

2016-01-01

Orbic Bards: Religious Liberalism and the Problems of Representation in the Postbellum Works of Walt Whitman and Herman Melville

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ORBIC BARDS: RELIGIOUS LIBERALISM AND THE PROBLEMS OF
REPRESENTATION IN THE POSTBELLUM WORKS OF
WALT WHITMAN AND HERMAN MELVILLE

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2016

ORBIC BARDS: RELIGIOUS LIBERALISM AND THE PROBLEMS OF
REPRESENTATION IN THE POSTBELLUM WORKS OF
WALT WHITMAN AND HERMAN MELVILLE

by

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THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of
The University of Texas at El Paso
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements
for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

English and American Literature
THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

December 2016

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Introduction

Both Herman Melville and Walt Whitman find something spiritual about the poetic contemplation of democracy. There's simply a divinity in it, as is evidenced repeatedly throughout both of their careers. In the first "Knights and Squires" chapter of *Moby-Dick* Melville outlines quite explicitly the divinity of this democratic contemplation. He speaks not of the "undraped spectacle of the valor-ruined man" nor of the "dignity of kings and robes," but he praises that which has "no robed investiture"(118). The dignity of which our narrator speaks is explicitly democratic, and it "radiates without end from God; Himself! The great God absolute! The centre and circumference of all democracy! His omnipresence, our divine equality!"(119). Similarly, in Whitman's 1855 poem that would become *Song of Myself*, he announces his presence as, "Walt Whitman, an American, one of the roughs" (503), and then demands access for all: "Unscrew the locks from the doors! / Unscrew the doors themselves from their jambs!"(506-7). The poet declares, "I speak the password primeval. . . . I give the sign of democracy;/ By God! I will accept nothing which all cannot have their counterpart of on the same terms"(511-2). The juxtaposition of God and Democracy by our authors in these instances is by no means incidental; where Melville foregrounds the essential divinity of all humanity that underpins democracy, the "just Spirit of Equality, which hast spread one royal mantle of humanity over all my kind!" (119), he is speaking from virtually the same camp as Whitman speaking on behalf of the divinity of "long dumb voices," of "slaves," of "prostitutes," and of "deformed persons" (513-5). Both writers are, in the words of Lawrence Buell, thinking of "secular literatures as a legitimate and even rival means of conveying spiritual experience"(167). Indeed, Buell's 1986 chapter on the practice known as "Literary Scripturism" has become something of a commonplace, and rightfully so. He posits, however, at the very beginning of the

chapter that the religiocentric nineteenth century American ethos is owed largely to the “Puritan imprint, which Enlightenment rationalism did not erase” (166). What interests me in the following chapters, though, is the collision, and subsequent negotiations between that rationalism and several densely spiritual post-bellum works by both Melville and Whitman. By placing their voices—through which they work to contextualize the voices of multitudes—in the context of a profound democratic spirituality, which they both ostensibly claim to possess, we are also faced with what I will refer to throughout this paper as “the hearsay problem.” That is to say, in the epochal words of Thomas Paine in *The Age of Reason*, there is an inherent problem with any attempt to record or demonstrate a divine revelation: “It is revelation to the first person only, and *hearsay* to every other, and consequently they are not obliged to believe it” (402). I will continue, borrowing once again from Paine, to illustrate an acute understanding on the parts of both Melville and Whitman, from both poetic and spiritual perspectives that “human language is local and changeable, and is therefore incapable of being used as the means of unchangeable and universal information” (419-20).

Paine’s sentiment seems shared again in *Moby-Dick* in a chapter like “The Whiteness of the Whale” wherein Melville grapples with the ineffability of the whale’s whiteness:

Or is it, that as in essence whiteness is not so much a color as the visible absence of color, and at the same time the concrete of all colors; is it for these reasons that there is such a dumb blankness full of meaning, in a wide landscape of snows—a colorless, all-color of atheism from which we should shrink?”(184-5).

Suggesting an inherent fear, and subsequent need for belief in an immutable syntax, as can be seen in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s account of Melville in Liverpool in 1857: “He can neither believe, nor be comfortable in his unbelief; and he is too honest and courageous not to try to do

one or the other” (*Journals* 628). In 1855, Whitman begins struggling with similarly inarticulable principles as justice, for instance, which he states “is not settled by legislators or laws It is in the soul, / It cannot be varied by statutes any more than love or pride or the attraction of gravity can, / It is immutable . . . it does not depend on majorities or what not come at last before the same passionless and exact tribunal”(50-3). In other words, while Melville and Whitman are both deeply invested in the literary epoch during which, “secular literature acquired greater spiritual legitimacy as the propagation of religion came to be seen as dependent upon verbal artistry and as the record of revelation itself was seen to be a verbal artifact” (Buell, 168), the record of revelation becomes increasingly complicated for these authors.

For a more contemporary example, and one with a more direct bearing on Post Civil War American literatures, the essays of Ralph Waldo Emerson merit consideration alongside the thinking of such rationalists as Paine. In one of his most frequently anthologized and characteristic essays, “The Poet,” Emerson addresses this question of revelation and of representation in some detail. As we also know, this particular essay garnered special attention from Melville, as it is more heavily annotated in his personal copy than the other essays in the *First and Second Series* combined. His notes range from tempered praise and admiration to what can only be interpreted as extreme frustration. In a short passage just before Melville’s first marginal inscription, Emerson spends a bit of time reflecting on the nature of the true poet, finding in him someone who “announces what no man foretold,” and even more significantly, someone who “was present and privy to the appearance which he describes” (9). Shortly thereafter, remaining on the subject of the true poet, Emerson, focusing simply on the technical, lyrical abilities of a young poet who did not possess the abovementioned “presence” nor the ability to “foretell,” he concludes that the young poet is “plainly a contemporary, not an eternal

man”(10). Melville underlined this passage, and wrote in the margin, “a noble expression, with a clear strong meaning”(10). This moment is one of the most clearly reconcilable between the thinking of Emerson and Melville as indicated by the marginalia—For both men the poetic record is subservient to the revelation, to both its relationship to reason and nature. Moreover, both men—in spite of the inherently flawed semiotic system that they are cognizantly using—are clearly interested, like Whitman in *Leaves* and Melville in *Moby-Dick*, in mitigating the “hearsay problem” as much as their respective poetics will allow.

We can see this concern with the “hearsay problem” in Emerson’s work as early as the “Divinity School Address” of 1838, the ideas of which, Joe Webb, notes are “derivative” in their published form “of the controversial deist,” Emerson explicitly warned (516). Indeed, Webb goes so far as to suggest a point that I find essential to my comparison of the spiritual explorations of Melville and Whitman; that is, “on the surface, one man found his God in Reason and the other in Nature, but a close textual analysis shows that for Paine and Emerson Reason and Nature had almost identical meanings” (515). We see this tendency played out at length in both *Moby-Dick* and in *Leaves of Grass*, and furthermore, Whitman biographer David S. Reynolds writes that despite “his professions of faith” Whitman was ultimately “upset by the intermingling of money and religion in America,” a sentiment, Reynolds notes that was shared by both Melville and George Lippard. Other prominent Whitman biographer Jerome Loving points us to three lines in *Song of Myself* where Transcendentalism and Deism seem most clearly to converge: “Divine am I inside and out, and I make holy whatever I touch or am touched from; / The scent of these arm-pits is aroma finer than prayer, / This head is more than churches or bibles or creeds” (142-3). Loving suggests accurately that we “can hear in this last line an echo of the blasphemy of Tom Paine in *The Age of Reason*, but it is partly muffled by the

Transcendentalism of the first line”(195). I would argue, however, that the two movements compliment one another, illustrating how the Deist and the Transcendentalist can collapse into one another, illustrating Webb’s suggestion that Nature and Reason are, in fact, the same thing.

Moreover, I suggest in the following chapter that only through this poetics of Nature and Reason, are the authors able to grapple with the problems they see in their contemporary religious and civil institutions, the historical and poetic record, and most importantly, their own faith and doubt. In short, by establishing a poetics grounded as nearly in the natural world, in material culture, and in physical history are Melville and Whitman able to mitigate the “hearsay problem” and arrive at something close to spiritual revelation. Chapter one examines Melville’s collection of Civil War poetry, *Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War*, focusing on sites, individuals, and events—particularly the New York Sanitary Fair of 1864, and the poet’s explicit concern in the prose supplement with his own ability to provide accurately a representation of so spiritually significant a set of events as the preservation of democracy and the end of slavery in the United States. The following chapter will focus on Walt Whitman’s 1871 essay *Democratic Vistas* along with some of his later, globally themed poetry. Therein I will suggest that Whitman’s preoccupation with the bodies, whether human, politic, or landscape—all speak to his necessary preoccupation with an expanded understanding of nature, and by extension, reason. Subsequently, Whitman’s excitement and disappointments will illustrate the persistence of the “hearsay problem” and of revelation through language, establishing the negotiation of Reason and Nature as a dialectic that can be traced throughout Whitman’s work to the heart of his spiritual consciousness. In the final chapter, I use Melville’s long poem *Clarel*, to explore the ways in which pilgrimage itself, and architecture, regardless of how ancient, is still subject to the same problems and limitations for those seeking revelation that Melville and Whitman saw in

Grace Church in Manhattan. Indeed, one of the poem's final lines arguably best summarizes the problem facing each and every pilgrim. Clarel laments modern advancements in communication in the face of his wavering faith as he says, "'They wire the world—far under sea / They talk; but never comes to me / A message from beneath the stone'" (4.34.51-53). The problem, I argue, is precisely the fact that he is looking for the answer in the iteration of some scriptural truth that lies beneath the stone—the same problem facing so many pilgrims. Thus, in the final chapter I also introduce a new source for *Clarel*, Isaac Leeser's 1852 translation of Moses Mendelssohn's *Jerusalem*, a text which fuels a debate started by a question regarding the proper use of the land and the question of Jewish durability and apostasy. Via Mendelssohn, I offer a discussion of arguably the most frequently overlooked character in the poem, the Jewish matriarch Agar, a woman through whom Melville makes his deistic appreciation of creation quite apparent. This I will illustrate through the poet's extended meditation on Agar's most devout and revelatory practice of her religion—during her time at her pastoral home in Illinois.

Chapter 1: Melville's Battle-Pieces, Emersonian Literary Nationalism, and Relics of Pilgrimage and War

During his famous, and somewhat scandalous, lecture delivered before the Senior Class of Harvard's Divinity school in the summer of 1838, Ralph Waldo Emerson offered up a manifesto that would have a great deal of influence over American letters for at least the remainder of the century. Emerson closes his speech, asking for new teachers, poets who would round off the edges of what he perceives to be the fragmentary nature of the Hebrew and Greek scriptures. More specifically, Emerson calls for the "oracles to all time" that he professes, "shall speak in the west also"(91-2). In short, what Emerson's speech demands is a work shown "in order to the intellect" a work of "Epical Integrity." Texts like Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* and Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, seem most directly to have answered this call, which by the time of their initial publications in the 1850s, Emerson had honed and refined into his *Essays First and Second Series* in the mid-1840s. Indeed, by the time these exactly contemporary thinkers—who seem relentlessly and frustratingly to elude one another throughout the century, and thus, throughout their lives—set out upon their careers Emerson's vision of the American heroic identity had permeated the American literary imagination to a degree by which Melville in particular is both delighted and frustrated. Indeed, Melville's subsequent volume of Civil War poetry, *Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War*, illustrates a clear affinity for the fragmented aesthetics of the Hebrew scriptures that Emerson criticizes, but that modern biblical scholar Robert Alter praises.¹ The reason for this is that Melville recognizes a national tendency toward a largely reductive polarizing narrative tendency that can be associated with the epic as Emerson describes it. Moreover, I believe that Melville recognizes that this tendency reaches beyond

¹ See Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*.

² See Herman Melville *Correspondence*, Northwestern-Newberry Edition p.120 for an incisive editorial speculation

literature and letters and permeates the narratives of popular culture. It is important to note, however, the ways that Emerson sets the stage for those oracles, noting that the absence of “primary faith is the presence of degradation”(79). Emerson warns that with this false faith “falls the church, the state, art, letters, life”(79), and so when Emerson speaks of Epic, he is looking for “the world to be mirror of the soul”(92). Emerson’s epic shows “that Ought, that Duty, is one thing with Science, with Beauty, and with Joy” (92).

Considering Emerson alongside two particular cultural events—The New York City Metropolitan Sanitary Fair of March and April 1864 and the construction and opening of the United States Capitol Dome between 1855 and 1866—offers an ideal case study for this sort of popular narration. Viewing Melville’s engagement with Emerson as a colossus of literary nationalism alongside large-scale public events coordinated in the interest of advancing the Union war effort and consolidating the national heroic narrative. In doing so, we can begin to see how texts religious, visual, spatial, or otherwise that we might not normally consider “epic” might register with such ambivalent cultural critics as Melville, fit the Nature-Reason poetics of *Battle-Pieces*, reconciling with Emerson’s idea of epical integrity that can be best characterized as a sort of “anti-epical lyricism”—that is, verse in popular lyric forms that engages with the traditions of the epic genre, but actively resists its political and nationalist implications.

Melville, Emerson, and the Poetic Record

Melville’s first encounter with Emerson, was likely in 1849, when he attended a series of lectures in Concord. He seems, from his correspondence with his famous literary interlocutor Evert Duyckinck to have been enchanted by the experience (*Correspondence* 119-20).² Melville seems to backpedal, however, in a letter written only a few days later, after receiving a letter

² See Herman Melville *Correspondence*, Northwestern-Newberry Edition p.120 for an incisive editorial speculation regarding the contents of Duyckinck’s missing letter.

from Duyckinck, no longer extant. We can only assume that Duyckinck chides then 30 year old Herman slightly for his hero-worship, and Melville's famous reply, which has frequently been used decisively and in my opinion mistakenly to illustrate Melville's view on Emerson and Transcendentalism, was "Nay, I do not oscillate in Emerson's rainbow." Sophia Hawthorne also writes in a letter that Melville devoured some of "Mr. Emerson's Essays" when he was their houseguest in 1850 (Sealts, *Pursuing Melville*, 269). For our purposes here, what is far more significant is Melville's return to Emerson in 1861 when he purchased the *Essays* and quite aggressively annotated them. This return is significant, first and most obviously, because it corresponds to the beginning of the Civil War, but furthermore, because it occurs four years after Melville completed *The Confidence-Man*, the last work of fiction published in his lifetime, and at a time when Melville was reading furiously, reimagining himself as a poet.³ This turning point is key, I suggest, because throughout the Civil War, Melville would observe Emerson's ideas regarding the narration of a uniquely American epic genealogy permeating the literary world and into the surrounding culture. This dynamic is readily apparent in one of Melville's most characteristic annotations to *Essays*: In response to one of Emerson's broadest attempts at encompassing the poetic authority necessary to his theories of nationalist narration, Melville explicitly agrees, writing "True" beside the assertion in "Spiritual Laws" that each individual has a peculiar poetic talent, but his willingness to accept Emerson's democratization of authorial sovereignty only goes so far. To the suggestion that each man's "ambition is exactly proportioned to his powers" Melville's annotation is a categorical, "False" (126). Melville's marginalia to Emerson demonstrates a growing frustration with Emerson's notion of a consolidated American identity in the person of a monolithic, and all-knowing bard. This quarrel

³ Although to my mind he detrimentally downplays the influence of Emerson in shaping Melville's poetic career, for a valuable examination of Melville's reading and transformation into the poet, see Hershel Parker, *Melville: The Making of the Poet*.

with Emerson is most clearly articulated in the most heavily annotated Emerson essay in Melville's library, "The Poet." Emerson's poet, the epic historiographer, offers an idealized heroic American genealogy that Melville, while authoring *Battle-Pieces* during the Civil War, simply cannot abide. Emerson suggests that "the poet, who re-attaches things to nature and the Whole,—re-attaching even artificial things and violations of nature, to nature, by a deeper insight,—disposes very easily of the most disagreeable facts" (20), and Melville, having underlined the final clause of this statement, snarkily replies in the margins, "So it would seem, in this sense, Mr. E. is a great poet"(20). As we saw in the introduction, however, Melville seems quite strongly in agreement with Emerson's belief that the true poet, the "eternal man" is one who can "foretell" and one who is "present and privy"(9-10). The significance of these instances of marginalia with regard to "the divine bards" is clear, as I will illustrate through the text of *Battle-Pieces* Melville actively resists what might be perceived as the contradictions in the notion of "epical integrity" as described in the "Divinity School Address" and fleshed out more thoroughly in *Essays*—what Melville himself may have struggled with as a hearsay problem—in favor of a fusion between epic tropes and popular forms. Rosanna Warren, for example argues that in "The Armies of the Wilderness" Melville achieves the true horror of the poem through "splicing together lyric and narrative forms," but goes on to point out that language ultimately fails and the horror "finally cannot be described" (103). Similarly, Helen Vendler notes that Melville is able to "fold" the epic into lyric form by "reversing the usual manner in which lyric poems unfold. While the normative lyric presents as its beginning a first-person narrative with its accompanying feelings... Melville tends by contrast, to offer first an impersonal philosophical conclusion, next the narrative that produced it, and last the lyric feelings accompanying it" (584). This type of fusion results in the creation not of a national epic history, but rather an epic-shaped

void filled with a plurality of “aspects” embracing even the most disagreeable facts. Still more importantly, this methodology allows the reader the luxury not simply to rely from the outset on the presentation of an unsubstantiated lyrical feeling, but rather to understand a philosophical and narrative premise upon which that lyrical sentiment, mitigating to a certain extent, the fundamental problem of the historical and poetic record. Moreover, this allows Melville fully to embrace his spiritual investment in the events transpiring, draw the most meaningful possible conclusions from them, and in the words of Emerson “not suffer the deduction of any falsehood” (83).

Faith Barrett has recently noted of this use of “aspects” particularly that of such popular forms as song and journalism, that Melville not only avoids such genres as, say, individual letters from soldiers, but more significantly to us here, he includes “no fiery call to arms comparable to Julia Ward Howe’s “Battle Hymn of the Republic” or to Whitman’s “Beat! Beat! Drums!”(40). This is particularly significant when considering the prose supplement wherein Melville’s self-consciousness regarding his responsibility to the poetic record and “exultation misapplied” is particularly sharp.

Indeed, in the Prose Supplement to his *Battle-Pieces*, Herman Melville expresses a particular concern about the affect of his poetry, fearful “lest in presenting, though but dramatically and by way of a poetic record, the passions and epithets of civil war, [he] might be contributing to a bitterness which every sensible American must wish at an end”(182). He expresses having had a desire to remove or to change certain episodes that might be construed as “censorious,” as “exultation misapplied,” but ultimately, he arrives at the conclusion that “Zeal is not of necessity religion, neither is it always of the same essence with poetry or patriotism”(182). This brief reflection on Melville’s philosophy of poetic composition tells us a great deal, and

supported by further evidence from the supplement, we can draw certain conclusions regarding the collection's spiritual as well as its poetic and cultural implications. When discussing the question of "penitence" on the part of the South, Melville asserts that it is "enough, for all practical purposes, if the South have been taught by the terrors of civil war to feel that Secession, like Slavery, is against Destiny"(182). Significantly, aside from the author's profoundly forgiving nature, is his emphasis on "all practical purposes" and upon "Destiny." In other words, what is of concern to Melville in this passage is that the will of God as seemingly manifest through Nature or Reason is satisfied. To borrow once more a passage from *The Age of Reason*: "I believe in the equality of man; and I believe that religious duties consist in doing justice, loving mercy, and endeavoring to make our fellow creatures happy" (400).

The Spirit of the Fair: Melville and the New York Sanitary Fair of 1864

During the composition of Melville's first published collection of poems, completed in 1866, he interrogates and often resists this broad "epical," to borrow Emerson's qualifier from the Divinity School Address, aesthetic throughout the poems, but it is not enough to suggest simply that Melville was opposed to an American version of the imperialist rhetoric of the epic, nor does it entirely suggest that he was entirely opposed to apparent efforts to create a deeply spiritual civil theology surrounding American democracy and the poetic historical record. Keeping that in mind, I would like to examine a specific cultural event that quite clearly illustrates the broad effort to establish an epic genealogy for the United States. This idea drove my research in the archives of the New York Historical Society, searching through the records of the New York Sanitary Commission, attempting to consider how these events, driven by the collective national narrative, may have come to color Melville's first published collection of poems—which, at times, embraces the national epic bombast, while also tenderly accentuating

the great national insecurity regarding the war while the fate of the great democratic experiment played out upon the world-stage. This insecurity is apparent, for example, in his poem “The Conflict of Convictions,” where Melville notes that, “Derision stirs in the abyss” and the kings of Europe “wag their heads,” clearly echoing the account of the crucifixion from Matthew 27. And finally, I am interested here in exploring the ways in which reconciling this gap in Melville’s literary biography, may illustrate the development of Melville’s attitudes about the rebellion, the reconciliation, and most of all, the role of the archive in spiritual historiography.

The Metropolitan Sanitary Fair took place New York City’s Union Square Park, spanning from 17th street down to 14th street along park avenue, during late March through April of 1864. The fair offered food service, a formidable collection of American and European artwork, a collection of flags trophies and arms, a children’s exhibit, and a leviathan white Ox whose exhibition at the fair I cannot explain but the presence of which was widely publicized and represented in the Sanitary Commission’s archive. The art exhibition represented the origins as well as the aspirations of the United States. The far wall was dominated Emanuel Leutz’s epochal painting *Washington Crossing the Delaware*. Elsewhere in the exhibit Fredrick E. Church’s *Heart of the Andes* and *The Andes of Ecuador* aspire to the Southern frontier, imagining, it seems, a united American Hemisphere, while Albert Bierstadt’s paintings of the Rocky Mountains, and Yosemite reach towards the West. All things in the room, however, from Thomas Cole’s Italian series to De La Roche’s *Napoleon at Fontainebleau* seem to spring forth from Washington’s massive presence.

David S. Reynolds observes in *Walt Whitman’s America* a popular Pro-union tendency during and immediately following the Civil War to foreground figures like George Washington, and narratives of the American Revolution. This tendency is really not unlike the poet Virgil’s

depiction of the Battle of Actium on Aeneas' shield in *The Aeneid*. The emphasis of a shared history of warfare and triumph makes a great deal of sense for a nation divided and very much in need of a common narrative. George Washington, then, becomes the most obvious choice for the role of America's Aeneas, and the unification—particularly of the wide array of American landscapes—offers an ostensible spatial unity for the nation. The room itself, it seems, became a sort of second-hand pilgrimage.

Michael Murrin whose study *History and Warfare in The Renaissance Epic*, offers a useful model for considering the epic watermarks of American cultural narratives during and immediately after the civil war. Murrin notes that as poets in the early-modern era began to consider more recent or even contemporary histories, they “had to respond directly to military developments”(15). Juxtaposition, Murrin contends, is one of the most “effective and economical ways to show this double issue of the relation of heroic poetry to war and to history”(15). While this tendency is clear, for example in poem's from *Battle-Pieces* like “A Utilitarian View of the Monitor's Fight” in which war “laid aside his painted pomp” and the poet praises “Hail to victory without the gaud.” I would like to consider the implications of this suggestion with regard to the visual arts in addition to poetry. Indeed, I believe that the fair's complementary exhibition of fine art alongside weapons and other relics from America's wars begs this sort of examination. Furthermore, noting the broader idea of epical cultural production, I would point to a common trope in heroic poetry—ekphrastic meditations on weaponry. This idea obviously interests Melville, as Book 18 of *The Iliad*, and the detailed description of Achilles' shield is a passage that Melville marked heavily in his edition of Chapman's *Iliad*. Moreover, to name just one poem in *Battle-Pieces* besides “The Monitor” and “The Temeraire,” both meditations on the Ironclad warships, “The Swamp Angel” is actually a poem about a “Parrott gun” which was

used in the defense of Charleston, and even more interestingly, the gun was the subject of one in a series of very popular woodcut prints for sale at the fair.⁴

Further, to establish more thoroughly Melville's interest in and awareness, if not attendance, of the fair, as well as his investment, despite his wariness, in the popular epic narrative, we should note its proximity to Melville's home—104 E. 26th street where he lived from 1863 until his death in 1891—from which Union Square Park is a short, 10 minute walk. Moreover, Melville's personal investment in the heroic narrative surrounding the fair becomes clear when considering the arms display—advertised as the most complete collection ever—An “Indian Hammer” taken by Col. Peter Gansvoort, Melville's grandfather, at the siege of Fort Stanwix in 1777, a Continental victory against an army of British and Iroquois war fighters. The flag of Col. Gansvoort's 3rd NY Regiment carried during the siege of Yorktown and during the surrender of Cornwallis in 1781. And finally, the Sword of French General Rouchambeau, commander of the French troops at Yorktown, presented to Gansvoort in 1781. Melville also commented on the great good being done by the Sanitary Fairs around the country's major cities, in a letter to George McLaughlin on December 15, 1863. A final piece of evidence is Melville's response to John P. Kennedy of Maryland who requested a contribution to a collection entitled *Autograph Leaves of Our Country's Authors*. Melville replied by sending his autograph, and a poem to be reproduced in facsimile, “Inscription for the Slain at Fredericksburg.” The proceeds of the volume went to benefit the Sanitary Commission (Leyda, 656). Even the most comprehensive of Melville's biographical scholars provide scant treatment of the fair and what it might have meant to Melville.⁵

⁴ For Melville's marginalia to Chapman's *Iliad* See Wilson Walker Cowan, *Melville's Marginalia*

⁵ See Jay Leyda's *The Melville Log* and Hershel Parker, *Herman Melville: A Biography Volume 2*

Battle-Pieces shows that epic narratives and genealogies are manifest no less through cultural events such as the NY Sanitary Fair as they are through the poems themselves. Indeed, when we look at *Battle-Pieces* as a whole, it looks quite a lot like a sort of fractured epic poem. Seemingly democratizing the role of hero, as well as that of the poet, Melville chooses an array of individual subjects giving voice to the multitude of experiences of the war. This engagement with the traditions of epic nationalism can be seen in Melville's most heroically-rendered historical figures, but that also speaks to his larger more spiritually interested project: rendering as many individual experiences and therefore as many personal revelations as possible. This, of course, is emblematic of Vendler's keen observation of Melville's tendency to invert the lyric wherein he uses the narrative as a vehicle for reaching the individual lyric sentiment. It is also worth noting, however, that Melville's heroic rendering also applies to one of the most conspicuous construction projects of the era, what truly amounted to a national cathedral—the U.S. Capitol Dome.

Stronger for Stress and Strain: Heroic Narration and the Iron Dome of the U.S. Capitol

On April 7, 1864, once the sanitary fair was well under way, Melville returned to Washington D.C. The Capitol Dome, a veritable character in *Battle-Pieces*, was nearing its completion⁶. Constantino Brumidi was likely to have been well underway painting his Fresco on the dome's underside in the rotunda, the "Apotheosis of Washington." If Melville were aware of this, it would have certainly interested him, as he was likely to have seen "The Apotheosis of Homer," when he visited the Louvre during his travels in 1856-7. Melville is also likely to have encountered the discursive space of the Capitol through Nathaniel Hawthorne's anonymously published 1862 essay, "Chiefly about War Matters." Upon his initial visit to the Capitol building,

⁶ For an incisive discussion of both Whitman and Melville's encounters with the Iron Dome of the United States Capitol, see Ed Folsom, "'That Towering Bulge Of Pure White': Whitman, Melville, The Capitol Dome, And Black America." *Leviathan: A Journal Of Melville Studies* 16.1 (2014): 87-120.

Hawthorne refers to the sinister omen of the walls of the central edifice “pervaded with great cracks” that “threatened to come thundering down, under the immense weight of the iron dome,” but this, like the rusted dome of *Battle-Pieces*, was an uncommon representation. The edifice was more commonly treated as a “splendid monument of American genius” (*NYH* 16 Jul 1857) as it was in the *New York Herald* in one of the earliest descriptions from July 1857. And from that point, the excitement only grew. In a February 1863 article, just under a year before the dome’s completion, a correspondent with the *Daily National Intelligencer* begins, “Hail, iron ribbed and clad, imperial dome!” and goes on calling the edifice, in the middle of the Civil War, “the first of our nation’s palaces” describing “the courts and halls vivid with patriot men, who think not of themselves but of their country” (*DNI* 24 Feb 1863). The “epical” agenda of this, and journalistic representations like it, must have certainly been conspicuous to Melville, who seems—to borrow a phrase from Neil Campbell— “as much concerned with negotiations amid complex spaces as [with] any absolute point of coherence within a national narrative framework” (Campbell 43). Indeed, as Melville calls early in his poem “The Conflict of Convictions” to “*dismantle the fort, / Cut down the fleet*” (13-4) he seems to desire as much the dissolution of state and military edifices as he desires the erasure of the death-list after the narration of the siege at Donelson. Indeed, Melville does recognize the mythologizing tendency and sees the fact that “The poor old Past” is “the Future’s slave” (69-70) and as such, that it is freely appropriable—a sentiment, once again, that could very easily have come directly out of Thomas Paine. The water, however, beneath which the battle fields congeal and which washes the names from the death-list in “Donelson” leaves a tide mark on the imperial dome, and worse, has caused it to rust (40-4). Melville, however, does not simply ironize the Dome as a contradictory edifice of democratic imperialism. Rather, he offers an alternative vision of the dome— one

where “the Iron Dome, / Stronger for stress and strain, / Fling[s] her huge shadow athwart the main” but then again, the inherent contradictions are once more foregrounded as he warns that “the Founder’s dream shall flee” (76-9). This complicated vision of the dome, then, is perhaps best illustrated in the poem “America.” Initially, the dome has grown to cosmic proportions, “Where the wings of a sunny Dome expand” (I.1). But the “exulting heart / Of young Maternity”(I.10-1) after she wakes from the frightening dream that falls “so foul... upon so fair a face,”(III.13) is inclined to repress the triumphal impulse, and is represented with “Law on her brow” (IV.12) She is still left, however, having had the vision, and while she “lifts her flag with graver air”(IV.13) she nonetheless does so “with empire in her eyes”(IV.12).

Perhaps no poem in *Battle-Pieces* more perfectly encapsulates the “hearsay problem” than “Donelson.” Much like the allegorical figure of America waking from her dream, Timothy Sweet points to this point of discontinuity and the way that the victory defers the corporeal sacrifice until the next day’s dispatch: “No continuity is proposed between the events of the battle...and their ideological signification” (*Traces* 182). We can see the extent to which Melville is interested in the role of heroic narratives in popular and journalistic narratives, and moreover we can see his acute concern with the extent to which these narratives are being mediated, through both individuals and machinery. While Timothy Sweet and Faith Barrett⁷ both note “Donelson” for its engagement with sensational war correspondence, I would like to complicate their readings by focusing specifically on that journalistic or editorial voice, and the specific ways in which Melville is able to address through it his concerns raised in the Prose Supplement with creating an adequate poetic or historical record of the War. In “Donelson” the editorial voices progress systematically, starting as simple caveats, but ultimately becoming

⁷ See Sweet, Timothy Robert. *Traces of War* and Barrett, Faith. "They Answered Him Aloud!: Popular Voice and Nationalist Discourse In Melville's Battle-Pieces." *Leviathan: A Journal Of Melville Studies* 9.3 (2007): 35-49

concerted narrative devices. These moments begin in “Donelson” as questions of logistics:

“(Some thirty thousand the command)” (16) and become increasingly dramatic:

*(This fighting—judging what we read—
Both charge and countercharge,
Would seem but Thursday’s told at large,
Before in brief reported.—Ed.)* (130-3)

The narratives shift back and forth from tragedy to triumph and public memory is short, until the poem culminates, as I mentioned earlier, with the erasure of the death-list in the rain. Before that moment, however, we see the final parenthetical aside of the poem:

*(Herewith a break,
Storms at the West derange the wires.
Doubtless, ere morning, we shall hear
The end; we look for news to cheer—
Let Hope fan all her fires.)* (380-4)

What begins here as a logistical message regarding the “deranged” telegraph wires, ultimately becomes a romantic vision of the end, both preceding and eschatologically ironizing the coming message of “VICTORY!” (387). As we know, this message is necessarily deranged, and the previously objective, logistical voice of the editor has adopted a paradigmatic and poetic standpoint, invoking an allegorical figure of Hope, but as Sweet has pointed out, Melville’s deliberate the deliberate interdiction of the information “displaces the body once the body has served its purpose in war” (*Traces* 182).

In this interdicted fashion, Melville seemingly reverses or ruptures the practice of epic invocation, asking God not for a power of representation, but placing the invocation after the

siege, asking for a power of erasure. Melville's poem desires that like "the death-list" which "like a river flows/ down the pale sheet, / and there the whelming waters meet" (446-8), and the siege of Donelson will only be sought in vain as he asks "may Time with happy haste / Bring wail and triumph to a waste, / and war be done" (52). Melville's poetics here is precisely one in which he acknowledges a consolidating/epical practice of journalistic rhetoric, and seeks concertedly to rupture it. Melville attempts here to erase dramatic reportage, through fractured multiplicity.

The most obvious example of Melville's engagement with and attempt to render a meaningfully fractured epic genre, however, is perhaps "Lee in the Capitol." Robert E. Lee is presented as conditionally heroic, capable of personal good and political evil. The lines of "Lee in the Capitol" have a similar visual arrangement, and also sway sonically and metrically between pentameter and tetrameter—ostensibly alternating between epic and popular forms. Likewise, Melville expresses an admiration for Lee while still presenting him as "Rebellion's soldier-chief" (2). He laments what might have been had Lee's "blade been drawn/ For yon stirred flag"(50-1). Lee, despite being externally depicted as strained between the right and wrong sides of history has an internal subjectivity in the poem, and he is resolutely impervious to the narrations imposition of either characterization upon him. Lee's body is quintessentially classical, silent: "No word he breathes of vain lament, / mute to reproach, nor hears applause" (12-3). The chiasmic relationship between reproach and applause perfectly encapsulates Melville's representation of Lee, and moreover, signifies why he represents such an ideal heroic figure for the anti-epical arc of *Battle-Pieces*. That Lee is frozen, impervious and stoic between applause and reproach only solidifies that characterization as do his continued warnings throughout the poem—including within the context of the Moorish woman narrative—against

triumphalism, and punitive reconstruction policies. Brian Yothers draws particular attention to the Moorish Woman narrative in Lee's speech, pointing to its ambiguity, dwelling on the line in response to Lee's anecdote "Faith in America never dies"(210). Yothers suggests that the line, "gives a rich sense of Melville's ambivalence in the aftermath of the war: does this mean that *faith* never dies in America, or does it mean that *faith in America* is immortal? The ambiguity here is significant, as Melville connects the religiosity of his nation and tendencies toward civil religion and American exceptionalism" (72). Yothers notes that the following march towards Providence is in fact a call for both "self-knowledge" and "self-doubt," driving at the central epistemic dilemma of this essay.

Earlier in the collection Melville further complicates Lee's figuration in his heroic narrative; in "The Conflict of Convictions" draws a Miltonian Satan who seems also representative of Lee, "a disciplined captain gray in skill" (9). In "The Conflict" Melville also introduces the "Iron Dome" of the United States Capitol, ironically rusted, but also "stronger for stress and strain"(76), metonymically representative of the Republic in which "the world's fairest hope" is indeed "linked with man's foulest crime" ("Misgivings" 7).

In each of these poems, these "aspects" of the war, Melville resists any attempt to consolidate a single authoritative, heroic or spiritual; proof-text. Melville is calling instead for a peculiar practice of reading, grounding American identity in a practice rather than calling, as Emerson does, for a poet. This is clear in the most obviously ekphrastic poem in the collection, and it links the text of the poems themselves to the physical texts such as the visual arts at the Sanitary Fair and on a larger scale to the Capitol Dome. The Poem "The Coming Storm," meditates on both Edwin Booth—renowned Shakespearean actor, and brother of, John Wilkes Booth—and the Sanford Gifford painting, "The Coming Storm", which Booth owned. The poet

refers to Booth as “Shakespeare’s pensive child,” noting that “never a line was lightly scanned” and asserting that Booth is privy to a peculiar body of knowledge because he is such a reader; because of “the Hamlet in his heart”(8-12). Booth, in other words, becomes the ideal case study for Melville’s philosophy of knowledge as his readings of both Shakespeare and of Gifford reconcile with his own profound personal tragedy. Melville illustrates this best in the prose supplement to *Battle-Pieces*, wherein he realizes forcibly the fact that the republic preserved can no longer cling to the genealogies set out in the popular heroic narratives—the collective epic that all Americans read upon recalling the revolution. Defeat, indeed, is necessarily become part of the nation’s histories, and for many, he recognizes, far more freshly so than triumph. Melville worries, in fact, with this in mind, considering the reception of these poems that he, “might be contributing to a bitterness that every sensible American must wish at an end”(183). Melville’s narrative is bleak; as he recognizes the rhetorical work of the Capitol Dome and journalistic narration; he recognizes not simply a nation that desperately needs to feel whole, but a burgeoning empire having set a dangerous and fratricidal precedent. Moreover, he recognizes a much-needed return to enlightenment era principles, bringing Reason into the providential narratives and genealogies that have permeated secular culture. As Melville invokes in the prose supplement that closes *Battle Pieces* the bards of both Progress and Humanity, and as he warns that the national anguish will not “tend to discreet legislation” it becomes clear why his precarious representation of the nation’s greatest architectural achievement is so significant. In other words, to represent the dome as a symbol of triumph—to represent the iron without the rust—is to fail, as the journalists of his era so often did, to achieve the balance between those bards. Indeed, Melville acknowledges that he considered withdrawing or modifying some of the poems from the collection for fear that he presents the war “but dramatically and by way of a

poetic record, the passions and epithets of a civil war,” and furthermore that he “might be contributing to a bitterness which every sensible American must wish at an end” (182), and it is for this reason, that *Battle-Pieces* so forcibly asserts its continued relevance: When millions of viewers stare up at the *Apotheosis of Washington*, and fail to see the pervasive cracks, the rusted pieces falling off each day, and fail to re-politicize the mythic symbol, the glory of the war “continues to fall short of its pathos—a pathos which now at last ought to disarm all animosity”(183).

Chapter 2: Whitman: Circumnavigation and the Persistence of Hearsay

“America” writes Walt Whitman in an 1872 letter to Alfred Lord Tennyson, “is at present a vast seething mass of varied material human and other, of the richest, best, worst, and plentiest kind.” And accompanying the letter was a copy of Whitman’s 1871 Essay *Democratic Vistas* wherein—in the wake of the fifteenth amendment’s ratification—Whitman describes “the new blood, new frame of democracy.” Significantly, at this moment, quite late in his career, Whitman upholds the Emersonian insistence that this democracy can only be sustained by the founding and growth of “its own forms of art, poems, schools, theology, displacing all that exists, or that has been produced anywhere in the past, under opposite influences.” In short, Whitman demands—both in *Vistas* and in his letter to Tennyson—that America needs “a definite heroic identity”—a national epic narrative attainable only through the creation of a global and democratic empire predicated upon the voice of “a great literatus.” Moreover, this letter recalls, once again, Emerson’s “Divinity School Address” calling for “the new Teacher, that shall follow so far those shining laws, that he shall see them come full circle; shall see their rounding complete grace; shall see the world to be the mirror of the soul; shall see the identity of the law of gravitation with purity of heart; and shall show that the Ought, that Duty, is one thing with Science, with Beauty, and with Joy”(92). I do not believe that the significance of this parallel can be overstated: Whitman is championing a new poetics at a unique moment in history. For the first time, it would seem, the poet has the tools necessary in American democracy—now battle-tested and ostensibly proven—to heal the “fragmentary” ancient scripture, bringing to them the “epical integrity,” that according to Emerson, they lacked.

Emerson’s speech anticipates his later essay “Circles” in which he quotes Saint Augustine, who “described the nature of God as a circle whose centre was everywhere and its

circumference nowhere”(403). Indeed, this circle will occur over and over again in Whitman’s work as he tests Emerson’s essays. In poems like “Passage to India” we see how, for Whitman, rounding the globe is a divine act, and we are reminded in *Democratic Vistas* how important the unattainability of the horizon is. Whitman is troubled by the suggestion that the circle can ever be completed, although he does not endeavor to fracture the narrative as Melville does in *Battle-Pieces*, but rather relegates it irretrievably to the future. I would argue, however, that he would believe wholeheartedly that “the ought, the duty, is one thing with science, beauty, and with joy,”(92) and for that reason the poet must remain in a permanent state of aspiration. This is true by definition of the vista Moreover, Emerson’s pun on “the ought” is most certainly not lost on Whitman, simultaneously “the duty,” the ought signifying infinite possibilities, and quite literally the circle, the “O,” which demands that the poet always continue circling the globe, always continue pursuing the horizon. Jerome Loving, moreover, notes in his discussion of Whitman between 1867-1881, particularly with regard to the authoring of *Vistas*, that this focus on futurity allowed Whitman to maintain his “optimism about the nation in the wake of war”(313). This fundamental need for optimism again echoes Melville and his desire to reach into the European and classical tradition of the epic while understanding that the translation of the genre into an American form is at a fundamental level contradictory. Melville’s rumination on the derision from the kings of Europe, for instance, and Whitman’s relentless focus on the futurity of the vista never allow the poet to find the epistemological perspective one might attribute to Homer or Virgil. Indeed, one might compare the effort to compose a classically conventional epic of the United States’ national origins to the task faced by Milton as he struggled to reconcile the pagan deities of his literary forbearers with his own devout Christianity. A more apt comparison, perhaps, than explicitly considering what Whitman was attempting to accomplish as epic, is

simply to consider it comprehensive. Whitman's efforts—a constant process of spiritual contemplation and revision, were not an effort to generate a genealogy of origin and conquest, but rather as many first-hand experiences of people, sites, and acts as he could possibly collect. Whitman's notion of "epical integrity" was completing the circle, circumnavigating the globe, pursuing revelations.

With that in mind, we should consider how Whitman, in the early 70's, having just observed one of the most profound displays of human mortality one could imagine, understands that his relentless production of literature, the pursuit that he can only see as divine, will end. And he fears, to be certain, and rightfully so, that the cultural climate of his nation is not one that is kind to the literatus, but to the engineer, both of whom must work in balance as point and counterpoint of the *musica universalis* that is his theory of democracy. And when Whitman speaks of the crudity, of the measurelessness, he is referring specifically to the lack of that balance, that musicality that he sees on the horizon as the providential, even messianic arrival of democracy.

This notion that Whitman's aspirational empire is based on an idea that is present throughout his work, that the ideal individual—in their pre-lapsarian, edenic state of being—is American. At the very beginning of his preface to the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman writes "The Americans of all nations at any time upon the earth have probably the fullest poetical nature"(5). The phrase "of all nations" can be and often is read as an appositive clause, as if to say, "The Americans, as compared to any other nation in history..." but if we are to read it instead, in light of Whitman's abstention to punctuate the clause, and keep in mind Emerson's instance that the Teacher return to the distant past, to the oracles of Hebrew and Greek scripture, his statement then seems to suggest that there have always been Americans in all nations at all

points in history. The Americans, for Whitman, are a diasporic, perhaps Hebraic people whom the oracular American poet seeks to gather from among the nations of the world. Moreover, it is through such a reading that we begin to realize the hemispheric and even global possibilities of Whitman's imperialist philosophy. Even the very first sentence of the preface with the giant "A" that says "America does not repel the past or what it has produced under its forms or amid other politics or the idea of castes or the old religions" is ambiguous. It brings us to the question of production. When Whitman says "what IT has produced," is he referring to the past as having performed the act of production or America? After all, as Whitman asks us in "Passage to India" "what is the present but a growth out of the past?"(1.13). Have Americans, for Whitman, always existed in all places at all times in history? Are Americans like the Hebrews scattered around the globe living under various regimes? If that is how we read it, then "the United States", which is conspicuously differentiated from "America" throughout Whitman's work is a poem written *by* Americans, and as it passed through the trials of the Civil War it was a poem under significant revision.

The resurrection and birth-themed language of the 1855 preface would certainly suggest, then, as do the messianic images in *Vistas* and elsewhere, that the Americans are like the Hebrews in diaspora waiting for their poet-Messiah, knowing that only then will the true democracy be realized. This notion begins to shed quite a lot of light on Whitman's profoundly contested theory of democracy. That is to say, the American experiment, like the conquest of Canaan, has a divine sanction. It is battle-tested, and perhaps most interestingly, it places the American in the position of underdog, never as oppressor, but as the chosen vehicle of a divine will. Moreover, Whitman's focus on sexual liberation and the total democratization of all bodies becomes so significant, because that is the point at which the limitations of his theory are most

clearly realized—his pursuit of experiential knowledge surpasses Deism and Transcendentalism in this regard. And it is as Whitman is testing that democratization in *Democratic Vistas* and elsewhere, that he runs into his most obvious obstacles. The questions of racism, sexism, compulsory heterosexuality, and heteronormativity about which Whitman is so acutely aware, relegate his notion of democracy forever to the vista, but paradoxically, that is where his democracy belongs. In other words, attainability necessarily results in the “hearsay problem.”

Keeping all of that in mind, I am interested in exploring Whitman’s moves, in the 1870s, not necessarily toward the “northern liberal nostalgia” recently described by Cristanne Miller, but toward a refurbished, heroic vision—no longer of the antebellum American experiment, but of a civil religious American Empire both literary and literal. Through my reading of *Democratic Vistas* in conjunction with his correspondence with Tennyson, I will examine how Whitman’s call for “vigorous, yet unsuspecting Literatures” –the transcendental expression of “democracy and the modern”—offers an increasingly complicated perspective on the poet’s refurbished vision of American democracy in the post-bellum years. In short, to borrow a phrase from Hsuan L. Hsu, I intend to highlight Whitman’s “cosmopolitan despair” by illustrating that his call for a heroic American narrative is acutely aware of the contradictions of U.S. expansion while being similarly attuned to and hopeful for the potential global connectedness, individual empowerment, and a genuine belief in a transcendental chosen-people narrative. Indeed, Whitman’s insistence that America must “surmount the gorgeous history of feudalism” does not preclude the building of an empire; rather, he envisions an empire rooted in egalitarian principle, biblical prophecy, and poetic production which must “outstrip all examples hitherto afforded and dominate the world.”

Ed Folsom's assertion in his critical introduction to the 2010 facsimile edition of *Vistas* that Whitman's aspirational title indicates a view of democracy as being "just on the horizon" is an apt one indeed. It is especially so when we consider the way that his postbellum, global themes which rely, by virtue of their existence, on a continued fluctuation and expansion. Betsy Erkkila further notes the "proposal for a radical reconstruction of literature" and the way that *Vistas* "anticipat[es] postmodern investigations" and not only names "the politics of past literature," but before the fact, calls "for the repoliticization of the literature of the future" (253). I take exception, however, to Erkkila's insistent departure from readings grounded in Emersonian transcendentalism.⁸ While I appreciate the necessity to focus on Whitman's matured political consciousness in the postbellum years, as well as his increased interest in Hegelian thought, I don't believe that a complete departure from transcendentalism is necessary or even warranted. In fact, as I will continue to illustrate, Emerson remains central to Whitman's thinking throughout.

Such a central placement of the poet, the literatus, in the workings of political and democratic production begins, then, to work in spatial terms as well. Paul Giles recently described the political and democratic production after the civil war, in terms of geographical boundaries, placing emphasis on "the ways in which geographical consciousness enters subliminally into American cultural narratives, evoking crosscurrents that destabilize the reproduction a self-authenticating literary subject"(2). Continuing to pursue Giles' line of reasoning, when we look at a poem like "A Passage to India" we, in fact see, "the replacement of an imperial design based on territorial possession by one driven by a liberal internationalism,

⁸ For a useful discussion of Whitman's relationship to Emerson in *Vistas* particularly with regard to the differences on matters of culture and modernity while maintaining an Emersonian idealism and metaphysics see Jay, Paul. *Contingency Blues: The Search for Foundations in American Criticism*. Chapter 2, "Emerson, Whitman, and the Problem of Culture"

through which American economic and cultural ideas would penetrate overseas markets” (12). Thus, the creation a poet who is, in fact, an agent of democracy, answers the critical commonplace pointing toward, as David S. Reynolds puts it Whitman’s post-war “ambivalent mentality, divided between technology and humanism, between capitalism and radicalism, centralized institutions and residual individualism”(452). Returning to Giles, then, we can read *Vistas* and the globally-themed poems like “Passage,” “Prayer of Columbus,” &c, as deterritorializing narratives, baring the diacritical marks of their constant reterritorialization, insisting that we should “read the United States as one of the objects of globalization, rather than as merely its malign agent, so that all the insecurities associated with transnationalism are lived out experientially within the nation’s own borders as well” (23). Moreover, as Reynolds also asserts that Whitman was averse to addressing any social issues in his poetry of the late 1860s, *Democratic Vistas* would be where he “set forth his new approach to these problems” (476). This is the key point, I think, where Whitman’s efforts seems to reach beyond “literary scripturism” and instead attempts to mediate responsibly the constant influx of new information—the revelations of modernity—into a poetic record that would be viewed by Deists and Transcendentalists alike as far superior to any text claiming scriptural integrity. Furthermore, as Reynolds so aptly puts it, “Whitman began to see America’s social problems as overwhelming, beyond immediate poetic repair.” Reynolds, however, also notes that Whitman assigned what I would note are peculiarly American, democratic heroic attributes to the “four presidents beginning with Lincoln, who rose from obscure origins to rule with iron will” (464).⁹

⁹ Luke Mancuso offers an interesting, and I think apt, solution to this problem in an earlier work, noting the way that Whitman’s poet as a reconciliatory force self-consciously asserting himself between divisive factions in postbellum political debate: Mancuso, Luke. “‘Reconstruction is still in Abeyance:’ Walt Whitman’s *Democratic Vistas* and the Federalizing of National Identity.” *American Transcendental Quarterly* 8 (September 1994). 229-250. Also see

A poem from *Drum Taps* best foregrounds the concerns that Whitman voices in his letter to the Victorian Poet Laureate bringing them into our conversation of *Vistas*. In the poem “Song of the Banner at Daybreak” Whitman presents what resembles a court masque in which he dramatizes the central problem of the theory of Democracy that he later offers up, illustrating what seems to be the fundamental paradox of democratic governance. In the poem, we begin with the poet who believes that he literally has the power to effect acts of war, and in doing so, he quite ironically denounces the very physical matter of the poem itself: “Words!” (perhaps an echo of Prince Hamlet) “book-words! What are you? / Words no more, for hearken and see, / My song there in the open air / and I must sing, With the banner and pennant a flapping”(9-12) The poet, here, has abandoned his literature, and taken up the cause of the banner and pennant, he sings of “Mechanics Working” of stores and depots, locomotives, countless profit, “the busy gathering and earn’d wages,” and “the identity formed out of thirty-eight spacious and haughty states (and many more to come)”(69-75). The only resistance to the Banner and Pennant’s call to arms, in fact, is the child’s father who tries first to distract his son also with the glories of production and expansion. He says, “look you my babe, Look at these dazzling things in the Houses, and see you the money shops opening/And see you the vehicles preparing to crawl along the streets with goods:/ These, ah these, how valued and toil’d for these! / How envied by all the earth”(28-31). But the child defies him, and the father’s last words are “It is to gain nothing, but risk and defy everything” (again in strictly market-based terms) “Forward to stand in front of wars—and O, such wars!—what have you to do with them? / With Passions of demons, slaughter, premature death?” (99-100), a line of course reminiscent, of course, of Melville’s

Trachtenberg, Alan “Whitman’s Visionary Politics.” In Geoffrey Still ed. *Walt Whitman of Mickle Street: A Centennial Collection* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1994) 94-108. Print. for a discussion of how Whitman’s manages his seemingly contradictory ideologies through the physical act of visualization, noting that *Vistas* requires “multiple acts of vision.”

foreboding declarative line from “The March into Virginia Ending in the First Manassas (July, 1861)”: “All wars are boyish and fought by boys” (6). After he forecasts the child’s death, the father is silenced by the banner’s song, a catalog mimicking the earlier one by the poet, devouring the entire continent, and consolidating all things into a singular national mythology, demanding “Pour in! Whelm that which asks, which sings, with all and the yield of all,/ fusing and holding, claiming, devouring the whole, / No more with tender lip, nor musical labial sound, But out of night emerging no good, our voice persuasive no more, creaking like crows in the wind”(112-4). The voice is, of course, no longer persuasive because everyone and everything besides the banner, the pennant, and the poet have been destroyed. It had been the poet’s responsibility to temper the banner and pennant, the nation’s hyper-productive drive to war, but he “burst through, where [he] waited too long, deafen’d and blinded”(119). And it is in the poem’s closing, that Whitman most directly refutes the symbols of nationalism and realizes both their value and limitations, realizes his own value and limitations as a poet, and, once again, the central paradox of democratic government. The poet says:

O you up there! O pennant! Where you undulate like a snake hissing so curious,
Out of reach, an idea only, yet furiously fought for, risking bloody death loved by
me,

So loved, — O you banner leading the day with stars brought from the night!

Valueless, object of eyes over all and demanding all—(absolute owner of all)— O
banner and pennant!

I too leave the rest—great as it is, it is nothing—houses, machines are nothing—I
see them not.

I see but you, O warlike pennant! O banner so broad, with stripes, I sing you only,

Flapping up there in the wind. (136-42)

Of course, the poet at this point “sings only” the pennant and banner because there is nothing left to sing, but what is particularly profound about this passage is the “O’s;” The O’s here, the circles, but also the “ought” the duty and the nil, I would argue, take us again back to Emerson, wherein “the eye is the first circle: the horizon it forms the second”(403). In this case, however, it seems less like the transcendent, spiritual achievement as it does in “A Passage to India” that has come from circumnavigating the globe. This circle is a closed system, one by which both poet and readers are enslaved; this poem presents a cautionary tale against the pernicious potential of poetic ministries. This is Whitman realizing that his ideal vision of democracy, the one he finally lays out in *Democratic Vistas*, must always be in the act circumnavigation, never achieving the circumference; by definition as, as a vista, it is just off the horizon. The banner, however, although valueless at the end of the poem is an “object of the eyes, over all demanding all”, and moreover (offset both parenthetically and with EM dashes) the poet calls the banner “absolute owner of all.” The *idea* of democracy, and the *idea* of market capitalism, pursued improperly, with the aid of the right poet, has forcibly drawn the elusive circumference and has destroyed and enslaved the world. Returning, then, to Whitman’s letter to Tennyson, what I find most interesting is the juxtaposition that can be made between the two texts’ themes of production, and goes a long way toward explaining Whitman’s state of mind as he negotiates these spiritual, economic, and aesthetic concerns. Later in the same letter, he writes to Tennyson:

The lesson of Buckle's books on civilization always seemed to me to be that the preceding main basis and continual *sine qua non* of civilization is the eligibility to, and certainty of boundless products for feeding, clothing, and sheltering everybody, infinite comfort, personal and inter-communication and plenty, with mental and ecclesiastical

freedom, and that then all the rest, moral and esthetic, will take care of itself. Well, the United States have secured the requisite bases, and must now proceed to build upon them.

To reiterate here, there are two points that Ed Folsom has recently made that I believe are absolutely central to this argument: First, in his introduction to the facsimile edition of *Vistas*, he very aptly notes the lengths to which Whitman went to keep his own ostensible racial prejudices out of *Vistas*. He states that Whitman knew that “his own personal racial biases had no place in work that was looking toward a transformed democratic future” and rightly points out that through this exclusion that “Whitman managed to produce an enduring essay that can still be read as a relevant critique of American culture today” (xlix). This is a perfect example of Whitman recognizing his limitations as poet in a culture, the production of which he knows must always remain aspirational.

The second point that I take from Folsom is found in the March 2014 issue of *Leviathan* wherein he describes Whitman’s response to the nation’s new Capitol Dome in 1862, noting the “giant derrick that had been hovering over the dome for years now” and which “seemed to him a kind of fitting permanent ornament”(89). Significantly, Whitman demonstrates both an aesthetic and philosophical affinity for that which is incomplete—again, the aspirational.

In the text of *Vistas* itself Whitman speaks there too about the nation’s capitol in a way that thoroughly articulates his belief in a democratic empire predicated on the balance of capitalist and humanist production towards a perpetually incomplete aspiration: “In a few years the dominion-heart of our America will be far inland, toward the West” He takes this line of reasoning still further and posits that:

Our future National Capitol may not be where the present one is. It is possible, nay likely, that in less than fifty years, it will migrate a thousand or two miles, will be re-founded,

and everything belonging to it made on a different plan, original, far more superb. The main social, political spine-character of the States will probably run along the Ohio, Missouri, and Mississippi Rivers, and west and north of them, including Canada. (28)

This is, of course a disquieting statement, but what is perhaps most interesting is Whitman's spatial imagination as he maps out the nation. He is moving from a centralized capitol to something that is in constant flux, fluid, based loosely around rivers with about two-thousand miles of wiggle room. That could nearly place the national capitol in Mexico City. And still, while this is one of the more disquieting facets of Whitman's imperial poetics, it does seem that his dialectic of Nature and Reason requires a constant state of expansionism. It would be overly idealist, even apologetic to suggest that Whitman's work is a conscious departure from the violent history of European imperialism, associating the American people instead with Hebrew prophecies—essentially viewing them as a chosen people, unique for their heterogeneity and their growth out of a multitude of nations, but it does seem to be the crux of his spiritual-democratic philosophy.

Returning, for example, to Whitman's descriptions of the spatial dynamic of the democratic empire, he goes on to say that:

Those regions with the group of powerful brothers towards the Pacific, (destined to the mastership of that sea and its countless paradises of islands,) will compact and settle the traits of America, with all the old retained, but more expanded, grafted on newer, hardier, purely native stock. A Giant growth, composite from the rest, getting their contribution, absorbing it, to make it more illustrious (28).

This organic vision of the growing America continues to be disquieting, but it is the result of free and equal exchange, of gathering and never using overt language of conquest. Moreover, it is

significant that he does not refer to them as “nations,” but as “regions;” they are purely spatial, and their inhabitants are explicitly treated as kin, and the use of such organic terms as “grafted,” “growth,” “and absorbing” reminds us as always, that the poet of the body remains prominent as ever in this narrative of democratic expansion.¹⁰ Furthermore, this expansion is the pursuit of something that Whitman sees as providential, but returning to the poet of the banner and the pennant, Whitman understands that in order to properly realize this democracy, its poet must be nothing short of Messianic—able to see center and circumference. Thus, he calls for “orbic bards” evoking again the movement of the universal spheres and the providential *musica universalis*, synthesizing that image with the Emersonian eye and with the horizon, but meanwhile he also recognizes the contradiction in all of this as he says, “Come forth, sweet democratic despots of the West.” Such a contradiction in terms seems to be Whitman’s recognition of the flawed language with which he is working—the knowledge that these revelations are problematized by virtue of their articulation. At present, though, Whitman is not simply aware of but insistently reminds us of the shortfalls of language, suggesting that only with the redemption, the coming of the poet-Messiah, will the perfect language, and subsequently, the perfect poetry be achieved.

He calls on Hebrew prophets, on Christ, on Shakespeare, Dante, Kant, Hegel, all “leaping over the ages.” He asks them to “sit again... like the Egyptian gods” He asks why we can’t view them as “orbs and systems of orbs, moving in free paths in the spaces of that OTHER heaven, the cosmic intellect, the soul.”

I’m finished at this point apologizing for Whitman. The problems of territory, of sovereignty, and even of cultural appropriation are clear, but what is also clear is an effort to

¹⁰ See Aspiz, Harold. “The Body Politic in *Democratic Vistas*.” In Ed Folsom ed., *Walt Whitman: The Centennial Essays* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1994), 105-119. Print. for a discussion of Whitman’s use of an organic, bodily metaphor to illustrate the “body politic.”

achieve a perfect and complete sense of empathy, and locate a poetic, literary salvation while the poet still hears Banner and Pennant, competes to speak over them, and watches America, far beyond his control, “advancing steadily, evil as well as good, penetrating deep, without one thought, of retraction, ascending, expanding, keep[ing] her course hundreds, thousands of years”(78). And nowhere is this poet-messiah more explicitly depicted than in “Passage to India.” Whitman turns, in Emersonian fashion, toward the East, the past, “the proud truths of the world.” As he relishes the completion of the transcontinental railroad, the telegraph, and the Suez canal, he exclaims, “Finally shall come the poet worthy that name, / The true son of God shall come singing his songs” (5. 24-5) It is, of course, significant that here, Whitman equates—in no uncertain terms—the poet and the messiah, but it is the implications of this equation that is the most significant, and for this reason the poem so obviously pairs with *Democratic Vistas*. These marvels of modernity, the work of voyagers, scientists, and inventors are finally reconciled with the work of the poet, and as a result, the perfect and complete empathy—the futurity to which Loving refers—after which Whitman has sought is ostensibly within reach:

Then not your deeds only O voyagers, O scientists and
inventors, shall be justified,
All these hearts as of fretted children shall be sooth'd,
All affection shall be fully responded to, the secret shall be
told,
All these separations and gaps shall be taken up and hook'd
and link'd together,
The whole earth, this cold impassive, voiceless earth, shall
be completely justified,

Trinitas divine shall be gloriously accomplish'd and
 compact by the true son of God, the poet,
(He shall indeed pass the straits and conquer the mountains,
He shall double the Cape of Good Hope to some purpose,)
Nature and Man shall be disjoin'd and diffused no more,
The true son of God shall absolutely fuse them. (25-34)

There is absolutely no mistaking it, Whitman is describing a complete and perfect redemption that is predicated wholly upon the ability to circle the globe, reconciling the old and new world—realizing the circumference, or as Emerson put it in “The Divinity School Address,” following “so far those shining laws, that he shall see them come full circle; shall see their rounding complete grace; shall see the world to be the mirror of the soul; shall see the identity of the law of gravitation with purity of heart; and shall show that the Ought, that Duty, is one thing with Science, with Beauty, and with Joy”(92).¹¹

This revelry, however, seems tempered by the poem’s ending. What otherwise seems to be Whitman’s perfect realization of democratic redemption in the end seems to give way to a seed of doubt. As the poet urges his soul to sail on farther and farther, he exclaims, “but safe!” and asks “are they not all the seas of God?” and then he tempers his optimism, halts any suggestion that the narrative might ever be complete as he closes, “O farther, farther, farther, sail!” (9.31-2). The poem, as it was originally published alongside “Thoughts” and “O Living Always—Always Dying,” seems to demand from Whitman a certain amount of skepticism. Indeed, considering again Whitman’s affinity for things unfinished and for the aspirational

¹¹ Arthur Golden describes how this section of the poem was modified from the previous, free-standing poem “O vast rondure” and argues that Whitman’s trinity relates “not to Christian Symbolism but... to a new, contemporary, and more meaningful trinity... whose achievements, the true son of God, the poet, shall interpret for man” (1098). Golden, Arthur. "Passage To Less Than India: Structure And Meaning In Whitman's 'Passage To India'." *PMLA: Publications Of The Modern Language Association Of America* 88.5 (1973): 1095-1103. *JSTOR*.

nature of his thought throughout his life, the completeness of “Passage to India” in terms of Whitman’s aesthetic, democratic, and spiritual philosophies does merit a certain amount of disquietude. The two poems with which it was originally published, then, are perhaps intended as an antidote for that. Neither of them, certainly, are poetic achievements anywhere even approaching that of “A Passage to India,” but their placement does merit some consideration. “Thoughts” which came first, responds to the poet’s soul and its ostensible fear of the Ocean at the close of “Passage,” depicting the scene of a shipwreck. In what seems decidedly more Melvillian than Whitmanian, the poet calls every achievement that he has just catalogued into question. Particularly skeptical of the existence of the soul, he depicts the ship “Sinking there while the passionless wet flows on—And I now pondering,” and then he goes on to ask “Are those women indeed gone? / Are Souls drown'd and destroy'd so? / Is only matter triumphant?” (8-10). Moreover, in the following poem “O Living Always—Always Dying,” Whitman continues to privilege the physical world over the spiritual, but not in his characteristically optimistic way. Instead, he asserts—in an uncharacteristically quiet way—the centrality of his aspirational aesthetic, and is determined, “To pass on, (O living! always living!) and leave the corpses behind!” (6). Also interesting here, once again, is the prominent use of the “O”. Beginning each line save the final, Whitman seems quite insistently, to be reminding himself that he is always met—on every journey—with a horizon.

These poems were replaced in the deathbed edition of 1891-2, and “Passage to India” was paired with “Prayer of Columbus,” a far more substantial, and quite a better poem than those previously paired with “Passage.” “Thoughts,” interestingly, was substantially revised and the image of the shipwreck was altogether replaced with a “vista,” some “sight in arriere” (2), purporting that all real knowledge is to be gained in the future, again emphasizing the

impossibility of the poetic revelation. “Columbus” does, however, do much the same work as its predecessors, tempering, the ostensible completeness of “Passage.” Originally published in *Harper’s Monthly Magazine* in March of 1874, the poem is, to be certain, one of the most important to a consideration of *Democratic Vistas*, and more broadly, to a consideration of Whitman’s view of imperial expansion. The poem, as originally published, was preceded by a short prose inscription, not included in the deathbed edition:

[It was near the close of his indomitable and pious life—on his last voyage, when nearly 70 years of age—that Columbus, to save his two remaining ships from foundering in the Caribbean Sea in a terrible storm, had to run them ashore on the Island of Jamaica—where, laid up for a long and miserable year—1503—he was taken very sick, had several relapses, his men revolted, and death seemed daily imminent; though he was eventually rescued, and sent home to Spain to die, unrecognized, neglected and in want....It is only asked, in preparation and atmosphere for the following lines, that the bare authentic facts be recalled and realized, and nothing contributed by the fancy. See, the Antillean Island, with its florid skies and rich foliage and scenery, the waves beating the solitary sands, and the hulls of the ships in the distance. See, the figure of the great Admiral, walking the beach, as a stage, in this sublimest tragedy—for what tragedy, what poem, so piteous and majestic as the real scene?—and hear him uttering—as his mystical and religious soul surely uttered, the ideas following—perhaps, in their equivalents, the very words.] (524)

Whitman, here, is asking his audience to reflect upon what he imagines to have been a prayer said by Christopher Columbus at the very end of his life. Significantly, Whitman insists here that we resist his poetics in favor of “the real scene” of “the bare authentic facts” the true revelation of suffering as Columbus experienced it. Obviously, this is a peculiar request from a person who

is about to attempt to articulate, “the sublimest tragedy” (of which he has no direct knowledge) in the form of a poem, but it ensures the fact that the poem will not even convey the delusion of achieving its ultimate purpose. And while this inscription is excluded from *Leaves of Grass*, it is certainly no accident that the subsequent poem is in answer to what is arguably Whitman’s nearest to complete realization of the ultimate object of his life-long grapple with language.

Moving into the text of the poem itself, we open with the image of Columbus “A batter’d, wreck’d old man,” who is almost certainly facing death. What is most interesting, however, is that what he has achieved is so remarkably similar to the achievements lauded in “Passage.” Columbus says, “By me earth’s elder cloy’d and stifled lands uncloy’d, unloos’d, / By me the hemispheres rounded and tied, the unknown to the known”(32-3). Columbus, it would seem, has completed the circle’s circumference, and in complete contradiction, to the scene of redemption depicted in “Passage,” he is not privy to any divine revelation, and moreover, the poem, as we are reminded in the inscription, is still entirely constrained by language. In response to having rounded the hemispheres he states, “The end I know not, it is all in Thee, / Or small or great I know not—haply what broad fields, what lands, / Haply the brutish measureless human undergrowth I know, / Transplanted there may rise to stature, knowledge worthy thee, / Haply the swords I know may there indeed be turned to reaping tools” (15-9). What is, of course, most obvious here is the reference to the prophecy of Isaiah wherein, at the time of the redemption, “nation shall not lift up sword against nation” and the people shall “beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks” (2:4). This image of the last days, when “out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem,” is the perfect vision of divine conquest, but Columbus, like Whitman, and indeed, like Moses as he looks out on the Holy Land, knows that he will not live to see the promise realized. Columbus knows, however,

and Whitman here echoes his letter to Tennyson, noting the “ brutish *measureless* human undergrowth”(emphasis mine), from which the divine knowledge will ultimately grow. Indeed, in the “Prayer of Columbus,” the realization of America is absolutely and entirely embroiled in and inclusive of, the fulfillment of biblical prophecy, but even more significantly, it is the reconciliation of the fragmentary Hebrew oracles with a perfect poetics, an “Epical Integrity” predicated upon a poetic record as nearly absent from hearsay as possible. Returning, then, from the Deathbed Edition to the 1855 Preface, Whitman ventriloquizing through Columbus can see the moment when the Hebrew scriptures, which have been—according to Emerson— “the bread of life to millions” are met with that which is uniquely American, that “fullest poetical nature.” The final result, which remains always on the horizon, a panoramic vista, is the ultimate articulation of a perfect democracy, an egalitarian empire, a divine *lingua franca*.

Chapter 3: “The Cornerstones of my House:” The Jewish Enlightenment, Pilgrimage, and Divine Revelation in Nature

In Herman Melville’s 1876 poem, *Clarel: A Poem of Pilgrimage in the Holy Land*, the distinctly American, and arguably most autobiographical character, Rolfe engages in a heated conversation with the Broad Church Anglican minister, Derwent, regarding the durability of Jewish identity, and subsequently, the plausibility of Jewish conversion and apostasy. Having encountered a self-proclaimed apostate Jew in the character of the geologist, Margoth, Rolfe and Derwent eventually turn their debate to the figure of Moses Mendelssohn, a prominent German Jewish philosopher during the eighteenth century *haskalah*, a Jewish intellectual movement inspired by the European Enlightenment. A fierce advocate for religious equality, Mendelssohn, like non-Jewish Enlightenment thinkers, presented many challenges to the ecclesiastical authority within the Jewish religion. Most importantly, however, in spite of his speculative view toward rabbinic law, Mendelssohn remained devoted to the Jewish religion and tirelessly resisted the frequent efforts of his gentile interlocutors to convert him to Christianity. Indeed, Rolfe, like some of Mendelssohn’s contemporaries, misconceives Mendelssohn’s doctrine as “doubt Judaic” when he (mis)quotes him as having inquired of Christian proselytizers, “Admit the mounting flames enfold my basement; wisely shall my feet the attic win, for safe retreat?” (2.22.86-90).

According to the Northwestern Newberry edition of *Clarel* this quotation has not been located (776), nor does Mendelssohn appear anywhere in Merton Sealts’ extensive catalog *Melville’s Reading*. I have located the source of this quotation, and found it to be a paraphrase of Philadelphia Rabbi Isaac Leeser’s 1852 translation of Mendelssohn’s treatise, *Jerusalem: A Treatise on Religious Power and Judaism*, and in light of this identification, I believe that Melville deliberately uses the quotation out of context, quite ironically mimicking not only

Mendelssohn's contemporary Christian respondents, but also the liberal Christian attitudes toward the Jewish reformers of Melville's own time. By placing the quotation in such a context, Melville asserts, the post-*haskalah* modernity and urbanization of a considerable population of previously ghettoized, rural Jews. The apostate academic Margoth, pursuing only a geologic monograph among the sacred ruins is, of course, a most extreme example. The *haskalah* should not, however, be mistaken broadly as an apostatic movement. To be sure, figures like Leeser and Mendelssohn were resolved to preserve some form of their Judaism, which is why in Leeser's translation Mendelssohn asks the actual question upon which Rolfe's is based. To those who would have him convert he inquires: "If it be true that the cornerstones of my house have started from their place, and the building threatens to tumble down; would I do well if I were to remove my chattels from the lower to the upper floor for safety? Would I be safer there?" (57)¹². The quotations themselves, I argue, are less significant than the sources are, but through Leeser's preface along with his ministry of Mendelssohn's work, we can begin to consider Melville's most extensive meditation on Judaism in far more nuanced ways. Moreover, we can consider Melville's attitudes toward beliefs in revealed religion simultaneously inside and outside of theological texts from a non-Christian perspective. His trip to Palestine, his journals, and the subsequent poem, are not simply a disappointing effort to reach a bedrock religious foundation, some message from beneath the stones. Rather, I argue that by considering both Leeser and Mendelssohn individually as new sources for Melville's consideration of Judaism—both of whom advocated assimilation into their host nations, along with translations of the Hebrew Bible into English and German respectively, and neither of whom were particularly interested in Zionism—we open up for examination an entirely different and extremely significant model for

Notes:

¹² Direct quotations refer to Isaac Leeser's 1852 translation, but I also rely on Allan Arkush's 1983 scholarly edition.

the modern American diasporic Jew, culturally and religiously connected to their heritage, but with an acute sense of national identity that rivals, if not exceeds, their individual relationship to the Holy Land. In other words, for the proto-Zionist Jews and other pilgrims that Melville—or Clarel, within the context of the poem—encounter in Palestine, the sites and landscapes are superimposed with the same biblical narratives dismissed as hearsay by the Deists. Thus, aside from the radical Millenarian Nehemiah, the only real model for religious devotion comes in the figures able to see it revealed in creation. That leaves us with the atheist Nehemiah, and Agar, the American Jewish matriarch.

I will establish this model for Jewish modernity first through an exploration of the Melville’s sampling of Mendelssohn within the full context of the canto “Concerning Hebrews,” followed by a discussion of the Leeser and Mendelssohn texts and their insistence upon Jewish citizenship and political activism in their respective diasporic nations. In the following section, I will discuss the political climate for Jews during the years leading up to *Clarel’s* publication, creating a context for Melville’s potential exposure to the increasing civic roles of Jews in popular American culture. Significantly, I will do this alongside Melville’s journal entries from his travels in Palestine, as I believe that his exposure to the multifaceted character and dynamic nature of American Jewish culture will allow for a more complicated reading of those entries that have simply been taken for granted as casual anti-Semitism. Finally, I will look to an important, and to my mind, very disappointingly, under-examined character, Agar, the poem’s guardian and primogenitor of Jewish matrilineality, and therefore, its only generative source, removed from her fertile and Edenic home in Illinois and relocated to the barren wasteland of nineteenth century Jerusalem.¹³

¹³ Nina Baym discusses Clarel and Ruth’s but makes only a glancing reference to Nathan and Agar in “The Erotic Motif in Melville’s *Clarel*”

“Faith’s Leaning Tower:” The Structural Integrity of Judeo-Christian Theology

Placing the quotation in the context of the poem, the first question that begs our attention is why the canto is entitled “Concerning Hebrews” rather than other common descriptors such as “Israelites” or “Jews” both of which were used frequently throughout the nineteenth century. What is particularly interesting about this noun choice, however, is the fact that it is a racialized choice, referring foremost to the Semitic descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, but in the more modern uses, as in Rolfe and Derwent’s debate, the word refers to Semitic nations and is not bound to its religious connotations (OEDonline.com). This, of course, allows for some slippage as the characters attempt to determine the durability of Jewish individual identity, and creates a glaring discrepancy between Melville’s interrogative and Mendelssohn’s, which already, of course, differ greatly from one another. As Rolfe takes up Mendelssohn as his proof text for essential Jewishness, the threat he presents to Mendelssohn’s precarious model of religious devotion is not the settling foundation, the shifting cornerstones, but flames “enfolding” his basement. Indeed, the implications of this change merits examining the debate at some length. Derwent begins, insisting upon the urbanization of the English Jew, that, “the weird old seed yields market grain,” noting the ways in which the Jewish garment merchants, the “Houndsditch clothesman” have assimilated into English mercantile culture (2.22.25-34). Rolfe challenges this point, citing a universal Jewish “fealty / To ancient rites,” encouraging a view of Judaism as something that is a permanent fixture of the world, suggestively pointing to Christianity’s ephemerality when he asserts that “Aaron’s gemmed vest” the breastplate of the high priest in the Holy Temple, “will long outlive Genevan cloth”—a clear reference to the city in which Calvinism developed and thrived (2.22.46-9). And upon making this point, Rolfe challenges Derwent to come up with “More than one bold freethinking Jew / That in his day with

vigor shook / Faith's leaning tower" (2.22.55-7). Melville's investment in Mendelssohn's treatise begins to become clear at this point with Derwent's response that "Faith's leaning tower was founded so: / Faith leaned from her beginning; yes, / if slant, she holds her steadfastness" (2.22.58-60).¹⁴ The conditional construction of the declaration presupposes genuine faith only in terms of a structure that is balanced through the negotiation not simply of faith and doubt, but as Mendelssohn insists early on in *Jerusalem*, in terms of liberty and devotion. True faith, then, is only so, "if slant."¹⁵ This marks Melville's initial reason for departing from Mendelssohn's choice of the "shifting cornerstones" as the destabilizing influence on his Judeo-Christian structure. In other words, choosing fire rather than simply a settling foundation seems for Melville to offer a more complete existential threat to individual faith, Jewish or otherwise.

In response to Derwent's having rendered steadfast faith's leaning tower, Rolfe changes metaphors, recalling and interrogating another instance when Jews living in diaspora ostensibly assimilated. Rolfe, using as evidence the vanished population of Hellenistic Judaism, demands, "Recall those Hebrews, which of old / ... / Would fain Eclectic comfort fold / By grafting slips from Plato's palm / On Moses' melancholy yew" and then goes on leadingly to ask, "but did they sprout?" (2.22.75-80). At first glance, it seems that both characters take for granted Rolfe's subsequent suggestion that "we seek balm / By kindred graftings" (2.22.80-1), but this anatomy of Hellenistic Judaism is not so easily dismissed. In addition to the obvious Mosaic allusion, it is worth noting that Melville may also be referencing Paul's meditation in Romans chapter 11 on Judaism, Gentile Christianity, the tension between works and grace, and the potential salvation of the Jews. Paul offers context to Rolfe's horticulture, insisting that Christianity is grafted like a

¹⁴ Bernard Rosenthal describes Derwent's rhetorical strategy in similar terms, noting that his reliance on an enduring transcendent myth (178).

¹⁵ Perhaps, like Emily Dickinson's "truth," it "must dazzle gradually" lest "every man be blind" (Fr 1263)

“wild olive tree” among the branches of Judaism, persistent throughout that “if the firstfruit be holy, the lump is also holy: and if the root be holy, so are the branches” (Rom 11:16-7).

Returning to Moses, though, and his “melancholy yew,” the narrative juxtaposition of Paul and Moses is certainly no accident, and although the approach to the Hebrew Bible is clear in terms of the general character, the exact context is ambiguous.¹⁶ Regardless of the specific allusion, however, the significance lies in the fact that they all represent story of the revelation of and covenant with the God of the Hebrew Bible. And like Rolfe’s comparison of the Jewish High Priest’s breastplate with the Calvinist’s Genevan Cloth, this grafting of Mosaic with Pauline indicates the narrative evolution of that same God. Melville evokes God as revealed in Exodus in the form of fire and later communed with by the breastplate-wearing priest through the rite of sacrificial fire. God was revealed to and guided the wandering Jews in the desert as a pillar of fire. The Jewish association with fire, in other words, stands in an ambiguous relationship to the mounting flames that Rolfe suggests enfolded Mendelssohn’s metaphorical basement. Melville’s use of fire as a threat to the structure of individual faith, then, seems to be a deliberate demonstration of the ways in which Jewish narratives come to be appropriated and redeployed by Protestant, and particularly Calvinist narratives. Moreover, it is certainly no accident that the biblical proof texts cited during this debate are all instances of revelations narrated at a remove, all coopted and decidedly representative of the “hearsay problem.”

For Mendelssohn, shifting cornerstones are an intellectual challenge to which he relentlessly rises—the negotiation of faith and liberty. The nature of this fire, however, may not necessarily be the flames of hellfire or of damnation. They may simply emphasize the futility of

¹⁶ Possible interpretations might include, for example, the yew as a tree, perhaps the burning bush through which God was revealed to Moses, or, as a frequent ornament of churchyards, the yew could reference the unknown site of Moses’ grave. Also feasible, as yews are famously used to make bows, it could represent the staff with which Moses performed divine magic, bringing forth the ten plagues, and with which Moses ultimately disobeyed divine orders resulting his exclusion from the Promised Land.

moving between sections of the same theological edifice when the mounting flames of doubt and secularity—like the apostasy of Margoth and his infidel science—encroach upon the structure of belief. Melville may indeed be suggesting that people of all faiths are doomed to the same final cosmic homelessness. But when we consider the parallel structure through which Melville grafts together the Hebrew Bible and the Pauline Epistles, the tension between salvation and damnation is foregrounded and the imperative remains: St. Paul warns the gentiles, those grafted branches, that “if God spared not the natural branches, take heed lest he not spare thee” (Romans 11:20-1),

Therefore, by replacing Mendelssohn’s shifting cornerstones with the threat of fire, whether that of damnation or of something more quotidian, the fundamental meaning of Mendelssohn’s structural metaphor is eliminated. All of what Calvin would call “the external rites”¹⁷ of Judaism that are predicated on some form of a divine fire, are replaced by the all-consuming blaze, and no space remains for Mendelssohn’s steady negotiations of devotion and liberty, nor is there a space for Derwent to suggest a counterintuitive steadfastness as he did with faith’s leaning tower. Furthermore, Rolfe’s fire threatens the Jew’s feet, ostensibly suggesting the corporal tortures of hell, while Mendelssohn’s concern is simply for his “chattels.” The total consumption of the structure through fire, then, allows Mendelssohn to be dismissed in the following lines wherein his convert nephew, the renowned composer Felix Mendelssohn, is confused with the progeny of a Jewish peddler named Emanuel Mendel, whose son converted to Christianity, coming to be known to us as the historian Neander.

In the lines that follow, Rolfe describes Margoth as being akin to Spinoza, reckoning them the “erring twain” who regardless of any claims to “high intelligence” remain, to Rolfe, deluded (2.22.122-4). And while Rolfe recognizes the distance—whether temporal, spatial, or

¹⁷ This term appears, for instance, in Calvin’s commentary on the book of the minor prophet Micah wherein he states, “Hypocrites place all holiness in external rites”

philosophical—between “Pan’s Atheist” and Margoth, noting “what parted poles appear,” his final rhetorical move, rendering them as disparate points on a globe, encapsulates all Jews in a monolith. This model for Jewish identity, based on a sort of one-drop-rule, is certainly not lost on Melville. Rolfe’s earlier comparison of the breastplate with Genevan cloth, asserts a supernatural durability that the Jewish people have relative to Protestantism, which seems also to apply to Catholicism as can be seen in characters like Ungar and Salvaterra (even by virtue of his name), the Franciscan Monk.¹⁸

Thus, Mendelssohn enters the conversation at a critical point in Melville’s contemplation of Jewish identity. Jewish belief and devotion is imperative to figures like Leeser and Mendelssohn while cultural and religious self-identification remains insistently contextualized within secular nationalism. Simultaneously, this identity must resist an externally imposed, racialized perception of Jewishness.

The Haskalah and the Role of Judaism in American Religious Liberalism

To be sure, this attempt to negotiate a space for Judaism within the larger scope of American religious liberalism is a complicated one, but quite simply defining the *haskalah*, the Jewish enlightenment, clarifies the role that both Mendelssohn and Leeser play in this space quite nicely indeed. American Jewish historian Hasia Diner notes this particular era leading into the early decades of the nineteenth century as a breakdown of the ghettos of Europe, a modernization and urbanization of global Jewry. As Diner aptly puts it, these migration patterns between the 1820s and the 1920s, spurred by the intellectual debates grown out of the *haskalah*, “informed deep changes in what Jewishness meant to [the migrants]” (74).

¹⁸ It is worth noting that this relationality between Jews and Catholics complicates Rosenthal’s conclusion that Judaism simply “offers a ghostly backdrop to the religious dialogue about Protestants and Catholics”(177).

A look at the contemporary representations of Judaism in publications like *The New York Times*, *The Galaxy* (A New York City serial later absorbed by the *Atlantic*), and *Harper's New Monthly* indicates, subsequently a significantly increased popular interest in the Reform movement that derives so much from Mendelssohn's thought. A column in *The New York Times*, for example, on December 18, 1870 entitled "The Jews in America" focused on "the progress of reform" (8), and in January 8, 1871 outlined "the exact difference between the Orthodox and Reformed Jews" (6). Elsewhere, an 1872 article in *The Galaxy*, insists that "Natives of the United States... cannot easily distinguish an educated German Jew from an educated German Christian" (47), and an 1874 article in *Harper's* asserts that "The Hebrew race is entering anew upon an unimpeded progress," and goes on to state that the main lesson "of the Jewish story is that education alone can preserve the permanence of races, and that the perpetuation of nations and of institutions rests upon the intellectual cultivation of the people" (91-2). The result, however, of these popular investigations seems, almost without exception, to equate progress in American Judaism with its resemblance to liberal Christianity. A great deal of attention is paid, for example, to the abandonment of Hebrew and subsequently of German in the prayer services, as well as to the absence of prayer shawls and skullcaps. Indeed, although there is evidence to suggest that popular tolerance of and advocacy for Judaism seems to have been on the rise at the time of *Clarel's* publication, the greater tendency seems, much like Melville's prodigal Lyonese, "to cut old grandsire Abraham / as out of mode" (4.28.147-8).

In order best to understand Rolfe and Derwent's debate in the canto entitled "Concerning Hebrews," and subsequently, both Melville's and contemporary liberal Protestantism's ongoing dialogue with Jewish reform, the context surrounding both the original publication of *Jerusalem* merits some consideration: In 1782 an anonymous pamphlet was issued in Berlin in response to a

preface that Mendelssohn composed to the widely circulated reprinting of the work, *Vindiciae Judaeorum*, originally composed during the mid-seventeenth century by the Portuguese Rabbi, Manasseh Ben Israel. In his title, the pamphleteer professed to be “searching for light and right” in the preface, but as is evidenced in Mendelssohn’s subsequent 1783 treatise, *Jerusalem*, in the pamphlet as well as other largely epistolary responses, “light and right” suggested a widely perceived sympathy between Mendelssohn and the teachings of Christianity--so much so, in fact, that *Jerusalem* was composed in part as a response to these murmurings. Mendelssohn refers explicitly in *Jerusalem* to a Mr. Mörschel, who insists, as Mendelssohn quotes, that he has discerned what he perceives to be Mendelssohn’s alienation from Judaism. The Pamphlet’s author, furthermore, suggests that Mendelssohn has “weighed with greater accuracy the Christian system of religion” than his own Judaism, suggesting further “perhaps you have now approached nearer the faith of the Christians whilst you tear yourself away from the servitude of the iron bonds of your church”(56). Mendelssohn imputes Mörschel’s sole piece of evidence, noting that it was his professed universal religious tolerance in the preface that seems to have given the Christian proselytizers the wrong idea, resulting in their insistence that he convert. Mendelssohn’s refutation of the proselytizing argument is what is of the most concern to me here. Mendelssohn turns in this section to an architectural metaphor to refute his respondents and suggest that Christianity is built *upon* Judaism and therefore must necessarily “tumble into ruins” where Judaism fails (57).

The structural metaphor is frequently utilized in Mendelssohn’s treatise. Mendelssohn does not, however, necessarily view the structure as a hierarchal religious model. The introductory statements, for instance, frame the intersection of and subsequent tension between religious authority and civil liberty as a shaky structure, one that can only be stabilized though

secular politics. Furthermore, Mendelssohn turns early on to models of ecclesiastical despotism, from the Roman Catholic Church looking as far forward as the works of Thomas Hobbes, and notes that the most stable civil and religious structures are those with the least implicit individual liberty. As an advocate of individual and religious freedom, of course, this model is not satisfactory to Mendelssohn, and he prefers the shaky house wherein moral authority and civil liberty are in a state of constant and precarious exchange. Most important, finally, Mendelssohn insists that this doctrine is not a departure from the religion of his ancestors although he opposes the concept of a revealed religion, suggesting instead that God is revealed through the natural, the physical world, but never simply through texts.¹⁹ That Melville would be drawn to this theological model, which smacks not only of Romanticism and indeed Transcendentalism, but also clearly resembles the views of Thomas Paine, Voltaire, and the Deists more generally, is not surprising. Historicizing Melville's most probable point of encounter with the text, then, not only adds nuance to his already a very sophisticated mode of religious thinking, but it also significantly illustrates Judaism's applicability to the model of religious liberalism that Melville pursued in the latter decades of his life.²⁰

Furthermore, I would argue that by considering both Leeser and Mendelssohn as new sources for Melville's consideration of Judaism, we open up for examination an entirely different and extremely significant model for the modern American diasporic Jew—culturally and religiously connected to their heritage, but with an acute sense of national identity that rivals, if not exceeds, their individual relationship to the Holy Land.

¹⁹ On Melville's interest in Judaism and the revelation of God in the Hebrew Bible see Goldman, Stan. William Potter goes on, however, to assert the Melville's view of the centrality of ritual observation and orthodoxy to Jewish identity, a notion that Mendelssohn and Melville's more contemporary American Jewish reformers are obviously writing against.

²⁰ For a discussion of the extent to which Melville was engaged with religious liberalism and more specifically the Unitarian Church see Yothers *Sacred Uncertainty*, also see Coleman, Dawn and Duban, James. For an alternative view see Parker, Hershel *Herman Melville: A Biography volume 2*, and also by Parker "The Confidence Man's Masquerade" in the Norton Critical Edition of *The Confidence Man*. 293-303.

The version of this text that Melville was almost certain to have encountered was Philadelphia Rabbi Isaac Leeser's 1852 edition, the first English translation available and intended for popular consumption. In his introduction, Leeser asserts "the power and scope" of the Jewish religion, "in opposition to the assumed right of Christianity to claim for itself" the prerogative to manage the affairs of civil society (v). Leeser's concerns extend to the question of American Jews as citizens able to hold public office; his rationale being that as a diasporic people they are at best, "tolerated aliens"(v). This concern with participating in politics is key to Mendelssohn who sees it as the balancing force in his model of religious belief.

The precedent for Melville's interest in Leeser can be easily established on a broadly cultural level, and in fact, Melville would have been keenly aware that Judaism, and for that matter Islam, (if we are to include all the Abrahamic religions) were anything but out of mode. While after his disenchanting visit to Palestine, Melville's journal indicates an attitude towards the Jewish people that ranges from ambivalent at best, and disdainful at worst,²¹ it remains imperative to consider the dynamic and flourishing American Jewish communities that Melville encountered after his return. Thus, Melville's turn to Leeser's translation is surely not an insignificant one; it places his finger clearly on the pulse of the burgeoning Jewish American culture of the second half of the nineteenth century²². Prior to our knowledge of Melville's engagement with this text, his registry of the nuances and variety of Jewish individuals in *Clarel* seems to fall frustratingly close to the massive influx of Eastern European Jews that would begin around 1880 and would almost entirely overshadow the previous immigrations of primarily German Jews following the Napoleonic wars, and of Sephardic Jews from as far back as the

²¹ See Obenzinger, Hilton. Also see, for example, *Journals* 91.

²² Leeser became visible in the political sphere during the Civil War when he lobbied president Lincoln to appoint the first Jewish chaplains in the Union Army, See Jonathan D. Sarna and Benjamin Shapell, *Lincoln and the Jews* p. 109

exploration. Assumptions founded solely on the ornery remarks in his journal, therefore, fall profoundly short of predicating the attentiveness with which Melville crafts Jewish subjectivities throughout *Clarel*. And while we have no record of when Melville would have encountered the text, his interest in the Jewish religion beyond his relentless allusive use of the Hebrew Bible appears to have been minimal prior to his visit to the Holy Land in 1857.²³ His extremely nuanced attitude regarding his Jewish figures in *Clarel*, however, seems to suggest that he encountered the text between his visit to the Levant in 1856-7 and the composition of the poem in the early 1870s. I would argue, in fact, that the profoundly increased visibility of American Jewish communities during the period of *Clarel's* composition likely colored Melville's interpretations as he returned to his travel journal.²⁴

Before discussing Agar in earnest and focusing on her severely underestimated efficacy as the impetus for the producing individual Jewish subjectivity, I should point to a moment in Mendelssohn's treatise wherein he addresses his Christian readers directly, not in defense of his own Judaism, but with a sincere desire for respectful discourse. He implores that reader: "not to challenge the Jew to battle at the appearance of a contradiction between truth and truth, between Scripture and reason, but [to] endeavor conjointly with him to detect the baselessness of the

²³ On Melville and the Hebrew Bible see Pardes *Melville's Bibles* and "Melville's Song of Songs". Furthermore, I do not want to exclude the possibility, however, that Melville may have encountered Mendelssohn's text at an earlier time. In fact, he uses a language strikingly similar to the passage he paraphrases from Mendelssohn in describing the structure of the Mosque of Omar rising "upon the foundation stones of Solomon, triumphing over that which sustains it, an emblem of the Moslem religion, which at once spurn's that deeper faith which fathered it and preceded it" (*Journals* 85).

²⁴ For example, Melville reflect briefly in his journal on his encounter with a man named Warder Cresson, a man from Philadelphia, and presumably one of the Jewish emigrants Melville depicts as flies taking up "their abode in a skull." Of Cresson, who remains the most obvious prototype for the character of Nathan, Melville notes that he is "An American turned Jew" who divorced his wife and "married a Jewess &c" and limits his commentary to a single word, "sad" (*Journals* 85), evidencing his engagement with, or at the very least, his awareness of the Jewish community in Philadelphia. Another significant member of the Philadelphia Jewish Community was Commodore Uriah P. Levy, "the savior of Monticello," the first Jewish Commodore in the United States Navy, whose crusades in the interest of religious freedom and the abolition of corporal punishment in the navy would have certainly been of interest to Melville. Levy's last will and testament, in which he left Monticello to the people of the United States as a school for the children and orphans of sailors in the U.S. Navy, was published in the *New York Times* in 1862. On Cresson see Yothers, *Romance of The Holy Land in American Travel Writing*. Also see Obenzinger.

contradiction,” as it “concerns the cause of both” (57). This notion of Mendelssohn’s permeates the lines of *Clarel*, and in the end, the student who vanishes into the “obscurer town,” seems—as the word “obscurer” suggests by definition—even more estranged and befuddled than he began (4.34.56). The question, however, that the speaker asks in closing—“If Luther’s day expand to Darwin’s year, / Shall that exclude the hope—foreclose the fear?”—is ultimately answered: Even the stoic may “be astounded into Heaven,” and death may, indeed, “[rout] life into victory”(3.35.1-34). The speaker, in these final moments encourages its reader to join in detecting the baselessness of the contradiction. And we should remember Clarel in one of his moments of deepest despair, crying out, asking “ah, Nehemiah, alone art true?” and pondering “the folly of the cross / contemned by reason”(3.21.323-5). What triggered this despair, however, is what is of most consequence: Margoth’s apostasy; Derwent’s forewarnings of encroaching modernity and secularity—that “a decade’s now a century” and that Clarel’s goading ruminations are “out of mode”—reflect the Anglican minister’s profound doubt of religious orthodoxy (3.21.284-5). But perhaps the most forcefully heterodox moment of Derwent’s sermon is his refutation of the foundational idea of Christ grafting “with his slip from paradise” onto the Jewish faith in which he was immersed. Particularly significant, moreover, is Derwent’s terming of Judaism as a “crab-apple faith” as Melville, in his 1857 journal describes the wild olive tree (like the one in Romans 11) as resembling the apple tree “in its grotesque contortions”(89). In short, Clarel’s despairing entreat to Nehemiah in the closing lines of this canto reflects Mendelssohn’s insistence that Jews and Christians not battle “at the appearance of a contradiction between faith and reason,” and as the speaker in the Epilogue and Mendelssohn both suggest, faith is necessarily challenged by modernity, and there is a solidarity that

transcends faith, perhaps even solace to be found in the fact that the discrepancies between faith and reason will not be resolved—that “the light is greater, hence the shadow more” (4.25.19).

Agar the Invisible Heroine and the Silent Erasure of American Judaism

Of the moments most regarded as casually anti-Semitic in Melville’s travel journals is his commentary on Warder Cresson, the American Jewish convert and inspiration for the character of Nathan. Nathan, of course, married a Jewish woman, Agar, and converted to Judaism in Illinois. The two, along with their daughter Ruth, then made the pilgrimage settling in Jerusalem, seemingly taking part in the fulfillment of Hebrew biblical commandment of *aliyah*, or pilgrimage, and ultimately bringing to fruition what many would assume to be the ultimate desire of any devout Jew—the completion of the Exodus Romance—redemption to the Holy Land. When we view the Cresson narrative through the lens of Agar, Nathan and Ruth, however, Melville’s commentary on his leaving his family, marrying a Jewess, and moving to Palestine, as simply “sad” seems less disparaging towards Cresson as a newly converted Jew, and more a commentary on the impulse to abandon permanently his native land. Moreover, when we view this impulse through the poetic figuration of Nathan, Agar, and Ruth the reasons that this pilgrimage would seem misguided to Melville become particularly apparent. Indeed, through our examination of Agar, we are given a unique perspective on this dynamic, and while one certainly should not dismiss that Melville’s “sadness” as articulated in his journal, may indeed be over the fact that Cresson abandoned his gentile family, his extraordinarily tender and extensive meditation on Agar’s homesickness for Illinois suggests that he sees the value of the Jewish constituency in America, how completely fulfilled Agar is in her faith while in America due to her experience of divine revelation through nature, and is disappointed by the religiously zealous impulse to relocate to Palestine. Also extraordinarily telling regarding his portrayal of

Agar is how seemingly deliberate he is hiding her role, which is absolutely indispensable with regard the sustainability of Jewish identity in the poem, quite conspicuously behind the much larger, male-dominated themes of pilgrimage.²⁵

In order to understand how Agar becomes lost within these pilgrimage narratives, we should note the ways in which contemporary Protestant orthodoxies focused around the Holy Land sought in large part to co-opt Jewish pilgrimage narratives. This, of course, is not altogether dissimilar from the attempts being made to blur the lines between liberal Protestantism and Jewish reformers in the United States, and moreover, it speaks quite clearly to the frustrations that Mendelssohn articulates in *Jerusalem* and elsewhere. To offer an example of how Melville actively registers this phenomenon in the text of *Clarel*, the critical index of major characters provided in the editorial supplement to the Northwestern-Newberry edition, describes Nehemiah as “the only major pilgrim committed to that narrow sectarian orthodoxy of which Clarel has recently been dispossessed”(629). The question of Clarel’s dispossession, first of all, is far more complex than the editors are allowing, but the central knowledge provided by this appendix is the fact that Nehemiah historically would have belonged to the Millerites formed in the United States around the 1840s. This movement, of which Clorinda Minor can be counted a member, was preoccupied with the “Establishment of a colony of Christian converts from Judaism in the Holy Land” (Yothers 44). More importantly, however, Brian Yothers notes something that is of absolutely central significance to the thesis of this paper: that is, the fact that Minor represents a “truly ‘made-in-America’ religious tradition” (48). Thus, although Nehemiah’s religious orthodoxy seems at times to be almost laughable, and although his belief system is predicated on a chauvinistic anti-Semitism that is nevertheless so for its benevolent

²⁵ Regarding the number and scope of the pilgrimages in *Clarel*, and their relation to the epic genre see David Watson, “Melville, Interrupted”

attitude, he represents the ultimate figuration of resolute *and* American faith in the poem. While the editors of the Northwestern-Newberry edition represent the critical commonplace in their dismissal of Nehemiah's religious beliefs, the subsequent dismissal of his character is fundamentally detrimental to our understanding of the poem. Yothers notes that Minor distinguishes herself from most other Christian Pilgrims to the Holy Land because of her "sympathy" as she describes one of the many Jewish religious services she observes (48). This same sympathy is apparent in the character of Nehemiah, and as such, Melville provides us in him a figure of deep intellectual attraction to the Jewish people, an attraction that can perhaps be seen to have transferred to Clarel after Nehemiah's death. More importantly, however, Nehemiah is representative, again, of the only unwavering American model of religious faith in the poem and shapes Melville's understanding of the relationship between American imperialism and eschatological Christianity; a relationship which, despite manifold popular negotiations, simply cannot be understood without prolonged and detailed attention to the Jewish people and their extremely complicated relationship with the Holy Land, and moreover, with their subsequent contentment in their diasporic homelands whether in Western Europe or the United States. To this point, Diner differentiates, very much in the spirit of Leeser's preface and Mendelssohn's manifesto, the ways in which America "gave Jews the chance to behave politically unlike Jews in other Western democratic societies" (187). Thus, the investment in nineteenth century civil society, particularly for a natural-born American Jew like Agar, becomes even more pronounced. In other words, the ostensible freedom from the ghetto that Diner posits as having been spurred by the *haskalah* is essentially erased by a virtual reghettoization of Agar within the walls of the Old City and ultimately, her mourning house, and tomb.

In no uncertain terms, Melville is illustrating the fact that any truly American eschatology would necessarily be predicated on a “narrow sectarian orthodoxy” like Nehemiah’s, and this eschatology is fundamentally problematized by the fact—as Melville illustrates exhaustively in the poem—that the Jewish people are a polyethnic, modern, and most significantly, a diasporic people that are not tidily waiting in the old city of Jerusalem to be converted.

When we focus, then, on Agar Melville’s attention to mosaic and Rabbinic law is keen, as Agar’s natural-born Judaism, renders her husband Nathan’s conversion to a certain extent irrelevant, as their children would necessarily be Jews regardless of his status. The centrality of her character, indeed, makes the extent to which she has been overlooked by *Clarel* scholars particularly frustrating. Worth noting, though is the fact that Melville’s reading of the Old Testament may not have yielded this information on Jewish matrilineality, as it is only referred to glancingly in the Hebrew bible, as in Numbers 36, but was codified explicitly in the Babylonian Talmud. Kitto does not seem to have included this information either, despite an extensive entry regarding biblical marriage laws. I am assuming, however, that between Melville’s reading and his interactions with Jews at home as well as in Palestine, he would have been privy to this information. That said, Nathan’s conversion and marriage to Agar is fascinating when considered in terms of their identity. Considering Edgar Dryden and his keen attention to nebulous national identities, it is, in this regard, particularly so. Agar and Nathan’s expatriation, in particular, renders them in such terms as we must dredge the poem for answers. Regarding Agar, the poem refers to her most directly as “a Jewess—born/ In Gentile land where nature’s wreath / Exhales the first creation’s breath.” (1.27.17-9). This provides an important echo of Leeser’s fears regarding the status of Jewish citizens in the United States. The rhetoric

here is that of relationality between Illinois, the American West, and the Holy Land. Illinois is in fact rendered here in Edenic terms, but Agar never treated as an American. She does however have a divine connection with nature that is never replicated when she is in Palestine. When Nathan first meets her, she is a “Jewess” and a Jewess she remains. Nathan, similarly, and oddly is never referred to as an American, but represented in terms of his likely Anglican roots as an immigrant. Nehemiah’s remarks about Nathan indicate the extent to which the act of conversion alienates him. He asks “did ever man stray / as thou?” and then Nehemiah proceeds to accentuate the active nature of his choice, “to Judaize to-day!”(1.22.77-8). Nehemiah’s focus on the temporality illustrates the urgency that he feels regarding the eschatological timeline—as though become a Jew today were more cause for despair than doing so yesterday. This is particularly interesting given his benevolent attitude toward Ruth and Agar; *They* are Jews, and can be saved, but Nathan has transgressed. The speaker, moreover, always considers, as I suppose the bible would, Jews living outside of The Holy Land to be living “on alien soil” (1.17.265). But Agar is drawn to Clarel *because* he is American. Although, as the poem says, Clarel does not share her blood, she is nearer to him in spirit (1.27.23), again accentuating the centrality of Agar’s Americanness to her identity.

Amy Kaplan argues for imposing the contemporary paradigm of “foreign” and “domestic” in our readings of nineteenth century texts, and suggests that in doing so, we may dislocate the notion of frontier men and women as existing in separate spheres, but as together constituting—as seen in the current rhetoric of foreign policy—as the domestic which is constituted by its contrast with the foreign (582). She argues, “If domesticity plays a key role in imagining the nation as home, then women, positioned at the center of the home, play a major role in defining the contours of the nation and its shifting borders with the foreign”(582). To be

sure, I am not suggesting that we should read the nineteenth century Holy Land as an American frontier, nor am I suggesting Melville is doing so, but there are points that merit our consideration. In particular, the continued concern that Nathan's farm—ostensibly his imposition of Jeffersonian agrarianism outside the walls of Jerusalem—is going to result in his death, as he is outside of the protection of first his own domestic sphere and second the larger sphere of protection that Jerusalem represents. Thus, upon Nathan's death, it seems that the paradigm Kaplan describes—wherein the American empire is described through the violent confrontation of the American domestic model with foreign Indians—is fully realized in Jerusalem by American Jews. This again makes explicit the Jew's role, which is otherwise ignored or disregarded, in a rehearsal of covenantal ideology. What is most significant about the breakdown of Kaplan's model, however, following Nathan's death is the subsequent deaths of Agar and Ruth. Those generative sources of Judaism that ostensibly possessed the efficacy to flourish, content in their true American Palestine, are swallowed by the wreckage of the barren desert and consumed by the mourning house and the rabbi's zealous enforcement of religious orthodoxy. On another note, it seems that Melville is insisting, through Agar's interactions with Clarel that she is essentially an American while her Judaism is something that must be performed. This may be that Agar simply, as Melville himself certainly would, prefers the natural landscape of Illinois to that of Jerusalem. Melville, in fact famously wrote in his travel journal that “No country will more quickly dissipate romantic expectations than Palestine — particularly Jerusalem” (91). To some the disappointment is heart sickening but the fact remains absolutely fascinating, and more importantly calls into question the entire notion of redemption from diaspora—Agar longs for the time when she was longing for Jerusalem. The speaker informs us, in a passage which ought to be considered at length:

Happy was Agar ere the seas
She crossed for Zion. Pride she took--
Pride, if in small felicities--
Pride in her little court, a nook
Where morning-glories starred the door:
So sweet without, so snug within.
At sunny matin meal serene
Her damask cloth she'd note. It bore
In Hebrew text about the hem,
Mid broidered cipher and device
IF I FORGET THEE, O JERUSALEM!
And swam before her humid eyes,
In rainbowed distance paradise. (1.27.52-64)

What is most obviously striking about this passage is the quotation of Psalm 137, which is arguably the most profound lamentation of diaspora to be found anywhere in the Hebrew scriptures. Agar's sentiment is certainly not an unfounded one. I would imagine that many Jews, even those who are so devout that they recite Psalm 137 daily, and those who chant "next year in Jerusalem" at their paschal table would abhor uprooting their lives for the sake of living in the old city of Jerusalem. Psalm 137, though, unfolds in a decidedly less romantic way than it is here being portrayed. It moves on, the speaker requesting profound punishments if they fail to place Jerusalem above their "chiefest joy" (we are perhaps reminded here of the Hebrew Psalms being customarily used for conjuring as seen in a work like *Dr. Faustus*) and then the poem ends with the joyous dashing of Babylonian infants against rocks. And while that may be a slight

digression, what is significant here is the fact that Agar's chiefest joy is undermined, and her American-ness is undermined, all because she is a devout Jew, and even more likely, because her husband as a convert cannot experience the same validation of his Judaism in Illinois as Agar can. This single passage dislodges, in fact, the American providential narrative for the simple reason that, although she had Eden before her while she was in Illinois, she was redeemed to the land of Zion. What is perhaps most significant, in Nathan's canto and here, is Melville's attention to the nuanced practices of Jews in diaspora, further indicating his interest not simply in their ritual, but clearly, in the role they play as an inseparable part contemporary eschatological doctrines. Thus, Agar, the poem's sole generative and most overlooked source of Judaism finds religious validation in dwelling "together in unity" to quote Psalm 133, and simply does not require the spatial validation of Palestine. In fact, a closer reading of Psalm 133, which *Clarel* does not offer, but which is recited at Jewish Sabbath tables all over the world, reminds us that for Jews to dwell together is tantamount to experiencing the dew "descending upon the Mountains of Zion." This is clearly a spiritual tradition to which Agar is profoundly attuned.

The following verse paragraph mirrors the last, as Ruth has her own garden, though pitiful in comparison to Agar's lush, Illinois garden, over which she cries and pitifully longs. This brings us to a point that is scarcely discussed in criticism, the fact that Agar so approvingly endorses Clarel's relationship with Ruth, through which it seems possible that "youth and nature's fond accord / Wins Eden back"(1.28.8-9). At this point, however, we realize in spite of Agar's wishes, that the two young lovers have little chance of such a victory. The poet here imposes, however, a seemingly foreign "Eastern" code, which clearly had not applied to Agar in her courtship with Nathan, but which will clearly keep Ruth and Clarel apart. Finally, Ruth is closed up entirely in her mourning for her father, which Melville seems to imagine, at least for

the purposes of his poetics, as such an intense emotional experience and imposition of oppressive religious orthodoxy that it can kill someone. But the death here, asserts once again the sadness that Melville experiences upon his meeting with Cresson. In other words, when Ruth dies, the hope of a returned maternal source of Judaism in America dies with her, leaving her story and Agar's as one more indecipherable message beneath the barren rubble and we are reminded again of Melville's journal that "hapless are the favorites of heaven" (91).

Conclusion

Thomas Paine writes in *The Age of Reason* that none of his critiques of religious institutions “can be said to apply to the character of Jesus Christ. He was a virtuous and amiable man. The morality that he preached and practiced was of the most benevolent kind;” he goes on however to include in this statement that “similar statements of morality had been preached by Confucius, and by some of the Greek philosophers, many years before; by the Quakers since; and by many good men in all ages, it has not been exceeded by any” (404). Melville, in an 1849 letter to Evert Duyckink described Shakespeare, as though he were one of these men: “full of sermons on the mount, and gentle, aye, almost as Jesus” (*Correspondence*, 119). My point being, that as is illustrated throughout this essay, both Melville and Whitman share an awareness of the fact that the poet is capable of approaching that singular morality, becoming what Emerson calls in “The Poet,” an “Eternal Man.” This preoccupation with the morality of their poetics, and with the achievement of that singularity does not simply result in great poetry, or even simply in high mindedness. It results in a palpable anxiety that often permeates the lines of their work. Difficult as it might be to see the insecurities of a poet who brags to us about the tidiness of his bowels, the Mosaic view mimicking Mount Abarim in “Prayer of Columbus” is enough to remind us. Similarly, when we see Melville’s monumental poetic task in *Clarel* self-deprecatingly described as “a metrical affair, a pilgrimage or what not, of several thousand lines, eminently adapted for unpopularity” it is difficult to believe (*Correspondence* 472). Both poets, however, have clearly illustrated to us their acute awareness of the fact that when they are contemplating democracy for the poetic and for the historical record, their purposes hold to a standard for which they must be confident in the sacredness of their endeavor, but wary of the dangers of false ministry, giving

the same advice to poets Emerson as does in 1838 to the newly-ordained ministers of Harvard's Divinity School:

For all our penny-wisdom, for all our soul-destroying slavery to habit, it is not to be doubted, that all men have sublime thoughts; that all men value the few real hours of life; they love to be heard; they love to be caught up into the vision of principles. We mark with light in the memory the few interviews we have had, in the dreary years of routine and of sin, with souls that made our souls wiser; that spoke what we thought; that told us what we knew; that gave us leave to be what we inly were. Discharge to men the priestly office, and, present or absent, you shall be followed with their love as by an angel. (90)

With this in mind, we can look to each of the works described above and see clearly the way that both poets discourage their readers from simply subscribing to the status quo, from searching for some universal or predetermined experience, whether determined by site, or text, or ritual. These poets promote the direct individual experience of the natural world and subsequently the individual spiritual revelation. In doing so, from their works one is able to draw substantive conclusions about the authors' own spiritual attitudes and negotiate such disparate topics as post-war reconciliation, global expansion and industrialization, and pilgrimage and settler-colonialism. The poetry and prose traverse difficult themes without regressing into didacticism, and arrays of aspects, of individuals are collected within the pages, allowing the reader, like Emerson's poet to be "the beholder of ideas," to be "present and privy to the appearances which he describes" (9).

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Vita

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