Transformation and appropriation of the primitive in Melville's "Typee", "Moby-Dick", and "The Confidence-Man"

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The Transformation and Appropriation of the Primitive in Melville’s Typee, Moby-Dick, and The Confidence-Man.

by

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The Transformation and Appropriation of the Primitive in Melville’s Typee, Moby-Dick, and The Confidence-Man.

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From the exotic narratives of Typee and Omoo, to the allegorical realism of Moby-Dick and The Confidence-Man, Melville was keenly fixed on the conflict between “savage” and “civilized” culture. Literary historians revisiting the sources of “American mythogenesis” have found in Melville’s work, particularly The Confidence-Man, a critical examination of the cultural creation of the mythic “frontiersman,” and have attributed to Melville a primary role in isolating the essentially violent and racist traits that lie beneath the image of the American primitivist hero.

One sees reflected in Melville’s fiction America’s radical shift from the romantic primitivist ideal of Rousseau to the new, American primitivist ideal of the frontiersman epitomized by Colonel Moredock in The Confidence-Man. Rousseau’s primitivist ideal of the “noble savage” is appropriated and transformed by the new American primitivist as frontiersman. Moby-Dick’s Captain Ahab becomes a key transitional primitivist figure, in which the traditional hunter hero becomes a monomaniacal instrument of vengeance, whose archetype will later be expressed in the “Metaphysics of Indian-hating” chapters of The Confidence-Man. Melville’s response to this process of American mythogenesis, which is undercut by the violent reality of western expansion, remained a sense of profound, disturbing irony. Where Typee stands as a testament to the untenability of the romantic primitivist paradigm, The Confidence-Man stands as an equally potent testimony to the corrupt cultural values which underlie the triumph of frontier mythogenesis.
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Introduction

From the exotic narratives of Typee and Omoo, to the allegorical realism of Moby-Dick and The Confidence Man, Melville was keenly fixed on the conflict between savage and civilized culture. Boundary situations in these works frame the culturally indeterminate status of narrators and characters who resist a pure association with either world, the savage or the civilized. It is not an original claim to suggest that Melville viewed America’s expansionist politics of the 1840s and 1850s from such an ambivalent vantage point, yet it clarifies the narrative stance many of his works assume. In the end, that profoundly ironic stance came to not only undercut the mythic claims of his “civilized” American culture but any potential narrative observer position that might exist outside of that myth as well.

There is a great deal of discussion in contemporary criticism of the relevance of “historicizing” the work of authors such as Melville, ranging from skepticism toward the idea of the novelist as historian to cultural discussions of
literary mythogenesis. Skeptics of historicizing literature justifiably note the difficulty in establishing a direct correlation between historical fact and fiction, in which the novelist functions first and foremost as social historian. On the other hand, scholars are equally justified in examining literature in the light of cultural mythogenesis; it is commonly granted that Americans viewed (and still view) themselves in precisely those same culturally mythic terms that have been created and perpetuated and transformed through the vehicle of literature. Scholars of the American West, such as Edwin Fussell, Henry Nash Smith, Richard Drinnon, Richard Slotkin, and Patricia Limerick, have exhaustively examined the ways in which Western mythology permeated the national psyche to the extent that the ideal of the frontiersman, the Daniel Boone myth, became the operative image of national self-determinacy in nineteenth-century America:

In American mythogenesis the founding fathers were not those eighteenth-century gentlemen who composed a nation at Philadelphia. Rather, they were those who (to paraphrase Faulkner's Absalom, Absalom!) tore violently a nation from the implacable and opulent wilderness--the rogues, adventurers, and land-boomers; the Indian fighters, traders, missionaries, explorers, and hunters who killed and were killed until they had mastered the wilderness; the settlers who came after, suffering hardship and Indian warfare for the sake of a sacred mission or a simple desire for land; and the Indians themselves, both as they were and as they appeared to the settlers, for whom they were the special demonic personification of the American wilderness. (Slotkin 4)
Literary historians revisiting the sources of "American mythogenesis" have found Melville's work, previously discussed by critics such as F.O. Matthiessen in terms of "metaphysics," to be particularly exciting. In particular, Chapter 26 of *The Confidence-Man*, "The Metaphysics of Indian-Hating," has become an operative trope, especially for Richard Drinnon, who draws the title of his book from the chapter:

One of the varieties of Western racism has been what I call, following Melville's lead, the metaphysics of Indian-hating, those deadly subtleties of white hostility that reduced native people to the level of the rest of the flora and fauna to be "rooted out." (xvi)

Slotkin and Drinnon pursue the cultural role of such latent hostility and violence in American society up to the present, and rightly accentuate Melville's place in the forefront of isolating this essential trait of American political and cultural mythology. Melville, to our late twentieth-century eyes, turned the idea of metaphysics on its head, and used it as a scope to view in uncompromising detail the essential traits of the coalescing nineteenth-century American character. It is no surprise that his contemporary audience either did not recognize itself or the cultural forces determining its view of the world and its inhabitants, or chose to ignore such messages as Melville felt compelled to deliver.
Most likely, the former principle was at work, and the inability of American society to recognize its own image in characters like Ahab or Colonel Moredock is to be expected. Part of the effort of this reading of Melville's fiction is to examine the ways in which Melville's narrators in *Typee*, *Moby-Dick* and *The Confidence-Man* gain enough cultural distance from both the dominant culture and various primitive societies to perceive both from a critical stance. Edward Said, in *Culture and Imperialism*, writes "that stories are at the heart of what explorers and novelists say about strange regions of the world; they also become the method colonized people use to assert their own identity and the existence of their own history" (xii). For Americans of the early- and mid-nineteenth century, the West would also come under the sobriquet of "strange region of the world." This is one of the essential links in Melville's fiction, from his first book, *Typee*, to his last completed novel, *The Confidence-Man*: Melville's encounters with the "Other" in the boundary situations of his whalers, riverboats, islands and traders, elicit a highly ambiguous metaphysical and cultural response to his world and its encounter with the primitive. Melville offers a counter-interpretation to the dominant strain of then-contemporary American expansionist thinking, while he simultaneously suggests, as Conrad would with his Marlow half a century later, the impossibility of
existing entirely outside it. Said, however, cites the following passage from *Heart of Darkness* which illuminates a chief difference between Conrad’s thinking and Melville’s:

> the conquest of the earth, which mostly means taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly fatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much. What redeems it is the idea only...not a sentimental pretence but an idea; and an unselfish belief in the idea—something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer sacrifice to..." (69)

It is difficult to tell whether or not Conrad is being ironic or not, at the end, but given that he’s talking about “redemption” of the imperialist enterprise, the “idea” of empire, I read him seriously. Such adoration would be horrific to Melville, whose primal image of horror is the Great Pyramid: “I shudder at the idea of ancient Egyptians. ...Pyramids still loom before me—something vast, indefinite, incomprehensible, and awful” (*Journals* 75-76). The “idea” of worship in the sacrificial sense, which “redeems” empire for Marlow, makes Melville “shudder.”

Such a reaction to the “idea” of monolithic thought is typically Melvillean, and helps define the narrative space he creates for his protagonists as a frontier-space in which cultural responses are at once critiqued and relied upon as a source of identity, as a way of distinguishing a character like Tommo from the native inhabitants of Typee even as Tommo attempts assimilation. For Melville, a pure belief in
empire was as impossible as a pure belief in primitivism. Nathaniel Hawthorne, Melville’s mentor and friend at the time he was writing *Moby-Dick*, illustrates this ambivalence in Melville in a letter dated November 20, 1856, just after Melville completed his final novel, *The Confidence-Man*:

[Melville] stayed with us from Tuesday till Thursday; and, on the intervening day, we took a pretty long walk together, and sat down in a hollow among the sand hills...Melville, as he always does, began to reason of Providence and futurity, and of everything that lies beyond human ken, and had “pretty much made up his mind to be annihilated”; but still he does not seem to rest in that anticipation; and, I think, will never rest until he gets hold of a definite belief. It is strange how he persists--and has persisted ever since I knew him--in wandering to-and-fro over these deserts, as dismal and monotonous as the sand hills amid which we were sitting. He can neither believe, nor be comfortable in his unbelief. (432)

The nomadic image is particularly interesting in light of Melville’s fascination with primitive cultures. Yet that fascination doesn’t translate into a zealous rapture of Rousseau-like Primitivism for Melville. As *Typee* bears out, all Tommo wants to do is escape from *Typee* by the end of the novel, and goes so far as to plunge a boat-hook into the throat of one “savage” who swims out to try to block his escape.

The core of my thesis rests precisely in this intricate relationship between Melville’s narrators and protagonists and the “idea” of the primitive that is central to each of the works in question. There occurs in the trajectory of
Melville’s fiction a radical shift from the romantic primitivist ideal of Rousseau, whose intuitive and natural “savage” became a convention of much American literature of the early 19th century, including Typee and Omoo, to the new, American primitivist ideal of the frontiersman, as epitomized by Colonel Moredock in The Confidence-Man. The primitivist ideal of the “noble savage” is appropriated and transformed by the new, American primitivist ideal of the frontiersman. This idealistic appropriation, which attributes the positive virtues of primitive people to the mythic qualities of the frontiersman, is bitterly undercut by the genocidal appropriation of the actual land of native people as the capitalist frontier expands west. The paradox of Daniel Boone as lover of wilderness and avatar of civilization creates an interpretive, symbolic frontier space in which Melville places Ahab, Ishmael and the Pequod, as well as Pierre and The Confidence-Man. This frontier space is a land of false images, of masquerades, behind which the real character of the expanding nation is cloaked behind a myth of individualism, freedom, and innocence.

In Melville’s fiction, the relationship between the actual world and its mythic counterpart is dialogic; real history informs not only Melville’s fiction but the broader process of cultural mythogenesis, and myth provides an apparatus with which to culturally process the actual
experience of reality. Virtually each of Melville's novels is historically grounded in real narratives, be it his own personal experience, or accounts he exhaustively researched. Typee, Omoo, Redburn, and White-Jacket are all drawn from personal experience (with some elaboration of additional narratives), where Moby-Dick, "Benito Cereno," "Billy Budd," and The Confidence-Man rely chiefly upon found narratives for their sense of reality and plausibility. What is interesting in Melville is the way he creates the narrative space for these reality-based accounts to engage with their powerful mythic counterparts. Tommo's captivity narrative brings about the confrontation between his mythic ideas of the primitive and his real experience of primitive life, which begins the process of erosion we will see in the next decade of Melville's fiction, wherein the deep ironies embedded in actual American culture cut away its mythic underpinnings.

For Melville, the reality of the American encounter with the primitive, which was essentially a capitalist, exploitative experience, materialistically savage and spiritually hypocritical, undermines any legitimate stance from which to accurately perceive distinctions between civilization and the primitive. This lack of authority, both moral and legal, questions the legitimacy of the expansionist American enterprise, whose attitudes towards "primitive" cultures
were most often articulated in first-hand accounts of
trappers and settlers. Such reports from the frontier, a
boundary condition in which any transcendental claims for
inherent human goodness seem ludicrous and deluded, find
their way into many of Melville’s narratives. In the early
South Sea novels Melville presents an account of the
primitive that seeks to celebrate it not in ideal terms
(though there are many conventional, romantic elements in
Typee and Omoo) but in the actual conditions of life ob­
served there by the narrator as anthropologist/deserter/
author. Robert Roripaugh has argued for a reading of Typee
that places it in the tradition of frontier travel
literature of the 1830s and 1840s, and as such the narrative
functions as yet another report from the wilderness. In
Moby-Dick, Melville assembles a Pequod crew representative
of the world, with Queequeg, Tashtego, and Daggoo
functioning as a primitive triad in the otherwise Christian,
Western crew led by the “ungodly, god-like Ahab,” survived
by the cast-out patriarch of the heathen nations, Ishmael.

If Moby-Dick presents the essential conflict between na­
ture and man, the primitive and the civilized, the capital­
ist project and the spiritual absolute as a vortex, from
which only Ishmael escapes to narrate, The Confidence-Man is
an epitaph on the American gravestone, which reads “The
Devil Lived Here And Won.” The romantic primitivist ideal of
Typee and Omoo, which ambivalently sought to celebrate the "savage" as superior has been transformed. The American cultural appropriation of the "primitivist myth," celebrating the individualist, anti-societal features of Daniel Boone in the terms of an idealized natural condition, suggests the utter subversion of those primitive ideals Melville celebrated in Typee.
Chapter One

Primitivism as Convention: Typee

Charles Webber's primitivist novel, Old Hicks, The Guide, published two years after Typee, in 1848, was hailed upon its publication as demonstrating "more genius than Typee or Omoo" by Graham's magazine (Nash 82). The novel is ostensibly a story about a western, "primitive" narrator, in the Canadian River valley of Texas, who fights a dandified French Count and his cavalry of trained Comanches, "children of the ancient mother nature," for the Count's wife, Emilie, the true object of the narrator's love. As Nash puts it, Webber "faces the same problem of plot construction that confronted Cooper: for incident he can contrive only a love story and an Indian fight" (79). In a chapter entitled "The
Philosophy of Savage Life" Webber writes that "our complex civilization" has taken centuries to arrive at "the highest truths" which are "acted upon intuitively" by the "savage," who "scorns all shackles but those of the God-imposed senses." Like perfect Emersonians, their "self-reliance" allows them "to rule all precedents by the Gospel as revealed within themselves" (Nash 80). For Nash, "the essence of civilization as struggle" is the defining feature of Webber's primitivism, "which now seems merely pompous and absurd, but did not seem so to professional critics of the mid-century" (82). In several publications Webber was compared "with advantage" to Melville, and those reviews were based on the sanitized American editions of Typee and Omoo, which Melville "agreed" ought to "eliminate everything 'which refers to missionaries'...or 'offend the tastes' of his readers" (Rogin 45).

An examination of the favor with which such a primitivist romance as Old Hicks could be received by the 1848 literary audience serves to illustrate two points. It highlights the conventional status of "primitive romance" that Melville pursued at first, and the acceptance that the "primitivist romance" enjoyed in the contemporary literary world. The lens of the primitivist ideal had already been brought to bear on the Plains Indians by Cooper's Leatherstocking Tales of the 1820s, as well as in Washington Irving's 1835 travel
sketch, A Tour on the Prairies, in which he described "the glorious independence of man in a savage state" to whom "the great secret of personal freedom" is realized through his "absence of artificial wants" (Roripaugh 53). Melville, shifting the actual scene from the prairies of America to the islands of South Pacific to draw on his own personal experiences, wrote a provisionally conventional romance; he narrated his adventures with the "savage" cannibals on a remote Pacific island, from which he escaped alive. Typee's narrator, Tommo, echoes primitivist descriptions of Typee as "one unbroken solitude," wherein are found the "gardens of Paradise" whose inhabitants are "void of artificial restraint." This is conventionally identical to Webber's description of "Peaceful Valley" (the fictitious stretch of the Canadian River where the novel is set) as "a new Eden of unsophisticated life." In both, the primitive is privileged over the civilized, and "both perceived in the simple life of savages values strikingly in contrast with the official doctrines of American society" (Nash 83).

Such a "contrapuntal reading," in Edward Said's terms, frames the paradoxical nature of Typee (60): the novel is at once a scathing critique of the Euro-American missionary enterprise in the South Pacific in the form of an encomium to the "unsophisticated life" of the natives and a cultural document testifying to the impossibility of European
assimilation into that island culture. Melville's thinly veiled self/narrator, Tommo, enters the labyrinth of Said's "lines between cultures" and only narrowly escapes with his sense of identity, and then only by jabbing the warrior Mow Mow in the throat with a boat hook in the final seconds of the novel's dénouement. The novel is seminal in defining Melville's relationship towards his own culture and the "primitive" world beyond it: Typee exists, in Nash's term, "in contrast to the official doctrine of American society," but it also asserts a deeply conflicted version of the primitivist ideal, an ideal which Melville would not cease investigating even in the unfinished drafts of Billy Budd.

As Michael Rogin points out, Melville "embarked on his literary career as a savage":

He [Melville] signed himself "Tawney" at the age of twenty-one, in a letter to his younger brother written when he returned from Liverpool. "Tawney" was colloquial for Indian or Negro; Melville was replacing his given name with the label of a person of color. Redburn, the tale based on his voyage to Liverpool, contains a character whose "tawney skin" makes him resemble a "wild Indian." Melville gave the name "Tawney" to a black sailor in White-Jacket. (43)

Rogin further points out complex layers this assumption of an Indian identity reveals in the Gansevoort (Melville's mother's family) patrimony, whose supremacy in Revolutionary society was based on Colonel Peter Gansevoort's successful defeat of Joseph Brant's Mohawk army at Fort Stanwix in 1768. Colonel Gansevoort was appointed commissioner to the
Iroquois by George Washington after “he led an expedition which destroyed tribal villages and food supplies” (43). A further irony in Melville’s assumption of an Indian identity is its essentially revolutionary mask: colonists in the Boston Tea Party, one of the seminal events in the American Revolution, disguised themselves as Mohawks before they cast the King’s tea into Boston Harbor. Melville assumes this mask in that early letter to his brother, when the mask is still an abstract ideal. When Tommo deserts from the Dolly with Toby and finds himself in the valley of Typee, the face of the “primitive” assumes a different mask, and comes to finally loom in the consciousness of Tommo as an “horrible apprehension” (233).

It is of some interest that Typee’s composition itself is an example of the novel as cultural document undergoing the transformation from primitive, oral narrative to civilized, literate text. Robert Roripaugh presents a Melville “urged on by his family to turn his oral accounts of the South Seas into a book” (47). In effect, the recently returned Melville, who spins tale after tale of his wild adventures to his “civilized” family members, undergoes an evolution from “savage” to “civilized” in the act of transforming his primitive oral narrative into a civilized literary narrative. Tommo, upon his successful return from the primitive world of the Marquesas, undergoes the final reintroduction
to literate society through the act of writing, the oft-cited definitive distinction between civilized and uncivilized societies. This written narrative, however, is fraught with contradictions regarding this very process of evolution, and creates a unique vantage point from which to view the encounter between Tommo’s true cultural identity and his primitivist ideals.

In seeking to divorce the conventional aspects of Charles Webber from Melville, which Nash equates on the level of primitivist convention, such a view of Typee serves as a final point of contrast; while Webber remained in the realm of an idealized civilization versus an idealized primitivism, Melville was at the core a realist. And for this he suffered in the opinion of his reviewers. While he was holding up the conventional ideal of the “savage” Melville also offered a real critique of the proselytizing enterprise of missionaries. In Typee, he asserts “how often the term ‘savage’ is incorrectly applied,” framing the Christian missionary and the expansionist Western nations as a whole as “savages” who “hold a hundred evils in reserve” (27, 124). It was this strain of skepticism toward civilized humanity, and later Nature itself, that led to disaffection amongst his audience, and his future lack of popularity. Melville’s distaste for the new Christian empire is latent in Typee and Omoo, but overall both novels remain conven-
tional adventure romances, in which "the Polynesian savage, surrounded by all the luxurious provisions of nature, enjoyed an infinitely happier though certainly less intellectual existence than the self-complacent European" (Typee, 124). Nature is benign, and the "unsophisticated life" "without contaminating contact with the white man" is celebrated.

Melville's restlessness with such a Transcendental idea of benign Nature, however, is evident in Typee as well, and it is this track that he will follow rather than the "essentially static, dream-like" course from which Webber would never deviate; the idea of a pure "communion with nature" that lay at the heart of romantic primitivism "was no longer tenable" for Melville (Nash 83). It was there, in Typee, that Melville had "formed a higher estimate of human nature than I had ever before entertained. But alas! since then I have been one of the crew of a man-of-war, and the pent-up wickedness of five-hundred men has nearly overturned all my previous theories" (203).

As Malini Scheuller suggests in her article exploring the cultural implications of Melville's South Seas writings, "the most interesting moments in Melville's texts are those where he deals with what might be called boundary situations or transgressive situations." This is an interesting idea,
and when one examines Melville’s various narrators and narrative strategies, a pattern of locating texts in these “boundary situations” is apparent: Tommo in Typee and Omoo wanders about the South Seas, half anthropologist, half seaman; the allegorical journeys of Taji in Mardi carry him further abroad than Tommo; Redburn and White-Jacket inhabit a psychological “boundary situation” between adulthood and childhood as well as a geographical “boundary situation” at all times somewhere off the coast of the United States; Ishmael and Ahab follow Moby-Dick around the globe; Amasa Delano and Benito Cereno find themselves in the gray, still harbors off the coast of Chile; the Fidele drifts down the Mississippi River, the real and metaphorical border between the wilderness and settlement, in The Confidence-Man; Captain Vere is forced to execute Billy Budd aboard the HMS Bellipotent, somewhere off the coast of Spain, in a borderland of moral uncertainty. Throughout his fictional career Melville located his best work in narrative situations that reinforced his central concerns with paradox, in “transgressive situations” in which the Claggarts and Babos and Ahab of his imagination have full access to narrative power.

Interestingly, Typee does not have a character like Ahab or Claggart, who forms the axis upon which the plot revolves. We have only a wounded Tommo who, unable to walk
himself down to the bay and escape, must endure and observe the vicissitudes of daily life in Typee. But this inactivity, as it were, in the novel, becomes the vehicle for Melville's full account of his encounter with the "Other." As readers we enjoy lengthy descriptions of Marquesan food, flora and fauna, ritual, historical asides, gender roles, linguistics, and a host of other subjects. But Melville is careful not to attribute the power of interpretation to Tommo, a privilege often attacked by recent cultural critics who rightfully view the power to narrate and interpret the "other" as an exercise of colonial privilege:

For my own part, although hardly a day passed while I remained upon the island that I did not witness some religious ceremony or other, it was very much like seeing a parcel of "Freemasons" making secret signs to each other; I saw everything, but could comprehend nothing. (177)

The last phrase is startling, and stands in stark contrast to Emerson's quintessentially ecstatic moment in "Nature": "I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God" (11). Emerson, who "in the wilderness [finds] something more connate than in streets or villages," finds ultimate meaning in his vision, a glimpse into the Eternal Spirit; Tommo "comprehends nothing." For Tommo, the "Universal Being" may be stoking the fire upon which he is to be cooked, finally and eternally consumed. One finds
in Tommo's narrative the true complexity of the relationship between cultural discourse and pure experience, and this is my preferred reading of Scheuller's term "boundary situations": it is that narrative space Melville creates for his narrators in which the world, far from becoming more defined, radiates in all its brilliant ambiguity.

Typee's Tommo epitomizes the dislocated, culturally transgressive narrator:

Toby, like myself, had evidently moved in a different sphere of life, and his conversation at times betrayed this, although he was anxious to conceal it. He was one of that class of rovers you sometimes meet at sea, who never reveal their origin, never allude to home, and go rambling over the world as if pursued by some mysterious fate they cannot possibly elude. (32)

Aside from the overtly marginal character of both Toby and Tommo, who exist on some kind of societal fringe, the passage rings with the kind of oppositions that will characterize Tommo's response to the natives of Typee. Toby and Tommo are alike ("like myself"), but they move in a "different sphere of life." They are similarly different, "anxious to conceal" what their talk will "betray," "rambling over the world" to escape a fate "they cannot possibly elude." To further complicate the sense of shared paradox, Melville has his protagonists abandon ship, and wander through the dense tropical mountains haunted by "the important question, Typee or Happar?" In their binary minds Happar is good and Typee is bad, the latter presumed to be cannibals. In another
ironic twist, when they stumble upon some natives Toby assumes immediately they are Happar: "You will have it to be Happar, I see, my dear fellow," Tommo replies, "pray Heaven you may not find yourself deceived" (56). Toby is deceived, but it turns out that the Typee treat them quite well, after Tommo manages to utter in Typee the exactly oppositional phrase to their previous mantra: "Typee good." Only by completely reversing their own expectations, and accepting the possibility that what is held as truth is false, are Melville’s protagonists saved from their understood-to-be grisly fate.

It is this inherent sense of paradox that colors Tommo’s encounter with the natives of Typee. While he came to the island freely, he now finds himself a captive. The natives presumed to be cannibals prove to be his caretakers and protectors. Most importantly, the primitivist ideals Melville and Tommo share undergo a similar encounter with real "savages," and their cultural biases that at once celebrate the primitive yet find it unbearable are "betrayed" throughout the course of Tommo’s discourse.

It is tempting to see an allegorical parallel between the natives of the Marquesas and Tahiti and the Indians of the Great Plains, to view the South Pacific as the farthest
reaches of the frontier-space of the American West. Edwin Fussell writes:

According to one of Frederick Jackson Turner’s several definitions, “the frontier is the outer edge of the wave’--a metaphor Melville would have liked, at least until he thought about it-- “the meeting point between savagery and civilization.” In that sense, Melville’s first three novels were about the frontier, for the Marquesas, Tahiti, and “Mardi” with which he courted the reading public were all conceived as lying either on or between white civilization... and a deeper-toned savagery. (234)

Robert Roripaugh seeks to connect Melville’s Typee with other contemporary frontier travel literature of the West, such as Francis Parkman’s Oregon Trail, Josiah Gregg’s Commerce of the Prairies, and George Wilkins Kendall’s Santa Fe Expedition:

During his years in the South Seas, Melville had the opportunity not only to explore and react to a frontier even further along Walt Whitman’s “passage to India” but also to examine the “clash of cultures” with a more critical and broad-minded perspective than many other travellers. Aside from these “western” aspects of Typee ...there are also wider but related questions concerning Melville’s utilization of the frontier in his writing as a whole and the extent to which he should be considered a legitimate part of Western American Literature--a major author who, though eastern in origins and residence, reflects western experience and myth in a significant fashion and reinforces the importance of the frontier in American literature. (49)

Melville himself occasionally indulges in western images, when he refers to Tommo and Toby as “pioneers” as they escape from the Dolly, and plays up the sense of exploration and discovery that await Tommo and Toby “on the other side
of the mountain." When they enter the valley of the Typee, there is "not a sign of life" as far as they can see, reinforcing the idea of the trackless wilderness, in which "the whole landscape seemed one unbroken solitude, the interior of the island having apparently been untenanted since the morning of the creation" (44). It seems unwise, however, to rely too heavily on a reading of Typee as Black Hills, of Fayaway as Pocahontas, and the journey around Cape Horn as analogous to the Santa Fe Trail. It requires a necessarily allegorical reading that distorts the view of Melville as an American prophet. It diminishes the power of actual geography, of real Marquesans, and assigns them stereotypic, nameless roles as "Americans." In short, it seems to be symptomatic of the very same process of evangelical appropriation which Melville decries in Typee. Insisting on a view of the world and its inhabitants in which they are reducible to players in some American frontier myth is yet another act of empire.

Melville's narrative, however, resonates with such ideas as narrative space as frontier-space; it is only that the cultural exchanges and assumptions and challenges that occur there don't simply fly under one nation's flag. Melville's stories are full of French and English history (the earliest chapters in Typee describe the battle between the French and English for control of the Marquesas), Australian ship-
captains, and Spanish frigates. The encounter with the "Other" is a broad encounter between the Euro-American mindset and primitive cultures, between imperial states expanding their materialistic boundaries and indigenous cultures trying to defend theirs. Roripaugh is right when he suggests that "these [frontier] accounts were strikingly ambiguous about the cultural as well as environmental changes occurring through expansion and the fulfillment of Manifest Destiny" (61); Scheuller, following Said's lead, refers to Typee as "a complex cultural representation of Euro-American colonial aspiration." The key phrases here are "complex" and "ambiguous" because in Typee we read not only about the impending dissolution of island culture at the hands of Euro-American missionaries and traders, but we encounter also the failure of the romantic primitivist paradigm to stand as a viable alternative to civilization. In Melville's stories from the frontier there are few winners and no heroes. Fussell's claim that Melville's first three novels "were about the frontier" is misleading for two reasons: it presumes some comprehensible object called the "frontier" for the novel to be "about" and it assumes that that objectified frontier just somehow came into existence, on its own, with no participation on Melville's or anybody else's part. It was just a fact, and the same goes for Roripaugh's "clash of cultures," a euphemism if ever one
existed. Clearly Melville was aware of his frontier metaphors, and used them to conventional and thematic advantage. But that frontier-space was part of a process, not an object, and it was inhabited by individuals who lent to it its particular dynamic: Islanders, Plains Indians, merchants, settlers, and missionaries. It is for the last category, whose aggressive activities across the globe served to accelerate and color the process of cultural penetration, that Melville reserved his invectives which frame the core issue of the primitive encounter with civilization in *Typee*.

One of the lasting ironies of *Typee* is that Melville dedicated the book to his future father-in-law, Judge Lemuel Shaw, Chief Justice of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. In a letter to Shaw Melville wrote: “The dedication is very simple, for the world would hardly have sympathized to the full extent of feelings with which I regard my father’s friend and the constant friend of all his family” (Rogin 43). As Michael Rogin has uncovered in Melville’s family history, Judge Shaw had belonged to the Society for Propagating the Gospel among the Indians for more than twenty years, and “the month after receiving his inscribed copy of the first edition [unedited and full of the criticisms of missionaries Melville would expunge in the second American edition] of *Typee*, Shaw solicited money from Edward
Everett for the conversion of the Montapec Indians" (45). This same segment of Massachusetts society, which would be scandalized forty years later by Twain's scathing satire of Christian piety, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, was the clear target of Melville's explicit criticisms of the missionary enterprise in the South Pacific and the American West. It was also the legacy of his own patriarchy, from whom he distinguished himself early on, in that letter to his brother when he signed himself "Tawney."

In what is perhaps the most excoriating statement of Melville's attitude toward the missionary project in America, he writes "The Anglo-Saxon hive have extirpated Paganism from the greater part of the North America; but with it they have like-wise extirpated the greater portion of the Red race" (195). There is no confused idea of "clash of cultures" or a sudden passive extinction here for Melville, because he sees the boundary condition in which missionaries and natives live as a place of distinct, directed, organized activity: "extirpation." The strength of the language demonstrates Melville's keen understanding of the cultural process which he witnessed as a decisive, intentional action based on a received code of cultural hierarchies which called for the extirpation, Drinnon's "rooting out," of indigenous, pagan peoples.
But one must read as well the sentence that comes directly before the oft-cited "extirpation" phrase to understand the conflicting nature of Melville's vision: "Let the savages be civilized, but civilize them with benefits, and not with evils; let heathenism be destroyed, but not by destroying the heathen" (195). The thrust of his criticism of the missionaries is aimed at their hypocrisy and their harsh practical application of the Gospel, but Melville appears to have no objection to the nature of the project: "let the savages be civilized." This appears to be a tacit endorsement of the missionary project in its ideal nature, but not its realistic practice, and it is just this sentiment he will echo two pages later, after he has written a veritable litany of abuses suffered by islanders at the hands of missionaries:

Lest the slightest misconception should arise from anything thrown out in this chapter, or indeed in any other part of this volume, let me here observe, that against the cause of the missions in the abstract no Christian can possibly be opposed: it is in truth a just and holy cause. But if the great end proposed by it be spiritual, the agency employed to accomplish that end is purely earthly; and, although the object in view be the achievement of much good, that agency may nonetheless be productive of evil. In short, the missionary undertaking, however it may be blessed of Heaven, is in itself but human; and subject, like everything else, to errors and abuses....There is something decidedly wrong in the practical operations of the Sandwich Islands Mission. (197-98).

It is doubtful anyone else could have written such a passage, filled with basic oppositions, sky and earth, ideal
and real, that carry so much allegorical weight and sub-
stance. It is hard to believe that Melville really believed
the missionary enterprise a "just and holy cause," and he is
careful to avoid such a statement: "No Christian can possi-
bly be opposed...." We are left to wonder whether or not
Melville includes himself in that category, and we enter the
same ambiguous space of the dedication to Judge Shaw, in
which Melville puts on the mask of conformity, only to be
suggesting something totally contrary. The world "would have
hardly sympathized" with Melville's feelings toward Judge
Shaw precisely because his feelings were at odds with the
hypocritical piety and real destructiveness in the real
world that such piety wrought. Shaw probably read it as an
enormous tribute; Melville is careful to never specify what
those "feelings" were.

He does, however, explicitly express his feelings about
the civilized encounter with the primitive in the Marquesas
and the Sandwich Islands in Typee and Omoo, and aside from
several remarks apparently designed to ingratiate himself to
his New England readers, he is decidedly appalled by what he
sees. In a chapter entitled "Population Decreasing" Melville
observes that "no sooner are the images overturned, the tem-
ples demolished, and the idolaters converted into nominal
[sic] Christians, than disease, vice, and premature death
make their appearance" (195). "No inconsiderable part of
[the islanders] disasters originate in certain tea-party excitements" and "the poor savage soon finds himself an interloper in the country of his fathers, and that too on the very site of the hut where he was born" after "neat villas, trim gardens, shaven lawns, spires and cupolas rise" from the now-"depopulated land." "The spontaneous fruits of the earth, which God in his wisdom had ordained for the support of the indolent natives, [is] remorselessly seized upon and appropriated by the stranger, devoured before the eyes of the starving inhabitants, or sent on board the numerous vessels which now touch at their shores" (196). Indeed, Conrad’s "conquest of the earth " is "not a pretty thing when you look into it too much," and Melville writes from the vantage of the "boundary situation" in which the act of appropriation lurking behind the preaching of the Word is most keenly visible.

Going beyond the catalogue of genuine abuses Melville observes, he writes as well in a general way about civilization and "savageness" that is equally one-sided against the progress of civilization, yet is not without its own internal contradictions. After all, Tommo decides he must escape from the "gardens of Paradise" on Typee, the central action of the novel that moves it beyond the formulaic primitivist convention of Webber’s Old Hicks; for Tommo, what he once viewed as a primitive "paradise" is seen in the end as cap-
tivity, and must be fled. The primitivist fantasy, as Nash says, become "untenable."

Melville embraces the examination of the dilemma with gusto, however, in a chapter entitled "Civilized and Savage Life Contrasted." Tommo, upon the temporary healing of his wounded leg, experiences an "elasticity of mind" which places him "beyond the reach of those dismal forebodings" to which he had recently "been prey" (123). Tommo is involved here in the pattern of oscillation which characterizes his stay in Typee: he variously goes from elation and tranquility, a purely ethereal joy at living "perpetually with the most delightful fruits," to the dread of being cannibalized and the loathing of his now-evident captivity among the Typee. "Elasticity of mind" is a wonderful phrase for Tommo's psychological and spiritual state, a state in which old boundaries are erased and new ones erected.

In his happy moments, Tommo "is fain to confess that, despite the disadvantages of his condition, the Polynesian savage, surrounded by all the luxurious provisions of nature, enjoyed an infinitely happier, though certainly a less intellectual existence, than the self-complacent European" (124). Here we see the machinations of the romantic primitivist myth, with its distrust of society, its exaltation of nature as the source of true spiritual and physical health, and the image of civilization as a place of decadence, of
"self-complacency" which is fatal to its inhabitants. But at the same time Tommo laments the lack of "intellectual existence" that is at the heart of the European mindset; what else is "primitivism" but an idea, an intellectual apparatus for perceiving and understanding the world. But Melville, above all, is interested in both the intellectual and the real, the life imagined and the life lived, the "earthly agency" as well as the spiritual.

Observing the world from this "boundary condition" between the "intellectual" and the "earthly," Tommo accurately concludes, "The fiend-like skill we [whites] display in the invention of all manner of death-dealing machines, the vindictiveness with which we carry on our wars, and the misery and desolation that follow in their train, are enough of themselves to distinguish the white civilized man as the most ferocious animal on the face of the earth" (125).

Melville coins oxymoronic phrases like "civilized barbarity" to erase all the preconceived boundaries between the two conditions. Several books later, in Redburn, Melville will conclude with a restatement of the same sentiment: "We may have civilized bodies and yet barbarous souls" (293). The idea of the "Other" as savage comes to mirror the "civilized barbarity" of Tommo’s own culture; likewise, islanders forced through perpetual contact with Europeans to internalize the influences of civilization, become those
"partially civilized savages" in Omoo, who compare "immeasurably to the disadvantage" of the inhabitants of the primitive Typee valley (190).

The skepticism with which Melville, and by extension Tommo, views his own society is laced with bitter irony:

I once heard it given as an instance of the frightful depravity of a certain tribe in the Pacific, that they had no word in their language to express the idea of virtue. The assertion was unfounded; but were it otherwise, it might be met by stating that their language is almost entirely destitute of terms to express the delightful ideas conveyed by our endless catalogue of civilized crimes. (126)

Passages like these demonstrate the vast store of real knowledge Melville drew upon to write. He is familiar enough with the lexicon of the particular tribe to debunk, authoritatively, the supposed linguistic omission, and yet disinterested in all assertions of his own intellectual superiority. He knows enough about both languages to expose the deconstructive gap between sign and signified in English, and strip away the mask from the intellectual constructs of "ideas" like virtue, to expose the "civilized crimes" that they conceal.

Still, we return to the fundamental question about Tommo, best phrased by D.H. Lawrence in 1923: "O God, why wasn't he happy? Why wasn't he?" With his favorite Fayaway, "the very perfection of female grace and beauty," radiant in her "primitive and summer garb of Eden" (86), with the "children
frolicking together the livelong day, no quarreling, no conten­tion among them" (126), how could Tommo fail to be happy? Lawrence answered his own question:

Because he wasn’t. It’s hard to make a man happy...We can’t go back. We can’t go back to the savages: not a stride. We can be in sympathy with them. We can take a great curve in their direction, onwards. But we cannot turn the current of our life backwards, back towards their soft warm twilight and uncreate mud. Not for a moment. If we do it for a moment, it makes us sick. (Roripaugh 60)

And Tommo is sick. He is physically sick, psychologically paranoid, and disgusted with the hypocrisy of his own culture. The sense of distinction he feels from both his own culture and the Typee natives leaves him hopelessly alone. I think this is what Lawrence is talking about, a sickness of the spirit and a poisoning of the soul that makes enduring one’s own life, with all its attendant evils, unbearable if one is constantly looking back to Eden, where we will never be allowed to return. “If we do it for a moment, it makes us sick.”

There comes a point in the novel, following several oscillations between rapture with Typee and its inhabitants and Tommo’s fear of being eaten, which serves as a key transition in Tommo’s narrative. It comes in a chapter entitled “Their Happiness,” which refers to the “Other,” “their happiness” as a separate condition that belongs to the natives and not Tommo:
But the continual happiness, which so far as I was able to judge appeared to prevail in the valley, sprung principally from that all-pervading sensation which Rousseau has told us he at one time experienced, the mere buoyant sense of a healthful existence. And indeed in this particular the Typees had ample reason to felicitate themselves...the general repose, however, upon which I have just been descanting, was broken in upon at about this time by an event which proved that the islanders were not entirely exempt from those occurrences which disturb the quiet of more civilized communities. (127)

By invoking the spectre of Rousseau, the architect of the "Noble Savage" as an ideal counterpart to the depraved civilized man, Melville is deconstructing the myth of the noble savage; even as he finds himself "descanting" about the "repose" of the Typeeans, it remains "their happiness." The significance of the passage lies in Tommo's awareness that he was "descanting," that he was caught up in a moment of rapture which was broken not only by the reality of a skirmish with the enemy Happar, but by his own recognition that the ideal was clouding the reality. "They," the Typeeans, do not live in an ideal world, and the world they do inhabit remains alien to Tommo, for whom "continual happiness" remains an impossible ideal. Tommo undercuts his own idealistic observations with the real fact of existence on Typee, and simultaneously alters his vision of the ideal permanently. The desire for paradise to exist, as Lawrence recognizes, will never go away; Melville modifies
the equation to claim that even on Typee, "the garden of Paradise," there is no possibility of paradise for Tommo.

It is in this light that Typee serves as a guide to the rest of Melville's fiction, which remains obsessed with the very distinctions he highlights throughout Typee: Romantic Primitivism, as alternately praised and critiqued by Tommo in Typee, as an ideal, is finally untenable. This does not, however, preclude the power of the grip with which it seizes the "civilized" imagination. In fact what one witnesses in the development of Melville's fiction is the transformation of the romantic primitivist ideal, which is asserted and denied in Typee, into the new American frontier version of the primitivist myth that is appropriated by white society as it moves further and further into the "boundary condition" of the expanding frontier. If Moby-Dick, Melville's next major work to pick up the primitivist themes introduced in Typee, is at heart a hunting story, in the great American tradition, it is also a story about the contest for control of the primitivist myth in American society which began sometime after Tommo's realization that "the buoyant sense of a healthful existence" was not enough, and would never be enough, to make a man like Ahab happy.
Chapter Two

Moby-Dick: Hunters, the Hunted, and the Conquest of Romantic Primitivism

There can be little doubt, in reading the first few chapters of Melville's master work Moby-Dick, that the story is bound to be a tragedy. Ishmael, in "Loomings," "involuntarily [pauses] before coffin warehouses" (93), and comments to himself, "how cheerfully we consign ourselves to perdition" (97). The landlord of the Spouter Inn is a man named Peter Coffin, and the suspended kettles which mark the Try Pots Inn on Nantucket, recommended by Mr. Coffin, appear "not a little like gallows" to Ishmael (160). As the ending of the
novel confirms, when Ishmael is saved from destruction by floating "on the margin of the ensuing scene" upon Queequeg's coffin, the framing image of the work as a whole is a coffin.

The significance of Queequeg in the novel, who even in death symbolically saves Ishmael's life, cannot be overstated. The bond established between the wanderer Ishmael and the "savage" Queequeg forms the central thematic axis intersecting its thematic opposite in the novel, the authority of Ahab in the text. If the first third of the novel is engaged in the erasure of all cultural distinction between Queequeg and Ishmael, the deroulement of Moby-Dick plays out the fatal encounter between this harmonious cultural union represented by Ishmael and Queequeg and the monomaniacal vengeance of Ahab, the oxymoronic "ungodly, god-like" prototype of the new civilized barbarian.

Melville's creation of the narrator Ishmael remains one of the novel's strokes of brilliance. Following up his early self-coronation as "Tawney," the wild savage social outcast, Melville begins Moby-Dick with the famous "Call me Ishmael." When we call him Ishmael, we are beyond the rather simple slang of America and its racial associations; we enter the authoritative realm of myth, and call up the son of Abraham, the patriarch of patriarchs, who has lost his patrimony and been cast out of Israel by the unalterable hand of God. The
Biblical Ishmael will become the patriarch of the heathen nations, and his descendents "lived apart from the other descendents of Abraham" (Genesis 25:18), "to the east of Egypt on the way to Assyria." Growing up beyond the borders of the Chosen Land, "God was with the boy [Ishmael] as he grew up; he lived in the wilderness of Paran and became a skillful hunter" (Genesis 21:20). Melville's Ishmael is about to embark on the journey where he will realize his fated profession, under the tutelage of the idealized epitome of the hunter, Queequeg, who shaves himself with his harpoon and eats nothing but rare steaks for breakfast. The conflation of Ishmael and Queequeg as outcast primitive hunters serves to highlight their contrast with the socially privileged, authority-wielding Ahab as hunter.

The camaraderie between Queequeg and Ishmael, however, emerges only after Ishmael sloughs off the cultural skin which automatically causes him to fear Queequeg. Ishmael's first encounter with Queequeg at the Spouter Inn is foreshadowed by the arrangement of "a heathenish array of monstrous clubs and spears" on the wall of the entryway, making Ishmael "shudder" as he imagined "what monstrous cannibal and savage could ever have gone a death-harvesting with such a hacking, horrifying implement" (104). As Ishmael awaits Queequeg, "that infernal head-peddler," in the bed they will share for the night, he "is as much afraid of him
as if it were the devil himself who had thus broken into [his] room at the dead of night" (115). Queequeg burns shavings in front of his wooden idol, Yojo, stows the heads he’s been trying to sell on the winter streets of New Bedford, and brings his tomahawk to bed; he is the quintessential savage and “wild cannibal.”

After the initial moment of contact, however, which borders on slapstick (at this point in the novel it seems Melville is writing a conventional adventure romance) with Queequeg swinging his lit tomahawk around, scared to violence by Ishmael’s unanticipated presence in his bed, the chapter closes with Ishmael commenting how Queequeg offered him a space in bed “in not only a civil but a really kind and charitable way,” and concludes the chapter with the maxim, “Better sleep with a sober cannibal than a drunken Christian” (118). Ishmael is beginning to transgress his cultural indoctrination on the basis of conclusions he draws from real experience, the chief instructor a paradigm of cultural separation must forever bar from the classroom: “it is marvellous how essentially polite they [savages] are...he treated me with so much civility” (121).

The next morning, as Ishmael observes Queequeg dressing, Ishmael suggests in a moment of unconscious self-reflexiveness that “Queequeg...was a creature in the transitional state--neither caterpillar nor butterfly. He
was just enough civilized to show off his outlandishness in the strangest possible manner" (121). This is a central statement of the role of Moby-Dick in the transformation of the romantic primitivist myth to the violent, anti-social primitivist myth of the American settlers. The Pequod is the ship upon which this transitional encounter between the primitivist pathos of Ishmael and Queequeg, which lies beyond a pure romanticism, since Queequeg is himself well versed in the behavior of Christendom (unlike the natives of Typee), and the self-destructive quest for dominance over nature represented by Ahab. When Ishmael comments that Queequeg is in a "transitional state," somewhere between savagery and civilization, he identifies the "boundary condition," very early on in the novel, from which he, Ishmael, will narrate Moby-Dick; but first he must go through the same "transitional state" as Queequeg, from the opposite angle, and settle somewhere between his Presbyterian upbringing and the world of the savage. This happens by Chapter 10, "A Bosom Friend."

After paying Queequeg the highest of patriotic compliments by describing him as "George Washington cannibalistically drawn" (145), Ishmael sits "in that now lonely room," just he and Queequeg:

...the evening shades and phantoms gather[ed] round the casements, and peer[ed] in upon us silent, solitary twain; the storm boom[ed] without in solemn
swells; I began to be sensible of strange feelings. I felt a melting in me. No more my splintered heart and maddened hand were turned against the wolfish world. This soothing savage had redeemed it. There he sat, his very indifference speaking a nature in which there lurked no civilized hypocrisies and bland deceits. Wild he was; a very sight of sights to see; yet those same things which would have repelled most others, they were the very magnets that thus drew me. I’ll try a pagan friend, I thought, since Christian kindness has proved but hollow courtesy. (146)

Ishmael’s break with civilization, and its “bland deceits,” is virtually effected, and his alliance with the “transitional state” nearly completed. Those “strange feelings,” strange only because they go against his own cultural inheritance of fear of paganism, culminate in the “redemption” of a “wolfish world.” Ishmael goes on to interrogate the very nature of his understanding of God and worship: “But what is worship?—to do the will of God—that is worship” (147). Finally, in the successful twist of logic Ishmael needs to rationalize his alliance with Queequeg (who has just “redeemed the world”) he ironically decides “I must turn idolater” as a form of following that most Christian of creeds, “do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” “Thus, then,” Ishmael concludes this crucial episode of fraternity, “in our hearts’ honeymoon, lay I and Queequeg—a cosy, loving pair” (148).

Their actual and thematic union secured, Melville moves the novel offshore, to Nantucket, where they sign on for passage on the Pequod under the command of Captain Ahab. In
describing the history of Nantucket, Melville moves from the story of "the island settled by the red-men" to a panegyric of the primordial character of "Nantucketeers" without once suggesting any racial difference between Nantucketeers of Ishmael's time and those of antiquity. The conflation between white and Indian represented in the culturally fused friendship between Queequeg and Ishmael is so absolutely asserted here by Melville that it is virtually subconscious. It is important that this real and symbolic alliance has been established between Ishmael and Queequeg prior to the introduction of Ahab as a character, himself the symbol of a different cultural fusion. What has been up until this point Ishmael and Queequeg's story shifts to Ahab's story, which providentially consumes every other character in the novel. The agent for this transfer of textual authority and thematic significance is the Pequod, which comes itself loaded with symbolic significance that suggests some original mythic past whose specter lords over the fated journey of the Pequod.

The Pequots, as Ishmael observes, "were a celebrated tribe of Massachusetts Indians, now extinct as the ancient Medes" (164). The Pequot War, as Richard Drinnon describes it, offered the New England tribes the first sense of "the genocidal intentions of the English" when it came to fighting for territory which was slowly filling with
colonists (44). As for the Puritan sentiments regarding the war, Captain John Mason, one of the founders of the new Connecticut colony, declared, “God was pleased to smite our enemies...and to give us their land for an inheritance” (Drinnon 46). While Ishmael, symbolizing a fraternal union with the primitive, huddles with Queequeg before Yojo kindling a fire of shavings as an offering, Ahab, the inheritor of the Puritan legacy of conquest and violence, is fated to enact the tortuous evolution of blood that is symbolically encoded by the Pequod.

In addition to representing the violent current of history running beneath the story, the Pequod, as whaling vessel, is cast into the role of interpreter between the civilized whaling countries and those savages countries where whales are most commonly sought:

If American and European men-of-war now peacefully ride in once savage harbors, let them fire salutes to the honor and the glory of the whale-ship, which originally showed them the way, and first interpreted between them and the savages. (205)

The image of whaler as bridge between cultures relies upon the reality of some connection between civilized and savage cultures, namely hunting, and the common language of blood. Queequeg and Tashtego and Daggoo, the primitive triad aboard the Pequod are above all hunters, the best hunters, the original hunters. In this way the whaler itself is the vehicle for the metaphorical “boundary condition,” the
“margin” from which Ishmael writes of the bloody contest that occurs there. The Pequod, as “an Anarcharsis Clootz deputation from all the isles of the sea, and all the ends of the earth” sails on in its own “transitional state” from whaling as international commercial activity to whaling as heavenly ordained spiritual destruction and bloodlust (216). The transition from the comic scenes in New Bedford, where Melville’s writing seems light and playful, though full of dark premonitions, to the increasingly obsessive, serious, and mad quest for Moby Dick, marks the end of any conventional, romantic qualities Melville’s fiction may have possessed. The “supreme lord and dictator” of the novel, Ahab, becomes the fulcrum in Melville’s career, after whose creation any hope for a benign human history, in which Ishmael and Queequeg become brothers, is colored by the dark, awesome destructive power of Ahab’s command.

Captain Ahab is a key transitional figure for two chief reasons. First, he signifies the break from a mythic hunter culture which traditionally respected and revered its prey. On the morning of the third day of the hunt for Moby Dick Ahab exclaims, “What a lovely day again! were it a new-made world...a fairer day could not dawn upon that world” (673). On the dawning day of his death, Ahab is contemplating a “new-made world,” blind to the inevitable end that awaits
him and the whole world, as represented by the *Pequod's* crew; the "new-made world," like the instrument of its creation, the harpoon (the gun, the cannon, the knife), is tempered and baptised in blood and evil: "Ego non baptizo te in nomine patris, sed in nomine diaboli!" (600).

This diabolic bloodlust in Ahab represents a crucial break from the mythic past of hunters like Leatherstocking and Daniel Boone to the "new-made world" of the mythic Colonel Moredock, the Indian-hater: "Ahab's hatred of the thing he hunts violates the ethic of the hunter myth, in which hunter and beast are lovingly to share and interchange identities" (Slotkin 544). Ahab's transgression into the realm of hatred and vengeance happens in the chapter entitled "The Quarter-Deck," in which Ahab, after calling the crew to assemble before him, makes public his private vendetta: "And this is what ye have shipped for, men! to chase that white whale on both sides of land, and over all sides of earth, till he spouts black blood and rolls fin out" (261). Ishmael is left to merely speculate about the nature of this "wild vindictiveness against the whale": "all evil, to crazy Ahab, were visibly personified, and made practically assailable in Moby Dick. He piled upon the whale's white hump the sum of all the general rage and hate felt by his whole race from Adam down; and then, as if his chest had been a mortar, he burst his hot heart's shell upon
it" (283). The "general rage and hate felt by his whole race" seems to pointedly refer to Ahab's heritage as a white man, as a Christian acting out the inherited hatred of nature coursing through the culture since the serpent tricked Eve in the garden.

This hostility to nature, as represented by its most enigmatic and powerful creature, the whale in the form of Moby Dick, is the birthright of Ahab as an ancestral Puritan who settled Nantucket and Massachusetts, epitomized in William Bradford's characterization of the first Puritan settlers' condition:

What could they see but a hideous and desolate wilderness, full of wild beasts and wild men...If they looked behind them, there was the mighty ocean which they has passed and was now as a main bar and gulf to separate them from all the civil parts of the world. (70)

Moby Dick "swam before [Ahab] as the monomaniac incarnation of all those malicious agencies which some deep men feel eating them" (283). Ahab, however, is aware of the essential falseness of this symbolization, of the potential gap between what Moby Dick is and what he demonically represents: "All visible objects are but as pasteboard masks," he says to Starbuck. What Ahab seeks to do is "strike through the mask" and get at the essential nature of evil, of the world, of "that inscrutable thing" that "is chiefly what I hate; be the white whale agent, or be the
white whale principal, I will wreak that hate upon him” (262). It is the most profound level of mystery in the world, of “that inscrutable thing” that is Providence, which resists Ahab’s efforts to become “an independent lord,” that becomes the object of his hatred.

Such is the portrait of Ahab as hunter, in stark contrast to the developed portrait of the harpooneer Tashtego as “an unmixed Indian from Gay Head, the most westerly promontory of Martha’s Vineyard, where there still exists the last remnant of a village of red men, which has long supplied the neighboring island of Nantucket with many of her most daring harpooneers...an inheritor of the unvitiated blood of those proud warriors hunters, who, in quest of the great New England moose, had scoured, bow in hand, the aboriginal forests of the main” (215). His “lithe, snakey limbs” are described as having a “tawny brawn,” which image figures so importantly as a trope for the savage in Melville. Interestingly, Ahab’s face is also described as “tawny”: “threading its way out from among his grey hairs, and continuing right down one side of his tawny scorched face...”(218). There is at once a link, geographically and physically, between Tashtego as “unvitiated” Indian warrior, the disinherited American Ishmael, and “black, terrific” hunter Ahab, who as the chosen second son will receive the destined birthright to the nation from which Ishmael will be
exiled. But this fusion between Ahab and Tashtego, and symbolically the rest of the primitive world, is fundamentally different from the bond between Ishmael and Queequeg. Ahab, who's "been in colleges, as well as 'mong the cannibals" (176), is the captain of "that cannibal of a craft," the Pequod, whose troubling legacy is the extermination of the Pequot Indians, indigenous people whose ideal qualities as hunters Ahab and the new mythic American frontiersman will appropriate. Yet when Ahab tempers his harpoon in pagan blood, the sacramental union of savage and civilized hunters, it ironically becomes a prophecy of death not life, of extinction not survival.

The idea of extinction in *Moby-Dick*, which only surfaces overtly in glimpses, calls up an associative vocabulary of frontier images that serves to extend the thematic scope of Ahab's quest to embrace the civilized encounter with the primitive on the American prairie in particular. The language in which his quest is described creates the second significant transitional element of Ahab's story in *Moby-Dick*; it brings the thematic resonances of the novel to American soil in a way that will usher in Melville's elaboration of the primitivist theme in *The Confidence-Man*. As Edwin Fussell observed, "A further threshold was crossed when American writers learned to double their basic metaphor [the frontier], especially the frontier-as-space, by
involving it with social, psychological, philosophical, or other situations" (17). As such, Melville’s doubling of the ocean as a prairie simultaneously reinforces the sense of "boundary situation" in the Pequod’s encounter with Moby Dick as much as it draws a parallel between the westward American pioneer expansion into the prairies:

These are the times, when in his whale-boat the rover softly feels a certain filial, confident land-like feeling towards the sea; that he regards it as so much flowery earth; and the distant ship revealing only the tops of her masts, seems struggling forward, not through high rolling waves, but through the tall grass of a rolling prairie: as when the western emigrants’ horses only show their erected ears, while their hidden bodies widely wade through the amazing verdure.

The ship passes over these “wide-rolling watery prairies” hunting the whale in much the same way that pioneers and settlers ride their horses through the tall-grass prairies in search of game.

But if Melville, as Fussell has suggested, along with other American writers, has successfully “doubled” the frontier metaphor, adding new levels of psychological and philosophical complexity to the hunter myth, it is only to reveal a Leviathan-like truth:

Death seems the only desirable sequel for a career like this; but Death is only a launching into the region of the strange Untried; it is but the first salutation to the possibilities of the immense Remote, the Wild, the Watery, the Unshored; therefore, to the death-longing eyes of such men, who still have left in
them some interior compunctions against suicide, does the all-contributed and all-receptive ocean alluringly spread forth his whole plain of unimaginable, taking terrors, and wonderful, new-life adventures" (597).

This is the frontier over which Ahab is "supreme lord and dictator," a real frontier which as the place of encounter between of hunter and hunted is foremost a place of death. But, doubling the doubling, Melville suggests that Death itself is a "launching into the region of the strange Untried"; if the original frontier metaphor becomes an allegory of death and extinction, it again doubles to regenerate a world of "new-life adventures" in the "immense Remote, the Wild," a new world whose very premise for existence is founded on death, is entered through death itself.

Melville squeezes himself into an interesting corner in the chapter, "Does The Whale's Magnitude Diminish--Will He Perish?" By comparing the fate of the buffalo, "which not forty years ago, overspread by tens and thousands the prairies of Illinois and Missouri, and shook their iron manes and scowled with their thunder-clotted brows upon the sites of populous river-capitals where now the polite broker sells you land at a dollar an inch" (571), and that of the sperm whale, Melville inadvertently suggests that his "sequel" of death more aptly applies to the interior lands of America than the vast Pacific fishery. He concludes that "the great whale [will] outlast all hunting, since he has a
pasture to expatiate in which is precisely twice as large as all Asia, both Americas, Europe and Africa, New Holland and all of the Isles of the sea combined” (573). “However perishable in his individuality,” Melville decides, “we account the whale immortal in his species” (574). The “wondrous extermination” of the buffalo in Illinois and Missouri, on the other hand, was brought about under different circumstances where “moccasined men” in the same number of months that a whaling ship set out hunting, “would have slain not forty, but forty thousand and more buffaloes; a fact that if need were could be statistically stated” (572).

Here we encounter one of the problems of trying to draw a decisive parallel analogy between Melville’s writing about whales in the ocean and buffalo on the prairie, even though he himself makes such an analogy plausible with his own language. Clearly, Melville, never having visited the great prairies, knows more about whaling than he does about buffalo-hunting. The former he knows first-hand, the latter only through second-hand accounts, which, as Edward Said would point out, are the cultural devices by which the “moccasined man,” the Indian, can be blamed for the extermination of the buffalo while the whaler can be exonerated from the near-extinction of the sperm whale. Literature, as a cultural agent, legitimizes cultural biases
and self-identifying mythologies. Melville is caught somewhere in the middle here, clearly asserting a parallel between frontier life on the prairies and whaling life on the Pequod, both of which derive their life-sustenance, paradoxically, from the ritualization of killing. When Tashtego, Queequeg, and Daggoo lend their blood to Ahab’s spear, christening it in the name of the devil, we see Ahab’s misguided appropriation of the sense of the primitive that Melville has conscientiously cultivated up until that point, namely that Ishmael’s embrace of paganism “redeemed the world,” that “civilized hypocrisy” is the real demon, and that the primitives aboard the Pequod are truly honorable, and the civilized Ahab is the real demon. Indians are no more responsible for the extermination of the buffalo than the primitive triad of harpooneers is for the diabolical madness of Ahab and the death-reaping vortex of the White Whale.

Melville draws an imperfect analogy because there is no perfect analogy. Ahab is at once civilized and barbaric; Queequeg is at once savage and dignified. The whale is at once white and dark, object of awe and terror. As Ahab says, “Ye two are the opposite poles of one thing; Starbuck is Stubb reversed, and Stubb is Starbuck; and ye two are all mankind” (663). The paradoxical nature of the world and its mysterious interpenetrations precludes precise delineations
and analogies of objects in it, which “are but as pasteboard masks” anyway. What we do see happening in Moby-Dick, however, is the process of the romantic primitivist myth, in which “the healthful existence” of the primitive is the ideal, being subverted by the “mad,” “monomaniacal” Ahab, a man who is not in any sense “healthy.”

But Ahab is not yet an Indian-hater; he’s only a whale-hater. His relationship to nature, to the object of his pursuit, is ultimately paradoxical: he seeks only to kill that which up until this point has sustained not only his life but his Nantucket culture, and in the process destroys himself. This paradox is the root of the new American primitivist myth of the frontiersman:

...socially, Ahab was inaccessible. Though nominally included in the census of Christendom, he was still an alien to it. He lived in the world, as the last of the Grisly Bears lived in settled Missouri. (250)

Ahab, near the end of the novel, broods upon “the desolation of solitude” his life has been, and later concludes, “Ahab stands alone among the millions of the peopled earth, nor gods nor men his neighbors” (651, 663). The hunter in the new hunter myth is no longer “socially accessible,” like the prototypes of Tashtego and Queequeg, who represent the traditional link of primitives to “unvitiated” blood of the tribe. The final image of the novel, Tashtego’s “red arm...nailing the flag yet faster and faster to the
subsiding spar” reads a final act of defiance; Tashtego’s “red arm” snares the sky-hawk, that “living part of heaven” that Ahab’s ship drags down to hell, and acts as the living connection between perdition and salvation that defies death even in its final surrender.

Ahab is no longer capable of any connection with the “living” heaven; his is a cult of death and suicide. As William Bevis writes about A.B. Guthrie’s Boone Caudill, the primitivist hero of The Big Sky, “such an antisocial freedom, carried to its extreme, can result in the loneliness and isolation that we have idolized in the western hero, riding off into the sunset” (28). The irony of Ahab’s situation is that Ahab, while continually choosing to pursue Moby Dick to the hazard of his crew, understands he is not “free”: “Ahab is forever Ahab, man. This whole act’s immutably decreed. ‘Twas rehearsed by thee and me a billion years before this ocean rolled. Fool! I am the Fates’ lieutenant; I act under orders” (672). The orders, unfortunately, come from his own mad mind, which is convinced of its final bloody triumph over nature and evil as represented by the White Whale, which in the end escapes. Ahab is fatally misguided, fatally severed from his connection to humanity; as his leg has been severed by Moby Dick and ironically refashioned with whale bone, so will the primitivist hero of The Confidence-Man, Colonel Moredock,
reconstruct a frontier world of violence and hatred in his own image and "drag" yet a larger piece of that "living part of heaven" along with him on his westward march into the "rolling waves of prairie."
Two novels, a host of shorter stories and novellas, and six years after the Pequod, which, "folded in the flag of Ahab...would not sink to hell till she had dragged a living part of heaven along with her," we arrive at Melville’s last published piece of fiction, The Confidence-Man (685). In many ways that same flag of Ahab lolled from the mast of the Fidele, whose cast of characters, like the Pequod’s, is characterized as "a piebald parliament, an Anacharsis Cloots congress of all kinds of that multiform pilgrim species, man" (6). The image of the ship as world so consciously
developed in *Moby-Dick* is picked up again in *The Confidence-Man*:

Natives of all sorts, and foreigners; men of business and men of pleasure; parlor men and backwoodsmen; farm-hunters and fame-hunters; heiress-hunters, gold-hunters, buffalo-hunters, bee-hunters, happiness-hunters, truth-hunters, and still keener hunters after all these hunters. (6)

The catalogue of hunters locates the thematic concerns of *The Confidence-Man* in the same vein as *Moby-Dick*, and alludes to the national cultivation of the hunter myth which Melville will explore in the character of Colonel Moredock, the monomaniacal "keen" hunter of Indians. Melville sketches a complete picture of the expanding frontier beyond the Mississippi with his inclusion of the "farm-hunter" as settlers, the "gold-hunter" as prospector, the "buffalo-hunter" as frontiersman and mountain-man; he also cultivates the sense of the mythic frontier by alluding to Cooper's "bee-hunting" young hero, Paul Hover, in *The Prairie*, calling up the powerful mythic associations of Cooper's Leatherstocking hunting novels. Melville, as he did with Ahab, will explore the nature of the hunter myth and its transformation from Natty Bumppo as co-habitant with the primitive, to the "Indian-hating" sensibilities of Moredock, whose chief prey is the Indian himself.

It is important that the setting for the novel, in contrast to *Typee* and *Moby-Dick*, has moved to the heart of
the American interior, the Mississippi, and begins in the city which stands as the symbolic link between the civilized edge of the American nation and the pagan's wild prairies. The strategic location of the narrative, however, remains identical to the two earlier novels: the story is told from the "boundary condition" of the frontier, a place of cultural fusions as described in the catalogue of passengers aboard the *Fidele* which includes "Kentucky boatmen," "English, Irish, German, Scots, Danes;" "old-fashioned French Jews," "Mormons," "grinning negroes, and Sioux chiefs solemn as high-priests" (6). A crossroads of the world, as it were, where Melville will play out his labyrinthine allegory of good and evil, in which the Devil, in many guises, dupes self-styled Christians out of their money and exposes their piety as a sham. Gone, however, is the coherent narrative perspective of Ishmael and Tommo; true to the "masquerade" metaphor that dominates the novel, Melville's narrative is told chiefly through dialogue and anecdote, through the masked character of the sometimes devil, sometimes innocent victim, sometimes omniscient voice of Melville. The narrative voice of *The Confidence-Man*, in this sense, is even more culturally dislocated than Tommo or Ishmael, and the reader is often faced with the task of separating out the irony from the allegory, a task which ultimately proves futile: the allegory is ironic; the
Christians, in hating the Indian-devils and worshipping the idol of money, become no better than devils themselves.

Such an allegorical Christian reading of the text, however, is disputed by recent literary historians, who read behind the prevalent allegory and irony a haunting realism, a scathing historical critique of American expansion and mythogenesis which itself may have been cloaked by Melville in order not to provoke the stern censure of an optimistic America. The "Indians-as-Devils" reading is argued most persuasively by Hershel Parker, who in his identically entitled article on Melville's "The Metaphysics of Indian-hating" writes: "if the Confidence Man is associated with snakes and is the Devil, while Indians are associated with snakes and at least one Indian is 'a type of the Confidence Man,' then in Melville's allegorical geometry the Indians are Devils also" (326). Extending the allegorical reading to the character of Colonel Moredock, "Once we accept Melville's ironic view of Christianity as the practice of Devil-Hating, we are ready to follow the similarity of the dedication to Indian-hating to the dedication to Christianity" (327).

The logic of Parker's reading works, as far as logic goes, but to accept it as a primary reading one must ignore the body of fiction prior to The Confidence-Man, in which Melville's narrators embraced the pagan qualities of Indians
and other natives as antidote to civilization, which in Tommo’s words, “holds a hundred evils in reserve” (124). Queequeg, the embodiment of the idol-worshiping pagan who “redeemed” Ishmael’s “wolfish world” of “civilized hypocrisies” in which “Christian kindness is but hollow courtesy,” cannot be read as a demonic symbol in Moby-Dick. Ishmael, the pagan’s “bosom-friend,” survives the vortex of the Pequod’s sinking, itself the symbol of the self-annihilation of the mad, monomaniac hunter figure Ahab who prefigures Moredock in Melville’s fiction, afloat on Queequeg’s coffin. Queequeg’s pagan overcoming of his need for a coffin (since dying for him, unlike the civilized man, “was a matter of his own sovereign will and pleasure”) becomes the instrument of Ishmael’s salvation, much the way that Tashtego’s dragging “a living part of heaven” into hell offers the hope of redemption. To accept Parker’s allegorical reading of “Indians-as-Devils” requires an acceptance of Melville’s use of the Indian as symbol that conforms absolutely to the Puritan/American stereotype, a stereotype against which he wrote throughout his prior fiction.

In his 1849 review of Parkman’s Oregon Trail Melville took Parkman to task for mouthing just such a stereotypical view of Indians: “It is too often the case that civilized beings sojourning among savages soon come to regard them
with disdain and contempt. But though in many cases this feeling is almost natural, it is not defensible; and it is wholly wrong....We are all of us--Anglo-Saxons, Dyaks and Indians--sprung from one head and made in one image” (231). Parker’s reading requires us to ignore Melville’s most deeply held sentiments about humanity and embrace an already debunked stereotype of Indians in the name of accepting an allegorical reading whose essential point was made as early as Typee: “Not until I visited Honolulu was I aware of the fact that the small remnant of the natives had been civilized into draught horses, and evangelized into beasts of burden. But so it is. They have been literally broken into the traces, and are harnesses to the vehicles of their spiritual instructors like so many dumb brutes!” (196). While there is no doubt that the hypocrisy of Christianity as practiced in the America of the 1850s is a prime subject and central figure around which the layers of irony in The Confidence-Man spin, there is equally little doubt that the novel, drawing as it does on accounts from James Hall’s Letters from the West, is concerned with the mythic reality of the “boundary condition” beyond the Mississippi, the frontier of real Indian-haters.

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By the 1850s the collective moral confusion was so
dumbfoundingly pervasive that Melville's surrealism
was in truth the harshest realism, just the means for
ripping off fake fronts and exposing sham and
deception, floating identities, the true patriotism of
empty rhetoric. "The Metaphysics of Indian-hating"
gave the reader the best single overview to date of
the terrain of racial hatred. It was an acute progress
report on the state of the animosity after only two
and a half centuries of growth. (Drinnon 214)

Drinnon's reading of Chapters 21-28 in The Confidence-Man
creates a different view altogether of the function of the
"Indian-hating" chapters in the novel; in this light the
Indian-hater Colonel Moredock, as presented by Judge Hall,
is the logical result of that hateful hunter Ahab's arrival
on the western frontier. The appropriation of the Indian's
land is mirrored by the Indian-hater's appropriation of
those traditionally savage qualities, and their
transformation into a fierce hatred which perverts the
romantic idealism of the primitive as the dwelling place of
Nature and God into a bloody frontier of hatred, hypocrisy,
and violence. By reading the "Indian-hating" chapters as
continuation of the evolution of the primitivist hero in
western mythology, Colonel Moredock and the misanthrope
Pitch become the proper targets of Melville's unveiling. The
ethos of the trailblazing Daniel Boone, whose embodiment by
Cooper in the characters of Hawkeye, Natty Bumppo, and the
Pathfinder had fed the popular imagination since the 1820s,
had been transformed into a pathos of hatred introduced to
the literary world in the person of Captain Ahab, but is
culminated in Melville's quasi-fictional account of the Indian-hater Colonel Moredock.

Reinforcing the sense of realism that is at the heart of Melville's inclusion in The Confidence-Man of the Indian-hating chapters, Edwin Fussell writes of the mythic evolution of the American primitivist hero:

By the time of The Confidence-Man, Melville's picture of the Westward Movement was harshly realistic, and qualified only by the detachments inherent in the comic mode;...from the beginning Melville had been intermittently critical, showing himself skeptical both toward the social-stages-of-history theory and the kind of romance which that theory supported, where Natty Bumppo and Indian John Mohegan sat down together on the frontier, each imbuing himself with the nature of the other. Melville had himself worked in that tradition, and I think he never objected that such theories lacked meaning, nor that such romances failed in nobility; the difficulty lay rather in their inadequacy to the facts. Together with the other best minds of his time, Melville was also much more charitably disposed (more Rousseauistic, if one likes) toward the Indian than the generality of his countrymen. He was also less inclined to let these countrymen slur over their crimes, whether past or present, or merely projected; no American historian has ever exhibited so great a talent for nosing out what is called in The Confidence-Man "sinning by deputy." (325)

Tommo cannot remain with the Typee in that state of happy union of Natty Bumppo, at once embodying the best of savagery and the best of civilization; as D.H. Lawrence pointed out, it was not culturally possible. Nor, on the other hand, could Melville sit idly while mythic caricatures of frontiersman such as Colonel Moredock remain unchallenged by a nominally Christian audience hungry for stories from
the frontier. In portraying the real activities of men like Colonel Moredock and Pitch, Melville sought to expose the ironic disparity between the appropriated mythic "savage" virtues of the frontiersman and the truth of the behavior they engaged in.

The first of the two western portraits we get is that of Pitch, a "Missouri bachelor" who is "ursine in aspect, sporting a shaggy spencer of the cloth called bear's skin, a high-peaked cap of raccoon-skin, the long bushy tail switching over behind," "a double-barreled gun in hand" (91). Pitch sports, like an Indian, the vestments of the natural world around him, and this conflation with the frontiersman and Indian will echo more significantly in the Moredock chapters.

The more we learn of Pitch, named so because "he sticks to what [he] says," the more he becomes a set-up for the Moredock chapters. Parroting a view of nature with which Melville would have been sympathetic, Pitch responds to the herb-doctor's panegyrics to nature thus: "Nature made me blind and would have kept me so. My oculist counterplotted her" (94). For Pitch nature is hailstones, floods, Indians, and winter. He mouths the philosophy of self-reliance that is at the core of the American culture: "Go lay down in your grave, old man, if you can't stand of yourself. It's a hard world for a leaner" (96). Pitch's defining characteristic,
however, is his misanthropy, in particular his hatred of boys: "I rejoice to think that the day is at hand, when, prompted to it by law, I shall shoulder this gun and go out a boy-shooting" (101). Pitch prefers machines to people: "My cider-mill--does that ever steal my cider? My mowing-machine--does that ever lay a-bed mornings? My corn-husker--does that ever give me insolence?" (99)

Pitch is the caricature of the self-reliant, people-fleeing frontiersman, even as his description of his life suggests that he is in fact more of a settled farmer than a frontiersman, which makes his mouthing of these ideas even more interesting. Pitch has an orchard, and cornfield, even mows his lawn, which is not something Daniel Boone, at least in the myth, would likely have done. Pitch is a settler, a farmer, part of society which lags behind the pathfinding backwoodsman: "the backwoodsman would seem to America what Alexander was to Asia--captain in the vanguard in the conquering civilization. Whatever the nation’s growing opulence or power, does it not lackey his heels?" (126).

Pitch’s individualist ideas, which will be expanded upon in the Moredock chapters, represent the successful transmission of culture through the oral tradition. Values and ideas are reinforced in myth-creating stories, and those values include the received notion of a grotesque "self-reliance." The American frontier myth, contrary to tribal primitive
myths, is essentially misanthropic, and celebrates the individual above society in a condition of perverted self-loathing. It is this idea which Melville seizes upon in the "Metaphysics of Indian-hating" chapters.

As has been alluded to before, chapters 25, 26 and 27 of The Confidence-Man borrow almost verbatim a great deal of language from James Hall’s Sketches of History, Life, and Manners in the West, published in 1835. Hall, a transplanted Philadelphian who moved first to Pittsburgh, then Shawneetown, Illinois, was a popular chronicler for an Eastern audience of life in the West. He eventually became a judge, editor, and banker, in Cincinnati. The narrative strategy used by Melville was to have Charlie Noble tell the story to Francis Goodman, an incarnation of the devil as Confidence Man aboard the Fidèle. Noble, "with the bluff abord of the West," proceeds to recount Moredock’s story which he "has heard again and again from my father’s friend, James Hall, the judge, you know" (123). This fourth-hand account, which comes from Melville, which comes from Noble, which comes from Hall, which Hall heard told about Moredock, seems another point in the novel where Melville is exploring the creation of myth, and using Noble’s retelling of the story to suggest that the entire genesis of the myth, and the cruel practices it rationalizes and justifies, must undergo moral scrutiny. The character of the frontiersman
that is culturally legitimized by oral tales, Indian-haters and misanthropes who become national archetypes, must be re-examined. And it is precisely this kind of oral education, this traditional passing down of racist values in the "boundary condition" of the frontier that is one of the main points of the chapters.

Charlie Noble, quoting Hall, explains that for the child born to a backwoodsman, "it is thought best not to mince matters, out of delicacy; but to tell the boy pretty plainly what an Indian is, and what he must expect from him" (126). Such a boy, whose very existence is hated by men like Pitch, "hears little from his schoolmasters, the old chroniclers of the forest, but histories of Indian-lying, Indian theft, Indian double-dealing, Indian fraud and perfidy, Indian want of conscience, Indian blood-thirstiness, Indian diabolism...in these Indian narratives and traditions the lad is thoroughly grounded" (126). With the idea of Roderick Nash's "wilderness condition" looming in the background, in which frontiersmen who lived in close proximity to primitive nature and Indians formed prejudices that city-dwellers back East would abhor, the Judge's concession of the cultural power of such overt indoctrination makes sense: "It is terrible, but is it surprising?" (127) This is, after all, the way mythologies form, and inherited ideas of cultural superiority are transmitted from one generation to another.
from men with experience like Moredock to "lackeys' like Pitch. But clearly Melville is using the occasion to suggest that men like Hall are involved in such myth-making as well, perpetuating stories which rationalize racist behavior under the guise of innocent storytelling and pandering to an Eastern audience hungry for western stories through which to better see its own successful accomplishments.

The situation being as it is, according to Hall, the backwoodsman boy grows up to be "a lonely man," "strong and unsophisticated," "impulsive," "unprincipled," "self-willed," and "self-reliant." "Instincts prevail with the backwoodsman," and he "presents the spectacle of a creature dwelling exclusively among the works of God" (125). A momentous shift in the mythology of the American primitivist hero has just occured; qualities which were once the exclusive domain of Indians and savages (and the inhabitants of Typee), such as "unsophisticated" and "impulsive," "self-willed," (Queequeg wills himself to live!), and "creatures dwelling among the works of God," have been appropriated by frontiersmen and backwoodsmen as defining characteristics, as virtues. The real, physical appropriation of land from the Indians is paralleled by the mythic appropriation of "natural" values, of "instinctual" living, in short the inheritance of Indians and animals has been claimed by the expanding American nation for its primitivist heroes.
Melville was clearly aware of this shift of values from the concept of the "noble savage" to the "backwoodsman," or frontiersman, as is indicated by the full title of the oft-cited Indian-hating chapter: "Containing The Metaphysics Of Indian-Hating, According To The Views Of One Evidently Not So Prepossessed As Rousseau In Favor Of Savages." Included in the category of viewpoints is Charlie Noble, and far more importantly, Judge Hall. The chapter title at once reveals Melville's recognition of the death of Rousseau-like ideals (which Tommo experienced personally in Typee as essentially untenable) and the perversion of those same values in their appropriation by frontiersman like Moredock. The positive values once associated with Indians are now owned by Indian-haters.

Richard Slotkin elaborates this fusion of western American mythological values with values traditionally associated with Indians:

These circumstances (living in the wilderness) made for a strong vein of realism as well as uncritical admiration in the oral mythology that grew up in the West around pioneers like Boone. This oral tradition did not envision heroes wrapped in the "solemn stole of Contemplation" or enraptured with Romantic "fancies." Westerners admired men of action and prowess, men who knew how to live like Indians, fight like Indians, think like Indians, and take scalps like Indians. A real hero was one who could beat the Indians at their own game, live on less food, kill more animals, and even take more scalps. (403)
Judge Hall, in his transmission of the Colonel Moredock story, cultivated the mythology of just such a man who could “take scalps like Indians” and “beat them at their own game,” the new hero Moredock, “Moredock of Misanthrope Hall—the Woods” (122).

In telling the story of the archetypal Indian-hater, as representative of hateful Ahab on American soil, Judge Hall unwittingly (or not) fulfills his own prophecy: “In short, if we at all credit the backwoodsman, his feeling against Indians, to be taken aright, must be considered as being not so much on his own account as on others’ or jointly on both accounts. True it is, scarce a family he knows but some member of it, or connection, has been by Indians maimed or scalped” (129). Judge Hall makes sure that the wrongs suffered by Moredock at the hands of Indians become popular legend, and as such part and parcel of the cultural package white frontiersman exported to the rest of the nation. Briefly, Moredock's mother, “thrice married and thrice widowed by the tomahawk,” set out with her nine children for “new Arcadia” on the unsettled west shore of the Mississippi after “she had wandered from wilderness to wilderness, always on the frontier.” Her son, John, who was following in a second party of emigrants, was the only one of the family spared from an Indian massacre at the rock of the Grand Tower of the Mississippi: “He was thus left in nature sole
survivor of his race" (132). This description of young John Moredock parallels Ahab's self-descriptions as "alone among the millions of the peopled earth." There is the profound sense of regeneration that accompanies the stories of frontier heroes, but this rebirth is usually bloody, a "regeneration through violence," which Slotkin uses as the title of his study of American mythology. Young John will avenge the death of his family, and wreak vengeance on "the gang of Cains in the red dusk of evening" (133). After successfully dispatching all twenty responsible Indians, his passion had become "to kill Indians." Whenever he would come upon an Indian, "he would either secretly pursue their track for some chance to strike at least one blow; or if, while thus engaged, he himself was discovered, he would elude them by superior skill" (134). Superior skill. Moredock, the new primitivist hero, would beat the Indians at their own game; having mastered what it was to be an Indian, having conquered the natural world by eliminating the buffalo and wolves from Illinois and Missouri, there was no need for the continued presence of Indians. The Indian-hater was a better Indian than the Indians. As Rogin keenly observes, signaling the successful transformation and appropriation of the romantic primitivist myth by the American frontiersman in Melville's fiction, "From Typee through Pierre, savages stand as authentic opponents of civilized life. They end, in
This, finally, is the state of affairs as the Fidele steams down the Mississippi, deep into the heart of slavery, which would be the issue that ultimately turned the violent legacy of America upon itself. Although Tommo could not remain among the savages of Typee, for complex cultural reasons (which included the desire to not be consumed), his encounter with the primitive in the "boundary situation" of the South Seas condemned the violent, dehumanizing influences of encroaching civilization upon the natives. In Moby-Dick, Ahab's hateful madness consumes the entire crew of the Pequod, save Ishmael, in a blood-tempered contest between the primitivist prototype of the Indian-hater Moredock and the White Whale. By the time of The Confidence-Man, twenty years prior to Chief Joseph's surrender in Montana's Bear Paw mountains signaled the end of Indian resistance, the script, as Melville knew, had been written, "a billion years years before this ocean rolled." In the ultimate act of empire, the most basic ideals of romantic primitivism were stripped of their legitimacy and transformed into an ideology of hatred, a mythology of society-loathing individualists whose perpetual advance into the western lands marked the end of a philosophy which found in the primitive the image of God, and the birth of a new

The Confidence-Man, as manufactured justifications for it" (246).
primitivism which saw in that same condition of wildness the image of the Devil.
Chapter Four

Coda: Myth, Ambivalence, and Paradox

In the unfinished manuscript *Billy Budd*, found on Melville’s desk after his death in 1891, more than thirty years after the publication of *The Confidence-Man*, Melville is still writing about civilization in terms of its relationship with the primitive:

...Billy in many respects was little more than a sort of upright barbarian, much such perhaps as Adam presumably might have been ere the urbane Serpent wriggled himself into his company.

And here be it submitted that apparently corroborating the doctrine of man’s Fall, a doctrine now popularly ignored, it is observable that where certain virtues pristine and unadulterate peculiarly characterize anybody in the external uniform of civilization, they will upon scrutiny seem not to be derived from custom or convention, but rather to be out of keeping with these, as if indeed exceptionally transmitted from a period prior to Cain’s city and citified man. (301)
Melville’s disdain for civilization and “its external uniform” never abated. One also sees in the above lines shades of the young Melville as “Tawney,” whose affiliations, if forced to choose, would surely belong with the primitive; the original Adam himself, like Billy, is pictured as a “barbarian.”

Yet, behind Melville’s longing for the existence of an ideal world before civilization lies his knowledge of the actual world, or reality. Few writers of American literature write so knowingly of the world as a peopled planet, inhabited by the spectrum of humanity possessing the spectrum of values. When Edward Said calls books “cultural documents,” he is describing the very best quality of Melville’s writing, in which Euro-American culture is scrutinized to reveal its hypocrisies and ironies. But Melville, having experienced the world as he had, creates a literature of cultural and mythic ideas with a continuous, relevant subtext of reality. In effect, he writes on the level of “The Metaphysics of Indian-hating”: the mythic, metaphysical world exists on one level, a psychically powerful level, with the actual, historical world beneath it, often in ironic contrast, “inscrutable.”

The transformation of the romantic primitivist myth, itself an intellectual ideal, occurs on both of these levels. The “virtues” of the primitive life as described by
Tommo in *Typee* come to be appropriated by the vocabulary Americans used to describe the promise of the West and its frontiersman vanguard: gardens, wilderness, and self-reliance. The myth of Colonel Moredock and Daniel Boone and Kit Carson, the new children of Nature, as an idea, rests upon the same foundations as the romantic primitivist myth, namely an idealized, mythic sense of reality that ignores the complexity of human society and its paradoxical nature. Marilyn Robinson, in her essay "Hearing Silence: Western Myth Reconsidered," writes:

> I consider myths to be complex narratives in which human cultures stabilize and encode their deepest ambivalences. They give a form to contradiction which has the appearance of a resolution....I would suggest that the power of myth lies in the fact that it arrests ambivalence. (50)

If Melville held one constant attitude toward the world, as Hawthorne noted in his journal, it was that “he can neither believe, nor be comfortable in his unbelief” (432). On the one hand he sees Billy Budd, one of Melville’s last fictional creations, as the “upright barbarian” who epitomizes a virtue that dates back before the Fall (itself a wonderfully paradoxical myth which accounts for evil in Paradise) even as he creates Captain Vere, the patriarch who must knowingly sacrifice innocence in the name of martial order.
The mythic American appropriation of primitivist virtues from native people, which cast its heroes in the same beneficent light in which primitive cultures were once romantically cast, functions precisely as Marilyn Robinson describes. The fundamental paradox of Moredock the Indian-hater as genocidal murderer is "arrested" in his mythic status as a frontiersman: "Moredock was an example of something apparently self-contradicting...namely that nearly all Indian-haters have at bottom loving hearts" (135). This is how Judge Hall's mythic Moredock functioned. Melville, however, viewed the paradox differently, with a pure irony that went beyond ambivalence, which in fact sought to dislodge Robinson's "arrested ambivalence." The violent history behind the mythic mask of the frontiersman exposed a deeper, more profound paradox, one in which Indians were systematically killed by men whose mythic virtues were extolled in a vocabulary which took ownership of primitive qualities as it simultaneously took ownership of the land. As always, the reality beneath the mask is what Melville, like Ahab, sought to "strike at"; the most bitter irony of the appropriation of the primitivist myth by the American frontiersman is that it came at the cost of the primitive cultures whose existence served to so fire the Romantic mind into its initial mythic projections. Towards such projections, even the projection that there ever existed a
time "prior to Cain's city and citified man," Melville would
until the end remain skeptical; the actual world as he knew
it, not its mythic twin, was the real paradox.
Notes

Chapter Three

1. Environmental historian Dan Flores ("Bison Ecology and Bison Diplomacy: The Southern Plains from 1800 to 1850," Journal of American History, September 1991, 465-485) convincingly argues the case that Melville was essentially correct in his understanding of the effects of Indian hunting on the bison herds of the Southern Plains. Contemporary environmental data and population projections suggest that a combination of drought, selective hunting pressures (young cows were preferred for a number of reasons), increasing Plains Indian populations, normal rates of wolf predation, introduction of bovine diseases which affected bison herds, and expanded Indian trading with whites, Hispanics, and other Indian tribes, all adversely affected the health of the bison herd. While it is common knowledge that by 1883 the last of the wild bison had been eliminated from the northern plains, Flores suggests that as early as 1850 the Plains Indians horse cultures may have already skewed the ecological balance between men and bison into the realm of unsustainability.
Works Cited and Other Sources


Melville, Herman.


