

An American Quest for Truth in the Mid-Nineteenth Century: Herman Melville's *Mardi*: and *A Voyage Thither*

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From the spring of 1847 to the fall of 1848, while thinking about and working on his third book, *Mardi: and a Voyage Thither*, published in 1849[i], Herman Melville was a young man in a hurry. He seemed, at least, to be rushing to establish himself in life. The author of two relatively successful books, he had been courting Elizabeth Shaw—daughter of Lemuel Shaw, Chief Justice of the Massachusetts Supreme Court—and the two were married on August 4, 1847, just three days after Melville's twenty-eighth birthday; the couple moved into a house in New York City, which they shared with one of Melville's younger brothers, Allan, and his wife as well as with the two brothers' mother and four unmarried sisters; and by the summer of 1848 Melville knew he would soon be a father (his son Malcolm was born on February 16, 1849). From an intellectual point of view, Herman Melville also seemed to be in somewhat of a rush, reading widely in great books and learning all he could in an almost frenetic pursuit of knowledge. That pursuit—in part an attempt to make up for an incomplete formal education that had been interrupted in 1832 by the death of his father and definitively ended in 1837, when Melville was seventeen, due to the financial difficulties of his older brother Gansevoort—had, in fact, begun just before the period of the composition of *Mardi*. As Melville wrote to his friend and fellow author Nathaniel Hawthorne in May 1851, "Until I was twenty-five, I had no development at all. From my twenty-fifth year I date my life. Three weeks have scarcely passed, at any time between then and now, that I have not unfolded within myself" (*Correspondence* 193)[ii]. But it was starting in the spring of 1847, after Melville had finished going over the proof sheets of his second book, *Omoo: A Narrative of Adventures in the South Seas*, that his search for knowledge and truth really got under way.

Living in New York City considerably facilitated Melville's development. It allowed him to see original works of art and attend the opera, but, more importantly, his frequenting of the social and intellectual gatherings at the homes of Dr. John Wakefield Francis and, no doubt even more importantly, Evert A. Duyckinck, who "knew everyone worth knowing," gave Melville the opportunity to meet a variety of important men of the day. These were "the two houses in all of New York where one could hear the best conversation" (Parker 571). Melville became friends with Duyckinck, who gave him access to his extensive collection of books, and the young author also made frequent use of the New York Society Library. In the first months of 1848, for example, he borrowed from these two sources works by authors as varied as Sir Thomas Browne, François Rabelais, Esaias Tegnér, Charles H. Barnard, David Hartley and Louis

Antoine de Bougainville and purchased volumes of works by Shakespeare and Montaigne, Daniel Defoe's *The Fortunate Mistress*, Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*, Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria*, James MacPherson's *Fingal* and an edition of Seneca's *Morals by Way of Abstract* while continuing to delve into books on Pacific travel and exploration he had already made use of in writing his first two works (Foster 661). Duyckinck remarked in a letter of 18 March 1848 letter to his brother George, "By the way Melville reads old Books. He has borrowed Sir Thomas Browne of me and says finely of the speculations of the *Religio Medici* that Browne is kind of 'crack'd Archangel.' Was ever any thing of this sort said before by a sailor?" (Leyda 273). If Duyckinck's comments reveal his own inability to see the author of *Typee* and *Omoo* as an intellectual peer, it is clear that with his pursuit of knowledge and truth becoming almost obsessive, Melville was already on his way to surpassing his literary friend and mentor.

Mardi: and a Voyage Thither is, to a large extent, the literary reflection of that pursuit. Indeed, as Elizabeth Foster points out, many critics "have seen Melville's quest for truth as the main impulsion in *Mardi*" (677). And, at least as early as 1944, William E. Sedgwick observed that "*Mardi* has for its theme the human mind's quest for truth" (38). It should, however, be stated right away that Melville's third book is, of course, not simply a reflection; it is more of a parallel process, an intellectual exploration of what constitutes truth, an aesthetic grappling with the search for it. As the narrator states in the chapter entitled "Sailing On," "this new world here sought, is stranger far than his, who stretched his vans from Palos. It is the world of the mind" (ch. 169, 556) [\[iii\]](#). *Mardi* enacts, in fact, the process it describes, making it clearly a performative as well as a constative articulation of a quest for truth. As Richard H. Brodhead points out, "the real object" of the pursuit in *Mardi* is nothing Melville's characters seek "but the mental world he himself discloses through the act of creating his book" (39). Indeed, *Mardi* is more about the journey than the goal, and it's a journey that leads, among other things, to the conclusion that there is no ultimate truth, but which does mirror and embody the intellectual activity of what the discovery and testing of various truths—some no doubt truer than others—involves.

What I would like to suggest in this study is that if *Mardi* deals with the pursuit of truth, it can also been seen, more specifically, as displaying, to a certain extent, a distinctively American quest for this goal, one anchored in the particular, and very nationalistic, historical moment in which Melville was writing. It was, to begin with, a time when many authors and other concerned citizens were actively engaged in trying to create and promote a distinctly national literature for the still

relatively young country. Indeed, Duyckinck, who, as already mentioned, became both a friend and mentor of Melville, was a leading member of this movement. As Hershel Parker points out,

in late 1847 Melville at twenty-eight found himself in a literary society where many American editors and writers, some hardly older than he was, hoped and plotted to rival the British in every aspect of literary production. Some of the more nationalistic like Duyckinck or even chauvinistic like Cornelius Mathews were obsessed with creating a rival to *Punch*. Melville had participated in *Yankee Doodle* to that end, and even talked about yet another paper partly inspired by *Punch* (573).

Furthermore, Melville's own essay, "Hawthorne and His Mosses," which appeared the year after *Mardi* was published, participated directly and overtly in the chorus of calls for the support of a distinctively American literature (even if it also made fun of some of the excesses of nationalistic rhetoric). On a more directly political level, it should not be forgotten that as Melville was writing his third book, the United States was caught up in the fervor of Manifest Destiny and was engaged in what is probably its most bald-faced act of imperialism ever, the Mexican War, which resulted, in 1848, in the cession by Mexico of an immense expanse of land corresponding to present-day California, Nevada, Utah, most of Arizona and parts of Wyoming, Nevada and New Mexico (without counting the recently annexed Texas and that state's own extensive and, at the time, ill-defined claims). My argument, in brief, is that a characteristically American way of seeing the world helped, in fundamental ways, to shape the quest for truth in *Mardi*.

That there is a link between the search for truth, on the one hand, and nationalism (as well as a more generally American way of seeing the world), on the other, is suggested, at least, in a letter Melville wrote to Duyckinck on 3 March 1849. Here, Melville discusses Shakespeare, expressing his regret that the bard had not lived in nineteenth-century America:

I would to God Shakespeare had lived later, & promenaded in Broadway. Not that I might have had the pleasure of leaving my card for him at the Astor, or made merry with him over a bowl of the fine Duyckinck punch; but that the muzzle which all men wore on their souls in the Elizabethan day, might not have intercepted Shakespeare's full articulations. For I hold it a verity, that even Shakespeare, was not a frank man to the uttermost. And, indeed, who in this intolerant Universe is, or can be? But the Declaration of Independence makes a difference (*Correspondence* 122).

For Melville, an independent and democratic America opened up a greater possibility for writers to be frank, to be more truthful than Shakespeare was able to be. A little more than a year later, in his essay "Hawthorne

and His Mosses," just mentioned [\[iv\]](#), Melville comes back to Shakespeare, comparing the writer generally acknowledged as being at the pinnacle of English literature, to Hawthorne. At one point, Melville crows,

You must believe in Shakespeare's unapproachability, or quit the country. But what sort of a belief is this for an American, a man who is bound to carry republican progressiveness into Literature, as well as into Life? Believe me, my friends, that Shakespeares are this day being born on the banks of the Ohio. And the day will come, when you shall say who reads a book by an Englishman that is modern? (245-246).

At another point, he proclaims the need for a sort of affirmative action for American writers: "Let America then prize and cherish her writers; yea, let her glorify them. They are not so many in number, as to exhaust her good-will. And while she has good kith and kin of her own, to take to her bosom, let her not lavish her embraces upon the household of an alien" (247). In this same nationalistic essay, however, Melville also praises Hawthorne for, like Shakespeare, telling the truth. In a well-known passage, Melville declares,

if I magnify Shakespeare, it is not so much for what he did do, as for what he did not do, or refrained from doing. For in this world of lies, Truth is forced to fly like a sacred white doe in the woodlands; and only by cunning glimpses will she reveal herself, as in Shakespeare and other masters of the great Art of Telling the Truth,—even though it be covertly, and by snatches (244) [\[v\]](#).

For Melville, writing real American literature, writing like an American, is somehow wrapped up with "the great Art of Telling the Truth," clearly one of his goals in *Mardi*. And in that work, as already stated, he adopts certain strategies or stances, which are fundamentally American and, at the same time, serve his quest for truth. These aspects include (1) his use of the genre of the romance, (2) the imperialistic nature of the narrative voice and (3) a tendency towards fragmentation in both the work's structure and themes.

I. *Mardi* as Romance

While Melville was engaged in writing *Mardi*, he became tired and frustrated with the constraints of writing a realistic travel narrative, the basic genre of his first two works, *Typee* and *Omoo*, whose format he had originally planned to follow in the composition of his third book. Indeed, limitations on the exercise of his art, both real and perceived, would plague Melville throughout his career. As he wrote to Hawthorne in the May 1851 letter already quoted from,

Dollars damn me; and the malicious Devil is forever grinning in upon me, holding

the door ajar. My dear Sir, a presentiment is on me,—I shall at last be worn out and perish, like an old nutmeg-grater, grated to pieces by the constant attrition of the wood, that is, the nutmeg. What I feel most moved to write, that is banned,—it will not pay. Yet, altogether, write the *other* way I cannot. So the product is a final hash, and all my books are botches (*Correspondence* 191).

And Melville's continual attempts to resist the constraints on his writing, which he clearly saw as limitations on his attempts to tell the truth, led him to emphasize the importance of the author's liberty. As Wai-chee Dimock points out, "Authorship, for him, is almost exclusively an exercise in freedom, an attempt to proclaim the self's sovereignty over and against the world's" (7). On 25 March 1848, Melville wrote what could be interpreted as a rather arrogant letter to his then English publisher, John Murray—whom Melville knew had an aversion to anything but nonfiction—informing him that *Mardi* would not, in fact, be a realistic work, but a romance:

I have long thought that Polynisia [sic] furnished a great deal of rich poetical material that has never been employed hitherto in works of fancy; and which to bring out suitably, required only that play of freedom & invention accorded only to the Romancer & poet.—However, I thought, that I would postpone trying my hand at any thing fanciful of this sort, till some future day: tho' at times when in the mood I threw off occasional sketches applicable to such a work.—Well: proceeding in my narrative of *facts* I began to feel an invincible distaste for the same; & a longing to plume my pinions for a flight, & felt irked, cramped & fettered by plodding along with dull common places,—So suddenly abandoning the thing altogether [sic], I went to work heart & soul at a romance which is now in fair progress, since I had worked at it with an earnest ardor.—Start not, nor exclaim "Pshaw! Puh!"—My romance I assure you is no dish water nor its model borrowed from the Circulating Library. It is something new I assure you, & original if nothing more" (*Correspondence* 106).

Murray, not too surprisingly, ended up rejecting the manuscript [\[vi\]](#), but another English publisher, Richard Bentley, did accept it. In the preface to *Mardi* Melville explains to the reader his decision to write a romance. He states that since the veracity of his two earlier travel narratives had been questioned, he decided to write a romance "to see whether, the fiction might not, possibly, be received for a verity: in some degree the reverse of my previous experience" (Preface, xvii). To anyone who has read *Mardi*, that statement sounds humorous, if not absurd or even delusional, but from one point of view Melville clearly meant it. He was writing a book about the search for truth, and, thus, on one level or another, the question of veracity was fundamental. And Melville obviously felt that the romance would be a well-suited vehicle for such a theme. Indeed, as Hyland Packard states, "We are wrong to consider as anxious defense or halfjest Melville's prefatory statement that in *Mardi* he hoped to have 'fiction . . . received for a verity.' This is a very clear and deliberate statement of his goal, to express greater reality than he had revealed in *Typee* and

Omoo but through less realism" (242-243).

Within the context of the literary history of the United States, and especially American Romanticism, truth and more poetic types of expression, like the romance, had long been linked. In fact, almost a half a century earlier, in 1800, Charles Brockden Brown—a writer of gothic romances who is often credited with being the first professional author in America—had already asserted that romance could offer more veracity than history, for example. He writes:

Historians can only differ in degrees of diligence and accuracy, but romancers have more or less probability in their narrations. The same man is frequently both historian and romancer in the compass of the same work. Buffon, Linneus, and Herschel, are examples of this union. Their observations are as diligent as their theories are adventurous. Among the historians of nature, Haller was, perhaps, the most diligent: among romancers, he that came nearest to the truth was Newton (252).

It seems clear that the kind of romancer that Melville hoped to be was one who could come as close to the truth as Newton. Indeed, in *Mardi*, Melville has Yoomy, the poet, voice similar ideas. He declares to Mohi, the historian, "we poets are the true historians; we embalm; you corrode" (ch. 93, 281). Soon after, Babbalanja, the philosopher, essentially concurs with Yoomy, telling Mohi that "what are vulgarly called fictions are as much realities as the gross mattock of Dididi, the digger of trenches" (ch. 93, 283). And the narrator emphasizes the close relationship between what may seem unbelievable (like a romance) and truth, in his introduction to Samoa's amazing story of the at least partially successful surgical operation involving the replacement of part of an injured man's brains with part of those of pig: "A thing incredible is about to be related; but a thing may be incredible and still be true; sometimes it is incredible because it is true" (ch. 97, 296). In fact, Melville's project of writing a romance was inspired to a large extent by the more profound truthfulness he believed could be expressed in that genre.

The romance, still a respected form of expression fifty years after the comments made by Brown, was seen by many of the cultural nationalists of the antebellum period as an ideal vehicle for the literary works of the new American republic, a genre which was particularly well adapted to allow for a grand, imaginative representation of the soul of the large and vibrant new country. As John P. McWilliams, Jr. states, "To create some kind of heroic song for the New World remained a pressing cultural need from the time the Republic was formed until the time it was severed" (1), and while this song was often, especially in the early years of the United States, envisioned as an epic poem [\[viii\]](#), the romance, with its poetic

nature and sometimes sprawling structure was also seen as a form well-suited to the country's needs. Indeed, as Hyland Packard notes, Duyckinck, along with his friend Cornelius Mathews, "taught Melville that American literary greatness would come from 'originality' rather than realism in the Dickens manner" (246). And the nationalistic Young America movement

emphasized the epic, the overstated, and a symbolism that was part of a national attitude. This attitude, which might be called the Niagara Effect, made the magnitude of American natural phenomena into a rationale for the achievements of an independent and even superior American culture. . . . In the Duyckinck-Mathews circle scale and hyperbole were literary value and method in the 1840's. Hyperbole would create the symbol which would express the large truth in the big, new fiction (Packard 247).

Mardi was Melville's first major attempt to follow that national model.

This intimate link between romance and Americanness, it should be noted, has been highlighted by modern critics, perhaps most notably by Richard Chase. For Chase, the romance is a defining feature of fiction of the United States. As he states, "since the earliest days the American novel, in its most original and characteristic form, has worked out its destiny and defined itself by incorporating an element of romance" (viii). Chase sees what he calls the "American romance-novel" as embodying "freer, more daring, more brilliant fiction that contrasts with the solid moral inclusiveness and massive equability of the English novel" (viii). If Chase may have been overstating his case in an effort to highlight the differences between American and British literature [\[viii\]](#), his essential point, it seems to me, remains valid. And Melville's choice to write a romance, thus, is a fairly clear attempt to use what he saw as a distinctively American genre in the service of both his attempt to write a great narrative for his country and his quest for truth.

II. The Imperial Narrator

The narrator of *Mardi*, who is at first unnamed and then later assumes the identity of the demi-god Taji, has an imperialistic aspect to his nature, which, I would argue, is closely linked to the contemporary spirit of Manifest Destiny and the historical realities of American territorial expansionism of the mid-nineteenth century. I do not see Melville as offering an apology for such a stance, far from it, but that the narrator can be seen as an avatar of aggressive imperialism, exemplified most dramatically at the time by the Mexican War, seems to me quite clear. In fact, the narrator of *Mardi* represents an expression of the exuberant spirit of Manifest Destiny and, at the same time, an implicit criticism of that nationalistic sentiment. The ambiguous attitude on Melville's part,

in relation to the Mexican War, specifically, and the spirit of Manifest Destiny, more generally, is suggested in a letter he wrote to his brother Gansevoort on 29 May 1846, shortly after America's declaration of war against Mexico. While the letter is clearly playful, and was intended, as Lynn Horth points out, "to distract Melville's ailing brother" (39)[\[ix\]](#), it seems to both criticize the exaggerated rhetoric and mindless enthusiasm generated by the war and, at the same time, get caught up in those very emotions. Melville begins his banter about the conflict thus:

People here are all in a state of delirium about the Mexican War. A military ardor [sic] pervades all ranks—Militia Colonels wax red in their coat facings—and 'prentice boys are running off to the wars by scores.—Nothing is talked of but the "Halls of the Montezumas" And to hear folks prate about those purely fictive apartments one would suppose that they were another Versailles where our democratic rabble meant to "make a night of it" ere long (*Correspondence* 40).

The mocking tone here, including the mention of "our democratic rabble," seems clear enough. Melville presents the war spirit as an example of a sort of mass frenzy that in no way reflects well on the United States. But immediately after this passage, he seems to contradict that view:

But seriously something great is impending. The Mexican War (tho' our troops have behaved right well) is nothing of itself—but "a little spark kindleth a great fire" as the well known author of the Proverbs very justly remarks—and who knows what all this may lead to—Will it breed a rupture with England? Or any other great powers?—Prithee, are there any notable battles in store—any Yankee Waterloos?—Or think once of a mighty Yankee fleet coming to the war shock in the middle of the Atlantic with an English one.—Lord, the day is at hand, when we will be able to talk of our killed & wounded like some of the old Eastern conquerors reckoning them up by thousands;—when the Battle of Monmouth will be thought child's play—& canes made out of the Constitution's timbers be thought no more of than bamboos (*Correspondence* 41).

Indeed, even if there is still a sardonic tone in this part of the letter, it also betrays a certain attraction to the excitement of the events of the day. And the same sort of ambivalence can be seen, for example, in the words of the mysterious scroll in Chapter 161 of *Mardi*, which offers a lengthy description and critique of the United States under the thinly veiled allegorical representation of Vivenza. The scroll declares to the inhabitants of the island:

though unlike King Bello of Dominora [the allegorical name for England], your great chieftain, sovereign-kings! may not declare war of himself; nevertheless, he has done a still more imperial thing:—gone to war without declaring intentions. You yourselves were precipitated upon a neighboring nation, ere you knew your spears were in your hands (528).

This clear indictment of the Mexican War is immediately followed by what seems to be sincere praise for America: "But, as in stars you have written it on the welkin, sovereign-kings! You are a great and glorious people. And verily, yours is the best and happiest land under the sun" (528). As Hershel Parker notes, both "Herman and Gansevoort took American expansion as inevitable, however ironical Herman would treat the subject" (391). And Manifest Destiny, Parker adds, was a political vision that that proved "alluring" to Gansevoort and "was not without a strong appeal for Herman" (535).

The narrator of *Mardi*, as already stated, seems imbued with the aggressive spirit of Manifest Destiny. There are numerous examples of this attitude. The narrator, to start with, is consistently focused on looking and moving westward, just as were American proponents of expansionism. Near the beginning of the book, when he dreams of abandoning the *Arcturion*, the narrator invests the west with an alluring poetic splendor:

Where we then were was perhaps the most unfrequented and least known portion of these seas. Westward, however, lay numerous groups of islands, loosely laid down upon the charts, and invested with all the charms of dream-land. . . . In the distance what visions were spread! The entire western horizon high piled with gold and crimson clouds; airy arches, domes, and minarets; as if the yellow, Moorish sun were setting behind some vast Alhambra" (ch. 1, 7-8).

From that point on, the whole movement of the narrative is towards the west. For example, the narrator muses just a short time later that "due west, though distant a thousand miles, stretched north and south an almost endless Archipelago, here and there inhabited, but little known" (ch. 3, 11)—and that is the world he hopes to discover. That this movement west seems almost to be an end in and of itself is suggested, in fact, by the narrator's somewhat strange formulation that he and Jarl needed to leave the *Arcturion* as soon as possible since its course was carrying them away from the most desirable parallel, not for their route westward, but for their "route to the westward" (ch. 4, 17). Later, having encountered the *Parki*, itself already "steering a nearly westerly course" (ch. 19, 57), the narrator continues to push on in his "westward progress" (ch. 34, 108). The meeting with Yillah changes nothing: "our destination was still the islands to the westward" (ch. 46, 144). And having met up with King Media and his three companions, Mohi, Babbalanja and Yoomy, they set off to visit Mardi, with no compass direction being indicated, but the next time one is made explicit, when they are off the shores of Porpheero, the reader finds Media crying out, "westward be our course" (ch. 153, 499). The whole obsession with westward movement is finally summed up in a paean declaimed by the narrator, which begins,

West, West! West, West! Whitherward point Hope and prophet-fingers; whitherward, at sun-set, kneel all worshipers of fire; whitherward in mid-ocean, the great whales turn to die; whitherward face all the Moslem dead in Persia; whitherward lie Heaven and Hell!—West, West: Whitherward mankind and empires—flocks, caravans, armies, navies; worlds, suns, and stars all wend!—West, West! (ch. 168, 551).

Again, like the enthusiasts of Manifest Destiny, the narrator seems to see the “West” as the embodiment of all his dreams.

A clear aggressiveness and an assumed position of superiority on the part of the narrator, however, also seem to express the spirit of expansionism. When he and Jarl board the *Parki*, for example, the narrator decides to withhold information concerning their past from Samoa, “fancying that if disclosed, it would lessen his deference for us, as men superior to himself” (ch. 28, 90). This thought leads directly to the narrator’s decision to take on the “air of a master,” which, he notes, “was not lost upon the rude Islander [Samoa]” (ch. 28, 90). Not long after, the narrator notes his “being anxious, at once to assume the unquestioned supremacy” (ch. 29, 96), which he executes forthwith, blithely summarizing, “Our course determined, and the command of the vessel tacitly yielded up to myself, the next thing done was to put every thing in order” (ch. 29, 97). And this taking over of control leaves him with a feeling of “no little importance” (ch. 29, 97). Once the narrator assumes the role of the demi-god Taji, as Patricia Chaffe points out, he “rarely speaks except to declare a decision already made” (81).

The whole scene involving the saving—or kidnapping, one might say—of Yillah is also aggressive. Before the narrator has any information at all about her or the islanders escorting her, he directs “the muskets to be loaded” (ch. 39, 127) and mentions in passing that he “looked like an Emir” (ch. 39, 127). The narrator quickly resolves to “accomplish the deliverance of the maiden” (ch. 41, 131), and in the process he ends up killing Aleema, the priest under whose protection Yillah was being transported, noting that, in addition, “some of the natives were wounded in the fray” (ch. 41, 133).[\[x\]](#) The point of all of this aggression, it becomes clear, is to take possession of Yillah, and the narrator is soon able to declare, “Sweet Yillah was mine!” (ch. 45, 143).

Arriving in Mardi, the narrator also assumes a threatening pose, explaining, “I crossed my cutlass on my chest,” “reposing my hand on the hilt” (ch. 54, 165). He then announces himself as Taji and asserts that he has come “because it pleases him to come” and that “Taji will depart when it suits him” (ch. 54, 166). The intruder, in true imperial fashion, will do exactly what he wants to do. This general attitude on the part of the narrator, in fact, continues unabated. In Chapter 84, he casually mentions

that "If ever Taji joins a club, be it a Beef-Steak Club of Kings!" (259), monarchs being the only ones fit, apparently, to sit as his peers. And in the very last chapter of the book, just a few lines from the end, the narrator, ignoring the pleas of his companions to give up his search for Yillah, cries out, "Now, I am my own soul's emperor; and my first act is abdication!" (ch. 195, 654). Just what exactly is meant by these words is unclear^[xi], but the narrator, in any case, seems, at this point, to have given himself a promotion from demi-god to God tout court, and the declaration as a whole suggests the assumption of an ultimate imperialistic power that knows no limits and recognizes no master.

In the context of this study, however, I would also like to highlight the close link between the narrator's imperialistic stance and the search for truth. Indeed, the narrator's attitude towards truth parallels his attitude towards the world; he wants to possess it and, if possible, it seems, to possess all of it. As Wai-chee Dimock points out, "the spatial appetites of Truth make the author an 'imperial' self almost by necessity—imperial, not only because he writes freely, in sovereign autonomy, but also because he writes appropriatively, like an empire" (8). And this propensity in *Mardi* manifests itself in various ways. One recurring trait of the narrator's is to take over the stories of others, putting them into his own words rather than letting them tell their own tales. Through such actions, he appropriates their experiences and the knowledge and insights gained through those experiences. The first clear instance of this behavior is when he tells Samoa's story of the *Parki*. The narrator introduces it thus: "Now: this story of his was related in the mixed phraseology of a Polynesian sailor. With a few random reflections, in substance, it will be found in the six following chapters" (ch. 21, 67). Indeed, the alterations the narrator admits having made, his addition of "a few random reflections" and his confession that the story is Samoa's, "in substance," indicate not only that his changes may be significant, but also that he has clearly sought to appropriate Samoa's experiences in order to draw his own conclusions from them, in order to use them in his own quest for truth. The narrator employs a similar strategy with Yillah. Having rescued her from Aleema, he is "all eagerness to hear her history" (ch. 43, 137). But it's not exactly Yillah's story that the reader is given. The narrator states that her "disclosures" "are here presented in the form in which they were afterward more fully narrated" (ch. 43, 137). It appears that what is to follow will be a faithful version of Yillah's story, but soon after the narrator uses phraseology indicating that he has, here too, appropriated her account and made undefined changes in it: "Though clothed in language of my own, the maiden's story is in substance the same as she related" (ch. 44, 139). And, in this case, the narrator's attempt to make the story his own goes much further than it does with Samoa since, having heard her account of

her past, he then invents his own version, which he tries to convince her is her “real” story—and it is immediately after having thus fashioned his own view of the “truth” that he announces, as already noted, “Sweet Yillah was mine!” (ch. 45, 143). Total possession comes only once the narrator gains Yillah not only physically, but intellectually, taking over her very essence.

Other examples of the imperialistic narrator appropriating the stories, and thus the experiences and knowledge, of other characters include the history of the “curious Peepi.” In the telling of this story, the narrator claims to be offering the words of Mohi: “the chronicler gave us the following account; for all of which he alone is responsible” (ch. 67, 202). Mohi may be alone “responsible” for the account, but it is nonetheless told in the narrator’s words. And when Samoa relates the story of the miraculous brain operation, the narrator, as Taji, declares, “But let not the truth be postponed. To the stand, Samoa, and through your interpreter, speak” (ch. 98, 298). The narrator thus appropriates a “truth” through interpreting for, and thus speaking for, Samoa. And the narrator later, several times, takes over accounts offered by Mohi (“And straightway Braid-Beard proceeded with a narration, in substance as follows” [ch. 110, 341]; “Called upon to reveal what his chronicles said on this theme, Braid-Beard complied; at great length narrating, what now follows condensed” [ch 113, 348]; “‘Now, to what purpose that anecdote?’ demanded Babbalanja of Mohi, who in substance related it” [ch. 114, 352]).

These appropriations of various stories and accounts along with their links to truth are, from one point of view, just the tip of the iceberg, one of the less dramatic ways, in fact, that acts of imperialistic possession are employed in the narrator’s quest for truth. The narrator also uses more frontal attacks and more sweeping seizures in his appropriation of knowledge, all of which occur, not surprisingly, after he assumes the role of the demi-god Taji. In chapter 75, for instance, which highlights the fact that great undertakings take time, the narrator offers a list of examples that seems like it’s never going to end. With the narrator having already provided quite a few illustrations of his point, the chapter’s fifth paragraph begins thus:

But let us back from fire to stone. No fine firm fabric ever yet grew like a gourd. Nero’s House of Gold was not raised in a day; nor the Mexican House of the Sun; nor the Alhambra; nor the Escorial; nor Titus’s Amphitheater; nor the Illinois Mounds; nor Diana’s great columns at Ephesus; nor Pompey’s proud Pillar; nor the Parthenon; nor the Altar of Belus; nor Stonehenge; nor Solomon’s Temple; nor Tadmor’s towers; nor Susa’s bastions; nor Persopolis’s pediments (229).

And the narrator is still just warming up. After these fifteen examples,

the paragraph goes on to list twenty more cases supporting the contention that great creations do not come into being overnight, and it ends with the two extended examples of man and the universe itself. Indeed, in an attempt to define this truth, the narrator seems to want to list, and at the same time possess, every case. And the fact that he ends with the cosmos, in which "day by day new planets are being added to elder-born Saturns" (229-230), only emphasizes the imperialistic dimension of his search for truth, which includes, it seems, a desire to possess not just the truths of the whole world, but those of the entire universe.

A similar attitude can be seen in Chapter 97, entitled "Faith and Knowledge," which serves as an introduction to the anecdote, already referred to, of Samoa's apparently miraculous brain operation. This brief chapter highlights the fact that knowledge requires faith and that without faith knowledge falls apart. While from one point of view this potential weakness of knowledge seems obvious and unavoidable, the narrator implicitly claims, personally, to have avoided that pitfall. He asserts that his knowledge does not, in fact, rely on faith since, with a sort of imperialistic omnipresence, he has gained it all firsthand and thus possesses it in a way that others cannot. He asserts:

I was at the subsiding of the Deluge, and helped swab the ground, and build the first house. With the Israelites, I fainted in the wilderness; was in court, when Solomon outdid all the judges before him. I, it was, who suppressed the lost work of Manetho, on the Egyptian theology, as containing mysteries not to be revealed to posterity, and things at war with the canonical scriptures; I, who originated the conspiracy against that purple murderer, Domitian; I, who in the senate moved, that great and good Aurelian be emperor. I instigated the abdication of Diocletian, and Charles the Fifth; I touched Isabella's heart, that she hearkened to Columbus (297).

Here again, the narrator's desire for knowledge is expressed through a imperialistic thirst to possess, in this case, the whole history of mankind, thus driving him not only to annex the world, so to speak, both spatially and temporally. In fact, his quest here goes beyond possession to identification. He seems to want not just to have all knowledge but to become all knowledge. And the same sort of melding process is also suggested in Chapter 119, "Dreams." Here, once again, there is close identification between the narrator and the world: "beneath me, at the Equator, the earth pulses and beats like a warrior's heart; till I know not, whether it be not myself" (367). The imperialistic possession seems complete: "I walk a world that is mine; and enter many nations, as Mungo Park rested in African cots; I am served like Bajazet: Bacchus my butler, Virgil my minstrel, Philip Sidney my page" (368). And if the narrator's embodiment of the universe itself does not, in fact, allow him to possess truth itself, it gets him as close as he can be: "with all the past and present pouring in me, I roll down my billow from afar. Yet not I, but

another: God is my Lord; and though many satellites revolve around me, I and all mine revolve round the great central Truth, sun-like, fixed and luminous forever in the foundationless firmament" (368). Finally, in Chapter 169, "Sailing On," the narrator, in a passage already referred to, in part, makes a direct parallel between the imperialistic voyages of discovery of Columbus and Balboa and his own search for truth: "But this new world here sought, is stranger far than his, who stretched his vans from Palos. It is the world of the mind; wherein the wanderer may gaze round, with more of wonder than Balboa's band roving through the golden Aztec glades" (557).

III. Truth and Fragmentation

A third and final dimension of *Mardi* that can be seen as being rooted in its mid-nineteenth-century American context as well as intimately linked to the quest for truth is its fragmentation, which not only characterizes the structure of the book, but develops into a pervasive theme. First of all, the 195 chapters, many of which are little more than a page or two in length, slice up the ostensible "story" into a multitude of discrete messages whose connection to each other is often tenuous. *Mardi*, like many of Melville's works, though to a greater extent than some of them, is a collection of pieces, often seeming more like a string of separate sketches and essays whose main link is sometimes simply the fact that they follow each other in successive chapters. Clearly the travel narrative aspect of the work, which Melville never completely abandoned, lends itself to this structure, as does the "geography" of *Mardi*, which comprises an extensive series of islands. As Philippe Jaworski points out, *Mardi* presents a voyage of discovery of a world laid out in an archipelago, and it does so through a discourse also in the form of an archipelago. That representation, he notes, is, appropriately enough, discontinuous, non-dialectical, globalizing and fragmented, forming a chain of complementary and contradictory propositions (65)[\[xii\]](#). Indeed, once the narrator meets King Media and sets off with him and their three companions, the narrative essentially becomes a tale of island hopping, with each new destination offering the occasion to discourse on a different topic. This structural and thematic fragmentation can be seen as having a parallel in the multiple voices incorporated into that of the narrator, already discussed, but also, at the same time, in the three characters Mohi, Babbalanja and Yoomy. As Jaworski also points out, this group offers a triple perspective on human knowledge as chronicle, speculation and song; or as history, morals (or ethics) and imagination; or, from the point of view of modes of truth seeking, as facts, backed up by memory, as argument, based on the exercise of reason and as poetry, which bears witness to the power of dreams (64)[\[xiii\]](#). And even these

three voices, I would add, are themselves fragmented since the characters often, in various ways, express the words or opinions of others. Mohi, described as “the Teller of Legends” (ch. 66, 200) and “the keeper of chronicles” (ch. 67, 202), for example, often quotes, or at least paraphrases, his historical sources; Babbalanja, for his part, frequently cites various authorities, notably the writer Bardianna, and is, from time to time, possessed by his devil, Azzageddi, who speaks through the philosopher; finally, Yoomy sings songs and recites poems written by others.

This multidimensional fragmentation becomes a recurring theme in *Mardi*, manifesting itself in various ways throughout the book. The very first island that the narrator and his companions visit after sailing off from King Media’s home of Odo, for example, is Valapee, ruled over by the boy monarch, Peepi. His reign is anything but serene as Peepi “was supposed to have inherited the valiant spirits of some twenty heroes, sages, simpletons, and demi-gods, previously lodged in his sire” (ch. 67, 202). His very psyche, thus, is an image of fragmentation and unpredictability. Much later, when Babbalanja is discoursing on the great work of Lombardo, the “Koztanza,” clearly meant as a self-reflexive reference to *Mardi* itself, King Abrazza protests that “the Koztanza lacks cohesion; it is wild, unconnected, all episode.” To this charge, Babbalanja replies: “And so is *Mardi* itself:—nothing but episodes” (ch. 180, 597). Finally, the intimate link between the fragmented world that is *Mardi* and the fragmented structure and themes of *Mardi*, Melville’s book, are highlighted near the end of the work when the narrator reflects that, “As if *Mardi* were a poem, and every island a canto, the shore now in sight was called Flozella-a-Nina, or The-Last-Verse-of-the-Song” (ch. 191, 642).

This fragmentation, however, is also linked to mid-nineteenth century America. It is reflected, for example, in the federal structure of the American government, which allows each state to retain a good portion of its sovereignty (the independence of the individual states was stronger, it should be recalled, during the antebellum period than it was later; southern demands for the respect of states’ rights, as is well known, almost led to the dissolution of the Union)[\[xiv\]](#). Indeed, when the narrator and his companions visit Vivenza, the allegorical representation of the United States, Media, highlighting what he sees as the fragmentation of the society they are visiting, asks, “How comes it, that with so many things to divide them, the valley-tribes still keep their mystic league intact.” Babbalanja responds with the somewhat, but only somewhat, strained comparison between the unity of the inhabitants of Vivenza and “the mysterious federation subsisting among the mollusca of the Tunicata order” (ch. 163, 536). The mollusca, in fact, are a perfect image of antebellum American federalism:

They live in a compound structure; but though connected by membranous canals, freely communicating throughout the league—each member has a heart and stomach of its own; provides and digests its own dinners; and grins and bears its own gripes, without imparting the same to its neighbors. But if a prowling shark touches one member, it ruffles all. Precisely thus now with Vivenza. In that confederacy, there are as many consciences as tribes; hence, if one member on its own behalf, assumes aught afterwards repudiated, the sin rests on itself alone; is not participated (ch. 163, 537).

The link between the fragmentation frequent in the writings of Melville and the American essence as characterized by a similar sort of modular spirit has been highlighted by Gilles Deleuze. He observes, first of all, that the literature of the United States is one that tells the story of a “universal” people composed of emigrants from many different countries, an observation which is linked to his concept of “minor literature,” one written by a “minority” group in the language of a generally larger, dominant population (14) [\[xv\]](#). But Deleuze goes further and asserts that America’s fragmented origins and the diversity of its composition make its writings a “minor literature” “par excellence.” Because the United States (the concept of multiplicity, I would point out, being inscribed in its very name) is, as Whitman declared, “a teeming nation of nations” (5), the fragmented nature of America’s literature is profoundly linked to its essence (76) [\[xvi\]](#). Finally, for Deleuze, the specificity of the fragmentation of American literature all comes together, to a large extent, in Melville, and it all comes together specifically in relation to the search for truth. A sort of American patchwork design, Deleuze states, becomes the “law” of the works of Melville (99), and with that “law” Melville sketches the outlines that lead to American pragmatism (a philosophy, I would note, that eschews a totalizing vision or logical consistency), itself continuing in the path laid out by nineteenth-century Transcendentalism. And that outline, of course, is necessarily fragmentary, not, as Deleuze states, like the pieces of a puzzle that together form a seamless whole, but more like undressed stones making up a wall with no mortar in which each part is independent and yet necessary to the overall structure (110) [\[xvii\]](#).

As James Jubak notes, “Truth is attainable only through a collation of diverse viewpoints, and the later parts of *Mardi* illustrate that belief” (131). For Jubak, “Each individual perspective is inadequate and no one individual guide can present the whole truth. Like the geography of *Mardi*, in which each island is at once a complete entity and a part of a larger whole, the visions of individuals present complete impressions that are yet only parts of whole truth” (131-132). Indeed, examples of the link between what I am suggesting is a very American fragmentation and the quest for truth are frequent in *Mardi*. When, for instance, the two

emissaries of Donjalolo, the ruler of the island of Juam who is forbidden by a sacred declaration to leave his own realm, return with their findings about the island of Rafona, they disagree about almost everything. Having hoped for reliable information about the outside world, Donjalolo becomes enraged:

"What!" he exclaimed, "will ye contradict each other before our very face? Oh, Oro! how hard is truth to be come at by proxy! Fifty accounts have I had of Rafona; none of which wholly agreed; and here, these two varlets, sent expressly to behold and report, these two lying knaves, speak crookedly both" (ch. 82, 249).

As far as the quest for truth goes, however, that the two emissaries offer contradictory accounts and thus a fragmented picture of Rafona is precisely the point. No single report can contain all of the truth, and, as Babbalanja soon makes clear, as far as Donjalolo's envoys are concerned, "both are wrong, and both are right" (ch. 82, 250). Other examples include Babbalanja admitting that his most trusted and beloved author, Bardianna, at times contradicts himself (ch. 104, 318) or an exchange between Babbalanja and Mohi concerning Alma, the allegorical representation of Christ, in which it becomes apparent that he seems, at certain times, to have dissuaded his followers from making pilgrimages to the summit of the "Tall Peak of Ofo" and, at other times, to have encouraged them to do so (ch. 105, 323-324). An extended version of this lesson is offered in Chapter 115 in the story of the nine blind men who attempt to find the original trunk of a centuries-old banyan (or banian) tree (355-357). A variation on the classic Indian parable of the blind men and the elephant, here the men are unable to agree on which is the original trunk of the many-trunked banyan, and the fact that they continually contradict each other is again the point. The truth is contained in the very fragmentation of their contradictory answers. These repeated instances of disconnected and often conflicting information that through its very lack of consistency thus approaches genuine truth is raised to an article of faith when Babbalanja, while philosophizing, is criticized by Media for being inconsistent. Babbalanja defends himself thus:

"And for that very reason, my lord, *not* inconsistent; for the sum of my inconsistencies makes up my consistency. And to be consistent to one's self, is often to be inconsistent to Mardi. Common consistency implies unchangeableness; but much of the wisdom here below lives in a state of transition" (ch. 143, 459).

Truth, like the world, like the fragmented nation of immigrants or nation of nations that makes up America, like the mosaic federalism of the United States, is necessarily inconsistent.

* * * * *

To conclude, Melville's decisions to adopt the genre of the romance, his development of a narrative voice with a strongly pronounced imperialistic strain and his use of a fundamentally fragmented structure and a patchwork of inconsistent points of view in his third work, *Mardi: and A Voyage Thither*, were all significant aesthetic choices that were no doubt the product of a variety of motivations, both conscious and intuitive. What I have tried to demonstrate here is that all of these aspects, whatever their other various sources and functions, are also fundamentally products of the specific context of the United States of the 1840s as well as being intimately linked to the book's central concern with verity, announced in the preface. In *Mardi*, Melville not only made a dramatic, if flawed, debut in the world of literary creation, but he also created and acted out a very American quest for truth.

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Notes

[i] The English edition of Melville's book came out in March; the American edition was published in April.

[ii] Though long conjectured to have been written on 1 June 1851, Hershel Parker has redated this letter to early May of that year (Parker 841).

[iii] In order to facilitate the location of quotations from *Mardi* that appear in this article for readers using other editions, chapter numbers (when they do not appear in the body of the text), followed by page numbers from the standard Northwestern-Newberry edition, will be indicated parenthetically.

[iv] The essay, published in the 17 August and 24 August 1850 issues of the *New York Literary World*, a weekly journal edited at the time by Evert A. Duyckinck and his brother George, is ostensibly a review of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Mosses from an Old Manse*, a collection of tales and sketches first published in 1846. While Melville does offer some insightful comments on Hawthorne's work, much of the essay is devoted to a nationalistic consideration of the present state of American literature.

[v] The image here of the doe echoes a similar one of a hind in Chapter 119 of *Mardi*, which deals self-reflexively with, among other themes, the book's focus on truth. The narrator, having noted that, "though many satellites revolve around me, I and all mine revolve round the great central Truth, sun-like, fixed and luminous forever in the foundationless firmament" (368), ends the chapter with the remark that, "The fever runs through me like lava; my hot brain burns like a coal; and like many a monarch, I am less to be envied, than the veriest hind in the land" (368).

[vi] John F. Guido notes that while other reasons may have been involved, in its decision to reject *Mardi*, "perhaps the deciding factor was the House of Murray's aversion to poetry and to fiction" (363).

[vii] Among the earliest, and relatively unsuccessful, attempts were Joel Barlow's *Vision of Columbus* (1787) and his more ambitious *The Columbiad* (1807). Just two years before the publication of *Mardi*, however, in his

review of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's long narrative poem, *Evangeline: A Tale of Acadie*, John Greenleaf Whittier declared: "EUREKA! Here, then, we have it at last,—an American poem, with the lack of which British reviewers have so long reproached us. . . . the author has succeeded in presenting a series of exquisite pictures of the striking and peculiar features of life and nature in the New World" (365).

[viii] Agnieszka Soltysik Monnet, for example, suggests that the characterization of American fiction by modern critics like Chase as having a strong element of romance was in part an attempt "to insist that American literature was very different from the British" and in part an aversion to labeling American literature "gothic," "because, first of all, this term was too closely linked to British literature, and second, it sounded too much like the airport novels for women which happened to also be called 'gothic romances' in the 50s and 60s" (6). While this comment does bring an important corrective to Chase's use of the term romance, in the case of *Mardi* that label, used by Melville himself, does seem appropriate. Furthermore, a gothic element, though important in many other American writings described as romances (including, as Soltysik Monnet points out, Melville's *Pierre; or, The Ambiguities*) is virtually absent from *Mardi*.

[ix] Gansevoort had been serving in London as secretary of the American legation, a political plum he had received for his tireless support of successful presidential candidate James K. Polk. Though Melville knew Gansevoort was ill when he wrote this letter, he was unaware that his brother had, in fact, already died.

[x] The narrator's intervention can, of course, be seen as justified, since he learns that Yillah "was being borne an offering from the island of Amma to the gods of Tedaidee" (ch. 41, 131). However, without embracing an unquestioning doctrine of cultural relativism, this interference can be seen as smacking of western moralistic disapproval of and interference in native customs.

[xi] Tyrus Hillway suggests that "here 'abdication' is difficult to account for if it refers to something other than suicide" (207), and James Miller states that "In asserting rule over his own soul, he [the narrator] usurps the function of God" (413). Harold Beaver interprets the declaration thus: "With final bravado, he [the narrator] cries: 'Now, I am my own soul's emperor; and my first act is abdication!' That must imply a symbolic suicide on launching into the endless sea, which is the precise point where *Moby-Dick* begins" (32).

[xii] "Dans *Mardi*, le voyage de découverte du Monde en archipel se déploie comme un discours en archipel : c'est une représentation critique de caractère discontinu, non dialectique, globalisant et parcellaire, un enchaînement de propositions à la fois complémentaires et contradictoires" (Jaworski 65).

[xiii] "On voit que ce trio de pèlerins (nous en excluons le roi Media, dont le rôle se réduit à susciter commentaires et éclaircissements) maîtrise une triple perspective du savoir humain : la chronique, la spéculation, le chant (CLV, 464), ou encore l'Histoire, la Morale et l'Imagination, ou encore trois formes ou trois modes de la vérité : celle du fait, garantie par la mémoire ; celle de l'argument, qui s'assure de l'exercice de la raison ; celle du poème, qui témoigne des pouvoirs du rêve" (Jaworski 64). One could note, however, that, as Wai-chee Dimock points out, the differentiation among these voices is actually not as distinct as all that. Indeed, the narrator's imperialistic nature, which I discussed in the second section, does tend to take over the other characters' voices. As Dimock states, "speech in *Mardi* is primarily something the author owns, and—ownership being exclusive—speech here also tends to be monotonous. Instead of a rich array of tones and accents, styles and vocabularies (as we might expect for a novel the

bulk of which is conversation), *Mardi* presents us with an uncanny uniformity of speech. . . . *Mardi's* monotony is the logical consequence, I think, of its commitment to proprietorship" (69). While I would agree with Dimock's suggestion, I do not think that the narrator's tendency to appropriate other voices totally negates the fragmentary vision suggested by the multiple points of view offered, most significantly, by Mohi, Babbalanja and Yoomy.

[xiv] One of the major threats of disunion in the period preceding the Civil War itself is alluded to in *Mardi* in the reference to Nulli (see ch. 162), an allegorical representation of John Calhoun, the ardent states' rights advocate who helped precipitate the nullification crisis of 1832-1833, in which South Carolina refused to recognize federal authority.

[xv] "La littérature américaine a ce pouvoir exceptionnel de produire des écrivains qui peuvent raconter leurs propres souvenirs, mais comme ceux d'un peuple universel composé par les émigrés de tous les pays" (Deleuze 14). In the case of the United States in the mid-nineteenth century, the dominant group whose language American authors had no choice but to use was represented, obviously enough, by the English.

[xvi] Deleuze writes, "La littérature américaine n'est-elle pas mineure pas excellence, en tant que l'Amérique prétend fédérer les minorités les plus diverses, 'Nation fourmillante de nations' ? L'Amérique recueille des extraits, présente des échantillons de tous les âges, toutes les terres et toutes les nations" (76).

[xvii] "Contemporain du transcendantalisme américain (Emerson, Thoreau), Melville dessine déjà les traits du pragmatisme qui va le prolonger. C'est d'abord l'affirmation d'un mode en *processus*, en *archipel*. Non pas même un puzzle, dont les pièces en s'adaptant reconstitueraient un tout, mais plutôt comme un mur de pierres libres, non cimentées, où chaque élément vaut pour lui-même et pourtant par rapport aux autres" (Deleuze 110).