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Phillips, Christopher N.

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Melville’s Epic Career

Did Herman Melville have a career? The question sounds facetious, since many critics have gone to great lengths to articulate and contextualize that career. In almost every case, however, that career has been one of a fiction writer, and especially of a novelist, whose turn to poetry on the eve of the Civil War has frequently been seen as beginning what Willard Thorp called in the 1930s “Melville’s Silent Years.” This, despite the fact that Melville wrote poetry for over twice as many years as he did prose, has been a difficult paradigm to break from, even as scholars have paid increasing attention to Melville’s poetry. Sheila Post-Lauria has deftly shown that Melville was already easing into poetic types of linguistic experimentation in *The Confidence-Man*, and that his experience with magazine writing prepared him to think of himself as an author who could effectively execute poetry. Edgar Dryden has seen Melville’s poetry as charting the development of a second, more intentional career after his first career as a fiction writer failed. More recently, Hershel Parker has persuasively argued that Melville was in fact steeped in poetry even before he was an author, and that his engagement with poetry not only marked key developments in his fiction-writing years but also led him to begin thinking of himself as a poet even before the ink was
dry on the pages of his last published novel, *The Confidence-Man* (1857). So then: did Melville have one career, or two, or one with a twist?

These varying answers to my opening question tend to conflate what Jonathan Arac calls “a public relationship to readers” and the “narrative overview” that partially determines that relationship. The narrative overview, an author’s sense of explaining what they do by temporalizing it into a story—often as an element in a larger work, such as a novel or a long poem—is my focus in this chapter. Rather than focusing on Melville’s relationship to his audience, though that certainly affects my reading in ways that will become clear in the following pages, I intend to read Melville’s relationship to himself as an author, in company with other authors, and particularly through his engagements with epic poetry. These engagements were nearly constant, especially between 1848 and about 1876. In 1848, the year that Melville completed his third novel, *Mardi*, and made a drastic break from the travelogue style of his earlier works, Melville first read Dante; he was reading Tegner’s *Frithiofs Saga* and Ossian in the same year. In 1849, the year he discovered Shakespeare, he also read intensively in Milton and purchased the Harper Family Classical Library, whose volumes of Virgil and Homer he would peruse for years. By the time he wrote *Moby-Dick*, he had spent considerable time with Spenser, Davenant, and Byron. By 1860, he was well versed in Ariosto, Tasso, Wordsworth, Tennyson, and multiple translations of Homer; he also had branched out into more recent American experiments in epic, such as John Quincy Adams’s *Dermot Mac Morrogh* (1832), the only epic poem ever written by a US president. *Clarel* indicates Melville’s familiarity with the *Ravana* and other non-Western epics, and his deep engagement with the sea adventure of Camões’s *Lusiads* seems to have lasted from his sailing days until the end of his life. To reconstruct Melville’s self-conception as an author among epics, I look not very much to his letters, which are usually considered the preeminent evidence of Melville’s understanding of himself as a writer, but in his relentlessly active reading (markings, annotations) and in his published works. Though not comprehensive, this survey of Melville’s encounters with epic offers insight into Melville’s craft, his chosen “ancestors” (in Ralph Ellison’s sense), and his use of narrative as a mode of thinking.

**Epic Overtures: Lombardo’s *Koztanza***

Melville first revealed his struggle with form in *Mardi* and a *Voyage Thither* (1849), his longest work in prose and his first explicitly fictional work. *Mardi* was also
Melville’s first attempt at expanding his literary technique to digest his reading—which by 1848 was extensive. As “the man who lived among the cannibals” absorbed volumes of Ossian, Dante, and other classic authors, he reenvisioned himself as an ambitious young author whose South Sea adventures were mere gateways into the intellectual and spiritual oceans that he was now discovering. The structure of Mardi is complicated and uneven: the narrator, an unnamed sailor who later adopts the name Taji, deserts his whaling ship and wanders into a fanciful archipelago called Mardi, which turns out to be a microcosm of the Western world in cannibal dress. The main Mardian characters, King Media, the philosopher Babbalanja, the poet Yoomy, and the historian Mohi, travel with Taji and his fellow deserter Jarl on a circuitous voyage through Mardi, part rescue quest, part pleasure cruise. In chapter 180, the characters discuss the ancient Mardian poet Lombardo with King Abrazza in the form of a Platonic dialogue; as Elizabeth S. Foster has pointed out, critics have often read this chapter as a kind of allegorical defense that Melville makes for his choice in writing Mardi, and it seems strangely prophetic of the book’s outraged reception by critics who had previously called Melville “the American Crusoe.”

Taji describes the conversation as concerning “old Homeric bards:—those who, ages back, harped, and begged, and groped their blinded way through all this charitable Mardi; receiving coppers then, and immortal glory now.” The characterization brings to mind Homer’s self-reflexive depictions of blind bards in the Odyssey, such as Demodokos, who sings inspired songs on command in the land of Phaeacians. Here even Homer and his kind are working, as Carlyle would say, “under conditions,” forced to their work by economic necessity and market demand rather than by disinterested inspiration that desires only “immortal glory” and not “coppers.” Babbalanja, serving as Lombardo’s biographer, explains why such poets perform for money and not for pure art: “[T]he greatest fullnesses overflow not spontaneously; and, even when decanted, like rich syrups, slowly ooze; whereas, poor fluids glibly flow, wide-spreading. Hence, when great fullness weds great indolence;—that man, to others, too often proves a cipher; though, to himself, his thoughts form an Infinite Series, indefinite, from its vastness; and incommunicable;—not for lack of power, but for lack of an omnipotent volition, to move his strength. His own world is full before him; the fulcrum set; but lever there is none” (593). The mechanistic metaphors of the passage—viscous fluids, fulcrums and levers—highlight not only the imposition of movement upon the poet but the ultimate lack of volition on the part of Lombardo and his kind. The necessity of material resources for artistic production
also becomes apparent as Babbalanja explains that the first step in Lombardo's composition process was to acquire "a ream of vellum" and a bunch of quills, which he declares to be "indispensable preliminaries . . . to the writing of the sublimest epics" (594). Even the most inspired poet is powerless without access to enough materials to communicate his ideas. And the need to share his poetry strangely coincides with a prodigious appetite for raw materials, as Lombardo fills fifty folios in ten days and then throws them all away; Babbalanja wryly comments that the poet "loved huge acres of vellum whereon to expatiate" (595), not unlike the "sea-room" that Melville declared was necessary for the American writer to achieve his potential.9 The vast appetite for territory and material, which Wai Chee Dimock has discussed in her Empire for Liberty, is a hallmark of Melville's epic impulse, even as his denouncements of American expansionism and the excesses of the wealthy reach at times jeremiadic pitches elsewhere in his writings (including much of both Mardi and Moby-Dick).10

But even barring ideological difficulties, Melville's epic appetite caused artistic problems for him, just as it did for Lombardo. After King Abrazza objects that Lombardo's Koztanza violates all of "the unities" of form, Babbalanja counters by insisting that while the work's beauty "is restricted to its form . . . its expanding soul" continues not only beyond form but even beyond the world of Mardi, as "there are things infinite in the finite; and dualities in unities" (597). In the footsteps of Shelley and Byron, Lombardo "abandoned all monitors from without" while "retain[ing] one autocrat within—his crowned and sceptred instinct" (597). Or did he? The incompatibility of the romantic author who writes the truth and the writer who can succeed by giving the public what it wants defined for Melville the tragic struggle of his own career. In a famous letter to Hawthorne, written near the end of Moby-Dick's composition, Melville confessed to his fellow author, "My dear Sir, a presentiment is on me,—I shall at last be worn out and perish, like an old nutmeg-grater, grated to pieces by the constant attrition of the wood, that is, the nutmeg. 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." And in the next few lines, it seems that Melville was losing not only the artistic battle with the market, but the economic one as well, as his own labors were now split (painfully) between writing and maintaining his farm in Pittsfield: "I'm rather sore, perhaps, in this letter; but see my hand!—four blisters on this palm, made by hoes and hammers within the last few days."11

Like Melville, Lombardo saw his own work as a botch. As Babbalanja relates, "[I]t ever seemed to him but a poor scrawled copy of something within, which, do
what he would, he could not completely transfer. ‘My canvas was small,’ said he; ‘crowded out were hosts of things that came last. But Fate is in it.’ And Fate it was . . . which forced Lombardo, ere his work was well done, to take it off his easel, and send it to be multiplied” (601–2). The analogy to painting emphasizes the artistic intentions of Lombardo, but his work is not only incomplete but “a copy”—though of something internal to him, rather than based on some previous model. The small canvas, as the denial of Lombardo’s appetite for “huge acres of vellum,” prefigures the failure of the work once “off his easel.” Yet how far off was the Koztanza from what its author had intended? When Abrazza objects that the poem “lacks cohesion,” that “it is wild, unconnected, all episode,” Babbalanja responds by redefining mimesis: “And so is Mardi itself:—nothing but episodes; valleys and hills; rivers, digressing from plains; vines, roving all over; boulders and diamonds; flowers and thistles; forests and thickets; and, here and there, fens and moors. And so, the world in the Koztanza” (597). Here the age-old “don’t blame me, blame my source” argument moves from literary source to mimetic source: the work is unmanageable and asymmetrical because its subject matter is as well. Melville here pushes the classical arguments of the interdependence of form and content almost to the annihilation, or at least the subjugation, of form. But if the Koztanza is a flawed, incomplete work, is its formal makeup the result of artistic intention, or of the inability to fulfill that intention? Is formal incoherence an aesthetic triumph of “barbaric vertù,” or simply a mistake—or even tragic fate? Much of Melville’s career after Mardi revolved around these questions, and in Moby-Dick some of his most explicit thoughts on intention and form dovetail with a magnificent yet flawed narrative.

How to Draught an Epic

Ishmael declares an ambition to write “a mighty book” with “a mighty theme,” not unlike Lombardo. However, the narrative of Moby-Dick might not have been the book he had planned to write, either. In chapter 102, “A Bower in the Arsacides,” Ishmael mentions that he had the dimensions of a sperm whale skeleton tattooed on his right arm while in the South Seas, as “at that period, there was no other secure way of preserving such valuable statistics.” However, he continues, “I was crowded for space, and wished the other parts of my body to remain a blank page for a poem I was then composing—at least, what un tattooed parts might remain” (451). No longer the uninitiated Ishmael that shudders at the sight of Queequeg’s tattoos, the narrator here declares that he has conceived of tattooing as
the proper vehicle not only for recording important data but also for preserving
poetry, making the monument of the poet’s achievement coextensive with the
body of the poet himself—and thus tying the poetry to his life, such that the po-
etry will survive as long as (and no longer than) he does. The quest for poetic im-
mortality is transposed into a further example of Melville/Lombardo/Ishmael’s
appetite for poetic materiality, a now self-consuming and self-inscribing appetite
that bears a strange resemblance to the image of the ill-fated “nutmeg-grater” in
Melville’s letter to Hawthorne. But again, the work is incomplete; the tattoo
poem is not written, or at least is not revealed to the reader. The body itself has
become implicated in what Emerson in his essay “The Poet” called the “necessity
to be published,” but by both casting the (white) body as a tabula rasa and leaving
it blank (at least to the reader), Ishmael-as-poet merely echoes Emerson’s sum of
human nature: “For all men live by truth, and stand in need of expression. . . . The
man is only half himself, the other half is his expression.”13 Like Emerson, Ishmael
still awaits his other half.

Yet even as Ishmael loudly yearns for greatness, his projected poem is unwrit-
ten, or at least uncompleted, or at the very least unpublished. The “un” world of
*Moby-Dick* thematizes the incompletion that haunts not only Ishmael but the
army of critics that have tried to explain his book. As Harrison Hayford remarks
on the opening question of his essay, “Is *Moby-Dick* a Botch?”

The biographical evidence says “Yes.”
The critical consensus says “No.”
The textual evidence says “Maybe.”
And the aesthetic implications need further study.14

However we understand the integrity of the book as a whole, the thematics of in-
completion are overwhelming at times. At the beginning of the famous “Cetol-
ogy” chapter, Ishmael offers his version of a “comprehensive classification” of the
various kinds of whales, with a qualification worthy of the Connecticut Wits: “As
no better man advances to take this matter in hand, I hereupon offer my own poor
endeavors. I promise nothing complete; because any human thing supposed to be
complete, must for that very reason infallibly be faulty” (136). But Ishmael’s reason
for his incompleteness is not merely his own lack of merit; he rejects outright the
idea of completion in a “human thing.” His failure to be definitive is his fault only
insofar as he shares humanity’s inherent limitations for objective and compre-
hensive expression. In fact, Ishmael’s inability to perfect his classification system
bespeaks its greatness, as he insists at the conclusion of the chapter:
It was stated at the outset, that this system would not be here, and at once, perfected. You cannot but plainly see that I have kept my word. But I now leave my cetological System standing thus unfinished, even as the great Cathedral of Cologne was left, with the crane still standing upon the top of the uncompleted tower. For small erections may be finished by their first architects; grand ones, true ones, ever leave the copestone to posterity. God keep me from ever completing anything. This whole book is but a draught—nay, but a draught of a draught. Oh, Time, Strength, Cash, and Patience! (145)

Here incompletion becomes not a failure but a (questionable) fulfillment of authorial intent, and the sublimity of the grand and true supplants the economy of symmetry that had dominated poetics in the eighteenth century.

The asymmetry of form is part of the ambiguity that has fueled critical debate over whether *Moby-Dick* is better understood as a novel, a tragedy, or an epic. However, as the discussion of Jones Very in chapter 4 has shown, some of the most interesting and productive analysis in epic and tragedy comes not through identifying the hero so much as through identifying the other key characters. In *Paradise Lost*, for example, Very favors Satan as the hero of the poem, following the German romantics in their reading of Milton as a rebellious prophet. Very’s most original contribution to his summary of romantic criticism is his identification of Adam with Troy, the doomed city around whom the action revolves. To the extent, then, that the *Iliad* is about Troy—and the title of the poem indicates that Troy (i.e., Ilium) is centrally important—*Paradise Lost* is about not Satanic rebellion but the Fall of humanity, “Of man’s first disobedience, and the fruit.” Following this line of reasoning, Moby Dick might seem to be the center of his story, but of all characters he possesses the most effective will—he can destroy without (immediately) succumbing to others’ wrath. Likewise, Ishmael is in too much control of his own story to become the passive subject of a modern epic. In my view, Starbuck holds the vital place in the story, as the brave, virtuous man who can face deadly whales but “cannot withstand those more terrific, because more spiritual terrors, which sometimes menace you from the concentrating brow of an enraged and mighty man” (117). In this passage from the first “Knights and Squires” chapter, Ishmael likens Ahab to Achilles, the first “enraged and mighty man.” Starbuck is more like the first man, Adam, at peace with the world until the soul-wrenching contradictions of his life—pacifism and slaughter, order and tyranny, duty and justice—paralyze him into his grave. Ishmael suggests that the power behind Starbuck’s portrayal is “the undraped spectacle of a valor-ruined
man” (117), the man who keeps his virtue even as it abandons him. The poignancy of this moment brings Ishmael into what amounts to his epic invocation, which I quote at length:

But this august dignity I treat of, is not the dignity of kings and robes, but that abounding dignity which has no robed investiture. Thou shalt see it shining in the arm that wields a pick or drives a spike; that democratic dignity which, on all hands, radiates without end from God; Himself! The great God absolute! The centre and circumference of all democracy! His omnipresence, our divine equality!

If, then, to meanest mariners, and renegades and castaways, I shall hereafter ascribe high qualities, though dark; weave round them tragic graces, if even the most mournful, perchance the most abased, among them all, shall at times lift himself to the exalted mounts; . . . then against all mortal critics bear me out in it, thou just Spirit of Equality, which hast spread one royal mantle of humanity over all my kind! Bear me out in it, thou great democratic God! . . . Thou who, in all Thy mighty, earthly, marchings, ever cullest Thy selectest champions from the kingly commons; bear me out in it, O God! (117)

Ishmael’s “I treat of” signals at the beginning of the invocation that his borrowing of epic is a complicated one. Not only is his subject matter “not the dignity of kings and robes,” but he does not sing that dignity but, as an epic essayist—perhaps in Emerson’s vein—treats of it. The hyperbole of this passage seeks its parallel in the tremendous fame of John Bunyan, Miguel de Cervantes, and President Jackson, even as it dwells on their grotesque shortcomings (the “swart convict,” the “stumped and paupered arm”) and Ishmael’s misgivings concerning the virtue of their successes (“the pale, poetic pearl,” “higher than a throne”). The invocation threatens to ring false, even as Ishmael makes his triple appeal “bear me out in it” rather than “sing in me” or “tell me.” Ishmael has bypassed the Muses and gone straight to the top of Parnassus (or Sinai), but not so that he can hear inspiration directly from God, but so that he might have the strength to say what is already in him to say.

Uniting will and strength is Ahab’s dream, and it is Starbuck’s conflicted wish. Ahab recognizes that Starbuck alone possesses the virtue to stand against him, and so the captain must continually remind Starbuck of his authority, his charisma, his will to power, in order to keep the first mate silent. While Ahab sounds like Lear or Macbeth, his goal is not to be Lear or Macbeth, but to be Achilles, the charismatic warrior whose wrath can change the fate not just of his
people but of the cosmos. His rival for the role of Achilles is Starbuck, whose righteous anger could overthrow Ahab’s supremacy and thus bring his war with the whale to an ignominious end. Thus, Ahab must be not only Achilles but Agamemnon, the seat of legal and political authority who can manipulate others by virtue of his position and cunning, but who can also overstep his bounds and suffer consequences for it. Repeatedly through the book, Ishmael calls attention to the prudential reasons that Ahab might have for various actions—not that such are necessarily his motives, but that his action indicates a political strategy for keeping the romantic monomania on an uninterrupted course. Following Milton's legacy (as Very described it), Melville blends his stock characters until the epic types of the classical tradition are only at first glance recognizable.

Even more fundamentally, Melville imitates Milton's penchant for similes. The extended simile, a rhetorical figure so commonly associated with epic and so basic to the poetics of the form that it has become known as the epic simile, traces its origin to the *Iliad*. However, as later epicists borrowed the device, it became increasingly sophisticated until in *Paradise Lost* the simile could do not only the positive work of layering associations onto a certain object or action but also the negative work of accentuating an object’s sublimity by extended comparison in the object’s favor. One of the most famous similes in *Moby-Dick* is of this second, negative kind and introduces the white whale himself near the end of the book: “Not the white bull Jupiter swimming away with ravished Europa clinging to his graceful horns; his lovely, leering eyes sideways intent upon the maid; with smooth bewitching fleetness, rippling straight for the nuptial bower in Crete; not Jove, not that great majesty Supreme! did surpass the glorified White Whale as he so divinely swam” (548). H. Bruce Franklin has called this passage “one of the great moments of revelation in literature,” but Lawrence Buell rightly qualifies Franklin’s statement by pointing out the highly stylized nature of the simile as an allusive literary device, thus calling into question how pure the moment of noumenal encounter actually is. Buell connects Melville’s technique with that of Milton in, for example, the negative simile comparing Eden to its classical counterparts in *Paradise Lost* IV; both Melville and Milton, he says, use negation as a method of deploying the rhetorical capital of extended comparison while finally denying the possibility of commensurability.

While Buell’s attention to the form of the simile is important, he elides the paradoxical nature of the whale that exhibits a “gentle joyousness—a mighty mildness of repose in swiftness,” while his history as told throughout the book emphasizes the awful violence, even malice, of his encounters with whalemens. Indeed,
such is ultimately the encounter of the *Pequod* as Moby Dick’s “predestinating head” (571) sends the ship and crew to their doom on the last day of the chase. Leslie E. Sheldon has pointed out this paradox, reading it as a parallel to Melville’s reading of the Son in *Paradise Lost*, a character who appears meek before his Father and phantasmagorically awful before his enemies. And this is precisely the kind of paradox Melville works into his simile through his reading of Ovid. The story of Jove’s rapine of Europa in *Metamorphoses* II.834–81 emphasizes the woman’s emotions, especially her attraction to and fear of the bull, which is really Jupiter in disguise, and her terror when the bull suddenly swims for the open ocean as she rides on his back. In Melville’s retelling of the story, Europa almost disappears except as an object of the god’s gaze, an element unmentioned in Ovid’s version. Recalling Ishmael’s discussion of the whale’s sideways, twofold vision in “The Sperm Whale’s Head” (330–31), the god-bull’s “lovely, leering eyes sideways” are “intent upon the maid.” Simultaneously, Jupiter keeps his lateral gaze on Europa while swimming swiftly and straight ahead for “the nuptial bower in Crete,” the site of the rape. In this simile, the *Pequod’s* crew is already doomed, following spellbound in the wake of a sublime creature that leads them into its own terrible violence. Even if the negative simile elevates Moby Dick beyond comparison, the form still does the powerfully subtle work of describing, but describing periphrastically—*around* the whale, not *into* the whale, as Ishmael so often attempts to do in the book. Ishmael’s quest, it seems, has also failed at this point, insofar as his mission to understand and communicate the whale, a la Emerson’s Poet, has been pulled down into the vortex of negation and periphrasis.

This example of the negative simile shows its usefulness to Melville as an enactment of the epistemological defeat that both Ishmael and Ahab fear, as well as a strategy for transforming that failure into literary apotheosis. It also suggests, in the figure of the “leering” god, the tremendous appetite for acquiring—“harpooning,” as the sexual pun in “Fast-Fish and Loose-Fish” puts it—more and more of the literary universe that is a hallmark of Melville’s project, particularly in *Moby-Dick*. June W. Allison has remarked that “Melville has employed elements of epic technique to the fullest and, one might hazard, even to excess as in the case of the similes and the huge epic digressions on cetology”; she counts over eight hundred similes in *Moby-Dick*, compared with 740 in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* combined. Even more illustrative of Melville’s epic appetite is illustration, or rather visuality, in the panoramic views and spectacular descriptions of the *Pequod’s* voyage and the whale’s world. And Melville’s emphasis on visuality—another
inheritance from Milton—announces a new turn in American epic literature: the return to *ekphrasis*. As a rhetorical device dating back to ancient Greece, *ekphrasis* is a verbal description of a work of visual art. Let us explore Melville’s reintroduction of this strategy into epic writing, as well as his redefinitions of ekphrastic subject matter and the implications for his developing notion of authorial career.

**Romancing *Ekphrasis***

As with similes, *Moby-Dick* is filled with *ekphrasis*.21 From the first chapter, “Loomings,” when Ishmael describes a hypothetical landscape painting, verbal representations of artwork appear in “endless processions,” so that, as Bryan Wolf has commented, a painting becomes “most like a whale” (4–5, 7).22 Melville had taken a keen interest in art even before his seagoing days, but his visits to art galleries in Europe, together with the purchase of several illustrated editions of classic works while in London in 1849–50, transformed his visual imagination almost at the same time that he encountered “the Divine William” and Carlyle. His first serious forays into *ekphrasis* appeared in *Redburn*, in which the title character reveals his desire for the wealth that has abandoned his downwardly mobile family by describing the glass model ship that his father had brought from France.23

When the wondrous Homeric shield appears in Ishmael’s narration, it comes almost at the very end of the series of pictorial chapters, 55–57, which are arranged in order from the “monstrous” distortions of whales by landlocked artists to more and more mimetic—meaning based on firsthand observation, in this case—pictures, concluding with an array of art made from the actual bodies of whales and other sea creatures. A particular focus during the latter part of the sequence is skrimshander, carved teeth or bones from whales. Using an “almost omnipotent tool,” the jackknife, sailors produce works of art that bespeak their restoration to “that condition in which God placed him, *i.e.* what is called savagery.” Yet even as Ishmael gleefully identifies himself and his sailing brethren as “as much a savage as an Iroquois,” he associates a surprising quality with savagery: “Now, one of the peculiar characteristics of the savage in his domestic hours, is his wonderful patience of industry” (270). By connecting the savage to domesticity and industry, patent hallmarks of Western civilization in Melville’s day, Ishmael democratizes the value of patient craftsmanship. He declares a richly carved “ancient Hawaiian war-club or spear-paddle” to be “as great a trophy of human perseverance as a Latin lexicon,” noting that both works have “cost
steady years of steady application” (270). With this allusion back to the pale usher’s lexicons at the beginning of the book, Melville hints at an ambition of his to write slowly and thoughtfully, a luxury that he regretted doing without. In the same letter in which Melville told Hawthorne he wrote only “botches” of books, he lamented that he had to rush to finish *Moby-Dick* in the frenetic maze of New York rather than the repose of his Pittsfield farm: “The calm, the coolness, the silent grass-growing mood in which a man *ought* always to compose,—that, I fear, can seldom be mine. Dollars damn me; and the malicious Devil is forever grinning in upon me, with the door ajar.”

The demands of the market and the account book, the forces which had driven *Mardi*’s Lombardo to fill “fifty folios” in ten days, and that had driven Melville to write *Redburn* in less than ten weeks and *White-Jacket* in just over six, denied Melville the savage artistry achieved by “steady years of steady application.” Yet the level of artistry of which Melville believed himself capable led him to recognize in the savage art of sailors the makings of an epic creation, such that he himself might produce to rival Homer, in the historical economy of savagery: “As with the Hawaiian savage, so with the white sailor-savage. With the same marvellous patience, and with the same single shark’s tooth, of his one poor jack-knife, he will carve you a bit of bone sculpture, not quite as workmanlike, but as close packed in its maziness of design, as the Greek savage, Achilles’ shield; and full of barbaric spirit and suggestiveness, as the prints of that fine old Dutch savage, Albert Durer” (270). Melville’s repeated experimentation with *ekphrasis* in *Moby-Dick* is both a rebellion from the iconoclastic refinement of Milton and a challenge to the example of Homer—the vital center of Melville’s epic is in its visuality.

The problematic nature of this visuality emerges early in the book, when Ishmael encounters a picture in the Spouter-Inn that would undoubtedly illuminate his thoughts, if he could only tell what it literally shows. In contrast to the signs of “The Crossed Harpoons” and of the “tall straight jet of misty spray” (8, 10), where interpretation could occur after relatively easy identification of the represented objects, the Spouter-Inn’s painting is “thoroughly besmoked, and every way defaced,” and hung in “unequal cross-lights” (12). The ambiguity of the picture immediately foregrounds interpretation: “[I]t was only by diligent study and a series of systematic visits to it, and careful inquiry of the neighbors, that you could any way arrive at an understanding of its purpose” (12). The simple art of the signpost, rather than finding its counterpart inside a cheap inn, gives way to the sustained, repeated, and collective attention demanded of the most sophisticated gallery paintings. Also unlike the emblems in the streets of New Bedford is the
attention to “purpose” that appears immediately in Ishmael’s encounter with the painting, as he speculates that “at first you almost thought some ambitious young artist, in time of the New England hags, had endeavored to delineate chaos bewitched” (12). Yet as much as the painting frustrates interpretation, it provokes the hermeneutic act: “A boggy, soggy, squitchy picture truly, enough to drive a nervous man distracted. Yet was there a sort of indefinite, half-attained, unimaginable sublimity about it that fairly froze you to it, till you involuntarily took an oath with yourself to find out what that marvellous painting meant” (12–13). After speculating further on wild, cosmically allegorical readings such as “a blasted heath,” the “combat of the four primal elements,” and “Time,” Ishmael identifies the key problem for interpretation: “[A]t last all these fancies yielded to that one portentous something in the picture’s midst. That once found out, and all the rest were plain” (13). Here the ekphrasis takes on the symbolic importance traditionally associated with the form in epic poetry; the inscrutability that drives Ishmael to understand the painting enacts the reader’s proper response to the book, which seems to hold a sublime mystery at its center, possibly “the great leviathan himself.” Robert K. Wallace has rightly characterized this passage as “arguably the most significant of Ishmael’s many attempts to ‘paint the whale in words,’” as it provides both a symbol for the overall narrative and a poetics with which to approach the book. Ultimately, Ishmael’s interpretation can make no greater claim than “theory,” and it is not his reading alone but that of several more experienced readers in composite that gives him his understanding: “[T]he artist’s design seemed this: a final theory of my own, partly based upon the aggregated opinions of many aged persons with whom I conversed upon the subject” (13). The picture comes into focus just in time to collect all of Ishmael’s previous guesses into one cataclysmic, highly figurative depiction of one of the most destructive moments possible in a whaleman’s experience—storm, shipwreck, and whale attack simultaneously. Yet as much as Ishmael has read into the painting before deciphering it, he now leaves the description to stand on its own, without further indication of its symbolic importance or its prophetic relationship to the rest of the book. This further reading is left for Moby-Dick’s reader to perform.

By making his ekphrasis so performative, Melville introduces one of his major reinterpretations of Homer’s poetics. As complex as the ekphrasis of Achilles’s shield is, Homer bases his description on a mimesis that is epistemologically untenable for Melville. No character reads the shield in the Iliad; only the narrator, in omniscient third person, describes the scenes as they unfold on Haephestus’s workbench. The act of perception is rendered transparent as the pictures confront
the reader in narrative language. In *Moby-Dick*, however, the language of description and narration gives way to a narrating of the act of perception—an act that, as Melville demonstrates, rarely occurs spontaneously or instantly. Working from his engagements with Kant and Coleridge, Melville highlights the moment of perception as the center of the ekphrastic project, and thus whether or not a viewer “reads into” an object is no longer a neutral question, since even Ishmael’s refusal to read into the Spouter-Inn picture once he has “seen” it emphasizes how much he actually does bring his own agenda to what he sees, as the blasted heath and the elements hover in the conceptual background.

Melville’s *ekphrases* thus highlight a slippage between art and nature, between the world of human thought and physical reality. Ahab’s monomaniacal drive toward solipsism is an extreme version of this slippage, representing as an epic hero both the reality of the interplay between world and mind and the dangers of exploiting that interplay through the will to dominance. The metaphysical violence of Ahab’s gaze first shows itself in chapter 37, “Sunset,” which immediately follows his declared vow to kill Moby Dick and which introduces a series of the most self-consciously theatrical chapters in the book. The entire chapter is a dramatic monologue by Ahab, with stage directions occasionally added to indicate his bodily movements. As he watches the ship’s wake through the windows, the captain remarks, “I leave a white and turbid wake; pale waters, paler cheeks. The envious billows sidelong swell to whelm my track; let them; but first I pass” (167). Watching the ship’s impact on the ocean and the ocean’s natural reaction becomes a high drama in which ship and captain merge, even as the view from a cabin window morphs into the proscenium arch of a romantic dramatic poem. The next three sentences further transform the view from the window into the lyrical stasis of a landscape painting: “Yonder, by the ever-brimming goblet’s rim, the warm waves blush like wine. The gold brow plumbs the blue. The diver sun—slow dived from noon,—goes down; my soul mounts up! she wearies with her endless hill” (167). Bryan Wolf has connected this passage with the erasure of nature in Bartleby’s view out of his Wall Street office window; he argues that in both Ahab and corporate America “nature is not only converted into a painting and held in abeyance by a frame, it literally disappears.” As the sun sets and Ahab’s soul rises, the murder proposed in the captain’s quarterdeck speech has already been perpetrated: “Nature died the moment it was framed. It was murdered by a sublime and monomaniacal imagination.”

Yet as Wolf points out, Ishmael himself is not immune from such imaginative tyranny over nature. Even as Ishmael describes the experience of direct visual
contact with the ocean from the panoptic masthead, in contrast to the framed window of Ahab’s gaze, he does not notice so much the ocean (or the whales he is under orders to watch for) but what the ocean suggests to him about his own soul. He slips into a reverie he describes as pantheistic, in which the barriers between ocean, ship, and self dissolve—just as they do for Ahab as he watches the ship’s wake two chapters later. And this reverie is not only detrimental to the economic task of the ship (“Whales are scarce as hen’s teeth whenever thou art up there [in the masthead]”) but also potentially deadly to the sensitive gazer: “But while this sleep, this dream is on ye, move your foot or hand an inch, slip your hold at all; and your identity comes back in horror. . . . And perhaps, at mid-day, in the fairest weather, with one half-throttled shriek you drop through that transparent air into the summer sea, no more to rise for ever. Heed it well, ye Pantheists!” (159). Ishmael’s and Ahab’s gazes derive at least in part from Emerson’s transmutation of land into landscape at the beginning of *Nature*: “There is a property in the horizon which no man has but he whose eye can integrate all the parts, that is, the poet. This is the best part of these men’s farms, yet to this their warranty-deeds give no title.” But in *Moby-Dick* to acquire a property in the landscape, as both Ishmael and Ahab do, is to risk losing one’s soul. What Emerson proposes is the transformation of description into *ekphrasis* through subsuming nature into art, but the cosmic appetite for art that such a practice introduces—and one to which Ishmael is susceptible—threatens spiritual annihilation for the poet, as Ahab eventually realizes. Yet Ahab’s mark remains on Ishmael, as Robillard has argued; when Ishmael first sees Ahab, his description of the captain becomes an ekphrastic rendering of a portrait rather than the account of a man. In order to see Ahab as heroic, Ishmael must see him through the predetermined categories of heroism in art, such as “Cellini’s cast Perseus” (123). To portray a “grand, ungodly, god-like man,” Ishmael must think a little like him as well—and at his own peril.

The most complicated and extended *ekphrasis* in *Moby-Dick*, the nine readings of the eponymous coin in “The Doubloon,” redramatizes the dangers of ekphrastic reading even as it reveals the necessity of *ekphrasis* for interpretation. As each successive reader—Ahab, Starbuck, Stubb, Flask, the Manxman, Queequeg, Fedallah, and Pip—gives his own response to the images on the doubloon, that reading is at least doubly mediated. Each reader is witnessed by Stubb (and many are narrated by him rather than by Ishmael), and each speaks and acts against the backdrop of the seemingly neutral description that Ishmael gives of the coin before the interpretations begin:
On its [the coin’s] round border it bore the letters, REPUBLICA DEL ECUADOR: QUITO. So this bright coin came from a country planted in the middle of the world, and beneath the great equator, and named after it; and it had been cast midway up the Andes, in the unwaning clime that knows no autumn. Zoned by those letters you saw the likeness of three Andes’ summits; from one a flame; a tower on another; on the third a crowing cock; while arching over all was a segment of the partitioned zodiac, the signs all marked with their usual cabalistics, and the keystone sun entering the equinoctial point at Libra. (431)

As with Ishmael’s other ekphrases, this description is far from neutral. The inscription on the border invites an emphasis on the equatorial origin, even the climate and the topography that Ishmael associates with Ecuador. But the exact location is pure speculation, as is the classification of the bird on one of the hills, because official government records identify the bird as a condor; one of the strangest aspects of the doubloon Ishmael describes is that the coin actually existed (fig. 18). While Parker and Hayford used an image of the eight-escudo piece on the cover of their anthology, Moby-Dick as Doubloon, no scholar has ever commented on the significance of the coin’s existence, much less how Melville knew of it or what the coin’s attributes might lend to an understanding of Ishmael’s description. Unlike the famous ekphrases of the epic tradition—Achilles’s and Aeneas’s shields, the temple of Juno in Virgil, the gates of Dis in Dante and of Jerusalem in Tasso, the various arms of fictional warriors in Ariosto and Spenser—Ahab’s coin is not the product of the writer’s imagination. “The Doubloon,” while the most Homeric of the ekphrases in Moby-Dick, is a crucial point of departure in the development of epic literature. The chapter, as a metonym for the book as a whole, is the moment when the epic and the encyclopedic meet. The encyclopedic narrative that Mendelson has described and read back through the canon as far as the Divine Comedy actually begins, with its emphasis on scientific knowledge and corresponding empiricist epistemology, in Moby-Dick, and locating the ekphrasis among the stuff of the living world so that the reading itself is the imagination’s domain marks a gestalt shift in the use of ekphrasis in epic literature.

But how did Melville know of the coin? A common seaman would have had little occasion to acquire a sixteen-dollar piece, as Ahab sets the value of the coin; what we know of Melville’s reading indicates that he had little specific interest in numismatics, and prints of coins outside of books were extremely rare. Melville may have found the coin either at a shop in New York or during visits with fellow
sailors. One other possibility is that Melville saw engravings of both sides of a very similar 4-escudo gold piece in Jacob Eckfeldt and William Du Bois’s *A Manual of Gold and Silver Coins of All Nations* (1842); though some of the details would have been somewhat small for someone with Melville’s chronic eye strain to see, there is enough visible to make the book a possible source for the doubloon.\(^3^3\) In any case, the description of the coin is remarkably detailed, and remarkably like its original. However, there are important departures from the coin itself.

Besides the speculative work that Ishmael had to have done as noted above, three other aspects of the coin’s face show further the narrator’s slant in giving a supposedly objective reading of the image. First of all, the order of the hills is completely arbitrary; on the actual coin, the left-to-right order is tower-bird-flame, while Ishmael’s order is flame-tower-bird, bringing the “crowing cock” in as the third in a curious echo of Christ’s prophecy to Peter on the night of Judas Iscariot’s betrayal: “Verily I say unto thee, That this night, before the cock crow, thou shalt deny me thrice.”\(^3^4\) Denial is a major theme in this chapter. Stubb refuses to see the truth in his reading but watches all the other readings (except Ishmael’s); Starbuck abruptly stops his reading, “lest Truth shake me falsely” (432), lacking the resolve to recognize the ship’s doom. Pip recognizes the danger, but his insanity precludes anyone taking him seriously. Ishmael’s reordering of the hills signals the treachery involved in reading—and not reading—the doubloon. Another aspect of the coin, the chasm between the tower’s hill and the bird’s hill, does not appear in Ishmael’s reading, but it does finally surface in Starbuck’s noting of a “dark valley between [the] peaks” (432). Starbuck is a sensitive reader of the doubloon, perhaps an overly sensitive one, but Ishmael’s omission in the “objective” reading creates the impression that Starbuck really is imagining things. The presence of the valley on the coin implicates Ishmael with Ahab in the silencing of Starbuck by making the first mate not the finder but the creator of a vital element in the picture.

The third aspect of the coin is that the condor (or crowing cock, as Ishmael has it) actually has a twin, which appears on top of the tower on one of the other hills; this second bird does not appear anywhere in “The Doubloon.” The missing bird in Ishmael’s account doubles a much more drastic omission, for as Pip states in his *ekphrasis*, “[W]hen aught’s nailed to the mast, it’s a sign that things grow desperate” (435). Garrison insightfully points out that the doubloon’s being nailed to the mast establishes a crucial difference between the *ekphrases* in
the *Iliad* and those in *Moby-Dick*: while the shield of Achilles shows a symmetrical world (including war and peace, country and city, love and hate), the doubloon shows only one side, keeping the reverse face hidden, possibly forever. This difference symbolizes for Garrison the contrast between the finally balanced heroism of Achilles, who expresses pity and remorse at the end of the *Iliad*, and the monomaniacal heroism of Ahab, who sees no other side—or, if Ahab’s mournful speech in “The Symphony” is a move toward balance, it is a move that Ahab retracts by the end of the chapter.\(^{35}\) And what the other side of that balance would have been is crucial to understanding Ahab as Achilles-turned-Agamemnon. Since Melville knew the reverse of the doubloon so well, he most likely knew at least the high points of the much simpler obverse, particularly the bust portrait of the goddess Liberty and the inscription “El Poder en la Constitucion [The Power in the Constitution]” (fig. 19). The restraint of constitutional law, as Starbuck lamented earlier in the book, is two oceans and a continent away during the doubloon’s reading, and Ahab’s monomaniacal denial of both procedural
justice and liberty in favor of his own form of justice drives itself home in the act of the captain nailing the doubloon to the mast, hiding the reverse from view. Oddly, the power of the Constitution also surrounds the only explicitly female presence on the ship, one not detected before by Melville critics, and certainly not detected by the crew—the portrait of Liberty, rendered as an Ecuadorian senora, literalizes the female imagery in the book noted by critics from Joyce Sparer Adler to Juniper Ellis. The Constitution’s power, it seems, has a female cast that Ahab both shouts down in his Achilles-Agamemnon violence and perverts in his “queenly personality” in “The Candles” (507). Only by such a bizarre ontological elision of gender can Ahab maintain control of his ship, and he glares, shouts, or argues down every mention of contracts, rights, and justice by Starbuck, the constitutional conscience of the Pequod. When Ahab makes the doubloon a “Loose-Fish,” and thus a piece of property alone, he obliterates part of the meaning of the object, and thus any ekphrasis will be a failed reading, an exercise in not-seeing.
And that is the joke of *ekphrasis* in *Moby-Dick*. As Bryan Wolf has argued about the genre in general, *ekphrasis* is in Ishmael’s mighty book an act of not reading *at least* as much as it is an act of reading. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the case of Queequeg’s tattoos, which Ishmael says were “the work of a departed prophet and seer,” and that the designs contained “a complete theory of the heavens and the earth, and a mystical treatise on the art of attaining truth” (480). Yet no Rosetta stone is available; only the departed prophet knew what he had written, and his secret died with him, so that not even Queequeg could read his own body. Composed as an intelligible text, the tattoos have become unintelligible and thus can only exist now in the realm of *ekphrasis*—a text to be described aesthetically, not to be read articulately. In his characteristic manner, Ishmael suggests that this might have been the reason for Ahab’s outburst one day while looking at Queequeg: “Oh, devilish tantalization of the gods!” (481). Queequeg’s secret would die with him, as would the secret of the doubloon, and the meaning of the *Pequod* would be entrusted to one sole orphan, self-named Ishmael, who admits to have suffered abandonment on the sea similar to that which drove Pip to his insanity—tantalization of the gods, indeed.

**Mechanizing Milton in *Battle-Pieces***

An investigation of *Battle-Pieces* and *Clarel* also can show us how Melville’s thinking about and use of epic develops beyond *Moby-Dick* and later stories such as *The Encantadas*, which included several epigraphs from Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene* and thematic material from Dante. Melville had a lifelong fascination with Spenser and Dante, as he did with Shakespeare and Milton, and these heroic presences in Melville’s library remained central even as he expanded his reading into many poets of his century, including Matthew Arnold, both Brownings, Robert Southey, and Henry Kirke White, to mention a few of those more popular in their own century. As Hershel Parker has argued, Melville’s career as a poet began in 1859–60 with the intention of becoming a major epic poet. In an ongoing effort to improve his flagging health, Melville accompanied his brother Thomas on a voyage around Cape Horn, leaving the manuscript of his first volume of poems in the care of his other brother Allan and his editor Evert Duyckinck. The fledgling poet expected to arrive in San Francisco with his poems published and waiting for him in his mail, and in anticipation he had packed not
only several volumes of literary periodicals to read during the voyage but also a
library of classic epic poetry, beginning with Chapman’s Homer (and probably
Pope’s as well) and continuing to Virgil, Milton, Ariosto, Tasso, and Dante, plus
additional titles. According to Parker, Melville’s reading during his voyage was
meant to launch him into the next stage of a poetic career, fashioned after Mil-
ton’s, viewing the first volume as an apprenticeship on the way to the masterwork
of the epic poem. If Melville could not write truth in a saleable genre such as fi-
c tion, he would retreat to the much less lucrative but more historically important
genre of the epic. Such aspirations, however, were dashed when Melville found
no package awaiting him in San Francisco, but instead a letter from his wife
Lizzie informing him that Duyckinck could not secure a publisher. Dejected,
Melville decided to return home rather than continue his voyage, and no other
mention of the manuscript of his first poems has ever been found; the manu-
script itself was probably destroyed.

Melville returned home from his disappointing voyage in late 1860, just as
unrest surrounding the presidential election and the threat of secession was ris-
ing dangerously. Through the four years of the Civil War, Melville remained fi-
nancially unstable, despite receiving an inheritance from his father-in-law Lem-
uel Shaw. Although he showed little interest in the war in its early years, sometime
in 1863 he began writing poems about various events and reflections based on
newspaper accounts, and in 1864 he and Allan visited their cousin Henry Gan-
sevoort while the latter served at the front with the Union cavalry in Virginia.
The visit gave Melville considerable material for description and refl ection, and
several poems in Battle-Pieces, including the longest poem in the book, “The
Scout toward Aldie,” are based on his time in camp and in the field. Melville rode
with the dashing young colonel Charles Russell Lowell—the poet-professor
James Russell Lowell’s nephew—in a scouting party whose mission was to locate
and capture John Singleton Mosby, a Confederate cavalry officer whose guerilla
campaigns against Union forces required cavalry units such as Gansevoort’s and
Lowell’s to remain stationed within sight of the newly completed dome of the
United States Capitol in Washington.

Melville continued working on his Civil War lyrics into 1866 and published
them as Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War in that same year. The presence of
prose in Melville’s first volume of poetry is remarkably strong; besides the essay,
a characteristically ambiguous prefatory note appears before the table of contents,
and extensive notes in the back contextualized and identified events and artistic
choices, sometimes to the length of several paragraphs. If *Battle-Pieces* constituted Melville’s declaration of his new choice of career, it also evidenced his continued understanding of the power and cultural importance of prose, both in his own prose and in the poetry.

Despite the hyper-realism of the journalistic details and the narration of telegraphy, posting, and reading in poems such as “Donelson,” Melville’s goal in *Battle-Pieces* was not merely to depict faithfully the reality of the war, but also to make the war a reality by its incarnation into printed poetry. This approach, informed by his reading of Wordsworth’s “Supplementary Essay” to the preface of *Lyrical Ballads*, arose from the belief that poetry should show not things as they are but things as they are felt and perceived—human interaction with the world around the self. Melville’s approach ran the risk of alienating his audience by creating too much distance between the clearly artificial poetry and the reader; William Dean Howells criticized the poetry’s vulnerability to that danger in his review of the book, in which he described Melville’s poetic consciousness as being filled with “tortured humanity shedding, not words and blood, but words alone”—an ironic criticism, or perhaps a displacement of guilt, since Howells had spent the war years as a diplomat in Venice. The terrible sublimity of the war, particularly for Northern noncombatants, often seemed so self-evident that the poet’s role in celebrating the war was to keep their poetry as transparent as possible, for the poetry was already in the events and actions themselves. In September 1864, Emerson wrote to Thomas Carlyle his impressions of the military sublime of the Civil War: “I shall always respect War hereafter. The cost of life, the dreary havoc of comfort & time are overpaid by the Vistas it opens of Eternal Life, Eternal Law, reconstructing & uplifting Society,—breaks up the old horizon, & we see through the rifts a wider. . . . Our Census of 1860, and the War, are poems, which will, in the next age, inspire a genius like your own.” This aesthetic account of the sacrifice of the war seems shocking today, but his insistence that the Civil War is itself a poem, along with the 1860 Census (the document or the counting itself?), suggests that Emerson’s earlier epic impulse was in 1864 searching for its object in the horror of the nation’s crisis and the expanse of the nation’s accomplishments.

Emerson faced a problem in the Civil War similar to Whitman’s problem of the nation-as-poem: how can you represent something that seems already so grandly to speak for itself? Melville’s solution to this dilemma was to deny Emerson’s premise that the war itself was a poem; in the pages of *Battle-Pieces*, Melville would literally reconstruct the Civil War, and with it the nation, as his
preface to the book suggests an analogy to the problem of federalism: “[The poems] were composed without reference to collective arrangement, but being brought together in review, naturally fall into the order assumed.” This claim for natural order, or else a happy accident of arrangement, takes a decidedly romantic turn in the rest of the preface, as Melville describes the poems as treating “a few themes” that “for any cause chanced to imprint themselves upon the mind,” concluding with an almost ridiculously shopworn allusion to Coleridge’s “Aeolian Harp”: “Yielding instinctively, one after another, to feelings not inspired from any one source exclusively, and unmindful, without purposing to be, of consistency, I seem, in most of these verses, to have but placed a harp in a window, and noted the contrasted airs which wayward winds have played upon the strings” (3).

Yet even as Melville declares his allegiance to the British romantic poets, he also alerts the reader to an epic unity that stands behind, and thus haunts, the seeming lyric serendipity of the book. The “few themes,” he says, have been taken from “the events and incidents of the conflict—making up a whole, in varied amplitude, corresponding with the geographical area covered by the war” (3), a totality defined by time, space, and action that, if not exactly Aristotelian, stands far from the extravagant formlessness of Mardi. Just before the preface, Melville’s dedication is “to the memory of the THREE HUNDRED THOUSAND” Union dead (2). If the Iliad’s true subject is not the Trojan War but the anger of Achilles, and that of Paradise Lost is not the expulsion from Eden but “man’s first disobedience, and the fruit,” the true subject of Battle-Pieces is not the war’s fallen heroes, as Howells would have wished, but the act of memorializing those heroes as an aesthetic and social endeavor of epic proportions. Battle-Pieces, as a collection of lyric poems, is, like Lombardo’s Koztanza, “all episode”; yet the collection is also a coherent book, Melville’s “American Iliad,” as Laurie Robertson-Lorant has dubbed it, and thus the episodes orbit around a still small point—the hollow center of a nation’s unfathomable loss. The mimicry of manuscript in the italics of “The Portent” also signals, consciously or not, Melville’s departure from public letters; he would never purposely write a public work again in his lifetime. With the country’s future hanging in the balance, and John Brown’s body “Hanging from the beam, / Slowly swaying (such the law)” (5), Melville has just published his suicide note as a public author. Whether “the law” stands for the market or the merciless demands of artistic integrity (the two forces that Melville said made his books “botches”), it has hanged the poet—or the poet has hanged himself with it.
The need to escape the horror of the war resonates throughout *Battle-Pieces*. Two early poems, “Dupont’s Round Fight” and “The Stone Fleet,” suggest a retreat from engagement with history. Critics have often read “Dupont’s Round Fight,” a poem describing the formal beauty of the Union gunboats’ elliptical formation in the Battle of Port Royal, as Melville’s rejection of political prophecy for the detached pleasure of aesthetic appreciation. “The Stone Fleet” nostalgically mourns the end of the age of sailing and of whaling—a lengthy note to the poem includes the list of old whaling ships sunk by Union forces in an unsuccessful attempt to blockade the port of Charleston, South Carolina. This poem, subtitled “An Old Sailor’s Lament,” ventriloquizes a former whaler bemoaning the futile fate of his former ship and its contemporaries. If “Dupont’s Round Fight” celebrates human accomplishment (and several critics have questioned whether it actually does), “The Stone Fleet” shows the insignificance of human action, even as the ships themselves serve as permanent, stony memorials of the end of action.

Following the long poem of a land-and-sea siege are four more naval poems. The second poem, “In the Turret,” continues the theme of mechanical warfare, with the suitably named “Worden” enjoying fame as the first sailor to man a turret in a battle. Describing the tomblike enclosure of the turret, the poet comments,

> Alcides, groping into haunted hell  
> To bring forth King Admetus’ bride,  
> Braved naught more vaguely direful and untried. (39)

The allusion to Euripides’s play *Alcestis* recalls a battle between Death and Hercules (son of Alcmene), the latter armed with a newly made weapon, an olive-wood club. The figured battle with death overwhelms the narration of the battle, and the glory of poetry resides in Worden’s ability to “live, twice live in life and story” (40), so that the fact of whether he survived or not becomes irrelevant—although the *Monitor*, according to the poem’s last lines, has certainly perished. As an aspiring tragedian, or so it seems, the poet mock-heroically takes on Euripides himself in asking Worden,

> What poet shall uplift his charm,  
> Bold Sailor, to your height of daring,  
> And interblend therewith the calm,  
> And build a goodly style upon your bearing. (39)

The irony of Worden’s heroism is that he was unprecedentedly well protected, but that very lack of precedent left him uncertain as to whether the armor would
actually work—the heroism was mental more than physical, taking on unknown security rather than the known danger of the *Cumberland*, the doomed sailing ship celebrated in the poem preceding “In the Turret.” Similarly, the poet’s triumph is not so much in praising Worden as in seeking to outdo his own mental deed in constructing “a goodly style” never seen before. As many critics have noticed, Melville’s style in *Battle-Pieces* is provocative, innovative, tense, but almost never “goodly.” The supposed celebrations of the war’s great deeds are becoming fainter and fainter echoes of history, as Howells had noted, and grow more self-reflexive with each poem.

A new level of reflexivity appears in the next piece, the first *ekphrasis* in the book: “The Temeraire.” Inspired by Turner’s iconic painting *The Fighting Temeraire*, the poem is “supposed to have been suggested to an Englishman of the old order by the fight of the Monitor and Merrimac” (41). As Hsuan Hsu has argued, the sense of *ekphrasis* as its etymology *ek-phrasein*, to “say away” or to “say outside,” comes across powerfully in this poem; watching the war from an outsider’s perspective, this Englishman from the age of sail observes the first battle between ironclad ships and moves from observation of history to perusal of art.\(^43\) If Worden faced absorption into his ship, “sealed as in a diving bell” (39), one of the great ships-of-the-line from Trafalgar is now succumbing to, even merging with, an ignoble steamboat: “A pigmy steam-tug tows you [the ship], / Gigantic, to the shore” (42). The adjective “gigantic” can apply to either ship, and as Turner’s picture suggests, size is rendered neutral by engineering.\(^44\) Even as the *Temeraire* is described as a “Titan,” the Englishman laments that its “bulwarks to the years must yield, / And heart-of-oak decay” (87). Size, grandeur, and strength almost become reasons for decay, such that even the central might of “heart-of-oak” comes apart in the end. This reflection is particularly ominous, as in the earlier poem “Lyon,” the eponymous Union general’s courage is described as “wizard-heart and heart-of-oak” (16). Even the courage of brave leaders cannot survive the relentless approach of the steam engine.

And approach the engine does in the next poem, “A Utilitarian View of the Monitor’s Fight.” After the near-blind view of the *Monitor* in “The Turret” and the willful blindness of “The Temeraire,” this poem reduces the ship to evidence of a global theory: the modern world’s drive for progress and utility has rendered war as commercial and mechanical as peacetime life. At the end of this chain of poems about not-seeing, Melville turns again to aesthetic theory. Many critics have pointed out that Melville’s austere poetics receives its most direct expression in the opening lines of “A Utilitarian View”:
Plain be the phrase, yet apt the verse,
More ponderous than nimble;
For since grimed War here laid aside
His Orient pomp, 'twould ill befit
Overmuch to ply
The rhyme’s barbaric cymbal. (44)

The allusion to Milton’s prefatory comment on the blank verse of *Paradise Lost* is clear; however, the verse’s ponderousness coupled with the denial of “pomp” serves also to reject Whitman’s “barbaric yawp.” A measured dissonance traces its way between the smooth regularity of heroic couplets and the sprawling grandeur of the Whitmanian line. The burial of the story of “the Monitor’s Fight” amid all this theorizing is one of the book’s most extreme examples of what Helen Vendler identifies as Melville’s greatest formal innovation. Melville starts lyric poems with philosophical reflection rather than building to it through description and emotion, a strategy that allows him to “fold the epic matter of history into lyric,” maintaining a god’s-eye view in the most personal and fragmentary of forms.

Such casting of a cold eye on war allows Melville to leave traditional heroes aside for the “renegades and castaways” of the lower classes: war now “belongs— / Among the trades and artisans.” However, this return of the “ruthless democracy” that Melville had claimed while writing *Moby-Dick* gives those artisans neither dignity nor agency. “[W]arriors / Are now but operatives,” and epic finally deflates into unredeemed cliché: “Needless to dwell; the story’s known” (44). The phrasing of this line suggests that more has been lost than the nostalgia of epic storytelling; since the story is “known,” and thus bears no more repeating, not only is it not worth thinking about, but it is not even worth continuing life—“Needless to dwell.” The question as to whether the country had ultimately survived the war, a question that recurs throughout the book and throughout the literature of the time, is rendered moot. As long as war can now be fought by “operatives,” by “crank, / Pivot, and screw,” whether the divinely directed soul of the nation still lives is irrelevant. The bitterly ironic tone of “A Utilitarian View” thus concludes this sequence in a jeremiad, prophesying that the nation’s trust in technology, economics, progress, and the will to power has destroyed its promise more fundamentally than the violence of civil war.

In “The House-Top,” one of the most anthologized of Melville’s poems and, not incidentally, the only poem in *Battle-Pieces* written entirely in blank verse,
the idealistic narrator voices his shock as the relentless violence of labor riots in New York forces the redeployment of the victors of Gettysburg in order to put down the city’s unrest. As the narrator watches from his roof,

Wise Draco comes . . .
In code corroborating Calvin’s creed
    . . . and the Town, redeemed,
Give thanks devout; nor, being thankful, heed
The grimy slur on the Republic’s faith implied,
Which holds that Man is naturally good,
And—more—is Nature’s Roman, never to be scourged. (64)

The need for the army to restore order is bad enough, bearing witness to humanity’s “total depravity,” as American Calvinists had long put it, but the citizens’ reaction belies the very foundation of democratic faith, that humans’ ability to self-regulate waives the need for government intervention. Even further, such self-regulation actually forms the basis for a right against government intervention; as Union troops arrive in New York, Melville finds that even the creedal foundations of the nation cannot rest secure. “The House-Top” bears the same enigmatic date, “July, 1863,” as the poem before it, “Gettysburg,” for the two events are inextricably linked for Melville. After the battle’s cacophony, an Arcadian hush descends over the battlefield-turned-cemetery at the end of “Gettysburg”:

    Soldier and priest with hymn and prayer
    Have laid the stone, and every bone
    Shall rest in honor there. (63)

The riots in New York cannot leave even this distant field in peace, however, as the opening words of “The House-Top” attest: “No sleep.” The glorious battle of what Daniel Aaron calls the “Federal Epic” of the war sinks into the restless ignominy of David staying home from the war to seduce Bathsheba.47 Yet Melville’s bleak foray into pentameters in “The House-Top” would find a new use in his far bleaker poem, Clarel. Published in 1876, that poem represented the height of Melville’s realized ambition as a poet, and its date thus serves as the end of this study’s scope, because one of the few clear messages from the labyrinthine text of Clarel—nearly twice the length of Paradise Lost—is that epic, along with the world that it is used to represent, has changed.
Redeeming Pentameters in *Clarel*

*Clarel* was something of a family effort, requiring the assistance of Lizzie and several other female members of the family to copy and proofread, as well as a gift from Melville’s Albany uncle Peter Gansevoort to finance the printing. And the metaphor of the pilgrimage that Melville made so central to his poem would emphasize not only the loneliness of the work but also the streams of tradition in which *Clarel* made its way.

The most extensive critical assessments have tended to interpret *Clarel* as a poem about comparative religion, and indeed, questions of the truth of Christianity and its relation to the other faiths of the world drive much of the conversation and reflection in the poem. Yet the threads of those religions weave through the literary tapestry with which Melville constructed his poem. In the first section, “Jerusalem,” two cantos amount to reflections on the disconnect, and possibly the reconnection, between the American tourists of Melville’s generation in the Holy Land and the worlds of two epics far removed geographically, temporally, and materially: Tasso’s *Jerusalem Delivered* was rapidly falling into obscurity by the publication of *Clarel*, and the *Ramayana* had only become available to English-speaking audiences in the thirty years prior. Canto 4, “Of the Crusaders,” follows Clarel’s doubt-ridden visit to the Holy Sepulchre, where his questions as to the veracity of the Resurrection are deflected by musings on the return of “Godfrey and Baldwin,” two of Tasso’s main characters, to the area as ghosts. The canto, a brief thirty-three lines, opens with a series of questions concerning the character of those Crusaders: were they mere brigands, as Voltaire asserted, or were they on a mission of piety? The narrator, whose reflection the canto relates, has it both ways by remarking that “man is heir / To complex moods,” and that service to God and searching for gain could be twin motives. The statement “man is heir” suggests also that this complexity is not merely a matter of psychology but one of history; if Tasso’s knights could receive their mismatched intentions from earlier patrimonies, perhaps Clarel might find belief amidst his doubt. Indeed, embedded in the *Odyssey* narrative of the poem, in which the hero quests for the home of belief through a waste wilderness of commercialism and rationalism, is a spiritualized *Iliad* in which doubt and faith vie for the battleground of Clarel’s mind—Jones Very’s *Paradise Lost* even more abstracted. But the associations that resonate from this canto are at last thematized by the closing lines, a kind of manifesto for the poem as a whole:
But wherefore this? such theme why start?
Because if here in many a place
The rhyme—much like the knight indeed—
Abjure brave ornament, ’twill plead
Just reason, and appeal for grace. (17)

Just before these lines, the narrator had asserted that whatever the truth behind the Crusades, Godfrey and Tancred were about more important business in Palestine than tourists like Clarel, and this disparity between the power of old stories and the aridity of modern experience serves as a symbol for the poetics of Clarel: Melville’s terse, jagged, often barely readable tetrameters are to deliver not beauty but earnest striving in which the reader must participate to continue. Clarel is, after all, both a poem and a pilgrimage.

Canto 32, “Of Rama,” offers a meditation on the possibility of bridging the distance articulated in Canto 4. The dramatic appearance of Rolfe, a character generally associated with Melville’s image of his younger, more confident self, leads the narrator to ask whether a human could actually parallel the life of Rama, the incarnate god who lived ignorant of his deity before fulfilling his true destiny. The question becomes a larger one of representation: “May life and fable so agree?” (104). Myth is another central theme of the poem, and this question raises the possibility that myths, so important both to the East and to the (earlier) West of Clarel’s world, might be closer to real experience than rationalists like Vine would be willing to admit. At the heart of the question also lies a longing to find the person that can unlock, for himself and for others, the secret of human existence, such as Rama managed to do in eventually realizing his deity. The canto concludes with the tantalizing couplet, “Was ever earth-born wight like this? / Ay—in the verse, may be, he is” (105). Such a person might exist in real life, if real life is confined to the world of imaginative expression, and then only “may be,” as possibility is the only realm in which such a being could survive.

The rich fantasy of a real-life Rama quickly withers into the journey into the wilderness of Part 2, and the promise of ecstatic revelation at the monastery of Mar Saba in Part 3 collapses into a collective reading of the monastery’s palm tree reminiscent of the doubloon chapter in Moby-Dick; the bloody-minded Mortmain destroys himself by gazing on the divine, Vine and Rolfe face the consternation of the Deus absconditus, and Clarel watches all the while, hoping to find new faith through aesthetic experience. But the eroticism that Clarel hopes will lead
him to God collapses again at the end of the poem, as his return to Jerusalem and the discovery that his beloved, Ruth, has died during his sojourn abroad leave him more desolate than the dystopian Palestine that he has experienced ad nauseam.

And then a curious thing happens: the final canto of the poem, the “Epilogue,” moves from an edgy tetrameter line to a flowing rhymed pentameter. The canto’s thirty-four lines set themselves up roughly as two fifteen-line sonnets, each preceded by a couplet. The rhyme scheme refuses to settle at any point through the canto, even as the hope of salvation mocks the reader who has been led on an episodic trek into despair. Bryan C. Short has offered a reading of the change in meter as a dramatic convention in which the player announces what the story he has just seen really amounts to—or better yet, how to walk away from it. The answer given to the canto’s opening question, “If Luther’s day expand to Darwin’s year, / Shall that exclude the hope—foreclose the fear?” is simply that science cannot say whether humanity has any hope of finding God, and the only thing that will end humanity’s quest is God’s self-manifestation, leaving open the possibility that “Even death may prove unreal at the last, / And stoics be astounded into heaven” (498–99). After all, Clarel is ultimately a poem about death, and its monumental arc carries its reader on Odysseus’s pilgrimage into the underworld and stops, as if the Odyssey went no further than the middle of Book XI, but Clarel’s narrator cannot help suspecting (or wishing) that the story, of its own organic accord, must somehow open up into something more glorious than the inglorious dead. Melville ends his epic with a bizarre sonnetesque volta, containing a quatrain between two couplets addressed not to the reader but to the main character:

Then keep thy heart, though yet but ill-resigned—
Clarel, thy heart, the issues there but mind;
That like the crocus budding through the snow—
That like a swimmer rising from the deep—
That like a burning secret which doth go
Even from the bosom that would hoard and keep;
Emerge thou mayst from the last whelming sea,
And prove that death but routs life into victory. (499)

The stirring rhetoric of these lines, driven by cadences resembling those of Longfellow in his apostrophe to the Union in “The Building of the Ship,” also points back to the sonnets that Longfellow had composed to accompany his translation
of Dante’s *Divine Comedy*. The will to believe, the juxtaposition of the sublime and the skeptical (the sonnet cycle ends, “And many are amazed and many doubt”), rings throughout Longfellow’s Dante and Melville’s *Clarel*—the latter formed on Mathew Arnold’s theory of translated poetics, according to one critic. As in the epilogue to *Moby-Dick*, the hope of finding life in the midst of death leaves the reader off balance, just as the narrator finally knows himself to be; yet hope of finding that revelation in the afterlife of a character is at the end a continuing quest for the real-life Rama. Epic has become about searching the entire world—its creeds, its forms, its people, its literature—for the Word.

Melville never returned to such a hopeful note after *Clarel*. The man who had begun his forays into the epic tradition with the panache of the Carlylean prophet, continuing with the “savagery” of Homer and the private ambition of Milton, self-identified at last with one of his youth’s favorite poets, Luis de Camões, or Camoens, as Melville wrote the name. In an unpublished poem, titled “Camoens,” Melville presents a diptych marked “(before)” and “(after) / camoens in the hospital.” The first part, reflecting on the unquenchable drive of epic ambition, depicts the poet, like the Melville of *Moby-Dick*, destroying himself for the sake of his art:

> And ever must I fan this fire?  
> Thus ever in flame on flame aspire?  
> Ever restless, restless, craving rest—  
> The Imperfect toward Perfection pressed!  
> Yea for the God demands thy best.

The unnamed God that “demands” the ultimate in artistic production, “the height of epic song” (296), gives no reason for the demand and ultimately abandons the poet in the second half of the diptych to the “wile and guile ill understood,” practiced on the innocent poet by hypocrites who,

> fair in face,  
> Still keep their strength in prudent place,  
> And claim they worthier run life’s race,  
> Serving high God with useful good. (297)

The epic that inspired a career has sunk below the surface of a society driven by false piety and a worship of “useful good,” which literature was increasingly divorced from in the late nineteenth century. Melville no doubt saw his own
career in such a light, but his epics would, like Camoens’s, resurface after his death. Epic seemed to have descended to what Ralph Ellison in *Invisible Man* would call “the lower frequencies,” but, as my epilogue will argue, that is precisely where the greatest diffusion is possible. Epic had not disappeared from American culture; it had simply been absorbed to the point of invisibility.