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BEYOND THE WALLS–POTENTIALITY ABORTED. THE POLITICS OF INTERSUBJECTIVE UNIVERSALISM IN HERMAN MELVILLE'S *CLAREL*

LAURA LÓPEZ PEÑA
laura301185@gmail.com

In 1876, U.S. writer Herman Melville published a volume of poetry named *Clarel: A Poem and Pilgrimage in the Holy Land*, which, later in life, he would describe to his English admirer James Billson as "a metrical affair, a pilgrimage or what not, of several thousand lines, eminently adapted for unpopularity" (10 October 1884, *Correspondence* 483). Based on his trip to Palestine in January 1857, *Clarel* narrates the encounter of multiple characters –representative of different worldviews, vital energies, and ways of facing, enjoying, suffering, or enduring existence– in a context that human beings have, for centuries, constructed as a scenario of projected hopes and even foundational myths. *Clarel* takes its name from the main character, a young American student recently arrived in Jerusalem victim of his own theological, existential, crises. Both narrator and readers accompany the young Clarel and his fellow pilgrims/travelers in a journey through thorny questions and sandy deserts, which takes Clarel on a gradual process of unlearning. This trip brings the student and his companions out of the walled Jerusalem in order to explore the surrounding spaces of the Brook of Kedron, Jericho, the Jordan river, the Dead Sea, the monastery of Mar Saba, and Bethlehem. The pleasures of *Clarel* are many, yet also its pains as a text which incorporates readers into a severe analysis of the human condition in a Holy Land context carrying both local and global resonances.

This study regards *Clarel* as a text that gives continuity to Melville's recurrent exploration of the dangers, beauties, (im)possibilities, and interconnection of intersubjectivity, universalism, and democracy. This exploration was always torn between the democratizing potentiality the author located in interpersonal relationships and the bleak realization that human beings –in the hearts of whom "Evil and good […] braided play / Into one cord" (*Clarel* 4.4.27-28)– might never materialize such democratic project. The dissertation defends that *Clarel: A Poem and Pilgrimage in the Holy Land* is a universalist poem which analyzes the necessity, ethical potentiality, political possibilities, and challenges of intersubjectivity for the creation of more democratic human relationships beyond the inter-human walls posed by communitarianisms of different kinds (e.g. nation-state, ethnicity, religion, culture, gender, sexual identity), which human beings have interiorized as "naturally" existing between them, as well as by individualistic –what Melville termed "one-sided"– attitudes and monologic thinking parameters. Focusing on *Clarel* as continuing the project of Melville's other works, my argument is that *Clarel* conceives what the dissertation names *intersubjective universalism* as an

ethicopolitical process subjected to the potentialities and limitations of those who may either develop or neutralize it: human beings conditioned by their fears and egocentric behaviors. It is in intersubjectivity –the space of "shared understanding" (*SAGE*468) or of "meaning between subjects" (*Blackwell*161)– that the author locates the possibility of universalism, anticipating that, as Hannah Arendt remarked in 1955, "the world […] can form only in the interspaces between men in all their variety" (30-31). Melville's conception of universalism moves beyond cosmopolitan and internationalist claims for affiliation with "the world", since those claims continue, paradoxically, to be deeply rooted in nationalist (therefore community-based) parameters and protective of national interests. On the other hand, Melville also rejects projects that neutralize human plurality and sacrifice the singularity of the individual within a collective "Unum" in an attempt to both empower and universalize a specific particular over others. Sensitive and respectful of the plurality of humanity, and of the fact that plurality is itself the trait defining humanity, Melville claimed universalism as a "site of multiple significations" (Zerilli 8). He analyzed in *Clarel* the "intervening hedge[s]"which prevent individuals from realizing the "wide landscape beyond" their particular mindsets and personal adherences ("Hawthorne and His Mosses" 48), and which often lead them to violent practices and neutralizing, even dehumanizing, categorizations of "the human". Melville's conception of universalism reinforces the humbling exercise of realizing the impossibility of complete "Truths", as it points to an understanding of the partiality of any interpretation, as well as the authoritarianism, narrowness, and fallacy of clinging to monolithic conceptions of meaning. In consequence, the universalism articulated in Melville's texts stems from a dynamic exercise in plural thinking. By this process, the author places different conceptions of the world in an equivalential relationship, yet, at the same time, these worldviews are laid open, tested, critically assessed, and, sometimes, as with those views on the world that violate the plurality of humanity by upholding non-democratic attitudes and endorsing supremacist assumptions, eventually rejected.

This study combines textual analysis with a more theoretical point of view based on philosophical, sociological, and political thinking. It is divided into two chapters. Chapter 1 provides a defense and articulation of the intersubjective universalism I conceive in Melville's *Clarel* from a theoretical perspective, as an ethicopolitical project with the potentiality of encouraging the development of more democratic interpersonal relationships beyond the rigid boundaries imposed by egocentric behaviors and one-sided thinking parameters. This articulation results from the theorizations of twentieth- and twenty-first-century thinkers such as Hannah Arendt, Étienne Balibar, Zygmunt Bauman, Martin Buber, Judith Butler, Jacques Derrida, Ernesto Laclau, Emmanuel Levinas, Jean-Luc Nancy, Martha Nussbaum, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Linda Zerilli, among others, whose analyses on

community, intersubjectivity, interpersonal relationships, global ethics, and universalism, from the perspectives of philosophy, ethics, sociology, and politics, are enabling to my own work. The chapter opens with a defense of the connection between universalism and democracy, which starts with the recognition that universalism has historically earned a negative reputation as a patronizing and totalizing system that neutralized the plurality of humanity by defending a monolithic, hierarchy-reinforcing One, and consolidated the supremacy of a universalized particular that was white, Eurocentric, Western, Christian, Enlightened (literate, rational), heteronormative, male. This universalized particular has traditionally been used to legitimize colonialist, even genocidal, practices, racial superiority, social and political discrimination, and authoritarian regimes. The opening sections explore how this "universal" has been questioned: they analyze the emergence of identity politics movements, their undeniable efficiency in political activism, yet also their problems in promoting a political reality of scattered particular struggles often absorbing individual complexities within the "common identity" of the group. Hence, using the possibilities offered by poststructuralist theory, the chapter moves on to a rethinking of identity and collectivity, problematizing traditional notions of "community" or "culture", and articulating a plural and decentralized conception of being and interpersonal relationships beyond the limiting parameters posed by communitarianism, including more or less "global" movements and worldviews such as multiculturalism, cosmopolitanism, or internationalism, which despite defending global alliances continue to be deeply rooted in identities and communities such as "race" and the nation-state.

Chapter 2 exposes the thesis's interpretation of *Clarel: A Poem and Pilgrimage in the Holy Land* as a poem –representative of Herman Melville's political literary project– that analyzes the potentiality yet eventual impossibility of universalism. The chapter argues that *Clarel* defends the necessity and potentiality of intersubjective universalism, at the same time that it analyzes how this potentiality is destroyed by characters that cling to egocentric behaviors, (self-)destructive manias, exclusive communitarian forms of conceiving existence, and one-sided thinking. The chapter claims that, in *Clarel*, Melville locates the possibility of universalism –therefore, of democratic human relationships– in intersubjectivity, which he both conceives and constructs as a dynamic collaborative dialogic process developing plural thinking. Chapter Two opens with an analysis of the specific context(s) and material conditions in which the poem came into being, as well as of the influence of Melville's actual 1857 trip to Palestine and travel journal on the actual writing of *Clarel*. The initial sections also expose my hypotheses on the origins and composition process of *Clarel*, claiming the importance of Melville's eldest son Malcolm to the conception of the poem-pilgrimage, as well as of other social and political events which may have shaped the writing of the

poem at its different stages. The chapter continues to investigate *Clarel*'s politics, examining the textual mechanisms the poem uses to problematize monologic thinking and expose the multiple walls constraining the development of intersubjectivity. Moreover, chapter 2 places *Clarel* alongside Melville's volume of poetry on the U.S. Civil War *Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War* (1866), defending the relevance of the latter for a better understanding of the discouraged tone and fierce critique of American democracy that *Clarel* voices. This severe evaluation of U.S. democracy –the violent animosities and inter-human hatreds of postbellum America– resonates in the more global context the Holy Land in the poem is made to represent, and within *Clarel*'s analysis of revolutionary politics and progress. Thus, Jerusalem, in particular, and Palestine, in general, constitute scenarios for analyzing the segregation imposed by communitarianism and egocentric mindsets, as well as for investigating the necessity yet difficulty of transcending such inter-human separation. Approaching Melville's textual construction in *Clarel* of the plural thinking most characters are incapable of, the last section of chapter 2 studies the difficulties and challenges of intersubjective universalism, at the same time that it also underlines how its rejection perpetuates inter-personal walls and one-sided –often violent and (self-)destructive– worldviews intolerant of human plurality.

Clarel defends the potentiality, and the necessity, of intersubjective universalism for the development of democratic human relationships, and, consequently, democratic societies, at the same time that it painfully laments how such potentiality is neutralized by characters who cannot transcend their one-sided worldviews. The poem analyzes the complexity of human relationships, and exposes the egocentrism shindering the possibilities of plural thinking and universalism. Despite this tragic realization –or maybe because of it– *Clarel* is an important work to unfold the political project in Melville's oeuvre.