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## OF WATERS AND DESERTS: THE METAMORPHOSIS OF A SYMBOL IN HERMAN MELVILLE'S *CLAREL*

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### ABSTRACT

*The essay examines how, in his narrative poem Clarel: A Poem and Pilgrimage in the Holy Land (1876), Herman Melville applied the symbolism of water to explore various aspects of nineteenth-century American culture. In this late work inspired by his Grand Tour of the Mediterranean and the Holy Land, Melville revisits the sites of some of his earlier quandaries related to Judeo-Christian theology, the search for religious certainty, and the moral lessons of Euro-American civilization. As he describes the arid sights of the desert by poetic images of water associated throughout his work, with intellectual quests, Melville gives artistic expression to issues of religion, science, history, empire building, and race relations. This essay argues that by examining the history of the New World from the perspective of the Old, the poem Clarel makes a powerful critical statement on the failed covenantal history of the United States after the Civil War and during the Reconstruction.*

**Key words:** Herman Melville, Palestine, Holy Land travel, Judeo-Christian culture, water and desert, symbolism, nineteenth-century US history, American Victorianism

## DELL'ACQUA E DEI DESERTI: LE IMMAGINI DELL'ACQUA NELLA POESIA *CLAREL* DI HERMAN MELVILLE

### SINTESI

*Il contributo fa il punto sull'applicazione di Herman Melville dei simboli dell'acqua nel suo poema narrativo Clarel: A Poem and Pilgrimage in the Holy Land (1876) utilizzati per esplorare i vari aspetti della cultura americana dell'Ottocento. In questa sua tarda opera, ispirata dal Gran Tour nel Mediterraneo e in Terra Santa, Melville rivisita i luoghi di alcuni suoi precedenti dubbi relativi alla teologia ebraico-cristiana, la ricerca di certezze nella fede e di lezioni morali della civiltà euro-americana. Nel descrivere paesaggi desertici attraverso immagini poetiche dell'acqua, Melville attribuisce un'espressione artistica agli interrogativi sulla religione, la scienza, la storia, la costruzione dell'impero, i rapporti tra razze diverse. Il contributo sostiene che nel poema Clarel Melville – che dalla prospettiva del Vecchio mondo affronta la storia del Nuovo mondo – assume un atteggiamento critico nei confronti del fallimento della storia delle alleanze dopo la guerra civile e durante la ricostruzione.*

**Parole chiave:** Herman Melville, Palestina, viaggio in Terra Santa, cultura ebraico-cristiana, simbolismo dell'acqua e del deserto, storia degli USA nell'Ottocento, periodo vittoriano negli Stati Uniti

Water in its various forms – running streams and rivers, the immensity and depth of the ocean, the vapor of the whale's spout, the rainbow – are essential elements of Melville's iconography, as are islands, reefs, and creatures of the deep. As an author with considerable experience in seamanship as sailor, whale-hunter and, later, passenger on sea voyages, he applied images related to water as vehicles of intellectual exploration. The plots of Melville's major novels *Typee* (1846), *Omoo* (1847), and *Mardi* (1849), as well as that of *Moby-Dick* (1851), are organized according to the structuring principle of the sea voyage. There is further thematic engagement with navigation in some of the short fiction of *The Piazza Tales* (1855), and *The Confidence-Man* (1856), his satire of mid-nineteenth century America, which recounts the voyage of a steamer carrying passengers down the Mississippi. His last masterpiece, *Billy Budd* (1891) returns once again to the nautical setting as if to reinforce Ishmael's intimation, in the »Loomings« chapter in *Moby-Dick*, that »meditation and water are wedded for ever« (13). Also, the register of nautical voyages and seamanship characteristically accompanies Melville's repeated attempts to address the American historical and cultural experience.

There is, however, a remarkable piece in the Melville oeuvre that evokes wholly different landscapes. *Clarel, A Poem and Pilgrimage in the Holy Land* (1876), his long poem, or novel in verse, is set in the arid regions of Palestine and in the desolate towns of Jerusalem and Bethlehem. The experience inspiring this extensive work is Melville's voyage to the Mediterranean and Palestine, undertaken in the winter of 1856–1857. On Saturday, October 11<sup>th</sup>, he sailed from New York to make the Grand Tour of France, Italy, Greece, Egypt, and the Holy Land. The journey extended over much of the following year: he returned to New York in the spring of 1857 (Leyda, 1969, 525–79). At the time of the tour, Melville's literary reputation was already in decline.<sup>1</sup> The exotic and adventurous journey to the Mediterranean and the Holy Land could have provided the theme for a popular travel book, re-establishing his authorial reputation and financial balance. The American public was receptive to topics about the Holy Land. John Lloyd Stephens, William M. Thomson, John Ross Brown, William Cullen Bryant and Bayard Taylor had captured readers' imaginations with accounts of their travels (Obenzinger, 1999, 3–5), and in 1867 Mark Twain had achieved climactic success with *The Innocents Abroad*, the book covering his tour of the Mediterranean and Palestine.

Melville, however, refrained from immediately engaging in a journalistic travel report unsuitable for conveying the weight and depth of his philosophical concerns. He left Palestine with feelings of grief and disappointment at the desolate aspect of both the landscape and the historical sites, and saved his travel notes for a more ambitious literary project. His journal of the tour is an accurate but sketchy record, a reminder rather than a detailed account of his impressions. When *Clarel* was finally completed in 1876, it was the result of two decades' worth of creative labor. Melville's treatment of the Holy Land in this long poem was different from the reverent and laudatory accounts of those who had travelled with a pious agenda, but nor did he adopt the irreverent tone of Mark Twain. *Clarel* is a serious philosophical work that addresses issues related to the process of intellectual, economic, and social modernization in America. By the middle of the nineteenth century, scientific inquiry into Scriptural history and the higher criticism of the Bible challenged the basic tenets of Christianity, and the theory of evolution further undermined faith in the transcendental design governing the universe (see Bezanson, 1991, 610). Extensive industrialization and urbanization in America after the Civil War and during the Reconstruction brought new social values and attitudes that Melville sensed as signs of moral decline. Setting his poem in Palestine, the historical site of the Promised Land, gave Melville an opportunity to re-evaluate American history from its early days when the Puritan colonists aspired to build a New Jerusalem to the emergence, through settlement and conquest, of a powerful continental empire.

Melville's own experiences as a sailor familiarized him with this latter aspect of America's imperial aspirations.<sup>2</sup> Most of his works are not only structured as sea voyages but also explore the place and role of the United States on the scene of global history and politics. My essay discusses a specific aspect of the Holy Land landscape evoked in *Clarel*: the imagery and symbolism of water. The abundance of aquatic and nautical references is more than peculiar for a poem set in a geographical area that is practically a desert. I will argue that the ubiquity of imagery related to water in its various forms – sea, rivers, streams, fountains, and even vapor – is an expression of Melville's unorthodox and alternative view of the Holy Land, one that defies and even runs counter to established notions of the site as an icon of Judeo-Christian spirituality and history. I will point out that the persistence of sea imagery in the poem trans-

1 Of the works he had published in this period, his novel *Pierre* (1852) was a critical failure, *The Piazza Tales* brought only moderate success, and news about the hostile reception of *The Confidence-Man* was still in store (Parker, 2002, 128–133, 283–285, 349–351).

2 We are often inclined to view American expansion as the result of the westward movement only, the process of settlement behind the shifting line of the Frontier. However, with the rise of the United States as a maritime power, Hilton Obenzinger points out, American global influence was also advancing in concentric circles across the oceans of the world (11).

forms the fictionalized account of Melville's journey into a philosophical exploration not unlike those undertaken by his reflective sailor-heroes Tommo, Taji, and Ishmael. The most characteristic elements of the landscape of the Holy Land, the desert and the ubiquitous sand, acquire significance identical with those of the ocean and water throughout the Melville canon. The scarce but culturally significant waters in the Desert of Judea – the River Jordan, the Dead Sea, and a small fountain at the monastery Mar Saba – have a prominent place in the poem's perspective on religion and history. Through them, Melville reminds us that the core ideas of Judeo-Christianity, the spiritual and ideological foundation of Euro-American civilization, have come under challenge. Finally, I intend to show how images of the wrecked ship are incorporated in the poem's perspective on historical crisis and the tragic experience of the American Civil War.

Over the course of the nineteenth century Palestine developed into a multi-ethnic, multi-faith area receiving an ever increasing number of visitors driven by various religious, cultural, and even political agendas.<sup>3</sup> By means of a large cast of characters, *Clarel* explores and analyzes a variety of attitudes related to the sacred sites of the Holy Land. Instead of offering the author's personal impressions of places overcharged with religious and historical significance, the poem pays tribute to a multitude of visions of the Holy Land. Melville, as Brian Yothers remarks, »was willing to rewrite his own perceptions in order to make *Clarel* a poem that could serve as a history of many minds and not merely Melville's own« (115). However, as a person with a Calvinist upbringing who grappled, throughout his career, with the nature and manifestations of divinity, he keeps the intellectual quest focused on aspects of Scriptural truth and history.

#### FROM SEA VOYAGE TO DESERT JOURNEY: THE PERSISTENCE OF A REGISTER

*Clarel* is structurally organized around the major sites visited by Melville during his Holy Land tour. Its four sections are set in historically and culturally significant locations: »Jerusalem« in the Holy City and its surroundings, »The Wilderness« by the Jordan and the Dead Sea, »Mar Saba« at a site of early monastic history, and »Bethlehem« at the birthplace of Christ. Early in the poem's plot, Clarel, the poem's title hero joins a train of pilgrims who, while taking a circular tour of the region, exchange ideas about various issues – theological, philosophical, political, and artistic – prompted by Holy Land sites and Scriptural history. The thoughts and opinions of

the characters are mediated by the omniscient narrator whom we can easily imagine as an old sailor, for he is the primary source of the poem's rich nautical register. The dialogues between the participants are also interspersed with metaphors related to the sea and seafaring. As Stan Goldman remarks, »[e]ither several of the characters have a nautical imagination or the characters are the refracted voices of the narrator« (111). Indeed, these individualized characters dramatize different, but not mutually exclusive intellectual attitudes that had long been integral parts of Melville's authorial perspective.

The name of the title hero, combining the words »Clar« and »El,« calls to mind a nineteenth-century Everyman in search for a clear idea of God in Judeo-Christian theology and culture. The American student of Protestant theology travels to the Holy Land hoping to satisfy his yearning for religious certainty. Like all journeys in the Melville canon, the pilgrimage described in *Clarel* recounts the plight of the hero as wayfarer and learner. Driven out of a safe and sheltered home by accident, dissatisfaction, poverty or simple ennui, Melville's earlier protagonists Tommo, Taji, and Ishmael started their respective adventures by embarking on ships. Clarel's route to apprehension is the opposite: he arrives in Palestine on sea, disembarks in Jaffa, and continues his journey to Jerusalem. But although the pilgrimage takes place on land, the sea metaphors that describe it keep the quest semantically linked to those of Melville's other seafaring heroes. Passing Ramleh, »the sail-white town« (4), Clarel catches sight of Jerusalem's blank towers that rise »[l]ike the ice-bastions round the Pole« (5). Contemplating the religious kaleidoscope of Palestine, he has a vision of pilgrimages across cultures: Christians are »huddled in the pilgrim fleet« (20), Hindu pilgrims are a »human wave / Which sprawls over India,« Muslims a »turbaned billow [that] floods the plains« (22), and the caravan he finally joins »labors like a fleet« (169). The narrator's register persistently creates links between the hero's plight in the Holy Land and that of sailors and ships navigating the oceans of the world. Such associations connect the Holy Land pilgrimage to voyages by water, and reinterpret Clarel's journey as an intense and perilous struggle towards a spiritual goal.

In his journal Melville describes Palestine as a fallen land, forsaken and deprived of grace, which is the dominant landscape in *Clarel* as well. The poem's first part, »Jerusalem,« is a series of autobiographically inspired vignettes that recount the hero's ramblings among the ruins of ancient history. Melville looked upon the desolate city Jerusalem as a powerful symbol of the slow but steady decline of religious faith. He perceived that

3 Between Melville's visit in the 1850s and the time of the poem's setting in the 1870s, Palestine was under Ottoman occupation. Its population was made up by Muslims – mainly local Arabs –, a much smaller number of Jewish settlers, as well as by a fluctuating number of Christian millennialists, missionaries, and pilgrims (see Obenzinger, 1999, xii–xv).

not only a segment of historical time, the nineteenth century, was drawing towards a close, but also centuries-old mind sets were threatened by a radical and irreversible change. Throughout his career Melville was wary of the idea, present both in natural theology and Romantic nature philosophy, of the divine design that governs the natural world by the principles of benevolence and grace. Yet he maintained Romanticism's dualistic approach of the visible world as appearance that conceals an essence not immediately accessible to the inquiring mind. Wandering among the historical sites of Jerusalem, *Clarel*, his poem's hero, permanently feels the presence of some lurking mystery. He has the impression that the buildings and walls of the city hide secrets that are ominous and foreboding. The latticed windows of houses shelter »some strange innocence or sin« (25), and even the pavement hides caves, ducts, sewers and waterways, »isled lagunes and watery halls« (50). Kedron, the underground brook, »Slips [...] furtive« underneath the ruins of King Solomon's Temple« (50). The Pool of Siloam, where Christ healed the blind man (John 9.1-7), is fed by underground waters which make it ebb and flow continuously (90). Universally recognized as a life-giving substance, water is elsewhere in Melville's fiction a symbol of truth and earnest quests. In *Clarel*, however, it carries ambiguous, multiple, and often diverging meanings. The »Jerusalem« cantos feature waterways that are concealed under visible surfaces and represent the occlusion rather than clarity of meaning in the world of phenomena.

The second section of *Clarel*, »The Wilderness«, sets in motion the pilgrimage that organizes the plot and intensifies the sense of hazard and danger inherent in the quest. The pilgrims start a journey to the Jordan and the Dead Sea. In this section of the poem water imagery underscores the themes of pessimism and despair. In their rambling discussions and meditations the travelers tackle the most important spiritual quandaries of the nineteenth century: the escalation of human evil, the horrible lessons of history, and the crisis of the religious world view displaced by the scientific. The immediate perils of the desert are made palpable when »[s]teel points« of robbers' spears are spotted as they appear behind a mountain ridge »[l]ike dorsal fins of sharks« (161). The River Jordan, the site of Christ's baptism, offers but little respite from the general mood of desolation that overtakes the pilgrims. As if to dissipate all remaining expectations of regeneration and purification on the bank of the holy river, another gang of hostile horsemen appears »[a]cross the waves which intervene« (207). The crisis culminates in the death of one of the pilgrims, Nehemiah, a naïve and unquestioning votary who, in a delirium of sleepwalking, is drowned in the Dead Sea. His body, washed on shore, is covered by the calcareous substance of the water. Thus, the death of the simple-minded old man completes the atmosphere of deso-

lation and loss looming over this descending phase of the pilgrimage. The Underworld experience is finally concluded by a roaring avalanche of stones immediately succeeded by a rare atmospheric phenomenon, a »fog-bow.« The vapory apparition seems to be »A thing of heaven, and yet how frail [that] / Up in thin mist above the sea / Humid is formed, and noiselessly« (261). Hovering over the Valley of Siddim, the fog-bow suggests divine presence amidst worldly dreariness and desolation. Yet even this heavenly sign disappears as quickly as it emerged, leaving the participants of the quest with their anxieties and misgivings. They keep pondering whether an omnipotent God exists, and whether there is any transcendental truth to be unraveled over the course of their journey.

Leaving the Dead Sea behind, the pilgrims follow the route of literal and spiritual ascent to the mountainous area south of the Dead Sea to the Greek monastery Mar Saba. The third section of *Clarel* combines instances of hedonistic celebration of life with moments of extreme introversion and asceticism. There are two objects inviting meditation in Mar Saba: a fount in a deep cavern created by St. Saba, the founder of the monastery a thousand years before, and the Holy Palm, also planted by the holy monk. While the Dead Sea was, in the previous part, a correlative of sin and evil, in this section the fount »cool to sip« and the palm, »that blessed tree« (358), are powerful symbols of God's redemptive agency. Mortmain, a bleak-minded but deep-thinking member of the pilgrim party, finds his peace in Mar Saba and dies while meditating under the palm. The peacefulness and transcendental ease by which he passes away counterpoints Nehemiah's violent death during his drugged sleep. Also, an eagle's feather fallen on Mortmain's lips stands in striking contrast with the old religious maniac's dead body enveloped in the bitumen of the Dead Sea. The clarity of the water in St. Saba's fount and the Holy Palm can be considered as manifestations of divine good-will. In the poem's perspective, a lucid doubter's earnest quest rises over the unquestioning votary's rigid adherence to religious doctrine.

The pilgrims' experiences in Mar Saba, however, fail to bring the metaphysical quest to fulfillment, and offer no definite or lasting solutions to *Clarel*'s queries whether man's spiritual pursuits will get their transcendental reward. The travelers turn towards Bethlehem. The fourth section of *Clarel* also recounts their arrival back in Jerusalem. The train is joined, among other travelers, by Agath, the »timoneer« or sea pilot, a tired, old ex-sailor whose presence opens new possibilities for Melville to apply his sea register. Agath is not a reflective character but a simple-minded man who »better may abide life's fate / Than comprehend« (397). Nevertheless his sea stories, scattered through the cantos of the »Bethlehem« section, become accomplished emblems of the human quest for faith and spiritual reassurance,

the central theme of *Clarel*. These stories, as Vincent Kenny observes, »further pronounce on the 'wrecked condition of the landed pilgrims« (108). The »stricken land« (394) of Palestine, for example, reminds the old sailor of the Galapagos Islands, a scene already depicted in Melville's cycle of tales »The Encantadas.« He evokes an iconic specimen of the islands' wildlife, the giant tortoise who »creeps with laboring neck« (396) into crevices and »[w]ater he craves, where rain is none« (397). The dumb creature's hopeless strife becomes, in the minds of the poem's intellectual inquirers, an emblem of man's vain search for some divine message arriving from a realm beyond the human ken. The inquirer's condition is similar to that of the giant tortoise in search of water on an island where the falling drops are but the condensation of its own rising vapors: »only dews of midnight fall / And dribbling lodge in chinks of stone« (397). Instead of the expected theodicy, man only hears the echo of his own voice.

The underlying symbolism of the journey in *Clarel* receives additional significance in the concluding cantos that feature the pilgrims arriving in Jerusalem, the place of their departure and destination. The final section of the poem evokes the passing of several processions. In these cantos water is a recurring symbol. On Palm Sunday an Armenian funeral passes through the city like »a rainbow throng [like] dolphins off Madeira« (492). The dead walk, in Clarel's vision, enveloped »in languid vapors [like] thaw-fogs curled from dankish snow« (494), and the congregations celebrating Easter Sunday flow in a »tide« (496). Clarel makes his last appearance in the concluding Whitsun-tide procession. Here, the hero is pictured as a »swimmer« in a sea of deep thoughts. The narrator invites him to »emerge [...] from the last whelming sea,« and »prove that death but routs life into victory« (499). Throughout the poem, Melville's argument rested on the symbolism of the journey as quest. By extensively applying imagery related to water he vindicated a connection between scenes of the Holy Land pilgrimage and the process of exploring and learning.

#### THE »OCEANIC SENSE«: THE DESERT AS A SYMBOL OF INTELLECTUAL DEPTH

The desert is often semantically linked in *Clarel* to the undulating waves of the sea. The association can be traced back to Melville's travel experience twenty years before, recorded in his journal. Passing, on 24 November 1856, through the straits of Gibraltar, he expressed his fascination by a sudden opening of perspective: »Calm within Straits. Long swell took us. The Mediterranean« (sic). Moving further into the arid regions of North Africa, he associated the immensity of the surrounding wastelands with the ocean: »A long billow of desert forever hovers as in the act of breaking, upon the

verdure of Egypt«. Approaching the pyramids, he concluded: »Desert more fearful to look at than ocean« (1989, 52, 76). The sea has complex significance in Melville's work, its essence being articulated most clearly in *Moby-Dick*. For Ishmael the ocean, »the watery part of the world« (3), is a place for intellectual adventure. In the oppositional pair of land and ocean, the latter represents the daring heroism of the soul. In the »Lee Shore« chapter Ishmael contends that »all deep, earnest thinking is but the [...] effort of the soul to keep the open independence of her sea; while the wildest winds of heaven and earth conspire to cast her on the treacherous, slavish shore« (107).

In *Clarel* the arid landscape of the Holy Land retains much of the symbolic relevance Melville attached earlier to the sea, the medium of spiritual inquiry. Jerusalem and the surrounding desert inspire the quest for meaning, the sand assuming similar significance as water:

Sands immense  
Impart the oceanic sense:  
The flying grit like scud is made:  
Pillars of sand which whirl about  
Or arc along in colonnade,  
True kin to the water spout. (169)

However, the Holy Land also conveys the spirit of despondency that Melville attributes to religious orthodoxy. In this context the desert and wasteland resemble the ocean only in outward appearance, not in essence. The blankness of Jerusalem, the first station of the journey, is connected with decay and death. Instead of being the fountainhead of belief transmitting spiritual reassurance, Jerusalem has an air of emptiness and desolation, and retains rather than reveals some hidden significance. Ascending on the house-top of his hostel in the evening of his arrival, Clarel contemplates a sight that is utterly enigmatic. The townscape is just as austere and arid as the landscape encircling it. The city is »walled« and »battlemented,« labyrinthine and lifeless. Devoid of organic life, the deserted architecture assumes the quality of animatedness: the houses make an impression as though they were retreating from his regard: »Overlooked, the houses sloped from him – / [...] All stone - a moor of roofs« (7). Jerusalem, the city surrounded by the desert, hides meanings waiting to be revealed. Here Melville returns to the motif of the concealed content, or more exactly, the containment of some essential meaning in the object viewed as enigmatic and hermetic as in »The Doubloon« episode of *Moby-Dick*. Throughout their journey in the desert the pilgrims are haunted by a continuous epistemological unease that has its primary source in the natural environment. As William Potter remarks, by describing a journey through the sites of the Old Testament »Melville recovers something of the original relationship between human beings and nature,

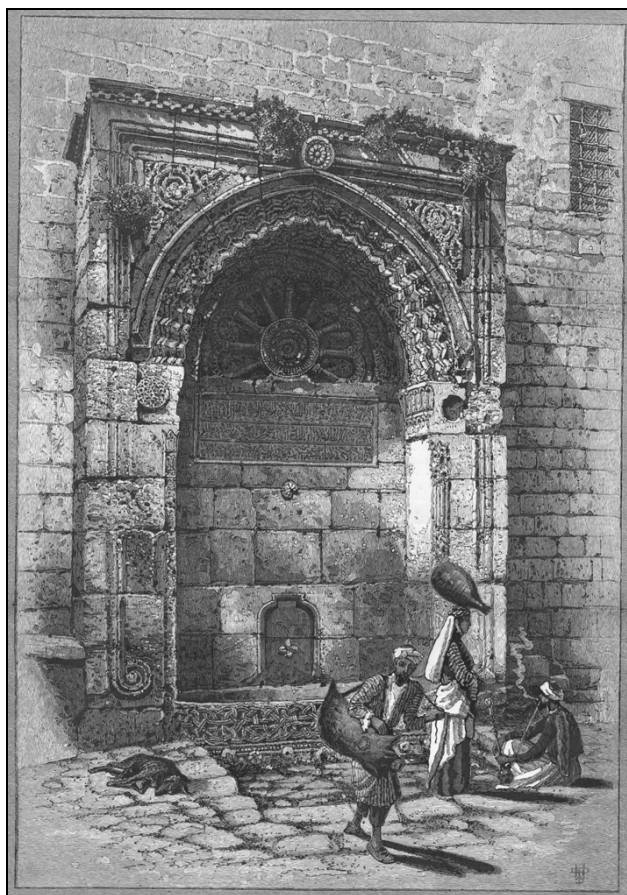
one fraught with danger and uncertainty for the former« (101). The pilgrimage is led through a forsaken, arid wasteland. The travelers contemplate and try to interpret a landscape that is utterly enigmatic.

The quest-journey of *Clarel* is undertaken primarily for the restoration of man's relationship to God, the recovery of faith. This is ultimately an attempt to unravel some metaphysical »truth« about the nature of the world man inhabits. The pilgrims struggle through the desert areas of Palestine trying to extract from objects or events

meanings that would point towards a transcendental source. The certainty of such source was claimed by Melville's former sailor-heroes, Taji and Ahab, both being absolutist pursuers of a noumenal essence beyond phenomena. In Melville's later fiction and poetry the phenomenal world appears to be incomplete and deceptive and, at most, mirroring the mind of the inquirer. In *Clarel* the vistas of the Holy Land resist attempts to fashion spiritual meaning from the visible world, and suggest that there may be no one-to-one relationship between natural object and transcendental referent.

Wastelands in Melville's Holy Land poem carry multiple, if sometimes contradictory, meanings. Deserts have on the one hand, redemptive power by their beauty »from the heaven / Above them« (168). But on the other hand they reveal the face of an angered God: the land of Judah is »visaged in significance / Of settled anger terrible.« In either reading, they derive their significance from a transcendental source without, however, possessing any fixed meaning. The God-realm transmits an ambivalent message: »'Tis a land / Direful yet holy-blest tho' banned« (170). In addition to this, Melville acknowledges alternative forms of spirituality, like that of Muslims, the most numerous inhabitants of Palestine in Melville's time. The mast-head metaphor familiar in *Moby-Dick* returns in *Clarel* to describe the minaret in Jerusalem, with the muezzin calling to prayer. On top of the minaret, »at the marble mast-head stands / The Islam herald, his two hands / Upon the rail« (48). The poem's perspective on non-Christian creeds, however, does not put forth viable spiritual alternatives. The muezzin turns »sightless eyes« towards the skies, and the scene is abandoned without the suggestion that he may possess some superior inner vision.

The final extinction of faith, expressed with such a suggestive maritime metaphor as »faith's receding wave« (68), is the key problem Melville explores in *Clarel*. »[I]s faith dead now, / A petrification? [...] How far may seas retiring go?« (278, emphasis in the original). This disturbing inquiry is performed in the »The High Desert,« an important canto in which the pilgrims undertake to explore the dualistic principles underlying religious thinking as well as the origins and perspectives of Christianity. It is here that they formulate the central problem of their spiritual quest: »Shall endless time no more unfold / Of truth at core?« (279). The pilgrims finally shift the focus of their exchange to consider the prospects of their own historical moment, post-Civil War America: »Can the age stem its own conclusions?« (280). »The High Desert« canto seems to suggest that the most haunting dilemmas cannot be solved within the confines of the human intellect, and the existence of a superior, divine intellect is doubtful, at least. The divine realm remains unresponsive all the while: »unperturbed over deserts riven, / Stretched the clear vault of hollow heaven« (281). Thus, the intellectual ramblings of »The



**Fig. 1: Fountain at the Gate of the Chain – Bab el Silsileh (supplied with water from Solomon's Pools). Wood engraving after a drawing by J. D. Woodward, published in *Picturesque Palestine*, about 1870. Recent hand colouring. <http://coastdaylight.com/prints/print-d0978.html> (James E. Lancaster collection, used by permission).**

**Slika 1: Tekoči vodnjak pri Verižnih vratih – Bab el Silsileh (ki se napaja z vodo iz Salomonovih bazenov). Lesorez po risbi J. D. Woodwarda, objavljen v delu *Picturesque Palestine*, okrog l. 1870. Nedavno ročno obarvan odtis. <http://coastdaylight.com/prints/print-d0978.html> (zbirka Jamesa E. Lancastra, uporaba z dovoljenjem).**

High Desert» lead towards an intimation that divine meaning and control may be absent from human history.

### THE WRECK: A METAPHOR OF THE HISTORICAL EXPERIENCE

Not only are the details of the 1856–57 journal reworked in the plot of *Clarel*, revitalizing the experience of almost three decades before, but Melville incorporates into the poem his vision of ante- and post-bellum America as well. Extending his exploration over nineteenth-century history, culture and politics as well as Christian spirituality, he tackles issues related to man's ontological and epistemological condition. *Clarel* is Melville's renewed attempt to map »the World,« extensively and inclusively, similarly to his early attempt in *Mardi*, but with a discipline surpassing even that of his mature fictional works, *Moby-Dick* and *The Confidence-Man*. On his tour of the Mediterranean and the Levant, Melville made the passage from the New World to the Old in order to explore vestiges of ancient Greek, Egyptian and Judeo-Christian civilization, a journey remote not only in space but also in time. He stopped at such major sites of the Mediterranean antiquity as the Acropolis and the pyramids, and visited those of ancient Judea, Jerusalem, the Dead Sea, and Bethlehem. Taking the route from the West to the East, Melville reversed the cultural paradigm of *translatio imperii*, the eighteenth-century trope describing the advancement of civilization from east to west. By visiting monuments of ancient civilizations he reassessed both the recent crisis in American history, that of the Civil War, and the status of the United States as an emerging empire of global significance.

The setting of *Clarel* is already overcharged with historical, cultural, and religious significance. The image it conveys of the Holy Land becomes emblematic of the entire Euro-American civilization that stands on the foundations of Judeo-Christianity. As Brian Yothers contends, *Clarel* is »a deeply cosmopolitan work and one that comments extensively on American culture and politics« (116). Scenes, stations of the pilgrimage, open the possibility for virtual travels in historical time, and create associative links to geographical space. A continuous interrelation between Scriptural and contemporary Judea pervades, and the poem's spatial vision establishes the significance of the Holy Land as the spiritual center of a civilization that extends over Europe and the American continent. In the wake of the Civil War Melville sees the course of history as one leading towards a deepening crisis. In *Clarel* a cluster of images associate death at sea with the waning of religious sentiment in the late nineteenth-century. *Clarel*'s intellectual uncertainty, both as a divinity student and as an American, is suggested right at the beginning of the poem, by the image of a shipwreck as the young man ponders his crisis of faith:

Those under-formings of the mind,  
Banked corals which ascend from far,  
But little heed men that they wind  
Unseen, unheard-till lo, the reef –  
The reef and breaker, wreck and grief. (5)

Early in the poem Melville engages in building an extended historical frame of reference for the journey-asquest. The canto entitled »Rambles« illustrates this tentative immersion into the coordinates of historical existence as it sums up *Clarel*'s several days of wandering in Jerusalem. Following the young man's random route, Melville weaves a dense web of Biblical and historical associations prompted by scriptural places, buildings and ruins, establishing the image of the city as a site where »serial wrecks on wrecks confound / Era and monument and man« (31). The idea of Jerusalem as a wreck will gradually develop into one of the most powerful symbols in *Clarel*.

As a site literally worn out by history, the Holy Land is described in the poem as a multilayered world where what remains concealed beneath the visible surface is infinitely more complex than what is revealed. The narrator of the poem proposes an imaginary descent into the layered depths beneath the city of Jerusalem, and exposes the deceptive nature of the peaceful domesticity sensed at the surface. For example, the scene of the »[m]ild matron pensive by her son« is set above an abyss filled with the ruins of the past:

Dark quarries where few care to pry,  
Whence came those many cities high –  
Great capitals successive reared,  
And which successive disappeared  
On this same site. (50–51)

The reference to obliterated civilizations and to the omnipresence in the Holy Land of the past foregrounds one of the most important problems tackled in *Clarel*: how the present relates to the vastness of the historical time. Melville extends the limits of the history of Jerusalem towards a remote beginning. Wandering among the ruinous buildings of the city, the title hero stretches his imagination to reach back to prehistoric time, to »hunters' camps of ages long before« (31). Also, nearing the end of the pilgrimage Agath, the timoneer exclaims at the sight of the holy city: »Wreck, ho! The wreck – Jerusalem!« (388). By the old sailor's despondent cry Melville seems to suggest that the terrible experiences of history cannot be obliterated, nor can they be assimilated. Even in America, regarded by the earliest New England Puritan settlers as the »New Jerusalem,« the memory of historical failures persists in the present as the ruin, the »wreck« of the best hopes of the past.

The accumulation of European and American historical experience, especially the recent crisis of the American Civil War, did not allow Melville to adopt a view of history as progress, and of the United States as a beacon of political and religious freedom and economic development. An explicit refutation of such an idealized view of America is made in *Clarel* by an episodic and a major character: Celio, a disillusioned hunchback rambling in Jerusalem, and Ungar, the Confederate veteran whom the pilgrims meet on their way to Bethlehem. Both characters engage in a critique of post-Civil War America and, implicitly, the cultural myth of the »New Jerusalem.« Celio, the young Italian, abjures both worldly pleasures and the illuminating force of religion, and feels an indefinite yearning »Some other world to find« (38). The solution to find some »unexplored rich ground« for his intellectual and spiritual aspirations presents itself in America: »Some other world: well, there's the New« (39, italics in the original). However, Celio denies this possibility as »joyless and ironic« (39), and exposes as illusory the idea that the newness of the New World exempts her from the pitfalls of history:

Brave things! Sun rising in the west;  
And bearded centuries but gone  
For ushers to the beardless one.  
Nay, nay; your future's too sublime:  
The Past, the Past in half the time,  
The proven half. (39)

Celio's words resonate with Bishop George Berkeley's 1726 poem »On the Prospect of Planting Arts and Learning in America.« The poem's argument, an adaptation of the earlier idea of *translation imperii et studii*, predicts »The rise of Empire and the Arts« (qtd. in Freese, 1996, 272) on the continent yet unaffected by the corruption and failures of Europe. Celio, however, claims that historical experience cannot be erased, nor can the »virgin sphere« become a site of a new beginning.

In the period during and after the Civil War, Melville was preoccupied with the failure of America to grasp her historical chance to redeem the accumulated wrongs of civilization. With the political and economic stabilization following the conflict, certain elements of the Victorian belief in progress and imperial expansion as well as the sense of mission not only persisted, but gained momentum or excelled in American culture. The most powerful denunciation of the ideals and aspirations of the Gilded Age in *Clarel* comes from Ungar, a veteran of the Civil War and an ex-officer of the Confederate army who joins the pilgrims on their way from Mar Saba to Bethlehem. Melville portrays him as a half-Cherokee and an Anglo-Catholic Southerner, exempting him from the cultural biases of New England Protestantism. The lucid and disillusioned Southerner does not share – and

is in fact, critical of – the millennial view of America as the New Jerusalem, American exceptionalism, and the Whig view of history as gradual development until the unfolding of modern liberal values. Also, Ungar exposes American expansionism of the mid-century from the standpoint of its victims. The almost mythical aura with which some late Victorian historians, Charles Kingsley, Sir Charles Dilke and Edward A. Freeman surrounded the Anglo-Saxons or »Teutons« (see Bowler 56–61) finds its counterpart in Ungar's rage against British and Anglo-American empire building:

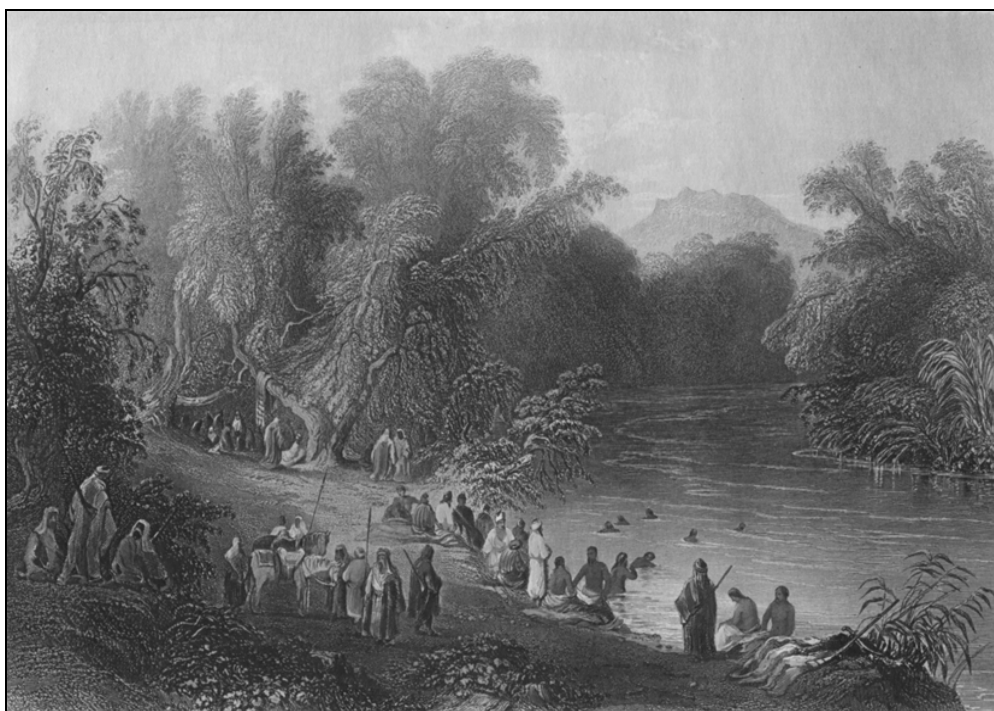
The Anglo-Saxons, lacking grace  
To win the love of any race;  
Hated my myriads dispossessed  
Of rights–The Indians East and West.  
These pirates of the sphere! Grave looters [...]  
Deflower the world's last sylvan glade! (413)

The criticism articulated by one of the deepest and darkest thinkers in *Clarel* is directed against both nations' imperial expansion on sea and land. However, it is hard to say which of the sentiments expressed by Ungar is more poignant: his revolt over the ravaging effects of the westward expansion over the indigenous populations of the continent, or his sorrow over the loss of illusions about America as mankind's last historical chance for a new beginning. The Anglo-American characters, as perhaps Melville himself, seem to identify more with the latter. The pilgrims listening to Ungar quietly acknowledge the loss of all spiritual and moral potential of democratic institutions, and finally acknowledge the failure of the American collective mission: »No New World for mankind remains!« (461). Such an unsparing critical focus in *Clarel* on the European and American historical experience is an expression of Melville's increasing disappointment in the political developments of ante- and post-bellum United States. His poem presents Jerusalem, the holy city of Judeo-Christian culture as a »wreck,« and suggests that the political ideals of the United States are tragically compromised. Having witnessed decades of political turmoil that spanned through the momentous middle decades of the nineteenth century as well as the devastating Civil War, Melville was compelled to question with equal severity, the more general Victorian ideal of progress and the more specific American ideal of democracy and political freedom.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

The suggestive sea imagery of *Clarel* is in concordance with Melville's symbolic treatment throughout his major fiction of the sea as a correlative of the depths of consciousness. In *Mardi*, Taji's final, perilous plunge into the sea represents his deepest immersion into the world of the mind. In *Moby-Dick*, Ishmael's ontological





**Fig. 2: The River Jordan (Greek Bathing Place). Drawn by W. H. Bartlett, engraved by C. Cousen, published about 1870. Steel engraved print with recent hand colour. [Http://coastdaylight.com/prints/print-d4192.html](http://coastdaylight.com/prints/print-d4192.html) (James E. Lancaster collection, used by permission).**

**Slika 2: Reka Jordan (grško kopališče). Ilustrator: W. H. Bartlett, vrezovalec: C. Cousen, objavljeno l. 1870. Jeklozez, nedavno ročno obarvan odtis. [Http://coastdaylight.com/prints/print-d4192.html](http://coastdaylight.com/prints/print-d4192.html) (zbirka Jamesa E. Lancastra, uporaba z dovoljenjem).**

and epistemological exploration targets the ocean, »the dark side of this earth« (424), in order to bring to surface versions of truth concerning the nature of divinity, man, and the natural world. Later, in the short fiction of *The Piazza Tales* the attributes of the sea converge with those that formerly belonged to land: water becomes an element that impedes rather than brings about knowledge. In »Benito Cereno« the misty air and the gray, opaque sea water envelop a world full of indiscernible secrets. »The Encantadas« features a group of islands that form a microcosm of abandonment, hopelessness, and the essential evil principle that lies at the core of the physical universe.

*Clarel*, this ambitious novel in verse, is set on land, one of the most ancient sites of Judeo-Christian civilization. However, Melville applies images of the sea and

sailing as vehicles for intellectual exploration and historical analysis. Through a distinctive narrative voice and a sailor's register he re-creates, perhaps, an image of himself as an unimpassioned observer of his time. The narrator of *Clarel* is, maybe, an Ishmael grown old: the young intellectual is transformed into a painfully wise old artist whose relation of the journey in the Holy Land reflects the experience of a life spent in spiritual inquiries. This life is Melville's, the sailor-author's, who made several attempts to create the map of the world he was living in. In *Clarel*, his late masterpiece, he explored the quandaries of mid- and late nineteenth century America, Euro-American Victorian culture, the failure of an ideal of a New World, of a »New Jerusalem« that initially held up the hope to become better than the »Old.«

## O VODAH IN PUŠČAVAH. PODOBE VODE V PESMI CLAREL HERMANA MELVILLA

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## POVZETEK

V zimi med letoma 1856 in 1857 je ameriški dramatik Herman Melville med potovanjem po Sredozemlju, Levantu in Palestini v dnevnik zapisal svoje vtise, ki so bili kasneje predelani v pripovedno pesem z naslovom *Clarel: A Poem and Pilgrimage in the Holy Land* (1876). Filozofska pesem obravnava vprašanja, povezana s procesom intelektualne, gospodarske in družbene modernizacije v Ameriki po državljanski vojni in med obdobjem obnove. S postavitvijo pesmi v Palestino, zgodovinsko mesto svetopisemske obljubljenе dežele, Melville ponovno ovrednoti ameriško zgodovino od njenih začetkov, ko so puritanski kolonisti z naseljevanjem in osvajanjem želeli zgraditi Novi Jeruzalem in ustvariti močan celinski imperij. Večina Melvillovih zgodnejših del je zgrajena na principu morske plovbe in raziskuje položaj in vlogo Združenih držav na prizorišču svetovne zgodovine in politike. Članek se osredotoča na način, kako Melville v pesmi *Clarel* uporablja podobe in simboliko vode ter register jadrnanja in morske plovbe za opis sušne pokrajine Palestine in neobljudenih območij svetopisemske zgodovine. Vseprisotnost podob, povezanih z vodo v njenih najrazličnejših oblikah – morje, reke, potoki, vodometi in celo hlapi, je izraz Melvillovega nenavadnega in alternativnega pogleda na Sveto deželo, ki kljubuje in celo nasprotuje uveljavljenim predstavam o tej deželi kot ikoni judovsko-krščanske duhovnosti in zgodovine. Vztrajnost podob morja v pesmi Melvillovo pripoved o potovanju po Sveti deželi preoblikuje v filozofsko raziskovanje evro-ameriškega pojmovanja civilizacije. Najznačilnejši elementi pokrajine, puščava in vseprisotni pesek, pridobijo pomen, ki je enak oceanu in vodi. Redke, vendar kulturno pomembne vode v puščavi Judeje, reka Jordan, Mrtvo morje ter majhen vodnjak pri samostanu Mar Saba, igrajo pomembno vlogo pri izražanju pogleda na vero in zgodovino. Članek prikazuje, kako Melville s pomočjo intelektualnega ogleda Svete dežele bralce spominja, da je viktorijansko obdobje prineslo izzive temeljnim idejam Judo-Krščanstva, duhovnega in ideološkega temelja evro-ameriške civilizacije.

**Ključne besede:** Herman Melville, Palestina, potovanje po Sveti deželi, judovsko-krščanska kultura, simbolika vode in puščave, zgodovina ZDA devetnajstega stoletja, ameriško viktorijansko obdobje

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