CLAREL:
AN INVESTIGATION OF SPIRITUAL CRISIS

AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL OF ARTS
AND SCIENCES OF THE CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY OF AMERICA
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

BY
MOTHER M. DENIS MAHONEY, M. A.
Ursuline Nuns of the Roman Union

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THE CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY OF AMERICA

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PREFACE

It is a happy duty to express my deep gratitude to all those who have helped in the preparation of this dissertation. I am especially grateful to Mr. Marius Bewley whose zealous interest in Melville first prompted this study, to Dr. G. Giovannini whose interest and advice far surpassed his academic obligations, and to Dr. Richard Foley for his gracious reading of the manuscript.

I also wish to thank the librarians of the Library of Congress, the Manuscript Division of the New York Public Library, the Mullen Library of the Catholic University of America, the Sarah Lawrence Library, and the Library of the College of New Rochelle.

Most of all I wish to express my immeasurable gratitude for the interest and generosity of the Ursuline Community of the College of New Rochelle to whom I owe far more than a preface can acknowledge.

Feast of the Incarnation
March 25, 1958
THE BACKGROUND OF CLAREL

It was in the spring of 1876 that Herman Melville, with the financial help of his maternal uncle, Peter Gansvoort, offered to the public, Clarel: A Poem and Pilgrimage in the Holy Land. The fact that no publisher would assume the responsibility for these 630 pages of tetrameter couplets is a foreshadowing of the poem’s whole history. The limited edition of 1876 was in no great demand, and no other edition appeared until 1924, when Constable & Co., Ltd. undertook a complete edition of Melville’s works. Despite the numerous editions of Melville appearing in the last few years, Clarel remains, even now, surprisingly inaccessible.¹

Reasons for this continued lack of interest are not hard to find, and even the author conceded that it was a piece “eminently adapted for unpopularity.” ² Yet even though Melville could thus cavalierly dismiss its reception, Clarel had been sufficiently important to him to demand his time and energy over a period of some twenty years. The doom pronounced by the author himself is one which his critics have felt little trouble in accepting. The poem as poem fails. It fails primarily in its choice and manipulation of verse and in its creation and organization of symbols. And yet precisely because it falls in time between those two classics, Moby Dick and Billy Budd, and because it is the work of the same symbolic mind which created these novels, Clarel is a poem which it would be imprudent to dismiss too lightly. While one must concede that the meanings of the poem come through only obscurely, one must also concede that such meanings, obtuse though they be,

¹ The new Hendricks-House edition of Melville's works will include a critical edition of Clarel edited by Walter Bezanson.
² This statement occurs in a letter to James Billson, dated October 10, 1884, eight years after the publication of Clarel. This is not, then, a purely conjectural comment but the utterance of an author who could bolster his statement by contemporary reviews.

On the subject of Melville's contemporary reputation, see the unpublished dissertation of H. W. Hetherington, The Reputation of Herman Melville in America (University of Michigan, 1933).
are our only handle to Melville’s thought in those “silent years” which followed the pessimism of The Confidence-Man and preceded the “acceptance” of Billy Budd.

The specific impulse for the poem came undoubtedly from his own trip to the Holy Land which he had undertaken in the fall and winter of 1856-1857. His journal records with bleak pathos his own disappointment at beholding at first hand the sterility and decay of the land which he had hoped would retain a spark of vital Christianity. “No country will more quickly dissipate romantic expectations than Palestine—particularly Jerusalem,” he wrote. This is the dull landscape which he chooses as the background for his long narrative poem. Unwilling to build solely on his own impressions, however, he read widely in contemporary travel literature, bolstering his own first hand information with the studies of such travelers as Dean Stanley, Edward Palmer, and William Thomson.

THE NARRATIVE STRUCTURE

The narrative elements of the poem can be easily summarized. Clarel, a young American student of theology, comes to Jerusalem on what was in nineteenth century America a commonplace sightseeing tour. While in the Holy City he meets the aged Evangelist, Nehemiah, and through him, the American expatriot, Nathan, and his wife and daughter, Agar and Ruth. Following Nathan’s death, Clarel, despite his love for Ruth, decides to join a pilgrimage journeying through the Holy Land. Parts II, III, and IV of the poem are concerned with the events of this pilgrimage. Before the return to Jerusalem, some of the pilgrims desert the cavalcade, two of them die, and Clarel determines to marry Ruth only to find as he re-enters the city that both Agar and Ruth are dead. Inconsolable, he watches the other pilgrims journey homeward, while he chooses to remain in Jerusalem. Such a summary of the narrative suggests that the poem is preeminently a tale of young love,
but actually *Clarel* is no more a story of romantic love than was Taji's wild search for Yillah. Perhaps the very word "narrative" is misleading in connection with *Clarel* since the narrative element is so slight as to be no more than a kind of scaffolding which the poem needs in order to hold it together; such an external prop never penetrates deeply in the construction of meanings. The poem is not so much narrative as reflective—a kind of large speculation about the subjects which the confused consciousness of the nineteenth century never ceased debating: faith, creed, suffering, immortality, progress.

Enclosed within the narrative scaffolding lie the symbolic meanings of the poem. Its hero is a kind of American Adam, the young innocent approaching his trial or the quester engaged in his search. In some ways he is brother to Melville's Captain Delano, also the innocent American brought unaware and unprepared into the presence of evil. Both Clarel and Delano manifest a temperamental hesitancy and an inability to make sharp decisions. Despite this generic likeness in character, however, Clarel shows himself far more preceptive than the captain of the *Bachelor's Delight*. Further, the situations which the two characters face are in marked contrast. In *Benito Cereno* the captain confronts an actual concrete situation of good and evil; in *Clarel*, the hero confronts not the experience but the abstract problem of evil.

It is here that Melville must have been faced with his first and greatest artistic decision. Should he symbolize the quest? Should he create, as in *Moby Dick* and *Mardi*, a whale or woman or what you will in which to embody his quest for spiritual answers. Had the answer been a strong "yes," we could have hoped for a more successful artistic creation, a stronger symbolic narrative. The answer, however, seems to have been a hesitant "no." As a result, the symbolic process is incomplete both because the symbol lacks vitality and because it operates only on the level of a device to enclose the bulk of argumentation of which the poem is mainly composed.

The physical journey through the Holy Land is the symbol of a journey in quest of spiritual values. Yet the long debates of the pilgrims are carried on by direct exposition, and even when these debates are enclosed within a topographical symbol, the literal and
symbolic levels lie so close together that the symbol no longer functions validly as a level of meaning. Perhaps, however, this is not pure loss, for Melville in making his choice must have felt that it was less important to provide a symbolic narrative than to retain the large body of abstract speculations which would have been impossible in a more symbolic poem. It is this which justifies a definition of Clarel as a long speculative poem.

Clarel we may assume to be the contemporary American consciousness seeking truth. Clarel's goal is an encompassing answer which will provide for such apparently conflicting values as science and faith, materialism and spiritual values, asceticism and the natural life, good and evil—all within the framework of truth. He wishes to find an answer which will provide for the harmonious ordering of all the disparate elements of human life. Clarel perceives within his mind the dangerous reefs of doubt showing through the shallow waters of faith. Determined to face these "underformings in the mind" before he is totally wrecked upon them, he, like so many other Melvillean heroes, embarks upon a journey. Leaving his less perceptive countrymen to enjoy their weak theology and provincial forms, he turns his face away from all known values to face alone and without preconception the problems of doubt which beset him.

The choice of his destination was determined by the fact that Palestine was the cradle of Christianity, and so, there, if any place, should the Christian seeker be able to confront basic Christian values and to see the full vision of Christian truth. Clarel's motivation separates him from the conventional traveler of the nineteenth century who made his trip to the Holy Land as an orthodox pilgrim attesting by his pious devotion his faith in Christianity. Clarel sets out not to venerate but to test. Although it is obvious throughout the poem that his deepest desire is to find proof in favor of the Christian religion, nevertheless, his explicit purpose is simply to see the truth and give testimony of it.

For Melville, truth was a word of the largest possible implications.

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6 It is interesting to note that of the seven most important pilgrims (Nehemiah, Rolf, Vine, Ungar, Clarel, Mortmain, Derwent), only the latter two are not Americans.

6 For the contemporary attitude toward the Holy Land, see Bezanson, Clarel, pp. 12-13.
To see the truth was to see the harmonious ordering of total cosmic experience. Through truth the opacity of daily events was made luminously intelligible to the perceiving mind. This is why Melville employs the quest for truth as the organizing control for the whole poem. It is fitting then that Clarel as hero asks the two questions which may be considered as handles for the central meaning of the poem. "What may man know?" he first queries, and later adds, "Whose the eye that sees aright if any?" In these two questions are subsumed the entire meaning of the poem, and, indeed, we may say, of the meaning of most of Melville's major work. What Clarel asks is, in fact: what kind of man will perceive the vision of truth, and, in what will such a vision consist? Melville's speculation on these questions in the years between Ahab's failure and Billy Budd's success is of major significance in the progress of his thought.

Despite—or perhaps because of—the importance of Clarel in the pattern of Melville's thought, the poem should be approached with two precautions: first, whatever may be said of the quality of its speculations, it fails as a poem; secondly, its meanings are far from being clearly articulated, and the task of determining its values (the meanings of faith, immortality, suffering, time, progress) must be approached with a perspicacity which will probe beneath the surface of the deceptively simple dialogue.

A Formal Evaluation of the Poem

Clarel, as poem, can be satisfactorily dismissed with the statement that it is a poem manqué. Its two volumes of over three hundred pages each must be accounted an artistic failure. It fails both in the manipulation of its symbols and of its verse form. Despite the intermittent praise of such critics as W. H. Auden and W. B. Stein, Melville's poetry has generally evoked little interest and less commendation. Even the admirers mentioned above are painstakingly careful to indicate that their approbation limits itself to only a

segment of the body of Melville's verse. *Clarel* is no exception to this general condemnation, and when an occasional critic such as H. W. Wells attempts to salvage this poem, his indiscreet enthusiasm succeeds only in embarrassing Melville's more judicious critics. To indicate that in *Clarel* we would have with a little compression another *Waste Land* or that we are reminded throughout of the *Divine Comedy* does little to improve the reputation of *Clarel*.

The wild turbulence of much of Melville's prose should have been a warning to him that he would not be at home in the narrow rigid enclosure of the tetrameter couplet. Perhaps he felt that his own impatience with established form might be quieted were he to commit himself irrevocably to a conventional pattern. This is the explanation given by William Sedgwick who writes:

> The choice of this metrical form seems madness at first sight; yet there is a deep-seated logic in the very fact that it was antithetical to Melville's most characteristic prose. By reversing his perspectives Melville had jacked himself above the chaotic eddies and fluidities which had engulfed him in *Pierre*... The form of expression in *Clarel* was a prop or support to his new state of consciousness in which his spontaneous ego no longer played an all-commanding role.

It is quite true that Melville's verses settle themselves within the confines staked out for them. They are patient, cautious, and lifeless. Here is the aesthetic tragedy. We are reminded of some great dog whipped into subjection, walking hopelessly in his narrow pen. Here we are at the very opposite pole from *Pierre* where the artistic control is paralyzed by the terror of what is being said. In *Pierre*, aesthetic distance disappears, and in place of a novel we have the unguided lashing and bludgeonings of an author who no longer controls his material. Perhaps it is in the hope that the use of technical devices will provide a firm control against his

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9 See H. W. Wells, "Melville's *Clarel*," *College English*, IV (1942), 478-483.


10 It is difficult to understand how H. W. Wells can seriously comment: "His verse is never elegant, unctuous or soft but is toughly imaginative, like the best verse of Emily Dickinson, Emerson, and Thoreau." "Melville's *Clarel*," p. 480.
own emotions that Melville chooses the couplet form. Unfortu-
ately, he is not sufficiently a verse craftsman to exploit his pattern,
and as in Pierre he became the slave of his own emotional responses,
in Clarel he becomes the slave of his medium which instead of
informing his material acts only as an envelope to enclose it.

Yet had Melville been capable of far more adroit management,
it is questionable whether the couplet would have suited his need.
Even in the hands of a skilled versifier it admits but slight variation,
and its insistent rhythm would be difficult to withstand for over
six hundred pages. An even deeper objection concerns itself with
the mating of this form with the material which Melville was to
explore. Were the subject capable of a brisk, ionic treatment, pos-
sibly the couplet would have met the need; but Clarel is concerned
with darkness, sterility, quest, and loneliness. Such themes would
seem to need a line which would allow a certain expansion and
development by paragraph rather than by the small unit of the
couplet. Lacking the ability to manage his lines, Melville generally
enforces their monotonous regularity rather than alleviating it.

The lines, furthermore, are small and cramped. Melville has set
up a giant canvas and attempts to cover it with the tools of the
water color artist. One feels that the artist's hand, used to the wide,
heavy strokes of the oil brush, persists with great weariness in his
appointed task. The wonderful massing of light and shade so
prevalent in Moby Dick is missing in Clarel. The great bulk of
the whale poised against the linear figures aboard the Pequod pro-
vides a contrast which nothing in Clarel is capable of suggesting.
There is no contrast; there are no peaks—everything is on the same
monotonous level.

Melville's choice of verse form, however, does not entirely account
for the failure of Clarel. The failure is not only one of metrical
form but also of symbol. James Baird is not alone in evaluating

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11 Walter Bezanson provides an interesting study of Melville's interest
in versecraft and in particular of Arnold's influence on him. Bezanson
suggests especially that Melville's marginalia indicate his profound admir-
tion for Arnold's "Resignation." He then raises the possibility that this
poem, written in rhyming couplets of iambic tetrámeter, may have provided
the model for Clarel. Walter Bezanson, "Melville's Reading of Arnold's
Melville as a symbolist of unusual stature. His ability to abstract from the symbol, to create, as with the white whale, a symbol of manifold meanings is his unique artistic gift.\textsuperscript{12} Even in \textit{Mardi} (which we may hardly deem a successful novel) this symbolic imagination may be perceived despite the clutter of language which often impedes its realization. But \textit{Mardi} was but a youthful exploration, valuable as heralding \textit{Moby Dick} rather than for any intrinsic value of its own. But coming to \textit{Clarel}, Melville commits a strange sort of blunder. He turns to the established symbolism of Christianity and employs it as it stands. Jerusalem, the Sepulchre, the Jordan, the Desert, the Christian cross—all, without refurbishing, are made the furniture of his poem. Jerusalem had long been symbolic as the city of redemption, the holy city of peace, the promise and type of the heavenly city of eternity. In the Middle Ages it was thought to represent the center of the world, so that a man standing in Jerusalem is standing at the very core of human activity. Yet by the nineteenth century this rich symbolic heritage had become a worn-out conventional symbol, capable, at best, of figuring as a kind of wooden allegory. In such a case, the poet who is content merely to reiterate such symbols without modulating them into a new tonality dooms himself to failure. Perhaps the deep sense of anguish which was the fruit of Melville’s journey to the Holy Places invested them with a significance which blinded him to their symbolic inadequacy. As the poem stands, however, its topographical symbolism is a sadly static machinery and no more.

It is true that Melville subjects this machinery to a peculiarly Melvillean focus—a duality of reality and appearance—but although this does amplify and deepen the meaning, it does so by a kind of imposed manipulation instead of by organic generation. This dual focus suggests that behind each appearance lies an antithetical reality: thus, within the desert waste will be found life and revelation, the green oasis with its pleasant water is actually a temptation, the walls of Jerusalem do not exclude danger but hem in the sins and weakness of the inhabitants. Such duality provides an ambiguity typical of Melville, but does little to vitalize his symbols.

James Baird aptly suggests that the search for new symbols is

\textsuperscript{12}James Baird, \textit{Ishmael} (Baltimore, 1956), pp. xii, xv, 188-189.
always elicited by the awareness of the failure of a mode of senti-
ence. Man, recognizing that the forms which had formerly ex-
pressed his perceptions are no longer capable of doing so, seeks
almost unconsciously for new forms. It seems artistically inex-
plicable that Melville even as he wrote of the tragic waning of the
Christian experience should choose as a mode of expression the
tired symbols of conventional Christianity. The strangeness of
his choice is augmented when we consider his vast store of primitive
lore from which he could so easily have drawn his symbols. Yet
only once throughout the poem does he modulate his conventional
Christian symbol by immersing it in non-Christian religious belief.
The episode in which this occurs is of sufficient importance to
detain us for a moment, since it indicates more clearly than any
generalization the mode of Melville’s failure, and the means by
which the poem’s symbolic quality could have been vitalized.

The episode referred to is the death of Mortmain beneath the
mystic palm. Since the Christian cross is a repeated image in
Clarel, and since there is an implicit relationship between the
sufferings of Mortmain and the suffering of Christ, one would
expect that Mortmain would meet his death beneath a cross. If
he had, the cantos would have taken their undistinguished place
beside the others; as it is, Melville succeeds, symbolically at least,
in raising these cantos to a unique stature. Mortmain dies beneath
a palm tree, and with this change of symbol, Melville achieves an
arresting cosmic vision. The palm tree becomes a manifold symbol.
It includes the note of the Christian cross, but also the idea of
resurrection (which palm signified to the Jews and early Chris-
tians); further, it reaches beyond the Judaic-Christian tradition
to include the Buddhist triumph beneath the Bo-Tree, and the
Maori concept that the bridge to eternity was constructed of a
bent tree. In these few cantos (II, xxviii, xxxii) Melville’s sym-
bolic imagination revitalizes the Christian commonplaces which had

\[^{18}\textit{Ibid.}, \text{pp. 192-193.}\]

\[^{14}\] This statement, however, does not mean to suggest that here Melville is
progressing further away from Christian values but rather that while
being drawn more fully to the primitive ideal of such values, he is faced
with the waning of these elements within the realm of his practical human
experience.
imprisoned him and succeeds in creating a symbol of multiple significance.

Yet the symbolic failure of Clarel is not only the failure to revitalize smaller symbolic elements but far more the failure to provide a successful symbol for the focus of the poem itself. This we have already suggested in classifying the physical quest as an inadequate symbol lying too close to the literal level of the poem. James Baird in analyzing the failure of Mardi comments that the interrelationship of the materials is always crude, so that the structure, as symbol, tends to spring apart and lie in fragments. One may press the same charge against Clarel. Melville provides no adequate symbol for the quest itself which is the organizing theme of the poem. The quest is stated in terms of abstraction. The questers are forced to seek for a metaphysical reality abstractly stated. Such a scheme is totally foreign to the activity of Melville's symbolic imagination, and one cannot be surprised that he achieves so small a success. Whatever the shadowy and bizarre meanings of Yillah, she was, as least, a dramatic conception capable of eliciting multiple reactions. Although one must admit that in Mardi the literal and symbolic levels are not equally manipulated, at least one sees a powerful imagination intent on welding two levels of meaning into a single focus. Moby Dick is the successful culmination of that initial effort. Here at every juncture symbol and reality are one. The whale is whale; the Pequod is ship. Both have their vast bulk of actual weight. Moby Dick never ceases to be whale even while he is infinitely more. It is in these terms that we find one of the major causes of the failure of Clarel. Two levels of meaning are never established. We must be satisfied with the dry bread of speculation even while in some confused way we are led to anticipate a symbolic feast.

Ambiguity of Meaning in Clarel

While all of the preceding criticism falls specifically under the heading of formal evaluation, it is true, nevertheless, that the form of a poem is nothing else but its idea and meaning in action. Thus, Clarel's symbolic failure impinges necessarily upon its semantic

\[\text{\textsuperscript{15}} \text{Baird, Ishmael, p. 193.}\]
Clarel: An Investigation of Spiritual Crisis

Clarity so that its imposed symbols only increase the opacity of the themes. Total meaning in Clarel is not easy to come by, although this is not immediately evident because of the deceptive simplicity of the dialogue. Although in Melville's best novels, multiple meaning and ambiguity are directly perceived, in the poem the poor level of the verse invests the statements with a childish banality. Initial explication suggests that the meanings are all very simple, and it is not until the explicator attempts a synthesis that he begins to realize the complexities of the task before him.

Ambiguity is a character of all Melville's works, but although in Moby Dick the great currents and counter-currents are universally acclaimed as a sign of genius, in Clarel ambiguity becomes another mark of artistic failure. The ambiguity appears in greater relief because of Melville's rigid and unimaginative use of his verse form. In the novels one feels that flexibility of form is in harmony with the ambiguities of meaning. This is especially true in Moby Dick with its switch from dramatic dialogue and soliloquy to first and third person narration and exposition. This ability to escape from the narrow confines of mechanic form is, of course, one of the most successful achievements of the novel which thereby gains in the inclusiveness which prepares us for the manifold symbolism of the whale. In Clarel, however, Melville commits himself to just such a mechanic form, and yet does not succeed in employing it as a control of his meaning. The form in no way controls the subject. They wander along together, awkwardly out of step, never exerting any appreciable influence upon each other.

Although the vastness of Moby Dick refuses to be neatly packaged, it is a comfort to the analyst to find that the story is at least implicitly controlled by the sensibility of Ishmael as narrator. Clarel lacks such an organizing sensibility. Clarel is the hero of the piece, it is true, but we must be careful not to invest him with a larger role than Melville designates. As hero, he is passive rather than active, a sounding board rather than an active agent. His attitudes and postures need not represent the ideal quester. It is necessary, therefore, before seeing the possible answers to Clarel's two questions, "What may man know" and "Whose the eye that sees aright, if any," to set up some criteria for evaluating the response and attitudes of the hero as well as of the other major figures.
In *Clarel*, we are faced with a great dialectic which is not played out against a clearly established normative background. The speeches of the characters measure and criticize each other but with no consistently operative normative voice to award the prize. The expository comment made by such a narrative voice is, for any piece of imaginative narrative, one of the most valuable means by which to determine the value and meaning of the actions and speeches of the characters. In *Clarel*, such expository comment is at a minimum. What Melville gives us here is something close to a morality play with its spare and uninterpreted dialogue. There is, however, this essential difference: the morality play could count on its audience for its interpretive sensibility; Melville lacked this advantage, for his audience had no communal sensibility on which he could depend. We need no more than a glance at Melville criticism to recognize the principle of private interpretation at work.

The lack of normative voice may be explained largely in terms of the basic exploratory quality of Melville’s mind. He had an aptitude for conjecture and speculation, for the kind of putative argumentation which is engaged in merely as a means of enlarging one’s mental boundaries, never with the finality of personal conviction. Thus, through the devices of his various characters, Melville explores with a kind of probing calculation the possible attitudes of the nineteenth century consciousness. The *dramatis personae* suggest a continuum stretching from the scientific materialism of Margoth the geologist to the pious fideism of Nehemiah the Evangelist. Although the extremes are defined and evaluated almost in terms of caricature, the large central bulk of characters receives no consistent evaluation. While their speeches balance, enlarge, and contradict each other there is no positive criterion for establishing a normative focus, and as a result the reader is left with a kind of shifting kaleidoscope in which each fresh view reveals new arrangements of the pieces.

Since it is clear that the meanings of the poem are not controlled by a constantly operative narrative voice, it is tempting to look to the person of the hero who may, in terms of the values which he offers, indicate the pattern into which the values of the other characters may fall. As we have indicated before, however,
Clarel is a unique kind of hero who is less an interpreter of values than a sounding board for them. Clarel seems to indicate not a final evaluation but only one more shift of the kaleidoscope. This statement is reinforced by the fact that on the few sporadic occasions when a narratory voice does operate it opposes rather than enforces the value represented by the protagonist.

There are three junctures in the poem at which such a phenomenon occurs. The first two may be cited as subsidiary evidence preparing for the third and critical episode. The first instance of this opposition between the narrative voice and the action of the hero occurs when Clarel turn aside from the proffered friendship of Celio, and the narrator comments sadly on his inability to respond to human relationships. The second instance is Clarel's inability to converse with the worldly young Greek, Glaucon, which is interpreted by the narrator as an unhealthy predominance of head over heart. The third and most important episode is the death of Ruth. There we see that the fierce pessimism elicited from Clarel by the death of Ruth is not the final value to be placed on the episode. Clarel, upon seeing the bodies of Ruth and Agar, is moved by his grief to a total repudiation of spiritual values. Faced with the final separation from one in whom he had found a return of his love, he can do nothing but condemn whatever forces have produced this tragedy. God is denounced, and Clarel plunges into a terrible despair. In the interpolated lyric which follows, however, we are confronted with a narrative voice which runs counter to the wild ravings of the hero. The lyric itself suggests hope rather than despair, and indicates that Clarel's attitude, although understandable, is not to be taken as the basic value of the poem. The fourth instance of this phenomenon occurs in the Epilogue, but an investigation of this point is reserved for a later section in which the whole meaning of the Epilogue will be discussed.

The Total Meaning: An Interpretation

Bearing in mind the dangers of interpretation proceeding from a lack of any constant normative voice, and from the ambiguous

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position of the hero, we may approach the questions which we suggested earlier may act as a focus for the poem. Clarel poses his first question following a discussion of the difficulty of arriving at truth. “Whose the eye that sees aright if any?” he queries more to himself than to the other pilgrims. His second question occurs as he ponders the impossibility of pulling the vastness of the world into a settled system. So much escapes, so much remains imponderable—“What may man know?” Before presuming to find answers to these two problems, it is essential to indicate the basic assumption on which these questions are based. Despite their apparent skepticism, they suggest a belief in the existence of truth. This is an obvious advance from the epistemological nihilism of Pierre and The Confidence-Man. Although in Clarel not all men (indeed very few) attain the full vision of truth, nevertheless, the entire quest theme suggests the possibility of such a vision, and concerns itself not with establishing criteria for absolute values but with the defects within the perceiving intellect which limit the capacity for vision. Among such defects are preconceptions, an over-simplified viewpoint, a desire for sensual comfort, eclecticism, passivity. Thus the Greeks desert the pilgrimage because of the difficulty and ugliness of the journey; Margoth and Derwent narrow everything to an over-simplified focus; Vine waits passively, unwilling to commit himself to any conviction; Nehemiah sees everything in terms of his Biblical preconceptions, and Rolfe, unwilling to restrict the probings of his mind, gives allegiance to one set of values after another. Very few of the characters in Clarel will make the sacrifices necessary to enable them to see clearly.

With this emphasis upon man’s capacity for truth rather than on the existence of truth, the problem becomes psychological rather than metaphysical. In this light, it is easy to understand why so much time is given to a consideration of the necessary qualities of the successful seeker. The ability to see “aright” demands constant renunciation. Such a man must be a true ascetic: a man of the stature of Bulkington who is willing to forsake all comforts, all known and ordinary values to launch into a world of desert, of loneliness, of suffering—for only in such a world will he be prepared for the vision of truth. He must be neither a sentimental optimist (Nehemiah) nor a cynical pessimist (Ungar). He must
be able to think deeply and willingly face his own dark thoughts. He must also have the power of the heart—the power to desire, to give himself totally to a cause.

He must, therefore, be a man who is capable of both thinking and feeling and of engaging in both activities simultaneously. To devote oneself to a cause, blindly, upon an impulse of the heart, without bothering to test the validity of the cause is not the attitude of the real seeker of truth. Such an attitude Melville had early satirized in Mardi as he describes the foolish adoration of the blind man worshipping false idols. While it is not possible for the quester to know ahead of time the qualities of the object sought—conscious ignorance is in a sense a necessary requisite of his search—still he must desire an object which will satisfy not only his heart but also his head, since truth is the proper object of the intellect and cannot, therefore, be inimical to it. This, essentially, is what Melville means by the term, used as early as Mardi, the “full-developed man.”

The eye that sees aright is also the eye that has looked on pain without shrinking. The inevitable fact of suffering and sin is both part of the quester’s vision, and part of the experience through which he must pass in order to achieve his vision. In Clarel, as throughout Melville’s work, there is a steady adherence to the fact of evil and pain. No transcendentalism could convince Melville against the testimony of his eyes and heart that these things were but chimeras. Suffering—both physical and spiritual—was a fact and was to be faced as such. To “live in the all”—Goethe’s phrase—did not lessen the pain of a toothache, and to maintain that evil was in the eye of the beholder did not destroy sin.

The attitude toward suffering in Clarel suggests an evaluation different from anything suggested in the earlier novels. While Melville had always been preoccupied with this question, he was generally concerned not so much with its effects as with its origin. Who is responsible for suffering? was the question, explicit or implicit, in Mardi, Moby Dick, Pierre, and The Confidence-Man.

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18 See Chapter V, section 1 of this dissertation.
In *Clarel*, however, he picks up a statement uttered in *Pierre* and makes of it a basic theme of the poem. In the earlier novel the narrator had remarked, "Grief is the chamberlain to knowledge" (p. 199). This casual remark is expanded in *Clarel* to a kind of psychology of suffering. The futility of suffering, seen in *The Confidence-Man*, is repudiated in favor of a new outlook which indicates that the man who has suffered will be prepared according to the measure of his pain for the full vision of truth. It is those who have suffered the most (Mortmain, Celio, Agath, Ungar) who are capable of seeing most fully into the mystery of life. The lines preceding Mortmain’s death provide the most important locus for this:

Indeed each wakeful night and fast  
(That feeds and keeps what clay would clutch)  
With thrills which he did still outlast,  
His fibres made so fine in end  
That though in trials fate can lend  
Firm to withstand, strong to contend;  
Sensitive he to a spirit’s touch. (II, 137)

Mortmain’s loneliness, his mental anguish, his vigils and other imposed austerities have made his spirit marvelously alert so that he can apprehend essentially what the others (Vine, Rolfe, Derwent, the Lesbian) see only as appearance. There is no question here of suffering seen only as a punishment for sin. Melville indicates quite clearly through the frequent use of the Christ symbol that pain is the portion of the just as well as the unjust. Here, the worthless anguish endured in *The Confidence-Man* is repudiated in favor of a pain which is, for the man strong enough to bear it, of incomparable value.

Such suffering is of two kinds. It may have its origin in physical pain as with Celio, the young Italian hunchback. It may have its origin in the spiritual pain of disillusionment as with Mortmain. In either case, both body and soul are eventually involved and the physical pain becomes a subordinate element to the far deeper anguish of the human spirit. Primarily, the suffering with which Melville is here concerned seems to be that of isolation. For Melville, isolation was a basic element of human experience. "We are our own worlds," he had declared in *Mardi* (II, 279), and this
position he never repudiated. But in Clarel, a further isolation is added to the ineluctable loneliness of the human spirit. Such withdrawal may be the consequence of a shy, reserved temperament which, in an excess of sensitivity, deliberately withdraws from the community of men; it may be a withdrawal caused by circumstances, or it may be a deliberate isolation undertaken by those courageous souls who recognize that only the man free in soul can be faithful to the quest for truth. Thus, Vine withdraws through fear of suffering, Agath because the circumstances of his life have cut him off from normal experience, and Mortmain and Celio because they realize the necessity for spiritual isolation in order to reach their goal. Clarel himself although aware that the quest demands an isolation from the known values of his homeland, does not immediately recognize that the quest may also demand a far more painful renunciation of human love. This is a viewpoint into which he is gradually initiated throughout the poem, until in the final cantos he is forced to choose between the asceticism of the Franciscan Salvaterra and the human devotion of Ruth.

The preceding pages provide a summation of the evidence for the question, "Whose the eye that sees aright if any." The quester who will see things as they are, who will be trusted with a vision of the truth, will be a dedicated soul, one endowed with a keen mind and a warm heart, a man who will not shrink from the sufferings imposed upon him and will even, if it seems necessary, enter into a deep and painful isolation in order to be freed from every impediment to truth.

Only two men of this elevated stature emerge from the poem: Celio and Mortmain. Celio is cut off by death from the successful accomplishment of his quest. Mortmain succeeds. It is to the "mad Swede" then that we must look for the answer to the second question, "What may man know?" Mortmain has been impelled upon his quest by his disillusionment with mankind: his immediate family, his intimate friends, his political allies have all in some measure betrayed him. Mortmain never articulates the object of his mysterious quest. One can come upon it only obliquely by observing his increasing restlessness, his passionate need for solitude, for a fanatical austerity of life, and by the tenor of his thoughts which are always concerned with the deep "mystery of
iniquity”—the pattern behind the cosmic sin and anguish which is man’s allotted bread.

What answer does Mortmain’s vision provide? This is never explicitly stated and one must again “by indirections seek directions out.” We are told less about what he sees than about the effect of what he sees. In a second, the turbulent violence of the madman is changed to a gentle tranquillity. In place of restlessness is peace; in place of bitterness, gentleness. For the first time in the poem, Mortmain’s mouth is free of invectives, and the lovely lyric invocation which he addresses to the mystic palm is itself the clearest indication of what his vision has meant to him. What Mortmain sees is enough to provide the first real peace of his whole life. That such a vision must have had a profound depth cannot be doubted since the profound restlessness of Mortmain’s spirit could not have been stilled by any superficial assurance. It seems safe to assume, then, that as he watched beneath the mystic palm he apprehended at last the full pattern of human existence. All the disordered pieces of his experience spring into shape and he sees that the jagged edge of human anguish fits harmoniously into the total scheme. With this realization, his quest comes to an end and he slips from vision into death.

Surely this is the only explanation of that sudden peace which follows so hard upon his frenzied searching. Though some of the pilgrims, such as Derwent and Rolfe, seem satisfied with more superficial answers, Mortmain, who has sacrificed everything to plumb the depths of the mystery, can be satisfied by nothing but an answer which penetrates to the core. Mortmain’s is the eye that sees aright, and his vision beneath the mystic palm is the answer to what man may know.

That Mortmain alone of all the pilgrims is given such a vision and that this occurs three quarters of the way through the poem, poses a difficulty. What is the position of the hero, and what remains to be said in the last one hundred and sixty pages of the poem? Within the structure of the poem it is necessary to understand Mortmain’s vision and death as an element subordinate to the experience and final posture of Clarel as hero. Because Mortmain is in character so much more vivid than Clarel, and because the quality of his final experience is of such large import for the
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meaning of the quest, it is difficult to keep him in the minor role which the structure of the poem seems to demand. Clarel is too pallid a figure to claim our interest, and yet it must be recognized that even though he is not the controlling sensibility he is the formal link which binds all the elements of the poem together.

Since it is obvious from the beginning that Clarel is not of Mortmain's heroic stature, it should come as no great shock to find that at the end he undergoes no experience of full truth. He ends as he began, a lonely young man wandering disconsolately through the ruined Jerusalem. Yet the Clarel who waits alone in the ancient city of peace is a far different person from the inexperienced student who sailed from the New World determined to face his doubts and put his spiritual affairs in order.

In attempting to evaluate Clarel's apparent failure, it is necessary to keep in focus the fact that he represents the nineteenth century consciousness. His experiences, therefore, will be those faced by his contemporaries, and the pilgrims who surround him with their contrary postures are the attitudes which, taken compositely, form the climate of the nineteenth century world. Mar-goth explains everything in terms of scientific materialism, Ungar and Don Hannibal represent the reaction to political liberalism, Derwent indicates the easy poise of latitudinarianism, Vine recoils from the problems into an aesthetic tower, Rolfe explores with an objective curiosity the area of comparative religion, Nehemiah turns for salvation to a myopic reading of the Bible. In such a warring world and against such odds the nineteenth century consciousness must work out its precarious trail toward truth. In such a world what man will see aright? Mortmain, it is true, succeeded. But Mortmain was a fanatical giant. What of the ordinary man, of the small sincere man who is admittedly influenced by the arguments about him and tempted by the comforts of ordinary social living? What happens to the nineteenth century consciousness?

To state the conclusion negatively is to indicate that Clarel does not capitulate to any of the specious postures with which he has been surrounded. Mortmain's vision has provided a conclusive answer to the problem of whether there exist spiritual values worth attaining. Clarel's problem is not the existence of such values but
man’s ability to retain them in a world which is increasingly beset with the perils of science, materialism, false sects, political liberalism, religious indifference. Looking at the final posture of Clarel, the answer to such a question seems to be equivocal. Clarel, although unsatisfied by any decisive conviction, continues to wander his solitary way through the streets of Jerusalem. The remainder of the pilgrims return homeward but Clarel waits on. There is, admittedly, nothing conclusive about such an ending. While it suggests the hope of a positive conclusion, it does not preclude the possibility that Clarel may, at any moment, pack his suitcase and return to the values he had once left. Is it possible for the nineteenth century consciousness to maintain its poise against the advancing tide of skepticism? While the determination of the dramatic action indicates that such a victory is possible it does not do more. The few dedicated souls, like Mortmain and the monks of Saba, succeed; the sensuous cowards early desert the cause; but Clarel, like Starbuck in his imperilled boat, waits on, hoping against hope itself.¹⁹

Following the conclusion of the action, however, Melville presents us with an Epilogue which is the last and perhaps the most important clue to the ultimate meaning of Clarel. The Epilogue is spoken by the basic narrative voice and endorses the final posture of the hero. Only if we accept these final lines as the last and deepest irony can we agree with Frank Griffith that the circular route of Clarel leads nowhere. Here are subsumed the basic tensions of the poem: science and faith, materialism and spiritual values, asceticism and the natural life, good and evil. All of these are included in the metaphor, the “running battle of the star and clod.”

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yea, ape and angel, strife and old debate—
the harps of heaven and dreary gongs of hell;
science the feud can only aggravate—
no umpire she betwixt the chimes and knell:
The running battle of the star and clod
shall run for ever—if there be no God. (II, 297)
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The opening lines of the Epilogue place the hero’s problem in the largest possible terms:

If Luther's day expand to Darwin's year,  
Shall that exclude the hope—foreclose the fear?

The lines which follow indicate an attempt to answer this query. Three personages appear in the subsequent passage: “the ancient Sphinx” who stands firm against the “claims our times avow”; Despair who scrawls his “bitter pasquinade” on the unyielding brow of the Sphinx, and bleeding Faith who, turning from the scrawl, inscribes upon her broken urns “the sign o' the cross—the Spirit above the dust.”

This unprepared for reference to the Sphinx presents difficulties of explication, but one may suggest that it represents the course of civilization over which Despair and Faith both battle. Despair, true to its nature, lampoons what it cannot believe in, but despite this attack the Sphinx remains unyielding. Pitted against Despair is Faith who also writes her testament, a testament diametrically opposed to that of Despair. The testament of Faith is simply the sign of the cross. This is the running battle which Melville referred to in the lines previously quoted. This section of the Epilogue seems to reinforce the equivocal meaning of the dramatic action. So far neither Despair nor Faith has capitulated, but the conflict still continues. The remaining lines, however, indicate an optimism which the preceding argumentation has not prepared for, and which, for that reason, does not ring quite true to the major tonality of the poem. In these lines the narrative voice directs itself to the young hero:

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

(The, 298)

The last line comes as a disappointment to one who feels that Melville’s unique quality is precisely his tough resistance to large platitudes. This is too close to Tennyson’s mild suggestion to trust the larger hope, and too far from the probing and inconclusive
argumentation of the whole poem to provide a satisfactory conclusion. Despite the explicit hopefulness of the ending of the Epilogue we are forced to agree with Walter Bezanson that the meaning of the Epilogue does not indicate a return to historical Christianity. Even though Melville makes use of such orthodoxly Christian terminology as faith, hope, the cross, he, nevertheless, does not accept the precision of meaning with which traditional Christianity endows them. Thus, in the use of the cross, he seems to have in mind not the historical fact of redemption but rather a general symbol of innocent suffering which may, perhaps, triumph over its persecutors—although such a victory is in no sense assured.

Such a position, however, does represent a new perception of values and a more mature emotional approach than Melville had manifested in the novels immediately preceding Clarel (i.e. Pierre and The Confidence-Man). While the precision of orthodox theology is missing, there is at last no repudiation, but rather a large acceptance of some of the symbolic values of basic Christianity. Thus Melville accepts the necessity of faith in God, the positive value of suffering, the mystery of the cross, the place of Christ in the Christian dispensation.

**Conclusion**

Clarel, it must be conceded, is an inconclusive poem in many ways, and yet it represents an interesting shift in Melville’s system of values. Having explored the intricate avenues of contemporary thought, Melville finds no positive answer to the question of what will happen to the nineteenth century consciousness. There is simply no other solution but to wait and see. Yet despite this equivocal conclusion, one must not lose sight of the shift toward optimism which the poem suggests.

Such a shift, as was suggested earlier, is away from a metaphysical problem and toward a psychological one. It is a commonplace to say that Melville is constantly concerned throughout his work with the metaphysical aspect of things: the existence of truth, of good, of suffering and evil, the existence of God and the philosophical implications of His existence. This is certainly the focal point of Mardi, Moby Dick, The Confidence-Man. And, if we take at face value the reasons which Clarel alleges for his
quest (to face the "under-formings in the mind," to "woo remote conclusions"), such metaphysical speculations will also be the focal point of Clarel. It is true that such speculations form the bulk of the poem. However what gives Clarel its peculiar coloring is the fact that such speculations are now considered under a new formality. Melville shifts from a preoccupation with metaphysics to psychology. The overwhelming concern in Clarel is not so much with the essences of things but with man’s relationship and reaction to these essences.

Throughout the poem we are faced with the basic premiss that there are certain absolute values which are worth a great price. Truth does exist, and provided a man is willing to make the necessary sacrifices he may have his vision. That Mortmain alone of all the pilgrims does enjoy the full vision of truth merely underscores the psychological aspect of Melville’s problem. If one man achieves the goal, then the goal must exist and be possible of attainment. Of the other pilgrims it must be said that they failed in some way as questers. What of Clarel? He is neither victorious nor defeated. He waits on amid the conflicting thought of the nineteenth century. The vision has not failed. It is man who has failed and the world man has shaped.