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Broken Hearths:
Melville's *Israel Potter* and the Bunker
Hill Monument

JOHN HAY

We borrowed the form of the monument from the structures of ancient Egypt, but we did not intend that it should stand like the obelisks and pyramids, a silent mystery to the successive generations that gaze upon them. We wished that, from time to time, there should go forth a faithful record of the glorious event, and of the all-important principles to which the monument is consecrated; and while the majestic shaft itself, from the clouds to which it towers, shall address its solemn eloquence to the eye, that the pen and voice, to the end of time, should interpret its illustrious significance to the understanding and the heart.

—Edward Everett, “Battle of Bunker Hill” (1850)

IN January of 1888, Herman Melville received a letter (now lost) from a confused fan. Given Melville’s response, it appears that an appreciative reader was asking for help in understanding the author’s *Israel Potter: His Fifty Years of Exile* (1855), a request which must have surprised Melville because the novel had enjoyed only mediocre sales and had been out of print for decades. The real, historical Israel Potter, who was a purported veteran of the Revolutionary War, had publicized his effort to obtain a soldier’s pension with an 1824 memoir titled *The Life and Remarkable Adventures of Israel*

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R. Potter. Melville refashioned him into an early-republic Forrest Gump, a picaresque American Everyman who fights in the Battle of Bunker Hill, falls into the hands of the British, and, while stuck in England and struggling to return home, fraternizes with famous figures such as Benjamin Franklin, John Paul Jones, Ethan Allen, and King George III.¹ Five decades later, on Independence Day, he finally returns home to America, where, denied a pension, he dies penniless. So how did Melville intend this Fourth of July narrative to be read? “In what light the book entitled *I. P. or 50 Years of Exile* is to be regarded,” he wrote back to his fan in 1888, “may be clearly inferred from what is said in the Dedication.”²

When the novel was initially serialized (anonymously) in *Putnam's Monthly Magazine* (from July 1854 to March 1855), it simply opened with “Chapter One,” but for the single bound volume published by Putnam in 1855, Melville added a short dedicatory preface. “To His Highness the Bunker-Hill Monument,” it begins. (A monument is a bizarre dedicatee, to be sure, though it should be remembered that Melville had dedicated his 1852 novel *Pierre* to a mountain.)³ The Monument, a 221-foot-high granite obelisk, commemorates the site of the first major battle of the Revolutionary War. Melville's dedication thus seems, at first, to be a direct appeal to the memory of a glorious moment in America's past. But as Robert Levine points out, the dedication is ambivalent; it can be read either as an act

¹For Potter as Forrest Gump, see Andrew Delbanco, *Melville: His World and Work* (New York: Random House, 2005), p. 226. For Potter as an American Everyman, see Alexander Keyssar, *Melville's Israel Potter: Reflections on the American Dream* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1969).

²Herman Melville, *Correspondence*, ed. Lynn Horth, vol. 14 of *The Writings of Herman Melville* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press and Newberry Library, 1993), p. 508. Horth suggests that the unknown correspondent is “quite possibly the author of the unsigned article on the historical Israel Potter in *Appletons' Cyclopædia of American Biography*,” a guess which leads her to conclude that Melville “answers here what must have been an inquiry about the ‘authenticity’ of his portrayal of the historic Israel Potter by citing his opening dedication to the Bunker Hill Monument in *Israel Potter*.”

³Perhaps Melville had also seen James Kirke Paulding's novel *The Puritan and His Daughter* (New York: Baker and Scribner, 1849), ironically dedicated to “the Most High and Mighty Sovereign of Sovereigns, King People.”

of patriotic nationalism or as one of ironic demythologization.⁴ That is, Melville may be gesturing to the continuing glory of republican heroism or to the nation's failure to maintain the ideals of its founders. What is to be "clearly inferred" from this dedication? It seems to offer ambiguity rather than clarity.

While *Israel Potter* contains rich scenic descriptions, intense renderings of military engagements, and humorous dialogues, this episodic novel has received frustratingly little attention. Critical neglect has been generally steady since the novel's publication (though a new surge of interest in *Israel Potter* may be gathering force).⁵ The 1888 reader's request for help seems oddly appropriate given the divided critical explanations for the text's obscurity relative to the author's other works. Melville's mid-twentieth-century champions tended to see the novel as derivative of its 1824 source-text (a narrative likely ghostwritten by its publisher, Henry Trumbull, since the real Potter was illiterate), dismissing the 1855 book as uneven hackwork employing Young America rhetoric in an attempt to strike a chord with the nationalist sentiments permeating the literary marketplace.⁶ Later critics would revise these brisk evaluations by claiming that the novel displays not pathetically sincere patriotism but obvious political parody, a satirical jab at the popular biographies of American heroes composed by writers such as

⁴Robert S. Levine, Introduction, *Israel Potter: His Fifty Years of Exile*, by Herman Melville (New York: Penguin, 2008), p. x.

⁵In *Melville: Fashioning in Modernity* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), Stephen Matterson opens an analytical chapter on *Israel Potter* by asserting that it is "Melville's least read and least critically studied novel" (p. 131). Yet Matterson's work appears alongside several other very recent reappraisals. See Stephanie A. Smith, "Union Blues: Melville's Poetic In(ter)ventions," *Genre* 47, no. 1 (Spring 2014): 21–53; and Joshua Tendler, "A Monument upon a Hill: Antebellum Commemoration Culture, the Here-and-Now, and Democratic Citizenship in Melville's *Israel Potter*," *Studies in American Fiction* 42, no. 1 (Spring 2015): 29–50.

⁶F. O. Matthiessen, observing that Melville's finances were not strong at the time he was composing the narrative, concluded that "the failure of *Israel Potter*" was "produced by a man not at all able to write the kind of books he wanted to, but under a miserable compulsion." *American Renaissance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1941), pp. 492, 491. Newton Arvin found the novel derivative, dismissing it as "hardly more than a heap of sketches" and declaring that "the use of another man's book . . . was a literary deadfall for Melville." *Herman Melville* (New York: Viking, 1950), p. 245.

Jared Sparks.⁷ Continuing in this vein, recent scholarly resurrections of *Israel Potter*, particularly following the work of Russ Castronovo, have characterized the novel as an ironic critique of the exceptionalist monumentalizing spirit of the age, emphasizing the protagonist's attempt to overcome the victimizing historical forces of industrialization and the forsaken ideals of the American Revolution by adopting a fluid, postmodern (and perhaps postnational) identity.⁸

But *Israel Potter* is not simply an acidic riposte to triumphant nationalism; Melville's appreciation for the process of monumentalization, as this paper will argue, was far more nuanced. The recent consensus regarding the novel's critical irony is interesting given the fact that an earlier generation of academic readers (Matthiessen, Arvin, *et al.*) perceived a nearly opposite tone of sincerity. Critics today take for granted an ironic detachment that was not at all obvious to mid-twentieth-century Melville aficionados. This collective about-face invites a reconsideration of the relations between Melville, *Israel Potter*, and U.S. political sentiments of the nineteenth century. Was Melville trying to reach a broader audience with popular patriotic pap? Or did his disenchantment with nationalism drive him to mockery and despair?

As Melville himself indicated in 1888, the key is the book's ambiguous dedication to the Bunker Hill Monument. What recent critics of the novel have overlooked is the irony inherent

⁷For readings of *Israel Potter* as satirical national biography, see Peter J. Bellis, "Israel Potter: Autobiography as History as Fiction," *American Literary History* 2, no. 4 (Winter 1990): 607–26; and Wyn Kelley, "Pierre, Life History, and the Obscure," *The New Cambridge Companion to Herman Melville*, ed. Robert S. Levine (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 85–98.

⁸Russ Castronovo, *Fathering the Nation: American Genealogies of Slavery and Freedom* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), pp. 141–56. For recent scholarship following Castronovo's approach to monument worship in *Israel Potter*, see Robert S. Levine, "The Revolutionary Aesthetics of *Israel Potter*," in *Melville and Aesthetics*, ed. Samuel Otter and Geoffrey Sanborn (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp. 157–71; and Smith, "Union Blues." For the failure of revolutionary ideals and Potter's identity, see Anne Baker, "What to Israel Potter is the Fourth of July? Melville, Douglass, and the Agency of Words," *Leviathan* 10, no. 2 (June 2008): 9–22; William V. Spanos, *Herman Melville and the American Calling: The Fiction after Moby Dick, 1851–1857* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008), pp. 57–103; and Gale Temple, "Israel Potter: Sketch Patriotism," *Leviathan* 11, no. 1 (March 2009): 3–18.

not just in the book's dedication but in the very monument itself. Hennig Cohen notes that the phrase "your Highness," repeated throughout the dedicatory preface, mocks the "tradition of pompous dedications of literary works to royalty, especially inappropriate in a republic which had but recently won its independence from a king."⁹ This mock-honorific is certainly meant to be read with tongue in cheek, but not merely because it betrays Royalist sentiments while punning on the obelisk's height; in this regard, Cohen and others have misplaced Melville's irony.¹⁰ For while the completed Bunker Hill Monument is indeed tall (in fact, it stood for decades as the tallest national monument until surpassed by the Washington Monument in the 1880s), for years it loomed unfinished as an embarrassing stump. The cornerstone was laid in 1825, but the final dedication ceremony did not occur until 1843, eighteen years later. These dates are significant; Potter's own 1824 autobiography placed his return to America in 1823, but Melville's narrative delays the homecoming for three more years. Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker, and Thomas Tanselle speculate that Melville chose to have Potter return on 4 July "to round out the half-century of his exile to 1826, which was also thematically appropriate as the fiftieth anniversary of the Declaration of Independence and the year in which both Thomas Jefferson and John Adams died."¹¹ The aesthetic appeal to a round half-century is unconvincing; Melville's Potter was captured in 1775, not 1776, so his exile would last for fifty-one years, and Melville repeatedly refers to an exile of "more than forty years" rather than an even fifty (*IP* 6, 153). More probable than a

⁹Hennig Cohen, ed., *Israel Potter: His Fifty Years of Exile*, by Herman Melville (New York: Fordham University Press, 1991), p. 346.

¹⁰John Samson, for example, stresses the satiric gesture to height, noting that the monument "is literally, but only literally, high," while failing to note that the monument is high in 1855 but *not* in 1826 when Israel Potter returns to Boston. Samson, *White Lies: Melville's Narratives of Facts* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), p. 190.

¹¹Herman Melville, *Israel Potter: His Fifty Years of Exile*, eds. Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker, and G. Thomas Tanselle, *The Writings of Herman Melville*, vol. 8 (Evanston: Northwestern University Press and Newberry Library, 1982), p. 264. Hereafter referred to as *IP*. For a historical study of Fourth of July celebrations in 1826, see Andrew Burstein, *America's Jubilee: How in 1826 a Generation Remembered Fifty Years of Independence* (New York: Knopf, 2001).

hint toward the deaths of Jefferson and Adams is the idea that Melville moves the date forward so that Potter can arrive *after* the cornerstone had been laid to the Bunker Hill Monument.¹²

American literary critics have generally overlooked the infamy of the Bunker Hill Monument during the antebellum period and have therefore missed the significance of Melville's dedication. In a recent study of nineteenth-century American memorials, historian Nick Yablon addresses this general oversight by identifying a host of unfinished monuments which he labels "ruins-in-reverse," testaments to the inconstancy of American interests rather than to the persistency of communal history. As Yablon notes, "Throughout the 1830s, Bunker Hill (or rather, neighboring Breed's Hill) was crowned by an ignominious, granite stump that remained (except for a few months of activity in 1834–1835) in a state of suspended animation." Yablon further asserts that "the unfinished pile on Bunker Hill functioned as an anti-monument to the government's unfulfilled debts to the rank-and-file soldiers who forged independence," noting that the "pension act of 1818 provided only for indigent veterans, prompting one veteran to repudiate the Bunker Hill folly as a hypocritical misuse of funds."¹³

These observations shed new light on *Israel Potter*.¹⁴ Yablon's work (which does not mention Melville's narrative) supports a reading of the novel that emphasizes gentle disillusionment (rather than harsh apostasy) regarding patriotic ideals; his essay concludes that "it was in that often lengthy interval between the cornerstone and dedication ceremonies that so many

¹²On this point, see also Bellis, "Israel Potter: Autobiography as History as Fiction," p. 620.

¹³Nick Yablon, "'Land of Unfinished Monuments': The Ruins-in-Reverse of Nineteenth-Century America," *American Nineteenth Century History* 13 (June 2012): 154, 171. The veteran was Caleb Stark; see George Washington Warren, *The History of the Bunker Hill Monument Association* (Boston: Osgood, 1877), pp. 65–66.

¹⁴Alide Cagidemetrio is the only critic to observe that Melville may have been attuned to the "historical irony of the granite Bunker Hill monument's celebrative intentions and its slow construction" and thus to its uncertain or ambiguous meaning. However, she does not develop at length the significance of this observation. *Fictions of the Past: Hawthorne & Melville* (Amherst: Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities, University of Massachusetts Press, 1992), p. 174.

nineteenth-century monuments exposed the nation's dominant narratives to doubt and contestation."¹⁵ Melville's Potter returns to Massachusetts at the beginning of this interval during the Bunker Hill Monument's construction; instead of a soaring obelisk, he spies an "incipient monument" resembling "a struggling sprig of corn in a chilly spring" (*IP* 167). Although the Bunker Hill Monument was finished by the time Melville's novel was penned and published, in 1855 it had existed longer as a work in progress than as a work completed. This extended chronology thus suggests a resulting re-vision without cynicism, or disillusionment without despair. Monumentalization (perhaps not unlike the revolution itself) is here realized as a long process rather than an immediate effect. *Israel Potter* itself is inherently expressive of this monumentalizing process; not simply a cynical jab at unfulfilled promises, it is a mature reflection on (and of) the gradual, evolving work of commemoration.¹⁶

In his preface, Melville explained exactly "in what light" he wanted *Israel Potter* to be regarded. Having based his narrative on Potter's own account published three decades earlier, he hoped that the novel might "be not unfitly regarded something in the light of a dilapidated old tombstone retouched" (*IP* vii). The image of an "old tombstone retouched" (perhaps a nod to Walter Scott's account of the work of stonemason Robert Paterson—"Old Mortality") bears a striking resemblance to an unfinished monument as a "ruin-in-reverse."¹⁷ Furthermore, this element of the dedication adds significance to the novel's conclusion, in which Potter discovers the meager ruins of his childhood home. The dominant symbol of the novel is truly

¹⁵Yablon, "Land of Unfinished Monuments," p. 185. A separate study reveals that "the average time required to complete a Revolutionary War monument exceeded thirty-one years in the pre-1860 period." Thomas A. Chambers, *Memories of War: Visiting Battlefields and Bonefields in the Early American Republic* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012), p. 94.

¹⁶While reading the novel primarily (following Castronovo) as a critique of monumentalization, Joshua Tendler in "A Monument upon a Hill" also considers the complex temporalities of commemoration.

¹⁷For the connection to Scott's *Old Mortality* (1816), see Cagidemetro, *Fictions of the Past*, pp. 182–83.

a diptych: a pairing and conflation of an incomplete monument and a crumbling ruin.¹⁸ The Bunker Hill Monument was neither simply a static, enduring symbol of greatness nor an ironic reminder that the nation had fallen away from its once lofty ideals. Rather it was a grand project that wallowed for a long time in an embarrassing state of apparent ruin—and yet was destined for redemption and fulfillment at a later date. For the sixty-eight-year-old author, writing to a fan regarding a book that could have genuinely been considered forgotten, the Bunker Hill Monument suggested a ruined reputation and a neglected body of work that might nevertheless enjoy a revival.¹⁹ Israel Potter died without receiving recognition from his government, but an American author rummaging through old books found his story, deemed it compelling, and rewrote it for a new readership. For Melville's *Israel Potter*, posthumous recognition is very much the light that can provide clarity.

A Monumental Project

Israel Potter's bizarre dedication may seem to be a minor detail, but it was one that aroused the interest of Melville's contemporary reviewers. Indeed, the American reviews from 1855 mentioned the dedication to the Bunker Hill Monument more frequently than any other aspect of the novel (even more frequently than the irreverent characterization of Benjamin Franklin). Reviewers were not unaware of the narrative's odd, ambivalent tone—an “obscure sarcasm,” as one critic put it, most apparent in the dedication. But even generally negative reviews of the book tended to praise this opening; Melville's story was “not too interesting,” declared one, a fault that could have been overcome “had all his chapters been conceived in as

¹⁸For other accounts of the importance of stone in *Israel Potter*, see Charles N. Watson, Jr., “Melville's *Israel Potter*: Fathers and Sons,” *Studies in the Novel* 7, no. 4 (Winter 1975): 563–68; and Michael Paul Rogin, *Subversive Genealogy: The Politics and Art of Herman Melville* (New York: Knopf, 1983), pp. 221–36.

¹⁹Some critics have seen Israel Potter's exile as symbolic of Melville's own authorial career. See, for example, William Ellery Sedgwick, *Herman Melville: The Tragedy of Mind* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1955), p. 181; and Baker, “What to Israel Potter,” p. 16.

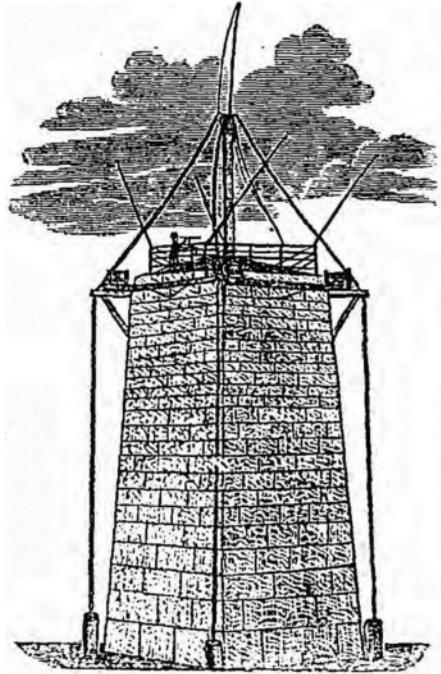


FIG. 1.—Uncompleted Bunker Hill Monument, from “Bunker Hill Monument,” *The American Magazine of Useful and Entertaining Knowledge* 3 (July 1837): 404.

novel a way as his dedication to his highness the Bunker Hill Monument.”²⁰

The Bunker Hill Monument itself required two dedicatory ceremonies: one for the laying of the cornerstone on 17 June 1825, and one to celebrate its official completion, on 17 June 1843. For much of the eighteen-year interval, the unfinished monument slouched upon the famed battleground as a kind of trapezoidal travesty—“a conspicuous and durable object of sarcasm and ridicule.”²¹ [See *Fig. 1.*] Work on the Monument

²⁰*National Magazine* [New York] (May 1855) and *Quarterly* [New York] (April 1855), in *Herman Melville: The Contemporary Reviews*, eds. Brian Higgins and Hershel Parker (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 461, 459.

²¹William Ladd, quoted in Warren, *History of the Bunker Hill Monument Association*, p. 176.

began slowly because of the difficulty of transporting the granite from a deposit in Quincy, Massachusetts. (The nation's first railroad was actually constructed for this purpose.) The monument's foundation was finished in the summer of 1827, and a year later the edifice reached nearly forty feet. But work was suspended in January 1829 due to a lack of funds. In 1830, Sarah Josepha Hale, then editor of the Boston *Ladies' Magazine*, called on the women of Massachusetts to raise the requisite funds, but her attempts were unsuccessful. "At present," noted a visitor from England in 1832, "it is but a monument of the inhabitants' want of spirit."²² After the Bunker Hill Monument Association reluctantly sold some of the surrounding land in 1834, work briefly resumed, only to stop after a few months with the monument at a height of about eighty feet, again due to insufficient funds. Hale successfully came to the rescue in 1840, helping to organize a charitable fair that raised enough money to complete the project. Construction recommenced in May 1841, and, with the work accelerated by the aid of steam power, the capstone was raised in July 1842. The monument was officially dedicated the following summer. [See *Fig. 2.*]

Daniel Webster was the featured speaker at both the cornerstone and the capstone ceremonies. His 1825 address became one of the most reprinted American orations of the nineteenth century.²³ Delivered to an enormous crowd on the fiftieth anniversary of the famous battle, Webster's speech began by reminding the audience of noble sacrifice: "We are among the sepulchres of our fathers."²⁴ The monument, Webster informs his listeners, is a "fit emblem . . . of the gratitude of those who have reared it," and in times of trouble "desponding patriotism may turn its eyes hitherward, and be assured that

²²E. T. Coke, *A Subaltern's Furlough: Descriptive of Scenes in Various Parts of the United States, Upper and Lower Canada, New-Brunswick, and Nova Scotia, during the Summer and Autumn of 1832*, 2 vols. (New York: Harper, 1833), 1:185.

²³As one scholar points out, "It is inconceivable that Melville was not at one time or other in his early life exposed to Webster's paragon of dedications." William B. Dillingham, *Melville's Later Novels* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1986), p. 255.

²⁴Daniel Webster, *The Writings and Speeches of Daniel Webster*, 18 vols. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1903), 1:235. Hereafter referred to as WS.

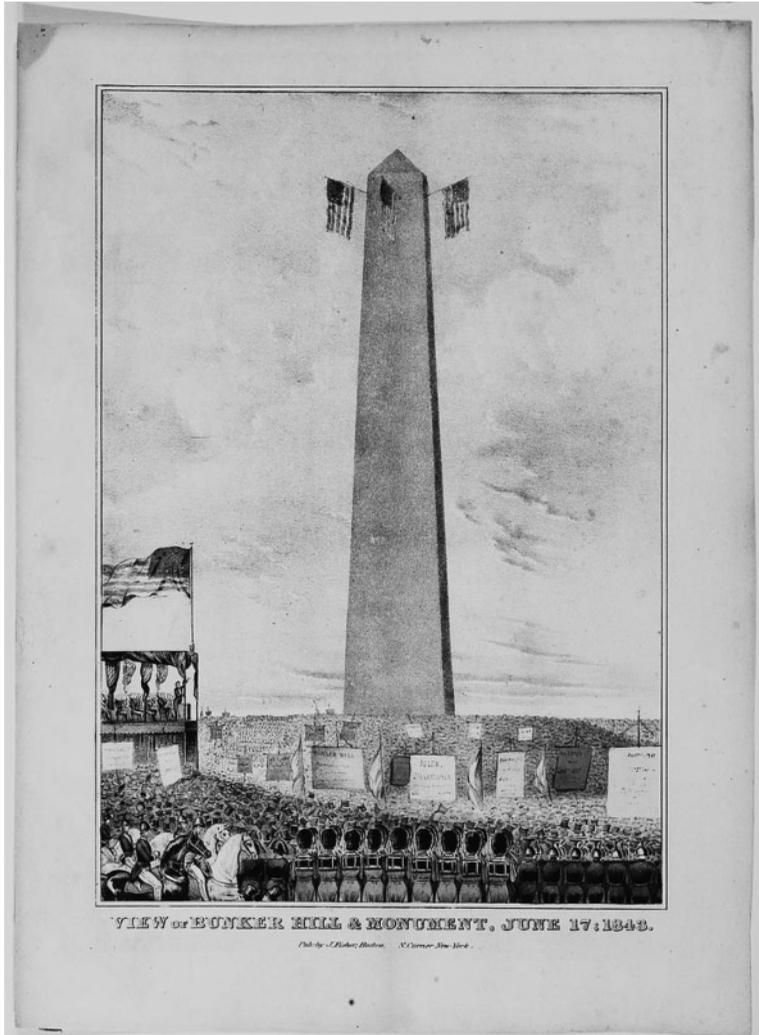


FIG. 2.—Currier and Fisher, “View of Bunker Hill & Monument, June 17, 1843”
Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Reproduction Number: LC-
DIG-ds-00670.

the foundations of our national power are still strong” (WS 1:237, 238). The fact that for almost twenty years the monument would remain a short pile of stones added an ironic layer to Webster’s words. Speaking in 1833, the statesman and

orator Edward Everett, a member of the Monument Association, called the unfinished obelisk “an object unsightly to the eye, and painful to the mind,” and he wondered if it would become a memorial “not to the renown of the great men we commemorate, but to the discredit of this generation of their descendants.”²⁵ What solace could “desponding patriotism” take in what persisted merely as a granite foundation and nothing more? Indeed, Robert Levine has suggested that Melville may have been referencing the irony of Webster’s famous speech as a way of pointing to the failure of the nation to show gratitude to those who have built it up, and thus imbuing *Israel Potter* with an “aesthetics of de-monumentalization.”²⁶

Melville likely had Webster’s speech in mind. One particular crescendo of the 1825 address is especially resonant: “We wish, finally, that the last object to the sight of him who leaves his native shore, and the first to gladden his who revisits it, may be something which shall remind him of the liberty and the glory of his country. Let it rise! let it rise, till it meet the sun in his coming, let the earliest light of the morning gild it, and parting day linger and play on its summit” (WS 1:238). This passage may have been personally significant to a young Melville; when he sailed into Boston Harbor in 1844, after a formative voyage of nearly four years into the Pacific, the twenty-five-year-old would have first spotted the recently finished monument—a monument that had been constructed to less than half its projected height when Melville departed. Furthermore, *Israel Potter*’s preface concludes with a hortatory exclamation to “Your Highness” that each of the “summer’s suns may shine as brightly on your brow,” which resonates with Webster’s own call for sunlight (*IP* viii).

But one must remember that Webster—a much older Webster (sixty-one years old, as opposed to forty-three), having just resigned his position as secretary of state over Whig political pressure during the Tyler administration—also offered remarks

²⁵Edward Everett, *Orations and Speeches, on Various Occasions* (Boston, 1836), pp. 334, 333.

²⁶Levine, “Revolutionary Aesthetics of *Israel Potter*,” p. 159.

at the 1843 dedication. In his recent reading of *Israel Potter*, Edgar Dryden suggests an oppositional relationship between Melville and Webster regarding the Bunker Hill Monument. As Dryden explains, Webster, especially in his second speech, had offered up myth-making rhetoric that established the monument as an “eloquent symbol of American exceptionalism,” his speech signaling “the formation of an imagined community.” “Among the seventeen millions of happy people who form the American community,” announced Webster, “there is not one who has not an interest in this monument, as there is not one that has not a deep and abiding interest in that which it commemorates” (WS 1:265). Dryden explains that Melville, a decade later, “constructs in *Israel Potter* an antithetical version of the national myth that not only destabilizes Webster’s version of the monument supporting the myth of the nation, but demystifies both public and literary monumentality.”²⁷

Dryden’s argument is persuasive, but the true relationship between Webster’s oration and Melville’s novel is subtler. Webster’s second speech does not consist simply of celebratory, nationalist platitudes. His opening rhetoric is more chastened, as he notes that many who were present at the cornerstone ceremony “have themselves become subjects of monumental inscription” (WS 1:260). Indeed, while two hundred Bunker Hill veterans joined in the 1825 dedication, by the time of the 1843 ceremony (attended by Melville’s future father-in-law, Judge Lemuel Shaw) only a dozen of them remained alive.²⁸ Webster moves even further by imagining a distant age when the nation itself is no more: a “future antiquary” will wipe the dust from the monument, and some final remnant of civilized humanity will discern its historical importance amid hordes of

²⁷Edgar A. Dryden, *Monumental Melville: The Formation of a Literary Career* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), pp. 38, 39. William Spanos has also recently argued that Melville was responding to the strain of exceptionalism in both of Webster’s speeches. *Herman Melville and the American Calling*, pp. 57–103.

²⁸Samuel Swett, *History of Bunker Hill Battle, with a Plan*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Munroe and Francis, 1826), p. 25; “A List of Revolutionary Soldiers Who Were Present at the Dedication of Bunker Hill Monument, June 17, 1843,” *Proceedings of the Bunker Hill Monument Association at the Annual Meeting, June 17, 1896* (Boston: Bunker Hill Monument Association, 1896), pp. 52–54.

neo-barbarians (1:262). This vision marks an interesting turn, one which would certainly have appealed to the young Melville. Webster offers, in essence, a postapocalyptic fantasy: "Even if civilization should be subverted, and the truths of the Christian religion obscured by a new deluge of barbarism, the memory of Bunker Hill and the American Revolution will still be elements and parts of the knowledge which shall be possessed by the last man to whom the light of civilization and Christianity shall be extended" (1:263).²⁹ In other words, he acknowledges the national instability which Yablon notes was signified by the unfinished monuments (the "ruins-in-reverse") of the nineteenth century, but he also affirms the permanence of the historical moment embodied by the (finished) granite tower. This dualism is no doubt the result of years spent contemplating a sturdy-yet-ignominious pile; in its state of incompleteness, the monument had looked "like a sublime ruin," wrote one contemporary historian, "emblematic of a Republic of magnificent promise in its rise, but prematurely dismembered, and inglorious in its fall."³⁰ To the extent that Webster's 1843 declaration embraces exceptionalism, it is artistic rather than national exceptionalism. The nation may perish, but the obelisk—the architectural representation of that nation (and potentially its tombstone)—will persevere.³¹

²⁹Webster's postapocalyptic vision may have been influenced by "A Peep through Time's Telescope," a future fantasy that appeared in the Boston *Ladies' Magazine* in 1832. In the story, set in the year 2352, a traveler arrives in Boston and gazes on "the time-worn ruins of departed glory." "You should have been with us," writes the future traveler to his sweetheart, "when the first slant ray of sunlight fell across that noble monument of heroes, the obelisk on Bunker's hill—you should have seen it, as we did, standing in its desolation like the ghost of the Republic of which it was at once the emblem and the pride. Surely, no where [*sic*] is the tomb of patriotism so eloquent as here!" "A Peep through Time's Telescope," *Ladies' Magazine and Literary Gazette* 5 (December 1832): 501. In a series of articles in the early 1830s, the *Ladies' Magazine*, edited by Sarah J. Hale, unsuccessfully implored the women of Massachusetts to raise sufficient funds to complete the Bunker Hill Monument.

³⁰Warren, *History of the Bunker Hill Monument Association*, p. 254.

³¹William Ladd, who was solicited for membership to the Bunker Hill Monument Association in 1825, favored the construction of a mausoleum instead of an obelisk because he believed that the former would be better preserved "through ages of barbarism." Quoted in Warren, *History of the Bunker Hill Monument Association*, p. 175. For another fantasy of viewing the ruins of the Bunker Hill Monument two

At the end of the speech, however, Webster steps back and suggests that the monument might *not* outlast the nation—that it is indeed coterminous with the nation:

This column stands on union. I know not that it might not keep its position, if the American Union, in the mad conflict of human passions, and in the strife of parties and factions, should be broken up and destroyed. I know not that it would totter and fall to the earth, and mingle its fragments with the fragments of Liberty and the Constitution, when State should be separated from State, and faction and dismemberment obliterate forever all hopes of the founders of our Republic and the great inheritance of their children. (WS 1:265–66)³²

This latter passage, generally characteristic of Webster's increasing political commitment to federal union, is important to Dryden, who uses it to claim that Melville takes such nationalist sentiments with a greater dose of irony, the Union being under greater threat in the 1850s than it was in the 1840s. But this passage must be considered alongside Webster's postapocalyptic fantasy; the entirety of the 1843 address, perhaps best characterized as an American jeremiad, preserves the tension between national exceptionalism and faith in an architectural marvel that will transcend the nation. Moreover, and more importantly, this tension is present in the very construction of the monument.

By 1854, when Melville wrote *Israel Potter*, the Bunker Hill Monument indicated a form of ironic grandeur. Its completed stature was certainly impressive as a commemoration of the ideals set down in the Declaration of Independence. But it had, throughout the 1830s, appeared as an ancient ruin, a forecast of a future beyond the fall of the United States. Rather than a

thousand years into the future, see Henry R. Cleveland's anonymously published piece "My Journal," *New-England Magazine* (October 1835): 274–78.

³²Webster's anxiety would later resonate with the monument's architect, Solomon Willard. On the day of his death, February 26, 1861, Willard tearfully expressed his fear that Confederate rebels would destroy his greatest achievement. William W. Wheildon, *Memoir of Solomon Willard, Architect and Superintendent of the Bunker Hill Monument* (Boston: Monument Association, 1865), p. 253.

reminder of immanent republicanism, it operated as a bulwark against imminent barbarism. The old claim that Melville was compelled to write this novel to capitalize on contemporary patriotic sentiments thus misses the mark. Melville regarded the novel, like the monument, as a work of art destined to outlive the nation while still serving as a posthumous beacon of truth. As he (echoing Webster) wrote of his own massive chimney one year later, "If undisturbed by innovators, then in future ages, when all the house shall have crumbled from it, this chimney will still survive—a Bunker Hill monument."³³ His dedication may have been ironic, but his appreciation was sincere.

As if to reinforce the strange temporal evocations of the monument, Melville's narration in *Israel Potter*, particularly at the book's opening, skips back and forth between past, present, and future tenses. The text of the novel "is crisscrossed by foreshadowing and narrative retrospection."³⁴ A paragraph may begin with the present tense and conclude in the past. At one point, when Potter is working in Kew Gardens, the narration offers a present commentary ("we see"), throws in a conditional speculation ("he would have"), adds a future notice ("we shall [follow]"), and finishes with both a past-tense explanation ("[he] was") and a past-perfect observation ("he had been") (*IP* 32). Such rapid reorientations in time distort and undermine the regular progress of the narrative, in the same way that Webster's uncharacteristically awkward style ("I know not that it might not") obscures his prophetic vision. Recent scholarship suggests that such temporal instability was more characteristic of nineteenth-century America than has previously been acknowledged.³⁵ However, Melville's example is

³³Herman Melville, "I and My Chimney" (1856), in *The Piazza Tales and Other Prose Pieces, 1839–1860*, ed. Harrison Hayford et al., *The Writings of Herman Melville*, vol. 9 (Evanston: Northwestern University Press and Newberry Library, 1987), p. 365.

³⁴Bellis, "Israel Potter: Autobiography as History as Fiction," p. 610.

³⁵See, for example, Thomas M. Allen, *A Republic in Time: Temporality and Social Imagination in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008); and Lloyd Pratt, *Archives of American Time: Literature and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010).

especially egregious; clearly Potter's narrative troubles a simple beginning-middle-end trajectory, just as the monument suggests to Webster not a linear historical progress but a potentially decadent future reinvigorated by a shining memento from a triumphant past.

Lost Youth

Critics have favored various scenes in *Israel Potter* as the most powerful: the introduction of Benjamin Franklin, Potter's entombment at the house of Squire Woodcock, the naval battle of the *Serapis* and the *Bon Homme Richard*. One scene usually mentioned is the octogenarian's return to America at the very end of the novel.³⁶ Having been exiled from his homeland for half a century, the elderly Potter finally books passage on a transatlantic vessel with his one surviving son. He arrives in Boston on the Fourth of July, 1826.

Feeling the need to escape the boisterous city with its holiday revelers, Potter ventures out to Copp's Hill and perches atop "a mound in the grave-yard." From this vantage point, he gazes across the Charles River to the nearby hill where he had battled the British fifty-one years earlier. Here he discerns the "incipient monument" to commemorate the event, though it is only as tall as a "struggling sprig of corn" and thus "hard to see" (*IP* 167). Familiar with the heavily delayed construction of the Bunker Hill Monument, Melville mirrors the "ruin-in-reverse" with this cemetery setting of the neighboring hill.

Finally Potter rises and declares that he wants to seek out "his father's homestead" in the Berkshires (*IP* 168). Passing through an "ancient natural wood," Potter and his son emerge into a field. The novel concludes with the following brief episode:

Blindly ranging to and fro, they next saw a man ploughing. Advancing slowly, the wanderer met him by a little heap of ruinous burnt

³⁶"We should be at a loss where to look for any thing more exquisitely beautiful in the way of description," wrote one contemporary reviewer, "than the account of the old exile's coming back to the spot where he was born, and being unable to find a solitary individual who remembered him." Boston *Puritan Recorder* (March 1855), in *Herman Melville: The Contemporary Reviews*, p. 459.

masonry, like a tumbled chimney, what seemed the jams [*sic*] of the fire-place, now aridly stuck over here and there, with thin, clinging, round prohibitory mosses, like executors' wafers. Just as the oxen were bid stand, the stranger's plough was hitched over sideways, by sudden contact with some sunken stone at the ruin's base.

"There; this is the twentieth year my plough has struck this old hearth-stone. Ah, old man,—sultry day, this."

"Whose house stood here, friend?" said the wanderer, touching the half-buried hearth with his staff, where a fresh furrow overlapped it.

"Don't know; forget the name; gone West, though, I believe. You know 'em?"

But the wanderer made no response; his eye was now fixed on a curious natural bend or wave in one of the bemossed stone jambs.

"What are you looking at so, father?"

"'Father!' here," raking with his staff, "*my* father would sit, and here, my mother, and here I, little infant, would totter between, even as now, once again, on the very same spot, but in the unroofed air, I do. The ends meet. Plough away, friend." (*IP* 169)

In the dedicatory preface to the novel, Melville announced that, "particularly towards the end" of the narrative, he "durst not substitute for the allotment of Providence any artistic recompense of poetical justice," thus warning any reader familiar with the hero's story not to expect a happy ending (*IP* viii). Melville insists that he draws his account from Potter's 1824 autobiography, and declares that his own work may, "with the exception of some expansions, and additions of historic and personal details, and one or two shiftings of scene . . . be not unfitly regarded something in the light of a dilapidated old tombstone retouched" (*IP* vii). This moment of the ruined remains of the hearth—a dilapidated old stone relegated to destruction—is certainly an addition of personal detail, as the autobiographical source-text includes no such description of the discovered ruins of a childhood home.

This moment, with its sudden denomination of Potter as "the wanderer," is also likely a reference to the first book of William Wordsworth's *The Excursion* (1814), in which an old man (the Wanderer), carrying a staff, reflects on the deceased former inhabitants of a now derelict cabin. Melville

owned and annotated a copy of *The Complete Works of William Wordsworth*, which he probably acquired in the early 1850s, and Wordsworth's "ruined cottage" scene seems to have been especially influential among American writers generally. For Melville, who paid special attention to these lines, Wordsworth's poem may have had an additional significance; in his own dedication, Wordsworth referred to *The Excursion* as "a monument," and Melville marked the text approvingly.³⁷ The personal detritus of a crumbling hearthstone may have invoked monumental associations.

The farmer's lack of respect for household ruins in Melville's novel suggests the nation's lack of respect for aged veterans like Potter, who is ultimately denied his request for a pension from the U.S. government. Indeed, Edgar Dryden (who also notes the connection between *Israel Potter* and *The Excursion*) has argued that the rubble of *Israel Potter's* conclusion acts as the "subversive double of the Bunker Hill Monument."³⁸ The "half-buried hearth" mirrors the half-built memorial, and Potter's patrimonial exclamation echoes a patriotic call to the Founding Fathers of the United States.³⁹ "The ends meet," and Potter relinquishes his hold on his native soil. ("The hearth is a houseless stone again," as Melville would later remark in his 1866 poem "The Armies of the Wilderness.")⁴⁰ The reader is cycled back to the first chapter of the novel, a description of the Berkshires (the birthplace of Melville's Potter) as a once-flourishing settlement now characterized by the "encroachments of decay." One might see, however, punctuating the mountain landscape, the occasional "immense chimney, of light gray stone," persisting as a reminder of the hardy pioneers of the Revolutionary generation (*IP* 4). The glory of the Founders fades, and their ruined

³⁷Herman Melville, "Melville's Marginalia in William Wordsworth's *The Complete Poetical Works*," *Melville's Marginalia Online*, ed. Steven Olsen-Smith et al. <http://melvillemarginalia.org/tool.php?id=18> (accessed 20 June 2015), p. 392.

³⁸Dryden, *Monumental Melville*, p. 48.

³⁹Cagidemetro, *Fictions of the Past*, p. 178.

⁴⁰Herman Melville, *Published Poems*, ed. Robert C. Ryan et al., *The Writings of Herman Melville*, vol. 11 (Evanston: Northwestern University Press and Newberry Library, 2009), p. 71.

remnants are both testaments to their power and signs of their followers' shortcomings.

In the final pages of *Israel Potter*, as the farmer passes over the rubble, the bond between hearth and hill is even stronger than it appears.⁴¹ In the early 1830s, the Bunker Hill Monument Association, having fallen into debt, considered selling land surrounding the monument but first attempted to raise funds by direct appeal to private donors. Edward Everett, in an 1831 speech on the subject, explained to his audience that the goal of the association was to preserve the entirety of Bunker Hill—that their object was “to rescue that field from the ploughshare.”⁴² The attempt was ultimately unsuccessful, and just as in *Israel Potter*, the land fell prey to commercial designs.⁴³

While Melville's imagined homecoming may have avoided poetic justice (no happy ending ensues), it conforms to a then-popular poetic convention, not unrelated to Wordsworth's verses. In fact, in an odd turn of events, the fictional experience of Israel Potter seems to have later become a real one for Walt Whitman. When the elderly Whitman returned to his Long Island childhood haunts in 1881 (recording his impressions in an article for the *New York Tribune*, later republished in his *Specimen Days*), he visited his mother's old house (the “Maternal Homestead”), where he had spent much of his youth. It was a place “where every spot had been familiar to me as a child,” Whitman writes.

Then stood there a long rambling, dark-gray, shingle-sided house, with sheds, pens, a great barn, and much open road-space. Now of all those not a vestige left; all had been pull'd down, erased, and the

⁴¹In her own 1843 poetic apostrophe to the Bunker Hill Monument, Lydia Sigourney had linked it to the “hearth-stone[s]” of the women who ultimately raised the funds to complete its construction. L. H. Sigourney, *Scenes in My Native Land* (Boston: James Munroe and Company, 1845), pp. 175–84.

⁴²Edward Everett, quoted in Alpheus S. Packard, *History of the Bunker Hill Monument* (Portland: Brown Thurston, 1853), p. 24.

⁴³For the symbolic importance of the plow in the novel, see Arnold Rampersad, *Melville's Israel Potter: A Pilgrimage and Progress* (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1969), p. 87.

plough and harrow pass'd over foundations, road-spaces and every-thing, for many summers; fenced in at present, and grain and clover growing like any other fine fields. Only a big hole from the cellar, with some little heaps of broken stone, green with grass and weeds, identified the place. . . . The whole scene, with what it arous'd . . . , made the most pronounc'd half-day's experience of my whole jaunt.⁴⁴

The similarities to Melville's Potter—a man returns, in Whitman's words, “after more than forty years' absence” and finds only “broken stone” to signify his former home—are striking. Compelling evidence suggests that Whitman had not only read Melville's *Israel Potter* but had relied on it as a historical source-text for sections thirty-five and thirty-six of “Song of Myself.”⁴⁵ Perhaps Melville's image of a melancholy homecoming had remained with Whitman, affecting the composition of his own memoirs.

In any case, Melville and Whitman both drew on a Romantic motif common in the work of American authors throughout the nineteenth century. Discovering the ruins of one's childhood home was a theme adopted with particular frequency by writers in the antebellum period. Poems such as James Gates Percival's “On Viewing, One Summer Evening, the House of My Birth, in a State of Desertion” (1823) fused the melancholy pleasure of ruin-gazing in the Old World with an American emphasis on hearth and home.⁴⁶ While specific moments like Percival's may not have always been canonized as classic tableaux of U.S. literary history, their prominent recurrence in their day suggests a readerly (and writerly) familiarity with the experience. Isaac McLellan, for example, captured the common sentiment in his 1829 poem “An Old Man Revisiting the Place of His Youth”: “The cottage door is broken! its thatch'd roof / Lies on the quench'd and long-deserted hearth, / And the dark

⁴⁴Walt Whitman, *Prose Works 1892*, ed. Floyd Stovall, 2 vols. (New York: New York University Press, 1963), 1:7–8.

⁴⁵Two different scholars independently discovered this likely literary influence: Jack Russell, “*Israel Potter* and ‘Song of Myself,’” *American Literature* 40, no. 1 (March 1968): 72–77; and Joseph Flibbert, *Melville and the Art of Burlesque* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1974), pp. 138–39.

⁴⁶James G. Percival, *Poems* (New York: Charles Wiley, 1823), pp. 329–39.

wall is settling to the ground.”⁴⁷ Nathaniel Hawthorne offered a succinct reflection on the appeal, to the generation of the American Renaissance, of the bittersweet return to a decaying natal dwelling. What could be more melancholy, he asks (in a passage Melville marked in his own copy), than “the spot where once stood a homestead, but where there is now only a ruined chimney, rising out of a grassy and weed-grown cellar?”⁴⁸

Chimneys and cellars may have had a special significance for veterans of Bunker Hill. During the battle, the British burned down nearby Charlestown—where, according to Melville, Israel Potter had been stationed just prior to the battle. A Massachusetts report drafted shortly after the affair found the Charlestown conflagration (and the resulting devastation of the area) to be an especially brutal act of the Redcoats. “Its chimneys and cellars now present a prospect to the Americans” that should kindle increased indignation against the British, emphasized the report.⁴⁹ In Potter’s case, the ruined hearthstone thus suggests not only the Bunker Hill Monument, but the battle itself—the “bloodiest engagement” of the Revolutionary War.⁵⁰

Ruins generally were a common theme for Romantic writers of various nationalities. But different versions of the ruin

⁴⁷Isaac McLellan, “An Old Man Revisiting the Place of His Youth,” *The Token*, ed. N. P. Willis (Boston: S. B. Goodrich, 1830), p. 126. Ellery Channing recorded a similar scene, with a “little wall half falling,” in his poem “The Lonely Road,” published in his *Poems: Second Series* (Boston: Munroe, 1847), p. 63.

⁴⁸Nathaniel Hawthorne, *Mosses from an Old Manse* (1846), *The Centenary Edition of the Works of Nathaniel Hawthorne*, vol. 10 (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1974), p. 12. Melville must have also observed that Hawthorne’s postapocalyptic “New Adam and Eve” (1843; included in *Mosses*) pray at the base of the completed Bunker Hill Monument. Furthermore, it has been recently suggested that the first line of *Israel Potter*’s dedication, which insists that “biography, in its purer form, [is] confined to the ended lives of the true and brave” so that the biographer cannot “hope for acknowledgment from the subject,” was likely a dig at Hawthorne, who had just secured an enviable consulship in Liverpool for his 1852 *Life of Franklin Pierce* (IP vii). John Jude Garcia, “The Ghostly Presence in Herman Melville’s Biographical Novel *Israel Potter*” (paper presented at the MLA Convention, Vancouver, 11 January 2015).

⁴⁹Quoted in Richard Frothingham, *History of the Siege of Boston, and of the Battles of Lexington, Concord, and Bunker Hill*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1851), p. 384.

⁵⁰Nathaniel Philbrick, *Bunker Hill: A City, a Siege, a Revolution* (New York: Penguin, 2013), p. 293.

carried different meanings. Depictions of the colossal architectural fragments from the ancient Greeks and Romans called up images of a glorious past while reminding the reader that the natural course of empire ends in desolation. In France, the Gothic ruin seems to have had a special appeal. The enthusiasm among British Romantics for monasteries like Tintern Abbey drew upon the history of the Protestant Reformation (and the resulting vacancies of the Catholic cloisters), with the image of an empty sacred space suggesting the new quasi-religious role for poetry.⁵¹ For all its various usages, the ruin theme in Europe tended to perform two basic functions: it provided enduring marks of a deep national or communal history, and it offered ancient examples against which modern readers could measure themselves. That is, ruins could stimulate self-consciousness by suggesting a permanent communion with past builders and/or a progressive difference from distant antiquity. In either sense, ruins could be both inspiring and instructive as aesthetic objects.

Yet in America, a country supposed to be without deep history, the artistic appeal to “ruins” was much more problematic. Many considered the lack of ruins to be the signature feature of the landscape; as Melville explains in *Israel Potter*, America is a place where “where the only antiquities are the for ever youthful heavens and the earth” (*IP* 159). Remnants of derelict buildings could only impede the march of progress which is in turn responsible for their abandonment. Israel Potter’s ruined home gets in the way of a local farmer, who symbolically turns over the soil to raise new crops. As Potter finds him with his equipment upset by the half-buried foundation, the man exclaims in frustration, “This is the twentieth year my plough has struck this old hearth-stone.” These American ruins simply obstruct the nation’s progress. Their provenance is insignificant to the model farmer; when Potter inquires as to the former inhabitants, the man curtly replies, “Don’t know; forget the name;

⁵¹M. W. Thompson, *Ruins: Their Preservation and Display* (London: Colonnade, 1981), p. 95. For an engaging history of the aesthetics of ruins, see Michel Makarius, *Ruins*, trans. David Radzinowicz (Paris: Flammarion, 2004).

gone West, though, I believe.” Though Potter has not forgotten the name, the stubborn pile is no public memorial fit for preservation. But while the novel’s ending appears dismissive of American ruins, it also suggests that Potter himself is trapped in a temporal anomaly: while the rest of the nation—and indeed, his own family—has been continually moving forward (and moving West), Potter has been caught in limbo, in a recursive wandering that brings him back to haunt the place of his youth. He even appears confused as to whether he is a father or a son. (He is of course both.) Like so many Americans before and after him, he needs to learn that you can’t go home again.

The common discovery of such home-grown ruins in America often led writers to believe that history itself had run wild—that time was somehow accelerated in the New World. The rate of change seemed to be advancing swiftly; as the poet William Cullen Bryant had noted, “A great deal of history is crowded into a brief space.”⁵² Daniel Webster, in his 1825 Address at the Bunker Hill Monument, echoed this popular sentiment by emphasizing the rapid progress of the nation: “We live in a most extraordinary age. Events so various and so important that they might crowd and distinguish centuries, are in our time, compressed within the compass of a single life” (WS 1:238–39). Many Americans worried that the new republic, rather than existing exceptionally outside of time, was actually developing at a dangerous velocity, speeding through an era of maturation and hurtling toward national decline. In other words, time passed too quickly in the United States, threatening the onset of early dotage. One effect of this chronological phenomenon is an increasing inability to distinguish between juvenility and senescence: half-built monuments become ancient ruins.⁵³ The

⁵²William Cullen Bryant, Rev. of *Redwood, a Tale*, *North American Review* 20 (April 1825): 255.

⁵³Like that of the Bunker Hill Monument, the construction of the Washington Monument in the nation’s capital dragged on for many years. Congressman Robert C. Winthrop of Massachusetts recalled that in the 1850s the Washington Monument’s “truncated shaft” symbolized a country apparently “doomed to premature decay.” Winthrop, “Oration on the Completion of the Washington Monument” (1885), quoted in Yablon, “‘Land of Unfinished Monuments,’” pp. 177–78.

national anxiety of accelerated aging is especially palpable in *Israel Potter*. The young John Paul Jones is described as possessing “octogenarian prudence,” and Benjamin Franklin exhibited “the incredible seniority of an antediluvian” (*IP* 99, 39). Such amplified development extends to Potter as well. When, at the beginning of his British sojourn, he exchanges clothes with an elderly Englishman, Potter “looked suddenly metamorphosed from youth to old age” (*IP* 19). And when he finally returns home to America, he cannot seem to reconcile his vivid memories with his senior status. “Nay, nay,” he tells his son, “I can not be so old” (169). Like the unfinished Bunker Hill Monument (which, Melville notes, is “prematurely gray”), Potter himself has suddenly become a ruin (viii).⁵⁴

Rip Van Winkle Redivivus

Israel Potter is Melville’s version of Rip Van Winkle, the iconic figure of such hastened transformation into geriatric decrepitude. Indeed, many critics have seen Potter’s final return to his birthplace as an explicit incarnation of Washington Irving’s original bumpkin-hero.⁵⁵ The latter’s two-decade slumber aligns neatly with the twenty years Melville’s farmer has spent plowing over Potter’s hearthstone, and in both texts the structure of exile and return leads to anxieties regarding the accelerated pace of change. “Rip Van Winkle suffers from undernarrated aging,” notes Michael Warner. “He is old before his time, off his generational track.”⁵⁶ Rip’s homecoming was pleasing enough to himself (he escaped from his shrewish wife and enjoyed an idle retirement) but potentially distressing for an American reader concerned about the stability of local institutions. After all, words like “Bunker’s hill”

⁵⁴For more on the novel’s repeated use of imagery that “superimposes a prematurely aging form on a youthful one,” see Judith R. Hiltner, “‘A Parallel and a Prophecy’: Arrest, Superimposition and Metamorphosis in Melville’s *Israel Potter*,” *ATQ* 2, no. 1 (March 1988): 41.

⁵⁵See, for recent examples, Manuel Broncano, “Strategies of Textual Subversion in Herman Melville’s *Israel Potter*,” *Amerikastudien/American Studies* 53, no. 4 (2008): 501; and Levine, “Revolutionary Aesthetics,” p. 168.

⁵⁶Michael Warner, “Irving’s Posterity,” *ELH* 67 (Fall 2000): 786.

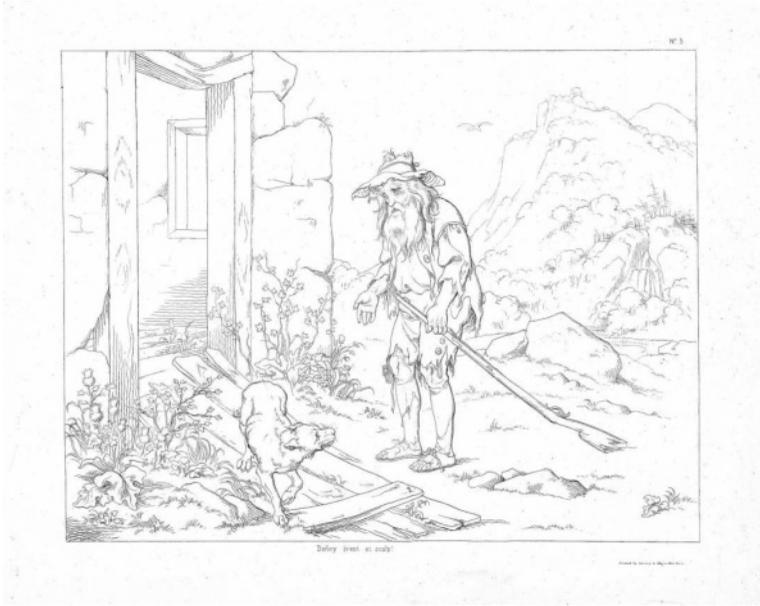


FIG. 3.—Felix O. C. Darley, *Illustrations of Rip Van Winkle* (New York: American Art-Union, 1848) The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Mrs. Frederic F. Durand, 1933 www.metmuseum.org.

and “heroes of seventy six” were a “babylonish jargon” to Rip, and his frightening discovery of his house in shambles—“gone to decay,” with “the roof fallen in, the windows shattered, and the doors off the hinges”—would inspire many similar occurrences in U.S. literary history.⁵⁷ Furthermore, Rip’s return to his own ruined cottage provided an especially powerful visual image in the mid-nineteenth century after the publication of Felix O. C. Darley’s acclaimed illustrations in 1848.⁵⁸ [See *Fig. 3.*]

This specific scene was an important one for Melville, who was particularly interested in the story of Rip Van Winkle.

⁵⁷Washington Irving, *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent.*, ed. Haskell Springer, *The Complete Works of Washington Irving*, vol. 8 (Boston: Twayne, 1978), pp. 37, 36.

⁵⁸“The Fine Arts: Mr. Darley’s Rip Van Winkle,” *The Literary World* 3 (November 1848): 812–13.

He composed a poem entitled “Rip Van Winkle’s Lilac” as part of his collection *Weeds and Wildings*, which remained unpublished at his death in 1891. The poem is preceded by a ten-page prose introduction (one of the longest prose pieces of Melville’s later years) that focuses on Rip’s return to a home in ruins, a moment similar to Potter’s revisit to the Berkshires. Lilacs “furnished a gay screen to the late abode, now a tenantless ruin, hog-backed at last by the settling of the ridge-pole in the middle, abandoned to leisurely decay, and to crown its lack of respectability, having a scandalous name as the nightly rendezvous of certain disreputable ghosts, including that of poor Rip himself.” The poem begins by explaining that Rip had planted some little flowers just before heading into the mountains, and these lilacs in the dooryard, like Whitman’s, continue blooming long after the hero’s departure, presenting a “redeeming attractiveness in those deserted premises.”⁵⁹

The lyrics then leap forward to a much later period in which another man has razed Rip’s ruin and rebuilt a new house on the spot—but the lilacs remain. And the locals now suddenly desire to cultivate these flowers for themselves:

The place a stranger scented out
 By Boniface told in vinous way—
 “Follow the fragrance!” Truth to own
 Such reaching wafture ne’er was blown
 From common Lilac. Came about
 That neighbors, unconcerned before
 When bloomed the tree by lowly door,
 Craved now one little slip to train;
 Neighbor from neighbor begged again.
 On every hand stem shot from slip,

⁵⁹Herman Melville, *Collected Poems of Herman Melville*, ed. Howard P. Vincent (Chicago: Packard, 1947), p. 286. Melville may have been influenced by Emily Herrmann’s poem “The Deserted Cottage” (*Literary World* 9 [22 November 1851]: 408), which depicts weeds and lilacs growing over a small, abandoned, whitewashed house. Melville was a contributor to *Literary World*, and the issue containing Herrmann’s poem also featured Evert Duyckinck’s favorable review of *Moby-Dick*.

Till, lo, that region now is dowered
 Like the first Paradise embowered,
 Thanks for the poor good-for-nothing Rip!⁶⁰

These verses allude to the posthumous power of Art (*ars longa vita brevis*); Rip may have appeared, in his own lifetime, to be a loafer who contributed nothing to society, but his simple act of planting the lilacs has evidently improved the region in the decades after his death. Similarly, although the real Israel Potter died in poverty, Melville rescued the pages of his narrative from moldering obscurity and retold his story in a form that remains in print today.⁶¹ And Melville's own words, neglected for many years, seemed possibly on the verge of a small revival in the author's final days. Not in Rip Van Winkle, but in Rip's lilacs Melville may have envisioned his own literary reputation "reflowering."⁶² And like Webster's postapocalyptic fantasy for the Bunker Hill Monument, Melville may have understood the importance of leaving his work for "the infallible finding of posterity."⁶³

Like the "tombstone retouched" of *Israel Potter*, the remodeled house of Rip Van Winkle (with its original decorative lilacs) is reflected as Irving's prose account rewritten into Melville's poetry. Melville has turned the ruined stones of his novel into a romantic, lyrical expression. And as in *Israel Potter*, a key influence here is Wordsworth's *Excursion*. Wordsworth's deserted cottage invited melancholy reflections, but a more hopeful feeling was called forth by the vegetation surrounding the ruins:

That secret spirit of humanity
 Which, 'mid the calm oblivious tendencies
 Of nature, 'mid her plants, and weeds, and flowers,
 And silent overgrowings, still survived.

⁶⁰Melville, *Collected Poems*, p. 293.

⁶¹Hennig Cohen has also drawn a connection between *Israel Potter* and "Rip Van Winkle's Lilac." Cohen, *Israel Potter*, pp. 321–22.

⁶²John Bryant, "Toning Down the Green: Melville's Picturesque," in *Savage Eye: Melville and the Village Arts*, ed. Christopher Sen (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1991), p. 157.

⁶³Herman Melville, "Hawthorne and His Mosses" (1850), in *The Piazza Tales, and Other Prose Pieces*, p. 249.

Melville underscored this sentiment in his own copy of the poem.⁶⁴ Just as the farmer's field offers a natural, fruitful growth to Potter's birthplace, Rip's lilacs share the "secret spirit of humanity" with future visitors to his hometown. The work of preservation has continued in unexpected ways.⁶⁵

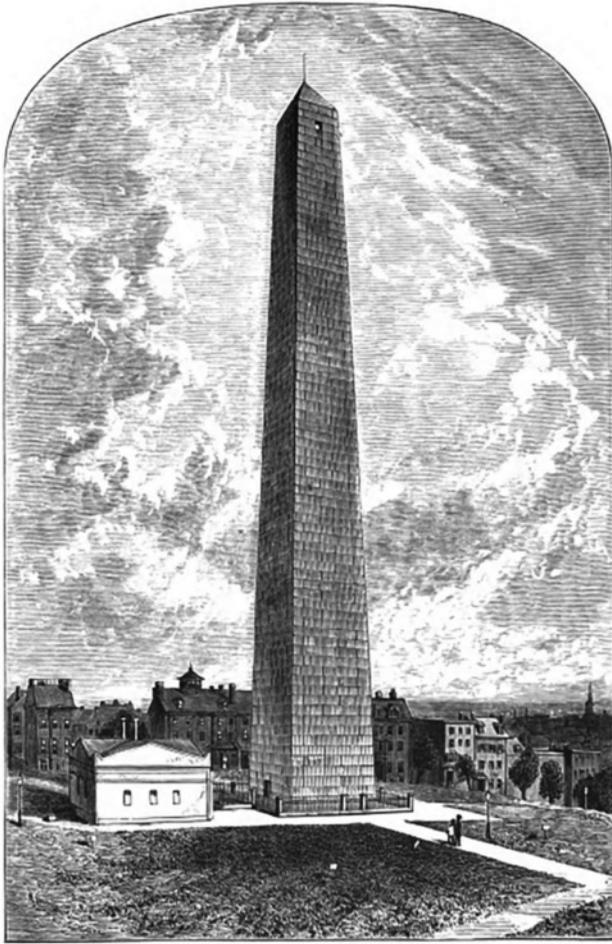
As Melville's writerly focus shifted from prose to poetry, his literary contributions turned from massive monoliths to germinous seeds. *Israel Potter*, which is neither a jingoistic celebration of national progress nor a cynical plaint about America's failure to achieve its ideals, occupies this turning point. When the aged Potter instructs the farmer to "plough away" through the hearthstone, he is not committing some ultimate act of spiritual resignation. Rather, his tone here is more aligned with the sense of "continue your productive work." The soil, not the stone, will bring forth fruit for future ages.⁶⁶ Potter's "posthumous pension," which consists of "ever-new mosses," is not a cynical joke about his gravestone (*IP* vii). Hope lies in such resurrection. As with the majestic Bunker Hill Monument—the key to the novel—apparently premature decay may simply precede eventual grandeur (just as the loss of the battle presaged the winning of the war).⁶⁷ Even a novelist whose career has been pronounced dead may, in another era, rise up as a prominent feature of the literary landscape. [See *Fig. 4.*]

⁶⁴Melville, "Melville's Marginalia in William Wordsworth's *The Complete Poetical Works*," pp. 403–04.

⁶⁵Henry David Thoreau likewise observed that buried stones and "cellar dents" were all that remained of the houses of many former inhabitants of the Walden Pond region, yet "still grows the vivacious lilac a generation after the door and lintel and the sill are gone," offering a story to "the lone wanderer" who chances by. Thoreau, *Walden* (1854), ed. J. Lyndon Shanley (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), pp. 263–64.

⁶⁶Clark Davis, "The Body-Deferred: *Israel Potter* and the Search for the Hearth," *Studies in American Fiction* 19 (Autumn 1991): 184.

⁶⁷In *Sketches of Bunker Hill Battle and Monument*, 2nd. ed. (Charlestown, Mass.: C. P. Emmons, 1843), a book which Melville owned, George Edward Ellis, writing of the delay in the construction of the Bunker Hill Monument, notes that "the durability of the structure was rather advanced than injured by the pause of a few years" (p. 166). Or as a poet of the time observed, "Here, though long delayed, hath risen at length / A trophied pile of undecaying strength." Walter Colton, "Bunker Hill: June 17, 1775, and June 17, 1843," *Graham's Magazine* 24, no. 3 (September 1843): 138.

**BUNKER HILL.**

[Drawn by EDWIN A. ABBEY. Engraved by A. V. S. ANTHONY.]

FIG. 4.—Completed Bunker Hill Monument, by Edwin A. Abbey, Frontispiece to the *Proceedings of the Bunker Hill Monument Association* (Boston, 1875).

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