

# “EVERY TIME HE COMES HE ROBS ME”. THE PARASITIC CHAINS OF ISRAEL POTTER’S EXILE

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Along with recent Melvillian scholarship (Irigoyen 2018, Lazo 2022), the present essay analyzes the representation of the exile in Herman Melville’s *Israel Potter: or, His Fifty Years of Exile* (1855), by focusing on the ways in which the geographical dislocation of American citizens abroad transforms their position within the body politic and the social contract established after the end of the American Revolution. In particular, the present analysis argues that the experience of exile is crucial in generating an imbalance between state and people, turning the mutually beneficial relationship that ties them together into a form of exploitation of the former over the latter. In other words, while the social compact (represented in the body politic) is theoretically configured as a relation of symbiosis between the two entities, the exile experience transforms such a reciprocity into a parasitical tie.

The narrative function of the parasite theorized by scholars such as Michel Serres (1980) and Cynthia Damon (1997) has been applied to Melville’s work by Anders M. Gullestad (2022), who focuses on the parasitical chains related to food. Here, the notion is applied to the dynamics of power and it is used to describe the relationship between the state and the persons in exile, configuring the political institutions as parasite, and the people as host. The essay subverts the relationship between parasite and host, identifying Israel Potter as the host during his life in exile, and the United States and British governments as parasites, thus suggesting Melville’s distrust towards the structures of power of his age. In other words, the present analysis grounds on Melville’s disillusionment towards the political scenario of the time and argues that Israel epitomizes the exploitation performed by the political institutions towards the body politic of the time. Two episodes will be examined: first, Israel’s stay in Paris and his relationship with Benjamin Franklin and, second, Israel’s exile in England.

Keywords: Herman Melville; Israel Potter; Parasite; Exile; Body politic.

## Body Politic and Parasitism in Melville’s *Israel Potter*

Recent Melvillian scholarship has examined Melville’s *Israel Potter: or, His Fifty Years of Exile* (1855) by exploring the notion of exile in relation to the dynamics of mobility, refuge, and nationality, especially in the wake of the contemporary social and political discourse on migration, both in the United States and beyond – as it emerges, for example, in the work of Emilio Irigoyen (2018) and Rodrigo Lazo (2020, 2022). Lazo begins his analysis by reminding that Melville protested

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the publication of an 1865 pirate edition of *Israel Potter* titled “The Refugee”. The author then proceeds by problematizing the protagonist’s status of national subject by describing the character as someone who experiences «geographic displacement, extra-national living conditions, and the necessity of being on the run» (Lazo 2022: 113). Lazo conceives the text as «a biographical portrait of someone crossing continents and countries» (2022: 116), which addresses «the relationship of a migratory individual person to the nation, the nation as a monumental conception, and the nation-state as a bureaucratic apparatus» (2020: 148-149).

Certainly, Israel Potter’s experience as an exile induces a revision on the emotional dynamics of memory, nostalgia or individual displacement<sup>1</sup>, but the novel also suggests exploring how, in XIX<sup>th</sup> century US culture, a forced condition of living outside the United States tended to redefine the status of US citizenship. As it seems evident, Lazo considers Israel Potter primarily as an exile and only secondarily as a national subject, whereas this analysis proposes that the two conditions are inseparable. In particular, the marginalized point of view of a citizen of the United States compelled to live outside the national borders highlights the progressive political and cultural strengthening of the nation building process. What is contended here is that Melville’s *Israel Potter* does not deal with the way in which the experience of exile may compromise the participation of a citizen in the American body politic, but it rather determines a transformation of the exile’s position in the compact that composes the body politic.

As Nadia E. Brown and Sarah A. Gershon argue, the people’s belonging to the body politic of the United States includes citizens in an interdependency between themselves and the national institutions. This relationship can be interpreted as a social compact which empowers the state to hierarchize and regulate the people’s lives to protect their liberties and rights (Brown & Gershon). However, while a social contract implies the recognition of mutual rights and duties on both sides, Israel Potter’s dislocation causes an alteration in the rules of the contract, thus subverting such a supposed reciprocity, consequently creating a non-reciprocal relationship of dominion and subjection. Throughout the novel, Israel Potter, though an exile, remains a citizen of the United States and considers himself as such; yet, evoking Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s notorious formulation, after being captured and carried to England, Israel Potter’s life undergoes a process of deterritorialization and reterritorialization abroad (1987). This alteration symbolically reconfigures the protagonist’s relationship with the state from a symbiotic paradigm to a parasitical one, where it is the state that

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1 As it has been observed by Mardorossian and Everett & Wagstaff.

lives on the body politic, incarnated in the book by Israel Potter. The suggestion therefore is that the dislocation that characterizes the condition of the exile distorts the interdependence between the exile and the state, transforming it into a parasitical one. In particular, even though the exiles depend on the state to go back home, the state exploits them, by taking advantage of their desire to return.

Contractual interdependence metaphorically outlines the contours of a symbiosis – a mutually beneficial biological interaction between different organisms. In the context of the present research, symbiosis is generated from the fact that, on the one hand, the people benefit from delegating power to the state and, on the other, the state exists because of the people's self-definition within nationality. In *Israel Potter* the main character experiences a concomitant condition as a citizen and as an exile, which interrupts the reciprocity of the compact. The state benefits from Israel Potter's commitment to the American cause, but the protagonist's stay abroad does not allow him to equally enjoy the right deriving from his nationality. This imbalance reflects the paradigm of parasitism rather than that of symbiosis: a relation in which one symbiont survives by exploiting another and not providing anything in return. In *lieu* of the *do ut des* logic which innervates a social compact, Melville's novel highlights a logic of exploitation between the United States and the character of Israel, configuring the nation as the exploitative entity – i.e. the parasite – and the protagonist as the exploited one – i.e. the host.

Quite interestingly, Anders M. Gullestad analyzes the narrative function of the parasite by drawing it upon classical Greek and Latin comedy genre and applying it to part of Melville's writings<sup>2</sup>. Gullestad describes the parasite as a character whose purpose is to obtain «a free dinner from others. [...] The parasite can be defined as a figure lacking a proper place at the host's table—he is a "foreign body" who does not really belong, and who is at the mercy of those who feed him» (13). However, Gullestad mainly focuses on the parasitical chains that emerge in relation to food and nourishment. He observes that, in Melville's work, food management «is often intimately connected to *power* and *power relations*» (23). In particular, «While to the host, giving a sumptuous feast may serve as an opportunity to put others in debt or to solidify power, to the guests, it may offer the possibility of nourishment at the host's expense»; in this way, «meals can be said to function as arenas for the *strategies* of those in power, but they can also provide opportunities for the *tactics* of those lacking it» (24).

The interpretative potential of parasitism goes beyond the food dimension and symbolizes relations of power in a broader sense. Cynthia Damon describes

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2 Particularly, Gullestad explores the notion in *Typee* (1846), "Bartleby, the Scrivener" (1853), "Jimmy Rose" (1855), and *The Confidence-Man* (1857).

the possible application of parasitism as a hermeneutical paradigm and argues that «The parasite is in fact a conveniently compact personified form of something quite abstract, of a complicated nexus of social irritants including flattery, favoritism, and dependency» (7). Damon's emphasis on the term "compact" encourages an alignment between the relationship between the political institutions of a country and the body politic to the one that exists between to symbionts. Building on Michel Serres's work (1980), Damon reminds that the parasite «cannot exist without a host» (3), a statement that also applies to the notion of body politic, exactly as a state cannot exist without a body politic. This equation is well illustrated in the notorious representation of the body politic in the frontispiece of Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan* (1651). The image shapes the social contract by depicting the physical body of the sovereign, formed by a multitude of citizens, working as a representation «of the human body as an analogue for the state, for a political system» (Herzogenrath 2). The structural function of the people can be grasped both in the bare existence and actions of a community, since it is community itself which operates as labor force, fighting force or taxpayers. Reading the notion of body politic through the lens of parasitism brings forth Damon's assertion that even though a social compact cannot exist without a people and a state, the political institutions of a country require a community the same way as a parasite cannot survive without a host<sup>3</sup>. The narrative trajectory of Israel Potter symbolically exemplifies a consistent discrepancy between theory and practice in the ways the political institutions of the United States and England exploit the people, disregarding the terms of the social compact which create the body politic.

Two significant sections of Melville's novel show the parasitical relationships between Israel Potter and the political institutions of the United States and Britain, when the protagonist is forced to live out of his country. The two sections differ in the geographical context where Israel Potter lives and in the political institutions he interacts with. During his time in Paris, he is an asset of the American revolutionary leadership (epitomized by Benjamin Franklin), while in London he lives like a British subject. One of the strongest elements of similarity in the two sections can be perceived in the way the political institutions exploit the body politic, symbolized by the protagonist. In both cases, Israel Potter

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3 A similar contractual logic innervated the foundations of *The Declaration of Independence*, as the document alludes to the relationship between the people and the institutions as intrinsic as it is to the body politic. As the text reads, «governments are instituted among men» and their function is to secure «certain unalienable Rights, [...] among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness» (1776). What might be inferred by these words is that the American government is entrusted with the protection of the people's unalienable rights, in exchange for the possibility to secure its own existence.

can be configured as a host that is exploited by a parasite within an apparently mutually beneficial relationship.

### **"Every time he comes in he robs me": Israel Potter and Benjamin Franklin**

The several historical figures who interact with Melville's protagonist include the fictional representation of Benjamin Franklin, to whom a significant and extremely famous section of the novel is devoted – from chapter 7 to chapter 11. During the American Revolution Franklin is deployed in Paris as United States Ambassador to France; he shelters Israel Potter and appoints him to deliver secret documents to some unknown English supporters of the American struggle for independence. By arranging Israel's permanence in Paris, Franklin shows the apparent generosity of a typical host; yet, his behavior unveils his subtle capacity to capitalize the protagonist's conditions and actions. This turn in Franklin's attitude can be perceived when he guesses Israel's «desire to return to [his] friends across the sea» (71). When Franklin gets to know about the protagonist's wish, Israel is reconfigured as an asset to exploit in exchange for the promise of helping him to go back to the United States. Franklin proposes to Israel Potter a mission and, in return, he claims: «I think I shall be able to procure you a passage» (71). Franklin repeatedly motivates the protagonist in accomplishing various missions. Franklin says: «it is probable that in two or three days I shall want you to return with some papers to the persons who sent you to me. In that case you will have to come here once more, and then, my good friend, we will see what can be done towards getting you safely home again» (71).

In this way, Franklin acquires a dominant position in his interaction with Israel Potter, because he understands that the protagonist will do everything to pay off a passage to America. Franklin's attitude exemplifies Gullestad's definition of parasites, which he considers as «intelligent opportunists excelling at taking advantage of others and, on occasion, also allowed to play leading roles» (13). The fact that Franklin acquires a dominant position in this relationship is based on the value that Israel applies to the possibility of going back to America. At the same time, Franklin never materializes Israel's passage, thus leading to two possible reflections: on the one hand, one may argue that the terms of Franklin's *do ut des* logic could generate a loop, because he could have potentially entrusted Israel Potter with new missions *ad infinitum*, to reinforce his dominion over him. On the other hand, Franklin's position symbolizes a redefinition of the compact between the revolutionary political institutions and the body politic deployed abroad, where the construction of the state is performed by people who are not granted with their unalienable rights.

The parasitical dynamic between the protagonist and Franklin emerges during Israel Potter's whole permanence in Paris. Franklin pays for Israel's lodging but "confiscates" all the goods at disposal of the guest, obviously, for his own use. This is particularly evident when Franklin repeatedly visits his guest, each time taking some goods away from the room, a behavior which clearly reflects the parasitical dynamic represented by Israel Potter's ironic remark: «Every time he comes in he robs me, [...] with an air all the time, too, as if he were making me presents» (90). The main character refers to a long catalog of articles soon examined and promptly removed by Franklin from Israel's room.

Israel conceals his disappointment as he does not understand the harm that those goods might cause, and questions the necessity of removing them. For each object, Franklin provides reasonable explanations evoking the maxims of *Poor Richard's Almanac* and the thirteen virtues included in the *Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* (1791). The protagonist reluctantly accepts every explanation provided by Franklin, but he cannot understand why, in taking all items away, Franklin should "suffer" the negative effects that commodities may provoke. All the items were provided by the lodging's owner and were included in the rent that Franklin paid; however, the owner's policy was to remove items which were not used by the guests. Even though Israel is convinced by Franklin not to use them, he wonders why the latter cannot simply leave them where they are. In reply, Franklin slightly alludes to their economic value: «Ah! Why indeed. My honest friend, are you not my guest? It were unhandsome in me to permit a third person superfluously to entertain you under what, for the time being, is my own roof» (87). Franklin takes advantage of the protagonist's status as a guest, exploiting his advantages in the name of the conventions of hospitality which Franklin slyly embodies. At first sight, the politician is a host while the protagonist is his guest; however, the dynamics that characterize this relationship are reversed as Franklin exploits Israel Potter's position for his personal advantage.

### **Brickmaking in England**

Israel's permanence in Paris constitutes one of the first stages of his life in exile and determines the redefinition of the social contract that the protagonist experiences in his reterritorialization. The novel proceeds with Israel Potter's stay in Britain, the longest part of the protagonist's life outside the United States. His dislocation in both France and England still highlights his feeling as an American citizen who still considers himself as such but is forced to live in a foreign country. Moreover, Israel Potter misses the rights his own country would supposedly guarantee: no war pension was granted, and he is thus forced to remain



in Britain since he has no money to travel back to the United States, being, as Gullestad writes, «at the mercy of those who feed him» (Gullestad 13). As a consequence, while in Britain, Israel Potter must adjust to the new context to survive and live as a British subject no matter how he struggles to defend his founding national ethics. In doing so, the protagonist lives like an immigrant and enters in the British social compact, reinstating an apparent relationship of interdependence between the people and the national institutions of the country where he lives.

Even though Israel Potter is not a British citizen, his life in Britain places him within the body politic of that nation. This repositioning is suggested during his activity as a brickmaker, in the passage where Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan* is overtly called forth<sup>4</sup> and Israel Potter wonders: «Are not men built into communities just like bricks into a wall? Consider the great wall of China: ponder the great populace of Pekin. As man serves bricks, so God him, building him up by billions into edifices of his purposes. Man attains not to the nobility of a brick, unless taken in the aggregate» (254). By resorting to the metaphor of bricks, this reflection suggests the idea that a nation and its structures of power are literally made of the people, by the people.

However, the interdependence outlined in this image is questioned by the allure of slavery. As the title of the chapter implies – «Israel in Egypt» (251) –, brickmaking metaphorically aligns Israel's stay in England to the biblical slavery of the Jews in Egypt (Castronovo, Baker)<sup>5</sup>. This allusion emerges when the protagonist reflects on his job: «To think that he should be thus helping, with all his strength, to extend the walls of the Thebes of the oppressor, made him half mad. Poor Israel! Well-named--bondsman in the English Egypt» (256). Connoting Israel Potter's job in England as a form of servitude, on a larger scale, also inevitably compromises the configuration of the body politic as a mutually beneficial compact between people and state. In this way, working in Britain means for the protagonist to be exploited by the country that hosts him. In other words, Israel Potter's relation with the state replicates the same parasitical chain that characterizes his days with Benjamin Franklin in Paris: i.e. the host takes advantage of the guest, where the former is reconfigured as a parasite, and the latter as a host.

The British dependence on the people is disclosed in the second to last chapter of the book, «Forty-Five Years» (262), which covers more than four decades

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4 See Derail.

5 According to Anne Baker, Melville's narrative shows a reflection on Israel's condition of a slave and represents «the ways in which the nation fell short of the promises made at its founding» (10). See also Levine 2020.

of Israel's life. After Israel gets married, the reader also gets to learn about the end of the war between England and the newly born United States. As the narrator deals with the social transformations of England as a consequence of the war, the subversion of the roles of host and parasite is reiterated. The text underlines how the period of peace – and the consequential homecoming of former soldiers – causes a disproportionate increase of the working force *vis-à-vis* the contingent demand of workers and the subsequent inflation of wages: «The peace immediately filled England, and more especially London, with hordes of disbanded soldiers; thousands of whom, rather than starve, or turn highwaymen (which no few of their comrades did, stopping coaches at times in the most public streets), would work for such a pittance as to bring down the wages of all the laboring classes» (264).

Israel Potter suffers from this condition and resorts to other activities: «Driven out of his previous employ [...] by this sudden influx of rivals, destitute, honest men like himself, with the ingenuity of his race, he turned his hand to the village art of chair-bottoming. [...] When chair-bottoming would fail, resort was had to match-making. That business being overdone in turn, next came the cutting of old rags, bits of paper, nails, and broken glass» (264-265). The protagonist, as well as the whole British people, are subjected to the state's management of power as their effort in the British economic system is not rewarded with any advantage<sup>6</sup>.

As the narrative continues, the reader learns of the English involvement in the Napoleonic wars which cause new labor inflation: «In 1817 he once more endured extremity; this second peace again drifting its discharged soldiers on London, so that all kinds of labor were overstocked. Beggars, too, lighted on the walks like locusts» (268-269). Here, the people are represented as “locusts”. The biblical allusion to the Plagues of Egypt configures the English people, there included Israel, as a collective war waste who survives by exploiting the national economy, while the narrative overtly establishes a cause-effect relation between the increasing unemployment and the end of the conflict, interrogating the national responsibility for the postwar labor inflation. The parasitical chain is subverted as is the English people who have nourished the national solidity by supporting the military effort both inside the national borders and beyond. The representation of the body politic as a mass of beggars reflects the consequences that the people face because of the British foreign policy.

6 Melville travelled to England in 1849 to find a publisher for his novel *White-Jacket, or, the World in a Man-of-War* (1850). The experience allowed him a first-hand observation of the British society of the time. See (Levine 2014: xvi).



## Conclusion

Melville's *Israel Potter* encourages a reflection on the cultural representations of the American citizens in exile in the wake of the national building process in the United States; it is their geographical dislocation which transforms the implications of their citizenship. The novel questions the actualization of the social contract in the post-revolutionary age both in the United States and in Britain. At the same time it resorts to the figure of the exile in order to highlight a problematic hiatus between the theories of social compact and their materialization. Israel Potter shows a failure in the reciprocity between the state and the people, that is progressively distorted in a form of exploitation of the former over the latter. In Hobbesian terms, Israel Potter's case shows that the fact that the people constitute the nation (delegating power to the government) is not reciprocated through the institutions' protection of the people rights.

The two sections of the novel that most significantly highlight these dynamics can be identified in Israel Potter's stay in Paris with Benjamin Franklin, and in his long period in England. These two parts show significant difference in the representation of the United States and British governments; however, they share several elements in the ways they depict the institutional exploitation of the people in two different countries and relationships between the state and the body politic. These similarities are based on the protagonist's narrative vantage point in both contexts and in the parallelism between the United States and Britain as examples of the role of governments within the social contract, both prone to benefit from a non-reciprocal relationship with the people.

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