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"THE JUSTEST OF ALL VIEWS" Traveling to *Mardi* and Beyond with Agnes D. Cannon

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When Herman Melville returned from his momentous journey to Europe and the Mediterranean in May 1857, his intention, rather than returning to his writing career, was to secure a permanent position at the New York Customs House. The reality, however, dictated a different scenario: following the advice of his mother and John Hoadley, a New York merchant and a close friend of Melville's family, the writer decided to seek his fortune embarking upon a lecture circuit. After the first two lecture seasons (1857–1858 and 1858–1859), in the course of which he delivered speeches on "Statues in Rome" and "The South Seas," he adopted a broader perspective:

> His new subject, "Traveling: Its Pleasures, Pains, and Profits," was possibly suggested by William Hazlitt's essay "On Going a Journey," Hazlitt being a favorite writer of Melville's later years. We travel, Hazlitt wrote, "to be free of all impediments and of all inconveniences; to leave ourselves behind, much more to get rid of others"; in the lecture Melville spoke of travel as being "a new birth" […]. He referred specifically to Washington Irving's "The Voyage," which opens *The Sketch-Book*, and observed that "one may perhaps acquire the justest of all views by reading and comparing all writers of travels."
>
> *Great men do this, and yet yearn to travel. Richter longed to behold the sea. Schiller thought so earnestly of travel that it filled his dreams with sights of other lands. Dr. Johnson had the same longing, with exaggerated ideas of the distinction to be reflected from it. […]*
>
> In such literary references Melville was expressing his devotion to both reading and traveling. (Sealts 107)

Curious how Melville's truth-seeking mind works: after *Typee* and *Omoo*—novels that (paradoxically) catered to the American

reading public's desire for *facts* about distant lands[1]—comes allegorical *Mardi*, which frustrates many of his readers; after *Redburn* and *White-Jacket* (both of which could, with a bit of good will, be construed as reportages) comes the disconcerting *Moby-Dick*, whose "mad English" brings the writer's antebellum career to the verge of a precipice in 1851, and would have probably marked its actual end, had *Pierre* not sealed its fate a year later. Prominent Melville scholars—including such celebrities as Hershel Parker (1996–2003), Robert Milder (2006), Newton Arvin (1957, 1962), Elizabeth Renker (1997), or Howard Paton Vincent (1969, 1980)—have explored the shift in Melville's narrative approach from realism to allegory, providing interpretations that align with the idea that this transition was driven by Melville's literary ambitions and his urge for philosophical explorations. The writer himself thus explains the change:

> Not long ago, having published two narratives of voyages in the Pacific, which, in many quarters, were received with incredulity, the thought occurred to me, of indeed writing a romance of Polynesian adventure, and publishing it as such; to see whether, the fiction might not, possibly, be received for verity: in some degree the reverse of my previous experience.
>
> This though was the germ of others, which have resulted in *Mardi.* (*Mardi* xvii)

The experiment seems to have backfired. However, while the fates of *Mardi*, whose sales, less than satisfactory, may have convinced the writer to reconsider his lofty goals and write the next two books for money, his 1951 relapse into what Joseph Conrad would later describe as "a rather strained rhapsody with whaling for a subject" (qtd in Seltzer 1969: 101–102) must have been a conscious choice[2]:

> […] *Redburn* and *White-Jacket* [Melville wrote in his letter to Lemuel Shaw of October 6, 1849] are two *jobs*, which I have done for money—being forced to it, as other men are to sawing wood. And while I have felt obliged to refrain from writing the kind of book I would wish to; yet, in writing these two books, I have not repressed myself much—so far as they are concerned; but have spoken pretty much as I feel.—Being books, then, written in this way, my only desire for their "success" (as it is called) springs from my pocket, and not from my heart. So far as I am individually concerned, and independent of my pocket, it is my earnest desire to write those sort of books which are said to "fail." (*Correspondence* 138–139)

1 More on this subject in my article "Traces in the Ocean On Melville, Wolanowski, and Willing Suspension of Disbelief" (Jędrzejko 2015).

2 Howard P. Vincent seems to share this view—see for instance footnote 4 in his seminal work *The Trying Out of Moby-Dick* (6).

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Apparently, in search for "the justest of all views," Melville, combining knowledge derived both from his reading and from his direct experience of travel to streamline "the great Art of Telling the Truth"[3] in his own creative writing, he commits himself to writing books that his contemporaries would find oddly unconventional[4]. Indeed, Hershel Parker confirms Melville's dissatisfaction with the constraints of realist adventure tales like *Typee* and *Omoo*, and argues that Melville, grappling with abstract and philosophical questions that his lived experiences had posed before him, strove to expand his artistic expression, which he felt required a move toward a symbolic mode; Robert Milder sees Melville's turn to allegory in *Mardi* as a critical step in his development as a philosophical writer (27–49), and Newton Arvin stresses that it is with *Mardi* that the writer enters into the realm of more ambitious and more speculative form of literature that allowed him to tackle existential and metaphysical issues through symbolic storytelling (90–101). Elizabeth Renker, likewise, highlights Melville's frustration with the popular adventure and argues that his shift in *Mardi* represents his attempt to create a more sophisticated narrative structure capable of exploring complex ideas (xxi), and all this aligns with Howard P. Vincent's diagnosis of *Mardi* (15). The novel, a crucial experiment, allowed Melville to move beyond the constraints of his earlier, more literal works and to engage with broader philosophical and metaphysical themes, which were soon to (re)surface in *Moby-Dick* and would later flourish in his later prose and poetry.

These and other scholars rightly argue that, rather than being driven by his "earnest desire to write those sort of books which are said to 'fail,'" Melville's transition to allegory was most likely propelled by (a much less suicidal) personal urge to "tell the truth": to address more profound philosophical questions and explore a broader range of human experiences. In light of the writer's tumultuous biography, his turn to the allegorical style in *Mardi* indeed seems to be a deliberate choice to break away from the conventions of realism and venture into the realms of myth, symbolism, and abstract thought. But perhaps even more importantly, it gave him an opportunity to express his own opinions on philosophy, history, and literature, camouflaged as opinions of fictitious characters inhabiting a far-off land which, like

3 "For in this world of lies, Truth is forced to fly like a scare white doe in the woodlands; and only by cunning glimpses will she reveal herself, as in Shakespeare and other masters of the great Art of Telling the Truth,—even though it be covertly, and by snatches" ("Hawthorne and his Mosses" 1160).

4 See Charles Roberts Anderson's influential study *Melville in the South Seas* (1939).

Queequeg's Kokovoko, is "an island far away to the East and South […] not down in any map; true places never are" (*Moby-Dick* 55). Such camouflage, often providing a sense of psychological freedom that allows ideas to emerge more openly, creates a layer of separation between the speaker and their subject, which can make observations less personal, and therefore less confrontational. By situating his critical discourse in a fictitious—or "exotically" remote—place (or alternative timeline), Melville can avoid direct judgment (or even ostracism) on the part of his contemporaries, and instead invites the reader to engage with the ideas on their own terms, without the weight of immediate relevance.

At the same time, if tinged with realism, such a distancing technique may prove attractive, as it also taps into the human fascination with the unknown or the unfamiliar—a fascination especially strong in mid-19th century America, hungering for veritable accounts of life in the distant lands. Before *Mardi*, Melville's "track record" is good: with the "truthfulness" of *Typee* officially vouched for by his *Acushnet* shipmate Tobias Greene (Jędrzejko 110), *Mardi*'s publication comes with a "credit of confidence," allowing his complex, and potentially controversial, ideas to be presented as though they were merely descriptive or exploratory concepts, rather than as explicit critiques of inherited conceptual systems, or as personal confessions. Employing the device of historical and geographical displacement, Melville communicates sensitive or subversive ideas while providing an interpretive "buffer zone": the reader is invited into an intellectual space where they are free to draw their own connections, which makes the engagement less "didactic." This strategy may also provide a fundament upon which to argue for the "universality" of the truths proclaimed: philosophically oriented creative fiction, while exploring the essence of human condition, often alludes to the timelessness of experience by projecting it onto other worlds or epochs. In this sense, Melville's method aligns with the belief that by stepping outside the immediacy of one's own reality, we can view our concerns and axioms in a fresh perspective, revealing insights that might be obscured in the heat of the present.

In a way, a distant setting, especially a fictitious one, may serve as a mirror reflecting not only our desires and fears, but also our ideals, allowing a critique of the present without the risk of direct confrontation. And of all of Melville's literary encounters with the South Seas, this particular one sets him *en route* towards the formulation of the rudiments of his own concept of art. Guised as an exotic journey, the novel allows him to camouflage his criticism of generally recognized "disciplinary" distinctions under the mask of an adventure story, to be

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marketed as yet another transoceanic narrative whose setting reminds his audience of his earlier Marquesan and Hawai'ian encounters[5].

The excursion into Melville's *Mardi* (and beyond) that I would like to share with the willing reader in these musings is a thematic expedition in search of the rudiments of the writer's personal concept of art as a medium of truth. Our guide extraordinaire on this trip is Agnes Dicken Cannon, whose work provides the skeleton to this synthesis. Unfortunately, because Melville did not leave behind any artistic manifesto, nor did he formulate a coherent literary theory that could be easily translated into the language of contemporary literary studies, our expedition will depend on interpretations offered by experts who have dedicated their careers to reconstructing the evolution of Melville's artistic program. Melville's correspondence and journals offer only fragmentary suggestions, and, consequently, one must turn to the information regarding Herman Melville's reading and his marginalia, collected and interpreted by scholars such as Jay Leyda, Merton M. Sealts Jr., Walker Cowen, and Douglas J. Robillard, and many, many other Melvilleans, who rose to the challenge.

Thus, inevitably, to demonstrate the main tenets of the insular philosophy of *Mardi*, I resort to the strategy adopted by one of the central characters of Melville's eponymous novel, who, advocating the shared ownership of "true thoughts," heavily depends on citations sourced from many other authors. Unlike Babbalanja, however, I also engage in polemics and supplement their arguments with observations of my own, thus revising, complementing, and hopefully enriching their conclusions. The reconstruction of Melville's vision of literature, as carried out by Agnes D. Cannon, reinforced with insights into of some of the writer's marginalia, justifies interpreting his works as consistent with dominant trends in 19th century Western philosophy of art, thus situating him within a broader tradition of American literary figures whose hemispheric and transoceanic explorations, both literal and symbolic, charted new intellectual territories. More specifically, it is a reconstruction of the part of his journey of philosophical inquiry when he is still *en route* towards the reconciliation of non-verbal *being* and discursive *existence* in a language that could be shared with others.

5 For a detailed study of the subject matter, see Thomas Walter Herbert's *Marquesan Encounters: Melville and the Meaning of Civilization* (1980).

MELVILLE'S CONCEPT OF THE ARTIST

However, at the onset of our explorations, it is worth recalling a particular misunderstanding associated with the writer's use of the notion of "poetry," which, for a long time, would complicate the critical assessment of Melville's works. The confusion arose from his "turn to poetry" around the year 1859 (Sealts 108–109), during which period Melville enriched his library with *English and Scottish Popular Ballads* collected by Francis James Child, and, discovering for himself the poetry of Robert Herrick, George Herbert, and Andrew Marvell—began to write his own verses. Likely, it was also then that his first poetic texts appeared in print. As a result of this coincidence, the critical circles did not immediately recognize that Melville understood the term "poetry" in a broader sense than the word itself might suggest today: to him, poetry clearly signified a general concept of human creative powers, encompassing broadly understood literature, and even art as a whole.

Such an understanding of poetry was not, in fact, an isolated phenomenon within Romantic aesthetics. Although Melville might have streamlined his own version of it independently, he may have drawn inspiration from Romantic critics—such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge (with whose works he was familiar), who applied the term "poetry" to all forms of artistic activity, in all its richness of forms and genres. For Melville, too, the poet is first and foremost a *creator*, a person endowed with artistic vision and sensitivity, but also a truth-seeking thinker, to which the scattered clues the author left behind seem to testify. Admittedly, there are many studies dedicated to Romantic concepts of creativity and the creator. However, indications concerning Melville's understanding of poetry and the poet's role in the world, dispersed across various scholarly texts, rely upon interpretations of hints rather than, as has been noted, upon a formulated manifesto. His own concept of art rarely becomes the subject of separate, monographic analyses: most often, researchers focus on selected aspects of his artistic views "in passing," while discussing other issues, which is why the now largely forgotten work of Agnes D. Cannon, whose main theses I have adopted as the framework organizing the structure of this discourse, deserves a revisit. As an author of one of the few synthetic studies that undertake the challenging task of assembling the dispersed elements of Melville's thoughts on art into a cohesive whole, Cannon is right to observe that in addition to the marginalia and intertextual references traceable in Melville's work (the validity of which many of his commentators emphasize), another, all too often

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unconsidered, source of information about his concept is his own oeuvre, replete with portrayals of poets, philosophers, or scientists.

Embracing this aspect of Melville's work, Agnes D. Cannon focuses on the construction of three characters: Yoomy, a young poet who has not yet achieved emotional maturity (manifest in balance between the fervor of emotion and the coolness of intellect) from the novel *Mardi* (1849), and two mature poets, Rolfe and Vine, from the poem *Clarel* (1867). The way in which these characters are depicted, the individual traits with which the author endows them, and the similarities and differences that exist between them allow the scholar to conclude that

> Melville depicts the poet as gentle, sensitive to beauty, possessing a deep love for humanity and a probing intellect, an unfailing commitment to singing what he sees even though his artistic honesty be misunderstood, a love for good fellowship, but a need for periods of solitude and silence in which the voice of his muse may be heard and, finally, the willingness to accept poetic belief as a substitute for unknowable historical fact or religious faith. (Cannon 320)

This characterization, aptly reflecting the attitudes and functions that the author assigns to "his" poets, indirectly points out to the roles he attributed to literature *sensu largo*, but also sheds some light upon the way in which the American writer might have perceived his own role as a creator. Drawing on Melville's selected works and on the contents of his annotations in the margins of his copies of *Essays and Phantasies* by the Scottish poet and writer James Thomson and of Ralph Waldo Emerson's works, Cannon identifies six social roles of the Melvillean poet, which, as we will see, also align with the indications flowing from the essential works of Romantic literary criticism. Organizing these roles "in the ascending order of social significance," she enumerates them thusly: "the entertainer," "the mouthpiece" through whom "emotions of mankind" are expressed, the "interpreter of ideas and objects," "the seer" who expands the accessible view of the world, the potential "savior" of his fellow men," and the "mythmaker" (Cannon 320). The complexity and complementarity of these functions may suggest the way in which the author intended his own works to be received, thereby pointing out to the characteristics of his model reader.

THE POET AS AN ENTERTAINER

This particular role of the poet—and, by extension, of literature/art in general—emerges in Herman Melville's writing as two-dimensional: the poet indeed may be the author of popular forms of literature,

but such works may simultaneously carry a distinctly philosophical message. Cannon observes that Melville understood poetry primarily as *elevated* entertainment, where ludicity ultimately yields to intellectual pleasure. It is worth noting that Yoomy, the young court poet of the Mardian king Media, when offering his audiences popular entertainment, sings songs authored by others, reserving for his own works, marked by a sense of sublimity, a more serious function. Similarly, Cannon notes, in the songs of Rolfe and Vine—the mature poets from *Clarel*—the joy of life mingles with a note of melancholy. Their poetry bears the weight of an awareness of transience, and what is joyful in their work ordinarily assumes the form akin to a hymn praising the brotherhood of humanity. Poetry, indeed, provides entertainment, but it does so in a unique fashion: celebrating values upon a joyous world could be founded, it conveys a clear intellectual message. Such a vision of a human macrocosm built on brotherhood, if shared with a sensitive audience, brings joy and hope, and by that virtue becomes a unifying factor. It is entertaining because it offers both aesthetic and intellectual pleasure *and* because it brings people together, integrating them into a circle of friends:

> Thus, while Melville recognized the value of cheerful lyrics, he himself was not writing for those who wished to be spared disquieting thoughts but for what he called the "kingly common," that coterie of noble souls who found works that gave them mental stimulation more entertaining than light reading and could be inspirited by meeting a kindred soul in a favorite author. This is further attested to by a passage Melville marked and checked late in life in one of James Thomson's *Essays* sent to him by his British admirer, James Billson, on October 7, 1885. In the "Sayings of Sigvat," the author is asked why, when he is "persuaded of the vanity of all attempts of proselytizing," he still sometimes writes or talks "as if to teach or persuade." (Cannon 321)

Thomson's response, drawn directly from a passage that Melville marked in his own copy, reads as follows:

> [...] first and foremost, because "it is my nature to." But also, though no word of mine will ever convert anyone from being himself into being another Me, my word may bring cheer and comfort and self-knowledge to others who are more or less like myself, and who may have thought themselves peculiar and outcasts; it may be to them a friendly voice revealing that they have a brother in the world, and may thus hearten them to put trust in themselves [...]. (Thomson quoted in Cannon 312–322)

Melville voices similar convictions through the statements of his character, the Mardian philosopher, Babbalanja, whose very name seems to intriguingly fuse the obscurity of the convoluted idiom

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of philosophy with the divine inspiration. Cannon observes that in the "Babbling Angel's" view, the poet's function as the provider of elevated entertainment is intertwined with his role of the "mouthpiece for others"—a medium through which the anxieties and emotions shared by individuals find expression, a voice with which others may identify.

THE POET AS A MOUTHPIECE FOR OTHERS

Cannon illustrates this more complex social role of the poet and poetry with a scene from *Mardi*, in which King Media reprimands Babbalanja for his constant reliance on the thoughts of others:

> "A truce to your everlasting pratings of old Bardianna," said King Media; why not speak your own thoughts, Babbalanja? then would your discourse possess more completeness; whereas, its warp and woof are of all sorts,—Bardianna, Alla-Malolla, Vavona, and all the writers that ever have written. Speak for yourself, mortal!"
>
> "May you not possibly mistake, my lord? for I do not so much quote Bardianna, as Bardianna quoted me, though he flourished before me; and no vanity, but honesty to say so. The catalogue of true thoughts is but small; they are ubiquitous; no man's property; and unspoken, or bruited, are the same. When we hear them, why seem they so natural, receiving our spontaneous approval? why do we think we have heard them before? Because they but reiterate ourselves; they were in us, before we were born. The truest poets are but mouth-pieces; and some men are duplicates of each other; I see myself in Bardianna."
>
> "And there, for Oro's sake, let it rest, Babbalanja; Bardianna in you, and you in Bardianna forever!" (*Mardi* 397)

In this crucial passage, Babbalanja formulates a philosophical thesis about the existence of a "catalogue" of primeval "true thoughts," and about the position of the poet, who, albeit giving them expression through art, is not their owner. The juxtaposition of the philosopher's statement with the passage highlighted by the author of *Mardi* in Thomson's *Essays* suggests that Melville himself probably believed that although the reader's "I" can never fully align with the consciousness of the writer, the former can still identify with the idea expressed by the poet, which then becomes an element shared between both conscious selves.[6] In this context, one could also argue that one of Melville's literary goals was to empathetically build a sense of community with others, as an act of brotherhood and in the name of universal human values: albeit quoting the words of Bardianna, Babbalanja,

6 Interestingly, a similar concept will resurface in the 20th century in the works of the scholars associated with the so-called Geneva School.

who understands literature as the medium making the expression of "true thoughts" possible, speaks *his own language* and, essentially, expresses *his own thoughts*. The above notwithstanding, this does not explain Melville's understanding of the discussed literary function in its entirety. What remains crucial are the conditions under which the poet expresses his thoughts: "in order to give voice to the feelings of others," the poet must address universal issues, but sometimes he is also required to "praise" values contrary to his own axiological system. To support this observation, Cannon provides the example of the poet Yoomy, who, despite his own pacifist beliefs, is compelled to obey King Media's command to sing a Mardian battle chant. Attempting to avoid the hateful task, the poet suggests to the king that "a sonnet would surely be more to his liking," but realizing that the monarch will not change his mind, he prefaces his performance with the proviso that the lyrics of the brutal song are not of his authorship. The scholar notes:

> What is really bothering Yoomy is not the dissonance but the glorification of war, for an examination of Melville's source shows that he deliberately made the song more bloody than its original as a part of his satire on war. Its singing arouses such feelings of belligerence in Media that he questions the moral responsibility of the poet. (Cannon 322)

This is illustrated by the following scene from the novel:

> "By Oro!" cried Media, "but Yoomy has well nigh stirred up all Babbalanja's devils in me. Were I a mortal, I could fight now on a pretense. And did any man say me nay, I would charge upon him like a spear-point. Ah, Yoomy, thou and thy tribe have much to answer for; ye stir up all Mardi with your lays. Your war chants make men fight; your drinking songs, drunkards; your love ditties, fools. Yet there thou sittest, Yoomy, gentle as a dove.—What art thou, minstrel, that thy soft, singing soul should so master all mortals? Yoomy, like me, you sway a scepter."
>
> "Thou honorest my calling overmuch," said Yoomy, we minstrels but sing our lays carelessly, my lord Media."
>
> "Ay: and the more mischief they make."
>
> "But sometimes we poets are didactic."
>
> "Didactic and dull; many of ye are but too apt to be prosy unless mischievous."
>
> "Yet in our verses, my lord Media, but few of us purpose harm."
>
> "But when all harmless to yourselves, ye may be otherwise to Mardi."
>
> "And are not foul streams often traced to pure fountains, my lord?" said Babbalanja. "The essence of all good and all evil is in us, not out of us. Neither poison nor honey lodgeth in the flowers on which, side by side, bees and wasps oft alight. My lord, nature is an immaculate virgin, forever standing unrobed before us. True poets but paint the charms which all eyes behold. The vicious would be vicious without them." (*Mardi* 437)

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Despite the philosopher's reassuring words, which absolve the poet of responsibility for the evil that resides in others, Melville knows that the poetic gesture, a literary verbalization of collective feelings devoid of cool self-censorship, can have dramatic consequences: artistic expression is capable of stirring powerful emotions. Cannon insightfully interprets the writer's concerns when she points to the "cautionary" function of the "Supplement" that Melville appended to his collection of war poetry, *Battle-Pieces*. In this prose, the author expresses his doubts about whether he should have removed—or at least modified—some of the poems, so that the depiction of the hell of the Civil War would not contribute "to bitterness which every sensible American must wish at an end" (*Battle Pieces* 198). The scholar also notes that the glosses that Melville included with selected poems represent an attempt to address a significant dilemma: Melville-the-poet was aware that in his works he dramatized genuine human emotions while also understanding that society had not yet healed its war wounds. He anticipated that the reactions to *Battle-Pieces* might be deeply affective, which is why he chose to supplement certain poems with prose commentaries that could guide the reader toward intended paths of interpretation. It can thus be observed that Melville was guided not only by his belief in the empathetic nature of poetry and the role of the poet as the "mouthpiece" for the feelings of others, or by the notion that poetry could offer the sensitive reader a sense of community or self-awareness. His inclusion of the "Prose Supplement" in the *Battle Pieces* may be interpreted as an act of the acknowledgment of the general fact that, despite all positive values they may potentially transmit, art and literature are also capable of stirring powerful negative emotions in their audiences, the consequences of which could be tragic.

The duality of this function of the artists manifests itself somewhat differently in *Clarel*, owing to the distinction between the role of Melville as the creator of the poem and that of the narrator (also a poet!) who creates the fictional world in it. Within the presented world of *Clarel*, the role of the poet as a "mouthpiece" becomes strikingly evident in the context of the narrative of Agath, an old sailor who tells his story—but, due to the latter's ineptitude in constructing his own artistic narrative, the poet, appreciating its value, chooses to "mediate": he feels entitled to speak on the mariner's behalf, justifying his choice thus:

But, more of clearness to confer—
Less dimly to express the thing
Rude outlined by this mariner,

License is claimed in rendering;
And tones he felt but scarce might give,
The verse essays to interweave. (*Clarel* 234–235)

Cannon does not delve deeper into the consequences of the narrator's gesture, yet it is easy to see that in this case, the poet goes as far in expressing others' thoughts as to "dispossess" the original speaker, and *not* by virtue of the "communal ownership" of true "thoughts"—after all, on the most literal level, the old sailor's narrative does not concern universal issues or even those that might represent a shared value for a particular group. Here, unlike Babbalanja, the poet presents the reader with a version of the narrative that has been adapted to meet the demands of preferred poetic diction, or, in other words, a "perfected" paraphrase of another's story. In fact, the narrator communicates *his own message*, but in doing so, he abides by a different principle than that which allowed the Mardian philosopher to use Bardianna's expressions. Babbalanja, when speaking about the universals of human experience that he discovered through others, employs empathy. Meanwhile, the poem's narrator, being a poet himself, unreflectively assumes that as an interpreter of human thoughts, he has the right to appropriate the sailor's voice and speak "for him." He does so, however, in *good faith*: he believes that his version will be more complete, resonating with tones that Agath would be unable to express. What does not occur to him, though, is that the tones which cannot be woven into poetry are, in fact, not expressible within it at all. By replacing the sailor's "crude form" with refined poetry, the narrator does not fear that he might entirely lose the sense of original message and instead convey his own, inevitably different one, even if inspired by the initial expression. Such a gesture seems tantamount to granting the creator the right to appropriate another's narrative *unconditionally*: the narrator, who in the poem is both a poet and a listener of another's narrative, identifies with the glimpse of "true thought" within it and revises "tones" Agath "felt but scarce might give" by filtering them through the mesh of his own concepts and incorporates a thus processed thought into his poem, thereby giving it a "transpersonal" dimension.

Yet, although, in his own view, the poet remains "unbiased," such a fusion of horizons is nonetheless different from the identification which occurs when he expresses the thoughts of others

[...] on the much larger level of the poem as a whole, which expresses the central Victorian problem of religious doubt engendered by the impact of science, comparative mythology, and textual criticism on inherited faith. [...] By con-

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trast, *Clarel*, when viewed in its entirety, exhibits the poet Melville voicing the thoughts of an entire group of intellectual soul-searchers representing varied approaches to the central Victorian problem of religious doubt. [...] While such British poems as "In Memoriam" or "Empedocles on Etna" were dealing with the Victorian intellectual's reaction to the impact of science and higher criticism on the authority of the Bible together with the subsequent loss of religious faith, *Clarel* is unique among American poems of the period in thorough exploration of this theme. (Cannon 323–324)

If we summarize Cannon's observations thus far, we may notice that writing (and the reception of writing), according to Herman Melville, are both based on the potential of empathetic understanding and mutual willingness to communicate that can lead to a "literary encounter." It also seems that it is precisely this belief that allows the Melvillean poet to trust that the thought expressed in his own language is not an act of appropriation: he believes that a true thought cannot be falsified, although it can take on different forms. The narrator of *Clarel* connects with the speaker by way of "resonance." *Bona fide*, he trusts his intuition, dismissing the idiosyncrasies of the original story as secondary in terms of significance. However, to accept such a stance, it is essential to remember that the presumption of good faith arises directly from the obligation to be honest with oneself, although, aware of poetry's power and its ability to ignite human emotions, the creator may, for the sake of the greater good, practice self-censorship.

THE POET AS INTERPRETER OF IDEAS AND OBJECTS

This role of the poet intrigues Melville the most. Analyzing *Mardi*, Cannon reflects on Yoomy's status in King Media's entourage, and concludes that Melville grants the rule over the interpretation of symbols exclusively to the poet: only Yoomy is able to understand the symbolic text as a clear message. The scholar argues thus:

This belief of Melville that part of the poet's function was to help others see the hidden significance in all objects, coupled with his Coleridgean belief that the imagination refashions what it beholds, led him to use the confrontation of self and object as a recurrent literary method. Knowing that every individual sees differently according to his idiosyncrasies, Melville attempted to show this as well as the multiple symbolic values inherent in any given object. (Cannon 324)

At this point, two (polemic) observations arise, which—as it seems—allow us to supplement, and, in a certain sense, also revise Cannon's conclusions. The first concerns the impossibility of defining categories

by which one could unambiguously define a poet, while the second relates to the symbolic values of objects considered in terms of inherence. As an illustration of her arguments, Cannon references a scene from chapter 70 of *Mardi*, in which a canoe of Queen Hautia's emissaries approaches King Media's boat:

> Here we were overtaken by a swift gliding canoe, which, bearing down upon us before the wind, lowered its sail when close by: its occupants signing our paddlers to desist.
>
> I started.
>
> The strangers were three hooded damsels the enigmatical Queen Hautia's heralds.
>
> Their pursuit surprised and perplexed me. Nor was there wanting a vague feeling of alarm to heighten these emotions. But perhaps I was mistaken, and this time they meant not me.
>
> Seated in the prow, the foremost waved her Iris flag. Cried Yoomy, "Some message! Taji, that Iris points to you."
>
> It was then, I first divined, that some meaning must have lurked in those flowers they had twice brought me before.
>
> The second damsel now flung over to me Circe flowers[7]; then, a faded jonquil, buried in a tuft of wormwood leaves.
>
> The third sat in the shallop's stern, and as it glided from us, thrice waved oleanders.
>
> "What dumb show is this?" cried Media. "But it looks like poetry: minstrel, you should know."
>
> "Interpret then," said I.
>
> "Shall I, then, be your Flora's flute, and Hautia's dragoman? Held aloft, the Iris signified a message. These purple-woven Circe flowers mean that some spell is weaving. That golden, pining jonquil, which you hold, buried in those wormwood leaves, says plainly to you—Bitter love in absence."
>
> Said Media, "Well done, Taji, you have killed a queen." "Yet no Queen Hautia have these eyes beheld."
>
> Said Babbalanja, "The thrice waved oleanders, Yoomy; what meant they?"
>
> "Beware—beware—beware."
>
> "Then that, at least, seems kindly meant," said Babbalanja; "Taji, beware of Hautia." (*Mardi* 215)

Even the philosopher Babbalanja proves unable to decipher the message based on the syntagmatic arrangement of material objects; Cannon rightly observes that when it comes to the interpretation of symbols, it is the poet who becomes the ultimate authority, one whom even the ruler must trust. However, it is not clear what makes a poet a poet; within the context of the entire work, there are no clear indicators

7 *Circe flowers*. This likely refers to the moly flower, the mythical herb black "at the root" but whose "flower was like milk" (Homer, *Odyssey* 10), given to Odysseus by Hermes as an antidote to the potion prepared by the sorceress Circe, which had turned his companions into swine.

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that unambiguously distinguish a poet from a non-poet. Moreover, in the final scene of chapter 137, such distinctions are entirely called into question:

> "Thus ever: ever thus!" sighed Yoomy. "They comprehend us not."
> "Nor me," said Babbalanja. "Yoomy: poets both, we differ but in seeming; thy airiest conceits are as the shadows of my deepest ponderings; though Yoomy soars, and Babbalanja dives, both meet at last. Not a song you sing, but I have thought its thought; and where dull Mardi sees but your rose, I unfold its petals, and disclose a pearl. Poets are we, Yoomy, in that we dwell without us; we live in grottoes, palms, and brooks; we ride the sea, we ride the sky; poets are omnipresent." (*Mardi* 438)

The leveling of the philosopher and the poet (creator, artist, writer) is particularly significant. Babbalanja, listening to Yoomy's words, performs a dual interpretative gesture. Firstly, he identifies with the poet, which is—as has already been demonstrated—a necessary condition for achieving the state of shared consciousness and, thereby, of mutual understanding. Secondly, although initially he only recognizes *the analogy* of their positions, Babbalanja ultimately concludes that their situations are *identical*: although Yoomy is a poet painting what all eyes see, his poetry becomes an *object* visible to all eyes, and, by that virtue, also a *subject* of identical poetic acts—albeit one could see them as acts of a higher order. In both cases, Yoomy and Babbalanja, the select individuals, perform the work of imagination: if Yoomy is a poet, then Babbalanja becomes a meta-poet; the difference between them lies only in the fact that the objects to which they attribute symbolic values are different kinds. Babbalanja is thus entirely justified in his claim: "poets are we."

This directly relates to the second observation, which is significant for the ongoing discussion of the relationship between human beings and objects in Melville's thought. Pointing to the recurring motif of the ambiguity of objects in the writer's work, Cannon speaks of this ambivalence in terms of the inherence of meanings. However, it seems that the continuous interplay of semiotic readings identified by Melville (to which the scholar refers in her article while writing of the Doubloon scene in *Moby-Dick* and Palm scene in *Clarel*), indicates something quite the opposite. Perhaps objects possess *no inherent meaning* until the reflection of the poet—as the interpreter of the object—*assigns meaning* to them.

Thus, the "dull Mardi" will interpret the object literally, in accordance with what is dictated by the immediate context, the general cultural code, and his idiosyncratic traits. Yoomy will elevate the object

to the level of symbolic discourse (in this understanding, Melville grants poets authority over the realm of symbols), while Babbalanja, through his capacity for empathy, will strive to "see" what Yoomy has seen. However, what Yoomy sees and communicates becomes an *object* for Babbalanja, and thus, in engaging his imagination in the same way as the poet of King Media, the philosopher *interprets Yoomy's interpretation*, remaining confined to the limits of symbolic discourse. He is not able to elevate his object (ie.: the interpretation created by the poet) to any higher, "suprasymbolic" level, although inevitably, due to the ontological secondariness of his own interpretation, his own will be a *meta*-artistic reading.

It might be that the ability to perceive the potential advantages of the boundlessness of meanings is what makes a poet the poet, and that "metapoetry" arises from a fear of semiotic fluidity. Perhaps it is this fluid mixture of such fear and fascination that prevents definitive divisions, causing the poet to become a philosopher, and the philosopher turning into a poet. Irrespective of the reasons, however, these and other manifestations of Melville's intuition regarding the "silence" of objects, which enables this fascinating (or terrifying) interplay, will eventually come to form one of the fundamental premises of his own philosophy of existence.

One might argue that Melville assumes that the poet's domain is the world of *signs*, in the function of which he also perceives *objects*. However, one should remember that in his understanding a poet is not merely someone who writes verses. Rather—or primarily—a poet is an individual endowed with a special sensitivity that allows them to interpret perceived reality in terms of true thoughts. Cannon is well aware that her observations, valid for *Mardi*, come into question when one considers the objectification of human beings in *White Jacket*, or the divorce of objects from meanings in the Doubloon scene in *Moby-Dick*. Perhaps the one true thought that our life journey never fails to impart on us is that *objects* that are subject to interpretation do not *possess* inherent meaning; the poet *perceives* objects as *meaningful*, or, more specifically, it is him to *make sense* of the objects—and it is this sense that he voices in his verse. The above notwithstanding, the very fact of granting the poet authority over signs and the belief that poetic words can bring joy, solace, and self-awareness to others who, to a lesser or greater extent, are the creator's alikes, are important features of Melville's thinking about literature, which allow us to connect the previously discussed functions of poetry with another socially significant role of the artist—that of a visionary.

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THE POET AS A VISIONARY

In the context of the above, it becomes clear that Melville's views on the poet as a visionary aligned with the perspectives shared by most Romantics:

> Closely related, then, to the fourth role of poet as interpreter of ideas and objects is his fifth role as the seer who broadens the vision of the world. The function of the poet is not only to help men speak but also to help them see. In Melville's mind, seeing clearly is directly associated with the power of feeling, or empathy, that enables one to see through the eyes of others. (Cannon 325)

To explain Melville's understanding of poetic vision, Agnes Cannon refers to the polemical notes the writer made in the margins of Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay "The Poet." He highlighted a passage in which Emerson argues that language is "fossil poetry," whose true nature can only be seen by the poet. Melville comments on this as follows:

> This is admirable, as many other thoughts of Mr. Emerson's are. His gross and astonishing errors & illusions spring from a self-conceit so intensely intellectual and calm that at first one hesitates to call it by its right name. Another species of Mr. Emerson's errors, or rather, blindness, proceeds from a defect in the region of the heart. (Melville quoted in Cannon 325)

Without delving deeper into Melville's ambivalent attitude towards the worldview of the energizer of American Transcendentalism—whom, contrary to appearances, the author of *Moby-Dick* did appreciate—Cannon links the writer's final remark on Emerson's understanding of poetry with the fact that in his copy of *King Lear*, Melville underscored a significant line spoken by Gloucester: "that will not see / Because he doth not feel."

> Melville, taking seriously the poet's role as a seer and believing in the poet's ability to see objects more clearly than others, felt that he was obligated to see everything, both good and evil. From Melville's point of view, Emerson, Goethe, and Wordsworth, among others, were not seers, but half-seers, seeing only the good and ignoring the evil. To Melville, the world, like the tortoise of *The Encantadas*, is both dark and bright with the dark side predominant and uppermost. A true poet must not ignore this darkness of evil or the darkness of the limitations of man's knowledge. […] Poets and philosophers are not gods, Babbalanja tells Yoomy, and hence it is their right to discuss such things as necessity and free will, fate and providence. If they were gods, knowing the answers, they would have no need to puzzle over these questions. But for the poet to claim that he possesses suprahuman knowledge is to affirm that which does not exist. (Cannon 326)

Explaining the premises of Melville's reservations with respect to Emerson's unequivocal assertion of the artist's "knowledge" of the primordial (and ultimate) reasons for all existence, as expressed it in "The Poet," the scholar emphasizes two outstandingly important aspects of Melville's perspective on the role (and qualities) of poetic vision. Firstly, since the poet's mission in the world is oriented toward the good of humanity, he has the duty to perceive and address both *good* and *evil*. In this context, from Melville's point of view, poets like Emerson, Goethe, and Wordsworth were (as Cannon puts it) "half-seers," because in their works they failed to consider the evil in the world as *unconditional*. Secondly, for Melville, it is crucial that the poet *does not* possess superhuman abilities:

> Sure knowledge of why the universe should exist as it does is, to Melville's thinking, beyond man's understanding. The poet's function as interpreter and seer is limited to showing what exists, to indicating the multiple meanings the same phenomenon may have for different individuals or to the same individual under different circumstances, and to suggesting that the profoundest interest the universe holds lies in its mysteriousness, including the mystery of the self and the imagination. (Cannon 326)

Indeed, the poet cannot predict the future, but merely sees the world more clearly than others owing to his unique ability to "perceive with the heart." And thus, irrespective of possible doubts, Melville's insight into mechanisms of perception, by and large, proves to align with Wordsworth's "Romantic epistemology"; in fact, the writer's remark on Emerson's "defect" seems to directly echo the message of the final stanza of William Wordsworth's canonical poem titled "The Tables Turned":

> Enough of Science and of Art;
> Close up those barren leaves;
> Come forth, and bring with you a heart
> That watches and receives. ("The Tables Turned")[8]

Such a perception allows the poet "to see further" and "more clearly" than others. This, along with a uniquely heightened sensitivity to good and evil, and the ability to influence readers' minds and moods, allows one to connect the discussed function of the poet as a seer with his role as a savior.

8 Sealts notes that Melville owned the following edition of Wordsworth's poetry: *The Complete Poetical Works*. Boston 1839 (Sealts 227).

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THE POET AS A SAVIOR

Cannon opens her argument with Melville's analogy between religion and literature, which the writer highlights in Chapter XXXIII of *The Confidence-Man*, commenting on readers' expectations of literature. The author notes that there exist readers who prefer imaginative prose over realistic works that merely replicate life's facts, and suggests that this group of readers is more "forgiving" towards the artist. This allows the creator not only to convey his perceptions to others but also to offer them a broader, and therefore more truthful, vision of the world. Such readers,

> […] sit down to a work of amusement tolerantly as they sit at a play, and with much the same expectations and feelings. They look that fancy shall evoke scenes different from those of the same old crowd round the custom-house counter, and same old dishes on the boardinghouse table, with characters unlike those of the same old acquaintances they meet in the same old way every day in the same old street. And as, in real life, the proprieties will not allow people to act out themselves with that unreserve permitted to the stage; so, in books of fiction, they look not only for more entertainment, but, at bottom, even for more reality, than real life itself can show. Thus, though they want novelty, they want nature, too; but nature unfettered, exhilarated, in effect transformed. In this way of thinking, the people in a fiction, like the people in a play, must dress as nobody exactly dresses, talk as nobody exactly talks, act as nobody exactly acts. It is with fiction as with religion: it should present another world, and yet one to which we feel the tie. (*The Confidence Man* 1037)

If, then, both literature and religion are narratives depicting "another world," and if the narrative of religion leads to salvation, then literature (which is here portrayed as a category encompassing the religious narrative) should, theoretically, also wield a salvific power. This insight allows Agnes Cannon to proceed with her reflections on the symbolic representation of the poet as redeemer in the novel *Mardi*, in the final scene of which, under the order of King Media, the poet Yoomy and the chronicler Mohi attempt to save Taji (the novel's narrator and the writer's enigmatic *alter ego*) from perdition by sheltering him on the island of Serenia, a utopian land of the apostles of Alma (Christ). Serenia, in Cannon's interpretation, is "another world": a realm of divine love and all-encompassing faith, thus offering Taji assistance in his escape, Yoomy, symbolically, offers him salvation. Surprisingly, however, Taji rejects the poet's gesture, choosing instead to face infinity on his own, regardless of the consequences. Evidently, he does not "feel the tie."

Taji's refusal problematizes the issue under discussion, especially that neither of the ambiguous fragments of the two novels analyzed

by Cannon lends itself to simple interpretations. While Melville might indeed have been convinced of the power of poetry, its moral obligations toward humanity, and its potential to broaden human perspective, the thesis of equating religion and poetry in the context presented by the scholar would seem to require further substantiation. In the cited passage from *The Confidence Man*, Melville clearly states that although the world of the novel, like the world depicted by religion, is "another world," it is a world that humanity may crave and can empathically connect with it, but "transformed," and thus unlike what they encounter every day. Melville's observation in *The Confidence-Man* seems ironic rather than formulated in earnest (especially in light of his experiences with the history of the reception of his *Typee*)—an act of his critique of religion rather than its legitimization. Even as early as in *Mardi* this seems to find confirmation, among other instances, in Taji's "suicidal" gesture of refusal to accept Yoomy and Mohi's offer and in numerous observations formulated by Babbalanja, not to mention Melville's sharp criticism of religious discourses in other works, of which Cannon, a seasoned Melvillean, is well aware. She stresses that Melville was convinced that religion "will save us from aught"; it merely, as Babbalanja says, may save us "from the evil in ourselves." Even if, indeed, poetry should have such a power, the group of individuals who offer Taji salvation includes not only the *poet*, but also the ruler and the chronicler, so the assumption that Melville attributed the "savior" role specifically to the artist requires additional justification. Cannon finds it in the example from the poem *Clarel*, which provides her with solid arguments in support of her claim: as salvific forces, Melville emphasizes poetry and—rather than religion—*faith*.

> Man's salvation, as Melville sees it in *Clarel*, rests upon his ability to accept a poetic faith in lieu of a religious one. Clarel, unlike his counterpart in Arnold's "Empedocles on Etna," does not commit suicide. Having caught a "new sense" from Vine, a poetic sense and a new philosophy of cheerful skepticism from Rolfe, he shoulders the cross that is the burden of all mankind. […] The Epilogue to *Clarel* unites the roles of the poet as the myth-maker and as savior. Having shown throughout the poem that all man's religious myths are created by his poets, the narrator adjures Clarel to accept faith in poetry. All of life is filled with such strange illusions that "Even death may prove unreal at the last/And stoics will be astounded into heaven" […]. (Cannon 329)

THE POET AS CREATOR OF MYTHS

Assuming an equivalence and a certain kinship between the fields of cognitive and myth-making activities in literature and philosophy,

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history, or religion, understood as symbolic narratives, it makes sense to consider Melville's concept of the poet as a creator of myths in light of the dominant philosophical-aesthetic theories of the 19th century, including those of Georg W. Hegel (with whose ideas Melville was familiar, as evidenced in Sealts 53) and, before him, Friedrich Schelling. Although there is no direct evidence that the writer was indeed acquainted with Schelling's thought, it is not difficult to notice certain similarities in their modes of inquiry as reflected in their work. Let us, therefore, focus on the convergence of the vision of the poet in Melville and Schelling's approach to myth, as presented by the philosopher in his *Philosophy of Art* (1859), where we read that:

> Mythology is the necessary condition and the foundational material of all art. Everything prior serves as proof of this. […] The *nervus probandi* lies in the idea of art as the representation of the absolute, of the inherently beautiful, through specific beautiful objects; that is, the representation of the absolute within limitation, without negating the absolute. This contradiction can only be resolved through the ideas of the gods, which themselves cannot possess an independent, truly objective existence except in their complete development into a distinct world and a poetic whole, which is called mythology. […] For further explanation: mythology is nothing other than the universe in a higher guise, in its absolute form—the true universe in itself, an image of life and the wondrous chaos in divine imagination, itself already poetry and yet, at the same time, the material and element of poetry. Mythology is the world and, as it were, the soil in which solely the plants of art can flourish and exist. Only within such a world are enduring and defined forms possible, through which alone eternal concepts can be expressed. The creations of art must possess the same, if not a higher, reality than those of nature—the divine forms which endure as necessarily and eternally as do the human race or the plant kingdom, simultaneously individuals and species, and as immortal as these. Insofar as poetry is the shaping of material, just as art, in the narrower sense, is of form, mythology is absolute poetry, as it were, poetry in its entirety. It is the eternal matter from which all forms emerge so marvelously and diversely. (Schelling 405–406)[9]

9 "Mythologie ist die nothwendige Bedingungund der erste Stoff aller Kunst. Alles Bisherige der Beweis. […] Der *nervus probandi* liegt in der Idee der Kunst als Darstellung des absolut, des an sich Schönen durch besondere schöne Dinge; also Darstellung des Absoluten in Begrenzung ohne Aufhebung des Absoluten. Dieser Widerspruch ist nur in den Ideen der Götter gelöst, die selbst wieder keine unabhängige, wahrhaft objektive Existenz haben können als in der vollkommenen Ausbildung zu einer eignen Welt und zu einem Ganzen der Dichtung, welches Mythologie heißt. […] Zur weiteren Erläuterung.—Die Mythologie ist nichts anderes als das Universum im höheren Gewand, in seiner absoluten Gestalt, das wahre Universum an sich, Bild des Lebens und des wundervollen Chaos in der göttlichen Imagination, selbst schon Poesie und doch für sich wieder Stoff und Element der Poesie. Sie (die Mythologie) ist die Welt und gleichsam der Boden, worin allein die Gewächse der Kunst aufblühen und bestehen können. Nur innerhalb einer solchen Welt sind bleibende und bestimmte Gestalten möglich, durch die allein ewige Beg-

Schelling's beliefs are complemented by the views of Friedrich Schlegel, with whose thought, at least to some degree, Melville was almost certainly familiar (Sealts 53). In his *Rede über die Mythologie* (*Speech on Mythology*, 1800), as noted by Alina Kowalczykowa,

> [Schlegel] synthesized earlier ideas from his *Fragments*, aiming to elevate poetry to the highest philosophical status, equating it with science and religion. [...] Schlegel claimed that the essential can only be known indirectly, through symbol. Mythology, which he regarded as a system of interconnected symbols, provides the means to comprehend the world of history and nature, and its language is true, that is, symbolic art. [...] The future mythology is to be all-encompassing—it is to absorb the mysticism of the Orient and unify science with philosophy. [...] If mythology is indeed the only path to authentic knowledge, then art, as its language, must act as a mediator between man and God. And the poet, who commands this language of symbols, can—according to Schlegel—express his era, understood in the context of the entirety of history, possessing the ability to grasp "that which is highest" and to prophesy the future. (Kowalczykowa 163–164)[10]

These reflections align significantly with ideas present in Melville's work, including the poem *Clarel* and the passages from *Mardi*, as highlighted by Agnes D. Cannon: indeed, in Melville the creation of "enduring" and "defined" forms is the result of the efforts of poet-mystics, who construct the mythological discourses of religion. Unlike them, however, the ever-critical Melville chose to take a step further: like Schlegel, embracing a much broader realm of mythology (and by that virtue also of poetry), having previously integrated it with philosophy and poetic faith, he enmeshed into it the discourse of history as well. Cannon illustrates this with an example from *Mardi*: the royal chronicler Mohi feels resentment toward Yoomy, because King Media, the ruler of Mardi, seeking knowledge about the island of Tupia, prefers to hear the legend from the poet's mouth rather than become familiarized with the chronicler's "factographic" records. Yoomy reacts thus:

> "Old Mohi, let us not clash. I honor your calling; but, with submission, your chronicles are more wild than my cantos. I deal in pure conceits of my own; which

riffe ausgedrückt werden können. Die Schöpfungen der Kunst müssen dieselbe, ja noch eine höhere Realität haben als die der Natur, die Götterformen, die so nothwendig und ewig fortdauern, als das Geschlecht der Menschen oder das der Pflanzen, zugleich Individuen und Gattungen und unsterblich wie diese. Inwiefern Poesie das Bildende des Stoffes, wie Kunst im engeren Sinn der Form ist, so ist die Mythologie die absolute Poesie, gleichsam die Poesie in Masse. Sie ist die ewige Materie, aus der alle Formen so wundervoll, mannichfaltig hervorgehen." Translation PJ.

10 Translation PJ.

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have a shapeliness and a unity, however unsubstantial; but you, Braid-Beard, deal in mangled realities. In all your chapters, you yourself grope in the dark. Much truth is not in thee, historian. Besides, Mohi: my songs perpetuate many things which you sage scribes entirely overlook. Have you not oftentimes come to me, and my ever dewy ballads for information, in which you and your musty old chronicles were deficient?"

"In much that is precious, Mohi, we poets are the true historians; we embalm; you corrode." (*Mardi* 280–281)

And so it is in *Mardi* that we observe that as early as 1849 Melville was verbalizing the same intuition that Friedrich Nietzsche would articulate in his *Daybreak* nearly half a century later as one of the most famous ideas of the 19th century: "Facta! Yes, *facta ficta*!" Melville is aware that historians speak of things that have not emerged beyond the borders of imagination and challenges the "objectivity" and "scientific nature" of history, and therefore its presumed superiority in its claim to Truth in his work (just as Nietzsche would later do in his). Poetry not only "embalms" truth; it is also a source of data for history, which then emerges as secondary to it. History, therefore, chases the illusion of truth, and in its claims to objectivity and factual accuracy distorts it, or as Yoomy suggests, "history corrodes the truth," while poetry immortalizes it in legend.

However, Mohi, fighting to retain his status as a proclaimer of truth, seeks counterarguments that would validate the previously unquestioned meaning of his work. He attempts to appeal to the common, rational judgments of the audience regarding the legend presented by the poet. This appeal becomes the starting point for the philosophical formulation of Melville's intuition of truth, which Babbalanja will later articulate in words. Mohi says:

"Now, I appeal to you, royal Media; to you, noble Taji; to you, Babbalanja;" said the chronicler, with an impressive gesture, "whether this seems a credible history: Yoomy has invented."

"But perhaps he has entertained, old Mohi," said Babbalanja.

"He has not spoken the truth," persisted the chronicler.

"Mohi," said Babbalanja, "truth is in things, and not in words: truth is voiceless; so at least saith old Bardianna. And I, Babbalanja, assert, that what are vulgarly called fictions are as much realities as the gross mattock of Dididi, the digger of trenches; for things visible are but conceits of the eye: things imaginative, conceits of the fancy. If duped by one, we are equally duped by the other."

"Clear as this water," said Yoomy.

"Opaque as this paddle," said Mohi, "But, come now, thou oracle, if all things are deceptive, tell us what is truth?"

"The old interrogatory; did they not ask it when the world began? But ask it no more. As old Bardianna hath it, that question is more final than any answer." (*Mardi* 283–284)

Assuming that myth is the domain of poetry, we must recognize that literary discourse, in shaping myths, also organizes human perception of the world. Moreover, if it is only within such a world that "eternal concepts" are possible, then the concept of truth is also possible only within the realm of literature. For Melville, *truth*—as opposed to the *concept of truth*—resides in *things*, and thus exists outside discourse and is inaccessible to it. On this basis, Melville philosophically equates the status of *objects* and *representations*, as both are perceived as phenomena, and therefore neither—although they are real—can be the truth.

This also sheds light on the ambiguity of the question posed by Mohi. Addressing the king, the philosopher, and the guest, Mohi the chronicler questions the credibility of Yoomy's story. If the chronicler uses the word "history" in the sense of a narrative, he cannot evaluate it in terms of truth or falsehood. However, if he believes that Yoomy treated the task of the historian "unprofessionally," then he undermines the unequivocalness of history in two ways. First, by saying "this […] history," Mohi allows for the possibility of multiple histories coexisting; the use of the demonstrative pronoun presupposes a situation of choice. Second, by questioning credibility, Mohi asks whether one can believe in a given history, and thus the ultimate judgment of the historian's work rests on placing faith in its results. The issue, then, is to establish the criteria for selecting one of the available *histories* or *versions of history*, none of which, in any case, can be based on the "silent" facts, mentioned by the thinker Bardianna: discursive categories belong to myth—that is, to poetry. In myth, then, poetry and history merge into one.

MARGINALIA

Thus, the journey of Mardi, guided by Agnes D. Cannon, comes to an end—but it is certainly not the end of the aesthetic wanderings of Herman Melville. Before I summarize my observations on Herman Melville's approach to literature, it is worth pausing to consider how his imagined voyage to *Mardi* reshapes our understanding of the poet's role and the nature of textual creation in 19th century America. Melville's notes—found on the margins of the essays of Ralph Waldo Emerson, the *Critical Essays* of Victorian thinker and poet Matthew Arnold, Richard Hooper's commentary on Chapman's translation of the *Iliad*, the essays of William Hazlitt and Madame de Staël, as well as the poetry of Percy Bysshe Shelley and Friedrich Schiller—help us understand the multidimensionality of his lifelong philosophical journey and serve

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as windows into the values that shaped the artistic reflection. These annotations, supplementing Cannon's detailed discussion, illuminate the interplay between Melville's philosophical inquiries and his literary ambitions, underscoring his persistent engagement with art as a means of navigating existence. Having charted the mangled realities of Mardi and crafted its allegorical landscapes, the writer continues his explorations—and the marginalia he left behind may well be treated as an important part of his artistic logbook, suggesting that he viewed the poetic act as both a gesture of imaginative freedom and an existential necessity. Agnes Cannon's analysis of these notes allows one to assume that:

1) Melville shared Matthew Arnold's belief that "poetry is the most beautiful, impressive, and widely effective mode of saying things, and hence its importance" (Arnold quoted in Cannon 330). He also leaned towards the stance of Richard Hooper's, who believed that poetry has "a subtle influence" upon "the rising spirit of the age," and that reading "noble" literature could transform readers into not only "a more poetical class [...] but a finer order of human beings in respect of energy, love of nature at first-hand, and faith in their own impulses and aspirations" (Hooper quoted in Cannon 330). Like them, he held the conviction that engaging with poetry can unleash in a person creative energy and natural genius, which "would have shown in their character the largeness of heart and depth of thought that Melville associated with the poetic nature" (Cannon 331).

2) Like Hooper and Hazlitt, Melville was convinced that the "arts hold immediate communication with nature, and are only derived from that source" (Hazlitt quoted in Cannon 331)— and that through poetry, an individual can acquire "a love of nature at first-hand." The effect of the connection between nature and art is twofold, as the artist "through the closeness of his contact with the creative force of nature, can release the latent creative energies of his reader. Simultaneously, the reader can gain the necessary understanding of nature that will enable him to reap the third benefit of poetry, its power to inspire faith in one's own impulses and aspirations" (Cannon 331). Melville's vision would also concur with the viewpoint of Matthew Arnold, who claimed that

> [t]he grand power of poetry is its interpretative power, by which I mean, not a power of drawing out in black and white and explanation of the mystery of the universe, but the power of so dealing with things as to awaken in us a wonderfully full, new, and intimate sense of them, and of our relations with them. (Arnold quoted in Cannon 331)

Therefore, Melville could attribute to literature the power of elevating a person to a level at which they are capable of interpreting for themselves the unsolvable mystery of the universe. He clearly shared Emerson's belief that a person should be a nonconformist, that they owe themselves authenticity, and thus, by rejecting falsehood, must seek their own truth. This is confirmed, among other passages, by Ishmael's epitaph for Bulkington in the novel *Moby-Dick*. Only a bold and honest, individual vision of the universe and reality, to which literature also contributes by stimulating human self-awareness and energizing original philosophies, can become the foundation for everything else. Only "this reality," according to Emerson, "is the foundation of friendship, religion, poetry, and art" (Emerson quoted in Cannon 332). Cannon observes that Melville added his own comment to this passage: "True & admirable! Bravo!" (332).

3) Herman Melville, believing that one of the essential qualities of poetry is its ennobling effect on the human spirit, also identified with Matthew Arnold, who in his essay *On Translating Homer* wrote that the poetry of the Greek master is "steadfastly noble," and that it "has the power to shape human character, and ennobles man" (Arnold quoted in Cannon 333). Agnes D. Cannon notes that Melville may have believed that this function of poetry stems directly from beauty, which is its highest *raison d'être*. This, as the scholar stresses, is indicated by the quotes from the works of French essayist and poet Joseph Joubert, which Melville highlighted in Arnold's essay, particularly the idea that the existence of literature is meaningless unless it is "more beautiful than reality. [...] the sole purpose of art is beauty" (Arnold quoted in Cannon 333). The combination of the idea of beauty as the essence of poetry's existence and its moral significance in Melville's concept of art crystallizes, as Cannon points out, in the words of Emerson that the author of *Moby-Dick* underscored: "All high beauty has a moral element in it, and I find the antique sculpture as ethical Marcus Antonius: and the beauty ever in proportion to the depth of thought" (Emerson quoted in Cannon 333).

This emphasis is no coincidence: the writer himself expressed a similar view through references to antiquity. Cannon recalls that even in his lectures on Roman statues, Herman Melville placed special emphasis on the ethical value of ancient sculpture. Douglas J. Robillard also points this out in his *Melville and the Visual Arts: Ionian Form, Venetian Tint*, noting that the subject of Melville's lectures included busts of such significant figures of antiquity as Demosthenes, Socrates, Julius Caesar, Seneca, and Plato, as well as the statues of emperors Nero and Tiberius, and that the writer, reportedly, concluded one

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of his presentations by stating that "The deeds of the ancients were noble—and so was their art" (31). Yet, the connection between beauty and ethics is especially evident in Melville's remarks on the *Apollo Belvedere* and *Laocoön*. Robillard notes that:

> The *Apollo Belvedere*, much admired in the nineteenth-century guidebooks and art criticism, drew enthusiastic praise from Melville: "There is a kind of divinity in it that lifts the imagination of the beholder above 'things rank and gross in nature'." [...] The *Laocoön*, "the very semblance of a great and powerful man writhing with the inevitable destiny," made a deep impression upon him, partly because he saw clearly that "half of its significance" came from "the fable that it represent; otherwise it would be no more than Paul Potter's *Bear Hunt*." [...] This is a clear-headed assessment of the way in which Melville and his contemporaries viewed art, finding much of its compelling power in the literary narrative attached; this is true of the Laocoon and of such paintings as Guido's *Beatrice Cenci*, which, without its pathetic story of murder and execution, is merely a very pretty portrait of a pretty girl. (31)

The combination of such elements as beauty-tinged-with-doubt, depth of thought, and the significance of a work of art, clearly points to the concept of the sublime, for which, as Marek Wilczyński notes, "Melville had a keen eye" (Wilczyński 210). Commenting on the conclusion of Melville's lecture *Statues in Rome*, in which the writer presents works of art as "realizations of the soul" of "visionaries and dreamers" and "representations of the ideal" (and not—in a Platonic sense—of reality), the scholar highlights the writer's interest in sculpture as a "possible vehicle of the supersensible" and poses questions about the relationship between ideas, art, and life in the context of Melville's artistic choices (209). He observes that:

> It seems rather striking that just as in "Ligeia" and "Morella," in Melville's lecture the romantic question of representation hinges on the marble human figure whose beauty (not sublimity [...]) unmistakably matches the "supernal loveliness" of Poe. Transcending history, the Roman relics made the American traveler contemplate the relation between ideas and their correlatives in a way that conformed to the aesthetics of *das Erhabene* and shed some light on the perplexing textual riddles that brought the first turbulent phase of his literary career to an end. (Wilczyński 210)

Wilczyński points out that the understanding of the sublime in the America of the period oscillated between the early, eighteenth-century, notion of the sensory sublime of Edmund Burke's and the Kantian concept of *das Erhabene*, a painful yet thrilling experience of the limits of imagination, which, having already arrived at the ultimate limit of its capabilities, still struggles to reach the unattainable realm of ideas

that lie at the source of reason.[11] Although beauty and the sublime, on whose dynamics scholars focus in their analyses of Melville's concepts of art, often go hand in hand, the "supernal loveliness" of Edgar Allan Poe's, the capture of which would be akin to capturing what is beyond the senses, refers not to the classical concept of beauty but is intellectually related to Kantian *das Erhabene*, a traumatic failure in the struggle to grasp ideas at the level of representation.

This distinction is crucial as it largely explains the dynamics of the specific roles of the poet and art at which Melville has arrived in his multidimensional peregrinations. It is easy to see that in fulfilling each of these functions, Melville's poet provides his audience with an experience of simultaneous delight and disarray: the artist does not create *pure beauty*, he does not provide *pure pleasure*—even as an "entertainer." Struggling for access to the world of ideas, he makes others aware of the opacity of the world and the ungraspability of the self. Art vanishes if no subjective discourse envelops it, if it fails to frustrate the individual work of imagination. This is also confirmed by Wilczyński's observation, who asserts that among the writers of the American Gothic, the preferred metaphor of subjectivity is that of an unexplored "crypt" of the subconscious—or what he dubs psychological *camera obscura*—which choice points to the particular significance of the ungraspability of mind in relation to the perceived object, rather than to the particular importance of the objects themselves. Analyzing the intricacies of this relationship (manifest in the dichotomy of sensibility and supersensibility in Melville's *The Piazza*) the scholar concludes that:

> Marble and mist are two correlated extremes that exclude *das Erhabene*; one too hard to match the supersensible, the other too rare to give it any definite, even if elusive, shape. Of course, the very endeavor to bring together ideas and forms is teleologically of no avail, yet, since the fuzzy logic of the sublime has its roots in the desire to comprehend, on the one hand, representations must be substantial enough to sustain hope, while on the other, they must not compulsively harden into beauty. (Wilczyński 213–214)

Wilczyński's observations indicate that Melville's understanding of beauty and the sublime defies definition: it depends on the projection of individual imagination. If the sublime lies between substance and transience, and can "harden into beauty," the reverse process is also possible: the marble Apollo, representing the "hardened"

11 See Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgement*, Second Book, "Analytic of the Sublime," paragraphs 23–29 (Kant §23–§29).

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canon of beauty, serves Melville as a starting point for an insight into the sublime, in the lens of which the sculpture acquires ephemeral qualities. However, the ambiguity of the dynamics between beauty and sublimity does not change the fact that, in Herman Melville's view, beauty/sublimity and ethics are common attributes of poetry and the other "liberal arts." The writer inclined towards the belief that at the foundation of all religion, philosophy, and all art lies a common creative force, "closely allied with nature that Shelley hymned as 'intellectual beauty,' and Schiller praised in 'The Artists' [...]" (Cannon 334).

In this very poem, which Melville came to know through the English translation by Sir Edward George Bulwer-Lytton (whose version deviated significantly from the German original) in 1844, Melville marked the stanzas in which Schiller/Lytton defined the role of poetry and the poet in terms of the highest spiritual values underscoring them multiple times, denoting a particularly emotional effect the poem must have had on the American writer. In "The Artists," the poet is entrusted with the care of human dignity and freedom, whose domain is art:

O Sons of Art! Into your hands consign'd
(O heed the trust, O heed it and revere!)
The liberal dignity of human kind!
With you to sink, with you to reappear. (Schiller quoted in Cannon 334)[12]

4) Art is also a treasury of spiritual values, even "in a materialistic age subservient to the claims of science" (Cannon 334); in art, as indicated by the lyrical subject of the stanza from "The Artists" which Melville underscored, lies Truth.

Truth, when the Age she would reform expels;
Flies for safe refuge to the Muse's cells.
More fearful for the veil of charm she takes,
From Song the fullness of her splendour breaks;
And o'er the Foe that persecutes and quails
Her vengeance thunders, as the Bard prevails! (Schiller quoted in Cannon 334)[13]

12 In the German original, the poem Melville knew from Bulwer-Lytton's translation, reads as follows: "Der Menschheit Würde ist in eure Hand gegeben, / Bewahret sie! / Sie sinkt mit euch! Mit euch wird sie sich heben!" (Schiller).

13 In the German original, the verses read as follows: "Von ihrer Zeit verstoßen, flüchte / Die ernste Wahrheit zum Gedichte / Und finde Schutz in der Kamönen Chor. / In ihres Glanzes höchster Fülle, / Furchtbarer in des Reizes Hülle, / Erstehe sie in dem Gesange / Und räche sich mit Siegesklange / An des Verfolgers feigem Ohr" (Schiller).

However, the concept of poetic truth adopted by Melville differs somewhat from that of the German poet:

> While Schiller's concept of truth seems to be that of an absolute, with a capital "T," Melville, like Madame de Staël, envisions poetic truth as momentary, for Yoomy's statement that "poetry is truth" carries with it the recognition that this truth is limited, and ordering of experience conceived by the poet and confined to his cantos. Yet within these limitations it does open up the boundaries of existence, as Madame de Staël phrases it, and converts the dreams of man into actuality. (Cannon 335)

5) Truth understood in this manner becomes a link between the abstract and the concrete. Cannon observes that for Herman Melville (who, in this respect, shared the views of Madame de Staël and Matthew Arnold), art is a bridge between reality and idea, a force that unifies the finite with the infinite, enabling the perfect unity of what Emerson described in his essay *Worship* as "extraordinary confusion of heaven and earth," and—as Richard Hooper expressed it in the passage of the introduction to Homer's *Iliad* that Melville highlighted—a power that enables one to discern order within absurdity (Hooper quoted in Cannon 337).

Agnes D. Cannon summarizes her observations on Melville's "theoretical" position as follows:

> Both in his favorite metaphors for the poet and poetry, the fountain and the rose, and in his comments on poetry, whether in his writings or his markings, Melville shows himself to be strongly within the romantic tradition that sees poetry as self-expression, and the poet as the mediator between the world of the mind and that of the senses. His emphasis on passion or feeling in poetry is equal to that of Shelley or Byron. [...] For like Shelley and Schiller, Melville believed that the beauty of poetry radiates an uplifting spiritual influence necessary to man's well-being. [...] Poetry, to Melville, as to Schiller or Shelley, is, together with the other arts, the creative power that underlies all civilization. Melville would agree with Keats, whom he deeply admired, that, properly applied to poetry, beauty is truth and truth is beauty, or beautiful. Whether or not that is all man needs to know, to Melville, as to Keats, the limits of man's poetic imagination do mark the boundaries of his knowledge. (Cannon 337–339)

Such a vision of art reflects characteristics typical of Romantic epistemology, combining the irrational and mystical with that which can be subjected to rational analysis. This way of thinking finds fuller expression in the writings of Friedrich Schlegel, whose formulations often correspond with Melville's intuitions, expressed in both his texts and in the marginalia he left for us to decipher. In his *Fragments* of 1798, Schlegel writes:

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[116] Romantic poetry is a progressive, universal poetry. Its aim isn't merely to reunite all the separate species of poetry and put poetry in touch with philosophy and rhetoric. It tries to and should mix and fuse poetry and prose, inspiration and criticism, the poetry of art and the poetry of nature; and make poetry lively and sociable, and life and society poetical; poeticize wit and fill and saturate the forms of art with every kind of good, solid matter for instruction, and animate them with the pulsations of humor. It embraces everything that is purely poetic, from the greatest systems of art, containing within themselves still further systems, to the sigh, the kiss that the poetizing child breathes forth in artless song. It can so lose itself in what it describes that one might believe it exists only to characterize poetical individuals of all sorts; and yet there still is no form so fit for expressing the entire spirit of an author: so that many artists who started out to write only a novel ended up by providing us with a portrait of themselves. It alone can become, like the epic, a mirror of the whole circumambient world, an image of the age. And it can also —more than any other form—hover at the midpoint between the portrayed and the portrayer, free of all real and ideal self-interest, on the wings of poetic reflection, and can raise that reflection again and again to a higher power, can multiply it in an endless succession of mirrors. It is capable of the highest and most variegated refinement, not only from within outwards, but also from without inwards; capable in that it organizes —for everything that seeks a wholeness in its effects —the parts along similar lines, so that it opens up a perspective upon an infinitely increasing classicism. Romantic poetry is in the arts what wit is in philosophy, and what society and sociability, friendship and love are in life. Other kinds of poetry are finished and are now capable of being fully analyzed. The romantic kind of poetry is still in the state of becoming; that, in fact, is its real essence: that it should forever be becoming and never be perfected. It can be exhausted by no theory and only a divinatory criticism would dare try to characterize its ideal. It alone is infinite, just as it alone is free; and it recognizes as its first commandment that the will of the poet can tolerate no law above itself. The romantic kind of poetry is the only one that is more than a kind, that is, as it were, poetry itself: for in a certain sense all poetry is or should be romantic. (*Fragments* 31–32)

Juxtaposing the findings of our exploratory expedition spanning Mardi, the Holy Land, the Mediterranean cradle of Western civilization, and the "long Vaticans" of the world with the above quotation, we may state that Melville's views on literature both coincide with those of Schlegel and supplement them. In the writer's conception, "poetry," "literature," and "art" (in its broader sense) are synonyms, because all of them are forms of creative thinking rooted in unrestrained imagination; they constitute a domain of freedom where the finite and the infinite unite. Since they arise directly from the unrestrained nature of humanity, they are also the domain of truth, which, though limited by form, transcends the boundaries of existence and transforms human dreams into reality. Art operates in the language of symbols, which is the only medium of human perception, and each of its forms bears a trace of the poet's imagination. It also stimulates

poetic sensitivity and the imagination of the recipient, which, in turn, define the limits of individual knowledge. Art has mastered the use of symbols to the highest extent; it is, therefore, the most magnificent form of expression: it has the power to awaken dormant creative energy and, as a result, to make humanity better and nobler. It is thus moral—and its aesthetic and ethical values stem from each other, they are an indivisible unity.

Literature and art are synonymous with philosophy and history, for at the root of the liberal arts lies the same ennobling and liberating force, "intellectual beauty." Each of them operates with the same symbolic medium and relies on the same work of imagination: facts remain silent because truth lies within things. Art that employs symbols holds power over intuition, feeling, and emotion; it is, therefore, closest to the "silent truth," because it directly arises from the untamed nature that is unbounded by principles and social norms, offering an inroad into the "epistemology of the heart," which does not articulate truth or attempt to categorize it, but has the capacity to allow one to feel it.

Melville's poet is a person who wields imagination, subtle and sensitive to beauty, endowed with a keen intellect, noble, and righteous. He is honest with himself and others, despising hypocrisy. He is also a nonconformist: true to himself, he builds his poetic expressions based on his own feelings; he writes "himself" and "with himself." He is aware that he risks being misunderstood by others, yet he does everything to lend voice to artistic truth. Melville's artist needs other people and creates for them, but he also needs the silence of solitude and moments of self-reflection. The poet, like in Coleridge, can willingly "suspend disbelief" and accept the truth of art in place of religious faith or an unknowable fact.

As a creator, he also provides entertainment, but the entertainment he provides is demanding. The writer is not a comedian but a bard: he stimulates the intellectual satisfaction of his readers, provoking them to reflect and ponder deeply. For this reason, he creates for a select audience: his audience belongs to the "kingly" group of ordinary-extraordinary people, with noble souls sensitive to beauty and inclined toward profound thought. The artist hopes that his audience is more or less like him; that by identifying with his art, they will be willing to see themselves in it and discover their own, previously unarticulated intuitions. He is also aware, however, that such identification will never be complete; he understands this rapport rather in terms of mutual willingness to communicate, a two-sided *effort* to attempt at identification. The poet creates in the name of brotherhood and for the good of humanity; he is the voice for the thoughts

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of others and a medium through which "true thoughts"—thoughts that "no one owns" but everyone harbors—become accessible. He thus reveals to humanity issues of a universal dimension; he allows other to name what "already lies within them," giving them a glimpse into their own selves.

To remain true to himself and honest with others, the poet conveys moral messages even in works with whose ideology he cannot agree, but is compelled to create or perform by a higher force. Literary "camouflage" becomes then his duty. The poet does not bear responsibility for the evil in others, but he is aware of *his own responsibility*, because he knows that, having power over human emotions, he is capable of eliciting reactions leading to either magnificent or outright tragic consequences.

In creating, the artist identifies with his material: both with the symbolically interpreted external world and with the narratives of other speaking subjects, which are also *objects* in his perception. He thus has the right, in good faith, to transform them through the means of his own artistic expression into a more perfect and, paradoxically, truer creation. The poet has control over the world of symbols and serves as their interpreter for others. He is aware that "truth is silent": meanings are not inherent in the objects themselves but come to life through the audience, changing depending on context, time, and the observer.

The artist is a visionary but does not predict the future; he merely "sees with the heart," revealing the truth to others, thus broadening the human vision of the world. He also possesses a redemptive power because, through art, he offers humanity poetic faith—a belief in the myth he creates, with which people feel connected and in which they recognize their own reality; mythology is the world where humanity resides, and outside of which self cannot exist. The concepts of the "artist," "philosopher," and "historian" are thus synonymous.

Melville would likely agree with Schlegel's assertion that only poetry can critique poetry, as the only poetic creed he seems to have left behind is a short poem titled *Art*:

Art
In placid hours well-pleased we dream
Of many a brave unbodied scheme.
But form to lend, pulsed life create,
What unlike things must meet and mate:
A flame to melt-a wind to freeze;
Sad patience-joyous energies;
Humility-yet pride and scorn;
Instinct and study; love and hate;
Audacity-reverence. These must mate,

And fuse with Jacob's mystic heart,
To wrestle with the angel-Art. (*Selected Poems* 144)

That art is capable of fusing the opposites is not a new thought. However, it is worth noting that for Melville, this process requires a fight. Creativity is a struggle: for art to be born, the artist must reject the passivity of idle dreaming. A "living" work demands sweat. Hennig Cohen writes about Melville's reflection on creative effort as follows:

> To embody [his dreams], he must bring together opposing elements, active and passive, male and female. Such words as "pulsed life" and "mate" give a biological tone to the process of artistic creation. […] The poem moves from a state of passivity to intense activity, the pace increasing as the number of opposing elements in the lines increases. When these opposing elements are reconciled, they must become part of patriarch Jacob whose victory over the angel gained him a blessing and a new name but also an injury in the hollow of the thigh (Genesis 32:24–32). Because this wound is symbolically an emasculation, the ironical aspects and exactions of creativity are made evident. The importance given to the "unlike things" that must be brought together stresses Melville's idea of the fundamental complexity and variety inherent in all objects and concepts. (Cohen 236–237)

However, it is difficult to escape the impression that Cohen's commentary offers a rather one-sided interpretation of the poem. The critic, focusing more on the psychoanalytical elements of the work rather than the character of the writer's literary *credo*, says little about Melville's concept of art, despite the title of the poem suggesting otherwise. What seems particularly important is hidden in the last two lines, where all the mentioned elements merge with Jacob's mystical heart in his struggle with the art-angel. Cohen sees in these lines only a suggestion of symbolic castration, presumably intended as Melville's ironic (self-)commentary on poets and the claims of art.

It seems, however, that besides all the underlying subconscious content, the introduction of the biblical patriarch from the Book of Genesis into the poem offers the interpreter many other hints, and it stands to reason that it should serve some artistic purpose. Let us, therefore, analyze the role of this reference in the context of the relevant fragment of the Bible.

> And Jacob was left alone; and there wrestled a man with him until the breaking of the day. And when he saw that he prevailed not against him, he touched the hollow of his thigh; and the hollow of Jacob's thigh was out of joint, as he wrestled with him. And he said, Let me go, for the day breaketh. And he said, I will not let thee go, except thou bless me. And he said unto him, What is thy name? And he said, Jacob. And he said, Thy name shall be called no more Jacob,

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but Israel: for as a prince hast thou power with God and with men, and hast prevailed. And Jacob asked him, and said, Tell me, I pray thee, thy name. And he said, Wherefore is it that thou dost ask after my name? And he blessed him there. And Jacob called the name of the place Peniel: for I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved. And as he passed over Penuel the sun rose upon him, and he halted upon his thigh. (KJV Genesis 32:24–31)

Jacob wrestling with the angel is wrestling with God—but not as His enemy: the patriarch seeks God's blessing, which becomes the stake of his struggle. Paradoxically, the struggle with God brings Jacob *closer* to God. Only by risking defeat in the confrontation with divinity can Jacob achieve his goal: the victorious encounter grants him the desired blessing and a meeting with the Almighty, who rewards his steadfast faith. Jacob becomes Israel, "one who struggles with God," and at the same time, the patriarch of a nation that will bear the same name. However, the price of victory is a mark: the injured hip becomes a metaphor for the irreversible change that occurs as a result of the confrontation with the divine.

Similarly, the poet: in creating a poem—struggling to irrationally unite what cannot logically be reconciled (things unlike)— fights with the divine element of art (angel Art) to gain the blessing, the name that will give birth to a new person: the artist, offering others "poetic faith," the medium of "true thoughts," holding sway over souls. Intimate contact with art can only be achieved through an unequal struggle with it, and engaging with art is a mystical experience: it is an experience of truth that wounds and leaves a scar.

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Melville's metaphorical and literal journeys we have explored with Agnes D. Cannon obviously transcend the boundaries of mere travel; they become odysseys of the mind and spirit, deeply intertwined with the pursuit of truth, art, and, most of all, self-awareness. Just as Melville's protagonist embarks on a voyage across seas, whether charted or uncharted, the journey is always dangerous. The writer—both "mariner and mystic," as Raymond Weaver called him—in his struggles to come to terms with reality, epitomizes humanity's eternal quest to grapple with the mysteries of existence, to interpret the manifold signs of the world. Navigating the tensions between beauty and sublimity, through the poetic lens, the traveler emerges as not only an observer but also a *creator*, molding experience into meaning and imparting a broader vision to those who would willingly follow. This learning experience, colored with both delight and disarray,

reflects the paradoxical nature of truth itself—voiceless yet omnipresent, elusive yet transformative. It is through these journeys, both external and internal, that one may begin to cultivate the "justest of all views," a perspective born not of certainty but of a profound openness to the world's infinite complexities—if only one musters the courage to embark. Melville's narratives invite us to embrace the duality of travel as both a physical endeavor and a metaphorical process of self-discovery, ultimately affirming that the greatest voyages lie not only in crossing oceans but in expanding the horizons of our understanding, and they are worth the effort, even if they should brand us for life.

Abstract: Herman Melville's *Mardi* emerges as a pivotal work that bridges the domains of narrative realism and philosophical allegory, reflecting the writer's evolving artistic ambitions and his quest for truth. This article examines Melville's exploration of the poet's role and literature's potential as a medium for conveying profound philosophical insights. Drawing on Agnes D. Cannon's critical framework and Melville's marginalia, the analysis highlights how the writer constructs a multidimensional vision of the artist as entertainer, mouthpiece, interpreter, visionary, savior, and mythmaker. Melville's poetic philosophy integrates Romantic notions of art's transformative power with a critical stance on truth, emphasizing the poet's duty to grapple with both beauty and the sublime while navigating the moral and existential ambiguities of human existence. By reimagining narrative as an epistemological journey, Melville challenges his contemporaries' aesthetic expectations and affirms literature's capacity to inspire intellectual and spiritual growth. This article situates *Mardi* within 19th-century debates on aesthetics and truth, shedding light on Melville's literary aspirations and his enduring contributions to the philosophy of art.

Keywords: Herman Melville, *Mardi*, concept of art, true thought, Romantic aesthetics, Agnes D. Cannon

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