The American writer Herman Melville traveled to Jerusalem in 1857; nearly twenty years later he published *Clarel: A Poem and Pilgrimage to the Holy Land*, a magnificent book that is delightful, difficult and strange. In 2009 Melville returned to Jerusalem – or at least his presence was invoked by about eighty scholars gathering for a conference sponsored by the Melville Society on the writer’s sojourn in the Holy Land and the region. Melville was an intense, troubled traveler – not a typical pilgrim in the traditional sense, but a man on a quest, nonetheless, as revealed by the journal he kept of his travels, as well as by *Clarel*, a narrative poem filled with dialogues on all the great spiritual and political issues of his day. As his great epic novel *Moby-Dick* demonstrated, Melville was a seeker of answers to ultimate questions, a deep diver, a radical skeptic never satisfied with expected responses. *Clarel*, longer than *Paradise Lost*, engages in all the religious and philosophical questions of Melville’s age. Over a century and a half later, scholars came to Jerusalem on another quest; this time to discuss Melville’s creation in the city of its inspiration.

The Seventh International Conference of the Melville Society, “Melville and the Mediterranean,” convened June 17-21, 2009 at the beautiful École Biblique et Archéologique Française de Jérusalem, in East Jerusalem. Scholars attended from all over the world, including China, Great Britain, Greece, Italy, Japan, Poland, Spain, Turkey, and the United States, with nearly sixty papers presented. Like Herman Melville, we were not typical pilgrims. We were literary tourists, “Melville pilgrims,” seekers of textual evidences of our own sort, hunting out the hotel where Melville stayed, the palm tree at Mar Saba Monastery which

figures importantly in his poem, and other sites revolving around his encounter with the Holy Land. Just as so many nineteenth-century travel writers from America and other Western countries had toured with their Bibles in their hands, we also came to “read” the landscape and realities of the Holy Land against a sacred text – in this case a poem-pilgrimage by the author of Moby-Dick. It is one of the characteristics of the Holy Land that so many travelers “see” the place through the distorting lenses of their sacred texts, cultural myths and national narratives; as a result, travelers often remain blind to the mundane realities of the place and of the actual people before them. We tried to be acutely aware of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, even as we worked to cultivate our own small literary niche, a tiny utopian space for intellectual exploration.

Professor Amy Kaplan, University of Pennsylvania, quoted a phrase in her keynote talk from the novel White Jacket that expressed much of Melville’s sense of transcending boundaries: “We expatriate ourselves to nationalize with the universe.” At this conference most of the critics engaged in a similar enterprise, examining the idea of leaving the United States in order to gain a new vantage point on the New World democracy, to become a part of the larger universe. But what kind of movement is Melville proposing? How does one “nationalize” the world, the planet, all religions, nationalities, systems, hopes? Is Melville proposing aggrandizement, even colonial expropriation? Or is he suggesting a way to join the world, to go beyond borders to embrace the larger universe. Perhaps, as is often the case with Melville, the phrase connotes multiple meanings and ironies, and even the possibility that to “nationalize with the universe” could be beyond our capabilities.

The Mediterranean and the “Holy Land” are geographic places, of course, but they are also culturally charged sites for Americans and the West, and for Herman Melville both zones that emanated complex multiple meanings and conflicts. Two texts by Melville were at the center of our discussions, the journal Melville kept while traveling through Europe, the Mediterranean and Ottoman Palestine in 1856-57 and Clarel: A Poem and Pilgrimage in the Holy Land (1876). Panelists discussed Clarel as a major work of literature, examining its poetics, as well as the poem’s engagements with politics, history, religions, mythologies, iconographies, and more. Melville’s 1856-57 journal of his travels through Europe and the Mediterranean was discussed extensively as a self-conscious literary text, beyond its role as a source for his poem.

**Jerusalem’s “Blank, blank towers”**

“No country will more quickly dissipate romantic expectation than Palestine – particularly Jerusalem,” Melville wrote in his journal. “To some the disappointment is heart sickening, etc” (91). Like other travelers, Melville experienced disappointment, shock, disjuncture, and the failure to align biblical text with imagination and lived reality, the contradiction between mythic notions of a Holy City and the profane facts of people going about the business of daily life. Melville could only have the most superficial understanding of the social, cultural and political realities of Ottoman
Palestine, but his dislocation of sensibility prodded him to meditate on and question all the ultimate truths of religion. He recorded his encounters with American missionaries, for example, each charged with irrepressible zeal, “preparing the soil literally and figuratively” (93) for Jewish restoration to the Holy Land. Melville did not share the missionaries’ enthusiasms, but he expressed them in the same idiom of a land of blessings and curses: “Is the desolation of the land the result of the fatal embrace of the Deity? Hapless are the favorites of heaven” (91). He regarded Christian Zionism, which was an obsession among evangelicals, as a “preposterous Jew mania” that was “half melancholy, half farcical – like all the rest of the world” (94). In his visits to all the shrines, he continued his descriptions of what he regarded as pious frauds – the Holy Sepulchre he called “[a] sickening cheat” (88) – and he commented on the rocky landscape: “Judea is one accumulation of stones” (90). He confessed to being “afflicted with the great curse of modern travel – skepticism” (97). Nonetheless, Jerusalem was, for Melville, the objective correlative for the distress of his soul; and he kept the landscape of his short visit in his imagination for nearly the two decades it took for him to write his “poem and pilgrimage.”

*Clarel* is the most neglected of Melville’s books, despite increasing attention to it in the last two decades. It was fitting, then, that the conference brought Melville back to Jerusalem to place his long, brilliant poem at the center of critical dialogue. The poem is an important philosophical narrative, and those who have the patience to brave its quirks and complexities will discover substantial pleasures, as well as peer through a window to nineteenth-century American culture and get a view of Ottoman Palestine as filtered through his direct experience and a broad array of Holy Land travel books. *Clarel* challenges orthodoxies, rigid thinking, ingrained hierarchies, and unquestioned absolutes, with both profound skepticism and, at the same time, compassion for all sincere believers.

With Israeli soldiers at checkpoints and pious guardians at all the shrines, we were never allowed to forget boundaries, aware that Melville ventured across many physical as well as spiritual frontiers. “You are going to Israel to attend a conference about . . . a poem?” the Israeli security guard incredulously asked Rodrigo Andres of the Universitat de Barcelona before he boarded his plane. He was told to step aside for more questions, and Andres noted “the almost shocking and not very comfortable exercise of hearing articulated in the mouth of Israeli security staff the kind of questions some of us had been privately and secretly asking ourselves.” How absurd to travel thousands of miles for a poem, how Quixotic. To do so, we traveled great distances, but we also had to cross fiercely guarded borders to Jerusalem, a city, as Andres put it, “that is paradoxically and simultaneously both a space of fictional narratives, illusions, and hopes, on the one hand, while at the same time a space of facts, stone, history, noise, citizens, quotidianity during the day, and calls to prayer in the warm, sensuous, moonlit nights, on the other” (Andres 66-67).

In her keynote, “Transnational Melville,” Professor Kaplan spoke on transnational understandings of Melville as another form of border-crossing, arguing for broadening our critical encounter with Melville and his intellectual agenda. She noted how
Melville provides insights on “the transnational circulation of knowledge, the retrospective construction of national histories, and representing and imagining non-national modes of collectivity” (43). She asserted that *Clarel* “also engaged in imagining communities and ways of knowing history that go beyond the framework of single nations” (50). In *Clarel*, as in Melville’s other works, “master narratives—whether revelation, progress, or revolution—are rejected. What unites the poem’s pilgrims is a sense of their being suspended at a moment of convulsive change where their relation to the past and future is unclear” (50).

Thomas L. Thompson, Professor of Theology Emeritus at the University of Copenhagen, brought his own skeptical approach to “master narratives” such as those constructed from biblical texts, history, and limited archaeological evidence. In his keynote talk, “Clarel, Jonah and the Whale: A Question Concerning Rachel’s Missing Children,” Thompson analyzed the complex biblical references in *Moby-Dick* and *Clarel*, arguing that “Melville’s epic poem is the least susceptible to orientalist distortions. *Clarel* seems to go strikingly against the grain of the romantic orientalism of his day” (60). He regarded biblical references in Melville’s work in relation to political and religious claims today, particularly to what he considered to be inaccuracies and distortions, especially “the myth of the empty land” used to justify colonialist settlement. For example, Professor Thompson discussed how “the ban from Jerusalem” at the time of the Roman victory “was interpreted as an expulsion from Palestine,” and as a consequence “a modern, new myth of the empty land and of a people in exile for two thousand years was created. This reconstruction of biblical myth ignores contradicting elements in the traditions about ancient Palestine, and even the teachings of a compassionate Yahweh in Judaism, in order to establish a neo-colonial, ethnic identity, which identified Judaism with a new return from exile” (64). His talk was provocative since the notions he critiqued were long-held by Melville, the missionaries he encountered, and by Americans to this day, and his assertions generated debate throughout the conference.

As we proceeded with the conference and with the tours to sites Melville had visited, many of our assumptions were challenged about the “Holy Land.” In that regard, we were all put in the same position as Melville’s young divinity student, Clarel, who came to pose questions and to seek certainty in Jerusalem’s “blank, blank towers” (1.1.60). Many of us questioned our ability to find meanings, as did Clarel, fearful that our “New World’s worldly wit so shrewd / Lacks the Semitic reverent mood / Unworldly.” Surrounded by such intense religiosity, perhaps we could not be “just interpreter[s] of Palestine” (1.1.92-93).

**Home, Homecoming and Empire**

Jerusalem has been a “home,” particularly a spiritual home, for Christians, Jews, Muslims, Israelis, Palestinians, and many others. Home is a problematic notion, often weighted with complex meanings and social constructions; and domesticity
has colored much American Holy Land literature. In his opening remarks, Basem Ra’ad (al-Quds University) noted that both Mark Twain in *Innocents Abroad* and Melville in *Clarel* highlight the word, and both writers underscore the instability of “home,” particularly when associated with religion, nation, empire, in addition to the more obvious connection with domesticity. Both Melville and Twain satirize the sentimentalities attached by religious tourists and “pilgrims” to the sacred sites. They also skewer the less benign assumptions of entitlement to the land by Westerners and the justifications deployed in various colonizing situations (e.g., the empty or uncultivated land, the burden to advance civilization against barbarism) to dispossess native inhabitants. I could see the large, segregated housing projects circling East Jerusalem; I wondered at the rationales for the necessity of “home” in those settlers’ minds. I remembered Melville’s dismissal of early, Christian Zionism as a “preposterous Jew mania” in his journal (94) and wondered at the state violence behind this “mania” today.

Melville questions the concepts of “nation” as well as “home,” to make possession “natural” by belief and geography. Decade after decade the West dominated much of the world in the name of civilization, and this natural role endowed by religion has led to occupations of land, confiscations of property, and a series of disposessions in Palestine as well as in the United States. If new versions of “home” are imposed to include some and exclude others, how benign is the concept? If one’s physical home cannot be secure in Jerusalem, how can one’s spiritual home be secure? What is a “homeland”; what is a “homecoming”? Did our conference “come home” to Melville’s world of inquiry and skepticism, or did we return to familiar landscapes of domination and appropriation? How has the West “naturalized” colonialism, nationalism, and empire?

With the U. S. directly involved in Middle East wars and the Israeli government persisting in its occupation of territories seized in 1967, we could not easily ignore these questions. We were made aware of the conflict even more dramatically because of the difficulties our conference organizer and co-chair Basem Ra’ad faced in getting a visa to stay in East Jerusalem to prepare for the conference. As a Palestinian Christian born in West Jerusalem who has been evicted twice in 1948 and 1967 from his family’s properties, he has experienced a bitterly ironic version of “home” shared by many other Palestinians.

Professor Ra’ad also highlighted the crucial lines in which Melville describes the young divinity student Clarel as “Learning, unlearning, word by word” (2.14.54). He emphasized the importance of viewing the poem as an anti-pilgrimage in which the main character learns to doubt the dominant, Protestant religious mindset about the “Holy Land.” (He noted that Twain likewise adopts a process of “unlearning” in *The Innocents Abroad* as a prerequisite for more accurate, realist understanding.) In alluding to the “blank, blank towers” of “Salem” in the first canto, Melville also draws parallels to the early Puritan town established in New England and to biblical stories that have been used to construct the national myth of what later became the U. S. In *Clarel* and the journal, Melville subverts this identification and all its related “sacred
geography.” Professor Ra’ad emphasized “how the poem dramatizes the dangers of religious fundamentalism, and how it anticipates the difficulties of the present.”

A Strange Haunted Place

At the conference, we found ourselves in that “strange,” haunted place Melville had described in both journal and *Clarel*. The land continues, as it did more than 150 years ago, to produce multiple meanings, dreams, quests, questions, texts, personalities, and conflicts. It was impossible, in our conferencing and our touring, to avoid the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; it was also impossible to avoid the pieties and strictures of different orthodox religious traditions. We were taken aback by the way the women of our group were provided with not just the expected head coverings, but full wraps to cloak themselves completely to enter the sacred Muslim sites, the Dome of the Rock and al-Aqsa Mosque. Women were forbidden outright from entering the Christian monastery of Mar Saba, which Melville visited and featured in *Clarel*. And when conference-goers went to visit the Wailing Wall, we had to part ways according to prohibitions against men and women praying together.

It was moving to be in the places that inspired Melville, yet also odd to be on such a literary pilgrimage when thousands of other visitors were there for more typical, religious purposes. Melville would have recognized the competing religious traditions in close, uncomfortable proximity to each other. Melville certainly would have appreciated all the juxtapositions, contradictions, and epiphanies; the dramatic contrasts never ceased: Across the street from the École Biblique, an institution one would normally expect to find in the Holy Land, stood the Che Guevara Mini Mart, a reminder of other, more secular influences in Terra Sancta (the invocation of a “saint” of a different type). And, while Melville was well aware of Ottoman guards, he would have been taken aback by all the military checkpoints, the massive barrier erected by the Israelis (the modern-day “blank, blank towers”), and all the guards at shrines and other places, mostly Israeli but some Palestinian.

Melvillian Moment at Mar Saba

The fact that women were barred from entering Mar Saba Monastery shocked us; but having traveled through rough terrain to get there, we felt that we could hardly reject the monks’ hospitality, despite our misgivings. A Melvillean moment took place, as the men were guided by Father Lazarus, an American who had graduated from the University of California at Santa Cruz and who described himself as having been a hippie and a fan of the Grateful Dead rock band; he was a “Dead Head” who followed the band and regarded their concerts as near-mystical experiences. As we viewed the preserved body of the monastery’s founder St. Stephen and the skulls of monks killed during the Persian invasion in the sixth century, the former Dead Head told the
story of his conversion experience – which was triggered by a mystical experience in a San Francisco Russian Orthodox church and cultivated by an Orthodox priest – while ironically describing the monastery as an outpost among the Comanches. Father Lazarus, albeit ironically, was reasserting the habit of nineteenth-century Americans to associate Arabs, especially Bedouin, with Indians as bloodthirsty natives (and sometimes as “noble savages”). He presented yet another notion of civilization, of a fort in the desert warding off savagery, although he was merely making a joke, a remark that would have been appropriate in *Clarel*. I would not have been surprised to see one of the poem’s characters, the Melville-like sailor Rolfe, talking about how Christ should have come to Tahiti instead of Palestine.

Father Lazarus also brought us to see the palm tree made famous in Melville’s poem. The fellow-pilgrims in the poem each contemplate the palm, offering characteristic meditations, the way the doubloon nailed to the mast by Captain Ahab provokes different responses from each of the crew in *Moby-Dick*. We had chosen Peter Toft’s watercolor painting of the palm at Mar Saba as the theme-illustration on the conference program. Toft had painted the scene knowing how central it is in *Clarel*, and he gave the painting as a special present when he met Melville in the 1880s. We could no longer see precisely the same long shaft of green in the wilderness that impressed Melville rising high above the monastery, since it had died. Our guide told us that the monks had planted another palm in its place many years ago, but it too had died. Then out of the old roots a new tree sprang. A solution is made out of fronds from this palm to aid infertile couples to conceive.

There were other intersections of past and present, of American literary history and daily life in Jerusalem. During the conference, archaeologist Simon Gibson displayed a photo of a nondescript stone edifice with a connecting archway to another building stretching across a narrow street in the Old City. “Here is where the Mediterranean Hotel was located,” he explained. “This is where Herman Melville stayed when he visited Jerusalem.” Suddenly, Albert Aghazarian, the chair of the panel, exclaimed, “That’s the house where I was born, where I grew up!” Mr. Aghazarian is the retired director of public relations at Bir Zeit University on the West Bank and an authority on the Old City. He became excited, even agitated, as he pointed to the screen: “I used to sleep over there, and play over there!” It was an electric moment, moving and amusing at the same time. How wonderful that such a coincidence could happen, that Herman Melville, literature, history, and personal life could converge with such dramatic force.

Professor Carolyn Karcher (Temple University) observed how “Melville’s journal of his voyage projects his inner hopelessness onto the biblical landscape he crisscrosses as he seeks in vain to recover a sense of meaning, if not his belief, in texts that had fired his youthful imagination” (n.p.). At the same time, she noted that “[c]ertain passages resonate uncannily for readers haunted by the latest phases of the war that has lasted since at least 1967, when Israel occupied the West Bank and Gaza. From his hilltop hotel in Joppa (now known as Jaffa), where he has been marooned for several days by a high surf and heavy wind, making him ‘feel like Jonah,’ Melville can see Beirut to the North and ‘to the South, Gaza–that Philistine city the gates of which
Sampson shouldered’ (*Journal 80*).” His journal, Professor Karcher noted, seemed to be “a prophetic adumbration of the religious and political conflicts that now rack the region—conflicts among Christians, Jews, and Muslims over which religious group should control or interpret sacred sites, and between Israelis and Palestinians over which people can rightfully claim a land both consider holy” (n.p.).

**A Conference and a Conflict**

As one of the co-chairs, along with Basem Ra’ad (al Quds University) and Tim Marr (University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill) I can testify that we harbored no illusions that our little conference would bring peace and understanding to the bitter Israeli-Palestinian conflict. We did attract a wonderfully diverse group of scholars from Europe, Asia and the Americas, although we had anticipated that scholars directly involved in the conflict would find participating problematic, if not impossible. Many scholars from the Arab world could not even enter the country to attend; it was easier to arrange for an academic from China or Poland to participate than for a Palestinian scholar to join us from just a few miles away in Ramallah. In the seven years preparing for the conference, the region was traumatized by wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, and, closer to Jerusalem, in Lebanon and Gaza, along with the bloodshed of the second Intifada. Political upheavals occurred in the U.S. and Europe, too, including calls for the boycott of Israeli academic and cultural institutions. We reassured participants that they would be safe, and by holding the conference in a French Catholic institution founded long before the State of Israel was established we found a site that was not identified with either Israelis or Palestinians. But no site could be entirely untouched by the conflict: Just the location is telling enough, since the École Biblique is in Palestinian East Jerusalem, occupied by the Israelis in 1967.

Considering the great extent relations have degenerated, Israelis may have felt uncomfortable and unwelcome in East Jerusalem. In recent years, as Milette Shamir (University of Tel Aviv) notes in her report on the conference “only a handful of Jewish Israelis can be seen in the vicinity of the Ecole Biblique, and hardly any Arabs visit the neighborhoods of west Jerusalem” (73). She felt what she describes as an “uncanny mixture of the familiar and the strange, of homecoming and trespassing, that accompanies each of my infrequent visits to East Jerusalem” (72). Scholars from Gaza could not have possibly gotten through the blockade, and those from the West Bank would have had to make it through the checkpoints, while tensions between Palestinians from within the 1948 borders of Israel and Israeli Jews were also high. Many Palestinians in the wake of the recent war in Gaza could not tolerate meeting with individual Israeli scholars as if everything were normal. Professor Shamir described “a sense of disconnection” (76) because people from around the world had gathered to discuss “orientalism, Zionism, the politics of racial and ethnic representation, and ‘Holy Land discourse” (70), while people from the region itself could not benefit from the exchange.
Soon after the conference was first proposed a member of the board of the Melville Society responded that it was “a marvelous idea for a scholarly event; it’s an opportunity to try to do some good for the world, to demonstrate a bold bilateral spirit, and to show the continuing vitality of Melville’s writing and its relevance to the world today” (Obenzinger, 41). I’m not sure how much good for the world we did, but we did advance intellectual and creative work in a modest way, and that in itself was a stance for life and peace. In a very limited way, “Melville and the Mediterranean” was historic, simply because we attempted to counter war and hate with intellectual engagement. Perhaps the absurdity of such an attempt in the midst of the even more absurd reality of bloodshed and conflict would have appealed to Melville’s fascination with the quixotic quest. Our little conference was just a tiny vessel floating on the vast sea of Jerusalem’s history, and as we departed, as in the end of *Moby-Dick*, “the great shroud of the sea rolled on as it rolled five thousand years ago” (Ch. 135).

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**Works Cited**