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John Paul Jones: *Queer and Wild*

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This essay on *Israel Potter* focuses on the chapter “Paul Jones in a Reverie” in the service of reconsidering the novel’s portrayal of John Paul Jones. Jones, arguably the most problematic of *Israel Potter*’s fictionalized American heroes, has generally been regarded as a character who embodies the violence of U.S. expansionism. Challenging this view, the essay argues for Jones as a queer figure linked to a potentially hopeful, if uncertain, future for the nation.

“**A**ll barbarians are rakes” (*Israel Potter* 63). This comically enigmatic axiom, occasioned by John Paul Jones’s animated morning departure from the quarters he has shared with Israel the night before, concludes chapter 11, “Paul Jones in a Reverie,” of Melville’s remarkable *Israel Potter: His Fifty Years of Exile*. As he takes his leave, looking “fresh as a daybreak hawk” and brandishing his “gold-headed cane,” Jones, “with a light and dandified air” throws “a passing arm around all the pretty chambermaids, kissing them resoundingly” (63). Melville’s portrayals of Jones, along with two other renowned and charismatic American heroes, Benjamin Franklin and Ethan Allen, have formed one of the primary loci of interest in critical readings of *Israel Potter*, helping to reveal Melville’s irreverent rendering of Revolutionary-era history and the mythmaking that has long bolstered it.¹ But of these three figures, Jones has long been the most problematic, often proving downright troubling for readers, representing, as many critics agree, the “brutal policies of expansionism” of the United States (Levine xxv).² Of course, such ambivalence toward or (not infrequently) outright condemnation of Jones mirrors in certain ways his vexed public status even among his own contemporaries.³ Melville himself alludes to that historical question later in the novel, stating, in his characteristically wry and elusive manner, that “Much subtle casuistry has been expended upon the point, whether Paul Jones was a knave or a hero, or a union of both.” And then he adds: “But war and warriors, like politics and politicians, like religion and religionists, admit of no metaphysics” (96).⁴ In this short essay, I offer a

close reading of “Paul Jones in a Reverie” in the service of a recuperative view of the novel’s fictionalized John Paul Jones. Following Melville, I also (largely) sidestep rendering any final judgment on Jones’s moral status, not because such questions are unimportant, but because that framework, rooted in longstanding debates from and about the historical *past*, seems to have prevented a more complete recognition of how Melville links Jones to the *future*, a future, I hope to show, that has everything to do with “barbarians” and “rakes” and the generative possibilities they represent.⁵ At the same time, that future also “admits of no metaphysics,” at least not in the sense that it is something finally knowable. Yet that unknowability, I would like to suggest, is its appeal.

Among the more outlandish of all of Melville’s fictional characters, Jones is surely the most beguiling of *Israel Potter*’s three famous Americans. As sportive and charming as he is brash and reckless, he seems the offspring of an unlikely union between Queequeg and Ahab. The narrator of *Israel Potter* describes him as a “jaunty barbarian in broadcloth” (63), a phrase whose comical juxtapositions echo similarly incongruous descriptions of Queequeg in *Moby-Dick* (“George Washington cannibalistically developed” [50], “soothing savage” [51]), which Melville evidently found humorous and suggestive enough to repeat. Here, for instance, is the novel’s initial description of Jones, which presents such a peculiar conglomeration of mien and attire that it bears quoting in full:

He was a rather small, elastic, swarthy man, with an aspect as of a disinherited Indian Chief in European clothes. An unvanquishable enthusiasm, intensified to perfect sobriety, couched in his savage, self-possessed eye. He was elegantly and somewhat extravagantly dressed as a civilian; he carried himself with a rustic, barbaric jauntness, strangely dashed with a superinduced touch of the Parisian salon. His tawny cheek, like a date, spoke of the tropic. A wonderful atmosphere of proud friendlessness and scornful isolation invested him. Yet was there a bit of the poet as well as the outlaw in him, too. A cool solemnity of intrepidity sat on his lip. He looked like one who of purpose sought out harm’s way. He looked like one who never had been, and never would be, a subordinate. (56)

The portrait here, at once precise and slippery, relies upon a series of discordances: Indian and European, enthusiasm and sobriety, rusticity and extravagance, barbarism and elegance, poet and outlaw. Israel himself recognizes the improbable intermingling of these disparate qualities, thinking to himself that “seldom before had he seen such a being. Though dressed, à-la-mode, he did not seem to be altogether civilized” (56). What Israel recognizes—and finds himself “absorbed” (56) by—is what we might call Jones’s anachronistic quality. He seems to belong fully neither to a savage past nor to a civilized present.

Of course, it is tempting—and this may well be latent in Israel’s thought—to reconcile these incongruities in terms of duplicity, to think of Jones’s European extravagance as a mask that obscures the real savage beneath. And indeed, the subsequent chapter, the aforementioned “Paul Jones in a Reverie” might well seem to support such a reading, providing readers and Israel alike with a literal glimpse of what lies beneath all of Jones’s finery. In that chapter, Jones and Israel find themselves sharing a bedchamber. The scene recalls in certain ways “The Spouter-Inn” and “The Counterpane” chapters of *Moby-Dick*, with Jones taking on the role of Queequeg to Israel’s Ishmael. Yet in *Israel Potter*, the two men never sleep together. Instead, Jones paces the room “wrapped in Indian meditations,” while Israel lies in bed, feigning sleep and watching furtively. Soon, Jones catches “a glimpse of his person” in a mirror:

He paused, grimly regarding it, while a dash of pleased coxcombry seemed to mingle with the otherwise savage satisfaction expressed in his face. But the latter predominated. Soon, rolling up his sleeve, with a queer wild smile, Paul lifted his right arm, and stood thus for an interval, eyeing its image in the glass. (62)

From his vantage, Israel can only see the reflection of Jones’s arm in the mirror. There, “framed in the carved and gilded wood,” Israel sees “certain large inter-twisted cyphers covering the whole inside of the arm, so far as exposed, with mysterious tattooings.” Yet rather than your ordinary seaman’s tattoo, this “was a sort of tattooing such as is seen only on thorough-bred savages—deep blue, elaborate, labyrinthine, cabalistic. Israel remembered having beheld, on one of his early voyages, something similar on the arm of a New Zealand warrior, once met, fresh from battle, in his native village” (62–63).

The scene has all the drama of a revelation: Jones, watched by an unseen observer (a stand-in for the reader) rolls up his sleeve—the superficial outer layer of clothing—to reveal the secret that lies beneath. Critics have taken this moment as signifying the fundamental discrepancy in Jones’s character between his external appearance and his internal reality, wherein his fashionable dress merely covers over the “primitive violence” (Samson 183) in his heart; he hides “the attributes of a savage under the accoutrements of a gentleman” (Karcher 105).⁶ In this way, Jones stands for the American nation, which masks its own history of violence beneath the mantle of patriotism. The problem with this duplicity reading, however, is that it accedes to the very dichotomous logic that the novel, and its portrayal of Jones in particular, seeks to unsettle in the first place. For instance, John Samson cites two passages from the novel to which readers have often turned for evidence of Melville’s denunciation of both Jones and, by analogy, American nationalism. The first is the question that concludes

the novel's famous chapter depicting the brutal battle between the *Bonhomme Richard*, captained by Jones, and the British frigate *Serapis*: "In view of this battle," the narrator says, "one may well ask . . . Is civilization a thing distinct, or is it an advanced stage of barbarism?" (130). The second passage comes near the end of "Paul Jones in a Reverie," where the narrator makes mention of "the primeval savageness which ever slumbers in human kind" (63).

It is not at all clear that these statements should be taken at face value. In his brief gloss on the first passage, Levine wonders, quite rightly, whether Melville isn't "mocking such conventional pious posturing" (xxii). After all, the rhetorical point is neither terribly insightful nor much of an open question; it is, in fact, exactly the kind of moralizing that Melville is typically more apt to satirize than engage in. The second passage presents an even more interesting case, especially when quoted fully and in context. It comes just after both Jones and Israel gaze upon Jones's tattooed arm in the mirror, at which point Jones re-covers his arm and continues pacing about the room:

So at midnight, the heart of the metropolis of modern civilization was secretly trod by this jaunty barbarian in broadcloth; a sort of prophetic ghost, glimmering in anticipation upon the advent of those tragic scenes of the French Revolution which levelled the exquisite refinement of Paris with the blood-thirsty ferocity of Borneo; showing that broaches and finger-rings, not less than nose-rings and tattooing, are tokens of the primeval savageness which ever slumbers in human kind, civilised or uncivilised. (63)

In other words, Jones's tattoos may or may not be signs of "primeval savageness." Either way, they are no more reliable as "tokens" of that particular quality—the meaning of which, as we will see, is open to question—than his "broaches and finger-rings." Hence the fact that underneath his European clothes is tattooed flesh seems less an unexpected surprise than a kind of redundancy. Indeed, those tattoos, we should recall, are "mysterious . . . deep blue, elaborate, labyrinthine, cabalistic"—adornments every bit as "extravagant" as his attire, and no more readable. One is reminded here of Ishmael's meditation on the unsimple matter of the skin of the whale in "The Blanket" chapter of *Moby-Dick*, the "hieroglyphical marks" that cross and re-cross the visible surface of the whale, just beneath the isinglass substance that "invests" its entire body (306). In terms of external legibility, Jones's clothing might be similarly understood as something like the "skin of the skin, so to speak" (306). And like the whale, the mystic-marked Paul Jones remains undecipherable.

Jones's unreadability thus not only hearkens backwards toward *Moby-Dick*, it also anticipates the novel Melville wrote just after *Israel Potter: The Confidence-Man* (1857), a text of deceptive appearances that is even more resistant to fixed certainties than its predecessor. In this way, Jones, with his

extravagant dress and cabalistic tattooings, seems in many ways a prototype for the sorts of characters one encounters in *The Confidence-Man*, who, to borrow Maurice Lee's description, "play roles . . . and are defined by their clothing and comportment, as if identity is a disguise or performance to be shuffled on and off" (119).⁷ Just as it is hard to tell, with Jones, where adornment ends and true self begins, *The Confidence-Man* likewise leaves unresolved the question of whether some truth or reality of character, some transparent or authentic self, resides beneath disguises or behind performances, offering instead, as Melville puts it in the novel's much-examined chapter 14, only "phantoms that flit along a page, like shadows on a wall" (69). This refusal of certitude, of *confidence*, can make for a confounding reading experience, as the chapter itself acknowledges. Indeed, the notion that behind every "masquerade" lies only another masquerade—or that, to recall "Benito Cereno" (1855), published between *Israel Potter* and *The Confidence-Man*, shadows may only foreshadow "deeper shadows to come" (*Piazza Tales* 46)—might well seem bleak or darkly cynical.

Yet this sort of unsettling of both formal and temporal expectations may be productive of more than just cynicism. Indeed, not all readers of *The Confidence-Man* have equated its slipperiness and intractability with Melville's personal and professional frustrations or with a more general cultural or philosophical pessimism. Jennifer Greiman, for instance, foregrounds the novel's interest in "theatricality"—performances, costumes, references to plays, metaphors drawn from the theater—to demonstrate how the novel "looks forward" to new imaginative possibilities, both "aesthetic and social" (253), rooted in "strangeness" (192). While theatricality challenges beliefs about consistency, stability, and authenticity as the basis for individual identity, Greiman argues, it nevertheless "demands a tolerance for strangeness that may promise a far more mutual, more equitable basis for relations than confidence does" (34). That promise, the promise of a future built upon "shared strangeness" (221)—that is, upon a notion of plurality that recognizes that we are all fundamentally strangers to one another—may help to explain the novel's infamously enigmatic final line: "Something further may follow of this Masquerade" (251).

Melville works with a similar sort of calculus in his portrayal of Paul Jones in *Israel Potter*, undermining stable structures of knowledge and identity as a way of looking forward. Thus, the scene in which Jones reveals his tattoos uncouples "savageness" from its place within conventional systems of meaning. No longer the opposite of "civilized"—after all, his narrator states, primal savageness may slumber within the civilized and uncivilized alike—its meaning becomes unfixed, once again put in play. Nowhere can this unsettling of the "attributes of a savage" be seen more clearly than in the intricate temporality of the passage above, where, "at midnight," the "jaunty barbarian" Jones

treads “modern civilization” as a “prophetical ghost” who anticipates events (the French Revolution) that have both already taken place (extra-diegetically speaking) and also not yet occurred (from the perspective of the diegetic fictional-historical world). An actor in the living present, Jones is also associated, at once, with a pre-modern past and an unspecified and unknown future. This strange, spectral, asynchronous quality of Jones—he is the novel’s living, breathing anachronism—has gone unremarked by readers. Yet attending to this important dimension of the text’s depiction of Jones can help us to re-read (or re-think) the meaning of his “primeval savageness” without slipping back into modes of conventional understanding that the novel sets out to challenge.

To explain this point, let me return once more to the moment when Jones, standing before the mirror and watched by Israel, pulls back his sleeve to reveal his cabalistic tattoos. The revelatory quality of the scene—the idea that it represents the uncovering of some truth about Jones—is undercut by its careful orchestration as a kind of theatrical performance. Presented through the medium of the mirror, which quite literally frames Jones’s gestures (in “carved and gilded wood”) for the spectating Israel, Jones acts out a series of bodily expressions. Upon first catching a glimpse of himself in the mirror, a look of “pleased coxcombry . . . mingle[s] with the savage satisfaction expressed in his face,” a pairing which seems to emphasize the harmoniousness, rather than the incongruity, between stylish vanity and primitive savagery. This curious mingling is reinforced a moment later when Jones rolls back his sleeve and lifts his arm with a “queer wild smile” (62), a phrase that similarly links the eccentric and the uncultivated (a combination to which I will return). Thus, when Jones re-covers his arm, “ironically glanc[ing] at the hand of the same arm, now again half muffled in ruffles, and ornamented with several Parisian rings,” the irony seems not derived from any discrepancy between ornamented hand and tattooed arm, sophistication and barbarism, for in Jones’s case there is no such discrepancy. His ironic glance, then, points only to the performance itself, to the fact that who and what Jones is (or, for the reader, what he *means*) cannot be known by deciphering any of the signs—whether clothing, flesh, or expression—that he puts on display in the mirror. Indeed, this point is reinforced immediately after the re-covering of his arm, when, finally resuming his walk, “a gleam of the consciousness of possessing a character as yet unfathomed . . . irradiate[s] his cold white brow” (63).

Like the phrase “prophetical ghost,” “as yet unfathomed” echoes the “may follow” of the final line of *The Confidence-Man* and the “shadows to come” of “Benito Cereno,” both of which also invoke a futurity whose shape and contour remain undefined, just beyond our apprehension. The difference is that, in *Israel Potter*, the “as yet” associates Jones, not with portent (as in “Benito

Cereno”) or with new forms of social relation (as in Greiman’s reading of *The Confidence-Man*), but with modes of being that at present remain unarticulated or unthought. This association of Jones with the premonitory is aptly captured in the “queer wild smile” that crosses his face as he reveals his tattoos. Indeed, there is something uncanny as well as enigmatic about this gesture, insofar as Melville’s use of “queer” here resonates with the rich vein of thought in recent queer theory that emphasizes questions of time: the varied, irregular, nonnormative temporal experiences, at odds with straightforward chronology, that mark queer existence and, as we have seen, form a crucial part of the novel’s portrayal of John Paul Jones. Of course, drawing upon queer studies as a potential lens through which to understand Jones also inevitably raises questions involving sexual identity and forms of same-sex intimacy—matters of no small interest in *Israel Potter*. As I noted above, “Paul Jones in a Reverie” begins with the prospect of Jones and Israel as bedmates. And while they do not sleep together, they nevertheless develop their own sort of bosom relationship. Later in the novel, for instance, Jones not only invites Israel to join his crew, but importunes him with an offer to become his “confidential man”: “Give me your hand, my lion; wave your wild flax again. By heaven, you hate so well, I love ye. You shall be my confidential man; stand sentry at my cabin door; sleep in the cabin; steer my boat; keep by my side whenever I land. What do you say?” (92). Soon after, recalling their previous missed opportunity together—“You offered me your bed in Paris”—Jones in turn offers Israel his bed, although this time it is Israel who, perhaps still feeling rebuffed, “beg[s] off” (92).

The latent erotics of Jones’s flirtatious relationship with Israel aside, however, my primary interest in queering Paul Jones has to do with the extent to which his character disrupts temporal norms and, in doing so, helps to imagine alternative forms of existence “as yet unfathomed” (63). This feature of Jones’s queerness is one reason I have emphasized the performance in front of the mirror that both he and Israel gaze upon, a performance that refuses to identify with or assign to Jones any essential identity. Is Jones, in fact, a savage? Or is he simply dressed in savage drag? Or is it that, given Judith Butler’s argument that drag performances reveal the fiction of originary gender identities (175–93), Jones’s performance reveals how embodied practices produce, rather than express, such categories as “civilized” and “uncivilized”? Even more generative in this context, for my purposes, is Elizabeth Freeman’s notion of “temporal drag” (85), the anachronistic embodiment of cultural, social, and political forms that persist in history, despite having been superseded, passed by, seeming outdated or no longer vital. Playing upon Butler’s influential understanding of drag performance, Freeman’s concept takes up the temporal associations of “drag” with “retrogression, delay, and the pull of the past on the present” (62).

For Freeman, temporal drag harnesses “the power of anachronism to unsituate viewers from the present tense they think they know and to illuminate or even prophetically ignite possible futures in light of powerful historical moments” (61). Something like temporal drag might help us to understand the meaning of Jones’s savagery, his barbarism, outside the quasi-stadialist framework that ordinarily inflects how he is viewed. That is to say, Melville casts Jones as a (paradoxical) savage modern in order to recover the latent possibilities of “savageness” that so-called progress toward “civilized” existence seems to have made no longer possible but that, in Freeman’s words, ask us “to imagine the future in terms that discourse has not yet caught up with” (84). In closing, I would briefly like to identify one feature of that not-yet-imagined future by returning to where I began: to the axiom “all barbarians are rakes.”

What makes this cryptic locution so very droll—and suggestive—is the unexpected reversal it effects. “All barbarians are rakes” works by overturning what might otherwise seem to be a common-sense proposition: that all rakes are barbarians, a statement that would render a rather conventional moral judgment on the sort of person Jones is portrayed to be—a fashionable man of dissolute habits. Rakishness is “barbaric” insofar as it is viewed as behavior indicative of a backwards, brutal nature, a primitive lack of moral refinement when it comes, especially, to the appetites of the flesh (as, for example, in Paul’s apparent sexual harassment of chambermaids). The likening of rakes to barbarians works because there are no literal barbarians any longer, only actions and behaviors that hearken back to an ancient historical period prior to the advent of so-called civilized norms. But to say that “all barbarians are rakes” is a different sort of proposition altogether, not least because it presumes the comically anachronistic existence of barbarians (and imagines them as rich and fashionable!) but also because it refuses the conventional moral judgment implicit in stating the proposition in reverse. The values implied by the statement “all barbarians are rakes” depends upon one’s view of rakishness. For instance, if one already thinks that all rakes are barbarians, then “all barbarians are rakes” becomes oddly tautological: all barbarians are barbarians.⁸

The point here is not to split hairs. Rather, the point is that Melville’s axiom effects yet another, even more unexpected reversal. It not only comically transposes its two operative terms but also, in doing so, upends their moral value. The axiom re-values barbarism by imbuing the term with the *virtue* of rakishness. This assessment may well seem comically absurd, but in the context of the scene in which Jones takes his leave at the end of “Paul Jones in a Reverie,” there does not seem much question that we are supposed to see his playfully extravagant exit, in all of its ribald exuberance, as quite charming and appealingly humorous (rather than simply, say, misogynistic).

Or, to put this point another way, if, like me, you find Jones to be a rather beguiling figure, then his status as a “rake,” no less than his “barbaric jauntiness,” recommends him. Or so the novel seems to suggest. After all, despite the “atmosphere of proud friendlessness and scornful isolation” that “invested him” (56), Paul is not altogether “impermeable to human fellowship,” as critics have claimed.⁹ Quite the contrary. Like a true rake, Paul is rather promiscuous, both literally (in his kissing of chambermaids and his willingness to share his bed with full-blooded Congos and American exiles alike) and figuratively (as “an untrammelled citizen and sailor of the universe”). His type of fellowship, we might say, is queer and wild. Such fellowship further links him to the novel’s titular hero Israel Potter who, despite all the tragedy and injustice and pathos of his fifty years of exile, twice enjoys forms of intimacy and belonging: first in his friendship with Jones and later, in the chapter “The Shuttle,” by “promiscuously circulating” (136) until his “general sociability” (141) eventually wins over the “suspicious hearts” (141) of the mariners on board a British frigate.¹⁰ We might want to try rakish promiscuity, Melville seems to say, since civilized forms of belonging have proved such hollow courtesies. This way of viewing Jones puts a different pressure on one of the novel’s more famous passages, typically viewed as Melville’s critique, but which I would recast as the closest the text comes to expressing something like hope for the future, almost unrecognizable as such because it is also cast in queer, wild terms: “intrepid, unprincipled, reckless, predatory, with boundless ambition, civilized in externals but a savage at heart, America is, or may yet be, the Paul Jones of nations” (136).

Notes

¹ See, for instance, Dryden and Castronovo.

² For strong denunciations of Jones, see Karcher, who calls him as “diabolical madman” (105), and Reising, who refers to him as a “borderline psychopath” (166).

³ For a recent take on the historical debate over Jones, see Roth-Reinhardt’s fascinating discussion.

⁴ At one point in the novel, Melville has Jones himself address his controversial public image, referring to himself as “the captain who flogged poor Mungo Maxwell to death” (91).

⁵ This essay does not take up the question of Jones’s propensity for violence. But elsewhere, I align Jones’s brand of reckless, sometimes violent, impetuosity with the stormy political impatience that spurred to action a number of immediatist abolitionists, for more on that topic, see Insko, ch. 5.

⁶ See also Dillingham, who claims that Jones “often appears highly civilized but who is internally not under control” (282).

⁷ See also Bryant’s discussion of Paul Jones as one of the precursors to the cosmopolitan Frank Goodman in *The Confidence-Man*.

⁸ There are indirect echoes here, too, of *The Confidence-Man*. Renker, for instance, views tautology as one of the ways Melville defies readability in that novel.

⁹ The phrase is Karcher’s, 107. Conversely, for an excellent reading of the bond between Paul and Israel, see Bender (46–51).

¹⁰ For an elaborated version of this point, see Insko, ch. 5.

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