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Creative Energy in Clarel

Hélène Guillaume

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Creative Energy in *Clarel*

Clarel is ostensibly the story of a quest for the truth about God; less ostensibly it is a manifestation of, and tribute to, human creative energy. The poem’s vast landscape of discourse and ideas – the narrator’s and the characters’— raises expectations of a definitive truth, only to veer away and redefine truth as energy.

Creative energy in *Clarel* works from within the heritage of the Christian creational myth, digesting it from inside. The divine *logos* was first explained to be only in the live voice of the Creator, the spirit being alive and the letters dead. But then, letters persisted in existing, so, in parallel to the live voice of preachers, letters, written discourse, were set the task of fixing and conveying God’s word. But letters play truant: the detail of a text may counter its overt intention and then the text splits up into different versions of itself. As Claude Richard said long ago in *Lettres Américaines*, Melville’s writing “challenges the univocality of the signifier”. In *Clarel*, as in *Pierre*, “Two books are being writ; of which the world shall only see one” [XXIII, p304]. Or shall it?

To explore creative energy in *Clarel*, I will look at the two books I find in the poem: a homogeneous one and a heterogeneous one.

1. The first book—homogeneous.

The hero’s task is to check the existence of God and find the right life path. To do so he travels across the material Palestine, visiting Jerusalem and touring to the Dead Sea and back, with a group of pilgrim friends and local guides and bodyguards.

Matter, in the sense of mineral substance, is everywhere represented in holy places, monuments and landscapes. These places are constantly paired to religious myths and concepts, as if they were a mineral text giving access to the spirit. But the collection of places does not homogenize around a spiritual presence: no spirit appears.

The mineral matter also elicits abundant discourse from the narrator and the pilgrims, especially the American intellectuals, Clarel, Vine, Derwent and Rolfe. When stones fail, could this discourse be material for spiritual guidance? But no, the verbal trip is as inconclusive as the physical one: names and references pile up, arguments and counter-arguments compete in a staggering, fluctuating encyclopaedia, but the characters get nowhere special. Religious meaning remains fragmented into elements which never homogenize into one inspiring truth. In this way, religion is reduced to dead matter. The hypertrophic but ineffective speech about it is like the medieval “Matter of Rome” or

“Matter of Britain” which awaited personal reworking by individual authors—it is a collection of inert elements awaiting an individual voice to make it meaningful and persuasive.

On the contrary, what is homogeneous is the efficacy of the individual believers who do not ask, but assert. Characters like Nathan, the fanatic Zionist with “Hades in his eyes” (IV, 32, 93), speak their God’s truth with intense performativity. Problem: this homogeneous speech is deadly. God-keepers follow their God into death, their own and others’ deaths, whether their religion is austere like Abdon’s or the rabbi’s or elated and happy like Nehemiah’s. In them, logocentric repression is at work: no dialogue is possible, or rather no dialectic dynamic. Even when arguments are exchanged, no difference is made.

The Holy Land turns out morbid and religion lethal. “Hapless are the favorites of heaven”, Melville said in his Journal. For a more striking quote: “In the emptiness of the lifeless antiquity of Jerusalem the emigrant Jews are like flies that have taken up their abode in a skull.” (*Journals*, “Journal 1856-1857”, p. 91.)

Religion yields no homogeneous answer, leaving the “seeker” in doubt and crushing him after he briefly finds an answer which owes more to sensuality than to God. Six characters die, four to religion (*Nathan*, *Nehemiah*, *Agar*, *Ruth*), two to despair, which is but the other face of certainty (*Celio*, *Mortmain*). Religion becomes the dominant face of a morbid absolutism ascribing homogeneous meaning to life. The attitude is found as well in politics or science, and produces fanaticism or nihilism, once the tenets collapse, as in *Mortmain*.

In this way, the pilgrims are helpless in front of the Real, labelled “nature”. A little scorpion on the path, an impressive rocky cliff or a sick-smelling fog leave them distraught, drained of any energy to respond to the challenges of life.

Critics have found vital, homogeneous religious meaning in the poem, finding for instance that the general morbidity reflects the necessary testing of faith by the mystery of evil. Yet I think vitality is elsewhere, in the heterogeneous dimension of the text. In this “second book”, the “Matter of religion”, i. e. the inert, morbid elements of the material trip and of the resulting discourse— are vitalized by a creative energy which is not divine but human.

2. The second book– heterogeneous: Experiencing energy.

Melville’s writing foments empowerment of minor textual elements: not overt macrostructures of narrative or theme micro heterogeneities. None of these makes sense alone, but together they make sense, like a democratic crowd.

A heterogeneous reading means to focus off-centre at the textual by-products of the main narrative.

In terms of story, they are digressions, hesitations, interruptions, free associations, associated affects, half-conscious sensations.

In terms of rhetoric and narration, they are vocabulary, imagery, syntax, discrepancies in theme, tone and image, and textual interpolations.

All these components of the “second book” work discreetly, like a textual unconscious, to open up an unexpected zone of meaning.

2.1 Story

Discrepancies are sometimes found in characterisation, for instance joining aggression with goodwill: brigands can shed tears of devotion (I, 4 “The Crusaders”), a mercenary carrying deadly weapons makes the best partying companion (III, 11, “The Beaker”, the Arnaut, 75-85). The meek

Nehemiah unexpectedly puts on “a meek superior look” when he judges Nathan insane (I, 22 “Hermitage”, 76). Theme is more often discrepant. Religion competes for attention with politics, science and psychology (*Mortmain, Margoth, Vine...*) and the various opinions are all expressed powerfully and persuasively. Margoth is ridiculed, but his sarcasms are pithy; Nehemiah is half-insane, but his visions are enchanting. There is little hierarchy of values in the treatment of characterisation and theme.

Then, most of the action is verbal and free associations articulate the discussions, which jump from politics to science, from King David’s time to the Paris Commune. The result is that digression is more a principle of composition than an exception.

Also, hesitations recur, especially in Clarel, who is often unsure he should express an idea or even decide on an idea.

1

Hesitations

No, I'll not leave her: no,
'Tis fixed; I waver now no more.—
But yet again he thought it o'er...
(I, 43, “A Procession”, 48-50)

Interruptions break off discourse, the speakers falling silent or musing, or interrupting another to make an unrelated remark, like Derwent stopping Rolfe’s speech to point out the moon (II, 16, “Night in Jericho”, 120) (*Rolfe on Mortmain, deserts, madness and wisdom*).

2

Interruptions

Delay of talk; they mused— (23)
The ball of thought
And chain yet dragging, on they strained
Oblique along the upland—slow
And mute. (285-286)
I, 31 “Rolfe”

Even written discourse gets lost: when Nehemiah offers his evangelical pamphlet to an Arab, the man’s camel tries to munch it up. The Arab spears it to take it up, and we never know the rest (II, 13 “Flight of the Greeks”).

3

A typical string of digressions and breaks from II, 16 “Night in Jericho”

They gaze silently at the landscape
→ Rolfe exclaims he can imagine Elijah and Saint John in the place
→ he carries on with a series of Western visitors, the deist Volney, Chateaubriand, Lamartine
→ he digresses to “poor” Lamartine’s “social dream”

→ is interrupted by jackal crying (16-58)

→ Derwent continues about pilgrimage, referring to the crusade of the 12th-c Norwegian king Sigurd

→ Vine inserts Walter Scott's imaginary "Knight of the Leopard" and the Biblical Rahab

→ "A lull. Their thoughts, mute plunging, strayed / Like Arethusa under ground..." (89-90)

→ Rolfe starts again about the Easter pilgrimages, then stops

→ silence returns (102)

→ Rolfe starts again about deserts ("Man sprang from deserts", 104) and comments on Mortmain's insanity which brought him to the desert

→ Derwent stops him to point at the moon (120)

→ Rolfe is "discouraged" (125)

→ Derwent, then Vine encourage him to resume

→ Rolfe starts again about Mortmain: "In gusts of lonely pain ..." (135)

→ Derwent cuts in immediately: "God help him, ay, poor realist!" / So Derwent. and that theme dismissed" (137-138)

(Rahab hid Hebrew spies in Jericho when the Hebrews wanted to attack the town, helping the Hebrews slaughter the inhabitants, and then converted to Judaism)

Not only discourse, but action too is interrupted. Clarel and Ruth's developing relationship breaks off on her father's death. When Clarel appeals to the monk in Mar Saba (III, 30 "The Celibate"), the monk stays mute and gives him a small book (the "hermit-rhyme") preaching asceticism, then vanishes. Clarel remains faced with the same undecidable alternative as before.

These perturbations are paralleled by half-conscious sensations and thoughts. Clarel's hesitation to leave Ruth, as quoted above (I, 43 "A Procession") is triggered by a funeral procession carrying a young woman to her grave on an "Armenian bier" /biə/). Clarel remembers this bier three times (II, 17; II, 29; IV, 16) before a procession repeats it for real after Ruth's death (IV, 32 "Passion Week").

In IV, 26 "The Prodigal", the Lyonese is the stimulus inspiring Clarel to drop mortification and a dream continues the work:

4

After speaking with the Lyonese

A spell came down;
 And Clarel dreamed, and seemed to stand
 Betwixt a Shushan and a sand;
 The Lyonese was lord of one,
 The desert did the Tuscan own,
 The pale pure monk. A zephyr fanned;
 It vanished, and he felt the strain
 Of clasping arms which would detain

His heart from such ascetic range
 ...
 Vital he knew organic change
 (IV, 26 "The Prodigal", 302-310, 313).

/zefə/

A key term signalling the characters' waverings is "sway" (60 occurrences). The meanings range from physical waves (*wind, trees, candle flames*) to mental attraction and power (*of a person, an opinion, a sect, a political movement, etc.*).

The sway may be passively undergone but also inwardly active. *For instance, on hearing* Nehemiah despise Nathan, Clarel has a "sway of thoughts" about him (I, 22 "Hermitage", 94).
(Nehemiah feels superior to Nathan because Christianity must replace Judaism.)

Affects are varied and intense in the hero and others. Some characters have fixed affects, others fluctuate: Mortmain drags his despair, the Lyonese sports his jollity. All this creates a roller-coaster of emotions. Clarel is first enthusiastic, then depressed; even in view of Olivet he sees "no play / Of life" (I, 1, 143-144).
(Derwent often struggles to keep cheerful.)

5

One of Clarel's mood swings:

Theology, art thou so blind?
 What means **this naturalistic knell**
 In lieu of Siloh's oracle
 Which here should murmur? **Snatched from grace,** 25
 And waylaid in the holy place!
 Not thus it was but yesterday
 Off Jaffa **on the clear blue sea;**
 Nor thus, my heart, it was with thee
 Landing amid **the shouts and spray;** 30
 Nor thus when mounted, full equipped,
 Out through the vaulted gate we slipped
 Beyond the walls **where gardens bright**
With bloom and blossom cheered the sight.
 I, 1 "The Hostel"

Fear is a strong recurrent affect: the group is struck with fright on seeing a scorpion (III, 4 "An Intruder"), Clarel is scared of the jangling weapons worn by a mercenary, although the man is peaceful and jovial (III, 11 "The Beaker", the *Arnaut*). Rolfe "shrinks" in "awe" thinking of the fate of St Louis (II, 13 "The Flight of the Greeks", 11-12); when Nehemiah falls asleep under an enormous poised rock he finds it "horrible" (II, 30 "Of Petra", 74). Clearly, Palestine is a "land of fear" (II, 16, "Night in Jericho").

2.2. Rhetoric

The rhetoric shows constant warpings which produce a sense of instability.

The **vocabulary** is quite heterogeneous. We find discrepancies in register: it may be informal (*fish up, foot it, chum*) but also technical, exotic or regional (*coignes, parhelion; yestreen*). It is also often highly abstract and conceptual and extremely archaic (“wight”, “demesne”, “hight”, “appanage”, “would fain”). It is full of rarities, even among archaisms (*cascatelle, symposiarch, irrelation, yestreen, oleose, mortcloths, malison*), and neologisms, particularly to create negative terms which are another lexical trait (“undelight”, 340, “undeify”, 442).

6

Lexical heterogeneity

To “fish up” a basket on a rope
 To “foot it”, “hump it” when riding is too difficult
 To have a “chum”

A mountain lane is “flanked by coignes”
 Declining faith is a “Parhelion orb / Of faith”

A character spoke with another “yestreen” (yesterday evening)

wight ... demesne ... hight ... appanage ... would fain

cascatelle ... symposiarch ... oleose ... mortcloths ... malison

undelight ... undeify ... irrelation

monks “**fish up**” a basket on a rope to get the pilgrims’ credentials before allowing them into Mar Saba (II, 10 “Before the Gate”)

Nehemiah “**foot[s] it**” (I, 37 “A Sketch”)

the group “**hump it** into that black Hill” (II, 14 “By Achor”, 54)

the “mellow man” who serves wine to the group in Mar Saba has a “**chum**” with him (the Arnaut, in III, 11 “The Beaker”).

→ **coigne**: an archaic spelling of “coign” or “quoign” = a projecting external angle; a cornerstone; a keystone; a wooden or metal angle used in printing

→ **parhelion**: an optical effect which seems to replicate the sun in the sun’s halo

→ **yestreen**: Scottish English

These surprises manifest uncommon lexical vitality—even excess is a stimulus which begs for response. For instance, moving from rare to extremely rare words functions as a receding frontier of meaning which leaves the mind on alert.

As for **grammatical structure**, major features are negativity, ellipsis and anastrophe.

7

Grammatical constructions

Double negatives: “not unblest”, “nor unlike”, “not unrenowned”, “not unamazed”...

Periphrasis: Nehemiah = “the sinless one”, etc.

Ellipses

Auxiliary “be”: “what think men?” (II, 25, 92)

Modal auxiliaries: “how much further this descending?” (III, 25, 44) (= will this descending carry on?)

“Be” copula: “who that man?” (III, 24 “Vault and grotto”; p. 356)

Adverb “there” in “there is/are”: “Be many Hebrews...” (II, 22, 18).

Objects of transitive verbs: “if eagles eye” (p 371, = supposing eagles eyed this), “may preconceptions thrall?” (II, 22, 17) (= may preconceptions enslave our thoughts?)

Determiners, pronouns, reflexive morpheme: “and seated him” (IV, 10, 159) (= and seated himself).

Anastrophe

“I grant that here by Judah’s side / Queerly it jars with frame implied / To list the geologic Jew / His way Jehovah’s world construe”

= to listen to the geologic Jew construe Jehovah’s world in his own way

The missing markers and disrupted constructions refresh the impact of common words (“What think men?”) and also make the referent feel abstract, outlining a world in need of definition; the mind reaches out for missing precision and the missing goals of the actions evoked.

The hypertrophy of difficult words and the hypotrophy of grammar beg the mind to supply missing forms and interpret strange ones – a strategy for the mind to create extra semantic space.

Imagery is surprising too, with a blend of standard poetic diction and unexpected free associations (*from characters or narrator*) which regularly imply associations of discrepant or antinomic values. For instance, two old clerics describe the light which colours the Church of the Ascension on Olivet and the simile is to the volcano Vesuvius, a rather hellish association. (I, 35 “*Arculf and Adamnan*”).

Another feature of the imagery is **animation**.

The poem mentions real plants and beasts (*willows, palms, poppies; horses, camels, an ass, a scorpion*) and uses traditional plant and animal images and pathetic fallacy (*the rose, the dove, halcyon, shark, vulture, hyena or the eagle of Saint John whose feather fell on Mortmain’s dying lips in III, 32 “Empty Stirrups”, “The Tree in salutation waved” (III, 29 “Rolfe and the Palm”*)).

Figurative plants and animals may be more creative

An old tower is an “oak” (I, 31 “*Rolfe*”), Vine’s gifts are like “mistletoe” on a tree (I, 29 “*The Recluse*”), time flies like “cranes” (III, 30, 90), choir boys are “dolphins” (IV, 32, 48), priests are “Brazilian birds” (IV, 33, 33).

Elsewhere we find the hippopotamus, the sloth, /sləuθ/, the penguin, the kangaroo. Beasts are even globally equated, existentially, with people: “Or man or animal, 'tis one: / Cross-bearers all” (IV, 34 “Via Crucis”, 42-43).

8

Imagery: animation

willows, palms, poppies; horses, camels, an ass, a scorpion

rose, dove, halcyon, shark, vulture, hyena, eagle; “The Tree in salutation waved” (III, 29 “Rolfe and the Palm”)

Figurative: a tower is an “oak” (I, 31 “Rolfe”), Vine’s gifts are like “mistletoe” on a tree (I, 29 “The Recluse”), time flies like “cranes” (III, 30, 90), choir boys are “dolphins” (IV, 32, 48), priests are “Brazilian birds” (IV, 33, 33)

... hippopotamus ... sloth ... penguin ... kangaroo ... leopard ... toucan ...

“Or man or animal, 'tis one: / Cross-bearers all” (IV, 34 “Via Crucis”, 42-43).

Imagery: animation

willows, palms, poppies; horses, camels, an ass, a scorpion

rose, dove, halcyon, shark, vulture, hyena, eagle; “The Tree in salutation waved” (III, 29 “Rolfe and the Palm”)

Figurative: a tower is an “oak” (I, 31 “Rolfe”), Vine’s gifts are like “mistletoe” on a tree (I, 29 “The Recluse”), time flies like “cranes” (III, 30, 90), choir boys are “dolphins” (IV, 32, 48), priests are “Brazilian birds” (IV, 33, 33).

*Elsewhere we find the **hippopotamus**, the **sloth**, /sləuθ/, the **penguin**, the **kangaroo**. Beasts are even globally equated, existentially, with people: “Or man or animal, 'tis one: / Cross-bearers all” (IV, 34 “Via Crucis”, 42-43).*

In short, life forms pop up irrespective of theme. The effect on the mind is centrifugal, offering gratuitous daydreams about curious animals. It’s a zoo. The menagerie will be interpreted as one of a number of decentered manifestations of vitality which suggest that the life of the text is not, as it seems, in the homogenizing potential of discussions about religion.

2.3 Narration

Now, some heterogeneous elements in the narration.

One feature is jumps of focus between grave and light themes.

Young Glaucon happily considers the presents he could bring home, including “cameos from the Dead Sea’s stone”, but his future father-in-law, the banker, comically freezes with fright. *II, 2 “By the Garden”, 30-44*

9

Glaucon and the Banker

"... but for that stone—
 Avoid, nor name!"
 "That stone? what one?"
 And cast a look of grieved surprise 40
 Marking the senior's ruffled guise;
 "Those cameos of Death's Sea--"
 "Have done,
 I beg! Unless all joy you'd cripple,
 Both noun omit and participle."
 II, 2 "By the Garden", 30-44

Focalisation also jumps from zero to internal focalisation to underline miscommunication between the characters:

10

Internal focalisation

"Ah, clear sweet ether of the soul / (Mused Clarel), holding him [Vine] in view.
 (II, 27 "Vine and Clarel", 64-65

"Thy passion's whim, / Wild Swede, mused Vine in silent heart"
 (II, 31 "The Inscription", 25-26)

Internal foc°

"Thy passion's whim, / Wild Swede, mused Vine in silent heart"
 (II, 31 "The Inscription", 25-26)

"Ah, clear sweet ether of the soul / (Mused Clarel), holding him [Vine] in view.
 (II, 27 "Vine and Clarel", 64-65

zero focalisation

* *on a collective state of mind: after seeing the rainbow vanish from over the Dead Sea and hearing Margoth's derision of it*

* *on Clarel's individual feeling, still zero*

—They heard [Margoth's jeers], but in such torpid gloom

Scarcely they recked, for now the bloom ————— → zero focalisation on the group's thoughts

Vanished from sight, and half the sea

Died down to glazed monotony.

Craved solace here would Clarel prove, ————— → zero focalisation on Clarel

Recalling Ruth, her glance of love.

But nay; **those eyes** so frequent known

To meet, and mellow on his own—

Now, **in his vision of them, swerved** ————— from zero to internal focalisation on Clarel

While in perverse recurrence ran

Dreams of the bier Armenian.

Against their **sway** his soul he nerved:

"Go, goblins; go, each funeral thought ————— *intense internal focalisation*

Bewitchment from this Dead Sea caught!"

II, 29 "By the Marge", 155-168

Finally, textual interpolations form bubbles in the flow of the narrative. An exhaustive study is impossible here but chosen examples confirm the textual heterogeneity.

They can be sung, recited or quoted by the characters, rarely written, or dropped into the narrative directly by the narrator. Some are serious, even pathetic, some light, even buffoon.

Example which is not about religion: {Ungar recites a text on the social theme of the disillusion of revolutionary leaders (after the Rizpah one) but I don't know whether there are many other interpolated texts about politics, science, philosophy etc. "Elating and elate, / Do they mount them in their pride? / Let them wait a little, wait, / For the brimming of the flood / Brings the turning of the tide." / His lyric. Yet in heart of hearts / Perchance its vanity he knew (...) IV, 5 "Of the Stranger"}

The serious texts are mostly about religion and narrative potential. They pay tribute to faith as a passion coessential with the beauty of myth. The narrator tells of the rescue of the pilgrim bishop Arculf (*in the 8th c*) by monks in the Hebrides. In a touching tale-within-the tale, the naïve Arculf tells the story of his visit to the Church of the Ascension and his host Adamnan listens like a child while natural elements rage outside.

11

Arculf's tale of the Church of the Ascension, embedded in the one of his rescue by the abbot Adamnan

'Twas of that church, so brave erewhile--	
Blest land-mark on the Olive Hight--	
Which Arculf told of in the isle	20
Iona. Shipwrecked there in sight,	
The palmer dragged they from the foam,	
The Culdees of the abbey fair—	
Him shelter yielding and a home. ...	
With travel-talk he did beguile	27
Their eve of Yule. ...	
Arculf first	53
The wonders of the tomb rehearsed,	
And Golgotha ...	
... Then: "On the hill--	59
In site revealed thro' Jesu's grace"--	
(Hereat both cross themselves apace)	
"A great round church with goodly skill	
Is nobly built ...	
that blest place where meet	65
The last prints of the Wounded Feet ...	
Upon Ascension Day--at end	

Of mass--winds, vocal winds descend	70
Among the worshippers." Amain	
The abbot signs the cross again ...	
[The abbot] snatched the palmer's hand—	99
Clung to it like a very child	100
Thrilled by some wondrous story wild	
Of elf or fay ...	
... But how grim	104
The Pictish storm-king sang refrain,	105
Scoffing about those gables high	
Over Arculf and good Adamnan.	

(I, 35 "Arculf and Adamnan")

12

A Dominican monk encountered by the Jordan glorifies Christmas and Rome in this "recitative"

Yearly for a thousand years
On Christmas Day the wreath appears,
And the people joy together:
Prithee, Prince or Parliament,
An equal holiday invent
Outlasting centuries of weather. ...
(II, 25 "The Dominican", 193-198)

13

Unseen in the Dead Sea fog, Nehemiah sings a hymn paraphrasing Psalm 23

... in the dark
Thick scud, the chanting saint they hark:

"Though through the valley of the shade
 I pass, no evil do I fear; 45
His candle shineth on my head:
 Lo, he is with me, even here."
(II, 28 "The Fog")

14

Minutes before drowning, Nehemiah then hears God's voice in a sleepwalking dream

And a great voice he hears which saith,
Pain is no more, no more is death;
I wipe away all tears: Come, ye,
Enter, it is eternity.
And happy souls, the saved and blest,
Welcomed by angels and caressed,
Hand linked in hand like lovers sweet,
Festoons of tenderness complete--
Roamed up and on, by orchards fair
To bright ascents and mellow air;
Thence, highest, toward the throne were led,
And kissed, amid the sobbings shed
Of faith fulfilled.

(II, 38 "The Sleepwalker")

These texts arouse empathy: the characters are stirred, and Derwent recites the same hymn over Nehemiah's grave (II 39 "Obsequies"). But no-one finds faith through them. At best, they lead to common humanity: religion is reduced to the idiom of humanism. This is the case when Ungar recites a verse commenting on the story of Rizpah, a concubine of King Saul. The issue for Ungar is faithfulness to political and humanist values and rebellion against an unfair death sentence. In the Old Testament, it is submission to God's advice to offer sacrifice by killing seven innocents.

(King Saul attacked the Gibeonites, then after Saul's death God punished the Israelites for this with bad harvests, so that King David made an agreement with the Gibeonites and gave over seven sons and grandsons of Saul's to be executed in compensation for the attack.)

Ungar: the story of Rizpah

The habit of his mind, and tone 167
Tenacious touching issues gone,
Expression found, nor all amiss,
In thing he'd murmur: it was this: 170

"Who abideth by the dead
Which ye hung before your Lord?
Steadfast who, when all have fled
Tree and corse abhorred?
Who drives off the wolf, the kite— 175
Bird by day, and beast by night,
And keeps the hill through all?
It is Rizpah: true is one
Unto death; nor then will shun
The Seven throttled and undone, 180
To glut the foes of Saul."

(IV, 5 “Of the Stranger”)

“Rizpah] 2 Samuel 21. 1-11 tells of her steadfastness in guarding the seven hanged corpses of Saul’s sons (two born of Rizpah) from the birds by day and beasts by night.”
Clarel, Editorial appendix: Discussions, Part 4, page 824. Northwestern-Newberry Edition, 1991.

A written text is glued inside Clarel’s trunk: a “denizen”, half-“written matter” and half-persona (according to the Melvillean homology between people and text). It embodies this duplicity of myth which arouses and disappoints:

16

A “faded denizen” glued inside Clarel’s trunk comments on Judaea

"The World accosts--

"Last one out of Holy Land,

What gift bring'st thou? Sychem grapes?

Tabor, which the Eden drapes,

Yieldeth garlands. I demand

Something cheery at thy hand. ...

"The Palmer replies:

"Nay, naught thou nam'st thy servant brings,

Only Judea my feet did roam ...

These palms I bring—from dust not free,

Since dust and ashes both were trod by me.”

(I, 2 “Abdon”)

17

Celio experiences the high and the comedown; seeing a night procession, he is infected by pathos:

One named the Bitter Cup, and said: 75

"Saviour, thou knowest: it was here

The angels ministered, thy head

Supported, kissed thy lidded eyes

And pale swooned cheek till thou didst rise;

Help these then, unto these come near!" 80

Out sobbed the mourners, and the tear

From Celio trickled; but he mused--

Weak am I, by a myth abused.

(I, 14 “In the Glen”)

Finally, when Clarel yearns for a discussion about marriage versus celibacy, he is silently given a book about biblical stories of unhappy marriages. It is not directly quoted but concludes that humanity would have been better created without any women. The text feels inhuman, boiling down to sheer repression of the erotic impulse.

18

The “hermit-rhyme” of the “Celibate”

Rhyme, old hermit-rhyme	106
Composed in Decius' cruel age By Christian of Thebaean clime: 'Twas David's son, and he of Dan With him misloved that fled the bride	110
And Job whose wife but mocked his ban Then rose, or in redemption ran-- The rib restored to Adam's side And man made whole, as man began. ...	114
He wandered as in sleep; A saffron sun's last rays were shed More still, more solemn waxed the time, Till Apathy upon the steep Sat one with Silence and the Dead.	160

(III, 30 “The Celibate”)

So, the religious “bubbles” are grounded in the passion for myth and may be productive in terms of human relations but the spiritual import dissolves into thin air.

Another type of interpolated texts appear as unexpectedly as the previous sort, but are completely unserious, even making fun of religion. The sources are collective culture or individual characters, who recite or sing them and then exit the scene happily, carrying their levity away with them. They may refer to Biblical stories but without repeating them.

A trio of characters sing these texts: Glaucon in Part II (“The Wilderness”), the Lesbian in Part III (“Mar Saba”) and the Lyonesse in Part IV (“Bethlehem”).

Glaucon, already quoted, is a young sportsman from Smyrna travelling with an old banker, his future father-in-law. His song sympathizes with a dandy who loses some pennies to a flower girl and compares her to a priest dressed up for a religious festival:

19

The song of Glaucon the Smyrniote

Song of poor-devil dandy: he:— 53

"She's handsome as a jeweled priest
In ephod on the festa. 55
And each poor blade like me must needs
Idolize and detest her.

"With rain-beads on her odorous hair
From gardens after showers,
All bloom and dew she trips along, 60
Intent on selling flowers.

"She beams--the rainbow of the bridge;
But, ah, my blank abhorrence,
She buttonholes me with a rose,
This flower-girl of Florence. 65

"My friends stand by; and, 'There!' she says—
An angel arch, a sinner:
I grudge to pay, but pay I must,
Then—dine on half a dinner!—

"Heigh-ho, next month I marry: well!" 70
With that he turned aside, and went
Humming another air content.

(II, 5, "Clarel and Glaucon")

The religious motif of the ephod is turned into a sign of erotic seduction. In the next Part (*Mar Saba*), an oxymoronic scene has the pilgrims stay overnight in a monastery and have a drinking party there. The Lesbian, a food and drinks dealer, cajoles Derwent into drinking with allusions to springs starting in the desert and to the water turned to wine at Cana. The religious motif now covers up inebriation /ini:bri-/ and fellowship. Drink is needed to weaken reason into a necessary acceptance of folly. This folly brings the companions together as they forget their reflections:

20

The Lesbian's first song

"Life is not by square and line: 1
Wisdom's stupid without folly:
Sherbet to-day, to-morrow wine
Feather in cap and the world is jolly!"

The Lesbian's third song. He distributes wine and song, bonding the group together.

"The Mufti in park suburban
Lies under a stone
Surmounted serene by a turban
Magnific--a marble one!" 180

So, man by man, with twinkling air,
And cup and text of stanza fair:

"A Rabbi in Prague they muster
In mound evermore
Looking up at his monument's cluster--
A cluster of grapes of Noah!" 185

When all were served with wine and rhyme ...
(III, 11 "The Beaker")

Ebriation and sex return stronger when Clarel shares a room with the "Prodigal", a Lyonese businessman (*Part IV, Bethlehem, canto 26 "The Prodigal"*).

This beautiful young man seems experienced but refuses to discuss the "mournful sway" of Palestine (83, *Palestine called "Judah" = one of the ancestors of the 12 Hebrew tribes descended from Jacob*). He is revealed to be a Jew (*by the Russian, in Canto 27 "David's Well"*), but one who shatters the cliché of tradition, faith and austerity set by Abdon and Nathan. Among informed bantering about Judaism, he quotes Solomon's Song as a literal erotic song; to him, Palestine is quite cheerful: it is where Noah invented winemaking, and the best about being a Jew is that Jewish women are the greatest beauties.

21

The narrator's metafictional address to the Lyonese:

Thy silvery voice, irreverent one!
'Twas musical ...

Dialogue with the Lyonese:

"But Palestine,
Insisted Clarel, "do you not
Concede some strangeness to her lot?"
" ... You of the West,
What devil has your hearts possessed,
You can't enjoy?-- ..."

22

The bloody story of Queen Esther (wife of Xerxes) in Shushan, recounting the revenge of the Jews over their enemies, is celebrated by Jews in the feast of Purim / Shushan Purim, and inspired this song to the Lyonese:

"Lights of Shushan, if your urn
Mellow shed the opal ray,
To delude one--damsels, turn,
Wherefore tarry? why betray?

Drop your garlands and away!
Leave me, phantoms that but feign;
Sting me not with inklings vain!

"But, if magic none prevail,
Mocking in untrue romance;
Let your Paradise exhale
Odors; and enlink the dance;

And, ye rosy feet, advance
Till ye meet morn's ruddy Hours
Unabashed in Shushan's bowers!"

(IV, 26 "The Prodigal")

"Shushan" (the city where Esther became queen to Ahasuerus / Xerxes, King of Persia had taken Esther to wife, not knowing she was Jewish, and he agreed with his minister Haman to slaughter the Jews; Esther revealed her faith and asked for pity and he King allowed the Jews to defend themselves and exposed their dead enemies.)

It would be better for Clarel to drop "inklings vain" and start to "enjoy", obeying natural law:

The Lyonese, parting song:

"Rules, who rules?
Fools the wise, makes wise the fools—
Every ruling overrules?
Who **the dame that keeps the house,**

Provides the diet, and oh, so quiet,
Brings all to pass, the slyest mouse?

Tell, tell it me:
Signora Nature, who but she!"
(IV, 26 "The Prodigal")

The "dame that keeps the house" evokes what Voltaire called "la folle du logis" (the madwoman housekeeper), i. e. imagination (*a phrase he wrongly attributed to the 17th-c metaphysician Malebranche*). She is the one who rules and brings about changes without our knowing: an allegory of creative energy.

3. Energy and "nature"

I will now discuss Melville's representation of creative energy in *Clarel*, before moving on to the values associated with this energy.

The heterogeneous elements do not bring meaning individually but in the energy that they release and arouse as a network. They cast doubt on (or "doubtify") the "Matter of religion", they arouse readerly energy and they vitalize the homogeneous first book so that it dies birthing new meaning, i. e. creative energy, manifested and represented.

The poem's paradigm issue is no longer where to find truth, but how to use one's mind; it is not about getting to a destination, but about moving on.

(Irony is exerted by a global ("elemental") rhetorical charge against an acceptance of ready-made meaning and against the exclusive importance of the issues discussed by characters and narrator.)

"Doubtification" begins with relativization and negativity: circularity, deaths, dead-ends, digressions, heavy vocabulary, all deflect readerly desire from the homogeneous quest. (*The energy of discussing religion is displaced onto an interest for the non-religious—sameness breeds difference.*)

Disrupted grammar and a receding horizon of never-ending lexical surprise arouse the mind. Baffling syntax refreshes old words, set off on a raw background smacking of primitive sagas (the rhythm helps). We grope for definition, our minds get eager to make it.

The *religious* interpolated texts displace attraction from religious meaning to myth for myth's sake, teasing up imagination. Incongruous life forms pop up from the most serious sentences.

The *light* interpolated texts commend enjoyment in sex and inebriation (*the most bodily, least godly ecstasies*) and they link pleasure with escape: the speakers (*/ singers*) vanish out of the prison of Palestine.

Are these heterogeneous elements informational noise? No, they defy the energies of control (*like Ishmael wanting to knock off the hats of passers-by, but without the spleen*), deny the legitimacy of religion to define what is meaningful and manifest the possibility for new meaning to arise as life forms do, spontaneously and beyond control. Vitalization is at hand.

Creative energy vitalizes inert matter which is found in the terms of a threefold homology:

- the morbid physical environment of Palestine,
- the Matter of religion which entraps the characters' minds,
- the human being, hovering between subjection to thinking *in terms of* religion and emancipation from this paradigm.

As in the bog the dead black pool:
Penal his aspect ...
Searching, he creeps with laboring neck, 75
Each crevice tries, and long may seek:
Water he craves, where rain is none...
(IV, 3 "The Island")

Dehumanised human nature

The face of Agath the timoneer bears "Nature's own look, which might recall / Dumb patience of mere animal" (IV, 3 "The Island", 104-105).

Deathly nature

... For Judah here—
Let Erebus her rival own: 65
'Tis horror absolute—severe,
Dead, livid, honey-combed, dumb, fell—
A caked depopulated hell ...
(II, 11 "Of Deserts")

But "nature" is also enchanting and vital.
(*Running water and greenery express vitality and pleasure while barren landscapes and hopeless beasts express disorientation and fright.*)

26

Vital nature

Clarel and Ruth--might it but be 1
That range they could green uplands free
By gala orchards, when they fling
Their bridal favors, buds of Spring;
And, dreamy in her morning swoon, 5
The lady of the night, the moon,
Looks pearly as the blossoming;
And youth and nature's fond accord
Wins Eden back, that tales abstruse
Of Christ, the crucified, Pain's Lord, 10
Seem foreign--forged--incongruous.
(I, 28 "Tomb and Fountain")

Our "deep nature" makes us pity the dead (IV, 29 "The Night Ride", 37)

Our "human nature dear" yearns for love and shrinks from celibacy (II, 30 "The Celibate", 117)

Rolfe, dynamic and generous, is "a messmate of the elements" (I, 31 "Rolfe", 21)

We follow the indications of nature to trace our paths (IV, 34 “Via Crucis”, 1-21)

It first seems that this contradiction is due to the wishful thinking of those who want to ignore unpleasantness and tell a false narrative of happiness in nature as God’s creation. Derwent does this, telling Clarel to stay on the surface:

27

Derwent tries to persuade Clarel out of his torment

[Clarel:] “Doubt bleeds, nor Faith is free from pain!” 304
... [Derwent:] “Alas, too deep you dive. ... 307
That shaft you sink shall strike no bloom:
The surface, ah, heaven keeps *that* green; 310
Green, sunny: nature’s active scene,
For man appointed, man’s true home.”

III, 21 “In Confidence”, 307-312.

This reminds us of the harlot nature of Moby-Dick, the pretty colours covering up terror: “all deified Nature absolutely paints like the harlot, whose allurements cover nothing but the charnel-house within ... the mystical cosmetic which produces every one of her hues, the great principle of light, for ever remains white or colorless in itself ... the palsied universe lies before us a leper.” Moby-Dick, chapter 42, “The Whiteness of the Whale”.

But in fact, nature is only indifferent or destructive as far as it is conceived in religious terms, i. e. as having got its meaning from God as a resource /rizo:s/ or a tool for punishment of the faithless: it punishes a freethinking ship-master blindly, with a “neutral mind” (I, 37 “A Sketch”, 47).

(= Rolfe’s story of the freethinking ship-master who suffered disaster after disaster till he broke down and became a Calvinist, I, 37 “A Sketch”).
To “her” “nothing is amiss” (IV, 28 “David’s Well”, 18, p 478).

It is neutral, but not in the Tennysonian sense of the Faith / Doubt issue nor in the scientist vision of Margoth (*who explains miracles as natural phenomena: “things natural”, II, 20 “Under the mountain”*).

It is neutral in the sense that it does not yield meaning till our inner nature orients its energy towards the outer nature and the world. (So Rolfe says that nature keeps its meaning to itself: it “vetoes all / Her commentators” (II, 32 “The Encampment”, 60-61).

This neutrality vanishes if we emancipate our thinking and apply it freely to nature: “Escaped from forms, enlarged at last, / Pupils we be of wave and waste” (II, 32 “The Encampment”, 56-57)

28

Rolfe is “revuls[ed]” at seeing Derwent read a pleasant book to forget the demonic landscape

"And read you here?"

Scarce suits the ground with bookish cheer.	55
Escaped from forms, enlarged at last, Pupils we be of wave and waste— Not books; nay, nay!"	
(II, 32 "The Encampment")	

Melville's symbolism folds outer nature and inner human nature together in the imagery, and adds the field of received ideas (*of which the Matter of religion*) as homologous to outer nature. Like it, the mass of ideas essentially makes no sense as long as we do not energize our minds in order to relate to it in an *innovative, a creative way*.

Here the poem is read as an allegory of Melville's ongoing struggle to assume creative energy. In this reading, the central metaphor of the poem is the switch from dead matter to live growth, be it physical vital processes, the development of meaningfulness in text or the emergence of love in people.

The vitalization triggered by the heterogeneous elements point the way to this central metaphor by exposing us to discreet, relentless energizing shocks in the rhetoric and in the story.

But the shocks are not only effected: they are also reflected in the story and in the rhetoric.

In the story, the dynamic starter is a "sway" running through the individual. The sway (*≈ 60 occurrences, plus "influence" and others*) may come from a character or from impalpable atmosphere (*which means Melville diffused it into his story, though atmosphere can also be read as an image for the unconscious*).

Being "swayed" is an opportunity (*seized or not*) to develop an original response to the stimulus. This is the case of Clarel with the Lyonese. The matter of religion he is chock-full with is so shaken that "vital he knew organic change":

29

<u>Clarel "swayed" by the Lyonese, who pushes his to acknowledge his libido</u>

"Blue eyes or black, which like you best? Your Bella Donna, how's she dressed?"	101
...	
What wind was this? And yet it swayed Even Clarel's cypress. ...	242
...	
Vital he knew organic change, Or felt, at least, that change was working— A subtle innovator lurking.	315
(IV, 26 "The Prodigal")	

The change is subconscious, "lurking" till it surfaces, not as matter but as dynamism, action—here, the decision to marry Ruth.

The process is not conscious, because it needs to escape the pre-existing forms of religion (*and other fixed ideas*), whose energy of control rules in consciousness.

The process, too, is transgressive, disregarding God's exclusive truth. (*Perhaps, after Ahab, this is a new species of ungodly, godlike characters, transgressive but vital.*)

Last but not least, the sway and vital change trigger Clarel's choice for sensuality, against unnatural celibacy—more about this in my conclusion.

One more interpolated text forms an embedded reflection of the poem's central metaphor. It is Canto I, 32 "Of Rama", *tellingly placed immediately after the canto "Rolfe" (I, 33) and introduced as "A niche for image of a novel mind"*.

30

Of Rama

That Rama whom the Indian sung--	1
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	5
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,	10
Though what that was he might not guess.	
...	
Mince ye some matter for faith's sake	42
And heaven's good name? 'Tis these shall make	
Revolt there, and the gloss disclaim.	

I, 32 "Of Rama"

In spite of his Christ-like qualities, Rama is incapable of self-consciousness leadership, which might result in creating a tradition.

(Christ-like: "innocent" but "lawless" (17) and "outlaw[ed]" (15) ; knows "no craft", "nor envy" (34) "tells of riddles" (41), challenges dogma: "revolt ... the gloss disclaim", 44, and know the secrets of Creation (45-46).)

Far from the self-conscious and controlling energy of divine Creation, Melville redefines creative energy as something which only exists « live ». It has been a long time since it was the free choice of « gipsy Christians » whose choice was not to gloss over dogma but to live and enjoy:

31

True Christianity has been gone for eighteen centuries (as of 1776)

Him [<i>Jesus</i>] following through the wilding flowers	
By lake and hill, or glad detained	
In Cana—ever out of doors—	
Ere yet the disenchantment gained	75
What dream they knew, that primal band	
Of gipsy Christians!	

(II, 21 "The Priest and Rolfe")

Conclusion: the values of creative energy

I find the sacrificial loss of the beloved Ruth a fine instance of literary duplicity. A persistent network of words and actions value the love and joy which help reveal the symbolism of creative energy, contradicting the final valuation of the mystery of pain, and to the end touches of sensuality overlay religious discourse.

Bereaving Clarel makes him a token Christian pining for what his God took and cursing faith (*"Then perish [Nathan's] faith ... [my] faith's gone"* (IV, 30 *"The Valley of decision"*, 103,117).

The narrator even compares the resurrection of Christ with Ruth's definitive death while Clarel longs for Ruth's face and voice:

32

Missing presence, missing voice, missing face

... But Ruth, may Ruth so burst the prison? (IV, 33 "Easter", 65-66)	<i>Christ is arisen;</i> 65
"They wire the world—far under sea They talk; but never comes to me A message from beneath the stone." (IV, 34 "Via Crucis")	51
But Ruth—ah, how estranged in face! (IV, 32 "Passion Week")	98

What Clarel has lost to his God is all that makes human identity and joy.

Strangely, the Epilogue vaguely suggests that heart and mind matter more than the soul: the narrator addresses Clarel (*who cannot hear*):

33

Heart, mind—but no soul

Clarel, thy heart, the issues there but mind ... (IV, 35 "Epilogue")	28
---	----

It seems that the soul is needless compared to heart and mind, which are key to creative energy. (*"heart" figures 231 times, "mind" 95 times and "soul" 47 times.*)

In the story, the mind has been occupied by the Matter of religion, then the text offered a symbolical emancipation from it thanks to a sensual "sway", and Clarel turned to his heart and to sensuality. In turn, sensuality led to love, not only of women but also of one's neighbour, even Jewish:

34

Charity in a sensualist—the Lyonese uses libido to reveal his and Clarel's common humanity

That grave, deep Hebrew coquetry! 235
Thereby Bathsheba David won
In bath a purposed bait!--Have done!--
Blushing? The cuticle's but thin!
Blushing? yet you my mind would win.
Priests make a goblin of the Jew: 240
Shares he not flesh with me--with you?"
(IV, 26 "The Prodigal")

The logic of keeping *Clarel* a spiritual poem represses the freedom of creative energy, but it also makes it run as it should, underground, inspirational without setting a conscious model, just like Rama. This is how, instead of a demonstration, we find overtones of sensuality, even in the touching "Dirge" to Ruth. The "palm" shading her otherworld dwelling might refer to Palestinian palms, but the Polynesian features of the Lyonese, and, according to Rolfe, of Christianity (IV, 18 "The Hill-side") suggest that the limbo is rather a half-tint bower of desire.

35

The Lyonese's Polynesian sensuality

Rich, tumbled, chestnut hood of curls
Like to a Polynesian girl's,
Who, inland eloping with her lover, 250
The deacon-magistrates recover--
With sermon and black bread reprove
Who fed on berries and on love.
(IV, 26 "The Prodigal")

Rolfe: Christ in Tahiti

"From Bethlehem here my musings reach 35
Yes--frankly--to Tahiti's beach." ...
... by beach where palm trees grow
That sheltered Omai's olive race--
Tahiti should have been the place
For Christ in advent." 45
(IV, 18 "The Hill-side")

Dirge: Ruth in limbo

Stay, Death. Not mine the Christus-wand	1
Wherewith to charge thee and command: I plead. Most gently hold the hand Of her thou ledest far away ...	
And if, ere yet the lover's free,	16
Some added dusk thy rule decree That shadow only let it be Thrown in the moon-Glade by the palm.	
(IV, 31 "Dirge")	

The subdued conflict between sensuality and spirituality only serves to demonstrate the way art works. Creative energy is here confronted to the Matter of religion which the narrator will not let go of, and it reworks discreetly the inertness of death to allow beauty to shoot through. As in the canto "Petra", in reading we see the switch from morbid chaos to the order of beauty:

36

The work of Art

One starts. In Esau's waste are blent	17
Ionian form, Venetian tint. ...	
... Mid such a scene	40
Of Nature's terror, how serene That ordered form. Nor less 'tis cut Out of that terror--does abut Thereon: there's Art."	
(II, 30 "Of Petra")	