s novel *Pierre*, is to “freeze” dissent in the United States “into [perpetual] silence.” So arrogantly confident has the history of forgetting made this neoconservative leadership that it can announce with the certitude of impunity—and in a dehumanized managerial language that resonates with what Hannah Arendt called “the banality of evil”—that they need not be accountable to history, since it is they who produce reality:

The aide said that guys like me were “in what we call the reality-based community,” which he defined as people who “believe that solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality.” I nodded and murmured something about enlightenment principles and empiricism. He cut me off. “That’s not the way the world really works anymore,” he continued. “We’re an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you’re studying that reality—judiciously, as you will—we’ll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that’s how things will sort out. We’re history’s actors . . . and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do.”³

To this end, the Bush administration, in an awesome reduction of historical reality reminiscent of Captain Ahab’s ontological reduction of “all that most maddens and torments . . . ; all that cracks the sinews and cakes the brain; all the subtle demonisms of life and thought” to Moby Dick, personified the complex and volatile history of the Middle East, in large part the result of the ravages of British and French imperialism, and, more recently, American Cold War policy, in the figure of Osama bin Laden to make “it” “practically assailable.”⁴ What ensued was, first, “the shock and awe” preemptive invasion of Afghanistan in the name of “civi-

lization" (regime change) and then, following the willful and duplicitous substitution of Saddam Hussein for Osama bin Laden as the United States' Moby Dick, the invasion of Iraq and defeat of Hussein's army and an occupation that, in the process of willfully imposing an American-style (ventriloquized) democracy on a recalcitrant and highly diverse Islamic people, has precipitated a guerrilla war all too reminiscent of the "quagmire" that Vietnam became. Analogous in so many ways to the Viet Cong's strategy of resistance, the Iraqi's resistance to the United States' occupation seems to be characterized by an awareness and exploitation of the "strength" of the Western "imperialist" occupier: they refuse in their tactics to be answerable to the deeply backgrounded and polyvalent instrumentalist ("can do") comportment toward being of the occupying enemy, the beginning-middle-end narrative, the forwarding/progressive orientation this temporal structure enables, and the "decisive victory," which resolves the conflict of differences into the same.

In other words, the figure of Melville I drew from my reading of *Moby-Dick* in 1995, continues to speak significantly and in a fundamental way to the present American occasion, indeed, more so now, it seems, than then. This is one of the reasons why I decided, in the wake of the announcement of America's "war on terror" after 9/11/01 to undertake this second study of Melville's fiction, this time focusing on some of the texts Melville wrote between the publication of *Moby-Dick* and *The Confidence-Man*, the last work of fiction he published in his lifetime: *Pierre; or the Ambiguities* (1852); "Bartleby the Scrivener" (1853); *Israel Potter: His Fifty Years of Exile* (1855); "Benito Cereno" (1855); and *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade* (1857). The other, equally important, reason is that recent "New Americanists," however attuned to Melville's relevance to the contemporary American sociopolitical occasion, have not adequately dissociated the revolutionary Melville from the Melville of the liberal humanists of the Revival in the 1920s and the Melville of the Cold War founders of American literary studies in the mid-1950s, nor have they adequately conveyed his powerful witness to the dark side of America's exceptionalist errand.

A telling symptom of this failure announced itself glaringly at the very moment I began writing this preface. In reading Bill Ayer's account of the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago in *Fugitive Days* (2001), the moving memoir of one of the Weather Underground, who resisted American racism and the United States' arrogant and brutal intervention in Vietnam, not as a reformer but as a revolutionary, I came across this startlingly traditional liberal humanist reading of *Moby-Dick*:

Mayor Richard Daley played a perfect Moby Dick for us. . . . After King was assassinated and Daly's cops buckled before the ensuing fury, he called out the National Guard and troops and tanks

rolled down Madison Avenue, up Austin Boulevard. Daly issued his famous “shoot to kill/shoot to maim” orders then. . . . We girded our loins and sharpened our spears, preparing for the monster.

Our Captain Ahab was Tom Hayden, former president of SDS, now leader of the National Mobilization to End the War, the coalition leading the convention protest.⁵

The differential being—the very (non)object of the Weather Underground’s care—that Melville represents in his novel as the intended victim of Captain Ahab’s monomania, becomes personified in the figure of Mayor Daly, and the paranoid American exceptionalist perpetrator of the violence against differential being, one of the heroes of the protest movement. This, it should not be overlooked, was not written in 1968, when Captain Ahab was still more or less universally read and taught either as the ideal humanist battling heroically against an indifferent and violent nature or as the essence of American democratic man in his struggle against all forms of totalitarianism. It was written in 2001, in the wake of the end of the Cold War and America’s announcement of the end of history and the advent of a New World Order under the aegis of the United States on the eve of 9/11/01.

I

What precisely makes these texts written by a very young Melville (he was, we need constant reminding, only thirty-two years old in 1851 when he published *Moby-Dick*) in the brief six or seven years between the publication of *Pierre* and *The Confidence-Man* so relevant to the contemporary post-9/11 occasion? To proffer some semblance of an answer to this question it will be necessary to go by way of a brief detour into the erratic history of the reception by the custodians of American culture of Melville’s fiction after *Moby-Dick*. Such a detour is necessary because, among other reasons, Melville’s creative production was, perhaps more than that of any other writer in the history of American literature, absolutely tethered to the reception of his work. It was not only that he committed himself at the outset of his career to earn his living by writing, but also that he wrote in a transitional society that, however conscious of the need to break the stranglehold English culture had on American writing, was lacking in cultural sophistication. This condition was amply demonstrated long ago by Perry Miller in *The Raven and the Whale*, which chronicles the flailing, moralist-bound efforts of the “Young Americans” under Evert Duyckinck, Cornelius Matthews, Jedediah B. Auld, and William Alfred Jones, to wrest control over the American literary imagination from the New York

"Knickerbocker Set," under Louis Gaylord Clark, whose model remained English literature.⁶

I have addressed the question of the volatile history of the reception of Melville's books in *The Errant Art of Moby-Dick*, but here I want to underscore an aspect of my analysis of this biographical/authorship issue that, however central to my reading of the novel, I had not fully developed in that book: the curious *anxiety* (*Angst*)—I use this word in the Heideggerian sense appropriated by many poststructuralist theorists⁷—Melville's fiction from *Moby-Dick* to the *Confidence-Man* has consistently activated in those journalists and academic critics who have assumed the responsibility of articulating Melville's place in the American canon; since it has "no thing" as its object, this anxiety could be equally related to the notion of *spectrality*. Despite the mixed reviews of *Moby-Dick*, which had as much to do with the bafflement over the novel's elusive structure—Evert Dyckinck, for example, called it "an intellectual chowder of romance, philosophy, natural history, fine writing, good feeling, bad sayings"⁸—that, following the formal experimentation in *Mardi*, replaced the "simple" narrative structure of the earlier realistic novels of adventure, as with its "raving," Melville was still considered to be an American writer of considerable "promise." With the publication of *Pierre; or the Ambiguities*, however, things changed radically. The reviewers at large undeviatingly condemned it as an outrage against American writing and American sexual and social morality, and/or as the depraved raving of a madman, all ostensibly lamenting his "desertion of the forecandle and the virgin forest, for the drawing room and modest boarding-house chamber."⁹ Of these reviews, one of the most self-righteously incensed was that of the influential critic of *The American Review* (later renamed *The American Whig Review*) George Washington Peck,¹⁰ whose language in his vitriolic attack was to become prophetic. I quote this representative review at some length both to recall the ferocity of the self-righteous moralistic attack on Melville's *Pierre* mounted by the antebellum (often racist) custodians of American culture and to underscore the resonant historical irony—one this book will make much of—informing the intended consequence of this unrelentingly negative criticism:

It is not much matter if South Sea savages are painted like the heroes of a penny theatre, and disport themselves amid paste-board groves, and lakes of canvas. We can afford Mr. Melville full license to do what he likes with "Omoo" and its inhabitants; it is only when he presumes to thrust his tragic *Fantoccini* upon us, as representatives of our own race, *that we feel compelled to turn our critical Aegis upon him, and freeze him into silence. . . .* It is always an unpleasant . . . statement for a critic to make, that he can find nothing worthy of praise in a work under consideration;

but in the case of *Pierre* we feel bound to add to the assertion the sweeping conclusion, that there we find everything to condemn. If a repulsive unnatural and indecent plot, *a style disfigured by every paltry affectation of the worst German school*, and ideas perfectly unparalleled for earnest absurdity, are deserving of condemnation, we think that *our already expressed sentence upon Pierre will meet with the approval of every body who has sufficient strength of mind to read it through. . . .*

Now, in this matter [the ambiguity of Pierre's relationship with Isabel] has done a very serious thing, which not even unsoundness of intellect could excuse. He might have been mad to the very pinnacle of insanity; he might have torn our poor language into tatters, and made from the shreds a harlequin suit in which to play up word upon word, and adjective upon adjective, until he had built a pyramid of nonsense, which should last to the admiration of all men; he might have done all this and a great deal more, and we should not have complained. But when he dares to outrage every principle of virtue; when he strikes with an impious, though, happily, weak hand, at the very foundations of society, *we feel it our duty to tear off the veil with which he was thought to soften the hideous features of the idea, and warn the public against the reception of such atrocious doctrines.* If Mr. Melville had reflected at all . . . his better sense would perhaps have informed him that *there were certain ideas so repulsive to the general mind that they themselves are not alone kept out of sight, but, by a fit ordination of society, everything that might be supposed to even collaterally suggest them is carefully shrouded in a decorous darkness.* Nor has any man the right, in his morbid craving after originality, to strip these horrors of their decent mystery.¹¹ (My emphasis)

What needs to be stressed is that the point of view informing Peck's apparently astonishing judgment against Melville in the wake of the publication of *Pierre* is not unique. It is, in fact, characteristic of the perspective of the great majority of the reviewers, although he spells out the moral and social issues more fully than they do.¹² That is to say, Peck's outrage constitutes something like a synecdoche of antebellum American cultural identity, a dilettante elitist identity, as the underscored text clearly suggests, informed by an evangelical Christianity that is indissolubly related to a severely narrow sexual, familial, and national morality that resonates with vestiges of Puritanism; a racism associated with cultural, if not exactly political imperialism; an exceptionalist disdain for the decadent affectations of European culture; an absolute certainty of the rightness of the practical, simple, homely, ethos of the American way; a blindness, in the name of the "proper," to the hypocrisy of a comportment toward being that would

at all costs “shroud” whatever threatens the truth, stability, and wholeness of this American world “in a decorous darkness”; and, not least, insofar as the American critic sees him- or herself as the custodian of the American cultural memory, a commitment to monumental history. The reviewers of Melville’s book, whether those who referred to his writing as the “ravings” of a madman or, those, like Peck, who condemned its content and style as morally decadent, would, like Medusa’s gaze, “freeze” Melville’s daringly originitive and differential voice—its unflinching acknowledgment of the “ambiguities” of being—“into silence” in the name of the exceptional status, the integrity, and the oneness of “America.”

The impact of this sustained assault on Melville’s will to write was clearly dislocating, given his commitment to making his living by writing. Despite the insistent advice from reviewers to return to the kind of adventurous seafaring fiction that had gained him a substantial readership, he nevertheless resisted the temptation, even as he notified his publishers, as he did Putnam, “that the story [of Israel Potter] shall contain nothing of any sort to shock the fastidious” and that, “there will be very little reflective writing in it; nothing weighty.”¹³ Indeed, in the process of the next six years, during which Melville published the transgressive texts I will address in this book, his resistance became increasingly affirmative until it culminated in the generically undecidable *The Confidence-Man* in 1857, the last fiction he would publish during his lifetime.

The consequence of this great refusal to be answerable to what I have referred to as “the American Calling” in my title—and to which I will return at length in chapter IV on “Benito Cereno” and “Bartleby, the Scrivener”—was, indeed, the “freez[ing] of [Melville] into silence.” In the aftermath of the publication of *The Confidence-Man*, Melville, at the age of thirty-eight, was all too rapidly marginalized, if not entirely forgotten, both by American critics and the reading public in the United States until the so-called Melville Revival of the 1920s. But this exilic silence, as its verbal prominence in *Pierre* testifies, is a resonant silence. It is a silence, in other words, that, in Edward Said’s words, *speaks* the truth to the power of the hegemonic discourse that had exiled and silenced Melville—the discourse I have provisionally identified above as the antebellum version of the American exceptionalist problematic¹⁴—in a “language” that is utterly *other* than or, rather, the other *of* this “totalizing” and “silencing” discourse.

The Melville Revival of the 1920s did not bring this national amnesia to its end; this long “sleep,” to a “great awakening”; or, to use the metaphors central to my book, this long interment of Melville’s fiction to a decisive and joyous resurrection as it is now all too often asserted by his “liberal” exponents. On the contrary, the history of the reception of Melville’s writing since then makes it forcefully evident that the Revival of the 1920s was in some fundamental way instigated by the unallayable force of Melville’s subversive exilic imagination. Far more conversant with

the complexities of the ontological, aesthetic, critical, cultural, and sociopolitical character of American life than their antebellum predecessors, the literary critics of the post-World War I Revival were also that much more attuned to the richness, the originality, the force, and the scope and depth—and in a subliminal way, the dangerous subversiveness—of his critical understanding of America. They were thus compelled by this haunting knowledge to reexamine the fiction beginning with *Moby-Dick* in the light of their contemporary postwar moment, which is to say, at a time when (1) the relationship between humanism and democracy had perforce become a major intellectual, cultural, and educational issue in the United States,¹⁵ (2) the Puritan ethic was rapidly metamorphosing into the spirit of capitalism; and (3) this momentum toward the vulgarization and disintegration of American culture was envisioned as under threat from the influx of southern Europeans into the factory cities and towns of the Northeast. The result of this rethinking was not the rehabilitation of Melville's late fiction at large—*Pierre* and *The Confidence-Man*, for example, remained tainted by the stigma of insanity—but the apotheosis of *Moby-Dick* as the great American novel. However, this canonization or, to invoke an analogous term that has great symbolic prominence in Melville's post-*Moby-Dick* fiction, most notably, *Pierre* and *Israel Potter*, this *monumentalization* of Melville's elusive novel was not based on the subversive aspects of his fiction that had haunted his contemporary critics to the point of compelling them to silence him. On the contrary, these liberal humanist American critics, as I argued in *The Errant Art of Moby-Dick*, in a characteristically democratic ideological maneuver that rendered them (temporarily) immune to the charge of repression, domesticated by *accommodating* Melville's spectral subversions to the *logos* of a secularized elitist version of the American exceptionalist national identity:

The Melville revival inaugurated by such biographers and critics as Raymond Weaver, John Freeman, Van Wyck Brooks, and Lewis Mumford . . . went far, if not the whole way (a project fulfilled by the next generation of Americanists), to reverse the judgment of the earlier critics, without, however, disturbing the *logos* informing the earlier representation of America's national identity and its canon. The critics of the revival apotheosized *Moby-Dick* as an American masterpiece because it intuited and expressed an essentially *human* "spiritual" Real that, in its integral and universal comprehensiveness, transcended the ideological partiality—the Hebraism, as it were—of American sociopolitical existence, an existence precipitated by the inevitable reduction of the Protestant prohibition of art and the vulgar materialism of post-civil War capitalism. This reversal, based on an "opposition" between the reductive and alienating (repressive) Puritan/capitalist ethos and the "emancipa-

tory" spirit of individual genius (the self-reliant . . . subject of an earlier American time) is, *mutatis mutandis*, a discursive regularity of the revival criticism of the 1920s. It is also . . . a reversal based on an opposition that derived as much from Matthew Arnold's "English" classical humanism (the "best self") as from Emerson's "American" transcendentalism.¹⁶

Melville's status as one of the great American writers was irreversibly established by the critics of the 1920s Revival. But as the turbulence of American literary criticism, particularly Melville studies, since then testifies, Melville's specter does not seem to have been finally laid to rest. Not long after the classical humanist appropriation, another resurgence—or, in the language of *Pierre*, another "extraordinary emergency"—of intense interest in his work occurred, this time in the context of World War II and the founding and institutionalization of American literary studies. But again the focus of this renewed interest was primarily on *Moby-Dick*, and its purpose, like that of its predecessor, was discreetly ideological. Instigated by a strong dissatisfaction with the earlier humanists' tendency to universalize an essentially American novel—the representation of Captain Ahab as tragic Man—these critics—F. O. Matthiessen, but especially Lionel Trilling, Henry Nash Smith, Richard Chase, Harry Levin, Leo Marx, Quentin Anderson, Walter Bezanson, among others, as Donald Pease has decisively shown¹⁷—appropriated the novel first in behalf of America's war against Nazism and Fascism and then, more decisively, in behalf of the Cold War against Stalinism: however nuanced the argument, Ishmael became the spirit of American democracy and Captain Ahab, the ominous threat of totalitarianism. Thus once again Melville's ontological, moral, and sociopolitical subversions of the American exceptionalist identity enacted in the fiction of the 1850s were reinterpreted coercively (or "overlooked") to enhance the authority of the very national identity Melville was interrogating.

It was not until the "New Americanists," the generation of critics that emerged from the rubble to which the self-destruction of the perennially confident American exceptionalist identity had been reduced during the decade of the Vietnam War, that the subversions of Melville's fiction—specifically its interrogation of the exceptionality of American exceptionalism and the prominence this interrogation gave to the rhetoric and thematics of spectrality—would come to be openly acknowledged. Unlike their predecessors, these New Americanists—precursors such as Richard Slotkin, Michael Paul Rogin, Richard Drinnon, and Sacvan Bercovitch, and practitioners such as Donald Pease, John Carlos Rowe, J. Hillis Miller, Amy Kaplan, Robyn Wiegman, and Eric Cheyfitz, among many others—became increasingly responsive in significant ways to the emergence in Europe of "poststructuralist" theory. This was the antimetaphysical (or -essentialist) theory that not only interrogated the canonical—"logocentric"—ontological,

linguistic, psychic, and, to a lesser extent, social and political structures of the Western tradition, but also forced into “visibility” the *nothing* that, as the poststructuralists have shown, essentially *belongs to* the (metaphysical) Being of the West—the *specter* that has always haunted (the peace of) its House. Accordingly, these New Americanists began, if only in an unsystematic way, to take seriously the Melville texts that had been marginalized, above all *Pierre*, *Israel Potter*, and *The Confidence-Man*, in the wake of the retrieval and overdetermination of *Moby-Dick*; more important, they began to identify the ubiquitous ghosts that insistently haunt this uncanny fiction or, more accurately, that instigate anxiety in their American exceptionalist “protagonists,” with the *nothing* that the Western tradition, especially in its post-Enlightenment phase, has systematically, which is to say anxiously, “wishe[d] to know nothing about.”¹⁸

I am suggesting, in short, that the “narrative” of Melville’s career as an American writer is a mirror image of the “narratives” he wrote after *Moby-Dick*, particularly in the wake of the representation of Melville’s originary fiction as the ravings of a madman and/or the blasphemies of a jaded and nihilistic decadent that culminated in the will to “freeze him into silence” by the confident custodians of the American national identity. His biography and the stories he wrote immediately after *Moby-Dick* are, ironically, as I will show, stories of the obsessive effort of the custodians of the dominant (democratic) American culture to “contain,” “enclose,” “marginalize,” “forget,” “repress,” “inter” (anti-)Americans who, in one way or another, simply *do not answer to* or *refuse to be answerable to* the *call* of the *American narrative*—to take their allotted or proper place in the larger whole whose “center elsewhere”¹⁹ is the (transcendental) Word of the caller. They are, in other words, stories that disclose the American calling to be a willful gesture of summons enabled, indeed, demanded by a plenary philosophy of optimism that, because it is *all-encompassing* (and *-embracing*), cannot imagine an alternative comportment toward being, yet has always already been fraught with an anxiety that betrays a distrust of this trust. To put it in a way that is reflective of Melville’s deepest intention, his stories after *Moby-Dick*, like his refusal to be accountable to his critics, *passively allow* the “can do” logical economy informing the American narrative—the attorney’s deeply inscribed need to “do something” in “Bartleby,” for example—to “self-destruct”: to fulfill its imperatives in order to disclose in this contradictory “*telos*” not simply the impotent violence latent in its welcoming embrace, but also, the positive possibilities for thinking the de-centered, silent, unaccountable, and unnamable (no)thing which this logic would annul—render “accountable”—in the name of truth.

To appropriate the resonant term Giorgio Agamben, a new, “Old World” philosopher, invokes, no doubt against the received negative connotations of the *nothing*, to “identify” the passive copyist who “would prefer not to” in his provocative essay on “Bartleby, the Scrivener,” what

the always and recalcitrantly open-ended narrative of the history of the reception of Melville's fiction and the deliberately undecidable narratives he wrote between *Moby-Dick* and *The Confidence-Man* dis-close is pure "potentiality."²⁰ This, in an America that, in the name of the "New World" and its highly prized rhetoric of possibility, reduced the elusive, life-enhancing intensities of potentiality to the comprehensible, which is to say, the take-holdable or manipulable. To sharpen the focus on this thematic itinerary, I have, in this book, as an attentive reader will notice, slightly but pointedly rearranged the order of the publication of those fictions that were written between *Pierre* (1852) and *The Confidence-Man* (1857). "Bartleby" (1853) was published before *Israel Potter* (1854) and "Benito Cereno" (1855), after "Bartleby." It will be seen, however, that (1) I have placed my discussion of *Israel Potter* immediately after *Pierre* in order to highlight the fundamental importance and the continuity of Melville's severe criticism of the indissoluble relationality between American exceptionalism, the calling, monumental history, and nationalism; and (2) my discussion of "Benito Cereno"—its portrayal of Captain Delano as the victim of the American calling (a subjected subject)—before "Bartleby" to highlight the all too often missed positive resonance of Bartleby's—and Melville's—refusal to be answerable to the American calling.

It is this passively induced disclosure of the violence latent in the confidence of New World—exceptionalist—America and, even more important, this retrieval of the potentialities of the nothing from the oblivion to which they has been relegated by the custodians of the cultural memory of the nation, that renders Melville, both the tumultuous vagaries of his status as an American writer, and the recalcitrantly uncontainable fiction he wrote between 1850 and 1857—proleptic of the poststructuralist or postmodern occasion. By this last, I want to make it clear, I mean neither the unworlded world under the aegis of a highly refined unmethodological method diagnosed by Edward Said, nor the commodified world under the aegis of the "logic of late capitalism" diagnosed by Fredric Jameson. I mean, rather, the volatile literary and philosophical moment in Western history that has borne witness to the *symptomatic* self-de-struction or de-centering of the Western representation of being (aided and abetted by various internal and external constituencies of the West's *Others*) in all its manifestations—ontological, subjective, racial, social, political; the e-mergence of the countermemory and what Foucault aptly called "the philosophy of difference";²¹ the demise of the self-reliant individual; the collapse of the disciplinarity of knowledge production; the waning of the nation state; the globalization of the hitherto local perspective; the rendering visible of the invisible of Western vision; and, not least, the releasement for *positive thought* of those indissolubly related "phenomena" of being—the nothing, temporality, historicity, potentiality, the various *others* of the West—that have been perennially represented as nonentities or nonbeings in the plenary

truth discourse of the West. It is no accident that, unlike the fiction of virtually all the other premodern American writers, contemporary critics in the United States and abroad have come to identify Melville's, especially that following *Moby-Dick*, with such global counterclassics as Dostoyevsky's *The Idiot*, Kafka's *The Castle*, Robert Musil's *The Man without Qualities*, Samuel Beckett's *Watt*, and Joyce's *Ulysses*—late nineteenth century and modern European novels that are universally considered to be harbingers of the de-centered postmodern occasion—and are invoked by globally visible postmodern American writers such as Charles Olson, Thomas Pynchon, Robert Coover, Toni Morrison, and Don DeLillo, who identify themselves as his heirs. Nor is it an accident that a number of the revolutionary thinkers who have been identified with the origins and development of what I have been calling the antiphilosophical philosophy of poststructuralism—Jacques Derrida, Maurice Blanchot, Gilles Deleuze, and Giorgio Agamben²²—have been compelled by the unaccountable force of Melville's philosophical imagination—and language—to perceive him, as they perceive Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Freud, Heidegger, and a certain Marx, as what Foucault has called “initiators of discursive practices.”²³

But I have not undertaken to rehearse the analogy between the volatile history of the reception of Melville's fiction after *Moby-Dick* and the deliberately elusive thematics and “form” of these dislocating texts simply to suggest Melville's remarkable anticipation of the growing body of contemporary literature and philosophical thought that has had its *raison d'être* (1) in disclosing the debilitatingly repressive—on occasion annihilating—effects of the thought and the idea of literature that has been privileged by the Western tradition, especially by that optimistic “humanist” phase inaugurated in the Enlightenment, which masquerades as objective or disinterested and open, and, (2) in urging contemporary humanity to think the undecidability—the nothing—thus disclosed positively. My intention has also, and primarily, been to suggest the remarkably proleptic relevance of Melville's post-*Moby-Dick* fiction to the contemporary global sociopolitical occasion, specifically, that which has borne witness to America's declaration of a “war on terror” in the wake of Al Qaeda's attacks on America soil. I mean, more specifically, the occasion in which the American “elect”—empowered by a recuperated exceptionalist national identity, now informed by a rejuvenated and active Protestant evangelical church that overtly refers to America as “the redeemer nation”—has regained its ontological as well as historical confidence in the idea that it is America's manifest destiny to undertake its “benign,” divinely or historically ordained, errand in the global wilderness in the “just” name of the *Pax Americana*. Under the aegis of what one of the most influential ideologues of this elect calls the “Anglo-Protestant core culture,”²⁴ the new American mission resonates with the significance of the title of Cotton Mather's history of the Massachusetts Bay colony, *Magnalia Christi Americana*: “The Great Deeds of Christ in America.”

In suggesting the relevance of Melville's post-*Moby-Dick* fiction to the present post-9/11/01 occasion, I am not simply referring to this fiction's genealogical anticipation of the self-destruction of the American exceptionalist ethos during the twenty years of the United States' arrogant and ruthless intervention in Vietnam in the name of "the new frontier"²⁵—the repressive violence to which, in the very process of monumentalizing itself, America has been willfully blind. Nor to Melville's anticipation of the poststructuralist exposure of those resilient mechanisms of forgetting and remembering that would enable the dominant culture to recuperate this most crucial ideological source of authority. I am also, and more urgently, referring to Melville's remarkable anticipation of both a mode of warding off or resisting oppression that is more adequate than direct confrontation to the power relations obtaining under the global dispensation of (capitalist) democracy, and, beyond resistance, to a way of comporting one's self toward being, in all its manifestations between thinking and acting, that is attuned to its radical contingency, a way of being "American" that manifests itself when the call to be American is refused.

II

In the chapter in *White-Jacket* (1850) condemning the brutality and "conscious imbecility" of the practice of flogging on board the ships of the American Navy, Melville famously—and problematically—wrote:

Escaped from the house of bondage, Israel of old did not follow after the ways of the Egyptians. To her was given an express dispensation; to her were given new things under the sun. And we Americans are the peculiar, chosen people—the Israel of our time; we bear the ark of the liberties of the world. . . . We are the pioneers of the world; the advance-guard, sent on through the wilderness of untried things, to break a new path in the New World that is ours. And our youth is our strength; in our inexperience, our wisdom. At a period when other nations have but lisped, our deep voice is heard afar. Long enough have we been skeptical with regard to ourselves, and doubted whether, indeed, the political Messiah had come. But he has come in *us*, if we would but give utterance to his promotings. And let us always remember that with ourselves, almost for the first time in the history of earth, national selfishness is unbounded philanthropy; for we cannot do a good to America but we give alms to the world.²⁶

And in the same "euphoric" vein in "Hawthorne and His Mosses":

This, too, I mean, that if Shakespeare has not been equalled, he is sure to be surpassed, and surpassed by an American born now or yet to be born. . . . The world is as young today, as when it was created; and this Vermont mountain dew is as wet to my feet, as Eden's dew to Adam's. Nor has Nature been all over ransacked by our progenitors, so that no new charms and mysteries remain for this latter generation to find. Far from it. The trillionth part has not yet been said; and all that has been said, but multiplies the avenues to what remains to be said. It is not so much paucity, as superabundance of material that seems to incapacitate modern authors.²⁷

In their seeming invocation of Puritan providential history in the figural mode, these encomia to exceptionalist young America have, no doubt, impeded critical recognition of the revolutionary character of *Moby-Dick* and the fiction that follows it. Indeed, it seems to have compelled even some New Americanists, who rightly identify the Puritans' divinely ordained errand in the wilderness with the origins of American imperialism, to tread gingerly around this issue as it pertains to Melville²⁸ or, in the case of Wei-chee Dimock, to indict Melville's fiction, most notably *Moby-Dick*, as a celebration of American individualistic liberty that conceals or justifies empire. There are two points about this matter I want to make in a preliminary way. The first is that the passage from *White-Jacket* and the one from the essay on Hawthorne have been taken far too literally by both traditional and revisionist Americanists or, more precisely, the America Melville exalts in them is assumed to be the America exalted by the traditionalists and criticized by the revisionists. Melville, I will claim, is indeed an *American*. It is his *raison d'être* as a writer. But his American is not and perhaps never was the divinely elected "*Nehemias Americanus*" imagined and institutionalized by the Massachusetts Bay Puritans²⁹ and then exalted by the post-Revolutionary American Jeremiahs, who secularized his return to Jerusalem out of the Babylonian captivity in the name of Manifest Destiny.³⁰ Rather, Melville's American is, like Ishmael, an orphan devoid of the burden of parentage, name, and identity, one of those "*no*"-sayers with whom Melville identifies Hawthorne, who, unlike "the *yes*-gentry" that are encumbered by "heaps of baggage," in their journey through the world, are "unencumbered travelers" that "cross frontiers into Eternity with nothing but a carpet bag."³¹ He is, in other words, singular: the antithesis of the divinely or historically predestined redeemer. Even more radically, he is decreed man prior to his naming, to his subjection to a higher cause, or what is paradoxically the same thing, his election to lordship over being. He is, to use the language of my title, unaccommodated man prior to his or her *calling* (interpellation) by the transcendental (father's) voice of Europe: *Homo tantum*, as Gilles Deleuze puts it, who "has no

other determination than that of being man,"³² or, as Giorgio Agamben characterizes Bartleby, "the extreme figure of the Nothing from which all creation derives; and at the same time . . . the most implacable vindication of this Nothing as pure, absolute potentiality."³³

To put this unencumbered and elusive, indeed, unrepresentable figure of Melville's American in the stunningly suggestive, even prophetic, terms Deleuze uses in his great essay on "Bartleby"—they are, not incidentally, remarkably reminiscent of Vico and Said—he is the "pragmatic" American—and the America that never was:

Pragmatism is misunderstood when it is seen as a summary philosophical theory fabricated by Americans. On the other hand, we understand the novelty of American thought when we see pragmatism as an attempt to transform the world, to think a new world or new men insofar as they *create themselves*. Western philosophy was the skull, or the paternal Spirit that realized itself in the world as totality, and in a knowing subject as proprietor. Is it against Western philosophy that Melville directs his insult, "metaphysical villain"? A contemporary of American transcendentalism (Emerson, Thoreau), Melville is already sketching out the traits of the pragmatism that will be its continuation. It is first of all the affirmation of a world in *process*, an *archipelago*. Not even a puzzle, whose pieces when fitted together would constitute a whole, but rather a wall of loose, uncemented stones, where every element has a value in itself but also in relation to others: isolated and floating relations, islands and straits, immobile points and sinuous lines—for Truth always has "jagged edges." . . . But to reach this point, it was also necessary for the knowing subject, the sole proprietor, to give way to a community of explorers, the brothers of the archipelago, *who replace knowledge with belief, or rather with "confidence"—not belief in another world, but confidence in this one, and in man as much as in God.*

Pragmatism is this double principle of archipelago and hope. And what must the community of men consist of in order for truth to be possible? *Truth* and *Trust*. Like Melville's before it, pragmatism will fight ceaselessly on two fronts: against the particularities that pit man against man and nourish an irremediable mistrust; but also against the Universal or the Whole, the fusion of soul in the name of great love or charity. Yet, what remains of souls once they are no longer attached to particularities, what keeps them from melting into a whole? What remains is precisely their "originality," that is, a sound that each one *produces*, like a ritornello at the limits of language, but that it produces only when it takes to the open road (or to the open sea) with its body, when

it leads its life without seeking salvation, when it embarks upon its incarnate voyage, without any particular aim, and then encounters other voyagers, whom it recognizes by their sound.³⁴

Whatever Melville felt about America prior to the publication of *Moby-Dick* in 1851—its founding, its national identity, its mission as a new nation among nations, and the role of the young American writer in this context—it became dramatically clear in the wake of the incredible indifference, if not hostility, of his contemporaries to this great novel, specifically, the general impatience, even resentment, against an imaginative excess that was crossing boundaries beyond which most American writers were unwilling to go, that Melville chose to pursue his de-structive or de-centering cultural/political project, knowing the likely economic consequences that would ensue in refusing to write the “charming” sea stories both his critics and friends were calling on him to write. And with the unequivocal and virtually universal condemnation of his next novel, *Pierre*, as a blasphemous outrage against the American way of life, Melville made a decisive turn. He did not say “NO! in thunder.”³⁵ Rather, like the *Bartleby* he would imagine shortly after *Pierre*, he said, “I prefer not to”; he simply refused to be answerable to the call of an America that, he felt, had already been corrupted by the elect’s will to render every thing and time in being, including the American writer, accountable.

The tension between the deeply backgrounded demand for accountability to the American exceptionalist narrative, on the one hand, and the passive refusal to be answerable to this American calling—a prefiguration, if not an overt manifestation of cultural guerrilla war, as it were—on the other, constitutes, in my mind, the supreme theme not simply of the history of Melville’s reception as an American writer of fiction, but also of the fiction I will examine in this book: *Pierre; or the Ambiguities*; “*Bartleby, the Scrivener*,” *Israel Potter: His Fifty Years of Exile*; “*Benito Cereno*,” and *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade*. It is also, not incidentally, the supreme theme of the exilic Melville’s legacy to the present generation, which has borne witness to the annunciation of an unending “war on terror” and a permanent state of exception and is being called to a “Fifth Great Awakening” in the name of the “redeemer nation.”

In a recent book rehearsing the history of the critical reception of *Moby-Dick* from the time of its publication to the current poststructuralist occasion, its editor, Nick Selby, insists on the continuous relevance of the novel for the various occasions of America’s history:

Moby-Dick’s power, it seems, is one of survival into a precarious future. As testimony to such powers of survival, the history of *Moby-Dick’s* reception is proof of its eloquent ability continuously to reinvent both itself and the culture which gave birth to it.

This pattern of survival seems set by Ishmael's final words, the *Epilogue* of *Moby-Dick*, where we see him as an orphan floating clear of Pequod's wreckage. But even earlier, in chapter 22, "The Doubloon," the survival of *Moby-Dick* in the hands of its readers and critics seems eerily anticipated by Stubb:

There's another rendering now; but still one text.³⁶

But in the very process of this demonstration, the author paradoxically continues the tradition inaugurated by Melville's early critics: the tradition beginning with the call to "freeze him into silence" and culminating in the accommodations of the post-World War II critics, who incorporated Melville's heresies into the American exceptionalist problematic in behalf of the United States' global war against the "destabilizing" machinations of the Soviet Union: its extension of the "errand in the wilderness" to include the policing of the globe against "the Red menace." For in asserting cavalierly that the various generations of American (and English) critics have seen *Moby-Dick* as relevant to the particular concerns of their respective historical occasions, this recent author, like so many of his predecessors and contemporaries, is, in fact, universalizing the singularity of the novel and thus not only denying its dense "worldliness," as Said would say, but also, and more important, disarming its devastating historical insight into the exceptionalist American national identity: the perennially negative—and often appallingly inhumane—effects of its "benignity" *before, during, and after* Melville's time.

In sum, my book will show that Melville's fiction from *Moby-Dick* to *The Confidence-Man*—from his prophetic announcement of the self-destruction of the logical economy of the Adamic ship of state to his decisive de-realization of the antebellum American reality produced by the relay of optimistic philosophies that had their origin in the myth of Puritan election—constitutes a sustained haunting of the exceptionalist problematic, past, present, and future. It will not only reveal the above kind of celebratory commentary to be symptomatic damage-control, an indirect form of silencing that, consciously or not, is, as most of its predecessors, unwittingly complicitous with the discourse that has justified and enabled America's domestic and global depredations. More important, my intention in this book is also to retrieve the worldliness—indeed, the "postmodern" revolutionary force—of Melville's fiction after *Moby-Dick*. It is to show, in other words, that this fiction is, in its spectral "unaccountability," an exemplary mode of indirect resistance to the polyvalent imperialism that inheres in the myth of American exceptionalism, that, therefore, in the language of Edward Said, it speaks the "truth" to the power of American exceptionalism, now, in the wake of the America's annunciation of global "war on terror," which is to say, of a permanent state of exception, as it did in Melville's time.

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