

# “Schooled by the Inhuman Sea”: Maritime Imagination and the Discourses of Emancipation in Herman Melville’s *Clarel*

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“...the prairie was to John Marr a reminder of ocean.”  
Herman Melville (*Published Poems* 197)

On the 4<sup>th</sup> of June 1839, the twenty-year-old Herman Melville signed on board the merchant ship *St. Lawrence* as a deck hand for a trip to Liverpool: his family fortunes were so disastrous that he may well have felt in a mood not dissimilar to Ishmael’s in the famous incipit of *Moby-Dick*. The sea might have been Herman’s “substitute for pistol and ball” (*Moby-Dick* 3), but most importantly, it eventually launched his career as a writer, providing him with a “mighty theme” (*Moby-Dick* 456) and inspiring his major literary works. In a period when America was not ready for cultural and religious relativity, Melville had the unique possibility of living for weeks with a tribe of natives in the Marquesas; from this experience, as Hershel Parker states, he “gained a permanent, instinctive sense of cultural relativity, whether Polynesian, Christian, Muslim, the Greek and Roman of myth and history” (xxiii). No wonder that he would thenceforth regard the sea as a personal as well as national myth of equality, freedom and emancipation.

In 1856, seventeen years after his first passage, an ill and disillusioned Melville entrusted the manuscript of his last novel, *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade* (1857) to his brother Allan and embarked on a journey to the Middle East; after

his return he completely abandoned fiction and thought of himself as a poet. From then on, except for *Billy Budd, Sailor*, written at the end of his life and published posthumously, he wrote exclusively verses. If the first sea voyages made Melville a famous novelist, the disappointing journey to the Middle East, and then the Civil War, made him a poet.

Through its eighteen thousand verses divided in four parts, *Clarel: A Poem and Pilgrimage in the Holy Land* (1876) chronicles the journey of a group of pilgrims traveling from Jerusalem to Bethlehem and back. Melville used the ancient *topos* of the pilgrimage in order to meditate on contemporary religious, social and political issues, as well as to reflect in a meta-fictional vein on his own literary career. In *Clarel* his early autobiographical sea-narratives and his later philosophical meditations come together in a significant and original way.

The aim of this essay is to read *Clarel* as Melville's most mature reflection on issues related to democracy and emancipation in the United States. Most importantly, I argue that Melville significantly structured *Clarel* as a sailor's narrative, originally adapting the popular devices of sea-writing to versification in order to bridge the gap between his early fiction and his later poetry. Finally, considering Melville's lifelong engagement with autobiographical narratives and maritime references, I propose to read *Clarel* as the author's poetic pilgrimage to offset the excessive autobiographical impulse of his early fiction, in order to gain an artistic, as well as a personal, emancipation.

Besides its obvious commercial importance, the sea in America is inevitably linked with the Atlantic slave trade. Melville's writing career as a novelist—from 1846 to 1857—coincided with years of mounting social and political tension, especially with regard to the “peculiar institution” of the slave trade. Questions related to democracy and freedom, slavery and emancipation, have been a constant underlying preoccupation throughout Melville's writing. In 1849 he visited Paris and was appalled by the prospect of rebellious masses; the Year of Revolution impressed Melville so much that he inserted into the dense plot of *Mardi* (1849) a bitter commentary on the violent outcome of democratic revolutions; significantly enough, the allegorical novel overtly reveals Melville's anti-slavery attitudes, when a character states that “Humanity cries out against this vast enormity”; and though “not one man knows a prudent remedy,” Melville admonishes his contemporaries: “Blame not, then, the North; and wisely judge the South” (*Mardi* 534). When *Typee* (1846) and *Omoo* (1847) were published, they were criticized because of Melville's harshly explicit descriptions of the missionaries' treatments of natives in the name of an alleged process of civilization. Moreover, many critics have been aware that *Moby-Dick* is, among other things, an allegory about a multiracial nation that has lost its way, so that at least one critic saw Melville's whole career as “an ongoing inquiry into the tangled relations of race, sea-faring and modern society” (Benesch 72).

The outbreak of the Civil War confirmed Melville's worst fears and provided him with a sustained poetic theme. In fact, he was less concerned about the

war than about the problems of Reconstruction and the reconciliation between North and South. *Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War* was published in 1866; probably the very next year Melville began working on *Clarel*, a long narrative poem the writing process of which was a pilgrimage in itself, as the full title intimates.

When *Clarel* was published on June, 3<sup>rd</sup> 1876, it passed completely unnoticed. America was celebrating the one-hundredth anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence as an occasion for writers to discuss national political and historical issues. A Centennial Exposition was held in Philadelphia, attended by ten million visitors. Among them was an unenthusiastic Herman Melville, who in a letter to his cousin casually mentioned his visit: "By the way, I was there yesterday—went & returned same day; you will be much impressed with it; it is immense—a sort of tremendous Vanity Fair" (*Correspondence* 447). Not surprisingly, the fair did not impress the writer of *Clarel*; the poem is mostly an "un-Centennial production" (Buell 139) and it stands apart from any patriotic celebration. Marrs describes it as "a poetic Declaration of Dependence" (103), while for Hershel Parker *Clarel* is Melville's "skeptical testament about the state of the country . . . , a counterdemonstration against public self-congratulation" (Parker xxv). Carolyn Karcher even goes so far as to state that *Clarel* "writes the epitaph of Melville's democratic faith" (Karcher 287). If in *Mardi*, as Walter E. Bezanson argues, Melville "had warned of dangers confronting a democracy in which he felt a stake, in *Clarel* he stood hostile to the whole spirit of the age" (607).

One of *Clarel's* recurrent themes is a postwar meditation on the national destiny in light of the ill-fated democratic revolutions of the nineteenth century. Emancipation is a recurrent motif in the poem, especially in part four, called "Bethlehem," where the characters, more than in any other part, engage in long debates over the past, present, and future of democracy. But before focusing on the peculiar character of Ungar, who explicitly introduces the discourses of race and slavery, it is important to assess another crucial theme of the poem, the one linked to the maritime imagination.

The few reviewers who wrote about *Clarel* when it was published basically agreed that it "should have been written in prose" (Higgins and Parker 585). Those who actually read the poem compared it to Melville's early sea-narratives: the anonymous reviewer of *Lippincott's Magazine* acknowledged "some good images and metaphors, especially those drawn from Mr. Melville's old sea-life" (Higgins and Parker 539), and he described the pilgrims' journey "as fanciful in its incidents and personages as those former voyages to the island of the Pacific or Southern seas" (539). Such a comparison was more accurate than one may imagine at first sight, because the text justifies it in several ways.

I argue that *Clarel* has many things in common with a sailor's narrative. In her work on first-person nonfictional narratives by antebellum American seamen, Hester Blum states that "the structure of sea writing is circular, as the narratives end, naturally enough, where they begin: in port" (14). So it is with *Clarel*, as the narrator remarks at the end of his journey: "At last, Jerusalem! 'Twas thence /

They started—thither they return, / Rounding the waste circumference” (IV.29 11-13, 482). Moreover, Blum goes on, “sailors are concerned with describing the places and people they encounter only to a secondary degree; the main impetus of their narratives is to describe the local culture of the ship, as well as its material demands” (13). Likewise, characters in *Clarel* converse about religion, science, politics, and personal histories, while the places they see acquire meaning only insofar as they trigger the conversation and provide the speakers with visual and symbolic counterparts. Lastly, in a sea-narrative the impetus for the youth’s choice to go to sea “lies in hearing or reading tales of maritime adventure,” but during the journey “the novice seaman finds that his romantic ideas of seeing the world from a ship are betrayed” (Blum 13); at the beginning of his pilgrimage the student Clarel reveals a similar state of mind, when he states: “Needs be my soul, / Purged by the desert’s subtle air / From bookish vapors . . . Come likewise now to consciousness” (I.1 66-70, 5).

Besides, though the only actual sea that the pilgrims encounter on their journey is the Dead Sea, *Clarel* is full of maritime references. The ocean is persistently used as an analogy for the wilderness, the desert is described in maritime terms, and the sea symbolism is a recurring metaphor sustained throughout the book. Bezanson singles out more than one hundred thirty nautical words in the poem and he states that “the consistency with which this analogy unrolls throughout the narrative is astonishing, and at first, grotesque” (583). “The effect of such abundant sea references,” concludes Bezanson, “is to create the fragments at least of a second voyage—by sea, to parallel the one by land” (586).

Rolfe, considered by critics as Melville’s alter-ego in the poem, is an ex-mariner, while Agath, a crucial character who appears in part three, is an old timeoneer, like his author “schooled by the inhuman sea.” However, all characters are castaways of some kind, outcasts from society, *isolatoes*, alienated from their country or disenchanting by politics or religion. “Wreck, ho!—the wreck” (IV.1 187, 388) Agath cries out when he first sights Jerusalem, as if it was a sunken ship; and the pilgrims come to the convent at Bethlehem like “shipwrecked men adrift” (IV.7 1, 406). According to Bezanson, Melville uses the sea imagery “to complement and extend the meanings of the wilderness image” (586), but, obviously, there is more to it than that. In *Clarel* the many references to the sea are often more or less explicitly tied up with a bitter criticism of democracy and emancipation.

In his works Melville often describes the ship at sea as a microcosm, a utopian space cutting across the boundaries of race and class. If American society is a ship led by a madman and headed for disaster, than Clarel and his fellow travelers are its castaways. The crew of the *Pequod* survived, and fled to the desert. They came to the Holy Land in search of atonement, to regain their faith, to escape the injustice of the world—in one way or another, to find freedom. “As places of freedom and solitude,” Auden famously wrote, “the sea and the desert are symbolically the same” (18-19).

At the beginning of the poem, the student Clarel “broods alone” in an old, dark, claustrophobic hotel room in Jerusalem, that is “Much like a tomb new-cut in stone” (I.1 1-3, 3). There is a strong contrast between his present mood and that of the day before, when he was at sea: “Not thus it was but yesterday / Off Jaffa on the clear blue sea; / Nor thus, my heart, it was with thee / Landing amid the shouts and spray” (I.1 27-30, 4). This is the first of the poem’s many sea images, and it is linked to the joy of exploration and discovery, the innocence of youth, and nostalgia for past freedom. The sea is in sharp contrast to the present situation of physical and symbolical barrenness, where there is no water.

Throughout the poem the sea is a powerful image—always vigorous, though sometimes violent and merciless—but only *in absentia*: it is only recalled, narrated in a story, evoked as a symbol or compared to something else. On the contrary, when the characters arrive on its shores, the sea is not much different from the desert: it is, literally, dead. Melville described the Dead Sea in his journal as follows: “foam on beach & pebbles like slaver of mad dog—smarting bitter of the water,—carried the bitter in my mouth all day—bitterness of life—thought of all bitter things—Bitter is it to be poor & bitter, to be reviled, & Oh bitter are these waters of Death, thought I” (*Journals* 83). And the narrator uses even harsher terms when he describes “the liquid waste” (*Clarel* II.29 29, 231; II.39 40, 258) in the poem’s second part, called “The Wilderness.” More than the sea, what is deadly is the absence of the sea: the Siddim Plain is seen as the sea-bed of a withdrawn ocean, and the Dead Sea is first represented through negations: “No gravel bright nor shell was seen, / Nor kelpy growth nor coralline” (II.29 23-24, 231).

Most significantly, in *Clarel* the Dead Sea is linked with the disastrous outcome of violent political revolutions. As Melville knew, this is the site of the biblical Sodom and Gomorrah, which aligned with other cities of the plain to rebel against Elamite rule, and waged war in the Vale of Siddim, until they were defeated by Elam’s king, and were eventually destroyed by Divine Intervention for their sins. It is no coincidence that the key figure in the second part is Mortmain, a Swede who served as a revolutionary leader in Paris and who has given up all hope of social reform. He moves to the edge of the Dead Sea and tastes its bitter waters in defiance. His gesture is a prelude to his ritual descent toward political, philosophical, and religious despair—the “bitterness of life” described by Melville in his journal. Directly addressing the sea in a long monologue, he says: “Nay, nay, thou sea, / ‘Twas not all carnal harlotry, / But sins refined, crimes of the spirit, / Helped earn that doom ye here inherit” (II.36 42-44, 250). Then, among the crimes inherited by the sea, he lists: “Black slaver steering by a star, / ‘Tis thou—and all like thee in state. / Who knew the world, yet varnished it; / Who traded on the coast of crime / Though landing not” (II.36 76-80, 251). Of course, this is an explicit reference to the slave trade, and not the only one to be found in the poem. The sea is dead also because it bears the mark of the terrible crime of slavery.

Keeping in mind the strong opposites of slavery and emancipation, maritime imagery and aridity, descriptions that make up the poem’s subtext, we can

now focus on Ungar—the predominant figure in part four—one of Melville’s representative American figures and, arguably, his most striking and original character. Described in the poem as “A wandering Ishmael from the West” (IV.10 186, 419), Ungar is a contradictory figure, constructed as “an amalgam of virtually every exploitative incident in American expansionist history” (Barca 26): he is a soldier descended in part from an Anglo-Catholic family that arrived in Maryland with the first settlers; Cherokee blood runs through his veins—he has “An Anglo brain, but Indian heart” (IV.5 140, 403); he is a Confederate veteran who after the defeat of the South moved to the Middle East and fought as a mercenary for the Ottoman empire. Yet, though slavery was common among the Cherokees even prior to European contact—and more than seven percent of Cherokee families owned slaves up to the eighteen-sixties—, Ungar hates slavery: “spite the prejudice of kin / And custom, he with friends could be / Outspoken in his heart’s belief / That holding slaves was aye a grief— / The system an iniquity / In those who plant it and begin” (IV.5 145-150, 403).

Though not explicitly linked with the sea, the narrator introduces Ungar just after Agath has finished telling the pilgrims a story about an unnamed barren, volcanic island which still haunts him, very similar to the ones described by Melville in “The Encantadas.” The reader has the uncanny feeling that Ungar springs directly from such an oxymoron: an arid and hellish island in the midst of the abundance of the Pacific. According to Bezanson, Ungar is linked to Agath and Mortmain, representing “the final phase of the monomaniac sequence” of characters (633), but he is also “very close to Melville’s own sensibility” (634).

In his harsh criticism of the “Dark Ages of Democracy” (IV.21 138, 460), Ungar describes democracy in terms similar to Mortmain’s (and Melville’s), as an “eternal hacking” (IV.19 118, 452), a “Harlot on horseback” (IV.19 135, 452), and the “Arch strumpet of an impious age” (IV.19 138, 452). He laments the debasement of democracy in contemporary America and warns against the dangers of demagoguery and populism, envisioning “Myriads playing pygmy parts— / Debased into equality” (IV.21 127-128, 460). Rolfe had already predicted that “men / Get tired at last of being free—” (II.26 123-124, 222). As we know, Melville’s distrust of the mob tempered his faith in democracy, but if Ungar literally embodies American political and ethnical controversies, the nation’s history of oppression and at the same time its yearning for freedom and emancipation, then through his character Melville struck a crucial chord in the nation’s history, forecasting the future struggles for civil rights and the racial issues of the twentieth century.

After having engaged in endless debates and countered the contrasting opinions of his fellow travelers, at the end of his *Via Crucis* Clarel is fatally drowning in the sea-desert of his doubts. Instead of finding an answer, the youth ends up in a situation of martyrdom and passion, his future more uncertain than before his pilgrimage—just like the question of the emancipation of the ex-slaves after the Civil War. The poem ends with the narrator’s paternal exhortation to Clarel, “like a swimmer rising from the deep” (IV.35 30, 499): “Emerge thou mayst from the

last whelming sea, / And prove that death but routs life into victory" (IV.35 33-34, 499). If we take into account the Latin origins of the word "emancipation"—"ex manu capere"—we understand that in *Clarel* the hand is not only that of the freed slave, but also of the drowning castaway who desperately calls for help. Like a compassionate father, the narrator exhorts the pilgrim to hold out his hand, so that he could still find victory, and defeat death. Despite its dark implications and possible distortions, Melville seems to imply, only emancipation can hold out hope for the future.

In much the same way, banished from the sea of his youth, relegated to a small office during his stints as a customs inspector, and self-exiled to his study at home, Melville began his own literary pilgrimage in the desert, as a different (and yet, as Auden points out, "symbolically the same") substitute for pistol and ball: in this sense, all the pilgrims of *Clarel* are impersonations of their author, and the desert, like the sea in his earlier works, is an objective correlative of his own "moral landscape." In this sense, it is important, as Bezanson first noted, that the poem's last lines echo Melville's family motto "Denique Coelum": Heaven at Last. Not only is the nation's freedom and the slaves' emancipation at stake in the poem, or poetry's emancipation from the progress and degradation of contemporary prose, but Melville's own emancipation as well; with a secure job as customs inspector, he was finally free from the necessity of selling his works in order to pay the bills.

*Clarel* signaled Melville's emancipation from the publishing industry as well, since the poem was published privately, thanks to a generous gift from his uncle Peter Gansevoort. Most importantly, *Clarel* represents Melville's narrative emancipation from the sea-prose of his past—a choice that proved disastrous for "the man who lived among the cannibals," in that it definitively sank his reputation; but such is the price of emancipation: his poem and his pilgrimage set him free, at last.

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