

# What is the Purpose of Your Trip to Jerusalem?

RODRIGO ANDRÉS

At my city airport, checking in with El Al:

—What is your final destination?—Jerusalem.

—What is the purpose of your trip to Jerusalem?

—I am going to participate in a conference on Herman Melville.

—Say that again?

—Herman Melville?...the author of Moby-Dick?

—What is the conference about?

—Well, he wrote this poem...['Klær-El]?...[KIE-'rel]?

—You are going to Israel to attend a conference about...a poem?[which you obviously do not even know how to pronounce]. Please move over to that corner and wait there. Somebody will be with you shortly. We need to ask you a few more questions.

The Melville and the Mediterranean conference, held in Jerusalem on June 17-21, 2009, became a learning experience even days before it started. For many of us, the simple fact of going through the El Al security control at the airport nearest to where we live, where we teach, where we read Melville, where we think Melville, implied going through the almost shocking and not very comfortable exercise of hearing articulated in the mouth of Israeli security staff the kind of questions some of us had been privately and secretly asking ourselves. Am I going to be on a plane for hours to discuss a poem? Am I going to travel to that specific region of the world simply because he went there? Surely—some of us argued to ourselves—it is not only because of that. I am going there also because it is a region in the world that matters politically, historically, religiously, spiritually, geographically. But what is it that really matters to me? What mattered to Melville? What is the true nature of my interest in Melville, of my interpretations of Melville's texts? Forty years after some French intellectuals proclaimed the death not only of God but also (even!) of the Author, what am I doing on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, the purpose of which is the exegesis of Melville's message(s) to the world? Maybe I am actually following Melville's path from Liverpool—where he had had that intimate conversation in Southport with Nathaniel Hawthorne—to the Holy Land, in a spirit more organic to his experience than I thought, in the search if not of belief, then of meaning.

As academics, many of us justified ourselves to ourselves, reasoning that the true purpose of our trip to Israel was our willingness/need to unlearn. Yet, the second we arrived in Jerusalem was the second we started learning, and learning fast. About the beauty of the city, about adjusting to the sudden and unexpected feeling of being in the spiritual center of the world, about pretending we were not surprised at seeing fundamentalists of most known religions walking the same streets,

being profoundly indifferent to each other. And, above all, about trying to function normally in a city that is paradoxically and simultaneously both a space of fictional narratives, illusions, and hopes, on the one hand, while at the same time a space of facts, stone, history, noise, citizens, quotidianity during the day, and calls to prayer in the middle of warm, sensuous, moonlit nights, on the other. The feeling of unreality almost abruptly became one of homecoming when we started encountering fellow Melvilleans, long-time friends, good friends, scholars we respect and admire.

That feeling was simultaneous with that of making new friends and the premonition of meeting people who will matter for life. Among veteran Melvilleans, the joyful and obviously comfortable reencounters. For newer members of the society like myself, the immense gratification of being embraced again by generous, kind, supportive, Melville specialist. For participants who were attending a Melville conference for the first time, the strange verification—as a dear colleague whispered to me almost inaudibly—that “This is almost surreal. I am meeting the bibliography”.

We reached the site of the conference—the École Biblique in East Jerusalem—a beautiful oasis of peace and silence in an otherwise intense street, Nablus Road, and there we were welcomed by the three generous wisemen, Tim Marr, Hilton Obenzinger, and Basem Ra’ad, who with warm hugs, welcoming words, and constant support, care, and affection, made sure that every minute of every day of the conference, during every excursion and every trip, both intellectual (during the sessions) and physical (on the bus as we went up and down both Israel and Jordan) was rich in experiences and in an atmosphere of delightful camaraderie.

The conference sessions were formidable because of the excellence of the papers, the extremely engaged listening that took place, and the periods of questions and answers that often became springboards for conversations among all attendants both during and after each one of the sessions. One of the factors that became crucial in the creation of the ideal atmosphere for discussing, sharing, contributing, suggesting, inviting to read texts yet unexplored, exchanging ideas, and, above all, encouraging further work was the brilliant format of having a single line of panels at all times.

The stressful moment of having to decide which panel to go to, the feeling of having missed a paper one should not have missed, not being able to listen to an admired friend because he or she is giving his or her paper as you are giving yours, all of that was absent from a conference in which all participants had the rare privilege of being able to attend the two keynote lectures and all the panels, and thus listen to every one of the papers by academics who came from the United States, Europe, Asia, Israel, Jerusalem. And what a privilege to have those voices interrupted only by the bells of the monastery or by the very moving calls to prayer of the muezzin from the nearest minaret. In total there were two keynote addresses—by Thomas L. Thompson and by Amy Kaplan—a roundtable discussion, and almost sixty papers organized around twelve panels: Vision, Imagination, Reality and Text; Poetics and Clarel; Melville’s Journeys; Mediterraneans; Judaism, Zionism, and Christianity in Clarel; Orientalisms and Cultures; Clarel and Symbolic Modes; Melville in Relationship to Other Writers; Nature, Place, Space; Other Melville Works; Other Holy Land Travelers; and Melville’s Italy, Italy’s Melville.

Clarel, which several participants referred to as “Melville’s most existentialist work,” became—surprisingly enough given its marginal position, up until Jerusalem, both within studies of Melville’s oeuvre and in the history of American poetry—the main pre-text to reflect on Melville’s

questions about architecture, landscape, time, history, place, poetics, imagism, allegory, the limits of human consciousness rising out of hallowed forms, inscriptions, complex passions.

One of the axes of discussion was the connections between places and form and time. Although we tend to fix Melville's career as American, it swerves and refuses to obey, offering us instead universalist, transnational, unconfined-by-boundaries possibilities. And among these transnational connections is, of course, the one between the Levant and America. In the presentation of the conference, Basem Ra'ad reminded us of the connection between Ur-Salem and the Puritan town of Salem in America. And as sessions unfolded, we accumulated evidence of the centrality of the region not only in Herman Melville's *Clarel* in particular or among nineteenth-century American travellers to the Levant in general, but even much earlier than that. Already in the European colonizers' first interpretations, America was understood as a replica of the Mediterranean. The conference corroborated that the waters of the Mediterranean, then and now, reach the shores of the United States, and—one more time—that Melville is both an American writer and much more than an American writer.

Many papers analyzed Melville's questioning of whether there can be an authentic faith, and also his rejection of religious fundamentalisms and of blind beliefs in nation states—or simply of the notion that nations are communities—as threatening the possibilities of universalism, and as dividing people both in the Middle East and in the United States of America, the most religious nation in the West with maybe the single exception of the Vatican. That rejection was often interpreted as organic to his resistance to—isms in general and, especially interesting in the context of our conference, to orientalism(s). A number of papers pointed in the direction of worldness in Melville as the only concept that may prevent clashes of civilizations and save us from going back, yet again, to estrangement, alienation, fear, distrust, hostility, exclusion. Melville prophesied the dangers of extreme fundamentalist thinking that lead to hatred and violence, and proposed instead the exploration of the transnational, universalist consciousness that had the potential to unite an Ishmael and a Queequeg.

As Amy Kaplan reminded us, Melville comments about sailors in Ch. 19 of *White-Jacket*: “we expatriate ourselves to nationalize with the universe,” thus offering an image that invites us to dream of a future beyond nations. Wouldn't that future be conducive to, among many other things, coming close to sharing Melville's “all” feeling?

Speaking of the “all” feeling, many of us will always remember the incredible sensation of gravityless floating in the Dead Sea at the lowest point of the world. And we will never forget that very strange, and very special moment on the boat trip that slowly took us across the sea of Galilee when, mysteriously, a thick quietness set in and each one of us found an instant and a space to be alone and to look at the serene waters and also far away, to the mountains in the distance, to a space that made one wonder.

And the wonders continued in Jordan, which our guide sweetly kept referring to as “your second country.” If many of us were already willing to let ourselves be surprised by Petra, the shock started by learning that all of the country, from North to South, from Um Qais to Jerash, is full of excavations and sites that made some of us feel close to ex-stasis, almost able to visualize the movement of the people in the market, smell the oil, the olives, the almonds, and the wine, listen

to the racket of the chariots, the horses, the children, and the peddlers that once inhabited those villages and towns

.As a possible critique to the conference—and all reports must include a critique, though it is especially hard with the impeccable organization of this one—some of us felt that the tensions due to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict were present during the conference. Whereas, as committed citizens concerned with the affairs in the Middle East, many of us appreciated all sources of information, which we may not necessarily have direct access to back home; some of us felt at points that discussions about the terrible political situation of the twenty-first century were presented to us via essentialistic and biblical discourses retroactively based on categories of religions and peoplehoods that are ahistorical in a way that, as academics—and not as engaged citizens—we would never tolerate in other arenas of identity, such as sexuality, race, or gender. Speaking of gender, some of the male participants in the conference also regretted having used a gender privilege to visit the men-only monastery of Mar Saba and having thus been complicit with gender discrimination. Whereas that discrimination is based on some religious people's fear that their own spirituality and moral integrity may be threatened by the eroticism of some human beings against whom they will discriminate, our having willingly allowed that to divide us during part of an excursion makes some of us cringe in retrospect. Separate spheres no more. Divisions no more. The graffiti some of us saw on the monstrous wall in Bethlehem—"Here is a wall to weep at," "You've locked yourselves in," "I have a dream and this wall is not part of it"—resonate strongly.

And fighting divisions and segmentalization, some of us would also have liked to hear more references to the Szczecin conference in 2007 as well as to the other five international Melville Society conferences prior to that. Whereas each Melville conference is truly unique, it is also true that issues discussed, and debates opened in one can be picked up again and built upon or questioned or qualified in following gatherings. I believe that many will agree that the 2009 conference in Jerusalem was intellectually, poetically, and personally so meaningful to its participants that it would be desirable to give it some form of continuity in the next conference to which our Melville friends in Italy have already generously invited us all.

I could not finish this brief report without expressing profound gratitude to Tim Marr, Hilton Obenzinger, and Basem Ra'ad and to our friends in Jerusalem for having made this learning experience so incredibly pleasurable at all moments, and for giving us so many purposes to go back to Jerusalem soon.