

of clearing themselves of the accusation of literary tumescence in their treatment of their subjects.

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Melville's *Clarel*

To the Editor:

Stanley Brodwin's article on *Clarel* (May 1971) contained a number of inaccuracies and distortions. Without intending to engage in interpretive dispute I would like to cite the following:

1. "Part iv concludes the pilgrimage at Bethlehem for Easter with a symbolic ending on Ash Wednesday" (p. 376).¹

This sentence with its syntactic obscurity perhaps contains a typographical error. But if it really means to say that the pilgrimage ends at Bethlehem on Easter it is incorrect. The pilgrimage ends at Jerusalem, where it began. *Clarel* remains in Jerusalem from Ash Wednesday to Whitsuntide, when the poem ends.

2. "Clarel leaves on his pilgrimage after the murder of Nathan and Agar by marauding Arabs . . . At the end of the poem *Clarel* returns to find Ruth dead of grief" (p. 376).

Only Nathan, not Agar, was killed before *Clarel's* departure. Upon returning to Jerusalem *Clarel* comes upon the funeral party of Agar and Ruth. Whether they died from fever or grief is unspecified: "'How happened it? speak! The fever—grief: / 'Twere hard to tell'" (iv.xxx.94–95). We learn, however, that "The life was reft / Sudden from Ruth" and that Agar died "out of her mind" (iv.xxx.106–08), which suggests that Ruth may have succumbed to fever and Agar to a combination of fever and grief.

3. "This broad summary of the plot reveals Melville's tragic vision. On one level, the brutal and irrational passions of men destroy the only possible redemptive value men have in their relations with one another: love" (p. 376).

This statement rests upon the unjustified assumption that Ruth died of grief for her murdered parents. But only one of her parents, Nathan, was murdered, and Ruth may actually have died of fever. It is not really clear, then, that the destruction of love is due primarily to "the brutal and irrational passions" of the marauding Arabs.

4. "The contrast between the genuine star of salvation and modern man's Heaven of 'feeble' stars provides a structural trope that also points to the characters of the 'starry watchers' who accompany *Clarel*, particularly Derwent, Rolfe, and Vine" (p. 377).

Here, as more explicitly elsewhere, Mr. Brodwin treats Derwent, Rolfe, and Vine as modern Magi and thus as "starry watchers," i.e., watchers of the star of

Bethlehem. But in the passage cited, "starry watchers" refers not to the Magi but to the angels in Christ's tomb, "when they kept / Vigil at napkin feet and head / Of Him their Lord" (i.v.35–37). The angels in their dazzling brilliance are likened to stars; they are "starry watchers" in a completely different sense from the Magi.

5. "Melville proleptically structures this theme by introducing the 'Star of Wormwood,' an apocalyptic image of the destruction that descends on man after the opening of the seventh seal . . . The doom is fulfilled when the fanatical Nehemiah sleepwalks to his death into the Dead or 'bitter' Sea" (pp. 377–78).

This passage contains both a misquote and a gross distortion. In Revelations viii.10–11 the phrase is "the name of the star is called Wormwood," not "Star of Wormwood." In *Clarel* the relevant passage is as follows: "It is the star / Called Wormwood. Some hearts die in thrall / Of waters which yon star makes gall" (ii.xxvi.22–24). To apply these lines, spoken by the misanthrope Mortmain, to Nehemiah is misleading in the extreme. Nehemiah, having tasted the waters of the Dead Sea and found them sweet, is specifically exempted from thralldom to the bitter waters and their star. His death, though not without ambiguity, is attended by a beatific vision of the New Jerusalem.

6. "The devil, however, has told the Monk that death is 'the cunningest mystery: / *Alive thou'lt not know death; and, dead, / Death thou'lt not know*'" (p. 378). [My italics.]

This is another misquote. It should be ". . . *Alive thou knowst not death,*" etc. (ii.xviii.122–24).

7. "Through the Devil, Melville is meditating on the fact that spiritual uncertainty must always be part of man's predicament" (p. 378).

It is not a fact but an inference, and there are characters in *Clarel*, e.g., Nehemiah, Derwent, the young priest at Bethlehem, for whom it is not even that.

8. "Either man must have absolute knowledge, or life loses its meaning and death becomes the only reality, yielding at least the grace of annihilation. This position permeates the Book of Ecclesiastes—one of Melville's favorites—and is Camus's existential starting point in *The Myth of Sisyphus*" (p. 379).

In a footnote Mr. Brodwin reinforces the reference to Camus by quoting from *The Myth of Sisyphus*: "There is but one truly serious philosophical problem and that is suicide." Granted that there are affinities between the moods of Ecclesiastes, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, and particular passages in *Clarel*, to equate them in this way without elaboration amounts to little more than name-dropping. There are, furthermore, at least two differences worth noting between them: (1) neither in Ecclesiastes nor in *Clarel* is the desirability of suicide overtly debated, as in Camus, and (2) in both Ecclesiastes and *Clarel* there is constant reference to God,

either as an assumed power (Ecclesiastes) or as a problematic possibility (*Clarel*).

9. "Yet, always in the back of his mind . . . is the memory of his illegitimacy. In dreams he rails against his mother as a 'Fair Circe—Goddess of the sty!'" (p. 381).

Again, a misreading. The relevant passage runs as follows: "His moods he had, mad fitful ones, / Prolonged or brief, outbursts or moans; / And at such times would hiss or cry: 'Fair Circe—goddess of the sty!'" (II.iv.140–43). Moods are not dreams, and while "Circe" may refer to Mortmain's mother, the reference is not self-evident, as Mr. Brodwin seems to assume.

10. "Part Indian and part white, a victim of miscegenation in a racist society, Ungar sees not hybrid strength in his origins, but the infection of his very authenticity as a human being" (p. 381).

The implication that Ungar has been psychologically damaged by racial prejudice is a distortion. An ex-officer of the Southern Confederacy, embittered by the War and Reconstruction, Ungar chooses self-exile rather than participation in a dishonored, fallen democracy. As an apparently respected, aristocratic descendant of a Maryland Cavalier he is not a "victim of miscegenation in a racist society" in the stock sense which that phrase implies today.

11. "He [Rolfe] shocks Clarel when he tells him—approvingly—that the fire lit by the priest . . . , representing the manifestation of God and the resurrection at Easter (the Easter fire), is a defensible act on the part of the Church to keep the people believers (III.xvi). One must keep up a front, as it were, like 'The king a corpse in armour led / On a live horse' (III.xvi.211–12). Religion will always survive, then, on 'this star of tragedies, this orb of sins' (I.xxxi.183)" (p. 383).

Rolfe does not, as this passage implies, defend the priest's act; he calls it "cheatery" (III.xvi.110). One might note also the confused syntax of Mr. Brodwin's sentence, which calls the fire an act. As to the image of keeping up a front, this occurs some eighty lines after the discussion of the Easter fire and has reference to Derwent and other reconcilers of Faith and Science: "Astute ones be though, staid and grave / Who in the wars of Faith and Science / Remind one of old tactics brave— / Imposing front of false defiance: / The King a corpse in armor led / On a live horse" (III.xvi.207–12). Whether Clarel is shocked by Rolfe's musing admiration or by the image of Christ as a dead king riding on the live horse of the church is a matter of interpretation. But Mr. Brodwin's barely perceptible shift from Book III to Book I in support of his notion of Rolfe as a hypocrite is methodologically questionable.

12. "The merchant . . . takes him [Derwent] . . . higher and higher to where he can see at last, far below, a great bird carrying Mortmain's skullcap into the

ravine" (p. 383).

Another misreading. Actually Derwent sees only the bird above. Below, falling into the ravine, he sees the skullcap.

Most of the above citations involve either inaccurate reading, inaccurate writing, or both. I have not bothered to point out inaccuracies of spelling, capitalization, and punctuation in quoted material from *Clarel*, several of which may be observed in the passages cited above. In the face of such carelessness Mr. Brodwin's conclusions regarding Clarel as an existential "gospel" seem quite irrelevant. Melville, as well as the readership of *PMLA*, deserves better than this.

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¹ All citations from *Clarel* are from the same edition used by Mr. Brodwin, that edited by Walter Bezanson for Hendricks House.

A reply by Professor Brodwin will appear in the March *PMLA*.

The Structure of *Wuthering Heights*

To the Editor:

David Sonstroem, in making his point that Emily Bronte is not endorsing the viewpoint of Heathcliff and Catherine, or of any of her other characters,¹ might well have made greater use of the structure of the novel as supporting evidence, for the structure clearly shows the failure of the Heathcliff-Catherine relationship to dominate the action.

My point stems from what I believe to be a mistaken view of the structure of *Wuthering Heights* on the part of Dorothy Van Ghent.² Mrs. Van Ghent logically divides the action of the novel into two parts, each part associated with one of the generations (p. 155). The first action, however, she sees as centered on the romance of Catherine and Heathcliff, with the second involving "two sets of young lives and two small 'romances,'" the Cathy-Linton and the Cathy-Hareton relationships (pp. 155–56).

Although Mrs. Van Ghent rightly sees the figure of Heathcliff and the narrative voices of Lockwood and Nelly Dean as binding the two actions into a neatly-structured whole, her diagram of the novel (p. 156) is obviously out of balance. It reflects her comments concerning the Catherine-Heathcliff romance in the first generation and the two "small" romances of the second. What is clearly missing is the Catherine-Edgar relationship of the first generation, a factor which balances the actions of the novel and Mrs. Van Ghent's diagram as well.

If the Van Ghent structural diagram were correct, the implication would be that the Catherine-Heathcliff relationship is structurally, and therefore probably