

Université de Montréal

**Nation and its Configuration: the (Mis)representation of the
Orient in the Literary Imagination of Melville**

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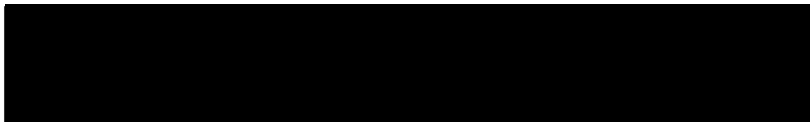
Ce mémoire intitulé :

**Nation and its Configuration: the (Mis)representation of the
Orient in the Literary Imagination of Melville**

présenté par :

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In Memory of Edward W. Said

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Résumé

Mon mémoire de maîtrise, "Nation and its Configuration: The (Mis)Representation of the Orient in the Literary Imagination of Melville," porte sur les contextes historiques, idéologiques, et politiques de l'Orientalisme Américaine. Mon mémoire examine trois textes par Melville. Cette étude interroge la manière dans laquelle le concept de l'Orientalisme est utilisé comme une stratégie discursive pour représenter la supériorité occidentale et légitimer le discours de colonialisme et impérialisme.

Ce mémoire est divisé en trois parties : la première examine la conception de Melville a propos le nationalisme dans le contexte des théories littéraires du XIV eme siècle concernant la littérature américaine ; la seconde étudie la représentation incorrecte et la construction subjective de l'Orient comme étant différent, passif, inférieur, et exotique ; et la troisième partie rendre compte a viser quelques concepts de Edward Said, surtout son discours d'humanisme et d'Orientalisme.

Abstract

This thesis, “Nation and its Configuration: The (Mis)Representation of the Orient in the Literary Imagination of Melville,” focuses on the historical, political, and ideological context of American Orientalism. This study reads texts by Melville to interrogate how Orientalism is deployed as a Western discursive strategy to both represent Western superiority and legitimize colonialism and imperialism.

This thesis is divided into three sections: the first examines Melville’s conception of nationhood within the framework of literary theory on nineteenth-century American literature; the second will explore the (mis)representation and the biased Western construction of the Orient as different, passive, exotic, and inferior; and the third re-thinks some of Edward Said’s assumptions, mainly his essentialist discourse of secularism which fails to read properly Melville’s *différance*.

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Introduction

Melville's prolific artistic output continues to inflict interpretive multiperspectivism on his readers. C. L. R James's *Mariners, Renegades, and Castaways: The Story of Herman Melville and the World We Live In* shows how Melville's texts can be used as documents to deal with today's concepts of nationalism, identity, and representation. He writes,

I therefore actually began the writing of this book on the Island, some of it was written there, what I did not write there was conceived and worked over in my mind there. And in the end I finally came to the conclusion that my experiences there have not only shaped the book but are the most realistic commentary I could give on the validity of Melville's ideas today. (132)

James's statement displays the mutivocality of Melville's texts in which national and imperial motifs intersect. Melville's travel narratives are linked to the strong need for a national identity and literature. His travel narratives, however, are sometimes complicit with imperial projects. Mary Louis Pratt's *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (1992) has shown the affinity between travel narratives and colonial narratives. Both aim at imperial exploitation and potential colonization.

I employ the term "discourse" to refer to Foucault's understanding of language as full of inconsistencies, contradictions, and gaps. He sees discourse as "a group of statements in so far as they belong to the same discursive formation; it does not form a rhetorical or formal unity, endlessly repeatable, whose appearance or use in history might be indicated (*Archaeology* 116-117). Discourse thus constitutes all texts and statements that frame our conception of the world and language. Discourse is an ideologically

inflected language, or specialized language in a knowledge-domain; it is unconscious of its ontological and epistemological assumptions. Foucault studies the Western legal and medical discourses. Edward Said likewise explores the Western cultural discourse about the East. Inspired by Foucault's power / knowledge theory, he examines the dynamics of the Western construction of the Orient and how Orientalism has shaped the literary, cultural, political, and religious consciousness of the West.

Building upon Pratt's arguments and Said's theorization of the encounter between the East and the West in his *Culture and Imperialism* and *Orientalism*, I would argue that Melville's travel narratives are grounded in the discourses of American expansionism and imperialism. Studying the discursive operations of these discourses, I shall demonstrate how Melville's narratives vacillate back and forth between postcolonialism and imperialism. My project explores the historical, political, and ideological context of nineteenth-century American Orientalism; studies the (mis)representation of the Orient in the work of Melville; and attempts to rethink some of Said's assumptions, notably his secularism. In lodging his critique of Western texts, Said's theory fails to read the complexity and indeterminacy of Melville's allegorical work.

I shall read Melville through Said's *Orientalism* and Said through Melville's texts. This means that I shall try to understand the dynamics of literature through theory and vice versa. This project attempts to detheorize, while emphasizing the complexity of Melville's works, some of Said's statements and works against the grain of his theorologocentrism or his heavy dependence on theorizing the East / West encounter. In

other words, I shall talk about the discourse of Orientalism as a dialogic discourse that is governed by a multiplicity of voices, thus denying any equivocal theorization. Although I also rely on Said's references to explore the East / West encounter, I will not be attempting to retheorize his *Orientalism*. Rather, I will show the narrowness of Said's theoretical discourse and ideological agendas by drawing upon different works on the field. His theorologocentrism misses the religious, cultural and historical complexities and realities of that encounter and falls into the essentialist trap of the Western discourse he wants to deconstruct. The complexity of theorizing such an encounter is heightened when we consider the complexity of Melville's texts and their affinity with many different discourses such as imperialism, expansionism, nationalism, and anti-imperialism.

Many critics consider Melville as a postcolonial writer; others regard him as an imperialist voice. They are divided about whether Melville is complicit with Euro-American discourses of imperialism. Michael Rogin's *Subversive Genealogy: The Politics and Art of Herman Melville* and T. Walter Herbert's *Marquesan encounters: Melville and the Meaning of Civilization* consider Melville to be a postcolonial writer. Recent critiques of Melville include Malini Johar Schueller's "Colonialism and Melville's South Seas Journeys," in which he argues that *Typee*, *Moby-Dick*, and *Clarel* depict many colonial and postcolonial assumptions. The (mis)representation of the Other in *Moby-Dick* shows the dilemma in which Melville was thereby embroiled: he wants to critique Euro-American colonialist discourses, but he uses the same Euro-American imperialist discourses. In *Typee*, Tom, like Melville himself, represents an ambivalent

position. He inhabits a border space in which imperialist and anti-imperialist ideologies coexist. Likewise, *Clarel*, which was written after Melville's visit to the Holy Land, draws a parallel between the East's desolation and America's spiritual and moral corruption.

I shall study two fundamental literary genres that are closely linked to the establishment of the narrative of the nation: the novel and the epic. The former helps to introduce and to strengthen the notions of the modern state and nation; the latter, as a form, attaches itself to and constructs ideas of nationality. What brings *Typee*, *Moby-Dick*, and *Clarel* together, though, is their participation in the representational and ideological interface between travel and (anti)imperialism. While Melville's journey's to the Middle East and the South Sea are usually understood as a record of the strangeness, primitivism, and eroticism of the Others, the images of (anti)imperialism are always already there. Melville's texts, however, can be read as revealing moments of ambivalence, weakness, and instability in the culture and politics they want to represent.

Melville wrote *Typee* in 1846, a crucial year in American history. The Mexican-American War revealed America's expansionist policies. *Moby-Dick* was published in 1851, three years after the revolutions in Europe. In America, after 1848, the Enlightenment ideas of nationhood, loyalty, and citizenship were tottering. Yet, read in the context of modern capitalist society and the struggle between an emerging bourgeoisie and a proletarian consciousness, we can see, within the structure of Melville's narratives, narratives of nationhood and imperialism which are legitimized only at the expense of and in relation to other narratives – which is to say, the Other or

the Orient. Melville soared to the height of his literary achievement when he published *Moby-Dick*. After these explosive years (1846-1851), Melville left for Egypt almost a broken man and a forgotten author. The desolate years culminate in the publication of *Clarel* – a portrait of American nineteenth-century cultural desert, set in the geographical desert of Palestine, which he visited in his 1857 journey. My goal in applying Said's theory is to read closely and archeologically Melville's texts to unveil their ideological unconscious. Drawing upon the Foucauldian archeological method which inspires Said's works, I shall address Melville's statements only in the specific historical conditions of their emergence. In other words, I shall describe the history of the discourse of Orientalism through Melville's narratives.

I intend to devote the first part of my thesis to examining Melville's conception of nationhood within the framework of established theoretical approaches to nineteenth-century American literature. His quest for a strong sense of belonging to a harmonious nation, at odds with his feeling of alienation in a decrepit capitalist society, generated on essentialization of a prototypical, libidinalized, inferior, and backward Orient. Drawing upon the works of Said, the second part of my thesis will explore the (mis)representation and the biased Western construction of the Orient as different, passive, exotic, and inferior. The temporal and geographical exoticization of the Orient is at once an attempt to escape from the despondency of the alienated capitalist society and a colonial mission laced with notions of power and superiority. I shall study both Melville's complicity with and criticism of Euro-American discourses of Orientalism and colonialism: Melville's critique of such discourses is clothed within an imperialist discourse. In the third chapter,

I shall revisit, while emphasizing the complexity of Melville's works, some of Said's assumptions, mainly his essentialist discourse of secularism which fails to read properly Melville's *différance*.

Section 1

History, Nation, and Identity: Empire and the Rhetoric of Repudiation

Texts and Contexts: (Re)mapping the Nation

I shall use critical discourse analysis¹ to study how Melville's preoccupation with the Orient and its "sacred" geography enabled the construction of American national values in which the concepts of liberty, expansionism, and democracy overlap with colonial settlement. Drawing upon Foucault's study of discourse and Said's analysis of the dialectical relationship between culture and empire, I shall show how the discourses of nationalism and imperialism interact in Melville's narratives. Then, I shall study how these narratives resist such discourses.

The revolutions of 1848 in Europe – in particular, Rome's republican revolution, the Parisian proletariat revolt, and the revolution of German bourgeois liberals – inspired many nineteenth-century American writers and were considered as manifestations of the 1776 ideals or the twelve basic American principles². It follows, then, that the shattering of the Jacksonian democrats and their ideas about expansion and slavery was influenced by the revolutions in Europe. Although these revolutions were acts of bourgeois liberals in the first place, aroused by the national feelings of the French Revolution, they ended up shaking the bourgeois ideals.

Explained by the increase in the numbers of Americans who traveled to Europe, travel literature was a reaction to and a reflection of a national anxiety about identity. This interest in travel, though, was also an expression of American expansionist impulses

¹ Drawing upon Spivak's understanding of Colonial Discourse Studies, I want to deal with the representation of the Other as it is embedded in the discourse of American nationalism. In *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, Spivak does not "concentrate only on the representation of the colonized" (1). She wants to show how self representation works in relation to the representation of the Other.

² For more on the American ideals of 1776 see Hamilton Abert Long's *The American Ideal of 1776: The Twelve Basic American Principles*.

– an expansionism that mirrored the American fear of the other Empires³. Although American expansionism is associated with a westward movement and the industry of traveling, it can also be seen in the spreading of economic interests, such as whaling and merchant groups, in all directions.

The mutuality between empire and expansionism haunts nineteenth-century America. This “ringed crown of geographical empire,” as Ishmael states in *Moby-Dick*, “encircles an imperial mind” (151). In the context of nineteenth-century America, expansionism is both interior and exterior, westward and eastward, explorative and imperial. Melville’s visit to the Middle East, which is registered in his epic poem *Clarel*, participated in the tradition of “mass pilgrimages, [which] aroused mythic identification with the crusaders along with characteristically nineteenth century manifestations of imperial expansion through colonization” (Obenzinger xvii). In fact, during nineteenth-century frontier movements, American expansionism witnessed a significant development following the acquisition of Texas, the addition of the Old Northwest, the Florida cession, the Louisiana purchase, and the Mexican cession, thus paving the way for the expansion into the South Pacific. “Manifest Destiny” was primarily a tenet of both nationalism and imperialism. In fact, nationalism was a word used frequently by politicians in the 1840s to legitimate America’s continental expansion and to promote the ideals of freedom and democracy abroad. As Diderot argues, “the nation itself is unconscious [of itself as a nation]. It only begins to have a character suitable to it at the moment when its speculative principles accord with its physical situation” (177).

³ See Mary Louise Pratt’s *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*. She focuses on what she calls “survival literature” which describes the interracial relationship with non-Europeans. Travel literature, however, is a kind of survival literature that expresses Europe’s desire for expansion.

The national character shaped political perceptions and social activities. However, “Manifest Destiny” – a mask that represents and hides the national character – excluded Native American people and those of non-European descent. Indeed, it functioned as the “Manifest Destiny” of white America. The Pequod’s expansionism evokes America’s desire for land. As Parke Godwin argues, “Cuba will be ours, and Canada and Mexico too – if we want them – in due season, and without the wicked impertinence of a war” (qtd. in Dimock 27). This sense of mission, however, can be interlaced with – as I will explain in the second section, an imperial mission. My understanding of the “Frontier” movement takes into consideration the geographical and the cultural, the physical and the ideological. The “Frontier” ideology is not just a geographical and economic movement; it is also, and, primarily, cultural and imperial.

Melville’s narratives intersect with colonialist expansionism and the American Protestant “fascination with Jewish Restoration” (Obenzinger 8). At home, the aboriginals were considered heathens or infidels who should be converted to Christianity. Likewise, the mission of America abroad is to convert Jews to Christianity. In nineteenth-century America, distinctions between people were made on the basis of religion. The Other was considered an infidel who should be civilized and converted to Christianity. Indeed, this is a continuation of race ideologies of the Middle Ages. The question of Christianizing the heathens and the idea of the rational individual arose in the sixteenth century. Heathens and Indians could not be Christianized because they were constructed as irrational and inferior. However, the Other played an important role in the construction of the American nation.

In order to define itself, the American nation had to construct its Others. In fact, modernity was possible only through what was not “modern”, through conquests, colonization, exploitation, slave labor, and so on. To emerge as a modern nation state, America had to have Others⁴. Said’s *Orientalism* lays bare these binary constructions. Said considers Orientalism “as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (3). The actual presence of the concept of modernity would not be possible without “restructuring” the Other. Said goes on to argue that “the Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience” (1-2).

The Western self is shaped according to a negative image of its Others. Foucault’s study of discourse is situated in the episteme of the Other in which discourse inheres. The modern episteme has come into its own death because it failed to understand the importance of the Other or finitude. Accordingly, “Western man could constitute himself in his own eyes as an object of science, he grasped himself within his language, and gave himself, in himself and by himself, a discursive existence, only in the opening created by his own elimination (*The Birth of the Clinic* 197). The slippage of referents in language refers to the inability of language to explain itself, the gaps inherent in discourse, and the importance of the “episteme” – “the total set of relations that unite, at a given period, the discursive practices that give rise to epistemological figures, sciences, possibly formalized” – to fill in these gaps (*Archaeology* 191). Western man (ab)uses the

⁴ The emphasis laid on the Other implies, however, the importance of race in structuring the formation of the United States as a nation.

discontinuities and gaps that reside in language to frame his Others. Such framing is often associated with the rhetoric of repudiation.

Roger Scruton, in the context of East / West confrontation, posits that “the culture of repudiation therefore reminds us that free inquiry is not a normal exercise of the human mind, and is attractive only when seen as an avenue to membership” (79). Nineteenth-century America witnessed the first manifestations of the culture of repudiation. The emergence of what is called the culture of repudiation in the nineteenth-century evokes the refashioning of Enlightenment concepts of citizenship, loyalty, and nationhood. Immanuel Kant’s and Denis Diderot’s theories of anti-imperialism were rejected. Like revolutionary and post-revolutionary France, which was committed to imperialism through spreading the ideals and institutions of the Revolution within Europe, nineteenth-century America had a penchant for an imperialist project. However, nineteenth-century Western political theorists were either ambivalent about or complicitous with European imperialism.

Karl Marx, Friedrich Hegel, and Stuart Mill thought that in order for non-European people to be able to govern themselves, they needed the help of European imperialists who would pave the ground for the transition to communism in the non-European world. Nineteenth-century philosophical and cultural discourses on empire marked a return to the imperialist tenets of pre-Enlightenment thought. To be a dissident voice in nineteenth-century America was to expect exclusion, displacement, and even delegitimization.

Said questions the notions of democracy and liberty held by the United States. He shows that the distinctions between people within American society on cultural differences. Therefore, they are constructed ideologically in the Marxist sense of the word – constructed by the bourgeois ruling classes. By reading nineteenth-century concepts of progress, nationality, membership, and empire, we realize their affinity with the ostensible civilizing and imperializing project. The American doctrine of progress, an extension of the Enlightenment universal ideals and values, was used by American expansionists to justify the subjugation of non-American people. In place of the old beliefs of a culture based on judgment, loyalty, and citizenship, people in nineteenth-century America were given new beliefs of a culture based on exclusion.

Nineteenth-century America was a society of strangers, held together by the Enlightenment notions of loyalty and membership. Said's *Orientalism* dismisses Enlightenment as a form of imperialism mostly when Enlightenment is a synonym for instrumental reason. Scruton argues that, "the Orient might have been a genuine alternative to western enlightenment; instead it is remade as decorative foil to the western imperial project" (76). In this sense, Enlightenment is monocultural; it helps commemorate the view of Western civilization as naturally superior to its rivals. The American Civil War questioned the established notions of citizenship, autonomous nationhood, and loyalty. The experience of membership required by the Enlightenment idea of the loyal citizen dwindled after the Civil War. Although the Civil War was a struggle for unity and the abolition of slavery, it disclosed a disparity between American people. In *antebellum* America and even *postbellum* America, Americans were rather

strangers living together and facing different futures. Unlike the Greek *polis*, which contained a small number of strangers, the modern American state assembles people who are strangers to one another. “The good citizen,” Scruton puts it, “recognizes obligations towards people who are not, and cannot be known to him” (52). Though the Enlightenment concept of citizenship enabled strangers to gather together and wage a war against any type of tyranny and assert their rights, it required a disposition to recognize the other strangers. This disposition – what Raymond Williams calls “exclusion” – is allied to territorial loyalty. Williams argues that culture is based mainly on exclusions. He writes, “as for me, though perhaps I am putting it too strongly, culture has been used as essentially not a cooperative and communal term but rather as a term of exclusion” (196). Western culture, Said argues in *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, is a “system of exclusions” and normalization designed to keep Others out (11).

Said’s *Culture and Imperialism* is a powerful example of late twentieth-century criticism that invites argument, provokes new readings, and incites critics to revisit and rethink works that have long been categorized and shaped by classical criticism. Read in light of Said’s *Culture and Imperialism*, Melville’s narratives work as a sequel to and a manifestation of the strong presence of “American Holy Land literature” in the nineteenth-century literary scene. His preoccupation with the Orient and its sacred geography allows for the construction of national values in which transcendental concepts of liberty, expansionism, and democracy overlap with colonial settlement. The return to Melville allows the reader to realize tentative hypotheses and new horizons of

expectations and to grasp the ideological unconscious of his works. Obenzinger posits that

the persistent preoccupation with the Bible and biblical geography stood at the ideological core of American colonial expansion, actual travel to Palestine allowed Americans to contemplate biblical narratives at their source in order to *reimagine* – and even to *reenact* – religio-national myths, allowing them, ultimately, to displace the biblical Holy Land with the American New Jerusalem [emphasis mine] (5).

“The American New Jerusalem” is a construction that dates back to Puritan colonial era. This quest of American Holy Land literature to restore the Holy Land, Obenzinger explains in his *American Palestine: Melville, Twain, and the Holy Land Mania*, is tainted with the desire for settler-colonialism and imperial expansionism. This argument further complicates the dynamics of colonialism and imperialism within American discourse of nationalism and identity.

In *Moby-Dick*, Ishmael argues, “what was America in 1492 but a Loose-Fish...? What was Poland to the Czar? What Greece to the Turk? What India to England? What at least will Mexico be to the United States? All loose fish” (381). In this logic the contemporary Orient is also a loose fish. Being a loose fish or an “empty” territory, the Orient can be conquered and refashioned by another former loose fish – America. As a result, the Orient becomes a loose property that can be claimed by the first harpooner. Becoming a harpooner, Americans willfully reflect the rich past of other cultures.

Jacksonian ideals equate America's future with its geographical expansionism. "For to be 'manifest,'" Dimock writes, "America's future must become 'destiny' – which is to say, it must be *mapped* on a special axis, turned into providential design" [emphasis added] (15). This emphasis on space characterized both the expansionist discourse of Jacksonian America and the literary productions of the time. To shift from time to space, *antebellum* America wanted to extend its expansionism with no regard to time. Quite different from the other Western Empires, expansionist America appeared, in nineteenth-century literary productions, as a *timeless* Empire. Time, as Paul de Man argues is "an ideal time that is never here and now but always a past or an endless future" (qtd. in Dimock 22). This subjection or rather elimination of time legitimated *antebellum* America's discourses of expansionism. To degrade time is to postpone the disintegration of Empire,

for temporal decline remained an imperial fate, the subordination would put off that fate indefinitely. Expanding not only continentally but eventually to include the entire hemisphere, America would dispense space as a sort of temporal currency, buying its tenure in time with its expansion in space (Dimock 15).

This extension in space, however, reflects America's anxiety about decline – the eventual fate of all Empires. The narrative of progress had to deal with the natives who were considered as a threat to the prosperity of the nation. However, "at the frontier [the American Empire] falls off. Going from one hemisphere to another, what does it become? Nothing" (Diderot 177).

To guarantee the survival of Empire abroad and harmony at home, *antebellum* America offered the narrative of progress as “a narrative that admitted no warring polarity, only orderly succession” (Dimock 18). Considered as “barbarous” people, the Indians had to be civilized and submitted to the rules of the narrative of progress. *Moby-Dick*, a narrative of progress, evokes a rather different way of taming the dangerous classes. Death or extinction of the first nations is what *Moby-Dick* illustrates. In fact, the Pequod is but “the name of a tribe of Massachusetts Indians, now *extinct* as the ancient Medes” (82). Read in light of Darwin’s theories of evolution, the extinction of the first nations results from the narrative of progress.

Sovereign author, sovereign nation?

Drawing upon the Foucauldian archaeological approach, I shall demonstrate how authorship works according to the politics of Empire. I shall question the affinity between national and authorial sovereignty and show how they complement each other. My point is that both the nation and Melville's national works are politically and ideologically constructed. Inspired by Foucault, Edward Said's method in *Culture and Imperialism* is "to focus as much as possible on individual works, to read them first as great products of the creative or interpretative imagination, and to show them as part of the relationship between culture and empire" (xxii). This dialectical relationship between culture and imperialism evokes a relationship between self and nation. Melville's work, a product of nineteenth-century American culture, reflects the imperialist ideology of the time.

Dimock argues that selfhood and authorship are both contingent. In this sense, Melville is "a representative author, a man who speaks for and with his contemporaries, speaking for them and with them, most of all when he imagines himself to be above them, apart from them, opposed to them" (6). Melville's expansionism is a kind of tourism – geographical and imaginary.

Given that nineteenth-century Americans were infatuated with expansionism, literary texts had to reflect the empire's craving for expansionism – a concept that necessitated the development of the ideals of "Manifest Destiny" in relation to new territories. Dimock talks about the "mutuality" between author and nation and argues that the author is "empire-like." In fact, "the special appetites of Truth make the author an 'imperial' self almost by necessity – imperial, not only because he writes freely, in

sovereign autonomy, but also because he writes appropriatively, like an empire” (8). Such imperial gestures, as they are evoked by Melville’s writings, tend to, though discursively, strengthen the ideals of the nation. This logic explains the narrative economy of *Moby-Dick*: Ahab’s doomed pursuit of the white whale, Ishmael’s desire “to sail forbidden seas and land on barbarous coasts” (26), and his despotic authority over his characters, who, following the American illusory “Manifest Destiny,” fall into the vortex of the sinking Pequod.

Melville’s language of freedom and individualism resonates with the discourse of nineteenth-century American expansionism – a discourse that is embedded in a larger discourse of imperialism. Such discourse of freedom serves to justify American imperialism, which, in turn, defends that freedom. Dimock posits that “Melville’s terms of authorial sovereignty – his particular conjunction of freedom and dominion would seem exactly to replicate the terms of national sovereignty” (9). The similarity of discourses in the texts of Melville reveals the interconnectedness of his texts and their contexts, for, as Stephen Greenblatt argues, literary texts are produced through “institutional negotiations of power” (94). Much like New Historicists, Said argues that literary texts are not innocent narratives. As he argues in *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, “in human history there is always something beyond the reach of dominating systems no matter how deeply they saturate society” (246-7).

In this sense Melville’s work is an arena in which ideology – in all its discursive manifestations of nineteenth-century America – is hidden, thus making it easy for the

non-literary to traverse the literary. Throughout this study the term “discourse” is used to refer to the Foucauldian paradigm, which sees discourse as

a group of statements in so far as they belong to the same discursive formation; it does not form a rhetorical or formal unity, endlessly repeatable, whose appearance or use in history might be indicated (and, if necessary, explained); it is made up of a limited number of statements for which a group of conditions of existence can be defined. (*Archaeology* 116-117)

Discourse is thus the group of all statements determined in the time and space of a very particular period. Nineteenth-century American imperialism, integrated into the fabric of Melville’s works, interpellates him as an obedient subject. The Althusserian analysis of the relationship between the state and the subjects sheds light on the state’s discursive mechanisms that guarantee that people within a state behave according to the rules of that state. An interpellated author, Melville’s works, as part of what Althusser calls Ideological State Apparatuses, internalize, in the name of authorial freedom, the ideologies of antebellum America. Althusser points out that “those who are in ideology believe themselves by definition outside ideology. One of the effects of ideology is the practical *denial* (denegation) of the ideological character of ideology: ideology never says, ‘I am ideological’ (118). By this logic, Dimock’s point of “authorial sovereignty” is put under erasure because empire always denies being imperial.

Nineteenth-century theorists of nationalism and European, mainly German Romantics, accentuated the affinity of literature with the national project. McLulich holds to the idea that “literature comes in national units [and]...that a writer’s work should be

praised for embodying the distinctive features of [a] people” (qtd. in Corsen 21). The works of Kant, Goethe, Holderlin, Schiller believed in the unity of history and literature, thus evoking a sense of a common heritage, which fosters nationalism, or, as Corsen points out,

because of these pressures for a distinct national literature, the primary selection criteria for national literatures becomes differentiation from other national literatures. In order to proclaim cultural independence, a nation-state must produce and identify a literature that differentiates it from other states. (9)

This quest for an autonomous national literature reflects Germany’s reaction to the French invasion of German territories. Rising up against the Empire of Napoleon I, German Romantics intensified the country’s nationalistic fervor and developed a “literary national spirit, *Nationalgeist*” (Corsen 21).

Recent theories of the nation have shown that nations are constructed. “National literatures, like nations,” Corsen states, “are created by the cultural work of specific people engaged in an identifiable set of activities” (7). Said considers literary texts as a creation of the nation or a national discourse in disguise. Literature becomes a veil that a nation puts on to pass on its ideologies. Read under the light of Said’s *Culture and Imperialism*, Melville’s texts are trapped within the American essentialist national discourse. Dimock argues that “America should strike Melville as the ultimate model for authorship, for what the nation has to offer is what the author needs to learn: a form of governance, a form of legitimation and subordination, license and control” (10).

“Manifest Destiny” therefore accounts for the individual and the national destiny. However, the discourse of “Manifest Destiny” articulates an anxiety about distinguishing the American nation from other nations over which it exercises its superiority and destiny. William Henry Dayton’s point shows,

how few are the days of true Glory!...The Almighty...has made choice of the present generation to erect the American Empire.... An Empire that as soon as started into Existence, attracts the Attention of the Rest of the Universe; and bids fair, by the blessing of God, to be the most glorious of any upon Record. (qtd. in Dimock 13)

The very phrase of “American Empire” reflects Melville’s model of authorship, which is committed to the discourses of *antebellum* America. Nineteenth-century American ideology of harmony and is analogous to the ideology of expansionism. The harmony Melville seeks in his texts reflects *antebellum* America’s desire for harmony and unity. It is true that “canonical national literatures also allow nation-states to compete for full status in the international community,” but they can be interlaced with an imperial project (Corse 8). The subordination of blacks in antebellum America, however, “was altogether necessary for the mending of the nation’s body” (Dimock 29).

Melville’s narratives problematize the relationship between literature and empire. The textual (re)modeling of empire in Melville’s narratives produces a national subject within nineteenth-century American literature. As Corse argues, “national literatures have traditionally been understood as reflections of the unique character and experiences of the nation” (1). *Moby Dick*’s affinity with the American national project has made of it a

canonical text. A canonical novel, *Moby Dick* plays a significant role in the construction of an American national identity. Corse posits that “national canonical status is thus rooted in national exceptionalism. Literary explorations of the ‘unique’ nation and its ‘exceptional’ status in turn help construct available images of the nation” (4). In this sense, the process of nation building and Melville’s national works intersect. My point is that both the nation and Melville’s national works are politically and ideologically constructed. As Corse argues, “national literatures exist not because they arise ‘naturally,’ but because they are an integral part of the process by which nation-states create themselves and distinguish themselves from other nations” (7). Melville’s national fiction exists because, as traditional theorists of the nation argue, nations are different – a difference that is reflected and accentuated in his works. The nation therefore is its ideological and teleological story. It is a differential construct, constructed within a context of different competing nations.

Constructed as being different to other nations, the American nation puts emphasis on the notions of positivity and difference – two key concepts in the discourse of the nation. Greenfeld notes that,

a nation is first and foremost an embodiment of an ideology. There are no “dormant” nations which awaken to the sense of their nationality ...rather, invention and imposition of national identity lead people to believe that they are indeed united and as a result to become united; it is national identity which often weaves disparate populations into one. (qtd. in Corson 22-23)

National literatures help nation-states evolve through their creation of a unifying national identity, thus strengthening the idea of membership and protecting the nation. The history of the American nation, however, is the totality of the different stories that become a teleology. *Moby-Dick*, for example, makes part of that teleology and resists the then dominant narrative of the nation. This teleology is not ideologically free; it is politically charged. Constructed by and in the different stories that constitute a teleology, the abstraction of the nation exists before the nation itself. This is echoed in the post-modern, new historicist, and post-colonial assumption that it is the map that precedes the land. American expansionism – an allegory of temporality and space – is a map or temporal terracing that precedes the American Empire. This activity of mapping is constructed according to nineteenth-century conception of geographies and framing tradition. This reproduction of geographies is achieved through literature.

Melville's texts are not, as Dimock argues, "a territory to the absolute sovereignty of the author" (24). Melville's seemingly sovereign authorship is overdetermined by the larger sovereignty of the nation. This transcendental chain of domination and freedom characterizes Melville's works. His works are determined by the overarching power of the nation, but they create the nation as an "imagined community" (Anderson 1991). This freedom within domination characterizes nineteenth-century American literature.

Melville's *Omoo* and *Typee* do not express a free mode of authorship – a restriction Melville wanted to go beyond in *Moby Dick*. As Dimock argues, *Omoo* and *Typee* are narratives of facts in their affinity with elements outside the author's realm. Again, to

consider *Typee* as a narrative of fact is to overlook the book's latent imperialism and quest for dominion. Dimock notes that,

Melville's very idea of authorship – his desire to have exclusive jurisdiction over his fictive domain, his need to exclude the rival claims of the world's "dull common places" – might be considered an authorial variant within a much broader tradition, one that conjoins "liberty" and "property." (45)

This tradition alludes to Thomas Jefferson's ideals of freedom, government, and nation.

The Jeffersonian philosophy emphasizes reason, individualism, liberty, and *limited* government – all of which, in direct and indirect ways, play an important role in the construction of the nation. In fact, the "asymmetrical distribution of power" makes the relationship between Melville and his characters, between him and his nation a very complex one (Dimock 24). Dimock sees Melville as a "monarch" who controls what he creates. However, his monarchy is legitimized and defined according to the rules of an overdetermining monarchy – the nation.

In Bhabha's terms, Melville's works are also counter-narratives that destabilize the nation's discourse. They "continually evoke and erase [the nation's] totalizing boundaries – both actual and conceptual – disturb those ideological manoeuvres through which 'imagined communities' are given essentialist identities" (300). These counter-narratives become the site of a dialectical interplay between discourses.

Applying Foucault's archaeological method to the analysis of nineteenth-century American discourses, we disclose the discontinuities in the condition of Melville's discourse. In *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault talks about the interruptions that

suspend the continuous accumulation of knowledge... [and] show that the history of a concept is not wholly and entirely that of its progressive refinement, its continuous rationality, its abstraction gradient, but that of its various fields of constitution and validity, that of its successive rules of use, that of the many theoretical contexts in which it developed and matured. (4)

To look for the discontinuities in Melville's discourse is to dig into the ideological archives of nineteenth-century America. The Foucauldian archaeological method allows us to reveal the epistemic space in nineteenth-century America and discover the condition of that "episteme." Nonetheless, the term archaeology

does not imply the search for a beginning; it does not relate analysis to geological excavation. It designates the general theme of a description that questions the already-said at the level of its existence: of the enunciative function that operates within it, of the discursive formation, and the general archive system to which it belongs. (131)

Archaeology discards any notion of stable unity and coherence. Novels and poems therefore are not flat syntheses; rather, they are full of discontinuities, gaps, and dispersions.

Since the Renaissance, the novel has been central to the acts of imperial expansion and to the construction of the nation. The heteroglossic, dialogic, hybrid, chronotopic, and representational dimensions of the novel have made it the primary focus of critics. The multiplicity of socially competing voices or discourses (*heteroglossia raznorecie*) accounts for the representational power of the novel and its ability to give

voice to all the characters. Timothy Brennan points out that “the rise of the modern nation-state in Europe in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries is inseparable from the forms and subjects of imaginative literature” (48). Historically, “the rise of the novel” was deeply implicated in the nation-building that secured England’s national difference from the other nations. Said wrote on the novels of empire and studied their implication in the discourses of nationalism and imperialism.

The different voices inherent in the novel explain the heterogeneous nature of the nation and the novel. Such heterogeneity reflects the communal ethos and the effort of the novel to control the voices that are in conflict. Postcolonial critics have studied the novel as a reflection of nation building. Studying the novel as a chronotope, a term used by Bakhtin to refer to the correlation between space and time in literature, one understands the dynamics of nation building. However, Brennan argues that “if novel for Bakhtin tended to parody other genres, the epic was that genre the novel parodied in its nation-building role” (50). The epic, as a genre, attaches itself to and constructs ideas of nationhood. The concept of a national epic, however, has always been associated with the nation. Nonetheless, when the epic is placed in the heterogeneous contexts of the nation, the nationalism of epic is called into question. We end up having a number of texts which look for authority and canonization. Such quest for authority can be read as a revealing moment of ambivalence, weakness, and instability in the nation these texts want to represent. Unlike the modern epic, Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey* capture the experiences of the community. Full of discontinuities and gaps, the discourses of the novel and the epic call into question the very possibility of thinking about the nation as a unity. The

polyphonic structure of the novel reflects the multiplicity of voices in the discourse of nation – a multiplicity that the epic try to avoid. These discontinuities, as Foucault argues,

show that the history of a concept is not wholly and entirely that of its progressive refinement, its continuously increasing rationality, its abstraction gradient, but that of its various fields of constitution and validity, that of its successive rules of use, that of the many theoretical contexts in which it developed and matured.

(*Archaeology* 4)

Shedding more light on the ideological and cultural contexts in which literary texts are written, one realizes the dynamics of discourse construction and nation building.

Though it is committed to the nation's ideals of Manifest Destiny, Melville's *Clarel*, an epic poem, it "is a rejection of the American dream, a rejection of the westward movement in general, and an important step in a contrary, eastward movement" (Knapp 3). This eastward journey, however, is not an innocent journey; it hides an ideological and imperial project and reflects Melville's anxiety of representation. Studying the ways in which the Orient is depicted in these journeys Said, as Asha Varadharajan argues in her book *Exotic Parodies: Subjectivity in Adorno, Said, and Spivak*, "wants to move away from a conception of orientalism as a lie that can be contradicted and toward an understanding of the ways in which the representations of orientalism actively displace the Orient in the imagination of the west" (124). His *Orientalism* produces knowledge and representation of the Orient or Others whose identities are negatively constructed. It unveils the Orientalists' hidden ideologies and

programs. His deconstruction of “Orientalism” shows the Orientalists’ ideological procedures as a hegemonic and imperial construction.

Melville's Complex Postcolonial Orientalism: "the Glorious Eastern Jaunt" and the Trap of Imperialism

Melville's Postcolonial Discourse: the Failure of the American Ideals

Though he can be considered as a postcolonial writer, Melville is also a racist and racialist writer: racist because the misrepresentation of Others in his discourse – though sometimes subtly injected – is always there; racialist because he, like most other nineteenth-century thinkers, believes in the pseudo-scientific theories of race and the notions of difference and evolution. Melville's proponents include Michael Rogin who calls Melville "a spokesman for the aboriginal victims of Manifest Destiny" (48) and T. Walter Herbert who argues that Melville "shows a tolerance for ambiguity sufficient to permit anomalous experience to be made available to consciousness, however inconsistent the resulting attitudes and feelings may appear to be" (207). Other critics argue that Melville is complicit with Euro-American colonialism. Malini Johar Schueller argues that Melville's narratives contains and continues the colonialist discourse of "civilized and savage" (3). If Melville's primary aim behind his journeys to the Middle East and the Marquesan islands was to explore these strange lands, his second and more important was to remap them according to Western imperial perception of geography. In this sense, "whaling is imperial! By old English statutory law, the whale is declared 'a royal fish'" (119).

I shall be dealing with the representation of the Orient in the literary imagination of Melville. Melville's complexity and ambiguity lie in his affinity with many competing discourses: Orientalism, imperialism, and post-colonialism. As Edward Said has shown in *Orientalism*, the

generalization about ‘the Orient’ drew its power from the presumed representativeness of everything Oriental; each particle of the Orient told of its Orientalness, so much so that the attribute of being Oriental overrode any countervailing instance. An Oriental man was first an Oriental and only second a man” (231).

According to Melville, America’s corruption is not part of what Knapp calls the “evolutionary perfectibility” (12). He does not see America’s problems as a step in the Hegelian dialectical triadism⁵. Much like Althusser, Melville posits that production of knowledge develops by breaks with and critiques of previous ideological thoughts. In this logic, *Moby Dick* is a critique of race in America and American imperialism, *Typee* is but another harsh critique of European colonialism, and *Clarel* is an evaluation of the American ideals and a quest for meaning.

Melville published *Clarel* nineteen years after visiting Jaffa. He spent about three weeks in Palestine. He travelled from Jaffa to Jerusalem and wandered in the Holy City for a few day accompanied by Fredrick Cunningham. He went to Jericho, the Jordan, the Dead Sea, Bethlehem, and Beirut. However, his stay in and contact with the Holy Land was indeed short. He drew upon his personal journey and others’ to write *Clarel*. He did not write much in that period, except for some short poems published in *Battle Pieces*. His poetry is a reaction to and a reflection of the conflicting ideas of the Civil War. Franklin Walker argues that

⁵ Hegel’s thesis-antithesis-synthesis dialectic has been used by many writers to project their understanding of history.

Clarel may be looked upon as a tale of the spiritual struggle and unhappy love affair of a young student in search of a faith, or as a sort of *Moby-Dick* in verse in which many of the mysteries of the universe are probed, or as a modern Canterbury pilgrimage made by victims of a *faithless* age [emphasis mine]. (135)

Clarel, the title character, is an American divinity student who has gone to the Holy Land in search of explanation of issues of his age such as: religion, faith, etc. In Jerusalem, Clarel he meets many people. Joseph G. Knapp divides Clarel's guides into two categories: major and minor. The major guides "are the profound thinkers – the men able and willing to dive into themselves and into the society that confronts them." The minor guides, however, "are the superficial thinkers, those who either mistake a fragment of experience for a whole by accepting the intellectual currents of their age" (5). After the death of Nathan – a Puritan who converted to Judaism – Clarel makes a pilgrimage to the Jordan, the Dead Sea, the Covent of Mar Saba, and Bethlehem with some guides he knew in Jerusalem. When he returns to Jerusalem, he realizes that his beloved Agar and her mother Ruth died when he went on pilgrimage.

Though the reference to and the description of this immigrant family is most of the times shadowy and unclear, they remain important agents for expressing Melville's different points of view. Rolfe, the spokesman for the Catholic Church, critiques the American Civil War,

Ay me,

Ay me, poor Freedom, can it be

A countryman's refugee?
 What maketh him abroad to roam,
 Sharing with infidels a home?
 Is it the immense charred solitudes
 Once farms? and chimney-stacks that reign
 War-burnt upon the houseless plain
 Of hearthstones without neighborhoods? (4.5.36-44)

Rolfe's interest in religion reflects Melville's disappointment in the American ideals during and after the Civil War. What Derwent, a "natural primitive turned transcendentalist, armed with evolutionary metaphysics," proposes is faith in idealism and nature (Knapp 45). Melville's pilgrimage is in fact a quest for religious truth. The basic question Melville tries to answer is the Kantian baffling question: what is man? To answer this puzzling question, Melville has to answer other subsequent questions: what is the universe? What is God? What is society?

As Knapp argues, "*Clarel* is a rejection of the American dream, a rejection of the westward movement in general, and an important step in a contrary, eastward movement" (3). In *Clarel*, Melville examines the premises of American society.

Much like *Clarel*, *Typee* shows that

civilization does not engross all the virtues of humanity: she has not even her full share of them. They flourish in greater abundance and attain greater strength among many barbarous people. The hospitality of the wild Arab, the courage of the North American Indian and the faithful

friendships of some of the Polynesian nations, far surpass anything of a similar kind among the polished communities of Europe. (329)

Melville's ambiguous position towards the Polynesian racialized Others allows for a critique of the Western colonial enterprise. His erotic journeys, which are part of colonial journeys, can be read as an anti-imperial discourse that troubles the established discourses of Orientalism and colonialism. Indeed, to praise the Polynesian beauty is but a way to condemn the colonial program.

Melville deconstructs the social hierarchy that sees the natives as inferior "savages". When the old king of Tior and the French admiral meet,

These two extremes of the social scale – the polished, splendid Frenchman, and the poor tattooed savage. They were both tall and noble-looking men; but in other respects how strikingly contrasted! Du Petit Thouars exhibited upon his person all the paraphernalia of his naval rank. He wore a richly decorated admiral's frock coat, a laced *chapeau bras*, and upon his breast were a variety of ribbons and orders; while the simple islander, with the exception of a slight cincture about his loins, appeared in all the nakedness of nature. (133)

This conspicuously detailed description of the two men legitimizes the authenticity of Melville's narrative. Such authenticity – an important element in travel narratives – allows Melville to critique the Western colonial assumptions. By authenticity I mean

objectivity and realism. Wearing the mask of authenticity and verisimilitude⁶, Melville critiques the very premises of the genre he makes use of and the Euro-American ideologies of expansionism and colonialism. Through inviting the American and Western readers to a journey into the Polynesian Islands, Melville hypnotizes them by offering various exotic images. This typical Romantic encounter of “civilization” and “nature” provides Melville with the right tools to inject his critique of American and Western policies in the South Sea. Consequently, the colonial gaze falls back on the colonizer, making it hard for the imperialists to control the situation.

The colonial gaze of Tom ricochets back on itself. To his surprise, Tom realizes that “never before had I been subjected to so strange and steady a glance; it revealed nothing of the mind of the savage, but it appeared to be reading my own” (180). Faced with the complexity of representation, the European colonizer responds to the Other in terms of difference or identification. If he thinks that he and the Other are identical, then he tends to ignore the differences and to judge the Other according to his politics of representation. If on the other hand, he assumes that the Other is different, then, again, he would adopt his personal point of view. This means that the colonizer will not try to understand the alterity of the Other. The visibility of the invisibility of what is going on in the Polynesian’s mind refers to Tom’s anxiety and fear. The anonymous invisibility of the Polynesian’s reading refers to the power of the invisible to terrify, to disrupt and to delegitimize the order. Lacan’s theory of the petrifying gaze that inscribes an arrest of time and death refers to “the pre-existence of a gaze – I see only from one point, but in

⁶ Verisimilitude or realism is a reaction against the idealism of romanticism. It is interested in the here and now and the scientific method. Verisimilitude is very crucial to travel literature; it authenticates the traveler’s story.

my existence I am looked at from all sides.... We are beings who are looked at in the spectacle of the world" (72-5). The Polynesian "savage" gazes back at Tom, petrifies him, and forces him, as it were, to follow his directions. As a result, Tom "grew absolutely nervous, with a view of directing [the scrutiny] if possible" (180). The Polynesian "savage", a traditional target of the Western colonial gaze, becomes a gazing subject and participates in the activity of representation and signifying.

Instead of being represented and exorcized, the ghost of the Polynesian Other turns out to be the exorcist. By challenging the Western epistemological dominance, the Polynesian subject troubles the Western cultural and racial assumptions. Being an ideological discourse, Western colonialism is basically binarist in the tropes it deploys to represent the Other. Following the premises of deconstruction, binary oppositions are but a violent hierarchy in which one of the opposed elements is privileged ideologically over the other and so "governs" it. A crucial stage in the formation of these hierarchical binaries, however, requires a reversal of positions, bringing what is low high. In his narrative, Melville wants to jump beyond the hierarchy that frames the Others as barbaric and inferior into a world free of such representations.

The Polynesian Other, like Henry Louis Gates' "Signifying Monkey,"⁷ redefines, renames, and signifies upon the Western tropes of representation in a discursive act. Although he is placed at the margins of Western discourses, the Polynesian subject's

⁷ In *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*, Gates takes the figure of "Signifying Monkey" as the archetype of the practice of signifying in African-American society. Signifying, however, is a form of verbal play, centering first on attacks and insults. Such verbal mastery works to substitute power. Gates links the manifestation of verbal play to the verbally powerful mythological figure of the "Signifying Monkey," who is capable of tricking the most physically powerful animals in the jungle through verbal mastery.

speech is more fluid and acrobatic than that of the Westerners. Unaware of Mehevi's verbal mastery, Tom

hesitated for an instant, thinking that it might be difficult for him to pronounce my real name, and then with the most praiseworthy intentions intimated that I was known as Tom. But I could not have made a worse selection; the chief could not master it: 'Tommo,' 'Tomma,' 'Tommee,' everything but plain 'Tom.' (181)

Though he could not pronounce "Tom," Mehevi (un)names "Tom" by adding another syllable to it, thus discarding the epistemological and ontological vision that name carries with it. Tommo emerges from behind the identity of "Tom," which becomes "Tommee" and "Tommo." (un)naming Tom, Mehevi, like Gates' "Signifying Monkey," signifies upon the Western tradition of naming and (un)naming⁸ the Others, which is, as Jamaica Kincaid argues, associated with possession and colonization. She posits that "this naming of things is so crucial to possession – a spiritual padlock with a key thrown irretrievably away – that is a murder, an erasing" that makes people "among their first acts of liberation ...change their names" (122).

In *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha argues that when the colonized avoids the colonizer's gaze, he discards "the narcissistic demand that [he] should be addressed directly, that the Other should authorize the self, recognize its priority, fulfill its outlines" (98). In *Moby-Dick*, for example, Ishmael deconstructs the binarist discourse that considers all non-white people as savages and the Westerners as civilized: "what is called savagery. Your true whale hunter is as much a savage as an Iroquois. I myself am a

⁸ See Kimberly W. Benston's "I yam what I am: the Topos of Un(naming) in Afro-American Literature."

savage, owing to allegiance but to the king of the cannibals; and ready at any moment to rebel against him” (267). The term “savage” loses its old significance. It is imbued with new signification. Melville uses the term to critique Western theories of evolution and natural selection.

As signifiers fall apart and all orders are disrupted, the harmonious model Melville is looking for seems to be threatened and saved at the same time by the disembodied elusive voice of the Orient. Suggestively enough, it is Fedallah – the shadow – who foresees the improbable circumstances in which Ahab will die. At the end of *Moby-Dick*, the Pequod is destroyed by White Whale. Empire sinks with the Pequod. The Indian harpooner Tashtego had nailed a red flag to the mast that caught the wing of a

Sky-hawk that tauntingly had followed the main-truck downwards from its natural home among the stars, pecking at the flag, and incommoding Tashtego there; this bird now chanced to intercept its broad fluttering wing between the hammer and the wood; and simultaneously feeling the ethereal thrill, the submerged savage beneath, in his death-gasp, kept his hammer frozen there; and so the bird of heaven, with archangelic shrieks, and his imperial beak thrust upwards, and his whole captive form folded in the flag of Ahab, went down with the ship. (535)

The sinking of the Pequod is but an allusion to the ultimate end of capitalism. All die at the end of the novel except Ishmael, who is saved by Queequeg’s coffin. Melville’s conception of history, much like Marx’s, is helical. The recurrent references to “vortices” in *Moby-Dick* show Melville’s understanding of history as teleology. The sinking of the

Pequod stands for the ultimate aim of socialism which is the destruction of the capitalist state. The ending of *Moby-Dick* can be read as a manifestation of the last elementary change in the mode of production – socialism. “Savages” and “civilized” people have the same fate.

Read in light of transcendentalist idealism, *Moby-Dick* is a critique of the “das absolute Ich”⁹ that characterizes nineteenth-century German romanticism. Such idealism influenced the American transcendentalists whom Melville critiques. The Americans did not experience many cultural revolutions like their counterparts in Europe. This explains the presence of the ideologies of primitivism, Orientalism, and mysticism in the works of the American transcendentalists. Ishmael describes of the city of Manhattoes, “Circumambulate the city of a dreamy Sabbath afternoon....What do you see? – Posted like sentinels all around the town, stand thousands upon thousands of mortal men fixed in ocean reveries....But these are all landsmen; of week days pent up in lath and plaster” (21-22). Melville seeks in Orientalism and primitivism an escape from the vicissitudes of capitalist America.

⁹ Like Napoleon, Ahab’s imperial ego is an example of the “das absolute Ich” or “le moi absolu.” German idealism of the nineteenth-century was a continuation and a critique of Kantian critical idealism. Fichte revised Kantian critical idealism into absolute idealism – an idealism that considers the ego the origin from which truth and reality stem. According to him, the world was created by a “das absolute Ich” or an “absolute ego,” the ideal of which is God.

Melville's Imperialism: the Trap of language

Melville uses the discourse of an empire that promotes ideologies of difference between American Christians and Polynesian “heathens,” between civilized whites and “Wild” Arabs (*Typee* 329). He uses many forms of disruptive language and framing strategies to mark the racial and cultural differences between white Americans and “heathen” Polynesians, alluding to them as “savages, “animals,” or “cannibals.” This description, however, shifts during his career. For Melville and many nineteenth-century American and Western writers, the white man is superior to the South Sea native who, following the ethnocentric and evolutionist social Darwinism, “represents the same stage in the history of the development of the race that the child does in the history of the development of the individual” (Kidd 52). Melville embraces the imperialist claim, which is celebrated by many philosophers and thinkers such as Marx, Hegel, and Mill, that it is necessary to control and eventually to tame the irresponsible natives in order for them to evolve and to ascend the ladder of civilization. Yet, much of his writing explicitly resists this.

In order to tame the natives, American tourist-imperialists use many strategies. Ahab's whaling journey, Clarel's journey in the Holy Land, and Tom's exploration of the Typee valley are all different kinds of mapping that try to appropriate the explored lands. Mapping has always been ideologically charged. It has always been associated with appropriating the land and its inhabitants, turning the wilderness into a garden. According to Obenzinger,

most American writers of Holy books stayed in Palestine only briefly. They were travelers, explorers, adventurers, pilgrims, and tourists passing through the Levant, observing the natives and their peculiar customs, visiting shrines, “reading sacred geography” with the Bible either in their hands or firmly planted in their heads. (xvii)

Melville recorded his visit in his long narrative poem *Clarel*, which narrates the muddle, danger, and mystery that may happen in the very heart of the Muslim lands as witnessed by Christian pilgrims. Jerusalem appeared to Clarel “Like the ice-bastions round the Pole, / Thy blank, blank towers, Jerusalem!” (1.1.60-61). Blankness is associated with Otherness and absence.

At the very beginning of the Poem, Clarel sits “In chamber low and scored by time, / Masonry old, late washed with lime – / Much like a tomb new cut in stone; Elbow on knee, and brow sustained / All motionless on sidelong hand” (1.1. 1-5). Clarel talks about the strangeness and decrepitude of Palestine: “do you concede some strangeness to her lot?” (4.26.140-142). This strangeness is associated with the barrenness of the land. However, as Obenzinger argues, “by the end of Melville’s poem-pilgrimage, the ‘strangeness’ of the land has become an ironic alienation: the divine presence is hidden or even evacuated, meanings are exhausted, Christianography and all the hermeneutics are rendered impossible” (39). The Holy City seems so dull to Clarel, “the flow / Of eventide was at full brim; / Overlooked, the houses sloped from him – / Terraced or domed, unchimnied, gray, / All stone – a moor of roofs. No play / Of life; no smoke went up, no sound / Except low hum, and that half drowned” (1.1. 139-145). Clarel feels

uncomfortable about being in the Holy Land. He loses his companions one after the other. However, he does not have any Muslim guides. In fact, Melville does not refer to Muslim characters. As Walker points out, “the emphasis is rather on Christian visitors and Jewish immigrants” (141).

Arabs are referred to only as killers, thus legitimizing the American and Jewish presence in the Holy Land. Nathan is killed by Arabs whose presence in the poem is very insignificant. The poem displays a fascination with Jews. Clarel says to an American traveler, “Our New World’s worldly wit so shrewd / Lacks the Semitic reverent mood, / Unworldly – hardly may confer / Fitness for just interpreter / Of Palestine” (1.1.92-96). The sense of selfhood Muslim characters acquire is totally perverted by the hegemonic colonial gaze of the Western traveler. Said argues that,

every pilgrim sees things his own way, but there are limits to what a pilgrimage can be for, to what shape and form it can take, to what truths it reveals. All pilgrimages to the Orient passed through, or had to pass through, the Biblical lands; most of them in fact were attempts either to relive or to liberate from the large, incredibly fecund Orient some portion of Judeo-Christian / Greco-Roman actuality. (168)

The American pilgrims, “disguised as tourists,” reflect the West’s desire to control, tame, and remodel the Orient according to Western ideals. This desire is explained by the description of the Holy city as a place of criminals, stowaways, and penitents.

The holy city is far from being the City of God. It resembles Eliot’s *Waste Land* and Poe’s *House of Usher*. It is a desert that

was yellow waste within as out,
 The student mused: The desert, see,
 It parts not here, but silently,
 Even like a leopard by our side,
 It seems to enter in with us –
 At home amid men's homes would glide. (1.24. 80-85)

The barrenness of the land is associated with the strangeness of the inhabitants.

Melville's narratives are haunted by the uncanny Other. In *Moby-Dick*, for example, the whale – a sign or a figure – is the Other that has long been chased by Western harpooners or colonizers. Captain Ahab and his crew stand for the new Christian conservative Western cabinet. The spectrality of the whale is in fact a manifestation of the omnipresence of the Other. The ghost of the Other is always already present in Melville's literary imagination. To use Derridean phraseology, "the ghost, *le re-venant*, the survivor, [that] appears only as a means of figure or fiction, but its appearance is not nothing, nor is it a mere semblance." This "presence without present of a present which, coming back, only haunts" (*Mémoires* 85). To think of the Other or the Orient is to see a multiplicity of specters.

When interviewed by David Barsamian, the director of Alternative Radio in Boulder, Said points out that,

in the final scene of the novel, Captain Ahab is being borne out to sea, wrapped around the white whale with the rope of his own harpoon and going obviously to his death. It was a scene of almost suicidal finality.

Now, all the words that George Bush used in public during the early stages of the crisis – “wanted, dead or alive,” “a crusade,” etc. – suggest...something apocalyptic....And it would seem to me that to give Osama bin Laden – who has been turned into Moby Dick, he's been made a symbol of all that's evil in the world – a kind of mythological proportion is really playing his game. I think we need to secularize the man.

By this logic, we need to secularize the whale. To secularize the whale means to redeem it from history and studies the various contexts in which it exists. It is also an attempt to critique ideologically the allegory which produces the whale. In the new Christian paradigm, the Other has become a prey of Guy Debord's society of spectacle, where there is an excess of representations and accumulations of images¹⁰.

The relationship among imperialism, textuality, and representation is, however, ambiguous and complex. Though linked primarily to territorial expansion, imperialism's basic underpinnings are ideological, cultural, and economic. Behind the imperialist discourses of nineteenth-century America, there are ideologies about civilization – ideologies that emphasize the superiority of Western civilization. There remains always a need for identifying an inferior race, thus valuing the self through the devaluation of the Other. Melville's interest in and reproduction of the Orient go through reproducing the Oriental territories and representing the Orientals. In this sense, representation is

¹⁰ See Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* and Benjamin's analysis of the deauratization of art through photography in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. When applied to the representation of Others during the various steps of imperialism and colonization, these analyses can be used to assert that the Others, while geographically and temporally difficult to contain, are available in estranged different forms that substitute their original aura. To tame the uncivilized Others, nineteenth-century America made recourse to product substitution of aura. Since getting rid of these Others cannot be achieved, Americans, through travel narratives and other discourses, sell a very particular image of the Other – an irresponsible infidel who needs to be tamed.

produced within the dynamics of imperialism and colonialism. Nonetheless, the representation of the Orient or the Other has gone through a development. The Others were first considered cannibals. Therefore, they must be exterminated. Then, the concept of the noble savage emerged. This concept is not free from the politics of representation and is inseparable from all European and American romanticisms.

In *Typee*, Melville uses many words from the Polynesian dialects to exoticize the Polynesian Other and to invite the tourist-imperialist into a journey in the Polynesian islands. There are two important qualities of Melville's journey that offer a useful departure point for our journey into exploring the affinity between tourism and imperialism. The first is Melville's paradoxical discourse – an amalgamation of fascination with and aversion to the natives. The other is Melville's actual visit to the Polynesian Islands and the Middle East. Tom's contact with the Typees entails an Orientalist and imperialist vision : “how should I be able to pass away my days in this narrow valley, deprived of all intercourse with civilized beings, and forever separated from friends and home?” (368). In fact, Tom's savior is an “English whaleboat” (378). This fear of losing touch with home is linked to a desire to sail Eastward. Melville writes, “were this world an endless plain, and by sailing eastward we could for ever reach new distances, and discover sights more sweet and strange than any Cyclades or Islands of King Solomon, then there was promise in the voyage” (*Moby-Dick* 235).

Melville's quest for the exotic allows him to reevaluate his own beliefs. Tom and Toby express their fears of “going native”. They see the Polynesian habit of tattooing as an exotic and unfamiliar activity that terrorizes them. Though they have decided to leave

the ship and all the Western cultural tenets, they retain an attachment to home. Their contact with the Marquesans reflects their fascination with and fear of these “cannibals.” They, like the tourist-imperialist, refuse to indulge themselves “in a popular mode of cultural transvestism” (Obenzinger 45). Such “cultural transvestism” might be also a means of disguising the colonial mission of the traveller. Melville critiques the voyager who, when he

arrives at home with his collection of wonders... attempts, perhaps, to give a description of some of the strange people he has been visiting. Instead of representing them as a community of lusty savages, who are leading a merry, idle, innocent life, he enters into a very circumstantial and learned narrative of certain unaccountable superstitions and practices, about which he knows as the islanders do themselves. (*Typee* 293)

However, Melville ends up using the same strategies used by the very traveler he criticizes. Like Tom and Kory Kory, Ishmael and Queequeg become intimate friends, and engage in a marriage-like relationship:

I found Queequeg’s arm thrown over me in the most loving and affectionate manner. You had almost thought I had been his wife....For though I tried to move his arm – unlock his bridegroom clasp – yet, sleeping as he was, he still hugged me tightly as though naught but death should part us twain. (43-5)

This mutual exchange of erotic desire destabilizes the ideology of Western male relationship because in nineteenth-century America, a heathen was to be Christianized,

tamed, and excluded not accompanied. The Ishmael-Queequeg relationship is part of Melville's erotic fantasy, which resembles the colonial fantasy that incorporates and consumes the Other.

The nakedness of the Polynesian characters fascinates Tom. "In the valley of Typee," Tom "saw several [people] who, like the stranger Marnoo, were in every respect models of beauty" (309). He finds much beauty on the Polynesian Islands, but he is also shocked by the destruction of these virgin lands brought up by Western invaders and their rotten policies. Yet Melville justifies and legitimizes the Western invasion and control of the Polynesian Islands – the only way to keep racial differences valid and strong.

Melville's narratives depict an eroticization and exoticization of the Marquesan land and its inhabitants. Tom thinks that Typee's "inhabitants hold their broad valleys in fee simple from Nature herself, to have and to hold, so long as grass grows and water runs; or until their French *visitors*, by a summary mode of conveyancing, shall *appropriate* them to their own benefit and behoof" [emphasis mine] (328). The inhabitants of the Polynesian Islands are used and abused according to the needs of the colonizers. The degeneration of the natives, however, is read within the context of "deculturation" and evolution. The assimilation of the Others is part of what Fernando Ortiz calls "acculturation" by which these Others acquire a new culture. Ortiz argues that the word transculturation expresses better the different phases of the transient process from a culture to another one, because it does not only consist of acquiring a different culture, [that is the acculturation], but also implies necessarily the loss of a preceding culture, which could be said of

a partial deculturation, and, in addition, it means the consequent creation of new cultural phenomena that could be denominated neoculturation.

(103)

He links the notion of “transculturation” to the creation of hybrid cultural forms. Ortiz’s term and what Homi Bhabha calls “hybridity” reflect a rejection of the colonialist dichotomous discourse. Homi Bhabha argues in *The Location of Culture* that, “the representation of difference must not be hastily read as the reflection of pre-given ethnic or cultural traits set in the fixed tablet of tradition. The social articulation of difference, from the minority perspective, is a complex on-going negotiation that seeks to authorize cultural hybridities” (2). Hybridity is produced in the “liminal” space between national communities. By this logic, the question of identity is closely linked to representation and cannot go outside the paradigm of language. *Typee*, however, is an elaboration of Bakhtin’s concept of novelistic hybridity which allows for a contestatory setting of cultural differences. Bakhtin posits that

in an intentional novelistic hybrid, moreover, the important activity is not only (in fact not so much) the mixing of linguistic forms--the markers of two languages and styles--as it is the collision between differing points of views on the world that are embedded in these forms. Therefore an intentional artistic hybrid is a semantic hybrid; not semantic and logical in the abstract (as in rhetoric), but rather a semantics that is concrete and social. (360)

The French colonizers are represented neutrally as visitors or explorers who have free access to the naked Polynesian female and male bodies. The reference to the naked Polynesians is an erotic invitation to the Western tourists into an erotic journey into the islands. Tom enjoys seeing the naked Polynesian women

from the verdant surfaces of the large stones that lay scattered about, the natives were now sliding off into the water, diving and ducking beneath the surface in all directions – the young girls springing buoyantly into the air, and revealing their naked forms to the waist, with their long tresses dancing about their shoulders, their eyes sparkling like drops of dew in the sun. (202)

Melville's detailed description of naked Polynesian females is a kind of advertisement that precedes the tourist-imperialist's actual journey. He describes also Polynesian male characters. The American or Western tourist-imperialist goes to the South Pacific where he can find "sexually accessible women...where [he] can experience a 'natural heterosexuality' that is accompanied by uncomplicated divisions of traditional gender roles" (Woods 126). Western tourists quite often engage in same-sex relationships with the natives – the homosexual end of a homosocial continuum that is proscribed in the Western countries. In fact, American expansion in the South Pacific allowed many Americans to engage in erotic adventures. These erotic journeys which precede the colonial journey combine an eroticization of both Polynesian female and male bodies. A closer look at Melville's novels highlights the complexity and ambivalence of his

attitudes. His representation of gender and sexuality is influenced by another representation – the representation of other travelers that inspire him.

As Said argues in *Orientalism*, the Orient provides the Western traveller with sensuality and “freedom of licentious sex” (190). In this sense, “the Orient was a place where one could look for sexual experience unobtainable in Europe” (190). What is unobtainable in the West is the accessibility of male eroticism. Said posits that,

Orientalism itself, furthermore, was an exclusively male province; like so many professional guilds during the modern period, it viewed itself as and its subject matter with sexist blinders. This is especially in the writing of travelers and novelists: women are usually the creatures of a male power-fantasy. (207)

Following the conventions of nineteenth-century travel writings and ideologies, Melville depicts his male characters as sensual and effeminate. Marnoo’s

unclad limbs were beautifully formed; whilst the elegant outline of his figure, together with his beardless cheeks, might have entitled him to the distinction of standing for the statue of the Polynesian Apollo; and indeed the oval of his countenance and the regularity of every feature reminded me of an antique bust. (253)

Assigning feminine attributes, Melville, as Said argues, participates in the Orientalist project that emphasizes the difference of the Other. Marnoo’s

cheek was of a feminine softness, and his face was free from the least blemish of tattooing, although the rest of his body was drawn all over with

fanciful figures, which – unlike the unconnected sketching usual among these natives – appeared to have been executed in conformity with some general design. (254)

The effeminate appearance of Marnoo and the other Polynesian characters is a kind of cultural imperialism that reflects the binarist discourses of the West.

The Polynesian male and female bodies become objects of desire – objects that are designed for American consumers. Many critics link the effeminization to the whole project of Orientalism, which is, as Joseph Boone argues, “an occidental mode of male perception, appropriation and control” (90). Melville’s discourse promotes ideologies of inferiority and effeminacy of Polynesians. In fact, *Typee* is a typical Orientalist fantasy that depicts and deploys the American ideology of imperial expansion and erotic adventures on the Polynesian islands. Melville uses many techniques to present an idealized, eroticized Marquesan body that is commodified and sold. Tom and Toby express their fear of the engulfing strange beauty of the Marquesans. Tom “perceived with no small degree of apprehension, the same savage expression in the countenance of the natives which had startled me during the scene at the Ti” (261). As I mentioned in the first section, American imperialism has always been associated with expansionism. The South Pacific was of vital economic importance to the industrialized nineteenth-century America. The Treaty of 1878 resulted in a tripartite government of the Samoan Islands¹¹ by the Americans, the Germans, and the British. The Americanization of the Samoan

¹¹ Some of the citizens of the Samoan Islands hold strongly to the idea that it is the Manifest Destiny of the Americans to govern them and bring them democracy, Christianity, and economic progress. However, after the July 1997 amendment of the constitution of Western Samoa. Many American Samoans still use the term Western Samoa instead of just Samoa. They think that their identity is linked to America.

Islands is part of the imperial project that appropriates the land and its inhabitants. The Marquesans are often described as “savages” and “cannibals.”

Melville’s use of the words “savage,” “cannibal,” “primitive,” and “civilized” is very ambiguous and complex. However, the points of view of his narrators are revealed through the choice of a given modus. Melville argues in *Typee* that “the term ‘savage’ is, I conceive, often misapplied” (242). Nonetheless, he ends up projecting and affirming the Western construction of the Other as a “savage.” The contextual configuration of Melville’s discourse allows the reader to see the demarcation lines between what is Western and what is different. The Other or the Orient can be considered as a Foucauldian document. The Orient – a document – is being divided up, organized, classified and interpreted according to the logics of Western history. Foucault writes,

the document is not the fortunate tool of a history that is primarily and fundamentally memory...in our time, history is that which transforms documents into monuments. In that area where, in the past, history deciphered the traces left by men, it now deploys a mass of elements that have to be grouped, made relevant, placed in relation to one another to form totalities; it might be said, to play on words a little, that in our time history aspires to the condition of archaeology, to the intrinsic description of the monument. (*Archaeology* 7)

This approach to the document invokes discontinuities and ruptures within discourse. Melville’s affirmation and denunciation of difference is explained by Homi Bhabha’s notion of ambivalence. He argues in *The Location of Culture* that

the colonial presence is always ambivalent, split between its appearance as original and authoritative and its articulation as repetition and difference. It is a disjunction produced within the act of enunciation as a specifically colonial articulation of those two disproportionate sites of colonial discourse and power: the colonial scene as the invention of historicity, mastery, mimesis, or as the “other scene” of *Enstellung*, displacement, fantasy, psychic defense, and an open textuality. (107-8)

This oscillation between ambivalence and difference is what characterizes the colonial and imperial architecture. Following Bhabha’s logic, *Typee*, for example, undergoes “an *Entstellung*, a process of displacement, distortion, repetition” (105). Undergoing this change, *Typee*, *Moby Dick*, and *Clarel* become themselves as ambivalent as the colonial project itself. Melville’s narrative personas are always ambivalent.

The constructions of difference prevail in *Moby Dick*. Melville was preoccupied with negative aspects of the Orient. His description shows,

the eccentricities of Oriental life, with its odd calendars, its exotic special configurations, its hopelessly strange languages, its seemingly perverse morality, were reduced considerably when they appeared as a series of detailed items presented in a normative European prose style.

(*Orientalism*167)

Melville’s comparison of Queequeg’s paganism to Islam – in the chapter entitled “The Ramadan” – is reminiscent of medieval propagandist myths about Islam and its depiction, albeit its incomparable monotheism, as a pagan creed. Melville equates Queequeg’s

Ramadan with “Humiliation” (94). Likewise, he compares the patriarchal authority and sexual indulgence of the male whale over its females to that of an Ottoman (Muslim) over his “concubines” or harem – a word used to refer to Oriental polygamy and sexuality. Melville writes,

in truth, this gentleman is a luxurious Ottoman, swimming about over the watered world, surroundingly accompanied by all the solaces and endearments of the harem. The contrast between this Ottoman and his concubines is striking; because, while he is always of the largest leviathanic proportions, the ladies, even at full growth, are not more than one third of the bulk of an average-sized male. (*Moby Dick* 375)

Apart from the degradation and exoticization of Fedallah and his crew, Melville seems to deliberately equate Islam with paganism. Ishmael “labored to show Queequeg that all these Lents, Ramadans, and prolonged ham-squattings in cold, cheerless rooms were stark nonsense; bad for the health; useless for the soul; opposed, in short, to the obvious laws of hygiene and common sense” (98).

Fedallah, as Melville tells us is a sun worshiper and the “devil in disguise” (315). His very name suggests that he cannot be but a Muslim. It is a very popular Arabic and Muslim name. It, indeed, includes the name of Allah, and the word Feda, which means sacrifice or martyrdom. The derivation of the name is very suggestive of a great number of most common Muslim names such as ‘Abdallah (slave of Allah), Saifallah (sword of Allah). Fedallah is a “gamboges ghost” whose presence disturbs the other harpooners. Westerners culturally and historically dislocate the Others through a

process of naming and unnamings and fix them in the context of their inferiority and subjugation. Therefore, there is an ongoing process of Americanization and Westernization of the Others. Put out of their homelands and dispossessed of their myths, traditions, arts, and even languages, these Others face an unavoidable process of assimilation. Studying the importance of naming in identity formation, Ralph Ellison argues that,

[w]hen reminded so constantly that we bear, as Negroes, names originally possessed by those who owned our enslaved grandparents, we are apt, especially if we are potential writers, to be more than ordinarily concerned with the veiled and mysterious events, the fusions of blood, the furtive couplings, the business transactions, the violations of faith and loyalty, the assaults; yes, and the unrecognized and unrecognizable loves through which our names were handed down to us. (148)

Names, however, are not mere thematic signifiers and labels; they participate in the narrative of empire.

David Spurr's *The Rhetoric of Empire: Colonial Discourses in Journalism, Travel Writing, and Imperial Administration* unveils the hidden powers of naming in the process of subjugating and dominating one culture, "the very process by which one culture subordinates another begins in the act of naming and leaving unnamed, or making on an unknown territory the lines of division and uniformity, of boundary and continuity" (4). Naming, therefore, is not an innocent act, nor is it a mere narrative agent.

Melville, one must remember, seems very familiar with Islam and the Arab world because of his perpetual references to Islam and Muslims in *Moby Dick* and his actual pilgrimage to the Middle East. However, this familiarity is determined by the rhetoric of empire. Melville's world is shaped by the ideologies of imperialism and colonialism. He posits that "the ringed crown of geographical empire encircles an imperial brain" (*Moby-Dick* 151).

Exploring Marquesan culture, Melville tries to study Marquesan cannibalism – a product of different discourses of race and gender. Imperialism is a transference of Western ideologies of secularism and Enlightenment to the rest of the rest of the world. Anouar Majid argues in *Unveiling Traditions: Postcolonial Islam in a Polycentric World*¹² that there is a strong affinity between secularism and capitalism. Secularism, a post-Enlightenment ideology, reduces religious thought to fundamentalism. In fact, it is another form of fundamentalism. The hegemony of modernization and secularism precludes any plausible understanding of the Orient and other non-Western societies. Majid states that,

the project of demonizing Muslim others meets various interwoven ideological needs, including the control of third world resources and persuading citizens of Western societies, through manipulated differentiation and consent, that they are members of a superior civilization. (138)

¹² Anouar Majid's study is a critique of both Western and Islamic theoretical assumptions. He critiques the western secularism liberal tradition, which, according to him, is a form of neo-Orientalism. He argues that postcolonial critics, who advocate a theory a hybridity or exile, have worsened the conditions of the Other.

Melville's modernization program, however, is part of a larger program that tries to tame the Orient and redefine Islam.

Arabs or Marquesans are different because they have different political systems and cultural assumptions. Influenced by the theories developed by secular science, Melville promotes the theory of polygenesis which talks about the human race in terms of different species and ancestors. To unveil and study the origins of racism, Goldberg goes back to the beginning of Western tradition. He realizes that hybridity is considered as negative in America because of the racial contamination that hybridity might cause. The death of hybridity is manifested in the death of the hybrid American Jewish family in *Clarel*. He argues that racism should be studied not as an expression of hate or difference; rather, it should be looked at as part of power relations that permeate discourse.

The Hermeneutic Anxiety and the De-theorization of Said's *Orientalism*

Towards a New Understanding of “Orientalism”

Drawing upon Cannadine and many other postcolonial critics, I attempt to de-theorize, while emphasizing the complexity of Melville’s works, some of Said’s assumptions, mainly his secularism, and to work against the grain of his theorologocentrism.¹³ In other words, I shall talk about the discourse of Orientalism as a dialogic discourse that is governed by a multiplicity of voices, thus precluding any unequivocal theorization. I shall explain how Said’s Orientalism fails to see the complexity and dialogism of Melville’s texts. Although I also rely on Said’s very references and theory, I do not attempt to re-theorize or reconsider his notion of Orientalism. Rather, I want to show the narrowness of his theoretical discourses and ideological agendas by drawing upon different works in the field. His theorologocentrism or his heavy dependence on theorizing the East / West encounter misses the religious, cultural, and historical complexities and realities of that encounter. For example, Islam and the Orient were considered a territory of the sublime, the missed, the primitive and the desired for many Western writers and philosophers, especially in the German Romantic tradition¹⁴.

Inspired by the Foucauldian theory of knowledge, Said examines the dynamics of the Western construction of the Orient. I will demonstrate how Said’s secularism, akin to

¹³ By the term “theorologocentrism” I mean the centrality of theory and reason to meaning and knowledge in the Saidian model. Here, I refer to the Derridean paradigm which criticizes Western logocentrism and phonocentrism.

¹⁴ According to Burke, Kant, and Lyotard, the discourse of the sublime was influenced by the Orient in various ways. In my project I bring together Burke’s understanding of the sublime and Lacan’s perception of Desire as lack, for the sublimity and danger of the East reflect the West’s lack – a lack that is made very visible by the system of capitalism.

Bhabha's in-between spaces,¹⁵ is itself a revival of Giambattista Vico's humanism as a Western ideology of which Orientalism is part. Said argues in all his works that Orientalism is a discourse that legitimizes, supports, and protects the Western colonial and imperial enterprise in the Orient. He argues that there is an entire literary tradition that supports the discourse of Orientalism. He posits that the Western literary tradition includes

a very large amount of writers among whom are poets, novelists , philosophers, political theorists, economists and imperial administrators [who] have accepted the basic distinction between East and West as a starting point for elaborate theories, epics, novels, social descriptions, and political accounts concerning the Orient, its people, customs, 'minds', destiny, and so on. This Orientalism can accommodate Aeschylus, say, and Victor Hugo, Dante, and Karl Marx. (Leitch1992)

The discourse of Orientalism constructs the Orient as being naturally inferior. Following Foucault's archaeological method, Said goes back to the Western archives to discover that the discourse of Orientalism belongs to a long history of discontinuities – discontinuities that work in favour of Western colonial interests.

Said's deconstruction of Orientalism is framed within the discourse of secularism. He formulates his secularism as an antithesis to the discourse of Orientalism in his article, "Figures, Configurations, Transfiguration." He argues that,

we should begin our acknowledgement of a world map without divinely

¹⁵ Bhabha's in-between spaces or "liminality" refers to the strategies of selfhood that form new signs of identity.

or dogmatically sanctioned spaces, essences, or privileges. It is necessary therefore to speak of our element as secular space and humanly constructed and interdependent histories that are fundamentally knowable but not through grand theory or systematic totalization. (25)

Instead of the binarist discourse of the Orientalists, Said proposes a secular space with no borders where people contribute to history regardless of their race or gender. However, the hybridised space of openness it offers as an alternative to the Orientalist paradigms, Said's secularism remains within the limits of its own binarism particularly when it situates itself in the space of humanism which includes the very Orientalism that Said criticizes. While he rejects the binarism of Orientalism, Said adopts Vico's humanism which is binarist.

Binarism, an aspect of American allegorical reading, is one of the major characteristics of nineteenth-century American literature. The whale, the Doubloon, and the Oriental hieroglyphics are figures that resist rhetorical clarification. This is the core of Melville's de Manian allegory of reading. This hermeneutic anxiety caused by the unreadable allegorical sign – the Orient – reflects Western colonial anxiety. The conjunction of hermeneutic and imperial anxieties is a manifestation of the desire to control. The colonial anxiety, much like the hermeneutic one, uses all strategies to demystify the Oriental text – a stage that precedes the geographical and military presence in the Orient. Postcolonial writing engages in destabilizing the fixed ideas of history and shows the inadequacy of the critical position that considers allegory as a limited mode of writing that is determined by the literary and historical pretexts upon which it is based.

Postcolonial allegory is concerned with opening the past and the present to new imaginative revision.

Said, like the Orientalist, thinks in terms of binarism. In his book, *In Theory*, Aijaz Ahmad studies Said's ambivalent humanistic stand. He argues that "what is remarkable about this. . .very resounding affirmation of humanist value is that humanism as ideality is invoked precisely at the time when humanism as history has been rejected so unequivocally "(164). Ahmad points out that while Said critiques the humanist tradition from Aeschylus to Marx for its Orientalist ideas, he adopts the same discourse of humanism in the name of Vico as an ideal intellectual.

In *Orientalism* Said observes that the "knowledge of the Orient, because generated out of strength, in a sense *creates* the Orient, the Oriental, and his world" (40). This knowledge, however, is associated with the concept of power which legitimizes for example the American military presence in the Middle East. Yet, this is merely the most recent manifestation of Western imperial desire. Said has not considered the importance of reading the Oriental Hieroglyphics in generating a colonial discourse. His claim that "Americans will not feel quite the same about the Orient, which for them is much more likely to be associated very differently with the Far East" (*Orientalism* 1) fails its own criteria when we take into account the American actual military presence in the Middle East. By "the Orient" Americans signify east Asia. When speaking of the pan-Arabic cultures, Americans use the term "middle east" – in the old days, they used the term "real east." It refers to the entire Arab world from Morocco (which is actually west of most of Europe) to Afghanistan. Its geographical center is, of course occupied Palestine or Israel,

depending on one's point of view. The Orient, however, is of a vital importance to the Americans. Nineteenth-century mapping and exotic journeys are now replaced with military and economic presence in the Orient. In this logic, nineteenth-century hermeneutics and twentieth-century imperialism complement each other.

Nineteenth-century Western epistemology creates a clash of ideas. Every nation constructs its own Orient. America, like all the other Western colonial empires, has its own Orient. However, it is important to notice that the nineteenth century witnessed a shift in the perception of imperialism; the century brought a new paradigm in which imperialism and colonialism are guised in the discourses of nationalism, modernization, and progress comparable to the current American invocation of "building democracy" in Iraq to conceal an imperial project guided by oil interests. In fact, American whaling industry did not end because petroleum replaced whale oil. Today, the American industry finds itself back in the Middle East, chasing petroleum (not whale blubber). Accordingly, we have many Orientalisms, not just one. For example, the Ottoman Empire embraced the ideals of Enlightenment. This means that imperialism is a Western template that is replicated by the Ottoman Empire. The "modernization" of the Ottoman Empire necessitated an internalization of the West's representation of its colonial subjects. The Ottoman reform system matched the European understanding of imperialism. The European discourse of imperialism sees the colonial subjects as inferior and, mainly, dependent on the West. Likewise, the Ottoman Empire legitimized the Ottoman Turkish rule over the other subjects, mainly Muslims. Ottoman reformers wanted the Arab provinces to be Ottomanized. What we have here is an Orientalism within Orientalism.

While subjecting Muslims and other minorities, the Ottoman Empire is itself considered by the West as a fertile territory that needs to be cultivated and governed by the West.

David Cannadine's *Ornamentalism: How the British Saw their Empire* works against the grain of Said's theory. His *Ornamentalism*, he argues, sketches in a necessarily abridged and schematic form, an account of the British Empire in which the concept of hierarchy as social prestige is brought more closely to the centre of things than historians have generally allowed" (10). He argues, against the ideas of Said, that the West is motivated not by race but by class. The desire to domesticate the exotic East and reorder it according to an idealized image of the West's class hierarchy makes it clear that it is *Sameness* rather than *Otherness* – the desire to replicate a certain vision of the imperial order throughout the world – that have motivated the colonial enterprise.

Said argues that the encounter between East and West was from the outset an antagonistic relationship between Christianity and Islam. This goes back to the crusades. This view, however, does not take into account the fact that Western travelers visited the Middle East seeking truth in the Christian Holy Land and wisdom of the East. As far back as the fifteenth century, Western travelers established a bond with the Middle East – a bond which is, though in some cases true, not necessarily imperial. Said argues that Orientalism has a strong impact on the Romantic tradition, for "it is very difficult nonetheless to separate such intuitions of the Orient as Mozart's from the entire range of pre-Romantic and Romantic representations of the Orient "(Orientalism 118).

The Romantics' stories about the East express their fascination with the East as the Holy Land and as an exotic world of wisdom and the sublime. The translation of

many Oriental works in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries stirred the literary imagination of Western writers and critics with the glamour and greatness of the East's literary tradition. Martha Pike Conant argues that "Arabian Tales was the fairy godmother of the English novel" (243). The Romantics' interest in the Orient expresses their desire to give free reign to their imagination and go beyond the rigid codes of representation. As Maryanne Stevens argues,

One of the preoccupations which profoundly affected the Western understanding of the Near East was the belief that this region could satisfy the West's urge for exotic experience. Exoticism meant the artistic exploration of territories and ages in which the free flights of the imagination were possible because they lay outside the restrictive operation of classical rules. (17)

For example, the East inspires Wordsworth's *Prelude* and Coleridge's poem "Khubla Khan" and many other Romantics. Alfred de Musset's definition of Romanticism expresses the importance of the Orient not in constructing an image about it, but in shaping the Romantic identity. He writes, "oh, sir, what a beautiful thing! It is the infinite and the star, heat, fragmentary, the sober (yet at the same time complete and full); the diametrical, the pyramidal, the Oriental, the living nude, the embraceable, the kissable, the whirlwind" (73). The East therefore is an allegory for Western desire. It is referred to by the Romantics to create an exotic world in which they can experience their sublime thoughts. Said sees that as part of the imperial construction of the Orient.

He, however, accentuates the Western binarist discourses. Using the very discourses of the West, Said depicts the Orient as the Other of the West. Though his aim is to critique those discourses, Said ends up using the same terms the Westerners invented. In a sense, Said emphasizes Western Orientalism as discursive system. Since language, as Saussure argues, is available through social usage,

the arbitrary nature of the sign explains in turn why the social fact alone can create a linguistic system. The community is necessary if values that owe their existence solely to usage and general acceptance are to be set up, by himself the individual is incapable of fixing a single value. (112)

To fix the values of Orientalism, the West needs Others to comply with these values. Said's *Orientalism* – a discourse on discourse – is full of discontinuities and aporias. It deconstructs an ideological discourse and builds a critical yet ideologically determined discourse. Barthes' examination of the nature of discourse asserts that "if there is such a thing as critical proof, it lies not in the ability to *discover* the work under consideration but, on the contrary, to cover it as completely as possible with one's own language" (650). Said's theory, much like the Western discourses, which it analyses, refers to a rigid center, to a fixed origin – which is to say, an unavoidable framing and misrepresentation of the Orient in the Western narratives. The West's infatuation with the Orient cannot escape establishing a complex relationship with that Orient.

Said's work falls into the trap of this Western essentialist discourse. The West's representation of the East constitutes a Foucauldian discourse – a system governed by discontinuities and interruptions. These discontinuities, however, construct knowledge.

Interested in the construction of knowledge, the Western discourse establishes a network of power relationships and enables the imperial construction of the Other to circulate as “knowledge”. Said does not talk about the interaction between the colonizer and the colonized. What we have is another binarist discourse. Though he is preoccupied with the construction of the Orient in the Western discourses, Said’s *Orientalism* works ironically in favor of the Western hegemony. Said considers all Western discourses about the East as misrepresentations and a kind of cultural domination, thus works within the dichotomous Western discourse that emphasizes the superiority of the West. By contrast, Homi Bhabha argues that hybridity is the key to resistance.

Majid argues that Orientalism and Enlightenment ideals are all formulated in a Eurocentric paradigm which is ideologically and historically associated with capitalism. He posits that “postcolonial theory has been particularly inattentive to the question of Islam in the global economy” (19). Secularism and utopian cosmopolitanism advocated by Said are, according to Majid, idealistic concepts that cannot withstand the capitalist system. He thinks that “the status [Said] confers on the migrant or the exile as the best situated intellectual and contrapuntal reader of culture in the age of global capitalism” is not convincing since postcolonial intellectuals, who are inside capital and outside the realm of the outsider looking in, are but products of Western imperialism. When the postcolonial intellectual does not put into question his / her secular assumptions, s/he cannot speak for and in terms of his / her society.

In the wake of the Foucauldian analysis of the Western epistemes and the Derridean deconstruction of the centrality of the transhistorical Western logocentrism,

postcolonial critics rely heavily on what is called “colonial discourse analysis.” Although I draw upon that very colonial discourse analysis, my aim is to deconstruct it from within. Colonial discourse analysis, however, advocates the primacy of the discourse of the colonialist while trying to undermine it. It rejects all methods to understand history and enters into the world of destructive skepticism. Colonial discourse analysis cannot give a thorough account of the basic elements of colonialism and its economic underpinnings.

To analyze the discourse of the colonizer is to look for a very particular meaning in that discourse – a difficult task that is made even harder by the Derridean claim that meanings only exist in other words. This transcendental chain of signifiers and signifieds makes any attempt to find the meaning impossible and differential. In “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,” Derrida writes,

From the moment anyone wishes this to show, as I suggested a moment ago, that there is no transcendental or privileged signified and that the domain or the interplay of signification has, henceforth, no limit, he ought to extend his refusal to the concept and to the word ‘sign’ itself--which is precisely what cannot be done. For the signification ‘sign’ has always been comprehended and determined, in its sense, as sign-of, signifier referring to a signified, signifier different from its signified. (250)

What complicates the postcolonial intellectual’s task is the nature of language itself. Differential as it is, language is characterized by the interplay of signifiers and signified in an unlimited chain. The point of postcolonial theory is to renew the relevance of deconstruction, not to merely repeat its dead end.

The inscrutability of the Orient is explained by the inscrutable White Whale. Textually, the desire to puzzle out the mystery of the White Whale leads to Ahab's death – which is to say, to another hermeneutic impasse. The whale, the doubloon, and the tattoo become allegorical signs for the Orient or the Other. These signs remain persistently unclear, and this is Melville's point. There is no way out of these signs' shackles. Many postcolonial critics such as Said and Spivak fail to see that the implausibility of reading and understanding the Oriental cipher might be linked to the Orient's strategy of defense which deploys hermeneutic puzzlement as a way to trouble the Western critic-imperialist's assumptions about the Orient. This conjunction of imperialism and criticism – a fundamental aspect of Western literary tradition – is suspended in its encounter with the baffling Oriental text.

Western criticism is imperialist when it tries to achieve hermeneutic certainty, which is but a form of linguistic violence done to the Oriental text. It follows, then, that what is unreachable, uninterpretable, and unknowable would be considered strange, bizarre, and would be subjected to Western scrutiny. The bafflement of the Western reader reflects the density of the Oriental figures – a density which further complicates the Western colonial project. Ahab claims to have understood the unearthly figure of the White Whale and on that basis, justifies the project of the Whale's destruction. However, he ends up being disfigured by that very strange figure. Dismembered and disfigured by the White Whale, Ahab allegorizes the dismal ending of any reader who tries to decipher the strange Oriental signs.

Ahab conveys the Western Orientalist fantasy that tries to redefine any sign according to Western politics of representation. The analogy with American Indians (i.e., as part of landscape) is an illustration of this fantasy. This leads to a larger and more complex question: is “inscrutability” a stereotype based on cultural contact, on “reality,” but also a defense against inscrutability? Obenzinger posits that the Orient

was considered strange, but it was a strangeness emanating from divine meanings waiting to be “read” as they oscillated between sacred ground and biblical text, a strangeness considerably more intense than the mere excitation of the exotic to be found in the Orient, one redolent with meanings about the divine and the destiny of “God’s New Israel.” (39)

Orientalism, unlike in the Saidian paradigm, is not just about the

corporate institution for dealing with the Orient – dealing with it by making statement about it, authorizing views about it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it : in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient.

(3)

Nineteenth-century American Orientalism, however, should be studied in the context of American Zionist relationship and the American quest for religious certainties. American travellers went to Palestine to read this text,

to engage in a complex interpretive practice of reading a female land inscribed with a male pen that, by the coupling of soil and story, would

provide evidence of faith and providence in a unified, eroticized entity created by the traveler who has come with great purpose to “read” it.

(39-40)

This oscillation between soil and story, male and female characterizes the Western binarist discourse. According to Obenzinger, “reading sacred geography inevitably also means writing it. Certainly, reading always involves a complex process of imaginative reconstruction, interpretive extension, and epistemological intervention, which constitutes a ‘writing’ act in itself” (39). The actual visit of the Western traveler to the Orient allows him to remap the land, write it, and be written by its signs since,

the actual art of traveling, already alters (“writes”) the landscape at the same time as the journey reconstitutes (“writes”) the subjectivity of the traveler through a process of constant reciprocity. After the Civil War, the arrival of genteel tourists would be seen as “ruining” the pristine, authentic text of any culturally valued landscape, particularly a sacred one.

(Obenzinger 40)

Nineteenth-century America did not venture to expand geographically in the Orient; its expansion was in the form of tourism and cultural hermeneutics.

The Bewildered Reader and the Hermeneutic Impossibility

Drawing upon deconstructive texts and in particular Derrida's understanding of "différance" and de Man's conception of allegory and symbol, I shall demonstrate how Said's secularism falls in the trap of Western metaphysics and how it fails to grasp the mutivocality of the White Whale. The White Whale is a complex, highly attenuated, fictional construct. The point I want to explain is that there are at least two levels of "Orientalist" encounter at work: first, the construction of the whale itself (the discourse of which, suspended as it is between failed symbol and obscure allegory) is derived, via Hawthorne, from a long history of Romantic semiotics. On the one hand, Melville is really trying to domesticate the White Whale and make it legible to American readers, by comparing it to distinctively American hieroglyphics – aboriginal art, American geography, etc. On the other, of course, he is trying to render its illegibility mysterious in decidedly Orientalist terms. The other level of encounter involves not so much the poetics of the whale-construct itself as the staging of the encounter: how Ahab and others see the whale, and how their seeing of others / Others (Queequeg, Fedallah) sets up this encounter. The point I want to raise is that Melville's narratives are allegorical, and thus refuse to vindicate any critical reading. Ishmael states that "Moby Dick [is] a monstrous fable, or still worse and more detestable, a hideous and intolerable allegory" (205).

Since hermeneutics¹⁶ is about the centrality of meaning to human life, all human knowledge is interpretation. *Moby-Dick*, a theory *avant-la-lettre*, deconstructs the traditional ideology of the transcendent signifier and transparent signified. The bewildered reader relies on the mysterious power of the hieroglyphic “to gather it up as play, activity, production, practice” (Barthes 170). I want to explore the deconstructive tradition that considers the text as an allegory of its own unreadability or hermeneutic impossibility. *Moby-Dick* challenges the hermeneutic certainty that characterizes the Enlightenment discourses of nation and imperialism. The white whale resituates that certainty into the vagueness of the ocean. Ishmael expresses the impossibility of reading the White Whale’s inscription and invites the reader into the mysterious world of the whale:

Champollion¹⁷ deciphered the wrinkled granite hieroglyphics. But there is no Champollion to decipher the Egypt of every man’s and every being’s face...how may unlettered Ishmael hope to read the awful Chaldee of the Sperm Whale’s brow? I but put that brow before you. Read it if you can.

(335)

¹⁶ Hermeneutics is derived from Greek mythology. Hermes, the winged messenger, was to interpret the words of the Oracle at Delphi. Christian hermeneutics began as a search for a single meaning entailed within the Bible. This hermeneutics, much like the work of New Critics, tries to find a determined meaning in a text. In the nineteenth century, however, hermeneutics acquired new meanings. The works of Schleiermacher, Humboldt, and Dilthey brought up the notion of the “hermeneutical circle.” Interpreting a text, according to them, involves a thorough study of all details, which are related to what the interpreter already knows. In the twentieth century, especially with the publication of Heidegger’s *Time and Being* and Hans-Georg Gadamer’s *Truth and Method*, hermeneutics changed our understanding of language which is no longer considered as a means to display experience but rather as experience itself. The interest in language itself complicates the interpreter’s task.

¹⁷ Champollion is a French Orientalist. His field of activity was Egyptology and his great achievement is recovering the key to understand the hieroglyphics.

To understand the whale's hieroglyphics, Ishmael refers to popular "sciences" of the mid-nineteenth century such as physiognomy and phrenology. Yet, all these analyses arrive at the unavoidable indeterminacy of the whale's head.

The inability to read the Oriental hieroglyphics inscribed upon the whale's head expresses memory's inability to address the transferential nature of the hieroglyphic. Barbara Johnson argues that knowledge does not necessarily engender an authentic learning. She posits, in her defense of deconstruction, that

deconstruction seems to locate the moment of meaning-making in the non objectivity of the act of reading rather than in the inherent givens of a text, but then the text seems already to anticipate the reading it engenders, and at the same time the reader's "subjectivity" is discovered to function something like a text, that is, something whose conscious awareness of meaning and desire is only one aspect of a complex unconscious signifying system which determines consciousness as one of its several effects. (16)

The deconstructive tradition questions the boundaries between subject and object, or between reader and cipher. These boundary lines make any act of interpretation an exercise in "différance." Allegory, however, functions to defamiliarize such circuits of "meaning-making."

By this logic, Melville's world is a world of allegory; it is not a world of Coleridgean symbol in which "it would be possible for the image to coincide with the substance, since the substance and its representation do not differ in their being but only

in their extension: they are part and whole of the same set of categories” (de Man 207). De Manian allegory deconstructs the false logics of the Romantic symbol. In the de Manian model, symbol does not give us a privileged access to the concept represented. The representation of the White Whale de-materializes its substance. Is the White Whale substantial, or “is it that by its indefiniteness it shadows forth¹⁸ the heartless voids and immensities of the universe, and thus stabs us from behind with the thought of annihilation, when beholding the white depths of the milky way?” (196) This is a kind of hypotyposis¹⁹ which signifies emptiness. In his reading of Kant, de Man posits that, “Here, the comparison to make with Kant is with Kant's statements about figuration, about *what he calls* hypotyposis, which is the difficulty of rendering, by means of sensory elements, purely intellectual concepts” (*Aesthetic Ideology* 153).

The whiteness of the whale – an allegory of race, indefiniteness, blankness, and deferred presence – refers to the multiperspectivism of this image. Following de Man’s analysis,

the relationship between signs necessarily contains a constitutive temporal element; it remains necessary, if there is to be allegory, that the allegorical sign refer to another sign that precedes it. The meaning constituted by allegorical sign can then consist only in the *repetition* (in the Kierkegaardian sense of the term) of a previous sign with which it can never coincide, since it is of the essence of this previous sign to be pure anteriority. (207)

¹⁸ Melville “lifted” this verb – which connotes allegory – from Hawthorne’s *Scarlet Letter*

¹⁹ Hypotyposis, a synonym for enargia, is used to sketch or describe an action, a person, a situation, and so on, thus creating the illusion of reality

Such anteriority refers to the whale's function to illustrate a philosophical concept or a pure abstraction. Following the Derridean logic in "White Mythology,"²⁰ thinking about metaphor takes place as a thinking through metaphor. This shows the importance of detours as well as the material construction of metaphor and allegory. To assign a meaning to a signifier is to kill its ability to signify. Signifying, according to the deconstructive school, is the endless play of language. In "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," Derrida writes,

Everything became discourse . . . everything became a system where the central signified, the original or transcendental signified, is never absolutely present outside a system of differences. The absence of the transcendental signified extends the domain and the interplay of signification *ad infinitum*. (249)

The Whale is a signifier that refers back to other signifiers. In fact it is an elusive signifier that denies any definition, it is "the one creature in the world which must remain unpainted to the last" (*Moby-Dick* 262). The "White Whale" is made up of two signifiers, but their combination produces a literary image that, I would argue, desires symbolic transcendence but collapses into allegory. Like the Orientals, it is described in a grotesque defamiliarized way. The White Whale's "nameless horror" (189) evokes the danger the Western traveler might face in the seemingly peaceful Polynesian islands or in the barren Middle East. Like the Orient, the White Whale is associated with the sublime, "for all these accumulated associations, with whatever is sweet, and honorable, and sublime, there yet lurks an *elusive something* in the innermost idea of this hue, which

²⁰ See Derrida's "White Mythology." *Margins of Philosophy*. Chicago: Uof Chicago P, 1982.

strikes more of panic to the soul than that redness which affrights in blood" (*Moby-Dick* 190). This "elusive something" is in fact the elusive signified that denies any categorization. The Orient, much like the White Whale, is a false transcendental signifier that hides a void – which is to say, the impossibility of interpretation.

Interpreting the whale becomes as difficult as hunting it down. In the "Cetology" chapter, Ishmael indicates that "utter confusion exists among the historians of this animal" and, moreover, that this confusion expresses the impossibility of pursuing "our research in the unfathomable waters." Such impossibility evokes the "impenetrable veil covering our knowledge of the cetacea" (137). The veil²¹ makes hermeneutics impossible, promotes a theory of indeterminacy, and implicitly defers "unveiling" as an apocalyptic act. The White Whale functions as "an 'image' of the fictive transcendence of language in the sublime, that is, of language understood as pictographically inscribed" (Irwin 291). The marks inscribed on the whale's face resemble the Oriental hieroglyphics,

these are hieroglyphical; that is, if you call those mysterious cyphers on the walls of pyramids hieroglyphics, then that is the proper word to use in the present connexion. By my retentive memory of the hieroglyphics upon one Sperm Whale in particular, I was much struck with a plate representing the old Indian characters chiselled on the famous hieroglyphic palisades on the banks of the Upper Mississippi. Like those

²¹ The "veil" is another image that is derived from Hawthorne specifically, and from Romanticism generally.

mystic rocks, too, the mystic-marked whale remains undecipherable.

(298-9)

It is this desire to “naturalize” the “Oriental” in the American landscape – really, the desire to domesticate the “Other” – that lurks at the very back of Melville’s polyphonic discourse. The “Other” broadens culturally and temporally in this passage.

The whale is transcendent signifier, a transcendent illegibility that defies the reader’s intention to comprehend it. It therefore “cannot be read, because it refers to nothing other than itself” (Dimock 113).

Ishmael cannot define the nature of the whale’s spout. He states that “owing to the mystery of the spout – whether it be water or whether it be vapor – no absolute certainty can as yet be arrived at on his head” (357). The indeterminacy and unreadability of whale’s spout is explained by the fact that “among whalers, the spout is deemed poisonous; they try to evade it. Another thing; I have heard it said, and I do not much doubt it, that if the jet is fairly spouted into your eyes, it will blind you” (358). Irwin argues that,

Melville’s linking the uncertainty of human verification and the indefiniteness of the veil of mist to the indeterminacy of self-reflective thought as it attempts to deal with the notion of eternity, with the survival of the self as a linguistic (that is, repetitive) entity in a condition of atemporality. (291-2)

In *Moby-Dick* we see the death of the imperial selves – Ahab and his crew.

Like the whale, the doubloon is another allegorical sign. This allegory does not attempt to avoid, deny, or transcend the inescapable fact of temporality. In this world of allegory, the meaning constituted by the allegorical sign refers to the meaning of a previous sign. The doubloon, like the White Whale, expresses the inscrutability of the figure of the other. The act of reading the doubloon is posited as an impossible act. In *Moby-Dick* Ahab “seemed to be newly attracted by the strange figures and inscriptions stamped on [the doubloon], as though now for the first time beginning to interpret for himself in some monomaniac way whatever significance might lurk in them” (409). Reading these inscriptions is prone to error because writing becomes inscription.

The Orient, like the doubloon and the White Whale, is inscribed in the Western text – uncannily inscribed as mere, strange figures. Inscriptions and figures – some of the basic characteristics of language itself – express the stark separation between the reader and the text. As Irwin argues, “an undecipherable inscription is disturbing precisely because here writing seems to commemorate its own inability by itself to transmit memory, its status not as a substitute for memory but simply as an aid to memory” (179). Reading becomes potent when linked to, but impossible in the absence of, memory. The importance of memory accentuates the need to contextualize our reading of the Orient. To contextualize reading is to get rid of stereotypical judgmental reading. This kind of reading leads to hermeneutic impasse since “the models westerners have of Polynesia can never really fit local metaphors” (Calder 29). As a text, the Orient makes the task of reading very difficult and ambiguous. Such difficulty and ambiguity are inherent in the notion of the Otherness of the Orient. In *Typee*, Tom puzzles over the meaning of the

terms “tattoo” and “taboo,” showing his refusal to undergo the experience of being tattooed. In *Moby-Dick*, likewise, Queequeg’s tattoos are stupefying to Ishmael. First, Ishmael thinks that Queequeg must be a white man who had been forcibly tattooed. Then, he realizes that he can be but a “savage.” Ishmael, as a result, shows his fear – a fear that resembles Tom’s in *Typee* and Clarel’s in *Clarel* – of mingling with the Indian native.

The Western reader is caught within the essentialism and binarism of the reading self and the written Other. This duality characterizes Melville’s works. In *Moby-Dick*, for example, Captain Peleg expresses the Western attitude that frames non-Westerners as unable to write and read. He says, “I guess, Quohog there don’t know how to write, does he? I say, Quohog, blast ye! Dost thou sign thy name or make thy mark?” (101) Writing back to the imperialist captain, Queequeg “looked no ways abashed; but taking the offered pen, copied upon the paper, in the proper place, an exact counterpart of a queer round figure which was tattooed upon his arm.” (101) Queequeg deconstructs Peleg’s stereotypical attitude and proves the ability to write and to puzzle the reader.

The round figure marked on his arm hides meaning and invites the reader to puzzle it out. Queequeg’s writing is the zero degree of writing in which communication is freed from all bonds and in which language is identical with nature itself. The round circle – an empty signifier – is the very sign Queequeg writes properly on the piece of paper offered to him. He seems to exist in the paradisaal realm where sign and object are unified and where the body refuses to be inserted into language. The circle Queequeg copies upon the paper stands for his Otherness and his refusal to be incorporated in the language of the Westerner. In *Moby-Dick*, Queequeg’s hieroglyphically inscribed coffin

saves Ishmael, “allowing him to write the narrative in which he will survive beyond his own death” (Irwin 347). Figuring out the meaning of Queequeg’s inscriptions, however, starts with giving those inscriptions a figure, by which one is able to trace back its origin.

The deconstruction of binaries, which brings what is low high, is at the center of Melville’s narratives. For example, *Typee* reflects Tom’s anxiety and fear of tattooing. This fear and anxiety express Melville’s anxiety about writing. John Evelev reads tattooing as a form of writing, “Tattooing is a form of writing which seems a threat of violence, a violence to identity” (20). Tom’s fear of being tattooed stands for his fear of being written upon and by the Other. In fact, Tom’s anxiety about being contaminated by the Polynesians alludes to Melville’s own anxiety about writing. Such anxiety expresses Melville’s aspiration to fame. If Tom – the writer – is tattooed, he loses the authority of writing and becomes an extension of the writing of the Polynesians. To argue with Evelev that tattooing is a kind of writing leads us to think of Melville’s own writing as a kind of tattooing marked upon his readers.

Melville’s narratives constitute his allegorical disavowal of the American ideals and Western Enlightenment. The White Whale becomes the model for Melville’s projected rejection of these illusory ideals. However, Melville’s narratives can be read as a reflection of his ambivalent attitude toward American and Western imperialism. As I have shown in the previous chapter, this ambivalence, however, is laced with an imperialist and colonialist ambition. Nonetheless, one can argue that Melville embraces the Enlightenment ideologies. To predicate one’s claim on the assumption that

nineteenth-century writers are the logical product of the Enlightenment ideologies, one fails to see Melville's intentionality and his oscillation between realism and symbolism.

Conclusion

In this work, I chose to focus on discourses of nationalism, Orientalism, and post-colonialism and see the ways in which these discourses converge and diverge. The main reason for this choice is to re-think Said's theory of Orientalism in light of nineteenth-century American literature. The choice of Melville as a case in point was to limit a big area of research to a particular American nineteenth-century literature by reading Melville's texts through Said's works. Such reading discusses Melville's works through their historical, cultural, and ideological contexts. My study has engendered approaches that try to contextualize and study Melville's works by linking them to the ideological and cultural discourses of nationalism, race, sexuality, and colonialism.

Establishing the link between these discourses, my study has attempted at de-theorizing some of Said's ideas mainly his "Orientalism" and "secularism" in the context of nineteenth-century American literature. This, however, does not mean that we can de-theorize "Orientalism" *only* in the context of nineteenth-century America. My point was to show that Said's monolithic theory loses its theoretical persuasiveness when applied to some literary texts. It fails to see the historical and ideological contexts in which Melville's texts are produced.

Upon completion of this work, I realized that the oscillation between literary and theoretical texts is one of the questions I would like to mention. Though such reading results in many important comparisons and conclusions, it lacks focus and precision. The second question I would like to mention is the question of historical framework. I chose

to limit my study to three texts that spare *antebellum* and *postbellum*. This issue may give the wrong impression that “Orientalism” does not exist in other literatures and centuries. The continuation of this study to comprise other texts, genres, and centuries will be the focus of my research in the future.

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