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Melville’s Carpetbag:
Nautical Transformations of the Authorial Self

Nautical Mobility: The Author as Global Traveler

In 1856, burned out by ten years of furious literary production, harsh re-
views, declining royalties, and personal difficulties ranging from squabbles
with his family to serious bouts of depression, Herman Melville embarked on
an extended journey to Europe and the Middle East. Since his literary debut
with Typee in 1846 he had published eight novels and completed one more,
written fifteen stories for America’s two leading journals, Harper’s New
Monthly Magazine and Putnam’s Magazine between 1853 and 1856, and col-
lected five of the stories in a volume he called The Piazza Tales (1856). He had
written one book a year for ten years, somewhere in excess of 4,000 pages of
published work, and countless more manuscript pages that have been lost.
This amounts to more than one page a day, a relentless pace for a writer who
had at the same time been furiously educating himself by devouring Shake-
speare, Dante, Rabelais, Sir Thomas Browne, and dozens of other classic and
contemporary authors even as he was producing novels with the heft and
depth of Moby-Dick (1851). He was an inveterate reader and annotator of
texts, and much of his marginalia has survived as a record of his autodidactic
efforts. He was a similarly fast-paced writer, and often found himself com-
posing conclusions to his novels while their opening chapters were being set
in type. He is a case study for Harold Bloom’s theories of the anxieties of
authorship, to which I would add the pressures of relentless deadlines and
financial necessity. In 1851, while he was working on Moby-Dick, he wrote his
new friend Nathaniel Hawthorne to complain that “Dollars damn me; and
the malicious Devil is forever grinning in upon me, holding the door ajar.”
Although he was only thirty-two years old he felt worn out, he told Haw-
thorne, “like an old nutmeg-grater, grated to pieces by the constant attrition
of the wood” and believed that he had “come to the inmost leaf of the bulb,
and that shortly the flower must fall to the mould.”

Melville lived one of the most physically mobile lives of any author up to
his time. Driven by financial necessity, his father moved the family from

1 Herman Melville, Correspondence, ed. Lynn Horth, vol. 14 of The Writings of Herman
2 Melville, Correspondence, 14: 191, 193.
Manhattan to upstate New York when Melville was eleven. At eighteen, Melville made a round-trip on a merchant ship from New York to Liverpool, a journey he memorialized in *Redburn* (1849). A year later, in 1840, he journeyed west to visit his uncle Thomas Melvill Jr. in Illinois, traveling the length of the Erie Canal, crossing America’s inland sea of the Great Lakes, and voyaging by steamboat on the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers, a trek of thousands of miles that worked its way into numerous references in his later writings, as Hershel Parker has shown. His early nautical travels culminated when he signed on to a whaling voyage for the South Seas in 1841, rounding Cape Horn into the vast Pacific where he spent a month living among cannibals on the Marquesas islands, a month beachcombing in Tahiti, four months working in Hawaii, and one year as an enlisted seaman on the naval warship the *USS United States*, visiting Chile, Peru, Mexico, and Brazil on the long return trip to Boston. By the time he was twenty-five he had seen more of the world than most people see in their lifetimes, and had visited more exotic lands than all but the boldest travelers today. Among antebellum writers not even James Fenimore Cooper, who spent four years at sea as a deckhand and a naval officer, voyaged so widely or took such advantage of America’s maritime prominence as a bicoastal nation with extensive inland water routes. Truly, Melville spoke for himself in *Moby-Dick* when his narrator, Ishmael, says that “a whale-ship was my Yale College and my Harvard.” These nautical journeys exercised a decisive influence on Melville’s literary career and his personal values, for they exposed him to the harsh lives of laborers and an ethnic pluralism that would be unusual even in today’s globalized world. It is no wonder, then, that when his health and his career began to flag in the mid-1850s, he again sought solace in travel, a seven-month sea-journey across the Atlantic to England, through the Mediterranean to Italy, Greece, Egypt, and the Holy Land, and back home again once more via England, an idiosyncratic grand tour that reshaped his literary ambitions and personal values.

Part of the appeal of England was Hawthorne’s presence in Liverpool, where he served as United States consul, and Melville visited with the older author and his family on both his outbound and inbound voyages. Hawthorne, in England with his wife, three children, and a maidservant, tended to stay in one place for several years or months, moving about as little as possible given the requirements of his job, his less adventurous temperament, and the huge amounts of luggage that his entourage carried. In sharp

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contrast, Melville traveled alone and carried only a week’s worth of clothing. In a journal comment that bespeaks at least some envy of the younger man’s freedom of movement, Hawthorne noted that his friend needed only “a carpet-bag to hold all his travelling-gear,” which seemed “the next best thing to going naked”; Melville, Hawthorne added, had “learned his travelling-habits by drifting about, all over the South Sea, with no other clothes or equipage than a red flannel shirt and a pair of duck trowzers. Yet we seldom see men of less criticizable manners than he.”

The two men’s modes of travel contrast as sharply as their conception of literature. While he was abroad, Hawthorne wrote The Marble Faun (1860), a self-conscious “romance” about Americans in Italy and the clash of morals, religions, and aesthetics that ensue. By far his longest novel, The Marble Faun depends on such well-worn conventions as light and dark heroines, gothic villains, sexual intrigue, stylized descriptions of landscape, and the ambiguities of dream and reality Hawthorne had long cultivated in his stories. Melville, on the other hand, had just completed his second shortest novel, The Confidence-Man (1857), a work that can only be described as post-modern, with its minimalist plot, multiple digressions, episodic structure, and three chapters of authorial commentary on the art of fiction. It is like nothing Hawthorne ever wrote, yet he consented to act as Melville’s agent in England and place the book with a London publisher, which he did four months later while Melville was visiting Italy. Whether Hawthorne ever read this strange novel is uncertain, but we do know that it was the last one Melville ever published.

This biographical information highlights a shift in notions of authorship as a stable profession in which authors present a relatively consistent face and style to their readers to one where the author disappears, or as Roland Barthes would have it, dies. At the end of The Marble Faun, for example, Hawthorne left several strands of his plot dangling, a willful obscurantism that upset readers and reviewers. In the novel’s second printing, Hawthorne obligingly added a “Conclusion” in which the author enters the narrative to ask his two American characters to fill in the missing details, which they conveniently provide. Although Hawthorne did not like adding such an explicit explanation of events meant to be shrouded, he felt free to enter the


narrative in his own voice in order to discharge his responsibility to his readers and illuminate the novel’s dark corners.

Melville felt no such obligation in The Confidence-Man. It literally ends in darkness, with the final incarnation of the title character, known as the Cosmopolitan, extinguishing a lamp just before the novel’s last sentence: “Something further may follow of this Masquerade.”8 Set on a steamboat traveling south on the Mississippi River, the novel draws its setting from Melville’s early western travels yet is anything but a literal or biographical rendition of that experience. All traditional components of narrative – plot, character, theme, structure – share in the nautical mobility of the fluid setting. The title character may be one person in many disguises, several tricksters who exploit passengers as they board and depart the steamboat, or an entirely symbolic incarnation of mythic figures who expose the venality of human beings. Some critics view the confidence-man as an allegorical figure of Christ, while others identify him with Satan, a disagreement so extreme that it suggests the novel can mean anything.9 Most characters have no proper names and are denominated by what they do or what they wear or their dominant trait, such as the gentleman with the gold sleeve-buttons, the Herb-Doctor, the philanthropist, or the misanthrope. These multiple narrative indeterminacies enforce larger moral and philosophical indeterminacies, leading many readers to seek epistemic refuge in irony, satire, parody, hoax, or the labyrinthine alleys of black humor. Whereas Hawthorne’s conception of authorship remained stable throughout his career, Melville’s shifted dramatically after Moby-Dick and, with respect to fiction, culminated in the unorthodoxy of The Confidence-Man.

Generic Mobility: From Fiction to Poetry

The literal mobility that Melville enjoyed as a seafarer and solo traveler serves as a metaphor for the generic mobility of his fiction, a movement away from the conventions of the American historical romance as described by George Dekker to something closer to the novels of James Joyce, Thomas Pynchon, or Kazuo Ishiguro.10 As an autodidact Melville was largely free of institutionalized structures of knowledge, and like Ishmael “swam through libraries and sailed through oceans”11 just as he had roamed the Mediterranean and Levant, carrying only a carpetbag to keep himself nimble and open

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8 The Confidence-Man, 251.
11 Moby-Dick, 136.
to new experiences. He had spent ten years trying to please English and American audiences while still telling the capital-T Truth, and finally decided that no one wanted to hear it: as he said despairingly in his 1851 letter to Hawthorne, “[b]ut Truth is the silliest thing under the sun. Try to get a living by the Truth – and go to the Soup Societies. … What I feel most moved to write, that is banned, – it will not pay. Yet, altogether, write the other way I cannot. So the product is a final hash, and all my books are botches.”12

None of his novels had been more of a botch than The Confidence-Man, which even today remains difficult to read, and after that sublime failure Melville made a calculated generic move from fiction to poetry, a genre he had experimented with in his novels and had studied for many years but which, he knew, would pay even less than fiction.13 He had already published humorous sketches, book reviews, and short stories, so he was no stranger to other forms of writing. But moving to poetry involved a career-changing shift to a genre that almost guaranteed obscurity, particularly the type of verse he preferred, replete with jagged meters, half-rhymes, archaic diction, realistic details set in contrast with lyrical effusions, and unconventional stanzaic structures. The connection between his physical and generic mobility is evident in the title he gave a group of early poems that remained unpublished until 1891, “Fruit of Travel Long Ago,” poems based on his 1857 Mediterranean journey. The mobility of sea travel released him from the genre that had sustained his imagination and career for over a decade and liberated him to seek “Truth” in more fluid and supple forms: “Like all decent poetry,” Robert Penn Warren keenly observes, “that of Melville aims at the moment of poise, of synthesis, but for him the poise and the synthesis are hard-won, and often incomplete and provisional, and the awareness of that fact is the point, the ‘truth,’ of poetry.”14 Yet American readers no more wanted such “provisional” truths than they wanted a divided nation, and Melville’s first published book of poetry, Battle-Pieces (1866), a verse chronology of the Civil War, met with devastating reviews that doomed it to failure.15 Nevertheless, Melville stayed the course and published nothing but poetry for the remainder of his life, a period three times as long as the time he spent writing fiction: four published volumes, three long unpublished manuscripts, and one lost unpublished volume of poems he completed in

12 Correspondence, 191.
13 For Melville’s extensive reading in poets and poetics, see Hershel Parker, Melville: The Making of the Poet (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern UP, 2008).
15 See Stanton Garner, The Civil War World of Herman Melville (Lawrence, Kansas: UP of Kansas, 1993), 441. One of the more acidulous reviewers Garner cites said of Battle-Pieces that “no one but Mr. Melville could have written it, and few besides himself would have cared to write it,” while another said “his poetry runs into the epileptic. His rhymes are fearful” (441).
1860. *Billy Budd*, the novella he left in manuscript at his death in 1891, actually began as a poem, “Billy in the Darbies,” and one reason he did not publish *Billy Budd* was that he first focused on bringing out his last volume of poetry, *Timoleon* (1891). Scholars have largely ignored Melville’s poetic output, proving themselves similar to Hawthorne’s readers who want authors to stay within familiar bounds and who express disappointment when they try something new. Melville was more aesthetically capacious than such readerly proscriptions demanded, and in his most ambitious poem, *Clarel* (1876), demonstrated how physical mobility can influence an author’s self-conception.

Few people, even die-hard Melvilleans, have read *Clarel*. They might argue about how to pronounce it – Clárel, Clarél? – and leave the poem alone after that, intimidated by its 18,000 lines of irregular iambic tetrameter, complex metaphors and allusions, incomplete rhymes, and confusing medley of speakers, including its distant narrative overvoice. The most recent biography of Melville, Andrew Delbanco’s *Melville: His World and Work*, devotes only nine pages to the poem in a chapter on the poetry tellingly titled “Adrift,” and considers it “finally a hopelessly talky poem, its intertwined stories over-earnest in the style of *Mardi*, yet without the madcap energy that made Melville’s early failures seem rehearsals for something grand.”¹⁶ Its full title, however, reveals the important connection between genre and mobility: *Clarel: A Poem and Pilgrimage in the Holy Land*, and clearly announces that it is something quite different from Melville’s earlier works. Based on Melville’s 1857 excursion on horseback into the deserts of Palestine when it was still part of the Ottoman Empire, *Clarel* follows the journey of a dozen male tourists from Jerusalem to the Dead Sea and back in ten days. It is also the high point of Melville’s literary pilgrimage from fiction to poetry, away from the anxieties of writing on a popular topic as he attempted in *Battle-Pieces*, away from the tradition of the American romance, and, most profoundly, away from America itself. Of the twenty-nine characters in the poem, only seven are American, and four of those are expatriates. Major speakers include a theology student, a sailor, a former Confederate soldier, an Anglican priest, an embittered Swedish revolutionary, a French Dominican, and a hunch-backed Italian orphan, while the supporting cast consists of an American Zionist, an evangelical millennialist, a Greek banker, a fun-loving young Cypriot, an enigmatic Druze guide, a Turkish armed escort, an Albanian warrior, a retired Mexican general, a Greek abbott, a Jewish scientist, a rigid Scottish Presbyterian, a Franciscan monk, and a dozen or more minor players. Few American literary works have such a cosmopolitan cast of characters, and their impassioned discussions of religious, political, and social issues explore a wide spectrum of ideologies ranging from orthodox

Christianity to atheism, revolutionary democracy to monarchism, heterosexuality to homosexuality, and linear to cyclical notions of history. Published in 1876, fortuitously, perhaps, in the centennial year of America’s Declaration of Independence from Britain, the poem immediately sank into an obscurity more profound even than *Battle-Pieces*. Yet it bears comparison to other great nineteenth-century poems of self-analysis and religious doubt, such as Wordsworth’s *Prelude* (1850) and Tennyson’s *In Memoriam* (1850), whose metrics it follows, and it expands across global and multicultural planes of thought and reference comparable only to *Moby-Dick* and Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* (1855-1891). The combination of Melville’s experiences with maritime mobility, his independent and lonely travel in the Mediterranean, and his move from writing fiction to writing poetry constitute the transnational impetus behind *Clarel* and his own redefinition of himself as a poet. The poem’s explorations of history, space, and self depend on mobility of mind and body and art as they achieve their literary force in a work that Robert Penn Warren, one of its earliest appreciators, considers “a precursor of *The Waste Land*, with the same basic image, the same flickering contrasts of the past and the present, the same charade of belief and unbelief.”

**Historical Mobility: Rome in *Clarel***

American identity has long been founded on myths of newness: the New World, New England, Hector St. John de Crevecoeur’s “new man,” the New Deal, the New Frontier, all catchphrases from the sixteenth through the twentieth centuries. Melville had propounded this doctrine early on, as did most antebellum Americans, but after his Mediterranean journey he developed a greater regard for the virtues of antiquity. One of the most powerful motifs in *Clarel* is the pervasive presence of the Roman Empire, from its religious manifestations in the Roman Catholic priests and abbots who speak up for the church again and again to the secular shards of ruins that lie about the territory of a supposedly spiritual landscape. Rolfe, the American whom most critics take to be closest to Melville’s point of view, finds the durability and flexibility of the Roman Catholic Church especially appealing. As a sailor, wanderer, and adventurer, Rolfe might be expected to harbor the anti-Catholic prejudices of his countrymen, which were undergoing a recrudescence of parochialism in response to Tammany Hall’s reliance on Irish Catholics for political dominance in New York City. Instead, Rolfe admires Catholic rituals for their organic response to basic human needs, as when he asks Derwent, the Anglican clergyman, how far back these rituals go:

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stands it true in fact
That robe and ritual—every kind
By Rome employed in ways exact—
However strange to modern mind,
Or even absurd (like cards Chinese
In ceremonial usages),
Not less of faith or need were born—
Survive untampered with, unshorn;
Date far back to a primal day,
Obscure and hard to trace indeed—
The sprouting of the planted seed
In the church’s first organic sway? (4.16.151-62).

Derwent, a trained theologian, confesses that he has not studied such things, an omission that undermines his intellectualized and institutionalized approach to religion in contrast to the common man’s intuitive sense of its timeless power, even when the manifestations of that power seem “absurd.” The modern and enlightened beliefs of the Church of England appear insubstantial and insincerely tolerant and progressive in the figure of Derwent, who fails to see the human need to place oneself in history and locate that organic link with “a primal day” that binds all human beings in spiritual amity.

No single character speaks for Melville in *Clarel*, however, unlike the first-person focalization of *Moby-Dick* and his early novels. *Clarel* employs a distant and often ironic narrative overvoice like that in *The Confidence-Man*, placing Melville at a distance from his multitude of speakers and giving them the opportunity to hold forth with minimal authorial interruption or analysis. Alert readers will notice that Rolfe’s favorable view of Catholic rituals has a secular counterpoint in the poem’s many allusions to the Roman Empire, a secular side to the Roman motif that offers an alternative vision of history. Melville gives the venerable topos of the “ruins of Rome” an unusually positive twist in the poem’s references to the material Roman artifacts that still stand, imposingly, across a wide swath of European, African, and Middle Eastern landscapes. Even the new American man Rolfe stands in awe of history’s immediate presence, and introduces his long question to Derwent by comparing the durability of Catholic ritual to “Caesar’s tower on London’s site” (4.16.150), and throughout the poem the marble reality of Roman architecture undergirds the poem’s narrative observations. Just before an earlier colloquy between Rolfe and Derwent, the poetic overvoice describes the

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19 *Clarel*, 440.
broken landscape of the Judaean hills as the pilgrims journey through it on horseback:

Uplands they range, and woo the breeze,
Where crumbled aqueducts and mounds
Override long slopes and terraces,
And shattered pottery abounds—
Or such would seem, yet may but be
The shards of tile-like brick dispersed
Binding the wall or bulwark, erst,
Such as in Kent still serve that end
In Richborough castle by the sea—
A Roman hold. What breadth of doom
As of the worlds in strata penned—
So cosmic seems the wreck of Rome. (2.20.29-39)

Roman aqueducts, massive and stunning monuments to another era, have survived the ravages of time to fulfill their purpose in a later age as do the bricks in Richborough castle. Even when broken into shards, they remain as omnipresent reminders of Roman hegemony, and are as integrated into the landscape as the strata that nineteenth-century geologists were studying to ascertain an ever greater age for Earth and explode biblical notions of creation. Rome may be a “wreck,” but in hyperbole worthy of a contemporary astronomer staring at distant nebulae, it is a “cosmic” wreck, a wreck of such vast scope that it has made a permanent impression on the planet itself.

Melville’s admiration for Roman civilization grew directly out of his travel, and his journal from his 1856-57 trip repeatedly mentions the vestiges of Roman power he noticed in Greece, Turkey, and Italy. When he returned to the United States in 1857 he wrote a lecture praising Roman architecture and statuary and delivered it to at least sixteen audiences on the winter lyceum circuit in states from Massachusetts to Michigan. He fashioned a moral for America out of the Roman arch, finding in its physical durability a symbol of conservative virtue in opposition to recent innovations in modern politics, art, and economics:

As the Roman arch enters into and sustains our best architecture, does not the Roman spirit still animate and support whatever is soundest in societies and states? Or shall the scheme of Fourier supplant the code of Justinian? Only when

20 Clarel, 195.
21 For the list of cities where Melville delivered this lecture, see The Piazza Tales and Other Prose Pieces 1839-1860, ed. Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker, and G. Thomas Tanselle, vol. 9 of The Writings of Herman Melville (Chicago: Northwestern UP and The Newberry Library, 1987), 723-24.
Neither the newfangled socialism of European idealists, the blunt prose of English realists, nor the commercial wealth of London merchants can match the timeless power and beauty of Roman art and architecture, and in a final sally at English modernism he asked his audiences whether the glass panels of London’s Crystal Palace would “bide the hail storms of eighteen centuries as well as the travertine of the [Roman Coliseum]?” Of course not, I can imagine the patriotic American audiences thinking, and as we know they turned out to be right.

By 1877 Melville decided that the high point of civilization occurred during the second and third centuries of Imperial Rome, an opinion he derived from Edward Gibbon’s *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776-1788). In a letter to his brother-in-law John C. Hoadley, Melville included a draft of his poem “The Age of the Antonines” – the title is borrowed from Gibbon - and praised the period for its peacefulness, secularism, social order, and rule of law. It was, he wrote, the “summit of fate and zenith of time,” which he hoped would return. He did not publish the poem until 1891, by which time he had altered the last two lines to identify his own country explicitly with Rome: “Ah, might we read in America’s signs / The Age restored of the Antonines.” This alteration, following as it does Melville’s musings on Rome in *Clarel*, shows how profoundly his travels turned him from an ardent literary nationalist to a critic of American excess, from an advocate of the moderns to a defender of the ancients. Time, history, old and new collapsed in Melville’s mature appeal to such eternal values as civic virtue, personal dignity, and deep regard for the accomplishments of earlier generations, enforcing a cyclical theory of history that advocated restoration, not revolution.

**Theological Mobility: Oceanic Doubt**

As a nineteenth-century world traveler, most of Melville’s journeys were necessarily by ship, either canal boats, steamboats, square-riggers, or the modern steamships he used on his Mediterranean journey. As late as 1860 he traveled around Cape Horn to San Francisco on his brother Tom’s clipper ship, the *Meteor*, his last extended sea voyage, and he continued to draw upon nautical experiences in his poetry, most notably in his penultimate volume of verse, *John Marr and Other Sailors* (1888). Space, for Melville, meant
the sea, for there one encountered vast expanses of globe-encircling water that made possible movement between continents. Anyone before the twentieth century who claimed a first-hand acquaintance with world cultures had to travel by sea, and those who knew it well understood that islands, archipelagoes, and ships themselves had cultures of their own to contribute to transnational awareness. Although Clarel is set on land, Melville took many opportunities to infuse it with the nautical mobility he recalled from his past, and employed sea imagery throughout the poem, anticipating W. H. Auden’s identification of the sea with the desert in The Enchafèd Flood. Drawing repeatedly on Moby-Dick and Melville’s descriptions of the dry wilderness of the Galápagos Islands in “The Encantadas,” Auden contends that despite their obvious differences, both locales offer freedom from community and personal responsibility yet at the price of an alienation that creates “desperate longings for home and company.”25 In Clarel, which Auden predictably ignores, Melville transforms this social desperation into theological alienation and existential seeking. The canto “The High Desert” (3.5), an interior monologue ascribed to the entire group of pilgrims, presents through narrative summary their unattributed questionings of whether faith can withstand the assaults of science. Melville uses the ebb and flow of the ocean’s tides to symbolize the ebb and flow of Christian faith:

… is faith dead now,
A petrifaction? Grant it so,
Then what’s in store? what shapeless birth?
Reveal the doom reserved for earth?
How far may seas retiring go? (3.5.79-83)26

The metaphor of “seas retiring” and leaving earth without faith is, of course, a strong echo of “Dover Beach” from Matthew Arnold’s New Poems (1867), a book Melville acquired in 1871 and annotated heavily. As Arnold puts it,

The sea of faith
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth’s shore
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled;
But now I only hear
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,
Retreating to the breath
Of the night-wind down the vast edges drear
And naked shingles of the world.27

Melville complicates Arnold’s metaphor by asking if faith is already dead, “a petrifaction” like the high desert of Judaea where this thought emerges, fus-

25 The Enchafèd Flood or The Romantic Iconography of the Sea (1950; Charlottesville, Virginia: UP of Virginia, 1979), 15-17.
26 Clarel, 278.
27 Matthew Arnold, New Poems (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1867), 96.
ing land and sea and offering a more spatially comprehensive vision of impending atheism than Arnold’s poem, which concludes with the image of lovers finding faith in each other on a “darkling plain.”

Melville knew the sea’s terrors as well as its delights, and from *Moby-Dick* on he viewed it as the ultimate emblem of nature’s indifference. The most nautically infused digression in *Clarel* (1: 37) recalls the true story of George Pollard, captain of the doomed whaleship *Essex* that was sunk by a whale in 1820, the event that gave Melville the idea for the *Pequod*’s fate in *Moby-Dick*. Pollard survived the wreck by resorting to cannibalism, and went on to captain another ship into the Pacific. This time he encountered uncharted shoals and was again shipwrecked, although with less dire consequences, and he never returned to the sea again. Ishmael recounts this history briefly in *Moby-Dick* (ch. 45), and on a visit to Nantucket in the early 1850s Melville actually saw George Pollard, who had become the town’s night watchman.28 For Melville the experienced sailor, the sea is no more a “sea of faith” than is the stony and sterile Judaean desert a symbol of immortality. The Holy Land is not, in fact, holy at all. Imposing such spiritual significance on these morally neutral landscapes ignores brutal experiences like George Pollard’s, where the freedom and exhilaration of sea travel leads to death, disaster, and the loss of personal identity.

**Psychological Mobility: The Authorial Self**

Melville’s life, career, and art illustrate a transcultural pattern of mobility as vital and life-changing as anything experienced by twentieth-century authors, and in *Clarel* that pattern reconstructs the identities of both the poem’s characters and its author. For all of the pilgrims’ arguments, debates, and unresolved dialogues, their pilgrimage remains deeply unsatisfying, for it exposes not only their own differences in religious faith, ranging from atheism to ardent Catholicism, but is marked by the deaths of two of their number. For those unfortunate men the journey of faith ends in the ultimate loss of identity – annihilation. Both are buried en route, bereft of the very rites of passage that religion confers, and while one is a believer and the other a skeptic, in death they are treated alike. The desert is as equally devastating as the sea: one of the pilgrims actually drowns in the Dead Sea, a dark irony that shows death is everywhere, God is silent, and belief remains a matter of stubborn faith in the face of nature’s contrary evidence.29

28 *Clarel*, 755n.

The surviving pilgrims fail to achieve anything like a collective identity and end up either smugly confident in their prior beliefs like Derwent the Anglican priest, constantly searching like Rolfe the adventurer, permanently alienated from their homeland like the ex-Confederate soldier Ungar, or hopelessly adrift in a sea of theological uncertainty like Clarel, the young student whose search for religious assurance has failed. One of Melville’s favorite terms for his seafaring characters was ‘isolatoes,’ men who found shore values so constricting that they began a new voyage as soon as the old one ended, not even stopping to repack their duffel bags for the next journey. These are men for whom mobility is mere repetition, continually voyaging out and returning in an endless, changeless cycle. Philosophically, this is the fate of Clarel’s pilgrims. None is really changed, none has made progress, none has answered the questions he raised in dialogues or personal meditations.

But the characters are not the author. Just as he made a dramatic shift in genre undergirded by a courageous seven-month journey alone carrying nothing but a carpetbag, so for Melville Clarel constituted a spiritual and literary journey through the deserts of faith, doubt, and authorship that he had traversed since writing Moby-Dick. Although his characters achieve little, Melville achieves much: 18,000 lines of powerful, complex, original verse that readers are still working to comprehend. Clarel confirms the wisdom of his turn from fiction to poetry, the generic mobility that led him to stick to his last and concentrate on poetry for the remainder of his life, with the brilliant exception of Billy Budd, which grew from a poem and concludes with the moving ode “Billy in the Darbies.” By the time of his death in 1891, Melville had not only mastered the great tradition of English poetry but extended it into modernity, taking a middle path between the quiet innovations of Emily Dickinson and the grand, self-promoting breakthroughs of Walt Whitman.

After his meeting with Melville in Liverpool in 1856, Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote the following journal entry recounting their conversation on the beach:

Melville, as he always does, began to reason of Providence and futurity, and of everything that lies beyond human ken, and informed me that he had “pretty much made up his mind to be annihilated”; but still he does not seem to rest in that anticipation; and, I think, will never rest until he gets hold of a definite belief. It is strange how he persists – and has persisted ever since I knew him, and probably long before – in wandering to and fro over these deserts, as dismal and monotonous as the sand hills amid which we were sitting.30

In Clarel, Melville found a way to express these concerns dialogically in a moving testament to the importance of mobility in genre, time, and space, a

30 The English Notebooks 1856-1860, 163.
“wandering to and fro” that coalesced into a stoic sense of personal worth that strengthened him against the indignities he suffered from reviewers and the reading public. By absorbing his physical movements into his spiritual, intellectual, and literary development, Melville rescued himself from annihilation, albeit at the cost of a commercial career. He knew that he could not go on writing for money or for audiences that neither appreciated nor understood his work, and *The Confidence-Man* had been his bitter farewell to that model of authorship. In poetry he found a better genre for penetrating the philosophical issues he had confronted in *Moby-Dick*, and he persisted even though he had to publish *Clarel* with the aid of a large subvention from his uncle and print his last two books of poetry in private editions of twenty-five copies each. Even as he took religion more seriously, giving dramatic voice to priests and monks, whom he had satirized in earlier works, he challenged their assumptions and practices with the knowledge he had gained both in his travel to the Holy Land and in his reading. He drove a final wooden spike into the Emersonian myth of self-reliance, still so prevalent in the United States that it is a required claim even for presidential candidates who come from families worth millions of dollars. By stripping himself of society’s demands for fame, money, success, and power, by traveling light and free of preconceptions and stereotypes, by carrying only a carpetbag for life’s necessities, he kept room in his mind and art for the fresh experiences and personal growth that mobility can contribute to our lives.
Melville’s Carpetbag

Works Cited


