

## The Skeptical Pilgrim: Melville's *Clarel*

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In October, 1856, Herman Melville left the tinted hills of Pittsfield, Mass., for a lengthy excursion to Europe and the Holy Land. Just 37 years old, Melville was a half-broken man. He suffered from headaches, sciatica, eyestrain, crushed hopes—in a word, burnout. His epic *Moby-Dick* had failed to catch on in 1851, and his next novel, *Pierre: or, The Ambiguities*, was head-scratching at best, a laughingstock at worst. Subsequent short stories were tepidly received. Earlier in '56 Melville had been able to squeeze out a final novel, *The Confidence-Man*, which was his tenth work of prose in 13 years. The novel is a string of disjointed vignettes about hypocrisy and flimflam, a bitter rosary to brood on. The swashbuckler of the South Seas, the prodigy who had produced *Typee* and *Omoo*, was in the past. Herman Melville had pretty much decided to give up writing.

The trip was proposed and largely underwritten by his father-in-law, who worried, along with everyone in the family, about Herman's physical and mental health. But if Melville's spirit was half-broken, the other half awakened when he was on his own again at sea, where he'd always been comfortable. The first entry in his maritime journal was: "Conversations with the Colonel on fixed fate &c. during the passage". The conversational matter (with one G. C. Rankin, an anti-Christian polemicist) indicates his mixed state of mind at this period and also the philosophizing that more than any

other factor had eroded and killed Melville's popularity with American readers. "Fixed fate" refers to a line in Milton's *Paradise Lost* about the paradoxes of "fixed fate, free-will, foreknowledge absolute" within the Puritan matrix of faith. On the one hand, a person's moral fate, her ending in heaven or hell, was predetermined, and only God knew the outcome for sure. On the other hand, God in creating human beings had granted them freedom to choose. There was a ray of light for human agency. How, therefore, was one to act in life?

Melville, we know, liked nothing better than to wade into these waters with a glass or two (or three) of whiskey, but the stakes were high—not for him the sanctimonious talk or what he called the "parrot-lore" of conventional piety. Although the slant and depth of his religious convictions have been long debated, no critic doubts that Melville was obsessed with the *implications* of religion. Thus Athens, Rome, and the other places on his to-do list were all very fine, but the Holy Land was where the writer meant to find certain things out, certain things about faith. The impressions he filed away of his brief stay in Palestine would lead to his most ambitious and difficult work, the narrative poem *Clarel*, published 20 years after the voyage. On the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Melville's birth some readers maintain—well, a lonely few dare say—that the pilgrimage poem is also Melville's greatest work. *Clarel* is 18,000 lines long, the longest skein of verse in American literature, and as knotty as the pasture pines of Pittsfield.

Melville stopped first at Liverpool, where his friend and mentor Nathaniel Hawthorne was serving as the American consul.

Hawthorne's record of the Liverpool visit is justly famous and proleptically captures one of the concerns of *Clarel*. After walking for a while on the beach the two writers sat down and talked. "Melville, as he always does, began to reason of Providence and futurity, and of everything that lies beyond human ken, and informed me that he 'pretty much made up his mind to be annihilated'; but still he does not seem to rest in that anticipation; and, I think, will never rest until he gets hold of a definite belief....It is strange how he persists—and has persisted ever since I knew him, and probably long before—in wandering to-and-fro over these deserts, as dismal and monotonous as the sand hills amid which we were sitting." On the spectrum between atheism and devotion Hawthorne situated Melville to the left, toward unbelief, but one may argue just as well that a non-believer would not care what happened to him after he died. Melville's gloomy expectation of "annihilation" was shorthand for being sentenced to hell—deservedly.

Shipboard into the Mediterranean: Melville seemed to brighten with the warming winter sun. Passing through the Greek islands, he spent some days exploring Constantinople, and was greatly stimulated by the mosques, fortifications, esplanades, and barges. Also the seediness and bustle in the streets of the Ottoman capital made him anxious; he clutched his wallet against pickpockets and sought the highest ground and most sweeping views. He surveyed the formerly Christian city from its topmasts, as it were.

Thence to Alexandria and his first taste of the sands of the Middle East. The Pyramids bowled Melville over. His journal

sputters, stops, and starts again as he strives to make sense of the mysterious structures. He decided they were the preternatural afterbirth of Jehovah, the signs of a God who had issued from the imagination of ancient Egyptian priests, but “for no holy purpose....Terrible mixture of cunning and awful.” Climbing as was his wont to the top of a pyramid, he compared the desert at its base with an immense ocean billow that would not break, and he became dizzy and frightened. From this moment onward the unfeeling vastness of the sea, which Melville knew well, and of the desert were married in his poetic vocabulary. As the poet Helen Vendler observed: “In the desert, as in the sea, human scale is lost, and the mind grapples for a larger scale by which to measure both life and thought.”

Notwithstanding its historical importance, the desert was deeply dismaying to Melville. In his journal and later in the lengthy poem Melville speculates that God’s embrace had squeezed the life and greenery out of the landscape, leaving stones and desolation as the environmental cost of faith. It is due to comments like these that many Melvillians think the author irreligious. Exhibit A in their analysis of his work is the ungodly Captain Ahab raging on the deck on that rival sea, but they overlook the earnest, prolix pilgrims who contend with one another in the wasteland of *Clarel*.

The full title is *Clarel: A Poem and Pilgrimage in the Holy Land*. Before taking up its scheme, we should consider that Melville, cantering with a guide into Jerusalem in January, 1857, arrived at a time of fervent European and American interest in Palestine. The Ottoman Turks who controlled the region had opened up the holy

places to the West, largely as a political gesture. Though Holy Land tourism is popular in the present day too, it lacks the intellectual dedication and moneyed curiosity of the 19<sup>th</sup> century expeditionaries. Among the prominent Americans who came were Mark Twain, Ulysses S. Grant, and the young Teddy Roosevelt; European luminaries were Chateaubriand, Disraeli, Thackeray, Flaubert, and Gogol. Beginning in the 1830s, the travel accounts spawned guidebooks that inspired more people to undertake the trip. This was not leisure travel. Gritty and, outside the towns, lawless, the Holy Land all but guaranteed an adventure. Yet the travelogues hewed to the beaten paths so predictably that in 1852 a British newspaper grouched: "Oh! Another book about the East. If you've read one, you've read them all. The same Arabs, the same camels...." Melville's journalizing was terse, jagged, and intended only for himself. When he got home, a couple of his relatives were bewildered when he wrote nothing up about Palestine.

There is a subset of Holy Land literature that we may call sacred geography. Christians, many of them clerics, and especially Protestants, who tended to treat the Bible as factually accurate text, journeyed here in order to corroborate names and places that had emotional meaning for them. It is a powerful thing to have a religious place put into one's mind perhaps in childhood, and to hear it addressed over and over in church, this shrine or village anchoring events humdrum or passion-filled, and later for one to resolve to see that site in person, in the hope, finally, of divining its meaning. The pilgrim, for that's who we are, seeks a peculiar kind of gratification in the one corner of faith that's tangible. The especially

erudite pilgrims, for example the Anglican priest Henry Baker Tristram, who visited Palestine in 1863, applied their knowledge of the Bible not simply to the shrines but also to the geological and biological features of the Holy Land. The skeptical era of Darwin and Comte having begun, pilgrims like Tristram labored to reconcile the truths of Scripture with contemporary science.

Herman Melville would pick up on all these currents later—but for now in his journal he tried to steady himself as Jerusalem’s sights, sounds, and smells buffeted his sensibilities:

“In pursuance of my object, the saturation of my mind with the atmosphere of Jerusalem, offering myself up a passive subject, and no unwilling one, to its melancholy [sic] weird impressions, I always rose at dawn & walked without the walls. Not so far as escaping the pent-up air within, was concerned was I singular here.”

*“Thoughts in the Via Dolorosa—women panting under burdens—men with melancholy faces.”*

“The city besieged by army of the dead—ceteries all around.—”

“The mind cannot but be sadly and & suggestively affected with the indifference of Nature & Man to all that makes the spot sacred to the Christian. Weeds grow upon Mount Zion; side by side in impartiality appear the shadows of church & mosque, and on Olivet [the Mount of Olives] every morning the sun indifferently ascends over the Chapel of the Ascension.”

“Wandering among the tombs—till I began to think myself one of the possessed with devils.”

“The strange arches, cisterns, &c you come upon about Jerusalem—every day discovered something new in this way.”

“I looked along the hill side of Gihon over against me, & watched the precipitation of the solemn shadows of the city towers flung far down to the bottom of the pool of Gihon [Gihon Spring was the main water source of the ancient city], and higher up the haunted darkened valley my eye rested on the cliff-girt basin, haggard with riven old olives, where the angel of the Lord smote the army of Sennacherib.”

“Inside the walls are many vacant spaces, overgrown with the horrible cactus.”

“The Old Connecticut man wandering about with tracts &c—knew not the language.—hopelessness of it—his lonely bachelor rooms....”

We don't know what Melville had expected of Jerusalem. He seems claustrophobic and at times skirts panic, yet he also keeps a sharp eye out for idiosyncratic human behavior. He must have befriended the “Old Connecticut man” who was passing out religious tracts, or else he could not have known about the man's dour living quarters. The fellow blossoms into a memorable character in *Clarel*, an addled evangelist who rides a donkey to the Dead Sea. In the Old City of Jerusalem today, throngs of natives and foreigners make a hugely distracting river of color, but one readily spots the visitors who are not all in their right minds. For instance, the youngish man with Jesus-length blond hair, in bare feet and white robe, who was carrying a cross in Muristan in the Christian Quarter one day in 2011, and who in 2019 was seen attending the Catholic Easter mass

at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre (this time *sans* cross). Israeli psychiatrists have documented many cases of so-called Jerusalem syndrome, whereby tourists become dehydrated and disoriented, and overwhelmed with emotion, and in more serious cases an incipient psychosis erupts, such that the pilgrims claim to be biblical figures. Scores of people have to be treated every year; usually they recover rapidly or at least become well enough to be sent home. Fundamentalist American Protestants appear to be most at risk for developing Jerusalem syndrome; we may speculate why another time. “It is an odd fact that many Americans who arrive at Jerusalem are either lunatics or lose their mind thereafter,” remarked Rev. J. E. Hanauer, an Englishman who grew up in the city during the late 1800s and wrote guidebooks.

Melville returned more than once to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. It was and still is a confusing, cavernous amalgam of theme park and holy of holies. The putative site of Christ’s tomb lies only yards from the putative site of the Crucifixion, just two of the shrines enclosed within the domed space. Christianity’s schismatic denominations have carved out zones in the church where each practices its rites. The leading officiants are the Greek Orthodox, the Roman Catholics, and the Armenian Apostolics, with lesser roles for the Syriacs, Copts, and Ethiopians. The Catholic Church is the sole representative of Western Christianity; the others are Eastern Orthodox. On many days it’s hard to know where to turn. As competing liturgies and processions snake through the pilgrims and gawkers, incense wafts, cell phones swivel and flash, and tourist guides strain to be heard in a dozen languages.

Melville's strongest comment about the Church of the Holy Sepulchre was: "...a sort of plague-stricken splendor reigns in the painted and mildewed walls....All is glitter and nothing is gold. A sickening cheat". The American was repulsed by the hucksters and hawkers, the successors to the money-changers who had infuriated Jesus. More importantly, he could not accept—and frankly it's impossible for a thinking person to accept—that Christ's body was pulled down from a wooden cross that three centuries later the emperor's mother dug up just over there, at Golgotha, its grim rock conveniently at hand, and that his body was laid to rest in a cave that once was located just over here. The miraculous reappearances of the cross and burial cave prime the true believer for the even more miraculous disappearance: that of the Resurrection. Permitted one by one, the worshipers duck inside the Edicule, the marbled tomb. Melville was stung by the artifice and hocus-pocus, "the ineloquence of the bedizened slab...like entering a lighted coffin". But why then did he keep coming back?

After a few days he joined a horse party and ventured into the desert. With Arab guides and armed guards, he and his companions went down to Jericho and the Dead Sea and returned to Jerusalem by way of the renowned Mar Saba monastery and Bethlehem. It was a standard, three-day, Holy Land loop of some 30 miles in all. Melville's journal actively disparages the landscape: "Barrenness of Judea: Whitish mildew pervading whole tracts of landscape—bleached—leprosy—encrustation of curse—old cheese—bones of rocks,—crunched, knawed,, & mumbled—mere refuse & rubbish of creation—" And: "Judea is one accumulation of stones—Stony

mountains & stony plain; stony torrents & stony roads; stony walls & stony fields, stony houses & stony tombs; stony eyes & stony hearts. Before you, & behind you are stone. Stones to right & stones to left.”

The Dead Sea was no better: “—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...Rainbow over Dead Sea—heaven, after all, has no malice against it...” Melville’s report of the water is accurate. Though invitingly clear, the Dead Sea scalds the mouth like acrid chili peppers. But its lovely color seems to have escaped him, a magenta-blue offsetting the rusty mountains of Moab on the eastern shore.

Having stayed two weeks, Melville was bound next for Italy and the softer landscapes of art museums. His overall judgment in sailing away was: “No country will more quickly dissipate romantic expectations than Palestine—particularly Jerusalem.” He was very glad to be through with the place, it appears, though the place was not yet through with him.

Melville told his family members the trip had revived him. If so, his work remained at an impasse. For a few years he tried the lecture circuit, where he expounded on travel, Italian art, and the South Seas, but his heart wasn’t in it. During the Civil War years he wrote a book of poems about the war, not the happiest of material. Except for *Billy Budd*, his posthumously discovered short story,

Melville's writing following his pilgrimage eschewed prose for the constrained format of poetry, its compressions mirroring the squeezes upon his life.

Giving up on country living, Melville moved with his wife, Lizzie, and four children, back to Manhattan in 1863. Money was tight, his drinking was a problem, and Lizzie nearly left him. His 18-year-old son Malcolm committed suicide in 1867. Through connections he got a job on the docks of New York as a customs inspector, a post that he held for 19 years. Six days a week he would check the manifests of ships against their cargos and verify the import duties owed. He became an Ishmael-like figure, "grim about the mouth," in the same haunts where he had introduced Ishmael to readers in 1851. But Melville meanwhile began to buy books about the Levant, and in his free time, unbeknownst to anyone, he started to compose *Clarel*.

The full title is *Clarel: A Poem and Pilgrimage in the Holy Land*. The plot is simple. Clarel (pronounced CLAR-el) is a young seminarian whose faith has faltered. He arrives in Jerusalem. At loose ends, he wanders the holy sights. He joins a circle of three other Americans and an Englishman, who all are older and more confident in their religious beliefs or critiques as the case may be. Separately, Clarel falls in love with an American girl, Ruth, whose Puritan father has converted to Judaism and moved the family to Palestine. The youths' happiness is not to be.

The story unfolds over four parts: "Jerusalem," "The Wilderness," "Mar Saba," and "Bethlehem." The first part introduces the core characters, and the other three sections follow Clarel and a

shifting troupe as they ride on a 10-day peregrination. The passive, lovelorn seminarian has much less to say than the other characters do. We meet Rolfe, thought to be Melville's alter ego, a pilgrim whose strength (and weakness) is to examine issues from many sides; Nehemiah, the aforementioned evangelist; Vine, a magnetic figure who is probably based on Nathaniel Hawthorne; Derwent, a cheery Anglican priest, always considering the Creator in a golden light; Mortmain, a bitter revolutionary; Djalea, a gnomic Muslim; and Margoth, a pick-wielding Jewish geologist who is scornful of the untestable revelations of religion. Ten or so lesser characters are no less distinctive. Not all live to return to the holy city.

The action in the poem is spare while the dialogue dominates. At first we're reminded of the old Western movies where long scenes take place inside a rocking stagecoach. The background out the window, the scrolling mesas and peaks, is not very convincingly attached to the drama inside, since obviously the actors are in a studio. Soon enough, however, Melville's theological ruminations, biblical allusions, and historico-political commentary, dispensed as speaking parts to his cast, *do* connect us to the landscape, whether it is a crumbling edifice in Jerusalem or the bleak Judean wilderness. The monumental landscape of *Clarel* never retreats but crowds right into the stagecoach. This trick cannot succeed unless the poet constructs metaphors tying the interior and exterior scenes together—but if Herman Melville could do one thing really well, it was to construct vigorous, compelling metaphors.

*Clarel*, a baggy monster of a poem, is not for everyone. First, the modern reader must not be discouraged by the staggering

length. She must overlook Melville's occasionally tortured syntax in shaping a rhyme, and hold fast for the relentless beat of his iambic tetrameter: ba-BOOM, ba-BOOM, ba-BOOM, ba-BOOM. Thus, during the pilgrims' ride along the Dead Sea:

Southward they file. 'Tis Pluto's park  
Beslimed as after baleful flood:  
A nitrous, filmed and pallid mud,  
With shrubs to match. Salt specks they mark  
Or mildewed stunted twigs unclean  
Brushed by the stirrup, Stygean green,  
With shrivelled nut or apple small.

The reader must also care about religion. As Melville's characters navigate the fearsome desert, they discuss and question, in no particular order, reason versus faith; the twists and turns in the evolution of monotheism; human suffering and God's tolerance for it; the commonality of the world's creeds; the strangeness of monks; the false allure of America's secular "progress"; the contradictory demands of existing on earth; and much more. It's quite a ride, but again, not everyone is going to be able to complete it. Here is a typical musing by Rolfe on the persistence of the religious instinct, which Melville clothes in a typically marine metaphor:

....Though some be hurled  
From anchor, nor a haven find;  
Not less religion's ancient port,  
Till the crack of doom, shall be resort  
In stress of weather for mankind.  
Yea, long as children feel affright

In darkness, men shall fear a God;  
And long as daisies yield delight  
Shall see His footprints in the sod.  
Is't ignorance? This ignorant state  
Science doth but elucidate—  
Deepen, enlarge. But though 'twere made  
Demonstrable that God is not—  
What then? it would not change this lot:  
The ghost would haunt, nor could be laid.

Melville was intent that his poem should appear during the centennial celebration of the United States. *Clarel* would be his reply to the cap-flinging and self-congratulation of 1876. With funding supplied by an uncle, he commissioned the publication of 350 copies, each issued in two volumes, since a single volume would have been too unwieldy. It landed with a thud, as he strongly sensed it would. “[E]minently adapted for unpopularity,” was his ironic appraisal somewhat later. The reviewers either ignored or objected to the poem, and even after Melville’s literary reputation was revived in the 1920s, the critics looked askance at *Clarel*, almost embarrassed for him, this poor duffer who was worn out by failure. In *American Renaissance*, the 1941 treatise that propelled Melville into the modern age (along with his 1850s peers Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, and Whitman), the Harvard critic F. O. Matthiessen commented, “It would be impossible to say, from the several thousand lines of discussion between the shadowy characters, precisely what Melville himself thought....*Clarel* is practically unreadable because of Melville’s inexplicable choice of rhymed tetrameter as the medium for philosophic meditation.”

But *Clarel* has been gaining ground since at least 1990. New editions of Melville’s poetry have come out, including one this past July [N.B. 2019]. Graduate students in English have found that they can earn a Ph.D. by cultivating one or two of the unplowed acres of Melville’s most sprawling work. As in all great literature, what is old can be made new again. Take the figure of Nathan, Ruth’s father, who acts like a Christian Zionist—he has 21<sup>st</sup> century contemporaries. Specialists in a new thing called “settler-colonial studies” see parallels between the dispossession of American Indians, which *Clarel* remarks on, and the dispossession of current Palestinians. For recognizing and respecting the tribal diversity of the Holy Land, the poet is hailed as a multi-culturalist. Melville frets about the dehumanizing impact of science and technology—welcome to the club!

Still, there’s no avoiding that *Clarel* is a downer. At the end of the poem young Clarel has lost Ruth forever without having gained a deeper hold on his faith. The other characters quietly take their leave of Jerusalem, feeling bad for him. Clarel meanders off into the crowded street. With some effort a positive message may be extracted from the epilogue, which is crafted in more lyrical pentameter:

Then keep thy heart, though yet but ill-resigned—  
Clarel, thy heart, the issues there but mind;  
That like the crocus budding through the snow—  
That like a swimmer rising from the deep—  
That like a burning secret which doth go  
Even from the bosom that would hoard and keep;  
Emerge thou mayst from the last whelming sea,

And prove that death but routs life into victory.

We are not consoled. Resigned to his literary obscurity, Melville has painted his self-portrait earlier, when Rolfe tells a long story about a sea captain. The unnamed captain is full of pride, an exponent of free will. Struck down not once but twice by terrible luck, the man ends his working days as a security guard on the docks, in effect a customs inspector. A model for the story is the real captain whose voyage had inspired *Moby-Dick*. However, in Rolfe's telling two ships are powerfully wrecked, one by a whale, the other by a reef. These must symbolize the novels *Moby-Dick* and *Pierre*, whose back-to-back failures had sent Melville careening toward the Holy Land. And so:

...Came the day  
Dire need constrained the man to pace  
A night patrolman on the quay  
Watching the bales till morning hour  
Through fair and foul. Never he smiled;  
Call him, and he would come; not sour  
In spirit, but meek and reconciled;  
Patient he was, he none withstood;  
Oft on some secret thing would brood.  
He ate what came, though but a crust;  
In Calvin's creed he put his trust;  
Praised heaven, and said that God was good,  
And his calamity but just.