

ALLEGORY AND NOMINAL IDENTITY IN MELVILLE'S POEM "CLAREL"

Of the thirty charactonyms that appear in Melville's Clarel, it can be said that almost all of them would require a literary onomastic analysis.

Indeed, as one may expect from a Christian romantic allegory, all names are symbolic of an intricate pattern of transcendental realities. For proof: Nathan and Nehemiah, pointing to prophets of the Old Testament; or Vine, referring to Christ in John 15, 5: "I am the vine and ye are the branches"; Celio, meaning "skies", "the heavens", and Clarel himself standing for "clarity", not without some touch of dramatic irony.

We shall presently focus our attention on one mysterious character, Rolfe. But first, let us briefly recall what this epic poem is about. Walking in Melville's footsteps, a young American pastor-to-be goes to the Holy Land in the year 1857. There, the confrontation between the reality of God's "City upon a Hill", Jerusalem (that is America's allegoric analogy), and its previously dreamed-of romance will turn his early misgivings into full-fledged doubts. So vast is the abyss between the fancied quality of the sacred and its natural perceived plight, that it opens onto and into the pit of damnation. In short, the discrepancy between the authorized dogmatic image of the supernatural ideal and the profanity of its appearance submits the hero, or anti-hero, to a trial of faith. As Clarel roams about the desert of Palestine, which is an inner hell, like Milton's Satan's, rather

than a physical one, he desperately calls for a guide: Dante in quest of his Virgil.

It is here and then that Rolfe comes into the picture as one possible image of salvation. Now the question is: why did Melville choose this name, how did he come across it? In other words, is the name purely fanciful or does it have natural historical roots?

A John Rolfe is aboard the Sea Venture, one of nine ships to sail, in 1609, from Plymouth, England, bound for Virginia. Close to the Bermudas, the Sea Venture is lashed by a dreadful storm, the same that inspired The Tempest.¹ After having been stranded for the next eight months, Rolfe sets foot in Virginia where he later becomes a prominent militant Protestant leader. First, because he will introduce the marketable exploitation of tobacco, thus carrying the colony to economic preservation and salvation; second, because he will be the first man to marry an Indian.

In 1613, the British kidnap Powhatan's favorite daughter, Pocahontas, and hold her hostage for the security of the English prisoners and property that the chief of the Indian confederacy has seized.² Pocahontas soon wins the love of John Rolfe.³ Even if the story sounds like choice material for an American T.V. soap-opera, the Pilgrim Fathers viewed things less profanely. For Rolfe would not give way to his sentiments without a thorough examination of conscience.⁴ It had to be known whether they were manifestations of the appetites of a fallen nature, or the promptings of God's Spirit.

Love for love's sake is lust. Love that is not of the devil but of God must serve some practical transcendent purpose and thus be redeemed from its animal nature. Rolfe is eventually convinced that his feelings are God's Word to promote the divine commonwealth. By marrying Pocahontas, he redeems her from idolatry and brings a benighted soul to the true fold of Jesus Christ, as he transfigures her pagan paradise (by appropriation) into the sacred western one of Paradise Regained. In this light, his wedlock is no natural event, for it is part and parcel of the woven fabric of God's almighty Providence. Rolfe is the father (even antecedent to the Mayflower Pilgrims, who are commonly considered to be founders of America) who gave a concrete visage to the not-so-new World's myth of innocence regained. Rolfe is a mythical god, one that initiates the American cosmology by taking upon his shoulders the sins of an archetypal fallen creature. He is, so to speak, an avatar of Christ made Indian.

That Melville knew this story, which had entered American mythology and folklore early, is manifested by his very choice of the name, and by these lines:

Yes, strange that Pocahontas-wedding
Of contraries in old belief—
Hellenic cheer, Hebraic grief.⁵

The last verse refers to paganism and the pastoral, and to the Judaic sources of Calvinism. Clarel's Rolfe is also "An Adam in his natural ways" (III.xvi. 184), in which nature must similarly be understood, not as instinctive, but as the victorious outcome of the self's

combat between worldly pagan profane~~ness~~ and the sacredness of the Christian conscience. The adamic dialectic gains the consciousness of self "Poised at self-center and mature" (IV.iii.127). Such mastery cannot be achieved once and for all, to be used subsequently as a paradigm for behaviour, as the case had been with the primitive Rolfe. For in the time of this primal father, the cosmos was theocratic, with definite beliefs unfailingly leading, if faithfully observed, to efficient salvation. Since then Time, the Destroyer, has brought the wheel of fate full circle, and history revealed the scientific concept of evolution. The latter undermined, in one way or another, the whole of the Christian empire. If the creation is the product of matter's own development, where does God stand? The paradox of chaos as creator cannot be sustained without dragging in its wake all fundamental structures: economy falls under Mammon's lawless law of the fittest, and democracy into mobocracy.

Rolfe acknowledges the apocalyptic plight of his age, though he will not surrender to its downright nihilism. For even if God is dead, man is not:

Yea, long as children feel affright
 In darkness, man shall fear a God;
 And long as daisies yield delight
 Shall see His footprints in the sod.
 (I.xxxi.191-94)

Rolfe preserves the idea of God thanks to a re-definition of the creator in anthropomorphic terms: man becomes God's fountainhead—and man his own, through the self. Immersed as man is into the

immanent, he turns into the mythic father of the transcendent. To do so, he needs a heart as deep and vast as the vast deep itself, and a marble brow" as ". . . Sunium by her fane is crowned." (I.xxxi.12.) Rolfe is Plato turned mariner—that is, a Poet, a Genius. This is why Melville compares him to the Indian Rama, the incarnation of Vishnu, who, to preserve the world from constant destruction by existence, submitted at all times the divine in him to the animal, without departing himself from his divinity:

That Rama whom the Indian sung--
 A god he was, but knew it not;
 Hence vainly puzzled at the wrong
 Misplacing him in human lot.
 Curtailment of his right he bare
 Rather than wrangle; but no less
 Was taunted for his tameness there.
 A fugitive without redress,
 He never the Holy Spirit grieved,
 Nor the divine in him bereaved,
 Though what that was he might not guess.
 (I.xxxii.1-11.)

In "this orb of sins" (I.xxxi.183) that history has made the earth to be, Christ is no more than a "foundered Star" (IV.i.18), but a star all the same, that man must rescue from total wreck. Such is the ultimate definition of faith capable of keeping man afloat.

The difference between the Old Rolfe and the New Rolfe is a matter of season: the former belonged to a spring-like era, the latter to a wintry one. In other words, America has come of age, if not of old age. The means to grace have become grimmer and more complex. But both characters are united by their vernal ideal of the Christian pastoral. What can be read, through a literary onomastic analysis of Rolfe's name, is Melville's statement about the

fateful destiny of America as a myth of innocence. Clarel's Rolfe is the Victorian New Adam, on the verge of being a modern Christian existentialist one—one who can be only through the birth-pangs of a constantly re-enacted tragic passion. It is in this light that we must perceive Melville's wit in his two-fold usage of the word "Indian". From Western India to Eastern India, there is a progress, or progressive return (that might be a regressive progress) in mythical patterns: from the once-born to the twice-born to the many-fold-born.

Should the sacred duty of being the New tragic Adam appear as too burdensome for any cross, even for such a mythic individual as the Poet-Genius, it might suffice to create the myth of a mythic Man-Father:

Was ever earth-born wight like this?
Ay--in the verse, may be, he is.
(T. xccii. 55-56.)

Prometheus might never have existed, but the myth of Prometheus has proved a perennial regulative idea of civilization. Why shouldn't Melville be allowed to enjoy the powers of his poetic genius to dream the dream that indeed the Poet can be the lawgiver of the universe? And shouldn't the world be enough of a fool to be wise and acknowledge him as its sole and only legal legislator . . . it shall fare all the worse because of its blindness and rue the day when he was banned from its midst. As some still declare, "Imagination must take over! NOW!"

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¹William Shakespeare, The Tempest, ed. Frank Kermode (1954; rpt. London: Methuen and Co., 1958), pp. xxvi-xxxiv.

²John Melville Jennings, "A Biographical Sketch," in John Rolfe, A True Relation of the State of Virginia Lefte by Sir Thomas Dale Knight in May Last 1616 (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1971), p. xix.

³Gary B. Nash, "The Image of the Indian in the Southern Colonial Mind," The William and Mary Quarterly, Third Series, Vol. xxix, No. 2 (April 1972), p. 215.

⁴Perr Miller, "The Religious Impulse in the Founding of Virginia: Religion and Society in the Early Literature," The William and Mary Quarterly, Third Series, Vol. v, No. 4 (October 1948), pp. 500-03.

⁵Herman Melville, Clarel: A Poem and Pilgrimage in the Holy Land, ed. Walter E. Bezanson (New York: Hendricks House, 1960), I.xxviii.32-34.