



Melville and the Iroquois: Reading, Cosmopolitanism, and the Biographical Condition

Abstract: Responding to the distrust in biography, widely accepted in literary studies, this article attempts to rethink the relationship between the reader and the author, with a special emphasis put on the role of the biographer. Such a task might help us read such texts authored by Herman Melville as *Pierre; or The Ambiguities*, which tend to raise our amazement and anxiety with their autobiographical entanglement. Moreover, the analyses of reading habits of the Melville family are crucial if we endeavour to understand Herman Melville's progressing cosmopolitanism and cultural empathy, influenced by the black legend of his grandfather and his involvement in the genocide of Native Americans.

Keywords: reading, Melville, biography, author, genocide, otherness

I

In writing my critical biography *Herman Melville: A Half Known Life*, I have been taking the standard precaution never to mistake episodes in his fiction for actual events. Early Melville biographers – Raymond Weaver included – made the classic error of believing the “facts” taken from Melville's largely autobiographical fictions like *Typee* and blithely assuming, for instance, that Melville had spent four months in residence on the island of Nuku Hiva, whereas, in “fact,” he had stayed only a month. Charles Roberts Anderson memorably corrected this error in *Melville and the South Seas* (1939), and literary scholars have been wary of using Melville's fiction as a source of biographical fact ever since. Experts on other writers have generally followed suit, and literary biographies of recent decades have tended sedulously to avoid imaginative works as resources for the life, settling for or reveling in the quotidian aspects of a writer's life. That said, readers (and especially Melville's it would seem) are nevertheless drawn to a critical precipice and tempted to leap into biographical speculation. How, they ask, could a man write a book like Melville's 1852 *Pierre, or the Ambiguities* – concerning illegitimacy and incest and in other respects so clearly based on the author's family – and not have

lurking somewhere in his life an illegitimate half-sister, the by-blow of his father's youthful indiscretion? Some fictions seem so realistically "like-a-life" – more particularized than conventional "life-like" verisimilitude – that they require us to consider, again, and more fully, the dynamic of fact and fiction.

What is that dynamic? Fiction – as an imaginative restructuring of experience – is necessarily a part of the writer's creative life. That restructuring might go something like this: The interior process of writing – the mental act of wording – transforms the similarly internal facts of our consciousness, which are of necessity based on a lived external reality, into facts of imagination that are inscribed on an exterior page. This leap from the immaterial facts of an interior reality into material textuality is the act of genesis that we call the creative process. The mechanism of that leaping remains fundamentally unknown to us, in some cases unknowable, at best speculative. Translating the dynamic of life and text into a critical approach, with any degree of credibility, is so daunting that critics tend to focus almost exclusively on text alone. When they do reach for context, they typically resort to broad historical moments rather than the specificities of biography. Indeed, the prevailing critical practice of our era tends to dismiss biographical detail and denigrate the interpretive value of biographical criticism. One might know the life of a writer well enough to see mirages of the writer's life in the writer's texts, but so what? What is the interpretive value in linking text to life? Are the meanings we derive from a text any more compelling or useful simply because we can identify its biographical groundings? In fact, we worry that biography will restrict meaning and impede interpretation. If, let's say, Ahab were revealed to be based on Melville's father, and if that biographical equation were taken to establish the boundary and flavor of all subsequent critique, then we might as well close up shop.

Still, biographical criticism seems ineluctable, if only because of the persistence of what may be called "the biographical condition." We are aware of the biographical condition when, in our reading, a text compels us to ask questions about its genesis and the life out of which the text evolves. It is a reader response of wonder and anxiety: wonder at this unexpected critical dimension that biography seems to propose but anxiety over our inadequacy in ever knowing the life sufficiently to say anything sensible about its relation to a text. How does one best respond to the momentary insights that emerge in response to this biographical condition? One option is simply to give up the attempt to link life and text critically and to consign the two to their separate spheres: interpretation of texts right here; biographical data only over there. To the extent that fundamentally archival biographies focus primarily or even exclusively on external facts of the life and minimize the transformed facts found in fiction, they promote the option of separation. Certainly for the purposes of any kind of literary biography, a bi-

ographer must remain, as I stated at the outset, suspicious of the imaginative transformations of life in fiction even when they seem so real as to be a reflection (not just a mirage) of the life lived.

But I follow a less positivistic, less restrictive approach to the problems of the biographical condition. To begin with, we cannot forget that no matter how “standard” a biography may come to be in the minds of readers and scholars, a biography is itself a kind of fiction, an imaginative transformation of the biographer’s research into the narration of a writer’s life. Just as biographers need to be suspicious of facts found in fiction, readers must remain suspicious of biographers as well. Or rather, putting suspicion aside, both biographer and reader need to be critically engaged in what is at stake in our study of the biographical condition: the dynamics of transformation. They need to share a mutual awareness of how texts (both imaginative and critical) come to be: how a writer might transform life facts into fiction; how a biographer extracts a life from source material, including the fictions that the writer writes; and how readers, who bring the writing they read into their own consciousness, learn new ways of also engaging the writer’s consciousness. This inescapable dynamic is inherent in the reader’s imaginative reconstructions that constitute the process of reading. The more that biographer and reader share the same goals of critical discernment in addressing the transformations implicit in the biographical condition, the more self-aware and useful both biography and criticism will be in revealing the interpenetrations of writer, writing, and culture. The burden of exposing the dynamics of transformations in writing and reading falls upon the biographer.

Literary biographies grow in credibility when biographers allow themselves to be seen wrestling with the critical problems of their craft. Among other goals, biographers want their work to be critically useful, and they demonstrate this utility by playing out the biographical condition and enacting on the page the biography’s interpretive range. In short, a biography is a self-aware interpretation of the life, the text, and the link between the two. Ahab may not be Melville’s father, Allan Melville, but Ahab is an angry, absent father in a paternalistic ship-world, and we cannot prevent ourselves from asking life-questions about Herman’s anger and his experience of his father, tarnished by failure and made absent through death. Regardless of a biographer’s commitment to archiving day-to-day details, these details will fall into a narrative arc or several arcs. The biographer has a story to tell: the loss of a father, let’s say; however, “the arc” exists not only to engage a reader’s interest but also to expose the biographer’s interpretive frame, for a narrative arc – the man-child in search of a father – is as much an argument as a transformation, and, like any argument, it is an implicit agreement with the reader that, no matter what life facts and fiction facts will be selected

for emphasis, evidence and logic will speak through the arc. Melville had a mother, too, and siblings: Where are their arcs?

In addition, biographers must be “certain” of their interpretations and yet always mindful of their uncertainties; they must not let their narrative bog down in tiresome subjunctives, retractions, and modifications that underscore the biographical speculations and too often kill a good story. And yet biography is inherently speculative. Similar to postmodern fiction, a biography must challenge readers, help make them mindful of formal limits, beckon them to join with the biographer in unraveling the life and text. Rather than refusing to link life and text, a credible critical biography, at its best, helps readers struggle with the very problems of writing a biography that the biographer experiences. It models our anxiety over the biographical condition.

The profit in coming to terms with the biographical condition in the strategizing of a literary biography is that biographers, critics, and readers may experience more fully and more critically the transformative nature of the creative process. They come to understand how a writer and culture interact. In this regard, Melville’s more autobiographical fictions both tantalize and challenge. *Pierre*, an odd and brilliant book by any reckoning, threads its peculiar biographical details so deftly within the warp and woof of its fiction that a biographer wonders whether a trap is being set. It feels as if the reader, teased by the promise of a glimpse at Melville’s life, is being led to an ornately carved sarcophagus that proves empty, as if that hollowness embodies the futility of discerning fact and fiction, and of writing biography.

A case in point: Melville’s description of Pierre’s iconic grandfather and namesake General Pierre Glendinning is readily identified with Melville’s maternal grandfather, General Peter Gansevoort. Both the fictional and actual figures are tall, commanding, and yet sociable and good Christian heroes of the American Revolution. What, then, are we to make of one carefully placed detail regarding the fictive General?

[I]n a night-scuffle in the wilderness before the Revolutionary War, [the General] had annihilated two Indian savages by making reciprocal bludgeons with their heads. And all this was done by the mildest hearted, and most blue-eyed gentleman in the world.¹

I have always marveled over this outrageous, slapstick image: consider the white man’s imperialist efficiency in dispatching two “savages” in one reciprocating

1. Herman Melville, *Pierre, or, The Ambiguities*, ed. Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker, and G. Thomas Tanselle (Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern University Press and The Newberry Library, 1971), 29–30.

blow. An Ishmael might have reflected on the universal significance of the simultaneity of one death being the instrument of another, but *Pierre's* narrator brings the scope of reflection immediately to bear on family and on the hypocrisy of "the gentleman," or worse on the killer instinct lurking within the mild heart of blue-eyed Christianity. Although this double homicide is a hyperbolic fiction, it triggers in subsequent lines a fuller and subtler undercutting of Pierre's grandfather. Moreover, because of the text's satiric innuendo, we are seized by the biographical condition of this text and have to wonder whether a life-fact lurks beneath the farce. More specifically, we ask: Did Melville's actual grandfather engage in actual hand-to-hand military conflict? With Iroquois warriors? At night? Was he a killer? Or was this head-bashing night-scuffle just a family legend? Or a stolen moment from Cooper, or from some New York stage spectacle? No matter what the actual answers may be, will our finding tell us anything critical about our reading of Melville: his culture, his family, his text?

Getting to the bottom of these and other questions has led me to a more textured understanding of Melville's ancestry and Melville's way of making texts. True, Melville was born well after his grandfather's death in 1812. Even so, as Herman grew into adolescence in Albany, New York – home of his mother's Gansevoort family – he could not escape the legend of the illustrious general, known to all as "The Hero of Fort Stanwix." General Gansevoort was a fixture in Melville's consciousness because he was an icon for everyone around him. The town worshipped his grandfather, celebrated his achievements in Fourth-of-July orations, and even included him in commemorations of brighter luminaries like Washington. Yet once the disaffected Albany adolescent had evolved into his more cosmopolitan adulthood, he was still angry enough to use the head-bashing grandfather in *Pierre* to register his resistance to family heroes. Whether the anecdote is based on a life-fact or not, it represents Melville's coming to terms with certain family stains, a revelation concomitant with the growth of the boy's progressive political consciousness.

In *Subversive Genealogy*, a compelling but more thematic than biographical treatment of Melville family and politics, Michael Paul Rogin sketches Melville's iconoclastic use of his grandfather's Indian fighting past, framing it within the broader narrative of generational conflict in the early republic. Rogin quotes the problematic "night-scuffle" passage only to assert that, in borrowing "the Gansevoort history of Indian relations" for *Pierre*, Melville "exaggerated its significance and its ferocity" (Rogin 167).² Rogin is certainly right to imply that General Gansevoort's Indian exploits were less than ferocious, but this likely

2. Michael Paul Rogin, *Subversive Genealogy: The Politics and Art of Herman Melville* (New York: Knopf, 1983), 167.

fact, regarding the Gansevoort family condition only encourages us to ask why Melville felt compelled to exaggerate and to wonder what is the meaning of his wanting to exaggerate.

Of course, an anecdote's significance depends upon one's critical focus. For instance, Rogin's narrative arc is shaped by the rhetoric and symbolism of the biblical family myth of Esau and Jacob, which also encompasses the professional writings of two adult sibling rivals: Herman and his older brother Gansevoort Melville. However, regarding these two, my focus in *A Half Known Life* is on the brothers in adolescence, as they were growing, before they had careers, and on a single moment of transformation in Melville's growing awareness as a young man as he rubbed against his older, more ambitious, and politically driven brother.

The transformation, triggered by the dynamics of reading within the Melville family, signals in both brothers the dawning of a cosmopolitan sensibility that we can see interrogated in a bio-textual "arc" that begins with *Pierre* and culminates with *The Confidence-Man* (1857).³ In Chapters 25–28 of the later work, Colonel John Moredock, a serial killer of Indians, is a version of the head-bashing General of *Pierre*, who is in turn rejected by "cosmopolitan" Frank Goodman, the novel's dubious moral center. For Melville, the cosmopolitan is a version of himself who resists (although problematically) the hidden savagery that the Indian-hater Moredock represents.⁴ But rather than rehearsing the full narrative arc of the development of Melville's cosmopolitan consciousness, I want to trace Melville's growth into that cosmopolitan identity back to his reading during adolescence.

For Melville, reading was itself a cosmopolitan act. Generally, we think of cosmopolitanism as a transnational phenomenon. At best, it embraces human principles that transcend local prejudices and tribal taboo. At worst, its progressive multiculturalism becomes invasive, treading heavily on regional identities that embody memory, difference, and tradition. Melville's lifelong skepticism enabled him to recognize not only the cosmopolitan ideal of a liberal democracy that respects all cultures but also the potentials within democracies that would

3. Herman Melville, *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade*, ed. John Bryant (New York: Random House, 2003).

4. Rogin reads Moredock as an Ahabian "lone figure of integrity" and in this regard follows Hershel Parker's argument that Moredock is the novel's moral center because of his relentless extirpation of Indians, taken as symbolic devils. See: Rogin, *Subversive Genealogy*, 245. In *Melville and Repose*, John Bryant argues that readers are challenged to determine Goodman's identity (in the context of the parade of preceding con men and of the nation's ambivalence toward the figure of the cosmopolite) and that a comparison of Melville's Moredock to its source in James Hall's *Sketches of History, Life, and Manners, in the West* (1835) heightens the text's sarcasms against Moredock, urging readers to look elsewhere for the novel's moral center. See Chapters 12 and 13 in: John Bryant, *Melville and Repose: The Rhetoric of Humor in the American Renaissance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

deny that ideal. We see the growth of Melville's cosmopolitanism in his process of reading, in his relationship with his brother Gansevoort, and in their engagement with two books: one local, the other Italian, and both touching on the Indian "removals" of the Revolutionary War. Melville's consciousness of his grandfather's involvement in Native American genocide contributed to his evolving cosmopolitan sensibility. In observing this evolution, we cannot avoid coming to terms with the biographical condition of Melville's work.

II

First, let us consider a curious reading habit practiced in the Melville parlor and witnessed by the Melville siblings. Generally, we take reading to be a personal affair. A communion of text and writer, performed in structured solitude, solitary reading is romantically conceived as a celebration of privacy. The Melville children did plenty of private reading. Yet no cultural artefact is more public than a book: the very notion of "publication" is to go public, and a book by its nature is a public space waiting to be opened, inhabited by readers, and shared. Reading is the reader's communion not only with writer and text but also with other readers. The sharing of books, the phenomenon of book readings, lectures, and tours; the invention of public libraries and the college seminar; the once popular practice of family reading in the Victorian era and the now popular reading groups (for men or women, usually in separate spheres) are only the more familiar forms of the very public nature of reading. During Melville's adolescence, his home was filled with books, and the older Melville siblings in the mid- to late-1830s brought journals, novels, biographies, histories, self-help books, and more into their Albany and, later, Lansingburgh homes. In addition, Herman's older brother Gansevoort, always the tutor to his younger brothers and sisters, introduced a new kind of reading involving a specialized commonplace book called the *Index Rerum*.

In 1838, during the depression following the Panic of 1837, and after the bankruptcy of his hat-manufacturing business, Gansevoort Melville fled with mother and siblings from vibrant Albany to sleepy Lansingburgh, across the Hudson River and just north of Troy, New York. Complaining of a leg ailment, the once active, young businessman now enjoyed what would become a fifteen-month period of invalidism. Herman, like Tommo's servitor Kory Kory in *Typee* (1846), would carry his brother from bedroom to privy to parlor, while Gansevoort would lie about downstairs in the spacious, rented home on the eastern bank of the Hudson, occasionally glancing at the river. With books and newspapers stacked around him, he held court midst his family, and he tutored his siblings in their reading and writing. Reading also became Gansevoort's way of returning

to the wider world, a confirmation of his liberalism that would eventually lead him from hat making into the law and Jacksonian politics. Herman, four years younger than Gansevoort, had undisclosed ambitions of his own, but Gansevoort's public display of reading in the Melville family parlor was a daily model of commitment and intensity that all other siblings were meant to admire and adopt. Herman's and Gansevoort's reading materials were both very local and very European. As a transnational act, stacking domestic and foreign works one atop the other, reading was a mode of cosmopolitanism whereby each young man sharpened his masculine, progressive, and universalist sensibilities.

Our only record of this remarkable reading period is located in the two surviving volumes of Gansevoort's *Index Rerum*.⁵ Used for categorizing and alphabetizing extracts and commentary taken from one's reading, and designed in a format copyrighted by the American pedagogue John Todd, the *Index Rerum* is a bound volume of over 200 scored, blank pages, segmented alphabetically, each page with two columns of uneven width. When readers found something worth noting in their reading, they entered a topic heading of their own creation on an appropriate alphabetized page in the narrow column at the left and then copied whatever content they wish into the wider adjacent column on the right of the blank page. For example, a passage associated with the topic "Savages" would be copied (along with its book reference) in the right column beside that heading in the left on one of the pages reserved for topics beginning with "S"; passages on "Indians" would be entered in one of the "I" pages, and so on.⁶ Cross-references in the surviving two *Index Rerum* volumes indicate that Gansevoort may have curated as many as six such volumes in the eight years preceding his untimely death in 1846.⁷

To some extent, Gansevoort's *Index Rerum*, intended as a memory aid for his private and professional use, was also a public catalogue of highlights from his reading for the entire family to peruse, a kind of cabinet of book learning to inspire good

5. Hershel Parker introduced Gansevoort's *Index Rerum* volumes in: Hershel Parker, Herman Melville: A Biography, Vol. 1 (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 108–110.

6. The alphabetizing is actually more complicated. The multiple pages assigned to each alphabetized consonant are in turn broken down into five subsections arranged by vowel; for example, Sa, Se, Si, So, Su. Topic headings are thus sorted depending upon the initial letter plus the next vowel to appear in the word. Accordingly, "Savage" or "Slavery" would be entered in the blank pages reserved for the "Sa" topics, and "Indians" would be entered in the "Ii" pages.

7. The two surviving *Index Rerum* volumes, copyrighted 1836 and 1837 and labeled volume 1 and 4, are located in the Melville collection of the Berkshire Athenaeum in Pittsfield, MA. Cross-references in the more sparsely filled volume 4 to unlocated volumes 3 and 6 indicate that Gansevoort might have been reorganizing, cross-referencing, or re-indexing his entries, and perhaps devoting certain volumes to specific topics, such as his readings in Law, which are chiefly found in volume 4, dated in Gansevoort's hand as "February 17–1840."

research habits and further reading. The first of these volumes is crammed with entries, but a careful analysis of the ordering of entries indicates that Gansevoort's earliest readings in the late 1830s included William L. Stone's 1838 *Life of Joseph Brant* and an English translation of Carlo Giuseppe Botta's 1807 *History of the War of the Independence of the United States of America*. Chances are that Herman knew of these volumes and may have read them as closely as Gansevoort. Stone's biography of the loyalist Iroquois Thayendanegea, popularly known as the "murderous Joseph Brandt," was a particular object of interest for both young men, not only because the book featured General Peter Gansevoort's greatest military exploit – the holding of the besieged Fort Stanwix – but also because the general's son and Herman's uncle, also named Peter Gansevoort, had given the biographer William Leete Stone, a local Albany editor, full access to the general's papers in order to write the book about Joseph Brant.⁸ A signed copy of Stone's *Life of Brant* sat in Uncle Peter's library and was available for Gansevoort and Herman's use.⁹ Melville refers to the book in a 7 November 1851 letter to his friend and editor Evert A. Duyckinck.¹⁰ And in *Pierre*, he gives a brief anecdote in which, after the war, "the gentlemanly, but murderous half-breed, Brandt" dines harmoniously with General Glendinning, based on an actual dinner hosted in 1802 by Peter Gansevoort, as reported in Stone's *Life*.¹¹

Less intimately related to the Melville family but no less important was Carlo Botta's 1807 *History of the American Revolution*. Although appearing originally in Italian, it was translated into French and at least eight illustrated American editions before 1838. Botta was a physician, philosopher, and early advocate of Italian unity. Hoping that Italy might follow the American example of throwing off foreign domination and forming a unified democracy, he concludes his history

8. See: William L. Stone, *Life of Joseph Brant (Thayendanegea)*, Vol. 1 (Albany, NY: J. Munsell, 1987), xxviii. General Peter Gansevoort's papers are located in the Gansevoort-Lansing Collection of the New York Public Library (NYPL-GLC).

9. See: Merton M. Jr. Sealts, *Melville's Reading* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1988), #491a. Stone's signed and annotated presentation copy of his *Life of Brant* is located in NYPL-GLC.

10. Herman Melville, *Correspondence*, ed. Lynn Horth (Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern University Press and The Newberry Library, 1993), 209–210.

11. Cf. Melville, *Pierre*, 6; Stone, *Life*, Vol. 2, 460. Of Joseph Brant's recollection of the Sullivan-Clinton campaign, Stone reports "that he [Brant] was hovering about him [Gansevoort] during the whole march; and was so near that, to use his own words, 'I roasted my venison by the fires that you left.'" Stone spells Brant's name without a "d" perhaps to distance his subject from the notoriety associated with the more popular "Brandt" spelling. Thomas Campbell's highly popular 1809 poem "Gertrude of Wyoming," which depicts the Wyoming (PA) massacre led by "the Monster Brandt, – / With all his howling desolating band" (ll. 615–16), gave wide currency to both the epithet and spelling in the popular imagination. (See note 18.) Melville retained the "Brandt" spelling in his 7 November 1851 letter to Duyckinck (mentioned above) as well as in *Pierre*.

marveling at the United States's ability to rid itself of monarchy. Because it had already developed democratic institutions that could take the place of the crown, "the republic found itself established without shock."¹² In 1807, Botta foresaw a *Risorgimento* that would not occur for another sixty years. So popular was Botta's history that it is the likely model for "the History of the Revolutionary War" that Pierre tells us he "sometimes read."¹³

Closer to home, Stone's and Botta's books capture the interest of a Melville biographer because they comment importantly on the nature of grandfather General Peter Gansevoort's heroism – a matter of considerable interest to Herman and his older brother. The general's reputation was based almost entirely on his strategic defense of Fort Stanwix in 1778. When he took command there, the fort was in shambles. Quickly restoring it, Gansevoort withstood a siege laid by a British regiment assisted by American loyalists and Iroquois warriors. Gansevoort's resistance thwarted the British advance down the Mohawk Valley and made possible the colonists' victory at Saratoga, the battle that decisively swung the war in favor of the Americans. Gansevoort's achievement was celebrated even into the 20th century, especially in Albany. A Gilbert Stuart painting of Gansevoort in full military regalia hung in the Gansevoort family home.¹⁴

But a year after the triumph at Fort Stanwix came a darker passage in Colonel Gansevoort's life: the infamous Sullivan-Clinton campaign of 1779 to eradicate the Iroquois from the Mohawk River region.¹⁵ Some months after Peter Gansevoort held the fort,¹⁶ the loyalist sympathizer and Iroquois chief Joseph Brant returned

12. Charles Botta, *History of the War of the Independence of the United States of America*, Vol. 2, trans. George Alexander Otis (Boston: Harrison Gray, 1826), 452.

13. Melville, *Pierre*, 13.

14. NYPL-GLC, Box 150, folder 2.

15. Rogin makes repeated reference to Peter Gansevoort's Indian fighting, though with some inaccuracies. By characterizing the siege as "one of the bloodiest battles" of the war, he may have confused the siege with the battle of Oriskany, which was a British and Indian ambush of American forces seeking unsuccessfully to relieve the besieged fort; see: Rogin, *Subversive Genealogy*, 43. This battle, a draw and considered the war's bloodiest engagement, took place six miles away from the fort, and Gansevoort was not involved. The casualties at the siege of Fort Stanwix, on the other hand, were three killed and nine wounded; see: Thomas L. Purvis, *Dictionary of American History* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1995), 143. In addition, Rogin seems to conflate the siege of Fort Stanwix and Gansevoort's subsequent involvement in the Sullivan-Clinton campaign, two separate engagements that occurred a year apart: "Colonel Gansevoort refused to surrender the fort. To end Indian raids in the valley, he then led an expedition which destroyed tribal villages and food supplies;" see: Rogin, *Subversive Genealogy*, 43. In fact, as discussed below, Gansevoort led one of the several regiments under James Clinton's command, not the entire Sullivan-Clinton expedition.

16. Peter Gansevoort did not rise above the rank of Colonel until he received an honorary generalship in 1809, three years before his death. During this period he supervised shipments of supplies to the Army in the Northwest Territories.

to the Mohawk Valley, leading numerous attacks against colonial and Indian settlements, in particular the village of Wyoming in northern Pennsylvania. Although patriot propagandists called it a massacre, the battle of Wyoming, in June 1778, was a conventional engagement with no civilian atrocities. Nevertheless, revenge was in the air. In the following November and despite Brant's attempts to prevent atrocities in what came to be called the Cherry Valley Massacre, thirty scalped women and children were counted among the dead. The event was only one of a series of conflicts between white and Iroquois villagers, with atrocities committed on both sides. At play was the same kind of escalation into terroristic "savagery" by both colonists and aboriginals in Polynesia that Melville would later expose in *Typee*.¹⁷ Along the Mohawk, colonial provocateurs had coerced Native Americans into retaliatory warfare, exasperating them tragically into becoming the very "savages" and "monsters" that colonists assumed them to be, despite the Iroquois's long-established traditions of democracy and civility.

On May 31, 1779, George Washington commissioned General John Sullivan, along with Colonel Peter Gansevoort's superior officer, General James Clinton, to put an end to the Indian attacks by putting an end to Iroquois culture. As recorded in Stone's *Life of Brant*, Washington ordered his officers to annihilate the Six Nations. To Sullivan, he wrote: "The immediate objects are the total destruction and devastation of their settlements [...]. It will be essential to ruin their crops now in the ground and prevent their planting more." The Father of his Country continued: "you will not by any means listen to any overture of peace before the total ruinment of their settlements is effected." And he concluded: "Our future security will be [...] in the terror with which the severity of the chastisement they receive will inspire them."¹⁸ Sullivan ruthlessly obeyed. The New World's great revolution, then and now, had come to this: Terrorism and genocide for the sake of national security.

Still largely forgotten, the Sullivan-Clinton campaign against the Iroquois nevertheless lingered in the collective consciousness of the early republic. Carlo Botta described the episode in rueful tones: "The habitations were burned, the crops were ravaged, the fruit trees cut down." Sullivan's men "utterly destroyed forty villages,

17. An irony Rogin registers is that, while Colonel Peter Gansevoort had fought against the Mohawk chieftain Joseph Brant, Melville's other grandfather, Major Thomas Melville, had participated in the Boston Tea Party, in which colonists dressed as Mohawks to perform their raid on British ships. See: Rogin, *Subversive Genealogy*, 49.

18. As quoted in: George Washington, *The Writings of George Washington from the Original Manuscript Sources, 1745-1799* (Electronic Text Center: University of Virginia Library, 1997) (26.01.2012); Stone, *Life*, Vol. 2, 18; Sherman Williams, "The Organization of Sullivan's Expedition," in: *Proceedings of the New York State Historical Association* 6, ed. William Wait (Albany, NY: 1906), 30.

and left no single trace of vegetation upon the surface of the ground. All the cattle which had not been removed by the Indians, were brought off, or killed upon the spot.” Noting that even some of Sullivan’s officers who complained of “these devastations, were themselves ashamed of them,” Botta remarked (editorializing with an appropriate Italianism), “some even ventured to remonstrate that they were not accustomed to exercise the vocation of *banditti*.”¹⁹ Echoing Botta’s incisive commentary, William Stone concluded that Washington had unleashed a “war of extermination waged against the very orchards.”²⁰

As Sullivan despoiled their lands, Iroquois sachems offered terms of peace. Sullivan would not relent. And though his own starving army was reduced in the wilderness to half rations, he would not preserve the Indian fields of ripe, milky corn and their herds of cattle for his recruits’ sake or for the region’s economy. After one or two initial bloody engagements, the Iroquois deserted their towns and villages and headed for the British-held Fort Niagara in Canada. Thus, Sullivan’s troops attacked mostly uninhabited settlements and the actual loss of human lives was thereby minimized. But the coming winter – one of the worst recorded in that century – proved equally relentless. With their harvests and animals destroyed, thousands of dispossessed Native Americans camped outside the walls of Fort Niagara and froze or starved to death. It was all just as Washington had ordered. Iroquois culture, for the time being, had been reduced to “total ruinment.”

Botta lamented that the refugees were in no way “savage tribes.” “They were found more advanced in civilization than was believed. . . . Their houses were placed in the most pleasant and healthy situations; [. . .] Their fields, covered with luxuriant harvests, attested that the art of culture was not unknown to them. The antiquity and marvelous beauty of their fruit trees, with the number of their orchards, were incontestable indications that it was no little time since they were arrived at this degree of civil improvement” (2.196).²¹ Tacitly Botta asked, “Who is the more civilized? the white man or the “savage”? Melville would raise the same question in *Typee* and ring changes on it throughout the rest of his career, in *Moby Dick*, “Benito Cereno,” and, perhaps most tellingly, *The Confidence-Man*.

Melville’s grandfather Peter Gansevoort took part in the Sullivan-Clinton campaign against the Iroquois orchards. I have found no record that he engaged either in the kind of hand-to-hand bludgeoning of humans or in the kind of “night-scuffle” that Melville alludes to in *Pierre*. According to accounts based on soldier journals, Colonel Gansevoort’s regiment engaged in two armed conflicts, resulting

19. Botta, *History*, Vol. 2, 195.

20. Stone, *Life*, Vol. 2, 25.

21. Botta, *History*, Vol. 2, 196.

in about forty Indian deaths.²² Most of Gansevoort's activity during this period involved the destruction of some forty already abandoned villages.²³ To make sure that Indian villagers had plenty of time to abandon those villages, Then-Colonel Gansevoort's commanding officer, General James Clinton, would fire off cannon morning and evening as his troops advanced through the woods.²⁴ As an officer, the colonel is not likely to have killed many, or, in fact, any Native American combatants. Indeed, Gansevoort had little relish for the Indian eradication campaign. When erroneously ordered to destroy a small pro-American Mohawk village, mistakenly considered to be hostile, Peter seized the village, took prisoners, but delayed torching the fields and habitations until a rescinding order arrived: To General Sullivan he wrote, "humanity tempted me, in this particular, to act in some degree, contrary to orders" (Craft 372; see also Stone 2.37–41).²⁵ Fort Stanwix notwithstanding, perhaps grandfather Peter's greater heroism lay in this moment of discretion.

III

Whereas Botta's *History* mentions Peter Gansevoort only once, Stone's *Life of Brant* is replete with references to him, and both books record numerous tales of atrocities against Native Americans. While reading these books, Gansevoort's two grandsons might well wonder how much Indian blood had stained their grandfather's hands. Melville's ironic treatment of Pierre's grandfather as a blue-eyed, mild-hearted bludgeoner of Indians in the night registers a tension Melville had, along with his brother Gansevoort, developed early on in his reading of Botta and Stone.

Decades after the revolution, Melville's consciousness of the Native Americans' plight was arguably triggered in adolescence by his older brother's reading of Botta

22. In all but two cases, Peter Gansevoort's third regiment pillaged already deserted Indian villages. Gansevoort's "bloody" engagements were the April 18, 1779, capture of the Onondaga "Castle" on Lake Oneida, several miles west of Fort Stanwix, and the quick and decisive battle of Newtown, NY on August 29, 1779. The body counts are recorded in: Stone, *Life*, Vol. 1, 404–406; Williams, "The Organization," 34; William Wait "Sullivan's Campaign," in: *Proceedings of the New York State Historical Association* 6, ed. William Wait (Albany, NY: 1906), 85.

23. Wait, "Sullivan's," 86.

24. Nathaniel Webb, "Continuation of Nathaniel Webb's Journal: As Published in the Elmira Republican of Sept. 11th and 12th, 1855," in: *Proceedings of the New York State Historical Association* 6, ed. William Wait (Albany, NY: 1906), 87–93.

25. David Craft, "Historical Address of Rev. David Craft," in: *Journals of the Military Expedition of Major General John Sullivan against the Six Nations of Indians in 1779 with Records of Centennial Celebrations*, ed. Frederick Cook [and George S. Conover] (Auburn: Knapp, Peck & Thomson, 1887), 372; see also: Stone, *Life*, Vol. 2, 37–41.

and Stone and his own growing awareness of General Peter Gansevoort's complicated involvement in the Sullivan-Clinton campaign. What both grandsons could read in black and white did not entirely square with the town's hero worship of their grandfather or the heroic image uncritically perpetuated in the family. Evidence suggests that the family blindness was willful. The crisp two-volume set of Stone's *Life of Brant* – presented to Herman's Uncle Peter, with affection, by "the Author" – shows evidence of close reading that goes only so far. Volume One, which relates Gansevoort's heroic defense of Fort Stanwix, shows several marginal markings. But Volume Two, which treats the Sullivan campaign and Gansevoort's involvement, is utterly unmarked. Various circumstances might explain the absence of annotations in the latter volume. One of them, however, is that to be a Gansevoort meant reading what you want to read, finding what you expect to find, and stopping there. But the Melville boys – two generations removed from 1776 – went further into Stone's *Life of Brant* and Botta's history of the Revolution.

The ordering of entries in the first of Gansevoort Melville's *Index Rerum* volumes indicates that Gansevoort read Botta's history before looking into Stone's biography. Recording Botta's withering report of the Sullivan-Clinton campaign quoted above, Herman's brother composed the following entry:

Savages, considerable advancement in civilization, manifested in the dwellings, orchards & fields of the Indian country which Genl Sullivan ravaged. Botta's *Histry* v2. b12, p. 196.²⁶

Gansevoort's index item – "Savages" – borrows from Botta's wording "savage tribes" but seems to be used without irony or awareness that the content of the entry itself – including the "civilization" that Sullivan "ravaged" (words also drawn from Botta's text) – deconstructs the imputation of savagery to Indians. Nevertheless, Gansevoort seems to be co-opting without personal commentary Botta's notion of a civilization ravaged. The young man Gansevoort could write the words that seem to indict the actions of his namesake grandfather but not as yet fully react to them. However, by the time Gansevoort began recording entries from his subsequent reading of Stone's *Life of Brant*, he seems to have replaced the word "Savage" in his index with the more respectful term "Indian." The revision suggests a deeper paradigm shift in Gansevoort's thinking. Though the lexical choice reflects Stone's own usage of "Indian" and eschewal of words like "monstrous" and "savage," the entry is nevertheless Gansevoort's choice as well, an emblem

26. Gansevoort Melville, *Index Rerum*, Vol. 1 and 4, Melville Collection, Berkshire Athenaeum, Pittsfield, MA; Gansevoort's underlining is a cross-referencing to another entry on "orchards." See also: Botta, *History*, Vol 2, 196.

of his growth as a reader from patriot grandson to a more progressive cosmopolite. Indeed, the progress of his reading, from Botta to Stone, was an enactment of his emerging cosmopolitanism.

Despite his sympathies for the Iroquois, Botta nevertheless routinely refers to Native Americans as “savages and barbarians” and had little tolerance for Joseph Brant.²⁷ Moreover, he reports only a fraction of the atrocities committed against the Iroquois. On the other hand, Stone’s agenda was to rehabilitate Joseph Brant, and he did not stop with the Sullivan-Clinton campaign. Thus, when Gansevoort read Stone, he found himself more deeply outraged by another reported massacre:

Indians, a/c [account] of the hellish murder of the Moravian Indians on the Muskingum by American white savages – the darkest transaction that disgraces our country – Stone, Brant, v2, ch7, p. 217.²⁸

Gansevoort alludes to the 1782 massacre of 96 Native Americans who had converted to the pacifist Moravian sect and lived peacefully in Muskingum, Ohio. White neighbors lined up these unarmed noncombatants and, in a manner reminiscent of the double bludgeoning in *Pierre*, murdered them with a cooper’s mallet while they prayed for deliverance. Gansevoort’s *Index Rerum* entry compresses Stone’s language but this time adds editorializations of his own. Where Stone uses the words “darkest” and “transaction” separately, Gansevoort combines them into one phrase. And he surrounds “darkest transaction” with his own words: “hellish” and “disgraces.” But a more telling textual transformation involves a compression of Stone’s wording. Whereas Stone writes that “the white men – not the Indians – are to be branded as the savages” (Stone 2.217),²⁹ Gansevoort offers a bolder formulation: “white savages” (*IR*).³⁰ More than Botta’s *History*, Stone’s *Life of Brant* was an eye-opener for Gansevoort. However, in Gansevoort’s synergistic reading, one text melded with the other; and feeding off both, Gansevoort expanded his political consciousness. More importantly, Gansevoort transformed Botta’s ambivalence

27. Botta, *History*, Vol. 2, 170; cf. David Ramsay, *The History of the Revolution* (Trenton: James J. Wilson, 1811), 184, 192. Botta follows Ramsay in spelling the chief’s name “Brandt” and in falsely assuming Brant’s mixed heritage: “a certain Brandt, born of mixed blood, the most ferocious being ever produced by human nature, often too prodigal of similar monsters.” Botta’s original Italian is “sangue misto europeo ed indiano.” However, Botta augments Ramsay by labeling Indians as “monsters” (“mostri”). Botta’s 1807 label precedes Thompson’s epithet “the Monster Brandt” by two years (see note 7 above). Stone dismisses the claim that Brant was a “half breed”; Melville perpetuates it in *Pierre* and plays with the idea of the deceptively vicious mulatto in the character of Francesco in “Benito Cereno.”

28. Melville, *Index Rerum*. See also: Stone, *Life*, Vol. 2, 217.

29. Stone, *Life*, Vol. 2, 217.

30. Melville, *Index Rerum*.

and Stone's revisionist outrage into an anger of his own. His new phrase "white savages" enacts a critique that Stone only suggests. In effect, Gansevoort's *Index Rerum* entry records a reading process: His ability to generate the transformative phrase "white savages" is not simply an appropriation of Stone; it is a re-writing of Stone, and his revision process is a form of self-re-formation.

Gansevoort's transformative reading gestures toward progressive cosmopolitan ideals. He and his siblings had not traveled much outside the precincts of New York, Albany, and Boston. In the 1830s, reading was their world travel. Although Stone was a local historian, the controversial subject of his biography, Joseph Brant, was himself a world renowned, world-traveling figure: he had (like other indigenous Americans before him) toured Europe and charmed courts with the contrast between his tribal dress and unexpected erudition. Gansevoort Melville – stuck on the wrong side of the Hudson, remote from the power structures of Albany and New York City, recuperating from the depression and pain of his business failures, and carried about like an invalid in the arms of his loving brother – re-schooled himself through reading and forged a new progressive consciousness for himself. Through Botta's trenchant commentary and Stone's equally revealing narrative of the plight of the Iroquois during the Revolutionary War, Gansevoort looked beyond racial categories toward a broader comprehension of humanity, not so much a transcendence of history as an absorption into it. To borrow from Wai Chee Dimock, who has applied the idea of "deep time" to literary study, Gansevoort was able to "denationalize" his reading, to make time and space reveal their connection as "conditional and elastic"³¹ so that an Italian's history of American revolution (gesturing toward Risorgimento to come) and a neighbor's revisionist biography of a "savage" kindled in him a radical cosmopolitanism that could claim that savagery is not located along the Mohawk; it is in all humans. Still stuck in Lansingburgh, Gansevoort was becoming a citizen of the world.

But did the adolescent Herman Melville also read this way? No evidence suggests that he kept an *Index Rerum* of his own. But given that traces of both Botta and Stone appear in *Pierre*, we can assume that Herman read both works or Gansevoort's *Index Rerum* entries on them. Melville might have read these entries in mourning, when the volumes came back to the family after Gansevoort's untimely death in 1846. But Melville's earliest exposure would have been during the extended period of fraternal intimacy in 1838 when the invalid Gansevoort first introduced the *Index Rerum* into the family parlor. As Herman carried his brother in his arms about the house, he endured Gansevoort's constant tutelage, resisted

31. Wai Chee Dimock, "Deep Time: American Literature and World History," *American Literary History*, vol. 13, no. 4, Winter 2001, 760; Wai Chee Dimock, "Literature for the Planet," *PMLA*, vol. 116, no. 1 (2001): 174, 179.

it as any younger brother would, but cleaved to it as well, dreaming of his own escape into adulthood and the world out there, beyond the Hudson and Atlantic. Quite possibly, Herman did not adopt at this time the line of progressivism that Gansevoort adduced through reading. Rather, Melville absorbed the first tinctures of his brother's cosmopolitan sensibility simply by witnessing his brother's passion for reading as a way to get himself out of Lansingburgh. Even so, the revelations about Native American genocide in Botta and Stone, whenever they may have sunk in, also brought Herman into a closer inspection of home, family, and his now not-so-heroic grandfather. Did Peter Gansevoort in the summer of 1779 spill the blood of Native American civilians, as he led men into genocide? Or did he merely trample Iroquois crops, destroy their cattle, and torch their centuries-old orchards? Did he terrorize a population and destroy a culture? Did his summer of Indian fighting make the blue-eyed gentleman a "white savage"?

IV

Such questions lay dormant in Melville's adolescence. And at this juncture, we begin to feel the biographical condition acutely. My biography of Melville is subtitled "A Half Known Life," not simply because no life can be fully known but because the paucity of biographical materials regarding Melville is such that we know the portions of it we can know chiefly and in some cases only through the lenses of those living around him. Necessarily, a biography of a writer is the biography not only of his gender and culture but also of his family and friends, in this case his deep-reading, self-transforming mentor of a brother. But these lenses make us anxious: We sense their speculation; we feel their distortion; we know they are critical refractions. To the extent that the thematics of "cosmopolitanism" constitutes a narrative arc, this useful critical term needs also to be more of an "accounting" not "recounting" of the relevant life-facts as they may be found in the Melville family reading behaviors and in Melville's fictive transformations.

In the case of the Melvilles and the Iroquois, we can know Gansevoort's reading practices far more directly than Herman's. But the intimacy of the brothers, the closeness of their living quarters during their formative and transformative reading together, the dominance of the invalid Gansevoort in the family, and the presence of the memory of Grandfather Peter in the town and in books stacked at one time or another in the Melville parlor – all give heightened reality to the atmosphere of reading, learning, desire, and growth within the family. If Gansevoort was revising himself as his *Index Rerum* reveals, might not his brother Herman, witnessing the self-revision, begin to revise himself as well? The question takes us even further into the biographical condition of Melville's

writing, a biographical leap that keeps us mindful of a fundamental caution: Herman is not Gansevoort; nor are we. Perhaps all that we may permit ourselves to say, absent more precise measurements of Melville's creative process, is that the arc of Melville's adolescent growth toward a cosmopolitan consciousness modeled by his brother is a possibility, just as biography and criticism are themselves only possibilities.

In 1845, Melville would begin writing *Typee*, initiating a process of unfolding that continued until his death in 1891. In that book, and in books to come, he would interrogate, in some instances flatly deny, the difference between so-called savage and civilized life. Three years later, in defending Native Americans in his review of Francis Parkman's *The Oregon Trail* (1849), Melville put it more explicitly and brought it closer to home when he wrote: "Whenever we affect to condemn savages, we should remember that by doing so we asperse our own progenitors; for they were savages also."³² But he would not convert his anti-genocidal argument fully into fiction until his last novel, *The Confidence-Man*, with its crafty indictment of Colonel John Moredock, a legendary Indian-hater and serial killer of Native Americans.³³ In between *Typee* and *The Confidence-Man* lies *Pierre*, in which the blue-eyed gentleman and night-time Indian killer General Pierre Glendinning – a figuration of the actual General Peter Gansevoort – prefigures Melville's fictional replaying of the historical Moredock.

The "facts" fabricated in *Pierre* gesture toward some kind of factual crime in Melville's real-life family: the grandfather's reciprocal "annihilation" of two Indians signals not simply homicide but genocide. But the facetious image of General Glendinning bludgeoning two Indian heads together is based on no actual event in the real grandfather's life: There was no night-scuffle, no hand-to-hand combat, only the command of a regiment, albeit one that helped to destroy a culture. Thus, the biographical fact is not the night scuffle but Melville's invention of it, or rather his need to invent it: to act out a blood-letting, to expose a family shame or a family trait of violence. To be a bit savage himself.

A further oddity in *Pierre* is that this imagined episode in the life of a ruthless fictive Indian fighter occurs before, not during the revolution. Placing the event before the revolution directs our attention away from the real grandfather's actual Indian fighting in the Sullivan-Clinton campaign of 1779, and thereby buries this already hidden part of his grandfather's past more deeply, within the slapstick of a past unhinged from its dating. But this edgy dehistoricizing is one

32. Herman Melville, "Mr. Parkman's Tour," in: *The Piazza Tales, and Other Prose Pieces, 1839–1860*, ed. Harrison Hayford, Alma A. MacDougall, and G. Thomas Tanselle (Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern University Press and The Newberry Library, 1987), 231.

33. Melville, *Confidence-Man*, 173.

of numerous dodges in *Pierre*, and this act of misdirection is also a biographical fact. In another dodge, Melville transposes the offending grandfather from his mother's side to Pierre's paternal lineage. The Dutch mother's line through Peter Gansevoort is transformed by a not-too-subtle mixing of French and Scottish names that evokes the father's line. "Pierre Glendinning" is a cosmopolitan cover-up, what Frank Goodman in *The Confidence-Man* might have called a "ragout" of nationalities and races. The invention, the false dating, and the renaming are diversions, all suggesting Melville's anxiety in exposing his grandfather's participation in genocide. Melville's familiar tactic of concealment doubles as a cunning self-exposure, as when a child hidden under covers bumps and giggles in order to be found. Thus, as facts of fiction, these tactics also emerge as creative decisions and hence meaningful facts in a life for both the biographer and critic.

As an adolescent, Melville's progressive cosmopolitanism came to him through reading. A local historian's biography of a worldly Native American and an Italian scholar's history of revolution in upstate New York crossed borders and raised his consciousness. Already, death had taken his father too early from Melville, and Herman had buried the resentment of that abandonment out of duty to his mother and brother. But he now could see in his mother's father a source of other disenchantments. The "Hero of Fort Stanwix" and paragon of civility – uniformed like Washington, pictured above the mantel in a Gilbert Stuart painting, enameled on militia helmets and breastplates in town – had blood on his hands. As did America. To make a nation, we become the savage we seek to eradicate.

Herman wondered, too, about how far along the family line might the stain of genocide descend. In *Pierre*, he wrote: "the stream may be corrupted by the banks it flows through."³⁴ Was the adolescent and nascent cosmopolite grandson – who would become a killer of whales and naval seaman trained to fight, who would live among cannibals and write it all down in *Typee* and *Moby Dick*, who would satirize his family in *Pierre*, and who would go on to write of Indian-hating in *The Confidence-Man* – was there in this writer some hint of self-loathing and doubt in his unearthing of a buried identification with the "white savage"?

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34. Melville, *Pierre*, 108.

of *Moby-Dick* titled *Herman Melville: A Half Known Life* (John Wiley and Sons), *Melville and Repose* (Oxford), *The Fluid Text* (Michigan), *Melville Unfolding* (Michigan), and the Longman Critical Edition of *Moby-Dick*. He is also the editor of *Leviathan: A Journal of Melville Studies* and of the *Melville Electronic Library*.

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