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2010

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No American Miltons:
Melville, Zukofsky, and America's Lost Epic Tradition

By

Timothy Clayton Wood

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

English

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

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Fall 2010

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By Timothy Clayton Wood

Abstract

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No American Miltons: Melville, Zukofsky, and America's Lost Epic Tradition explores the exigencies of the epic traditions in American poetry. I examine the novelization of the epic and the concomitant lyricization of poetry within American literary history before positing an extant albeit chthonic epic tradition best exemplified in the 19th century by Herman Melville's *Clarel* and in the 20th century by Louis Zukofsky's "A". I argue that while the epic tradition stemming from Wordsworth through Whitman and on to Pound is indeed defunct, an alternative epic tradition exemplified by Melville and Zukofsky's use of Milton is alive and well, although it goes unrecognized. I ground my notions of epic in the prevailing discourses about the genre in 20th century American literary criticism and link my definitions to the basic tenets outlined by Aristotle. By offering provisional definitions of epic, yet ones specific enough to justify the use of what has often been a contentious term, I attempt to bring aspects of the poems that often go unnoticed into relief so that otherwise seemingly unrelated poetic projects can be realigned and understood as part of a tradition that tests the critical reception of epic in general, and *Clarel* and "A" in particular. Attending to the epic qualities in these poems may also lead us to ponder how our understanding of them is predicated on what we imagine a poem to be.

In a series of chapters on Melville, I illustrate the ways in which epic discourse has been deflected in the criticism of *Clarel* toward either the novel or the lyric. I then offer a close reading of *Clarel* as an epic, attending specifically to the role of the storyteller, the condition of the characters, and the function of the landscape. In the next chapters, I turn my attention to Zukofsky. After considering the limitations of the postmodernist and autobiographical readings of "A", I compare the poem to Ezra Pound's *Cantos* in order to delineate the problems with situating "A" within the tradition of the modern verse epic. I then offer a considered reading of "A" both structurally and thematically as an epic. Finally, I conclude with a brief epilogue that looks at the way epic informs possibilities in postmodern 21st century writing, where genre distinctions remain suspect and are sources for hybridization more than distinct categorization. I use Lyn Hejinian's *A Border Comedy* to focus my analysis, examining the epic resources she draws on in the construction of her hybridized poetic text.

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Acknowledgments

The problem with an acknowledgements page is that it tends to formalize gratitude. As it is with all such conventions, an acknowledgments page has the tendency to turn real feeling into a bouquet of clichés. Giving acknowledgment often feels like sending off a Hallmark card to someone who deserves a handwritten letter. I owe so many so much, so much more than a few words of stock thanks. But then, as the poets remind us, it is due to these necessary forms that our feelings can find a shape and that we are able to give voice to those ineffable sentiments; so I suppose I can be thankful for that. Even if it is inadequate, I count myself lucky that there is a place to express my indebtedness to so many people who have helped me and continued to do so long after I was deserving of their assistance. Now at the risk of wading into the platitudes of acknowledgment, I want to start by saying that we all know that writing of any significance is a collaborative effort and is never really the result of the author alone; however, as the author, I have the right to take credit for all mistakes herein and the privilege of exonerating all others who have contributed to this text from any blame. Whatever genuine insight remains after that, I offer to those below in humble thanks.

I would like to thank my committee. My chair, Michael Bernstein, whose belief in me and in the modern American verse epic, has kept me committed to the project over many years. Sam Otter, who introduced me to the existence of *Clarel*, has offered unstinting support and careful reading of my reading of the poem. Lyn Hejinian, whose influence and encouragement predates my matriculation in graduate school, first stirred my interest in experimental writing by showing me—and continuing to remind me—that poetry is a way of being in the world. Thanks is also due to Richard Cándida Smith whose generosity of spirit has made him an ideal “outside reader.” I would also like to extend thanks to Lee Parsons in the Berkeley English Department’s graduate office who has miraculously remembered my name and made me feel welcome even after long leaves of absence and years of being incommunicado. I couldn’t have gotten through Berkeley’s bureaucratic nitty gritty without his help.

I would like to acknowledge the institutional support of Nassau Community College as well as U.C. Berkeley for the time to research and write. What is more, my colleagues at Nassau have proven to be fantastic interlocutors over the years, helping me to keep encouraged even when the dissertation lay fallow, composting under reams of student essays. Thanks to Sara Hosey, Bill Moeck, John Woods, Bruce Urquhart, for provocative and timely conversation, and a special thanks to Tim Strode whose confidence in my abilities and generosity during our many collaborations has shown him to be a true friend. I would also like to thank Craig Dworkin; although we didn’t know each other at Berkeley, he has been a wellspring of encouragement and advice in the final stages of this project.

I would like to recognize my parents, Scott and Jeannie Wood, who gave everything to get me to college, and have shown me how to recognize unique possibilities in what can at first appear to be an indefatigable failure. And for Ali and Dana who have always made me feel that what I do is significant. I would like to thank Ted Tayler who provoked me with questions and witticisms when I was an undergraduate at Columbia that I’m still trying to puzzle out. This dissertation is one of my more longwinded responses to his laconic brand of inquisition. I would also like to thank Liz Strode, Poppy Johnson, and Lily Dougherty-Johnson who solved my research woes and made it possible for me to get the information I needed when I needed it.

Now for the harder part: how to express gratitude for which there are no words? Mira, do you remember the old rusted out Mercedes station wagon that transported us across the country to Northern California and would not stop, not even when we took the key out it? It just kept running, no matter what. Since even before that, you have been more than editor, proof reader, and reader; more than advocate, believer, and provoker. The way you read and write and perceive things are models to which I aspire; you are my ideal of critical enthusiasm and patient intelligence in the flesh. For your sacrifices and dedication, I want to thank you most of all. I dedicate to you these pages, whatever they're worth. Finally, I want to say something to my kids, Leif and Frey. As you know, it has taken me longer to finish this than I planned, and though you may have helped delay the completion of this project, you have never been an impediment to it. You two continuously remind me that there are more important things than dissertations and, even more, those things are the reasons I write in the first place: *you* are the reason that I kept this up until I got it done, and you have given purpose to what I've written here. I can't imagine what it would mean to write this or anything else without you. I love you.

Introduction: The Exigencies of Epic in America

The purpose of criticism by genres is not so much to classify as to clarify such traditions and affinities, thereby bringing out a large number of literary relationships that would not be noticed as long as there were no context established for them.—Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*

They should consent to be pleased in spite of that most dreadful enemy to our pleasures, our own pre-established codes of decision.—William Wordsworth, *Advertisement to Lyrical Ballads*

American Epic: Novel(ty) or a Contra(di)ction in Terms?

The epic was still considered the sine qua non of literary forms in the 19th century when Melville began *Clarel* and it is pretty clear that Melville conceived of the poem as an epic. It is also clear that the term was problematic by the time Ezra Pound began his epic effort in 1914. Given the fact that Melville's career wasn't resuscitated until the 1920s, Melville's critical reception sheds light on what happens to epic as epic becomes the vanishing point for lyric and novel in the 20th century. At the same time, 20th century poet Louis Zukofsky begins his epic poem "A" around the same time as Melville's revival. Coming after Pound, Zukofsky resolves many of the problems critics identify with modern verse epics, solutions that we can also retroactively find in *Clarel*. In the following pages, I want to look at the way the term "epic" is used by both critics and poets in order to understand how epic becomes an obsolete genre in America literature. In order to do so, I will first trace how the presence of the novel leads to the lyricization of poetry before defining epic and using the genre to explore and clarify these extraordinary poems. It is my contention that more than anything else, this erasure of epic from America's literary landscape accounts for the general ignorance of these two poetic masterpieces.

Certainly in both theory and practice we recognize that there are no fixed forms and that textual examples of ideal genres are never replicas of a tablet of rules. With that said, I want to try and distill the practical definitions of epic brought to bear on 19th and 20th American literature into a description that can be used, interrogated, clarified. From there, I can go on to examine the way genre has affected the critical reception of Melville and Zukofsky and consider the way "epic" as a critical rubric helps us understand and relate their poems. To do this, I will need to first distinguish epic from those long poems written in a lyric mode and those epics written as novels to show the significance of what John McWilliams calls its "defining qualities." Recovering the genre's defining qualities based on a sense of epic tradition and on epic as a functional poetic mode will not only allow us to bring to light a chthonic tradition in American poetry but also acknowledge an implacable if embarrassed discourse about epic that has continued right into the 21st century. Whatever the motive of the critic or the writer, the epic genre is, based on its contentious and continued use, alive and well, even as it has become increasingly difficult to apply the term to poetry.

Twentieth century genre criticism has been interesting for the epic to say the least. The general thrust, following the laments of Georg Lukács, Walter Benjamin, and most notably,

M.M. Bakhtin has been to dispense with the epic in favor of the novel. There is a pervasive sense—so much so that it is a critical commonplace—that the epic is a totalizing form of the past, incommensurate with vagaries of modern life, that the novel is its new and improved version whose prosaic open-endedness is more suited to a post romantic, individualized experience. This critical sentiment has left American epic poems by the wayside, languishing in a ditch between the lyric poem and the prose novel and, needless to say, has had a direct effect on our understanding of Melville’s epic *Clarel* and, indirectly but no less pervasively, on our conception of modernist epics of which Zukofsky’s “A” may be considered a late example.¹ The impulse to show that the epic is an unviable and unavailable genre for American writers by applying these 20th century European theories to 19th century American texts distorts our sense of American literary history and leads us to misunderstand and undervalue these long, narratively structured and culturally directed poems.

The 20th century sentiment that epic can’t be written would at first seem to coincide with 19th century American ideas. In “The Poet” (1844), Ralph Waldo Emerson will opine that “We have yet had no genius in America, with tyrannous eye, which knew the value of our incomparable materials, and saw, in the barbarism and materialism of the times, another carnival of the same gods whose picture he so much admires in Homer; then in the middle ages; then in Calvinism” (465). Emerson’s complaint about the absence of a great American poet is couched in epic terms, tracing a trajectory from Homer to Dante (i.e. Middle Ages) to Milton (i.e. Calvinism). Admittedly, Emerson’s statement is said before the publication of *Leaves of Grass* and also before the Civil War, which will have an epochal effect on American literature and culture, and one that certainly catalyzes Melville’s writing of *Clarel*. One could assume that Emerson merely anticipates the American epic soon to come. However, a decade after the Civil War ends and only a few years before the publication of *Clarel*, Bret Harte will write a similar apology in the preface to *Luck of Roaring Camp and Other Sketches* (1873):

I fear I cannot claim, therefore, any higher motive than to illustrate an era of which Californian history has preserved the incidents more often than the character of the actors,—an era which the panegyrist was too often content to bridge over with a general compliment to its survivors,—an era still so recent that in attempting to revive its poetry, I am conscious also of awakening the more prosaic recollections of these same survivors,—and yet an era replete with a certain heroic Greek poetry, of which perhaps none were more unconscious than the heroes themselves. And I shall be quite content to have collected here merely the materials for the Iliad that is yet to be sung.

Epic here does seem to be a thing of the past. That is, an American epic cannot yet be written because it requires a past that America does not yet seem to possess. According to Harte, America is too young for epic and can only sustain “the more prosaic recollections.” The idea that epic requires a sense of the past distinct from the present seems to echo Bakhtin’s argument that “the epic as it has come down to us is an absolutely completed and finished generic form, whose constitutive feature is the transference of the world it describes to an absolute past of national beginnings and peak times... not merely temporal categories but valorized temporal categories” (15). And yet, unlike Bakhtin who deems epic as “an absolutely completed and

¹ It is also been called a postmodern epic (cf. Burton Hatlen, “From Modernism to Postmodernism”) which is one way to envision Zukofsky’s reworking of modernist principles.

finished generic form,” Harte looks forward to the epic “yet to be sung,” undermining Bakhtin’s sense of “valorized temporal categories” by implying that possibilities for epic are still to come. For our understanding of epic, it is also important to note that in his anticipation of “the Iliad that is yet to be sung,” Harte acknowledges Homer as the progenitor of epic, clearly identifying the genre with poetry rather than prose.

Probably more important and more surprising, Walt Whitman, a decade later and having already produced several editions of *Leaves of Grass*, will still look forward to the American epic in his *Specimen Days & Collect* (1882): “I feel, with dejection and amazement, that among our geniuses and talented writers or speakers, few or none have yet really spoken to this people, created a single image-making work for them, or absorb’d the central spirit and the idiosyncrasies which are theirs—and which, thus, in highest ranges, so far remain entirely uncelebrated, unexpress’d” (225). While Whitman does not directly refer to Homer in the way Emerson and Harte do, his call for a national poem, a “single image-making work” written “in highest ranges” clearly invokes the epic as the genre that will celebrate “the central spirit and the idiosyncrasies” of America. And Whitman, too, looks to the future for a national poem of the past.

Nineteenth century America’s “relentless futurism”² generally seems to be taken as an early symptom of modernism’s epochal shift. By appearing to usher in a “novel” sense of time, a temporality incommensurate with the cordoned off, mythologized sense of the past that epic requires, contemporary critics of 19th century American literature feel at liberty to apply the work of 20th century novel theorists to American poetry and to Melville’s epic *Clarel* in particular. While this has led to some interesting work, it has had the unintended consequence of skewing the sense of epic’s place in the 19th century and has therefore caused a misprision of American epic poetry. By lumping all long poems together into a failed category, it has become difficult if not impossible to distinguish among these poems and then to sympathetically evaluate their achievements and possibilities. Moreover, without a viable epic tradition, epochal distinctions between the romantic and Victorian, the modernist and post-modernist have filled the vacuum, replacing genre as a means of critical inquiry. Using epochal distinctions as an organizing principle may have the advantage of historicizing aesthetic changes, but by occluding significant connections between 19th and 20th century American poetics, it sacrifices attention to consistencies and traditions that continue through those epochal shifts. Moreover, eliding connections among texts betrays the fact that writers work within textual traditions demarcated at least implicitly by a genre. So without a working sense of epic, we overlook the considerable connections between texts such as *Clarel* and “A” that, because of temporalized aesthetic categories, appear to be so strikingly dissimilar as to defy comparison.

How did such an oversight occur? We can look to John McWilliams whose work reveals the way in which this critical elision of epic came about. In his book *American Epic*, John McWilliams adroitly traces the history of epic in American letters and shows, to borrow a phrase from Wallace Stevens, the nothing that is not there and the nothing that is. As McWilliams suggests, the American epic doesn’t really exist despite there being examples of it. The epic in America is a dream deferred (the nothing that is not there) and the early examples of American epic like Barlow’s *Columbiad* serve to show that the American epic can’t be written, at least not in verse (the nothing that is). McWilliams will then go on, using Bakhtin and Lukács as support,

² cf. McWilliams, John. *The American Epic: Transforming a Genre, 1770-1860*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989: 239

to project and declaim that “The twentieth-century long poem is no vessel for the epic” (241) and claim *Moby Dick* as *the American epic*.

As McWilliams demonstrates, by 1870 many American writers had tried to write epic poems. Yet, these early epic attempts, while recognizably epic in style, having taken up its mantel and machinery, failed to be seen as more than what McWilliams describes as “a closed couplet cul-de-sac, a cemetery for long patriotic poems” (1). By looking back at these poems, epic comes to connote long versified doggerel. Joel Barlow’s *Columbiad* remains the main example of such an epic. As one of the more interesting and perhaps more successful illustrations of early American epic, the *Columbiad* becomes proof for critics that the American epic cannot be and perhaps should not be written. Such 20th century sentiment has found its 19th century voice and advocate in Edgar Allen Poe whose dismissal of the epic has perhaps been unduly emphasized. In “The Poetic Principle,” Poe famously deflates the epic impulses of American writers by describing Barlow’s epic attempt as “A mountain, to be sure, by the mere sentiment of physical magnitude which it conveys, *does* impress us with a sense of the sublime—but no man is impressed after *this* fashion by the material grandeur of even *The Columbiad*” (89). “This” we can take to mean “epic” while in the phrase “of even” we can hear a subtle admission on Poe’s part that *The Columbiad*, despite being “after *this* fashion,” is nevertheless worthy of our attention.³ But, as McWilliams almost laments, scholars continue the critical convention of “ridiculing without reading” (42). Such it seems has been the fate of American epic. Until very recently, poems like *Clarel* and “*A*” have also gone largely unread and variously pronounced “unreadable” by several who have tried.

McWilliams describes an epic tradition that has been always already defunct but one that nevertheless must exist since epic remains the sine qua non of literary genres. McWilliams therefore redefines the genre and proposes that “an epic must be a heroic narrative, but that heroic narrative may assume many forms” (4). McWilliams justifies generalizing the genre so that it may apply to prose as well as poetry by arguing that “to apply any proscriptive definition of ‘epic’ to American writing after 1915 would only deny to an era the opportunity gained through a new flexibility in the conception of literary genre” (4). This justification seems in accord with other critical estimations of the epic. For example, in his introduction to *The Tale of the Tribe*, Michael Bernstein would seem to agree: “By the end of the First World War, a verse epic was not so much a form as an oxymoron, an anachronism that seemed to violate what many poets as well as critics had come to regard as the characteristic structure and horizon of poetic discourse” (4). However, this state of affairs leads Bernstein and McWilliams to opposite conclusions. While Bernstein admits that “any single, rigid set of criteria defining the nature of an epic is bound to seem reductive,” this is not a result of “a new flexibility in the conception of

³ The critical fate of *The Columbiad* resembles that of *Clarel*. As McWilliams says, the poem is not read. Having read it, we find a Miltonic poem where “vain empires” become Barlow’s “future empires.” Homer’s list of ships in Milton become a list of devils and then, in Barlow, a list of American towns. Columbus in prison with “Chains for a crown, a prison for a world” leads to “vision’d ages, opening on his eyes,” tracing the inverse trajectory of Adam and Eve being cast out of paradise. Even more, Barlow incants “Freedom” as his muse and “true subject”: “Almighty Freedom!...no Muse but thee.” In the epic, freedom gets cast in literal and imaginative terms. There is a temporal freedom through future visions that Columbus sees through Hesper and a spatial freedom arising from the founding of a “new world.” These spacio-temporal conceptions of freedom coalesce to proleptically redeem a nation which is not only similar to man’s redemption in *Paradise Lost* but also to the way Melville approaches the concept in his poem. Moreover, Barlow’s introduction against Homer’s glorification of war pits the epic against itself in ways that also anticipate Melville’s poem and the function of epic in American literature. While I think the epic has been undervalued, it does nevertheless seem, unlike *Clarel*, hampered by its dogmatic adherence to literary convention.

literary genre” but rather due to the fact that “the nature of an ‘epic’ was a question, a problem to be explored through specific texts, rather than an established poetic form with a generally acknowledged set of conventions” (11). For Bernstein, the epic heterogeneity is a result of the complex ways the poems interrogate, particularize, and, within “a generally acknowledged set of conventions,” transform the genre.

An additional problem with “the new flexibility” that McWilliams proposes is that it depends on an apparent epochal shift occurring at the onset of World War I. McWilliams, who deftly charts the history on the genre in the 19th century using primary sources, seems to belie his own research when redefining epic by suddenly resorting to the “critical assumptions of [his] age” (4). It would therefore seem that his definition has more to do with 20th century critical climate than with a 19th century estimation of the genre. McWilliams will argue that “Because of the attention paid to the modern American verse epic, we have overlooked the possibility that twentieth-century writers and scholars have been more categorical in their thinking about genre than their nineteenth-century predecessors, not less so” (5). Yet, even considering just the above statements by Emerson, Harte, and Whitman, this seems doubtful and, in any case, the assessment does not fit well with the trajectory of Melville’s career. Melville’s writing always and everywhere shows a keen awareness of genre even as he drives each to its breaking point. As Samuel Otter charts it in *Melville’s Anatomies*:

Although it seems that Melville’s literary career must have ended with the ashes of *Pierre*, it did not. Still to come were the point-of-view experiments in the short fiction (1853-1856), the insinuating studies of character, form, and reform in *The Confidence-Man* (1857), the aspects of Civil War victory examined through various poetic genres in *Battle-Pieces* (1866), the exacting lines of *Clarel’s* spiritual, scientific, and sexual quest (1876), and Melville’s ultimate, unfinished reflection on “measured forms” and “ragged edges”: the painstaking inquiry into the mysteries of desire, narrative, and authorship in *Billy Budd*. (255)

While Otter resists using explicit genre categories, his descriptions clearly delineate Melville’s pilgrimage from one genre to another. Moreover, as I will later demonstrate by following the recent work of Hershel Parker, it was *Clarel* not *Moby-Dick* where Melville deliberately writes within an extant epic tradition.

Even putting Melville’s own writing practices aside, superimposing a decidedly 20th century critical attitude onto a 19th century literary context runs the risk of creating a false impression of epic’s status in America during the period. As McWilliams acknowledges, “Until at least 1800, influential critics did not directly challenge the premise that an epic was a long, ambitious poem, morally instructive, concerned to some degree with martial heroism, and written in sublime language” (29). This would seem to apply to 19th century writers as well. McWilliams decision to discuss epic in terms of the novel is very unlike Emerson, Harte, and Whitman who all identify the epic with poetry. While McWilliams’s critical move may recall Pound’s exasperated shrug to ‘sulk and leave the word to novelists’ (qtd. in Bernstein 4), it does not describe the epic tradition within which poets like Melville and even Whitman worked. Moreover, it does not even allow a fair appraisal of the trenchant poetic traditions within which modernist poets worked.

The transition McWilliams makes from verse to prose does not really offer us “a new flexibility” for epic but, as we will continue to see, brilliantly adumbrates the story of poetry’s

lyricization. While perhaps unintended, McWilliams reflects, albeit through a glass darkly, a literary legacy that affects the modernists in their ambitious even spectacular but nonetheless failed attempts to write epics and, what is more, helps account for the continued obscurity of *Clarel* despite being a monumental work written by a “colossus”⁴ of American literature. When assume that epic has been subsumed by the novel, what happens to the epic poems that are left in the wake of that assumption? Without the proper poetic category, they become either awkwardly incorporated into a lyric paradigm or otherwise ignored. The modernist epics become “interesting failures” (Gioia 22) and Melville’s epic becomes *Moby-Dick*.

Looking at epic in the 19th century through the lenses of novel theory in the 20th century has significant if not catastrophic consequences for poetry as McWilliams makes clear when he encapsulates a critical commonplace by declaring, “This book accepts the premise of both Lukács and Bakhtin that, once prose became the dominant literary medium, no poem could any longer do the cultural work...required of the epic” (6). Indeed, the strangest and most estranging part of the “new flexibility” that McWilliams prescribes is that it precludes verse narrative—the traditional and Aristotelian form of the genre—from ever becoming the vehicle for an American epic. Under the veil of innovation, McWilliams argues that narrative verse epic is inherently proscriptive and limiting, and tacitly claims that American epic can be anything but a narrative poem.

As we will see, McWilliams is not alone in applying the novelistic theories of Lukács and Bakhtin to 19th century American literature but rather indicative of general assumptions in genre theory that derives from the application of these theorists to American literary history. If we examine McWilliams’s use of theorists like Lukács and Bakhtin a bit more closely, “neither of which mentions one American text” (5), we can see some inherent problems with their application to the American epic. The predictions concluding *vaticinium ex eventu* that epic has been superseded by the novel does not derive from a direct examination of the poetic traditions from which American epics emerge. As McWilliams concedes:

Bakhtin’s view of epic as a static genre elegizing past heroism does not allow for the rebellion and transformations that have occurred within the epic tradition itself. Virgil, Dante, Milton, Wordsworth, and Whitman all felt that they possessed their own ‘higher argument’ that would transform the tradition begun by Homer and modified by intervening poets. As ideas of heroic behavior changed so did the form of the epic poem; its admittedly special conventions have been a way of measuring change as well as enforcing conformity. (6)

Even as McWilliams unwittingly brings to light the chthonic epic tradition, citing all poets to support his “assumptions about prose epic” tends to undermine his argument for a “new flexibility.” Beyond this obvious point, however, this intriguing list of poets, those most often cited as examples of epic, may help explain the confusion about American epic and the strange reception the genre has received at least in American criticism. While all the above poets wrote long poems that have been considered at one time or another “epic,” the list breaks into two distinct parts. In the list above, I would argue that the tradition of epic proper stops at Milton. Wordsworth and then Whitman do not represent innovations of the genre as much as they begin

⁴ cf. Gunn, Giles, Ed. *A Historical Guide to Herman Melville*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005: 3.

its dissolution, a dissolution that critics consistently pick up on without being able to name. When Wordsworth introduces the Romantic “I” to the epic, he undermines the genre’s fundamental narrative structure. More than what McWilliams calls “a conscious reshaping of its own defining qualities” (4), Wordsworth conflates inherent qualities of lyric with a sense of epic scope.

McWilliams historical assessment of epic is acute but his conclusions, greatly determined by 20th century European theory of the novel, are ultimately inaccurate when applied to poetry. But novel theory is not totally to blame for these misconceptions. When McWilliams like many other critics makes the claim that “no poem could any longer do the cultural work...required of epic” (6), he may be right to an extent but his critique of an American epic poetry is based on the wrong poems. The need to find the poets of “rebellion and transformation”—revolutions variously seen in Virgil, Dante, and most of all Milton—often makes it hard to identify epics or even know what you are looking for beyond “a simple one of length” (248), a reduction that Northrop Frye admonishes us against making. In order to find poems that are epics *because* they reform the prevailing epic tradition rather than overhaul its defining characteristics by conflating it with other genres, we need to understand how that epic tradition—that constellation of epic texts consistently referred to by critics and, more importantly, writers—relates to the variegated literary history of American epic.

Wordsworth to Whitman, Milton to Melville: America’s Twin Epic Traditions

Whitman we have called our greatest voice because he gave us hope. Melville is the truer man. He lived intensely his people’s wrong, their guilt. But he remembered the first dream.—Charles Olson, “Call Me Ishmael”

As we’ve seen, McWilliams bases his estimation of epic in the 19th century America on 20th century European theory of the novel. He then boomerangs and extends his critique of 19th century American epic into the 20th century by declaring that “The twentieth-century long poem is no vessel for the epic” (241). McWilliams goes on to identify the vessel by various names and insist on its inefficacy:

Whether one calls these works ‘personal epics,’ ‘poetical autobiographies,’ ‘tales of the tribe’ or ‘self-generated myths,’ they will always remain long, loosely unified works, without narrative, without a culturally accepted hero, and written in a literary form valued by a miniscule fraction of the reading public... the genre extends organicism toward shapelessness. The personal epic seems to end only with the death of the poet whose imaginative powers comprise its heroism. In all these respects, the writing of a personal epic is at variance with the basic connotation of the term *epos*. (237)

If not a fair assessment of modernist epics in general, a lumping together of a variety poetic effort based mainly on the criteria of length, it is nevertheless an attitude shared by many critics. Such prognostications about the “personal epic” usually seem based on a hyperbolic need to escape a gilded epic past or, conversely, account for the leaden, alloyed nature of the modern world which somehow precludes poetry from doing cultural work or having political efficacy.

But from where does this new form of “personal” epic or “poetical autobiography” come from? And does this fairly describe all modern American poems of a certain length? It is not surprising to find that McWilliams does not cite “A”, for example.⁵ That is not so say that McWilliams wouldn’t also find Zukofsky’s epic “shapeless,” but, as I will argue, “A”, like *Clarel*, flouts the basic problems of unity and narrative, the hero and readership, that McWilliams finds “at variance with the basic connotation of the term *epos*.” In other words, looking at *Clarel* and “A” will show us another tradition of epic besides the “personal” epic that McWilliams cites.

Reading the criticism of modern epic, it often seems that these “long, loosely unified works” arise ex nihilo from the pressures of modernism on classical forms. However, looking at the criticism more closely, a less arcane answer begins to emerge: the “personal epic” comes out of the very tradition that critics ascribe to modern epic. McWilliams among others traces a trajectory of modern epic from Wordsworth to Whitman and then onto Pound. The version of epic born of this lineage is indeed caught in the vortex of the novel’s takeover of narrative and the shrinking of poetry to a lyric mode. Rightly, many critics have taken this modern version of epic as a sign of the genre’s undoing. However, few if any have distinguished this lineage from another that allows for a different kind of modern epic, one that fulfills “the basic connotation of the term *epos*” by overleaping the Romantic personalizing of the genre to return to the classical narrative and temporal structures represented by Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. We need to ferret out and briefly look at these separate strands of this braided tradition if we are to demystify the way Melville and Zukofsky avoid some of the problems that otherwise seem to plague American epics.

The poets most often cited when discussing the tradition of modern epic, and in particular its lyricization, are Wordsworth and Whitman. It was Wordsworth who transformed the long poem into something that will lead to a hybrid form that continues to make critics skeptical about the viability of an American epic. For better or for worse—and for the reception of epic it is for the worse—Wordsworth renovated the epic to make it amenable to the Romanticism’s brand of individualism which Whitman then expands to cosmic proportions. Perhaps unwittingly, Pound and others will smuggle this tradition into their epic poems by conflating the storyteller with the epic hero and furthermore positing the storyteller as one in command of history as opposed to one who tells a version of a story that has already been mythologized by the culture.

Ultimately, the “innovations” Wordsworth brings to the epic undermine the genre’s “defining qualities.” As the critic Karl Kroeber explains:

The effort to escape the limiting conditions of history goes far to explain the form and the subject of Wordsworth’s most ambitious poem, *The Prelude*, which attempts a new kind of epic system. . . . *The Prelude* is, in part, a history of the French Revolution, but Wordsworth subordinates that history to his autobiography. The mighty events of contemporary history are presented only as they appear to, and exert influence upon, the life of a private individual. (98)

By couching the epic in terms of autobiography, Wordsworth moves the poem away from being about “cultural, historical, or mythic heritage.” By approaching epic from the position of “the individual in his absolute inwardness” rather than “the citizen as a participant in a collective linguistic and social nexus” (Bernstein 14), Wordsworth undercuts a structuring principle and

⁵ In his refutation of “personal epic,” McWilliams refers to *The Cantos*, *The Bridge*, *Paterson*, *77 Dream Songs*, and *The Maximus Poems* (237).

distinguishing characteristics of the genre. The *Prelude* redirects epic away from an historical and cultural accounting toward the type of individualized perception that remains the hallmark of the lyric. As we will see, this shift will go far to explaining the troubles that Pound gets into when he defines the epic as a “poem containing history” and then tries to direct history with a personal set exempla, an enterprise whose failure is recorded in the poem’s thematic and structural fragmentation. It will also help clarify the way Zukofsky reverses Wordsworth by resituating autobiography within an historical context, absorbing the changes romanticism and then modernism bring to epic within a more traditional epic system.

Wordsworth’s epic system has been taken as an innovation of the genre, but its reduction of epic scope upends the genre and puts the poem on a lyric footing. As Barry Ahearn affirms,

Wordsworth’s retreat into himself actually opens up new possibilities for the long poem. His ambitions for *The Prelude* were egotistical in two senses. First, he was reinventing the long poem. Second, he was taking himself as his theme. But autobiographies had been written before. In examining his “self,” Wordsworth aimed higher; he attempted to recover the course of memory. This is what is involved in charting “the growth of the poet’s mind.” (97)

Again, we see the shift away from history toward the self, from a cognizance of a collective memory based on cultural knowledge to an exploration of private memory based on personal experience. Wordsworth’s attempt “to recover the course of memory” by “charting ‘the growth of the poet’s mind’ takes the principle muse of epic—“Mnemosyne, the rememberer”—and makes it a matter of personal rather than cultural recollection. If, as Walter Benjamin claims, “*Memory* creates the chain of tradition which passes a happening on from generation to generation” (98), then personal memory would seem too limited in scope to attend to the mythic underpinnings of culture, delimiting history based on personal experience alone. By imagining the purpose of memory as a matter of personal improvement, Wordsworth collapses the dual cycle Northrop Frye describes: “The cycle has two main rhythms: the life and death of the individual, and the slower social rhythm which, in the course of years...brings cities and empires to their rise and fall” (318). By subordinating history to autobiography in the *Prelude*, the teleological structure of the poem, a cyclical narrative that moves episodically to adumbrate a cultural whole, implodes. Symptomatic of this shift is the fact that the poem remains incomplete—a “prelude”—and the storyteller is conflated with the narrative hero who can therefore never get the necessary distance from the story being told.

These changes within epic are readily recognizable in the respective magnum opuses of Pound, Williams, Olson and the modernist epic enterprise in general. As Ahearn notices:

Somewhere within us, we presume, exists the entire body of memory—yet we can only recover it in bits and pieces. So the poet who takes himself for his subject is in trouble before he starts; his subject is apprehensible only in fragments. Memory is, however, always ‘there’ to be drawn on.... Perhaps Wordsworth hoped *The Prelude* would be memory transposed to a concrete medium. (197)

Indeed, as Ahearn goes on to assert, “*The Prelude*’s break with traditional ways of unifying a poem and its exploration of the coils of memory lead inevitably and unfortunately to obscurity” (198). Wordsworth’s autobiographical personalization of epic forces an unnecessary alignment

between the life of the poem and the life of the writer. The subordination of history to the individual, who also becomes the central character or the hero of the story, is an untenable position from which to write a poem that intends to address the mythic and cultural underpinnings of a culture. The move from cultural to personal memory demythologizes history by shifting from cultural to autobiographical narratives, and it is myth that tends to infuse history with cultural significance.

As Erich Auerbach admonishes, “To write history is so difficult that most historians are forced to make concessions to the technique of legend” (20). But in Wordsworth, legend gets replaced with poetic renditions of incidental events of an individual’s life. Wordsworth privatizes epic which, at first glance, may seem to make it accessible to American cultural attitudes and beliefs and to a certain extent—as we will see in Melville and Zukofsky absorption of Wordsworthian personality to larger epic structures—does allow for a complex negotiation with America’s mythic principles of democracy, freedom, and equality, all of which resonate with a romantic sense of individualism. However, these “new possibilities” for epic, as we can see in Whitman, the quintessential example of epic’s lyricization, can just as easily backfire. We can look to Whitman to see how “a man speaking to men” can be taken to an extreme and become “what I assume you shall assume,” a change that, emboldened by epic systems, potentially becomes an expression of domination rather than democracy, a kind of narrative tyranny rather than a declaration of interpretive freedom, a subordination of the reader rather than a form that fosters equality through acknowledgment and participation in the poem’s meaning.

The legacy of Walt Whitman for American epic has obviously been problematic. On one hand, *Leaves of Grass* seems like the only extant example of the form in 19th Century American literature. On the other hand, the poem raises consistent incredulity and unease when called an epic, casting a pall over a viable American epic. Whitman continues the tradition of Wordsworth’s “new epic system” bringing it to its logical self-aggrandizing conclusion. As McWilliams notes, “For Whitman, as for Wordsworth, internal battle has replaced external battle, and heroism is revealed in perceptions rather than actions” (218). This fundamental shift will be something that Melville and Zukofsky will variously avoid. Nevertheless, our assumptions about epic in American literature have come to depend on our understanding of Whitman, a heritage that is responsible for the collective sense of modern epic that the poet-critic Dana Gioia calls “interesting failures.”

Steven Henry Madoff, discussing long poems, sums up the critical assumptions about Whitman’s inception of the American epic:

It is true that the ambition to write a poem of extended length has spirited numerous projects since the inception of the Republic. But not until the publication of Whitman’s *Song of Myself* did the nation find its essential model. This poem lived without classic narrative structure, for the novel had outstripped the epic’s classic mode. No, this was a poem of America, the democratic ethos, the vaunted premise of the individual. And it was a poem of *size*, phenomenal in kind, engaging the continent and its population. Forget Poe’s dictum that a poem should be no longer than a hundred lines. In order to embrace the country’s enormity, so Whitman said, this poem would have to have vista. And so it did, taking each view in a lyric’s stride; a progress of lyrics; a journey of lyrics.
(8)

Madoff, like McWilliams and others, cites the rise of the novel as the demise of epic's "classical mode" and "classic narrative structure." He then notes that the basis for "a poem of America" is "the vaunted premise of the individual" before going on to assert that the chief aspect of the poem is "size." Finally, Madoff declares that the poem, despite its ineluctable length, is a lyric or a "progress" or "journey" of lyrics. In his description of *Song of Myself*, Madoff recapitulates the "progress" of lyricization that the epic undergoes from Wordsworth to Whitman, citing both its loss of narrative structure and its reliance on "vaunted" individualism.

Ultimately, however, such transformation eviscerates epic of its defining qualities leaving only size as the genre's distinguishing feature. Although "the chief distinction" is, as Frye admonishes, "not a simple one of length" (248), in the absence of "classic narrative structure" this is all that remains between the epic and the lyric poem. As Madoff seems to conclude, length in and of itself is insufficient to distinguish *Song of Myself* from the lyric. Therefore, if we take *Song of Myself* to be American epic's "essential model," it is no surprise that the attempts are doomed to fail. As Madoff logically assumes:

The aesthetic, then, of the modern long poem isn't to be judged in relation to the project of the epic narrative (Homer, Lucretius, Virgil). The nonlinear narrative is the orphaned child of the epic. Within it, it bears the will of its parent to create a poem of epistemological totality. But brought up in a different place, it has structured its life differently and adapted to its own world. Whitman presents such a paradigm. (8)

In the absence of other structural or formal elements, Madoff mystifies Whitman's "nonlinear narrative" blaming the contingencies of time and place for this "orphaned child of the epic." Madoff would seem to suggest that it is the peculiar exigencies of America, this modern nation like no other, that makes it incompatible with epic's classical narrative mode. It is certainly true that the epic will undergo changes in 19th as well as 20th century America as "the word 'epic' describes a tradition founded, not only upon change but upon conscious reshaping of its own defining qualities" (McWilliams 4). However, these changes are not a result of some peculiar quality that America possesses. Nor does an American context preclude the adoption of classical epic structures. It is only because Whitman remains the singular example of 19th century American epic that this seems to be the case.

In his attempt to situate Zukofsky's "A" within a larger epic context, Mark Scroggins, one of the poet's foremost critics, identifies the same rift that Madoff does. But where Madoff tries to justify Whitman's form in relation to classical epic structure, Scroggins seems more uneasy about Whitman's model:

Perhaps it was implicit in the models of poetic excellence the Western tradition offered: Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Virgil's *Aeneid*, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. The very font of Western tradition, Homer, was remembered for his twin epics. More proximately for American poets (and more ambiguously) there was Walt Whitman's sprawling, shapeless, but undeniably energetic *Song of Myself*. . . . The epic-length poem, simply put, was a mark of a poet's ambition. (79)

There seems to be an unsurpassable rift between the classic epic tradition and “Song of Myself,” and yet the need for a “proximate” example has always lead critics uncomfortably back to Whitman. This invariably leads critics to overemphasize length and ambition as the hallmarks of epic, since these tend to be the only evident similarities between Whitman and earlier epic form. Interestingly enough, the “proximate” poems that more closely resemble the classical epic narrative structure and that would support an extant epic tradition in American literature have been summarily ignored, overshadowed by poems that demonstrate not a new type of epic but rather the genre’s abandonment.

McWilliams exaggerates when he claims that “Although heroic literature has clearly survived, *the* American epic poem, in any form, died at the moment Whitman began to claim he had written it” (237), but his claim nevertheless demonstrates the distorted affect that attention to Whitman and ignorance of Melville has had on perceptions of American epic. McWilliams may be right to conclude that “However heroic and indigenous ‘Song of Myself’ may be, *Leaves of Grass* is not the centerpiece of American epic verse, but the massive cause of its continuing impossibility” (237), but in an instance of literary criticism that toggles between literary irony and poetic justice, McWilliams identifies the author without ever noting the poem who wrote the epic that will show the genre’s continuing *possibility*.

Hershel Parker, who does cite *Clarel*, will indirectly distinguish between Melville’s epic and Whitman’s extended lyric. Parker ends his recent biography *Melville: The Making of the Poet* with a brief epilogue where he draws a comparison between *Clarel* and “Song of Myself”: “Despite my reticence, any careful reader of the chapters on *Clarel* in my biography would conclude rightly that I rank it as the greatest long poem in American literature, unless one puts ‘Song of Myself’ in the same category” (206). Parker’s discomfort calling *Clarel* “the greatest long poem in American literature” is interesting as is his resistance to putting *Clarel* and “Song of Myself” in the same category. Along with showing once again the trouble with the amorphous term “long poem,” it suggests a definitive difference between the two poems. Perhaps ambition and length and the fact that they are both poems are their only points of resemblance. Beyond that, they represent different genres. I would further suggest that Parker’s “reticence” to call *Clarel* “the greatest long poem in American literature” comes in part from the lack of an acknowledged epic tradition within which to situate Melville’s poem. Without such a tradition, Parker unfortunately seems only promote his own subjective evaluation.

The critical discomfiture with “Song of Myself” as an epic comes from its consistent and unseemly comparison with classic epics that exemplify the tradition within which the poem supposedly fits. However, a correlative strand of epic runs through the criticism, one that acknowledges Milton’s distinct importance for 19th and 20th century epics and yet one that seems to find no real poetic descendents. For example, in his critique of “the modernist long poem,” Burton Hatlen argues that

In its ultimate surrender to fragmentation, the modernist long poem (and here I’m thinking especially of *The Cantos* and *The Wasteland*) acknowledges the inability of the individual ego to master history through what Lyotard calls a ‘grand narrative’(xxiii)—whether a narrative of national origins and identity, as in the traditional epic through Milton, or a narrative of individual development, as in Wordsworth’s *Prelude*. (214)

What is interesting here for our purposes is the unwitting distinction Hatlen makes between Milton and Wordsworth. Where Milton offers “a narrative of national origins and identity,” Wordsworth gives us “a narrative of individual development.” As I continue to argue, these are decidedly different poetic forms; however, Hatlen lumps them together and, in a critique devoid of genre distinctions, attributes the failure of “the modernist long poem” to the same type of zeitgeist shift as Madoff.

Looking at Hatlen’s critique from the vantage of genre, however, we can see that Hatlen makes a clear distinction between Milton and Wordsworth nevertheless. Dana Gioia is more conscious of the genre difference and puts the matter precisely when he asks:

Why then could a poet like Milton, an unquestioned master of the short, concentrated poem, also manage brilliant longer poems whereas our contemporaries cannot? The answer is complex and encompasses several acknowledged factors, such as the increasing identification of all poetry with the lyric mode, the subsequent rejection of narrative and didacticism as available poetic forms, and the neglect of precisely those metrical resources in English which have traditionally provided long poems with an underlying structure. (20)

Again, as Gioia notes, the failure of epic comes from “the increasing identification of all poetry with the lyric mode” and from the “narrative and didacticism” that are hallmarks of epic. Moreover, Gioia cites the lack of an “underlying structure” derived from “those metrical resources in English.” As we will see, *Clarel* and “*A*” both draw on these sources which remain tantamount to adapting classical epic to 19th and 20th century American contexts, respectively. Even McWilliams acknowledges, “For prospective writers of epic, the example of Milton was especially awesome because *Paradise Lost* had proven that the classical epic could be successfully adapted to a Christian cosmology” (23). We will eventually see how both Melville and Zukofsky variously respond and make use of this adaptation, continuing this tradition within a secularized and syncretistic American culture.

If we continue to replace genre distinctions with more nebulous categories such as “the long poem” and then trace that singular tradition from Homer to Milton and then to Wordsworth on through Whitman, we can continue to agree with Ahearn’s assessment that “After Milton, poets seemed to lose faith in the efficacy of grand designs as vital and vitalizing structures” (196). On the other hand, if we use genre to complicate our perceptions of literary history, to see two epic strains in American literary tradition, one stemming from Wordsworth and another distinct trajectory coming from Milton, then there is not so much a loss of faith as a loss of genre that continues to reify our sense of epic failure. Certainly the story of the epic in American literature is complex and, due to the lyricization of epic that many critics cite, we cannot claim that all attempts at epic unequivocally succeed. Nevertheless, it has been those long poems most often ignored that have seemed to keep the faith and serve as the essential models of this “other” epic tradition, a tradition that maintains the classic epic structures associated with epics from Homer through Milton. To look at this tradition, however, we will have to abandon the idea that Melville’s epic is *Moby-Dick* and resist making the often too easy association between Zukofsky’s “*A*” and Pound’s *Cantos*. We will also have to have a more precise idea of what these epic structures entail.

Readership, Subject, and Form: Defining Epic By the Three Aspects of Genre

Up until now, I have tried to tell the story of epic in America through by relying on other's assessments and definitions of the genre. I have referred to epic systems and epic structures and even "defining qualities" without much attempt on my part to clarify what those are. As mentioned before, this is due in part to the difficulty if not impossibility of proscriptive definitions. As McWilliams says, almost throwing up his hands, "Although so loaded a term demands definition, securing a workable definition that is not idiosyncratic proves exasperating. A genre commonly considered to include *Gilgamesh*, Homer, Virgil, Lucan, *Beowulf*, Tasso, Milton, *The Prelude*, *Leaves of Grass*, *Ulysses*, and *Paterson* is not a genre easily defined with precision." (3) True enough, but McWilliams fails to note the obvious connection among these texts. With the exception of *Ulysses* (which is arguably the exception that makes the rule, crashing the list of epics by conning Homer's *Odyssey*), all of these texts are poems. As elsewhere in the criticism of epic, there is a tradition of poems associated together and part of what makes a poem epic is that it is in direct dialogue with these earlier texts. McWilliams contends:

Because *The Odyssey* is in many ways unlike *The Iliad*, because Virgil sang of both Arms and the Man, yet made them serve a new interest in historical forces, and because Milton was convinced that the Fall was an "argument/ Not less but more Heroic Than the/ Wrath of stern *Achilles*," we must acknowledge that the word 'epic' describes a tradition founded, not only upon change, but upon conscious reshaping of its own defining qualities. (4)

Despite his insistence on change, McWilliams simultaneously reveals a contiguous and ongoing tradition of poems that share structural principles, and it is this tradition and these structures that allow us to notice and make sense of the "conscious reshaping of its own defining qualities."

Nevertheless, it is probably true that "no precise meaning of 'epic' can be found that will suit even those few texts that centuries of readers have agreed to call epics" (McWilliams 4). Michael Bernstein bolsters McWilliams argument by concurring: "The conclusion that arises from any comparative historical survey is, perhaps dishearteningly, that no one constellation of fixed attributes, no set of necessary and sufficient elements, can be isolated that would allow us to determine by a purely formal analysis whether or not a poem is an epic" (13). However, while Bernstein like McWilliams notes the "urge felt by succeeding ages to redefine the meaning of an epic according to their own aesthetic and intellectual needs" (12), this does not lead Bernstein to conclude that epic can therefore "assume many forms" (McWilliams 4); rather, Bernstein, pointing out that such a generalizing stance "is by itself rather unenlightening," argues for a set of propositions "based upon an admittedly uneasy combination of *a priori* conditions and *a posteriori* conclusions drawn from specific texts" (13-14).

I am inclined to follow Bernstein's tack here if for no other reason than, unlike McWilliams's "new flexibility", offering propositions to negotiate the interstices and intricacies of genre, while often an uneasy enterprise, is the very purpose of genre criticism. As I tried to suggest by citing Northrop Frye in my epigraph, giving specific if not propositional parameters to epic allows us to be sensitive to the way in which texts situate themselves within a specific textual traditions at least implicitly demarcated by genre and almost always explicitly delineated by a distinction between poetry and prose. Whether or not one approves of my allegiance to Bernstein's approach to epic, the variegated responses to the problem of genre posed by 20th

century criticism at least shows that McWilliams's decision to resort to prose is not a *fait accompli* and we should not feel required to entirely do away with the heuristic capacities available by making clear genre distinctions. For to rid ourselves of these differences is to obliterate the "defining qualities" we hope to examine and to end up in the very situation that McWilliams sets out to avoid where "the word 'epic' is only a substanceless advertisement for size and length, as it has long since become for jacket blurbs and film promotion" (3).

Moreover, it is not only that we lose the capacity to make comparisons and connections between texts but that our ability to appreciate the texts themselves becomes hampered. For example, positing an interesting critical role reversal, Gioia imagines "intelligent eighteenth-century reader" discovering and describing a trove of recent books of American poetry:

Amid this myriad of shorter work he would see only a few poems longer than six or seven pages—most of them massive and complex undertakings running many times the length of the average thin volume. These, he would ascertain, are the epics of this age, but he would probably not be able to classify them further since they are mostly difficult, allusive works not governed by a narrative or expository structure. They undoubtedly belong to a genre whose rules he doesn't understand. (19)

Considering the criticism over the last century, we may be no better off than this fictional eighteenth century intellectual, likely intended as a stand-in for Gioia's own chagrin, since it is not clear that we understand the function of epic in American poetry or its rules any better than this reader from another century. I might even go further than Gioia and suggest that the sense of genre that this reader possesses may put him in better stead to apprehend the rules to these admittedly "difficult, allusive works." Certainly, as generations of critics before us, we can come to some understanding of the genre; however this requires us to move beyond merely categorizing poems by length.

In this respect, the Marxist critic Raymond Williams offers a touchstone for the aspects genre that we need to further explore. Williams articulates three "types" of genre classification. The first is by literary form; the second, by subject matter; and the third, by intended readership (182). While the focus here and in later chapters will be on poetic form, I'd like to first look briefly at these other two aspects, since they too affect our understanding and reception of these epics and, as aspects of genre, directly relate to questions of form.

The Reader of the Unreadable: Epic's Critique of the Reader

Many critics have pointed out the underlying paradox involving the reception of modern American epic. Despite being a poem that speaks to and for a culture, the actual readers of modern epics are few and far between. In *The Trouble With Genius*, Bob Perelman admits that, looking at modernist epics, "It is easy to focus on the richness of meaning that the writing provides—as if ambiguities and multiple possibilities automatically accrued in some ideal readerly account—and to forget the other side: the lack of actual readers, the absence of social impact, the obscurity of the language" (184). McWilliams identifies the same rift between aesthetics and political efficacy as Perelman does and uses it to lodge a critique against the genre, claiming modern epics are "a literary form valued by a miniscule fraction of the reading

public” (237). Yet, Guy Davenport gives this problem of reception some historical perspective, reminding us that it is not just modernist epics that have suffered obscurity:

“A”’s first twelve parts were set in type by Japanese compositors and printed in Kyoto in 1959. The first thirty of Pound’s *Cantos* were set by French, the eighty-fifth through ninety-fifth by Italian compositors; the first half of Olson’s *Maximus* was printed in Germany, the second half in England; Walt Whitman himself set *Leaves of Grass*; Melville paid for the printing of *Clarel* out of his own pocket; The *Columbiad* sold because of its handsome binding and typography and engravings by Robert Fulton. (100)

By extending the criticism of modernist epic to epic poems throughout American literary history, Davenport will claim that “It cannot be demonstrated that the American public has ever clamored to read a long poem by an American poet” (101). McWilliams wants to blame the lack of readership on the form of modernist epic, but given Davenport’s observation, it is hard to say whether the lack of readership may be attributed to literary form or whether it is not more a matter of literary context. But whether we attribute it to form or context, we can consider readership as an integral aspect of genre separate from subject and form in order to divine the ways in which the dearth of readership is in fact one of the ways epic as been “reshaped” in America.

It should be said at the outset, though, that deciding what comprises a popular form and what is devoted to “a miniscule fraction of the reading public” is a slippery slope. Take *Moby-Dick* for example, cited by McWilliams and others as Melville’s epic. To classify *Moby-Dick* as an epic based on its being more widely read than modernist epics, a claim upon which McWilliams insists, loses sight of the fact it was this book that ended Melville’s career as a popular writer. Like the modernist epics McWilliams complains about, *Moby-Dick* was largely ignored by the public and often denounced as unreadable by the critics. Even today with its critical acclaim, it is still denounced by some as unreadable. A recent postcard issued by the United States Postal Service depicting Herman Melville’s 20 cent postage stamp can help make the point. The accompanying copy to an image of Melville’s young but grizzled visage lists his first five novels before stating that,

Ironically, the book now considered to be his masterpiece, *Moby-Dick* (1851), presaged the end of Melville’s popularity. Deeply symbolic as well as tragic, *Moby-Dick* was ignored by critics and rejected by readers. Through the 1850s, Melville continued to write, producing three novels as well as the short story collection *The Piazza Tales* (1856), which contained the now-famous stories “Benito Cereno” and “Bartleby the Scrivener.” When all these works failed to restore his popularity, Melville gave up writing as a career and became a customs inspector in New York City. At the time of his death in 1891, he was virtually forgotten. It was not until the 1920s that Herman Melville began to be recognized as one of the great American writers.

Hardly criticism, this summary of Melville’s career gives us the popular understanding of the author. Considering *Clarel*’s notable absence from the list—“Melville gave up writing as a career and became a customs inspector”—the irony attributed to the reception of *Moby-Dick* may

be a hopeful harbinger of Melville's epic. Indeed, while the postcard does not mention it, it is this text where Melville truly fulfills his role as "customs inspector." That said, it is hard to say how robust the actual readership of *Moby-Dick* really is despite its critical ascendancy. It is certain that it has garnered many more readers than *Clarel* and yet it is unlikely that it has achieved the breadth of later novels with a similar epic scope like say J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. The ultimate irony may be that its resistance to popularity more than anything else shows the novel's affinity with the more traditional American epics written in verse.

However many readers a text actually has, clearly mass readership remains an unstable if not untenable benchmark with which to ascertain a text's value, especially when the terms set within the text resist the kinds of capitalist evaluation—i.e. sales—upon which such estimations are based. A related but more germane question may be why epic as a genre seems to garner this criticism far more often than other literary forms when there are clearly so many texts from so many genres that also have a limited, even miniscule readership? The problem of readership with regard to epic seems to point to the particular expectations we bring to the genre. As a poem that intends to engage its reader as "the citizen as participant in a collective linguistic and social nexus" (Bernstein 14), it would seem that the epic would require the kind of national absorption that Whitman was always calling for. It may even seem that, more than with other genres, an epic *requires* a large audience and is immaterial without it.

Among other things, this connotation of epic may be a holdover from the genre's earliest manifestations as a poem recited by a storyteller transmitted orally to a captivated audience. As Walter Benjamin puts it: "The storyteller takes what he tells from experience—his own or that reported by others. And he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to the tale" (87). This loss of this context, the transformation of reception set off by the printing press, may be what Walter Benjamin is getting at when he argues that "The earliest symptom of a process whose end is the decline of storytelling is the rise of the novel at the beginning of modern times. What distinguishes the novel from the story (and from the epic in the narrower sense) is its essential dependence on the book" (87). In other words, the lack of reception may be taken as a sign of the genre's oral orientation and by troping earlier oral structures, even those epics that are written down can serve to critique the terms of this new relationship between author and audience.

If we assume that as Gregory Nagy does, following Tzvetan Todorov, that genres offer us "'principles of dynamic production' of discourse in society" (22), we can think of reception of epic in terms of a political critique. However, unlike Perelman's earlier suggestion that the apparent lack of readers heralds "the absence of social impact, the obscurity of the language" (184), we can take it for a resistance to the social mechanisms upon which reception is based. As Woods argues, referring to "A": "Zukofsky's poem as repeatedly rejected by publishers with no word or reason for its unsuitability. The language labor was refused because it made no compromise with the language market, in that it did not accede to the domination of exchange values that permeate language as communication" (87). In other words, if we identify lack of reception as something inherent and identifiable within a text, then the creation of a text that resists being assimilated into conventional reading practices is in and of itself an interrogation of the assumptions upon which those practices are based. As Perelman finally concludes:

While the stylistic displacements... can be explained as scientific demonstration of the writer's craft, they can also be seen as attempts to forestall commodification. The same argument holds for indefinability with respect to

genre. If genres are, as Fredric Jameson puts it, ‘social contracts between a writer and a specific public,’ then Pound and others were not signing any contracts. But to be in circulation, to reach the public, was also an attractive proposition, offering a way out of the marginality to which these writers at times found themselves consigned. (4-5)

Perelman echoes Gioia’s “intelligent eighteenth-century reader” when he suggests that Pound and others refused to commit to a genre. In fact, Pound’s instance that he was writing an epic seems more like a deal with a devil than a breach of contract. The sense that the genre is “indefinable” arises from the paradox to which Perelman obliquely refers. By definition, the modernist epic is not widely read because—and not in spite of—the fact that it intends to address the foundations of American culture. By taking on the underlying economic and social structures through poetic form, American epic trespasses into the political arena and by directly interrogating the way in which those systems are communicated and received must necessarily flout conventional reading and publishing practices. The epic, even if the author does not wish it, must necessarily distance itself from the socio-economic forces it intends to confront, and, on the page, this distancing often registers as impenetrability or unreadability.

Such a critique can further be extended to the issue of readership. The difficulties these poems pose for readers is often confused with a kind of elitism. Perhaps with Pound who insisted that his poem was “a schoolbook for princes” such a claim holds true. However, as Perelman points out, “These writers were not just looking to establish a well-defined, congenial audience of experts; they were addressing a larger body as well, ‘the public’ But while these positive projections of audience verged on the imaginary, the negative aspect of the public was clear enough: the public occupied the alien territory of mass literacy, where writing became a commodity” (4). Creating a poem that resists easy understanding is not necessarily a sign that it is for a chosen few who “understand.” It might not be much consolation, but *Clarel* and “A” defy the expert and “common reader” alike and likewise will reward any reader who has the patience to cultivate the reading strategies that these texts demand. Neither text requires particular knowledge, although of course appreciation deepens as we come to understand the scope of their allusions and the breadth of the epic traditions within which they are involved.

I will pursue this issue further when discussing the function of the reader with respect to “A” but suffice it to say here that when addressing such readers who declare “the thing is unreadable,”⁶ it may be that we advertise the limitations of our own entrenched habits of reading and project them onto the poem. In faulting the text for our confusion and branding it elitist, we are forced to ignore the irreconcilable fact that the deepest motivation of these poems runs counter to such elitist notions. Moreover, in failing to interrogate our own expectations of a text and the assumptions upon which those expectations are based, we might not allow ourselves to consider the political implications of our own reading practices, a problem that the epic foregrounds by its stylistic difficulties.

We might end our discussion of reception by thinking for a moment about what it means to write a poem that is, as Melville says of *Clarel*, “eminently adapted to unpopularity” (qtd. in Kenny 219) or what it is meant by the kind of critical assessment like that of William Carlos Williams after reading “A”-10: “Your poem is a beauty, you are fast becoming the most important and neglected poet of our time and place” (qtd. in Scroggins 201). We might pause to consider the implications of Guy Davenport’s suggestion that “Our greatest living poet is usually a man as unknown to the professariat as to the corps of reviewers and the deaf custodians of the

⁶ cf. William Harmon qtd. in Parsons, 230

laurels. It was true of Whitman in 1873, and is true of Zukofsky in 1973” (107). While here I would replace Whitman with Melville, the larger question remains: what does a line criticism that links literary greatness to public obscurity indicate? Certainly it’s a loaded question that inspires many lines of critique, but in terms of genre, the sense of failure that dogs American epic may simply result from the fact that our connotations of a poem that would engage “the citizen as participant in a collective linguistic and social nexus” (Bernstein 14) cannot easily accommodate the notion that such a poem would also be unpopular, and deliberately so. We therefore assume that its lack of reception is due to oversight and recognition of its greatness, although long in coming, is simply a matter of time.

But even if such acclaim eventually comes, it is hard to see how a radical, revisionary, and political directed poem attending to the underlying myths and assumptions of a culture and levying a critique of accepted cultural mores could ever really be popular in its own time and not ever without avid and extensive critical attention. And yet we see how critical judgments based on reception hampers our appreciation of a text that deliberately violates our sense that the text is, in the end, explicable. The counterintuitive unpopularity of American epic is part and parcel of the genre’s complex relationship to and critique of American culture which necessarily includes both reading *and* criticism. That is to say that in the case of American epic, it may not necessarily be criticisms role to make the text more popular. If an epic is indeed “the speech of a nation,” one of the ways these poems critique normative culture is by transforming this speech. It is an epic bind: to become epic, the poem must gainsay and thus become alien to the culture to which it fondly if not also petulantly adheres.

Subject Matter: America’s Cthonic Epic Tradition

Subject matter is the second leg of the tripod of genre that Raymond Williams delineates. The subject matter of the epic has been commonly understood as one that addresses a culture and its mythic underpinnings, one that addresses itself to history, and one commonly associated with war. Following up on the epigraph by Northrop Frye, the purpose of defining genre is to bring out like qualities in texts, to return them to themselves, so that we can better appreciate their significance and see connections between texts we would not otherwise see. We can thus recover literary traditions that otherwise go unacknowledged by adumbrating the historical leaps that writers make and the traditions they imagine themselves in. Conversely, genre may act as a corrective to the perhaps unintended critical tendency to cordon off writers into specific periods when situating them in a given historical moment. Ultimately, subject matter within genre can help give us a more coherent picture of the larger trajectories within literary history by showing us striking similarities among even apparently dissimilar texts.

Without the lens of genre, poets like Zukofsky and Melville may seem entirely unrelated or at best an eccentric pair. But if the comparison does not seem obvious, it is an indicator of how obscure the tradition of American epic has become. Both poems clearly participate in an epic tradition and benefit from their association with each other. As we see, the criticism on Melville’s *Clarel* and Zukofsky’s “A” is finally catching up to their achievements, but we can also note that both poems are still seen as relative anomalies and both are hemmed in by entrenched comparisons to their contemporaries. Melville’s poetry often suffers when contrasted with the established tradition of late Victorian and early modern poetry represented by Whitman, Dickinson, and Dunbar (although the aesthetics and accomplishment of his poetry deserves this company). Zukofsky seems overshadowed by and at times is even considered derivative of

Pound (although, as I will demonstrate, Zukofsky and Pound write their epics more or less at the same time and it is Zukofsky not Pound who finds a way to complete his poem). *Clarel* and “A” are American epic’s most successful examples and to consider them in this light will not only help to reinforce their status as two of the most significant poets in American literature but will also allow us to understand them as part of a larger literary tradition that can be traced back to Milton. Moreover, putting them in this context will enable us to examine more closely the formal aspects of these poems that make them so fantastically complex and provocative. Relating the two together encourages us to see the ways in which Melville anticipates postmodern poetic strategies and the way Zukofsky’s postmodernism relies on older traditional forms.

While I intend to explore the subject matter of these poems in depth in the following pages, let me offer an *amuse bouche* by very briefly noting some tantalizing connections that not only suggest the affinity between *Clarel* and “A” but also adumbrate the larger epic tradition within which these poems exist. Critics have noted how both poets appropriate significant amounts of Greek myth and Christian hagiography into their epics. In both cases, these mythic underpinnings help establish an approach to history in line with classical epics; moreover, the use of Christian hagiography specifically comes out of a tradition of epic established by Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. Both poets also situate these larger mythological traditions within the context of American history. For both, America serves as both an historical context and teleological point upon which their respective narratives hang. Both poets address war and levy significant critiques of the specific wars with which they are associated. *Clarel* emerges in the aftermath of the Civil War while “A” is begun in the relatively brief period between the First and Second World Wars, and its writing continues through and addresses both the Korean and Vietnam wars as well.

Significantly, both poems direct critiques of specific wars remain relatively oblique to the operative narrative being told. Their critiques are part of and ultimately subsumed by massive binary oppositions that both poets seek to negotiate, synthesize, and resolve. In this, they again resemble Milton who couches his critique of contemporary politics in a cosmic battle between the divine ordinances of good and evil, negotiated by means of large linguistic and structural oppositions. Both poets, like Milton, give us circuitous pilgrimages, journeys marked by wandering more than progress; yet, unlike Milton, both take the Wandering Jew as their figure for such a quest, attaching Milton’s Adamic wandering to a sense of exile which complicates the underlying redemption implied by Christianity’s temporal progress from Old Testament to New Testament and onward toward the day of reckoning.

Both poems can also sustain and deserve careful feminist readings. Both poems represent complex female “characters.” With respect to *Clarel*, we are given Agar, Nathan’s wife while in “A” it is Celia, Zukofsky’s actual wife, who plays an indispensable part in the creation and meaning of the poem. But beyond that, both poems address the larger patriarchal systems in mythological, religious, and cultural terms. Moreover, a feminist reading may not only benefit from taking the two poems together but also by relating them to the complex representations of Milton’s Eve to which both poems seem to share correspondences.

As epics, these feminist interrogations are part of a larger critique of American empire. Interestingly, both use Gibbon’s *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* to ground their accounting of the reach and use of political power, and while Milton obviously cannot avail himself of Gibbon, the scope of the critique does resemble the kinds of social assessments mounted in Milton’s poem. Finally, more than the thematic connections between these poems, I would argue that in their separate ways, the reading experience of both *Clarel* and “A” is most

like that of reading *Paradise Lost*. With its enjambment, neologisms, chiasmic progression, word play, and extraordinary allusiveness, *Paradise Lost* serves as a poetic prototype for these later writers, and for the one looking to cultivate the types of reading strategies required by these later poems, one could do worse than cut their teeth on that earlier epic.

This list, while neither exhaustive nor definitive, means to suggest the kind of practical work a genre reading can do as well as the type of particular connections that begin to emerge between poems when they are understood as part of the same genre. When taken together, I would submit that the minute as well as the structural similarities are evidence of the fact that these very different writers at very different times are working in the same albeit unacknowledged tradition.

Form: Defining Epic, the Contours of the Genre

We should now turn to form, the final aspect of genre given by Williams and the one most pertinent to the following chapters on *Clarel* and “A”. It might be a good idea to begin such a discussion of epic form by first going back and considering a few things that Aristotle had to say, since his *Poetics* is the place from where all other definitions derive. Also reviewing Aristotle will help remind us that, as Bernstein points out, “Even in Aristotle’s *Poetics* only two of the twenty-six sections are devoted exclusively to the epic” (12). As we go on to contemplate the afterlife of epic in American criticism, recalling this point may help us understand why small bits of Aristotle’s descriptions get cannibalized, radiated and magnified by later critics. Finally, by going back to Aristotle, we might try and bring these pieces together and in doing so derive the basic formal structures underlying an often fraught discourse surrounding epic.

In his *Poetics*, Aristotle attempts to categorize and classify the art of poetry that “has been nameless up to the present time.” He offers three distinctions: “the imitation is carried on by different means or because it is concerned with different kinds of objects or because it is presented, not in the same, but in a different manner.” By “means” Aristotle specifically means “rhythm and song and meter.” By “objects imitated” he means whether the poet presents the subject as “either better than or worse than or like the norm”; he adds that Homer, who represents epic, presents the object “as better.” By “manner” Aristotle means “to narrate the story (either speaking in the person of one of his characters as Homer does or in his own person without changing roles) or to have the imitators performing and acting out the entire story.” The parenthetical in this last category seems particularly important for criticism involving American epic. The distinction Aristotle makes between the poet who moves between his narrative voice and the voices of characters as opposed to the poet who maintains his own narrative voice without modulating becomes a crucial distinction between lyric and epic. On one hand, this distinction is used to shift epic discourse to the novel; on the other, it is used to show why modern epics—those without access to character other than the speaker of the poem—fail.⁷

At this point, Aristotle breaks off into a discussion of comedy and tragedy, privileging tragedy as the more “dignified.” He then associates epic and tragedy (drama) together, arguing that “when tragedy and comedy began to appear,” poets were drawn to either one or the other and that those drawn to tragedy “became writers of tragedies instead of epics because these genres were of greater importance and more admired than the others” (8). Given that one of the chief critiques of epic since Bakhtin is that the epic is a genre of the “absolute past,” it is interesting to hear Aristotle talk about epic in similar terms long before the affect of

⁷ The above paragraph summarizes Aristotle’s *Poetics*, 3-6.

“novelization.” Be that as it may, from here Aristotle basically uses epic as a foil to discuss the poetic and dramatic elements of tragedy; however, in doing so, he lays out the characteristics of epic that become the framework for writing and criticizing epic poems after Homer. Aristotle first sketches out the main differences between tragedy and epic thereby delineating epic’s distinguishing characteristics:

Now epic poetry follows the same pattern as tragedy insofar as it is the imitation of noble subjects presented in an elevated meter. But epic differs from tragedy in that it uses a single meter, and its manner of presentation is narrative. And further, there is a difference in length.... Epic poetry, however, has no limit in regard to time, and differs from tragedy in this respect.(10)

As noted earlier, the epic presents the object “as better” than it is and, more importantly for our purposes, the “imitation of noble subjects” is reinforced by an “elevated meter.” Aristotle also insists that epic have “a single meter,” “a narrative,” and “length.” These qualities form the basis of epic and conform to Aristotle’s earlier classifications of “means,” “object imitated,” and “manner.” These aspects of the genre will also serve as prognostications of later definitions that will influence the understanding and the reception of American epics, and have been variously and often conflictingly adapted to various texts.

At the beginning of the 20th century, before and even during his writing of the *Cantos*, Ezra Pound would erupt with panoply of definitions of the epic. The urgency and frenetic irradiation of his designations speaks to the crisis of genre that Pound at least felt when confronting the act of writing an epic poem. It seems clear that for Pound, the epic as a given form—if ever there was such a simple ideal stone tablet of laws—had been shattered once and for all. Amidst that rubble and in his need to get a clear idea of what he was doing, Pound calls epic variously “a poem including history,” “the tale of the tribe,” “a record of struggle” (qtd. in Froula 2). He also echoes Wordsworth and later Emerson when he calls it “the speech of a nation through the mouth of one man” (qtd. in Lind).⁸ Finally, in a letter to Isabel Weston, where he coyly rejects her exhortations for him to write an epic, Pound retorts:

Kindly consider what an epic needs for a foundation:

1. a beautiful tradition
2. a unity in the outline of that tradition. Vid. *The Odyssey*
3. a Hero, mythical or historical
4. a damn long time for the story to lose its garish detail & get encrusted with a bunch of beautiful lies (qtd. in Froula 2)

Pound’s denotative profligacy may be more of a hindrance than a help when trying to understand the definitive aspects of epic. Still, the Aristotelian concepts of a “noble subject” and of “a narrative” are clearly stated, and one can sense in Pound’s idea of “a beautiful tradition”

⁸ In the preface to the second edition to *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth famously writes, “What is a Poet? To whom does he address himself? And what language is to be expected from him?—He is a man speaking to men” (453). Later on, in “The American Scholar,” Emerson will reverse Wordsworth’s emphasis and offer an epic sense of “a man” when he declaims, “You must take the whole society to find the whole man” (54). Pound is making a similar statement that seems to conflate these two declarations.

Aristotle's notion of length and "appropriate meter" (Aristotle 44), since these are the most obvious qualities of the genre's quintessential examples. But after Pound, and perhaps in part because of him, the expectations for the epic have both qualitatively and quantitatively changed. In Pound there is already a growing sense that the epic cannot be accessed or makes demands that are impossible to meet. This change in attitude more than any other foments a critical environment that requires later critics to justify and even at times alter one or more of the aspects of epic that Aristotle lays out.

In the epic criticism in the latter half of the 20th century, some which overlap and others which seem completely disconnected from each other, a vigorous, if not often contentious debate continues about that constitutes epic and which texts exemplify the genre. At very least, these debates would be clarified and deepened by a close examination of Melville's *Clarel* and Zukofsky's "A". But before moving on to discuss these poems, I would like to extrapolate some parameters for my discussion derived from Aristotle while remaining conscious of the way in which epic has been applied to American literature and theory.

Over all, an epic can be defined as a poem or mode that takes up both structurally and thematically the temporal conditions on which both culture and experience are established. The poem reveals the ways time manifests itself socially (history) and personally (memory) and, by implication, gives instruction to a community or culture about who and what they are. More particularly, there are three crucial aspects of epic to consider: (1) the role of poetic narrative, its formal structure, especially with regard to the organization of the narrative and function of the verse; (2) the position of the poet with regard to the relationship between poetic voice and character, and the concomitant roles of storyteller and reader; (3) the subject of epic and in particular its relationship to history (which includes the social, political, and mythical nodes of a culture).

With regard to poetic narrative, Aristotle makes a big deal about the fact that epic narrative is episodic. This makes it possible to have a coherent narrative centered on a character while at the same time allowing for expansions or digressions outside the action that extend the story to the culture as a whole. Additionally, the episodic enforces a cyclical structure which tends toward a recapitulation of past events, lends itself to themes of return or memory. Moreover, this narrative orbiting can potentially unsettle the notion of chronological progress by coupling the sense of forward movement to a revolving or recurring poetic structure that is reinforced by the literal "turning" of the line. At its most extreme, the episodic counters chronology with anachronisms.

With regard to the storyteller, who is or imagines himself to be in the presence of an audience with whom he shares communal ties, his role implies, as Bernstein sketched out, that the direction of the poem is public not private, involved with cultural not personal concerns. This sense of kinship is reinforced by the oral or, in the case of a book, oral troping within the text that implies presence or direct contact between the storyteller and audience. The sense of orality traditionally necessitates verse as a pneumatic and ordering principle for the storyteller and a means of recapitulation through repetition for the listener, but because a book is its own pneumatic as inscription replaces memory's narrative function, the oral troping has additional implications for the written epic.

First, a sense of orality emphasizes the auralty or the sound and rhythm of language. The music or tone becomes an inherent part of the narrative's meaning. Second, and more complicated, the idea of orality as communal telling gives a new dimension to the sense of difficulty one confronts when reading verse epics. As Michael Bernstein observes in "Making

Modernist Masterpieces,” “these texts were composed from the outset with the intention of being studied, not just read” and this expectation establishes a community of readers analogous to the expectation of a group of listeners. Third, these two qualities—the emphasis on the sound of language and also its need for communal rumination—foregrounds the indeterminacy of the text by insisting on, as it would be with an orally transmitted story, the variability of context. That is, the book resists its own textuality by breaking the illusion that the words on the page are a calcified conduit to stable meanings. The tendency of verse to obscure syntax leads to the reader’s self-conscious awareness of the language’s indeterminacy, forcing the reader to consciously participate in the act of making the poem mean. While this is true of many lyrics as well, in the context of epic, the opacity of language both reinforces the need for reading within a collective context and serves as a critique for the conventional associations the mind makes, associations based on entrenched cultural assumptions of which our reading habits are symptomatic.

Finally, with regard to the subject of the epic, the story, whatever the specific narrative, becomes freighted with cultural significance and overt knowledge pertaining to the historical or structural sense of a community based on shared cultural heritage. The story has a central character, but the purpose of the epic is not so much about conveying what happens to this individual as it is situating that individual in a larger cultural context, a context that extends to the culture’s mythic or legendary foundations. The intention of epic allows the poet a direct way to confront and address the culture within which he exists and to explore the cultural coordinates of his experience. It is not true that the epic poet must speak from “the reverent point of view of a descendent” (Bakhtin 13); this is only one of many ways an epic poet can position himself in relation to his culture and generally since Homer epic poets have had been more confrontational. As “a poem about the past” (Bakhtin 13), the epic allows the poet to situate his language—and the concomitant thinking and feeling—within the shared social and political context that language always implies. It is through this “struggle” more than through the narrative itself that the fundamental lessons of the poem reside.

The particular constellation of these qualities within epic verse gives the genre its shape and purpose. While I’ve attempted to ground the notion of epic in the prevailing discourses about the genre in 20th century American literary criticism and to link that to the basic tenets outlined by Aristotle, I’ve also anticipated the braided arguments about genre I intend to present when discussing *Clarel* and “A” as epics. I can only hope that my extended explanation are not misconstrued as prescriptive or, worse, exegetical, but instead understood to be provisional and descriptive and intended to be used heuristically or dialectically in concert with a close reading of the poems. Still, I have wanted to make the definitions specific enough to justify the use of what has often been a touchy term and to tease out the implications of the genre here before going on to nuance these definitions with concrete examples. Most importantly, I want to bring into relief aspects of the poems that often go unnoticed or seem unrelated to each other. Clarifying these aspects of epic should allow us to (re)align the text in a tradition that tests the boundaries of critical reception of *Clarel* and “A.” Attending to these particular qualities in the poems may lead us to ponder how our understanding is predicated on what we imagine the poem to be.

After illustrating the ways in which epic discourse has been deflected in criticism of *Clarel* toward either the novel or the lyric, I will offer a reading of *Clarel* as an epic (because the term is so freighted with a sense of grandiosity, I want to insist here that such a reading is just one significant critical approach among many). I will then turn to an examination of Zukofsky.

After considering the limitations of the postmodernist and autobiographical readings of the poem, I will compare Zukofsky to Ezra Pound in order to show the problems with situating “A” within the context of the modernist epic. I will then turn my attention to the poem itself and consider “A” both structurally and thematically as an epic. Finally, I will conclude by briefly looking at the way epic as a genre informs possibilities in postmodern 21st century writing, where genre distinctions remain suspect and as sources for hybridization more than distinct categorization. I will do this by looking at Lyn Hejinian’s *A Border Comedy* and examining the epic resources she draws on in the construction of her hybridized poetic text.

**Clarel:
A Novel Epic**

Whitman appears, because of his notation of the features of American life and his conscious identification of himself with the people, to be more the poet. But Melville had the will. He was homeless in his land, his society, his self.... Melville went to space to probe and find man. Early men did the same: poetry, language and the care of myth, as Fenollosa says, grew up together.... In place of Zeus, Odysseus, Olympus we have had Caesar, Faust, the City. The shift was from man as a group to individual man. Now, in spite of the corruption of myth by fascism, the swing is out and back. Melville is one who began it.

—Charles Olson, “Call Me Ishmael”

In his essay “Melville’s Last Long Novel: Clarel” (1970), John T. Frederick looks at Clarel’s 18,000 lines composed almost entirely in rhymed iambic tetrameter and pretty much dismisses its ambitions as a poem. Frederick insists:

Indeed, it *is* a novel in terms of all the major categories under which we study long works of fiction—characters, settings, theme—and is essentially different in form from Melville’s other novels only in that the story is told in verse: an idiosyncratic and sometimes crabbed verse which opposes, admittedly, a serious obstacle to most modern readers.(151)

Three years later, in his book *Herman Melville’s Clarel: A Spiritual Autobiography*, Vincent Kenny will have the occasion to timidly suggest that “The poem *resembles* an epic in its size and grandeur of subject” before going on to retract the claim and dismiss its “epical effect” (98, italics mine). The fact that Kenny can only say *Clarel* “resembles” an epic while Frederick can unequivocally declare the poem *is* a novel intimates the prevailing critical bias for the novel and a general sheepishness around the word epic. Stan Goldman will echo Frederick and Kenny in his later book, *Melville’s Protest Theism* (1993) when he also tries to evade a discussion of the verse by again incanting Bakhtin: “It is more rewarding to read *Clarel* not as poetry, which some discourse theorists including Bakhtin view as monological but as narrative verse that contains the essential dialogical principle usually associated with prose fiction” (6). In the absence of an acknowledged epic tradition, it is easy to agree with Bakhtin that “there exist excellent novels in verse” (9) and name *Clarel* as one such example. Yet, Goldman’s aversion to verse leads him to associate narrative with “prose fiction. As a result, Goldman reifies Bakhtin’s generic categories by misreading *Clarel* as “a distinctive prose-art” (Bakhtin 276). Goldman, like Frederick and others, repeat the ideational split between poems and novels—between verse and narrative—and by doing so elide novelistic and epic modes of expression.

Even more recently, In *Melville: His World and Work* (2005), Andrew Delbanco calls *Clarel* “a vast ‘philosophical verse-novel’ whose structure provided Melville with a sort of template that spared him from having to invent, as he had once done in prose, his own forms” (280). I think Delbanco is tricked a bit by the mirage of the tetrameter verse that, without close scrutiny, looks like “a sort of template” but in fact is replete with formal innovations. This is most evident when Delbanco glosses the longest canto in the poem by calling Agar’s complex response to Nathan’s desire to go to Jerusalem “as close to humor as *Clarel* gets” and then

follows by saying, “The poem is often a lugubrious work in which, as one critic puts it, Melville ‘deliberately hobbled his muse’ by keeping himself within its highly confining structure of rhythm and rhyme” (284). It is Delbanco not Melville who follows “a sort of template.” Despite his keen criticism of Melville overall, here Delbanco accepts one of the few commonplaces within the scant criticism of *Clarel*: a disparagement of the poem’s verse as “crabbed” or “deliberately hobbled.” Delbanco concludes by imposing a lyric standard on verse: “But *Clarel* is finally a hopelessly talky poem, its intertwined stories over-earnest in the style of *Mardi*, yet without the madcap energy that made Melville’s early failures seem rehearsals for something grand” (285). The assessment of *Clarel* as a failure is based on a comparison to an early novel and a misguided sense that the verse can be separated out from the narrative.

The effect of this polarized response is best exemplified by Robert Milder in his recent book *Exiled Royalties: Melville and the Life We Imagine* (2006). Milder, an astute and sympathetic critic of *Clarel*, summarizes and, to his credit, celebrates its stylistic difficulty:

The poem is formidable and has a reputation for dryness, based as much on its stony, elliptical style as on its philosophical density. Its extraordinary achievement is how, in cadences removed at once from natural speech and mellifluous epic speech (Milton, Wordsworth), it manages to trace the curve of its characters’ thoughts and feeling and the subtle dynamics of their interactions. (195)

It may not seem worth mentioning right now, but it is important to notice that Milder begins by calling *Clarel* a “poem.” Milder then goes on to give a nod toward epic by using it as an adjective to characterize the language, but he only employs the term to say that Melville’s cadences are “removed” from the diction and syntax of Milton and Wordsworth. While I will have occasion to dispute this observation later first by noting Melville’s careful attention to Wordsworth and then more extensively by demonstrating the close linguistic affinity between Melville and Milton (a subject often noticed and already thoroughly supported by Henry Pommer’s *Milton and Melville*), it is interesting here that Milder leaves Spenser out of his list of epic poets, since Spenser is a poet Melville read avidly and who shares his archaic diction and even the cadences of his “stony elliptical style.”

After the attenuated reference to epic, Milder emphasizes character, leaning on the Melville’s seminal biographer Newton Arvin for support:

The characters themselves, as Newton Arvin commented, “are on the whole a remarkable assemblage of distinct and freshly noticed people,” many of whom “have the quality of reconciling poetic representativeness with a real sharpness of outline as individuals.” Starbuck, Stubb, and Flask are vivid but fixed types whose range of being is established in the thumbnail sketches of “Knights and Squires”; by contrast, Rolfe, Vine, and Derwent are fluid characters who respond to occasions and to each other even as they embody classes of mind and sensibility. (195)

Arvin’s insistence that the characters are “distinct” and reconcile “poetic representativeness with a real sharpness of outline” does not account for the constant critical complaint—one that is hard to deny—that the characters are obscured, not individuated, and difficult to tell apart. As the

“monomaniacal” rhythm of the verse takes hold and the names give way to vague pronominal indicators, a dark democratization of the character occurs, deemphasizing distinct outlines of individuals even as they retain their respective identities. This obfuscation can make the verse seem at odds with character development. At the same time, Arvin’s idea of “reconciling” a “poetic representiveness” with “a real sharpness of outline of individuals” comes very close to recognizing the poem substantively as an epic by bringing together the aspects of verse and the narrative that are usually seen as opposed.

Yet, Milder does not notice, or at least does not mention, this connection. Instead, he follows up Arvin by comparing the characters in *Clarel* to those in *Moby-Dick*. On the one hand, this critical move reinforces the primacy of novel when discussing character. On the other hand, relating *Clarel* to the text in Melville’s cannon that most often garnered with the term “epic” backhandedly reinforces the poem’s genre. However, and here we should recall that Milder began by calling the text a poem, Milder concludes by saying that as “paradoxical as it may seem, *Clarel* is the book in which Melville is most completely the novelist” (195). Such a claim recalls John T. Frederick’s declaration almost forty years ago. Without a sense of epic, Milder’s reading splits into text as “poem” and text as “novel.”

Notwithstanding the critical trajectory of the passage, couched between his contrast of Starbuck, Stubb, and Flask to Rolfe, Vine, and Derwent and his “paradoxical” assertion that *Clarel* is where “Melville is most completely the novelist” is an aside that may be a place where the verse and narrative come together:

Representative, too, are striking cameo figures like the Syrian monk, the Dominican, Margoth, the Cypriote, the Lesbian merchant, Don Hannibal, Salvaterra, and the Lyonese Jew, as well as intensely drawn but narratively aborted characters like Celio and Nathan. (195)

This last observation about Celio and Nathan is particularly interesting to me, in part because Delbanco also notes the importance of the Nathan canto and in part because it seems to contradict the idea that Melville is “most completely the novelist.” What novelist creates “intensely drawn characters” and then leaves them “narratively aborted”? This is a place where we can enter the text to see how this odd character representation—from the perspective of the novel—is symptomatic of a poetic narrative that, as an epic, succeeds at “reconciling poetic representiveness with a real sharpness of outline as individuals.” But before we do, we should follow Milder a bit further and consider the criticism directed at the verse itself. This will not only give a better context with which to evaluate the poem but also allow us to look at the key distinction at the heart of the debate about epic.

Crabby about Crabby Verse: A Lyric Response to *Clarel’s* Verse

Unlike Frederick, Milder’s criticism does not cease with his conclusion that *Clarel* represents Melville as a novelist. After using Arvin to characterize the characters as novelistic, he turns to evaluate the poetics of the text, citing Bezanson’s estimation of *Clarel* as “a distinctly ‘personal’ poem with ‘filaments of self spread through it everywhere’ (195). This is a very lyrical idea of poetry and Milder expounds by arguing that “Outwardly, *Clarel* is Melville’s attempt to sift the range of intellectual and emotional responses to the later nineteenth-century crisis of belief; inwardly, the poem is his testimonial to unworldly yearners and his effort to

inscribe a vindication for their lives and, in the process, for his own” (195). Milder’s bifurcated appraisal of the text as first a novel and then a poem reflects the elision of the epic and its refraction into novel and lyric categories. There seems to be almost no way to talk about narrative and verse simultaneously; instead, the best critics quickly vacillate between the novel and the lyric. Although Milder acknowledges the national or public import of the poem in a passing reference to “the later nineteenth-century crisis of belief,” his sense of poetic scope inevitably gives way to praise for the poems lyrical accretion of personal “testimonials” thinly veiled as a series of “unworldly yearners.” These personal aspects of the poem are certainly present, but Milder takes them out of the context of the epic as a whole. As an epic, the intimacy of the lyric joins with the distance of novel afforded by characters so that the storyteller is *in* but not *of* the story.⁹ The personal remains subject to the larger cultural and mythological contexts.

The census of comments about the verse seems to show a general consensus that the verse fails as poetry. *Clarel* presents us with “an idiosyncratic and sometimes crabbed verse which opposes, admittedly, a serious obstacle to most modern readers” (Frederick 151). Or, “the poem is often a lugubrious work in which, as one critic puts it, Melville ‘deliberately hobbled his muse’ by keeping himself within its highly confining structure of rhythm and rhyme” (Delbanco 284). Or, “its hobbled metrics, its stumbling rimes, its contorted language” (Stein 3) or “maddeningly constricted, convoluted, iambic tetrameter verse” (Obenzinger 66). These assessments of the poem’s “strangely crabbed style” (Pommer 113) or “stony, elliptical style” (Milder 195) are all based on lyric assumptions that make Melville’s poetics seem derivative at best.

The poet and New Critic Robert Penn Warren privileges the verse in his analysis but, despite himself, finds Melville’s poetics wanting:

It must be admitted that Melville did not learn his craft. But the point is that the craft he did not learn was not the same craft which some of his more highly advertised contemporaries did learn with such glibness of tongue and complacency of spirit. Even behind some of Melville’s failures we can catch the shadow of the poem which might have been. And if his poetry is, on the whole, a poetry of shreds and patches, many of the patches are of a massy and kingly fabric—no product of the local cotton mills. (109)

It seems that Warren wants to like the verse but can’t. In his attempt to look at “the poem that might have been,” a critical move born of a desire to recover the poetry from the verse, Warren unintentionally looks past the poem that actually is. By describing the “shreds and patches” as “kingly fabric,” Warren gives backhanded praise while at the same time eviscerates the epic for good lyrical bits, a critical habit that has been applied to the modernist epics as well. Warren recognizes the poem as a lyric failure but can’t account for its epic success. Notwithstanding Warren’s underlying appreciation for *Clarel*, his claim that “Melville did not learn his craft” is dead wrong.

⁹ Aristotle distinguishes the position of the epic storyteller from the lyric speaker when he says, “It is necessary for the poet himself to speak in his own person in the poem as little as possible.... Now the other poets are themselves active performers throughout the poem.... Homer, on the other hand, when he has made a brief prelude immediately brings in a man or woman or some other character; and all his figures are expressive of character, and none lacks it” (44).

As Hershel Parker reminds us at the beginning of his book *Melville the Making of the Poet*, “Herman Melville was a practicing poet...for three times as long as he was a professional, publishing writer of prose.... It was important to him; indeed, it was, for many years of his life, certainly from 1870 into 1875, when he was working on *Clarel* (1876), obsessively important” (9). Whatever else is said about the meter, it is clearly deliberate and painstakingly conceived. In her essay “On Translating *Clarel*,” Agnes Dicken Cannon unfolds Melville’s long poetic deliberations: “As to meter, ultimately he was to reject Miltonic blank verse, the heroic couplet, ballad meter, and Arnold’s own recommended unrhymed hexameters, but not before weighing the advantages of each” (163-4). Unlike Warren’s estimation that Melville “did not learn his craft,” Cannon reveals Melville’s intense tutelage: “Melville’s marking in Arnold would seem to show that he did willfully choose this diction for purposes other than rhyming and was anxious to control its effect so that it might be quaint, not grotesque, to adopt the terms of Arnold’s distinction” (165). Despite being perceived by later critics as “crabbed and ugly,” Melville uncannily restates the English metrical tradition without being derivative; *Clarel* gives us “neither the severe grand style of Milton nor wholly the simple grand style of Homer but a composite of the two with the simple, or Homeric, predominating” (Cannon 174). Coincidentally, Pound will arrive at a similar sense of formal innovation when he uses an Anglo-Saxon line to recast the *Nekuia* (book 11 of the *Odyssey*) in Canto I.

Like Milton who set out to write *Paradise Lost* in “Heroic Verse without Rime,” knowing that abjuring rhyme may be “taken for a defect,” Melville creates a poem that attempts to supersede or at least make obsolete conventional critical responses and contemporary literary practice. Also like Milton, Melville imagines his “subversive” meter as an expression of or adhering to an established epic tradition. Milton identifies Homer and Virgil as the basis for his verse form and transforms these predecessors into English blank verse; Melville also imagines Homer as his predecessor and, where he otherwise embraces Milton, rejects Miltonic form in order to remain true to his sense of the Homeric line.¹⁰ His rejection of Milton’s unrhymed pentameter allows Melville to apply the dyadic dynamics of *Paradise Lost* to a more dialogic, Anglo-Saxon line and, as we will see, reserve the pentameter for use in a brilliant formal resolution.

As Melville wrote in his copy of Mathew Arnold’s *Essays in Criticism*, which, according to Agnes Dicken Cannon, he used extensively to eke out the meter for *Clarel*: “The style governs the thought. Ascribed to Wordsworth” (qtd. in Cannon 166). Such a statement connecting “style” to “thought” sounds like a premonitory version of Charles Olson’s famous claim in “Projective Verse” that “FORM IS NEVER MORE THAN AN EXTENSION OF CONTENT” (240). Charles Olson, in fact, a no less admiring critic of Melville and whose own epic *Maximus Poems* strains at the confines of the lyric bit,¹¹ offers his own critiques of *Clarel* saying, “Christ had contracted [Melville’s] vision” (86). While Olson means to critique Melville’s myopia here, it may be Olson’s own vision that is contracted by his definition of poetry as “a high energy-construct and, at all points, an energy-discharge” (240). Nevertheless, “contracted” is an apt word to describe what happens in *Clarel*. Thematically, Melville does seem to make a contract (even a covenant) with Christ in that the poem attempts to rework the puritanical assumptions upon which America was founded, assumptions that rely on a displaced Christianographic

¹⁰ cf. Cannon, 161

¹¹ Olson’s epic is guided by the reigns of his lyrical definition of form also set out in “Projective Verse”: “the poem itself must, at all points, be a high energy-construct and, at all points, an energy-discharge” (240).

conception of the world. Additionally, the verse seems to stand in contrast to the poems length, contracting as the poem expands, reflecting what Melville calls the poem's "ampler dearth."

Given his definitions of poetry, Olson has no way to really measure the scope Melville's "contracted vision." Instead, Olson recapitulates Poe's basic sentiment in "The Poetic Principle" where "The degree of excitement which would entitle a poem to be so called at all, cannot be sustained throughout a composition of any great length. After the lapse of half an hour, at the very utmost, it flags—fails—a revulsion ensues—and then the poem is, in effect, and in fact, no longer such" (88). Any definition of poetry based on its "energy" or "degree of excitement" dooms any long poem to failure. As Poe will go on to make clear, this lyric idea of poetry makes any definition of epic poetry a kind of oxymoron. Under this rubric, even *Paradise Lost* cannot sustain itself as poetry: "After a passage of what we feel to be true poetry, there follows, inevitably, a passage of platitude which no critical pre-judgment can force us to admire" (89). Sounding like later critics of the *Cantos*, Poe's estimation of Homer is even more resonant with critical commonplaces about epic poetry: "In regard to the *Iliad*, we have, if not positive proof, at least very good reason, for believing it intended as a series of lyrics; but, granting the epic intention, I can say only that the work is based in an imperfect sense of Art." Poe attempts to rescue Homer in a way that anticipates critical attempts to rescue *The Cantos* by poaching it for its "good parts." The upshot for Poe and for those critics that follow is that "If, at any time, any very long poems *were* popular in reality—which I doubt—it is at least clear that no very long poem will ever be popular again" (89). Poe is right on target but fails to appreciate the implications of such a claim in the hands of a poet like Melville. It is Melville's genius to arrive at this measure which, from the vantage of given critical measures, looks a lot like failure.

Deliberate Failure: The Measure of *Clarel* as an Epic

So how can we take a measure of Melville's versification when *Clarel's* deliberate failure subverts and transforms the conventional notions of epic in order to cast an epic that responds to the peculiarities of America's untraditional notion of nation and the paradoxes of its nascent national mythology? Given that current state of the verse in *Clarel* criticism, we might need to look to Leo Bersani's seminal essay about *Moby-Dick* "Incomparable America" in order to estimate the scope and means of Melville's deliberate failure. In the essay, Bersani points out that Melville "happily embraces" failure, citing Melville's "remarkable" declaration in "Hawthorne and His Mosses": "Failure is the true test of greatness" (qtd. in Bersani 211). Bersani goes on to admit that "this habit of thought makes it nearly impossible to imagine how the great American work might be produced" (212). Bersani's failure of imagination makes sense considering that most critics search for "the great American work" by attempting to navigate between the Scylla of Europe's belletristic tradition and the Charybdis of Emersonian originality. Nevertheless, Melville seemed to have little difficulty saying what "the great American work" would be. "If failure is the true test of greatness," then the great work would be something like Melville's description of *Clarel*: "a metrical affair, a pilgrimage or what not, of several thousand lines, eminently adapted for unpopularity" (qtd. in Kenny 219).

In order to create a new literary standard, Melville upends the Emersonian notion of originality put forth in "Nature" where Emerson complains that "the foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face; we, through their eyes" (7).¹² As Melville insists, referring

¹² Emerson's notion appears to be in accord with Bakhtin's idea that "The authorial position immanent in the epic and constitutive for it (that is, the position of the one who utters the epic word) is the environment of a man speaking

to Emerson in a letter on March 3, 1849, “The truth is that we are all sons, grandsons, or nephews or great-nephews of those who go before us. No one is his own sire” (qtd. in Kronick 11). Melville is not interested in being “his own sire” but to gauge himself against his American heritage. On the other hand, Melville concurs with Emerson’s estimation of Milton and Homer. As Emerson writes: “But when we adhere to the ideal of the poet, we have our difficulties even with Milton and Homer. Milton is too literary, and Homer too literal and historical” (466). Emerson finds no suitable text upon which to base an American epic because an American epic must be without precedent. Melville’s is not about creating a literature *sui generis* but in establishing a standard that cannot be measured by that which has come before. In “Hawthorne and His Mosses,” Melville complies with Emerson’s complaint not because he wants to disavow earlier epic poems but because he intends to supersede them:

We want no American Miltons.... Call him an American, and have done.... But it is not meant that all American writers should studiously cleave to nationality in their writings; only this, no American writer should write like an Englishman, or a Frenchman; let him write like a man, for then he will be sure to write like an American. (qtd. in Bersani 211).

Sounding a bit like Wordsworth’s “man speaking to men” and with a bravado that resembles Whitman’s “What I shall assume you shall assume,” Melville flouts what McWilliams describes as “the unsuitable literary conventions... worriedly imitated (116) and rejects his immediate predecessor whom he so assiduously studied and from whom he drew great inspiration. His rejection of Milton is not because Milton is “too literary” (Melville is just as literary) but because Milton is not American. Melville like Emerson finds America “incomparable” but this should not be confused with a rejection of the epic outright. Instead, Melville seeks to renovate and revise the genre to suit a new national context.

Bersani shrewdly notes that “It is as if the writing of *Moby-Dick* became for Melville the eerie process of dismissing the very ambitions that the novel also seeks so strenuously to realize, as if a kind of leveling indifference had taken over or—most interestingly—as if the notion of American literary greatness were dropped in order to be reinvented, but reinvented as something lost, indefensible, abandoned” (214). From here, Melville’s career careens toward unpopularity and finds its nadir in *Clarel*. In his critique of Bakhtin, McWilliams acknowledges the need for this trajectory:

Bakhtin’s brilliant argument for closing the epic out of post-Renaissance literature rests upon an assumption that is fundamentally misleading. Bakhtin’s view of epic as a static genre elegizing past heroism does not allow for the rebellion and transformations that have occurred within the epic tradition itself. Virgil, Dante, Milton, Wordsworth, and Whitman all felt that they possessed their own “higher argument” that would transform the tradition begun by Homer and modified by intervening poets. (6)

about a past that is to him inaccessible, the reverent point of view of a descendent” (13). However, Emerson’s idea posits the opposite notion: that “the position of the one who utters the epic word” is not cut off but rather can behold God and nature “face to face.” Emerson seems to have a Bakhtinian sense of the present, but, unlike Bakhtin, Emerson imagines epic as a genre that allows an access point to the otherwise inaccessible past.

What Melville envisions and manifests in *Clarel*—a centennial poem with as much cultural import America as Milton for England or Homer for Greece—is not something other than Milton or Homer but something opposed to them. As with these epics, *Clarel* is a poem that does not aspire to the literary standard that such poems establish but rather achieves a style in response to its culture which, in this case, is as “crabbed and ugly as our own [American] pine knots” (qtd. in Bersani 211). What is “lost, indefensible, and abandoned” becomes formally and thematically realized in *Clarel*. Within the poem, these become quintessential American tropes and, as far as Melville represents himself in the epic, the writing of *Clarel* becomes an act of self-exile which adheres to the exilic nature of the characters within the poem itself. Considering *Clarel* as an epic emphasizes the elements of the poem that concerned Melville most. The fundamental elements by which Melville seemed most consumed and yet seem correlatively most foreign to our current sense of poetic discourse are the interstices between verse and narrative. This is a natural fissure for Melville to bring together his talents as a writer and for us to examine the particular elements of epic: namely, the function of the epic storyteller, the condition the epic characters, and the significance of epic landscape.

**Author, Storyteller, Reader, Character:
The Form and Function of Epic Narrative in *Clarel***

Oral Narrative and the Written Text

Unlike Ishmael who ends up floating amid the planks of the destroyed ship, the storyteller of *Clarel* exists outside the action of the story and yet clearly occupies a position within the narrative.¹³ The storyteller's dual role, both existing within the text as narrator but removed from and able to comment on the action, is at once identified with and separate from Melville the author. It is a liminal position that rests in between the author and the characters, creating a space for the reader who becomes—as in oral texts—self-consciously aware of being present to a told story. The presence of the storyteller, who remains nameless, is generally unobtrusive which follows Aristotle's dictum that "it is necessary for the poet himself to speak in his own person in the poem as little as possible" (44). However, the storyteller, even when not speaking "in his own person," is always and everywhere felt through the verse. Its "crabbed and ugly" style is a constant reminder that the story is a work of artifice, that it is being constructed, even recited. The moments when the storyteller becomes conspicuous by speaking "in his own person," emerging from behind the veil of the verse to briefly interrupt the narrative, usually to apologize for the difficulty of the crabbed metrics, forge a peculiar relationship between the storyteller and reader. Like the characters in the story, the reader becomes a pilgrim confronted by text that is sometimes perplexing, often paradoxical, and deliberately provocative. The direct address tropes epic's oral tradition by imagining the reader as an auditor in the presence of the storyteller and the two as part of and participating in the performance of a larger cultural narrative.

The tale and its telling are always intimately tied but they are tangible where the storyteller interrupts the story and directs his attention away from the action to ponder the pilgrimage. Early in the poem in the section titled the "Flight of the Greeks," the storyteller reflects on the decision of those who decide to break off from the pilgrimage:

They fled. And thou? The way is dun;
Why further follow the Emir's son?
Scarce yet the thought may well engage
To lure thee thro' these leafless bowers,
That little avails a pilgrimage
Whose road but winds among the flowers.
Part here, then, would ye win release
From ampler dearth; part, and in peace. (2.13.112-119)

As Melville insists, "form is never more than an extension of content." The wending journey is always at once both narrative and poetic, and the problems with the pilgrimage always resemble the problems with the verse. While the storyteller is overtly talking about the pilgrimage, his conception of the journey is indistinguishable from the poem's "ampler dearth," a particularly apt oxymoron for the prolixity of thousands of lines of terse tetrameter. The storyteller

¹³ This term, borrowed from Walter Benjamin, is used to both identify the narrator of the poem as separate from the author and distinguish him from types of narrators associated with novels by connoting the particularly oral qualities Benjamin ascribes to epic narrators in his essay "The Storyteller."

exonerates pilgrim and reader alike for wanting to leave off but not without admonishing them: “little avails a pilgrimage/ whose road but winds among the flowers.” To “win release” may sound good at first, but it really just means that the pilgrim loses his spot on the journey.

The winding road of “dun” resembles Chaucer’s famous wending lines at the beginning of *The Canterbury Tales* which marry the prurient with the religious in a way similar to Melville’s link between the scatological and the belletristic. Perhaps, too, there is a pun here on “dun” to suggest that the way is also “done.” Those who flee finish before they even begin; those who continue may worry that the pilgrimage, which is supposed to have some unique spiritual meaning, has been “done” so often that it devolves into a mere act of tourism. But as the lines go on, they allay the true pilgrim’s fears. The idea that the road has already been accomplished is essential to the Christian pilgrimage, since any ritual act requires repetition and that the journey itself, as in Milton, is a meditation on the way God’s will is always already fulfilled by Christ’s suffering and death. By definition, the pilgrimage allows the pilgrim to re-enact what has already taken place. The text as ritual reenactment is part of its strategy as epic, offering a way to engage and perhaps revise the historical precedents that manifest themselves as cultural myths and mores. It is this sense of ritual repetition in the epic that will make pilgrimage to Christ’s empty tomb into something more than the reenactment of an empty ritual.

The poem’s enjambed lines and tangled syntax resembles the torturous path through the desert that the characters must navigate. Just as the meaning of the journey is often the opposite of what it appears to be, the storyteller’s equivocations often mean the opposite of what they seem to say. For example, looking closer at the enjambment and rhyme in these lines reveals the way in which the storyteller anticipates and then revises conventional literary expectations. The first lines with their rhetorical questions seem to show sympathy with and for “those who have fled.” Furthermore, “the thought” like the leaves in “the leafless bowers” seems “scarce”; yet, the scarcity of thought “may [very] well engage” the true pilgrim just as a few scraggly flowers may very well take root. The line can also mean that the “thought” is scarce or hidden but may eventually come and “engage” the pilgrim who devotes himself to the journey; until then, the pilgrim continues on faith. That is to say that the pilgrim must heed Derwent’s command to have patience in the face of what seems mystical (2.31.45-9). There’s still another way to conceive the line that attends more directly to the act of reading the poem. It may be that the pilgrims are “scarce” and a single thought will “engage” the select group. The chosen few lured on an otherwise forbidding journey makes the poem into a type of hero’s quest, the underlying narrative structure of epic, and as an elect, the pilgrims take up the mantle of an American identity hewn from the myths of religious zealots and rugged explorers.

The pilgrim-reader who is “lured” may now start to suspect that these lines answer the initial protest, “And thou? The way is dun/Why further follow the Emir’s son?” Rather than as a justification for the reader-pilgrim’s desire to “win release,” there is couched critique of a wholly belletristic view of literature, which attends only to “flowers” and not to “leafless bowers.” Those who “win release” see the path is made of dun and a scarcity of thought, but as the lines proceed, the storyteller transforms the meaning of this path. It is the unlikeliness even the ugliness of this road that recommends it, since “little avails a pilgrimage/ Whose road but winds among the flowers.” The resolve of the closed couplets seems to encourage departure with its predictable rhymes casting away any doubts about the decision. But the insistence of the couplets should also make the invitation to leave sound a little too easy. The storyteller’s matter-of-fact tone affected by the meter and rhyme is not so much acquiescence to the reader’s desire to “part” as it is a dare masking as indifference. It is an indifference finally unmasked by the storyteller’s

repetition of the word “part.” The very retention of the word resists any sense of departure. And the journey remains whether the reader takes it or not.

The lines function as a gateway for and a test of the reader. Following logic that echoes that of Christ in the gospels, the material world is the opposite of what it appears to be. Between couplets addressed to the departing group, a quatrain intervenes where the rhyme couples “engage” with “pilgrimage” and “the flowers” with “the leafless bowers” and then intertwines the two pairs. The quatrain imbeds the pilgrimage and engagement in between these apparent opposites, directing the pilgrims to commit to these paradoxes. “Little avails” a straight path through the flowers while the wending journey through “leafless bowers”—that “amplified dearth”—becomes the more meaningful way. In trying to resolve such oxymorons, we can see that the phrase “that little” is not only a statement of dearth but also of ampleness. “Little” can avail or assist a pilgrimage by getting rid of distraction of a pilgrimage “whose road but winds among the flowers.” The pilgrim undistracted by blooms has the chance to see through to the root. The flower, a classic stand in for literature (as the etymology for “anthology” might remind us), creates disengagement unlike the “leafless bower” which is either dead or just about to bloom. The “leafless bower” links the transitory “flowers” to both the lasting cycle of their beginnings and endings.

Just as Edward Taylor says Milton “ties a knot in time” so that “*Paradise Lost* . . . moves straight through history in a circle (14), Melville creates an image that attends at once to literary origins and to what Taylor nicely phrases in another context as the “planned obsolescence” built into “the Idea of Progress” (13). By way of Melville’s somewhat Zen-like logic, deliberate failure makes obsolete literary success based on past achievements (“the flowers”); instead, these “leafless bowers” supplant the flowers just as Emerson’s “incomparable materials” are made manifest not by some fragrant literary work but rather by writing a poem suited for unpopularity. As the unanticipated fruition of a buried epic tradition, the “leafless bowers,” while perhaps at first off-putting, offer the pilgrim a way back before the blossoms created aesthetic expectations or a path recommended by the sheer number of travelers. As the rhyme between “engage” and “pilgrimage” suggests, the journey by way of the “leafless bowers” relies on “a majority of one,” as Thoreau puts it. The lines repeat the Puritan notion of an elect who are known by both the dual austerity of hard work and the seeming rejection of the material world and, with the title of the chapter “The Wilderness,” the pilgrimage grafts this stock to the myth of those few rugged individuals who explored the American interior.

In this spirit, the pilgrim will follow the “Emir’s son,” who is, as Walter Bezanson reminds us in his appendix, at once a guide and an exile (Bezanson 621), a somewhat paradoxical and peculiarly American combination. Silent and devout, he is also mystic who embodies the formal and thematic mysticism of the text. As Derwent declares, the verse, like the pilgrimage, “‘Tis mystical’ (2.31.49) but the mysticism ultimately results from paradoxes that seek to undermine conventional expectations, producing “a Pocahontas-wedding of contraries” (1.28.32). These contraries, described here with a vivid image that is particularly American, are held together by the meter and rhyme that guide “the thought” and engage both the characters and the readers in a poem-pilgrimage that repeats the fundamental American dialectic born of interactions with extreme difference, initially the European settler contact with the continent’s native peoples.

The Emir’s son stands in contrast to Glaucon who flees with his father-in-law, “the wealthy banker,” always a problematic type in both Christian and American mythology. The couplet ending the storyteller’s admonition links “release” with “peace” but this link is undone

with the next lines ending the stanza: “Nay, part like Glaucon, part with song/The note receding dies along.” “Son” is opposed to “song” and the silent Emir and the crooning Glaucon go off in opposite directions. Yet the two converge in the end as “the note receding dies along.” From the perspective of the pilgrims, both paths resolve into silence. The difference is that the Emir’s silence promises a mystical hope and the guarantee of arrival at some conclusion however ineffable; Glaucon’s song, on the other hand, portends death, a death that “dies along” before ever really getting anywhere. Glaucon’s romantic song as opposed to the inscrutable silence of the Emir’s son only offers a release into romanticized notions, a tourist’s vantage of the world, by venturing in directions that trod and trod the flowery paths of song measured by the belletristic ruts of traditional verse. In contrast, to follow the Emir’s son, who appears as austere as the “leafless bowers,” is to struggle to overcome these romantic ideas. This is not just a theoretical gauntlet that the storyteller throws down before the reader but also becomes the central motivation of the poem’s namesake. As he continues on the pilgrimage, Clarel will try and come to terms with own romantic ideals, ultimately represented by his love of Ruth. Ruth, like Glaucon’s son, will “die along,” the poem ending with Clarel’s discovery of her untimely death.

For those who continue like Clarel, there will be ample opportunities to depart prematurely as the storyteller goads readers with challenges, ironies, and contradictions. Twenty cantos later, the storyteller will direct his dare at the reader, inciting the reader to skip a canto:

For ye who green or gray retain
 Childhood’s illusion, or but feign;
 As bride and suit let pass a bier—
 So pass the coming canto here.(2.35.38-41)

Part of the reason the storyteller wants the reader to skip this canto is its content. Titled “Sodom,” the canto sounds, in Christian terms, an illicit homoerotic theme. The storyteller wants to keep deep passions between the all male pilgrims hidden and hushed; he wants to keep it secret by skipping over it. At the same time, singling out the canto for censorship clearly draws attention to it. These relationships function like “the leafless bowers,” meaning the opposite of what they seem. Such exclamatory “passion,” if illicit, is ironically associated by the word with Christ’s redemptive suffering on the cross. Also, just as the untoward romanticism may be represented by Clarel’s infatuation with Ruth, the ascetic mysticism is represented by Clarel’s desire for Vine. As it is with the Emir’s son, the homoerotic feelings between characters are also associated with patience and silence: “Such passion!—But have hearts forgot/ That ties may form where words be not?” (1.19.1-4). But all of these entangled interrelationships are expressed by the storyteller’s apparent dismay about the verse.

Opposites are continually juxtaposed, even when directed at the function of memory, a central motivation of epic. “Green” and “gray” in the lines above offer two ways to imagine childhood “illusion.” “Green” imagines such memory as a way to revive the past while “gray” suggests recollection as something dead and irrevocable. These are somewhat typical ways of imagining the past after this binary the lines get stranger. The idea that childhood is illusory is one thing, but the idea of an “illusion feigned” compounds its insubstantiality. The illusion is not even real. The storyteller heeds the past without the requisite reverence, showing not only the past but even the memory conjuring of the past to be illusory.

Standing in contrast to the storyteller who already knows what is coming, those who retain this illusion either by pretending or by actually holding on to childhood should skip the canto “as bride and suit let pass a bier.” Their letters almost identical, “bride” and “bier” call to each other in the line and create another life/death paradox. More important, the line puns on the word “passing.” Pass means both “to go by” and “to die” but, ultimately, both seem to apply to the canto rather than the reader: the canto passes the reader by even as the storyteller incites the reader to “pass the coming canto here.” It is a strange metaphor that takes back the offer of skipping a canto. By imagining the text as a corpse and ritual spectacle to which a reader, however inactive or invested, must bear witness, “passing the coming canto here” becomes tantamount to reading it. The offer to skip the canto is disingenuous as the emphasis on “here,” with its reminiscence of *ecce homo*, makes the canto present through prolepsis. The bier as *memento mori* disrupts, if not destroys, the celebratory illusion of marriage held by “the bride and suit,” showing them their future which is always already encapsulated within the wedding vows: “in death do we part.”

Working on the dynamics of bringing things into opposition (memory/past, wedding/funeral, life/death, etc.) and then just as often inverting them, this metaphor reveals to the reader the dilemma Clarel faces. Showing marriage to be untenable because it portends parting as both separation and death, Clarel must give up his desire for Ruth; however, to reject Ruth also means giving up an identity forged on “childhood’s illusion.” Unmoored from who he was, Clarel begins in self-exile being led by an exile as he attempts to forge a new identity while traveling through a foreign desert with a bunch of strangers. Structured on the extremities of layers of self-exile, *Clarel* reforges the primary myth of the American condition.

Left for most of the poem in profound estrangement, these types of thematic interjections with both their theological and sexual undertones and their odd impatience with the verse coalesce near the end of the poem to bring Clarel back to himself and the reader back to the poem. As Bezanson points out in amid a long explanatory note, Clarel’s religious doubt and his sexual confusion are interwoven (640), and at these moments of crisis, the storyteller interjects to address the reader. At the end of “The Invitation,” just before the canto titled “The Prodigal,” the storyteller cuts in:

And now—not wantonly designed
Like lays in grove of Daphne sung,
But helping to fulfill the piece
Which in these cantos finds release,
Appealing to the museful mind—
A chord, the satyr’s chord is strung. (4.25.56-59)

Again, the storyteller apologizes for what seems to be excessive cantos, insisting they are “not wantonly designed” but are “helping to fulfill the piece.” Besides being a nod to the episodic structure associated with epic since Aristotle, the intent as well as the content of these cantos, as Bezanson notices, “is not ‘wanton’... but it *is* ‘the satyr’s chord’” (640). This type of apparent paradox is typical of the storyteller who thrives on making multiple puns. As far as sounding a sexually illicit theme, “the satyr’s chord” contradicts the intention to sing cantos “not wantonly designed”; however, “wanton,” also meaning capricious or gratuitous, addresses the storyteller’s other more pressing concern that no canto in the massive poem is unnecessary but that all are “helping to fulfill the piece.”

The storyteller interrupts himself to obsess over the making of the poem much more than to extend his worry about the illegitimacy of “the satyr’s chord.” The awkward syntax of “like lays in grove of Daphne sung,” for example, results from an odd diction choice that serves as yet another critique of the belletristic tradition that Melville allies scornfully with popularity. Instead of a grove of laurel, the storyteller speaks of “grove of Daphne” which not only personifies the laurel but reminds us that Daphne is at this point synonymous with the tree. With the myth of Daphne already well-established, the transformation of the girl into the tree has always already taken place and Apollo’s “satiric” deed has already been done. Again it is the established literary and romantic traditions associated with Greek myth and represented in the poem by Ruth that become illicit. It is these destructive passions that are replaced by “leafless bowers.” Coupled with the next line, the critique of the popular literary tradition becomes explicit, functioning much like the storyteller’s earlier appraisal of a pilgrimage that “but winds among the flowers” (2.14.121). Referring to poetry but also connoting religious law, “the lays” are sung in groves of laurel, the traditional crown of the most popular poet (a tradition retained in the title “poet laureate”). The storyteller suggests that such popular songs and perhaps even conventional faith are “wanton” in contrast to his own epic which strikes “the satyr’s chord.”

Cantos that at first seem paradoxical and superfluous become necessary “to fulfill the piece” because it is where, otherwise left unstruck (cf. 1.19.1-4), the satyr’s chord “finds release.” The idea of “release” associated with fulfillment by rhyming with “fulfill the piece” sparks connotations of sexual gratification even as it ingeniously revises the storyteller’s earlier interjection in “Flight of the Greeks.” First, the Greek’s earlier flight now takes on mythic proportions as we see the extent to which the storyteller criticizes this epic tradition as understood by Emerson while engaging in “a conscious reshaping of its own defining qualities” (McWilliams 4). Where the Greeks sought to “win release,” it is now the cantos that find release. Similar to the cantos passing “as bride and suit let pass a bier,” the cantos are active not the reader and do not free but rather bind the reader to the poem by releasing the cantos into “the museful mind.” Besides suggesting a deeply contemplative reader, “the museful mind” also stands in contrast to “lays in grove of Daphne” (which shares an imagistic similarity to the singing Glaucon and pilgrimages through groves of flowers). Again, the storyteller distinguishes between a kind of inherent poetic sensibility and one dependent on traditional, popular expectations.

Even wittier, the storyteller’s earlier command to those who prematurely end their pilgrimage to “part in peace” is shown to be a slight rather than a gesture of goodwill. By punning, the storyteller transforms the meaning of this phrase and “part in peace” becomes “fulfill the piece.” With only a “part” in a “piece,” the direction is a dig at the Greek’s integrity. By leaving, they go off incomplete. For those who continue, the storyteller suggests that they will find fulfillment and wholeness. This is reinforced by the way “the museful mind” completes the “satyr’s chord.” Held apart by dashes, the mind maintains an interiority while the body remains external; yet, the mind and body are interdependent, and despite the initial sense in the lines that they are opposites, are said to be— through the pun on “a chord” in the last line— literally in “accord.”

Finally the demand to “part here” in the earlier interjection finds its compliment in the phrase “and now.” Taken together, they are the here and now, making the poem about immediacy and presence rather than duration. The interjections reveal how the ultimate fulfillment, following a Christian paradigm, comes not from progress but through deep engagement. It is not so much getting through the poem or trudging along the road until you end

up back where you began; rather, “the piece” is always already fulfilled, the part is always already the whole, and fulfillment comes to those who, as Milton put it in “Sonnet 16,” “only stand and waite.”

Like the Emir’s son, the storyteller serves as a guide, but his guidance is prohibitive, exclusive, and elliptical. He tells the pilgrim-reader when to leave off, what to skip, and what is excessive even if it turns out to be necessary. The storyteller’s encouragements to leave off are in fact a means to engage the reader in the pilgrimage, a way of “appealing to the museful mind.” The storyteller acts as a form of resistance that includes the reader in the action. Through the verse, the storyteller puts the reader in the same binds as Clarel and the other travelers. For Clarel, the quest is to overcome his own sexual inhibitions and religious doubt by accepting his passions and beliefs even when they appear paradoxical. Similarly, the storyteller presents the reader with incentives to pass over the poem but, through puns and paradoxes, incites the reader to overcome these prohibitions, “helping to fulfill the piece” by somewhat passively letting all the cantos pass which at the same time requires a kind of active participation by *not* skipping and reading. On this fundamental level, the reader must accept paradox and cultivate a healthy tolerance for contradiction.

The reader is not just another pilgrim, though, but is also an auditor who exists in the storyteller’s presence as he tells the tale. The thematic insistence on the here and now points to this epic paradigm of the oral narrative. The storyteller stands outside the narrative but he is more than just a mask that Melville strikes through. As Warren Rosenberg argues, “Melville’s decision to turn to poetry... was rooted in a need to reject an organic creative mode which blurred the distinction between writer and work in favor of a mode, poetry, which emphasized aesthetic distance and therefore increased his control over his materials” (70). The verse may delineate the writer from the work by creating a sense of aesthetic distance, but if we distinguish between Melville and the storyteller the verse has the opposite effect of Rosenberg’s conclusion. Rather than giving Melville “increased control over his materials,” the verse decreases Melville authority and his authorial presence. As Vincent Kenny argues, “[Melville] maintains a distance from the events and characters so that the reader is left, as he is with Shakespeare, unable to identify the author’s personal voice” (121). The authorial distance Kenny feels seems accurate, but the comparison to Shakespeare here is a little off. Melville has not been transformed into a playwright by the epic but rather, to paraphrase Auden’s famous observation upon the death of W.B. Yeats, Melville has become his poetry.

This distinction becomes more clear when we recognize the difference between Melville the author and the character of the storyteller who narrates the poem. As Bryan Short observes:

In *Clarel*...[p]oetry transforms Melville’s narrative voice from that of a first-person participant or an objective observer into a less well-defined authorial presence. The constraints of meter, rhyme, and third-person detachment make it difficult for the storyteller to submerge himself in the events of *Clarel* as Ishmael does when the *Pequod* sets sail; his voice, identified with versification, is less malleable. (188)

Short concurs with Rosenberg and Kenny’s observations that the verse distances the writer from the work, but Short notices the way in which this distinction attenuates the authorial presence by keeping the storyteller outside the events. Short does not yet entirely separate “Melville’s narrative voice” from “the storyteller” although he does distinguish the two. Perhaps without a

clear sense of the storyteller's epic function, there is little reason to make this distinction unambiguous.

It is easy to see how an anonymous storyteller unable "to submerge himself in events" may be mistaken for the writer, but the storyteller of *Clarel* is in no way an author. Although Melville may be allied with the book, the very idea of the book like the bier that passes the bride and groom is a corpse and ritual spectacle which the storyteller revives through an imagined recitation. Hilton Obenzinger who, like Rosenberg and Short, also notices the distancing effect of the verse, best explains the difference between the storyteller and the author:

[Melville] abandons the voices of his characters in order to speak from the heights of disembodied third-person anonymity.... The point is not that this is the 'real' Melville speaking: if anything, the constant, obsessive play of arguments and counterarguments itself comes closest to a 'real' Melville; for as much as the poem is a series of dialogues, the 'dialogic' quality of the poem is not entirely consistent, a single dominant voice persisting throughout. (95)

Both the storyteller and Melville exist outside the story but Obenzinger identifies Melville with "the constant, obsessive play of arguments and counterarguments." The storyteller, on the other hand, although often speaking in paradoxes, is a consistent, identifiable presence associated less with the arguments and more with the verse. It is the verse that exists as the poem's "dominant voice."

The storyteller is identifiable but anonymous and it is his anonymity that makes him so easily mistaken for Melville; yet, the storyteller's anonymity is not a sign of his insubstantiality as a character but is a mark of his particular role as storyteller. The storyteller is an epic figure reminding us as McWilliams does of the genre's origins: "Primary epics, of course, have no known author; they are inherited, communal legends retold in formulaic language by an anonymous bard whose purpose is to sing the traditional song as best he can. The singer's function is choric rather than active; he celebrates a heroism he does not personify" (209). The "crabbed and ugly verse" like the storyteller's apologetic, ironic commentary on both the action and its telling are hallmarks of epic narration and turn out to be "a conscious reshaping of its own defining qualities" (4). An anonymous non-participant, the storyteller principally functions as a chorus; his main function seems to "keep a story free from explanation" which, as Walter Benjamin insists, "is half the art of [epic] storytelling" (89). Free from explanation, action, and identity, the narrative presence creates a larger textual paradox, one that resembles the intertextual oppositions within the story. Like the main character, Clarel, the poem is at odds with itself. In many ways, Clarel embodies the poem for which he is named. As Edwin Haviland Miller notes, "Clarel is a listener rather than a participant" (335). If the storyteller is Melville's agency in the poem, Clarel is a proxy for the reader. Both are complete characters but dramatize within the narrative the relationship Melville and the reader have outside of it. In effect, Melville and the reader like the storyteller and Clarel exist on different planes and one ostensibly controls the other; the epic relationship exists in the crosscurrents between storyteller and the reader.

Traditionally, the epic is opposed to the book and so as an epic *Clarel* must resist its own construction. Perhaps the storyteller's imagined presence is just "illusion feigned," but even the illusion points to the poem's epic intention to activate "communal legends retold in formulaic language." Still, Richard Slotkin pointedly asked the question: "Is the dominance of printed literature inconsistent with the initiation and development of myth, and is the post-Gutenberg

period also necessarily postmythological?” (6). This seems to be the case when we look to Bakhtin and even Benjamin, who is much more sympathetic to epic as a genre, sees the book as a problem for an epic:

The earliest symptom of a process whose end is the decline of storytelling is the rise of the novel at the beginning of modern times. What distinguishes the novel from the story (and from the epic in the narrower sense) is its essential dependence on the book. The dissemination of the novel became possible only with the invention of printing. (87)

Part of the struggle for reader and pilgrim alike is to overcome their dependence on the book which means somehow overcoming the very material from which the story is spun—the writing. As we’ve seen with Derwent’s perplexity over some mystical verse, writing poses big problems for the pilgrims. As Benjamin asserts, “No poem is intended for the reader, no picture for the beholder, no symphony for the listener” (qtd. in De Man 78). But storytelling is. Storytelling implies a listener who is both active and present. When Benjamin speaks of the poem, it must be the lyric impulse toward privacy obliterating the reader’s presence to which he refers. It is this tendency of lyric not epic that makes epic attempts like Whitman and Pound implode.

That is not to suggest that *Clarel* is reader friendly but to suggest that the poem’s difficulty does not arise from an impulse toward the personal or an intention to be cryptic. Here is how Obenzinger explains it: “Both the handwritten notebooks and the eighteen-thousand-line poem published in two volumes are products of a revolt against the reader and the marketplace that has gone far beyond petulance or anger to reach unique levels of detachment, isolation, resignation, and nerve” (Obenzinger 66). The poem’s difficulty is not so much a result of its disregard for the reader as it is an acknowledgment of the reader’s disregard for it, an inevitable result for writing that understands writing as a problem. Such a text will naturally make most readers feel ostracized but for those who see it through to its end will discover the way in which the meter becomes a vehicle for the storyteller’s presence to be felt.

Essentially, making the writing an obvious problem serves an epic intention: “the initiation and development of myth” (Slotkin 6). By trying and getting the book out of the way, the storyteller shows the reader how to apply the liniments of myth to the ligaments of culture through the inherently oral art of storytelling. Needless to say, this verbal muscle-rub burns. As the remnant of the oral, the meter riots against the apparent message, allowing the storyteller to give the reader interpretive bearings without ever having to explain the poem. As Benjamin argues, “All this points to the nature of every real story”:

It contains, openly or covertly, something useful. The usefulness may, in one case, consist in a moral; in another, in some practical advice; in a third, in a proverb or maxim. In every case the storyteller is a man who has counsel for his readers. But if today “having counsel” is beginning to have an old-fashioned ring, this is because the communicability of experience is decreasing. In consequence we have no counsel either for ourselves or for others. After all, counsel is less an answer to a question than a proposal concerning the continuation for a story which is just unfolding. To seek this counsel one would first have to be able to tell the story. (86)

The storyteller counsels the reader, but consistent with his ironic stance, the story is based on the decreasing communicability of experience. In some ways an epic about the failure of storytelling is more dire than a cultural narrative where understanding is assumed. But whether or not there is an added urgency to an epic of inscrutability, *Clarel* as “a proposal concerning the continuation for a story which is just unfolding” is an epic that is both American and modern.

The story returns to America’s imagined roots and anticipates the consequences of those origins; moreover, the poem addresses some of the linguistic quandaries to which modernism and postmodernism will eventually be addressed. So what is the storyteller’s advice? How is his elliptical method finally useful to the reader? As Obenzinger puts it, “Learning and unlearning, word by word, until, by the end of the poem, both author and reader can obtain, if not Truth, at least the ability to sustain multiplicity, contradiction, linguistic indeterminacy, doubt, and failure without going insane or, in the imagery of the ‘Epilogue,’ without drowning” (72). This is the counsel that the storyteller has for both reader and author alike. But as we have seen, the storyteller is not naïve and knows that whatever else they do “multiplicity, contradiction, linguistic indeterminacy, doubt, and failure” do not instill trust and “where the distrustful thought may range,” the reader will continue to ask, “what mean the hints?” (2.35.3-4).

Finding the Clew: *Clarel’s* Formal Trap and Egalitarian Vision

In his interjections, the storyteller dwells on the idea of giving “release.” The storyteller mines the word’s paradoxical meanings to at once “recall” or “revoke” the “crabbed metrics” while simultaneously “conveying” or “passing on” its meaning to “the museful mind.” Yet the word’s most common meaning—“the act of freeing or being freed”—is also its most profound. In the poem, “release” comes to represent sexual, spiritual, and psychological freedom for both the characters and the reader. This quest for social, religious, and personal freedom also defines the core of the American myth, albeit in complex and often contradictory ways. The storyteller’s obsession with liberation is ultimately an American obsession and his desire to free the reader from the bondage of the book, as we have seen, is, as far as it tropes oral narratives, an epic aspiration. But like the characters, the reader quickly perceives that there is no obvious liberation. In fact, it is when the characters step out of the wall or go beyond the boundaries that they find themselves most confined by and dependent on culturally bound rituals and myths.

Near the end of the first part, *Clarel* comes upon a graveyard in the canto titled “The Mounds.” Squeezed in between a highly romantic canto entitled “Ruth and *Clarel*” and an opposing chapter titled “On the Wall,” the canto serves as a fulcrum, dealing with death and freedom and the way memory can serve to both revive and liberate. Again, as Melville did earlier with “the bride and suit let pass a bier,” Melville pits the marriage ritual against funereal rites. This is certainly an instance of what Bezanson describes in the notes as a metaphorical obsession:

The joint image of death and marriage...recurs several times in the coming journey.... The narrative function of this recall is to create ominous premonitions as to Ruth’s future.... The psychological effect is to suggest *Clarel’s* unconscious wish to escape marriage. The moral implication is that any hope that love can solve the ‘complex passion’ is foredoomed. (588-589)

Juxtaposing images of death and marriage serves a narrative intention and, again, Clarel's "foredoomed" personal romance stands in for a larger critique of a romantic literary tradition made most visible by *Clarel's* crabbed metrics. However, the meditations on these rituals of life and death do more than extend metaphors that sound a theme or two, and they are more than merely veiled attempts to attack a literary climate that undoes Melville's career as a writer. These dual and seemingly opposite rituals exemplify the ways in which the poem attempts to create a literary standard that is incomparably American by revising the expectations of the traditional epic poem.

"The Mounds" begins just before twilight, which suggests something liminal or in the balance. Following the canto "Clarel and Ruth," "The Mounds" immediately juxtaposes romantic love with death rites and holds the two together. The meditation is staged "On Zion hill without the wall" which also puts the canto in direct opposition with the next one, "On the Wall." These constant juxtapositions create a prism of dyadic relationships which cast a complex of oppositions that—like the characters and the landscape—often appear indistinguishable from each other. The canto begins:

Ere twilight and the shadow fall
On Zion hill without the wall
In place where Latins set the bier
Borne from the gate—who lingers here... (1.40.1-4)

The first line gives the time, which is not only "ere twilight" but in metaphorical terms before "the...fall" and "without the wall/ In place." The image is prelapsarian; there has been no fall and there is no wall delimiting "Eden." As Richard Slotkin aptly states, "In the end is the beginning" (539), and this is a hallmark of mythic time. Edward Taylor, discussing Milton, explains the temporal structure with regard to Christian time:

There is, first of all, the tendency, evident in Isaiah (40-55) and elsewhere, to envisage the (ideal) future in imagery reminiscent of the original state, to see the end as somehow a return to Eden ...the beginning...somehow contains the ending, the ending the beginning. (13)

And Northrop Frye will describe a similar temporal structure in terms of epic:

The convention of beginning the action *in medias res* ties a knot in time, so to speak.... All three epics [Homer, Virgil] begin at a kind of nadir of the total cyclical action.... From there, the action moves both backward and forward far enough to indicate the general shape of the historical cycle. (318-19)

Melville, using clear Miltonic imagery—"twilight," "shadow fall," "the wall"—activates all of these, insinuating them into an image that is at once mythic, Christian, and epic.

The storyteller creates his signature paradoxes as well. Zion hill is borderless but the enjambment severs "In place" from "without a wall," allowing it to stand literally in place as the line break creates a kind of border. A tension emerges between a "hill without a wall" and a "place where Latins set the bier." The bier is logically "in place" in the graveyard; however, "borne from the gate," it comes in tension with this positioning in two ways. First, where

“borne” means carried, it sets in motion what is said to be “in place.” Moreover, by putting it in motion, it animates death which is a decidedly static state. Secondly, by using the word “borne,” the word grafts a connotation of birth onto an image of death. Still, the bier’s trajectory is from the gate into the borderless “Zion hill without a wall” where it will liminally “linger.”

From the panorama of the graveyard, the storyteller hones in on Clarel as the next line transfers the lingering from the bier to Clarel, changing it from a declaration into an interrogation: “Who lingers here,/ Where, typing faith exempt from loss,/By sodless mound is seen a cross?” (1.40.4-6). The word “typing” gives off the vague sense of Melville as an author staving off doubt and loss by literally “typing faith”; yet, the storyteller, whose bodiless presence speaks the lines, uses the word to identify a symbol of resurrection. The “Latin” or Roman Catholic “faith exempt from loss” due to Christ’s resurrection is represented or “typed” by “a cross.” The cross is a particularly apt emblem here. As a typical way to distinguish a Christian grave from a Jewish or Muslim one, it resists the graveyard’s homogenizing effect, trying to force a distinction where there really isn’t one, a symbol that resists the borderless “hill without the wall/in place.” The cross as an image also conjures up the place where opposites intersect, and reminds Clarel that he stands at an intellectual and spiritual crossroads. He is leaving Ruth after all and going off on a quest to find himself which, given his name, is also a quest to find God.

The “lingering” not only attaches to Clarel, however, but to Celio, who, buried in the “sodless mound” christened by a cross, also “lingers” as he awaits final judgment. Relating together Clarel (the light) and Celio (the sky or heavens) through the word “linger” makes them into an inseparable and at times indistinguishable pair. In “The Fulfillment,” a title prematurely raising the hope of sexual, spiritual, and intellectual gratification, tells us of Celio’s death. Here, Clarel reads Celio’s journal and “a second self therein he found/but stronger (1.19.27-28). What is “fulfilling” is Clarel’s discovery of a doppelganger or his other half who is, at once, “a handsome Italian youth” (Bezanson 533) and a humpback who represents both “heaven” and “apostasy” with “Faith’s candle in Doubt’s dying hand” (1.40.18). What makes Celio “stronger” than Clarel is not just his capacity to doubt but his capacity to contain the opposite of his belief: even in doubt, Celio maintains his Catholic faith by committing himself to the monastery where “the friars had claimed [him] as of their fold” (1.40.10). Celio’s ability to contain his opposite not only makes him model for Clarel but also makes him into an example of how “multiplicity, contradiction, linguistic indeterminacy,” might be seen to unify, and such conditions as “doubt and failure” may become sublime circumstances for conviction and victory.

The storyteller tells that Celio’s circumstantial faith causes many of the faithful to pause and protest his conversion. The friars

had held to unprotesting lips
In mistimed zeal the crucifix
and last, among the fellowships
of Rome’s legitimate dead, laid one
not saved through faith, nor Papal Rome’s true son.(1.40. 12-15)

Celio’s conversion made at “Life’s flickering hour” is almost literally done over his dead body when he couldn’t reject the catechism. Because of Celio’s dubious conversion, “some, who other forms [of religious faith] did hold/ rumored, or criticised/ or told the tale (1.40.21-22). Clarel, however, does not go to the mound as a gossip or because of the scandal:

Nay, but he felt the appeal begin—
 The poor petition from the ground:
 Remember me! For all life's din
 Let not my memory be drowned.
 And thought was Clarel's even for one
 Of tribe not his—to him unknown
 Through vocal word or vital cheer:
 A stranger, but less strange made here,
 Less distant. (1.40.21-26)

Rightly, Clarel feels compassion even empathy for Celio. Ironically, Celio's estrangement in death makes him "less strange" and "less distant," a result perhaps of death's homogenizing effect. Through his identification with Celio, Clarel seems to sense that life and death are not so much opposites as compliments to each other.

But more than this arch theme, these lines, earnestly seeking the grave as "death yields without reserve of heart to meditation" (1.40.34), carry Clarel into a scene determined by epic impulses, allowing the storyteller to extemporize on the poem's epic purpose. Clarel not only distinguishes himself from the gossipmongers when he hears "the poor petition from the ground" but also revises Celio's deathbed conversion with the friars. Where Celio was silenced on his deathbed and christened with "unprotesting lips," now buried and with Clarel as witness, Celio makes a petition: "Remember me." Funeral rites are obviously about remembrance, but, as Walter Benjamin reminds us in "The Storyteller," "Mnemosyne, the rememberer, was the Muse of the epic art among the Greeks" (97). Even more, "*Memory* creates the chain of tradition which passes a happening on from generation to generation" (Benjamin 98). That said, memory functions in lyric poetry as well. It is the stuff of elegy and the principle of Wordsworth's "personal epic"; so beyond a nod to memory, what else happens here that could be considered epic? At first glance, an obscure and relatively insignificant tourist standing over a grave of one who is either forgotten or remembered by a few "of a tribe not his" (1.40.29) would hardly seem to meet our general expectations of an epic scene. But here emerges a "tale of the tribe" when the tribe is a tribe of strangers and the poem is an epic of exile.¹⁴

The storyteller's telling of the scene makes the events part of a larger cultural narrative. Even though the event for Clarel is a private meditation, for the storyteller, the episode is about memory as a vehicle for constructing, as D.H. Lawrence put it, the "tale of a tribe."

even for one
 Of tribe not his—to him unknown
 Through vocal word or vital cheer:
 A stranger, but less strange made here,
 less distant... (1.40.28-32)

On a biographical level, these lines extend Melville's authorial worries and doubts implied by "typing faith exempt from loss" (1.40.5). Here, Melville seems to hope for a future reader will remember him by his words rather than by a reputation found on rumor or criticism or, worse, its absence.

¹⁴ I have adapted the phrase "epic of exile" from the book *Ethics of Exile* by Timothy Strode.

However as intriguing as such a biographical reading may be, the issue of memory really has less to do with Melville and more to do with the story's essential epic paradox: as an epic, the poem uses collective memory to forge what Benedict Anderson called "an imagined community"; however, as American, the poem must recall the nation's mythic origins based on an estranged community founding its home in a foreign elsewhere. Celio's imagined mandate to Clarel—"remember me"—strengthens the sinews of a "tribe" of exiles by making "less strange" a stranger from a "tribe not his." As we will recall, Michael Bernstein argues that "the epic speaks primarily to members of a 'tribe,' to listeners who recognize in the poem, social (in the broadest sense, which here includes political) as well as psychological, ethical, emotional, or aesthetic imperatives" (14). In this instance, that means staging a scene where memory reconstitutes "tribe" to include what is "to him unknown" and functions to make "a stranger...less strange." It must show exile to be not a means of distancing or separating but as a force that brings people and places into proximity and binds them to one another.

The dynamics of American myth activated by the scene helps explain the strange and seemingly dislocated reference to Salem that ends Clarel's meditation:

Turning, he slow pursued the steep
 Until he won that leveled spot,
 Terraced and elevated plot
 Over Gihon, where yet others keep
 Death's tryst—afar from kindred lie:
 Protestants, which in Salem die. (1.40.35-40)

The Protestants in Salem appear as exiles in this context just as the Protestants buried in Gihon "afar from kindred lie." But this recollection serves as a literal act of re-remembering where far off kin who have been otherwise separated are brought back together. Even more important, it realizes the otherwise displaced American context for the poem. The suggestion that the dead here are far from home has an Odyssean feel to it. The action of the poem takes place somewhere else while the locus of the poem remains in a distant imagined "home." Also similar to the *Odyssey*, this displacement is double-edged. Just as Odysseus seems more "at home" without a home, the Protestants buried on the outskirts of Jerusalem are more at home away from Salem. The burial in Gihon is a return, literalizing the "New Jerusalem" by literally transplanting the new in the old. The Protestants in Gihon compound their self-exile by fleeing a home which itself was a utopia founded through self-exile. In the context of such circuitous migrations, Clarel, a Protestant tourist, standing over the grave of an exiled Catholic, becomes emblematic of the waves of early American colonization by both Catholic and Protestant explorers.

Leaving Celio's grave, Clarel then notices Rolphe "fixed before a founded stone" muttering over Ethelward's grave—"Him, him I knew...but 'twas far from here—How far from here!" (1.40.44-46). The adjective "founded," with its sense of foundation and discovery, along with Rolphe's memory, drawn not only to another time but another place, gives Rolphe's grief poignancy and thematic resonance. The repetition in Rolphe's lament sounds the "the satyr's chord" by giving his impromptu obituary for Ethelward a hint of erotic desperation. But in this private and passionate recollection, Rolphe also repeats America's mythic dynamics as his outburst gives way to a longer meditation on modern death-rites. Rolphe's diatribe not only shows what makes a modern American epic unpalatable but identifies the danger in trying to

construct one. After imagining that “at this spent man’s death-bed/ some kind soul kneeled and chapter read,” Rolphe reflects:

Ah, own! To moderns death is drear,
 So drear: we die, we make no sign,
 We acquiesce in any cheer—
 No rite we seek, no rite decline.
 Is’t nonchalance of languid sense,
 Or the last, last indifference?
 With some, no doubt, ‘tis peace within;
 In others, may be, care for kin:
 Exemplary through life, as well
 Dying they’d be so, nor repel... (1.40.55-64)

The idea that in death “moderns” seek “no rite...no rite decline,” counters the beginning of the canto which seeks to make ritual distinctions among the dead through various “signs” such as the cross. For Rolphe, the modern indifference to ritual signs or, rather, the modern’s acceptance of all rituals threatens to obviate all distinction, making it difficult to distinguish people and therefore impossible to remember them. In context, this complaint smacks of America’s complex resistance to its own celebrated heterogeneity.

There is a strange pun in the lines following the “last indifference” that emphasizes this point. When Rolphe says “some, no doubt, ‘tis peace within,” he means to suggest that this inclusiveness which he registers as indifference is certainly appealing to some. But the use of “no doubt” also suggests that this type of acceptance creates a kind of credulity that Rolphe finds treacherous. The “peace within” comes from a refusal to recognize difference. Extending the pun to the next line even suggests that it is “doubt” that leads to “care of kin”: “In others, may be, care for kin.” Rolphe means to suggest this “last indifference” may inspire in some a “care for kin,” but it is ultimately the “may be” or doubt that makes this possible. While there is extraordinary power in the idea of a tribe founded on its opposite (exile), Rolphe identifies the potential pitfall of a nation without borders, a people whose collective identity is hewn from an idea of diaspora. For Rolphe, it is a kind of cultural “nonchalance” that leaves them without a way to remember, without a means to “care for kin” since kin become illogically everyone and no one. Rolphe mourns the loss of cultural identity arising from the fact that “moderns” exist without a sense of tribe and therefore without a sense of themselves.

Rolph exemplifies this by punctuating his diatribe with a story. Almost an allegory for the latent threat to identity inherent in this “last indifference,” the burial of Johann Ludwig Burckhardt becomes a symbol of the citizen living in exile with strangers. As Bezanson explains, “Burckhardt, famous Swiss explorer and travel writer, had adopted the disguise of a Turkish native, mastered the languages and mores of an alien civilization, and so gained access to Mohammedan holy places no Frank had seen before” (587). Rolphe begins by drawing an analogy between his invective on modern burial rites and his telling of Burckhardt’s burial:

This minds me that in like content,
 Other forms were kept without dissent
 By one who hardly owned their spell. (1.40. 67-69)

Bringing up the relationship between content and “other forms” draws attention back to the verse, since the verse is the most constant and concrete example of the ways in which form affects and even becomes content. In this context, the verse becomes formal oxymoron. On one hand, the iambic tetrameter establishes a kind of cultural norm or foundation supporting Rolphe’s perspective; on the other hand, the verse form undermines Rolphe’s point of view by obscuring difference so much that it is often hard to discern which character is talking or being described. It is this tension that underlies Rolphe’s perturbation and turns his graveside philosophizing into an epic interrogation of the relationship between personal identity and a sense of tribe. Yet Rolphe exists within the poem and so he too functions as content. In relation to the poem, the form of the poem creates a kind of meta-contradiction: while Rolphe refers to “like content” and “other forms,” the verse itself poses the opposite—dissimilar content in like forms. This opposition seems to suggest that having a normative cultural mythology is no better at recognizing individuals, undercutting any potential nostalgia that Rolphe’s lament might carry.

The opposition of content and “other forms” as well as their reversal juxtaposes two fundamental principles of American myth: freedom and individuality. Within the matrix of the poem, these two values become at odds. As Agnes Dicken Cannon notices, the motivation for the verse form is not only the influence of epic writers but also “the freedom within confinement that befitted [Melville’s] view of the universe” (171). Melville then creates a sense of “freedom within confinement” by consistently undoing stark contrasts and oppositions within this relatively strict meter. As Stan Goldman observes, “In every possible narrative and structural way, Melville tries to change the stark ‘either/or’ absolutism characteristic of the Law and the Prophets into the more flexible ‘both/and’ balance of Proverbs” (99). Creating a balance of opposites sparks a conflagration of possibility which may feel like freedom; however, the metrical structure continues to resist or at least confine these burgeoning contradictions.

Even if the poem succeeds in establishing a satisfactory type of freedom, the cost may be too high. As Rolphe opines, the price for winning this type of freedom is the individual, since individuality requires “the stark ‘either/or’ absolutism” for its definition. As Vincent Kenny explains, “Clarel and the other sincere pilgrims exist in a situation where transcendent values and certitude are not convenient, and where identity of self emerges painfully only after heroic acceptance of the circumscribed universe which hems in man” (103). The “both/and” universe of the poem multiplies the choices but does not get rid of the need to choose. If this is true and it seems to be, it is not certain that an individual can accept or exist in the condition of “both/and” and will inevitably have to accept “the circumscribed universe” of “either/or.”

In his discussion of *Moby Dick*, Leo Bersani points out that “in a democratic society, anybody can be lifted to royalty. The principles that determine places within a hierarchy have been changed, but the hierarchical structure has remained intact” (215). Yet, it is the form of *Clarel* that demolishes any hierarchical structure consistently pulling against the type of individual distinctions where “anybody can be lifted to royalty.” Bersani is right that “In *Moby-Dick* the rhetoric of democracy has become oxymoronic: in democracy, equality founds and legitimates inequality” (215). But this flux occurs because of the individual:

Against those aristocratic societies where individual personality is largely irrelevant to a hierarchy of power determined by inherited privileges and reinforced by external arts and embellishments, Melville argues for a society (if not a universe) where the individual personality counts, indeed is determinant, in the distribution of power. (Bersani 217)

In *Clarel*, the opposite seems to be true: form, like the American myth, seems to insist on a democratic ideal that, at its logical extreme, dissolves “individual personality.”

This anyway is how the canto “The Mounds” begins and ends. Similar to Celio, Burckhardt is remembered incorrectly, subsumed by the beliefs to which he does not subscribe. Unlike Celio, however, Burckhardt is an imposter:

He, in fulfillment of pledged work,
Among Turks having passed for Turk,
Sickened among them. On death-bed
Silent he heard the Koran read:
They shrilled the Islam wail for him,
They shawled him in his burial trim... (1.40.68-73)

Where Celio, a Catholic apostate, passes for what his own culture expects him to be, Burckhardt “passed for Turk.” Not only does this mean that he appeared to be a Turk but that he also “passed” or died as a Turk. His identity as exile becomes calcified and perpetuated in death. The reason for his death among the Turks is simply stated: “he...sickened among them.” But this also suggests the way in which this cultural transmogrification ruins him. His disguise attenuates his personality as it gets taken for real and Burckhardt can offer no correction. Like Celio’s death-bed conversion where Celio “had held to unprotesting lips...the crucifix,” Burckhardt is “on death-bed/ Silent [as] he heard the Koran read.” Where Celio is hushed by the cross, Burckhardt is overpowered, “shrilled” and “shawled” by Turkish Islam.

Taken over by the roar and raiment of an alien culture, his identity remains precarious and liminal, fashioned and petrified on the periphery of unchanging cultural erosion:

And now, on brinks of Egypt’s waste,
Where the buried Sultans’ chapels rise,
Consistently toward Mecca faced... (1.40.74-76)

Just as Rolphe and Clarel stand outside the gates, Burckhardt is “on brinks of Egypt’s waste.” But unlike Rolphe and Clarel, who can return and potentially recover themselves, Burckhardt “Consistently toward Mecca faced.” Even buried as a Turk, he remains an imposter far from the cultural center where “the buried Sultans’ chapels rise,” and the “brinks of waste” reflect Burckhardt’s calcified identity as a Turk: “The blameless simulator lies.” Again, there’s a pun here. Burckhardt’s death as a Turk not only leaves him perpetually prone but also forever deceitful. He remains blameless only because his burial is sanctified by religious ritual; so in the end, the lie or simulation is perpetrated and perpetuated by others. From what we can tell, he never intends to die a Turk.

Blameless or not, his identity becomes a motley of cultural signifiers:

The turbaned Swiss, Sheik Ibrahim—
Burckhardt.—But home the sparrow flees.
Come, move we ere the gate they quit,
And we be shut out here with these
Who never shall re-enter it. (1.40.78-82)

His highly Germanic and dissonant name ridicules the metrical and mellifluous title of “turbaned Swiss, Sheik Ibrahim—.” At the same time, the name is associated with home, not only because the name gives away his Swiss background but also because of the enjambment which associates the name with “home.” Relating the idea of “home” to the name Burckhardt makes cultural background the foundation of identity despite the variegated trappings heaped on from a kind of multicultural syncretism. In this sense, “but home the sparrow flees” becomes somewhat ironic, since Burckhardt remains in everlasting exile despite the partial recovery of Burckhardt’s origins in the lines.

As it turns out, the phrase directly relates to Rolphe and Clarel. As Rolphe winds up his story, he notices how late it is getting and breaks off his anecdote by observing that “home the sparrow flees.” The fleeing sparrows suggest both that returning home is a natural impulse and that, in the case of Clarel and Rolphe anyway, there is a need for escape or fleeing. Like Burckhardt, they find themselves potentially “shut out.” But even when they make it back to the gate, it is unclear whether they can ever really re-enter. They come to the gates of Jerusalem, the origin of origins, but arrive as the young man in the story told by Mandeville who circumnavigated the world. As Stephen Greenblatt relates it:

The story is of a young man “who went on a time to see the world.” He passed India and the many isles beyond India until he found an isle where his own language was being spoken to oxen. At this he marveled greatly and then turned back and retraced his immense journey. Only when he returned home did he realize that he had circumnavigated the globe and actually been at the boundaries of his own land; he had simply heard one of his countrymen encouraging his cattle. The story shows, Mandeville writes, that men can travel on what appears to be the underside of the globe without falling off into the firmament...but it also suggests that this relativizing understanding is purchased at the price of never again feeling quite at home, the price of what Heidegger called an “uprooting in one’s origins.” (48)

The heterogeneity of exile ultimately erases any sense of home or origin and so that there is no where really to return. Their confinement, therefore, is not inside the walls but without and as questing tourists Rolphe and Clarel may already be counted among those “who never shall re-enter.”

Moreover, their exile is typically American. As Hilton Obenzinger traces it:

Yet the special nature of Holy Land travel, which embraced such diverse activities as pilgrimage, missionary enterprise, colonial settlement, exploration, archaeological excavation, and tourist excursion, all in an overtaxitized landscape, allowed sanctified and consciously desanctified displacement, along with the fear/delight of capture/enchantment to stand almost as an epitome of American settler-colonial identity. (36-37)

This “constantly reproduced liminal state” (Obenzinger 37) is the mark of an American epic whose version of return home just as it is with Odysseus and as shown by the Puritan’s of Gihon, becomes simply another kind of exile. A tribe based on an “American settler-colonial identity,” whether manufactured through conversion or deception, is largely superficial and turns out to be

unsustainable even in death. As all utopist visions eventually betray, they are apparitions of nowhere.

While “The Mounds” dramatizes a private meditation on one person’s death, the meditation is set in a graveyard just outside the walls of Jerusalem. Jerusalem is not only an ancient city but a sacred one to a confluence of the world’s major faiths. As such, it connotes the past, the mythic, and a kind of multi-denominational “democratic spirit.” Yet secularized and displaced by Christian diasporas of which America is one, the idea of the “New Jerusalem” makes this spiritual epicenter—and epic center—an empty center of a barren Palestine that has become a symbol of its own memory. In the terms of the poem, as Obenzinger explains, “Material Palestine is a disjuncture marked by absence, by the decidedly empty tomb of Christ, by the fact that the profane land is no longer sanctified in history but only a representation of sacred past and an anticipation of sacred future, an image flickering in ruins” (20). That is to say, that the most American thing about the epic is the landscape. As a poem of somewhere else, Jerusalem becomes a displacement which is in fact a replacement of what Emerson calls in “Nature” America’s “ample geography” (465): it is a literalization of the Puritan idea that the New World was both New England which meant it was also the new, as Blake called England, “New Jerusalem.” Here is where the imagination of place comes full circle, but instead of the epic return leading to fulfillment, it short-circuits itself.

**Paradiso Terrestre:
America's Displaced Wilderness**

The great poems of heaven and hell have been written and the great poem of the earth remains to be written.—Wallace Stevens, *Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction*

Because landscape features hugely in the American literary imagination, it should be no surprise to find the poem grounded in a topographical interplay between the Palestinian desert and the American wilderness. Helen Vendler, for one, finds the function of the landscape paramount to understanding *Clarel*:

The concentric clusters of ideologically determined personages surrounding the progressively disabused Clarel make up one of the two principal inventions of the poem. The second, and perhaps the greater, invention is the succession of landscapes that constantly recede before us as we move with the pilgrims on their pilgrimage. (41)

Vendler notices the acute way in which the “ideologically determined personages” and the “succession of landscapes”—which I would emphasize are equally “ideologically determined”—exist as the core innovations of the poem. And whether or not “the succession of landscapes” is a “greater” invention, it is the landscape that carries the epic weight by binding the “ideologically determined personages” together and giving their intimate interactions cultural and historical resonance. The landscape is an extension of the characters not just a backdrop or stage. It is a product of their perception. As Richard Slotkin contends “Natural terrain is suggested in horrific abstractions; the landscape of the Puritan mind replaces the real wilderness” (99). Melville’s desert is an extreme extension of the Puritan wilderness and as such it is a landscape of the mind which is both malleable and portable. Melville’s desert serves a catalytic function, confining and conflating characters, often reducing their arid ideological view points to the equivalent of a pile of indistinguishable stones.

In the second part of the poem aptly titled “The Wilderness,” there is an incident halfway through the canto titled “A Halt,” that epitomizes the ways in which the landscape works. Nehemiah, “the aged American millennialist” (Bezanson 629), considered at once “crazy” and “a saint” (2.10.187-188), starts “flinging aside stone after stone” (2.10.190). Nehemiah is a paradoxical figure. He is a figure who exemplifies both unwavering belief and mindless conformity. The canto’s title, “The Halt,” which means to describe a temporary stop taken by the pilgrims, confers doubt and even a sense of urgent resistance—“halt!”—on Nehemiah’s Sisyphean enterprise. Moreover, the word resounds with connotations and allusions that inflect Nehemiah’s activity by putting it in a larger Christian context.

The word “halt” refers us to the passage in Luke 14 where Jesus is in the middle of one of his parables: “Go out quickly into the streets and lanes of the city, and bring in hither the poor, and the maimed, and the halt, and the blind” (14:21). The chapter is within a parable that follows a speech by Jesus where he argues for performing acts of healing on the Sabbath. Before moving to the parable, Jesus admonishes the Pharisees: “whosoever exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted” (14:11). The warning serves both as a moral and as a transition to his parable. Jesus then begins to tell a story about a party where the invited guests,

having made excuses about why they can't come to the feast, are rejected from the supper while the "poor, and the maimed, and the halt, and the blind" are brought in their place as honored guests. Jesus concludes saying, "Whosoever doth not bear his cross, and come after me, cannot be my disciple" (14:27). Like "the poor, and the maimed, and the halt, and the blind," Nehemiah abases himself to do God's bidding in anticipation of being one of the chosen:

With patient look,
Poising a stone as 'twere a clod:
"All things are possible with God;
The humblest helper will he brook." (2.10.198-202)

Following the paradoxical logic that Jesus preaches in Luke, Nehemiah also believes that by humbling himself, he will be exalted, and it is through his interaction with the desert that he finds a superlative expression of his belief.

But Nehemiah begins his task "yet feebly," which also means "haltingly," so that his action not only exhibits physical weakness but also suggests mental faltering. While this sense of "feeble" emphasizes the vanity rather than the virtue of Nehemiah's efforts, the etymological meaning of the word—"to weep"—conjures a kind of noble Niobe figure who, turned to stone, sobs in a perpetual state of penitence and loss. Although he is feeble, Nehemiah suffers the "charge":

Yet feebly, nathless as he wrought
In charge imposed though not unloved... (2.10.191-192)

The line begins with feeble and ends with a near opposite, "wrought," showing Nehemiah to be as tenacious as he is weak. "Wrought," which not only emphasizes his effort but also, somewhat ironically, gives his pyrrhic act of displacement a sense of fashioning or creating something. The line opposes itself, bringing the conflicting aspects of Nehemiah together. It also intimates that what Nehemiah seeks in the stones—a divine presence—is absent and unrecoverable. What Nehemiah seeks has not only already happened, Jesus has not only risen and disappeared long ago leaving behind an empty tomb, but Nehemiah's yearning itself is yet another kind of displacement. His desire to "pave the way of the lord" can be traced back to another character's self-destructive mission.

The line pivots on the conspicuous yet seemingly insubstantial term "nathless." Serving as a hinge in the line, it is an interesting word choice. Besides being yet another example of distressed diction which smacks of Spenser's epic antiquarianism, and recalls the diction of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, it is a contraction that also recalls "Nathan," who is, as Bezanson summarizes, "An American Gentile Zionist farmer, the father of Ruth... primarily a case history in AMERICAN DOUBT AND BELIEF" (628). Through connotation, the word suggests that Nehemiah begins his work "Nathan-less." Being that it is Nehemiah who introduces Clarel to Ruth, Nathan and Nehemiah relationship is significant to the plot; even more, Nathan seems to inhabit Nehemiah's consciousness, even as Nathan's story is, according to Robert Milder, "narratively aborted" (195). By this point, Nathan is dead and the text is literally "nathless"; nevertheless—or, rather, nathless—Nathan remains Nehemiah's doppelganger.

An equally quixotic figure, Nathan, with a zeal as imperturbable as Nehemiah's, has a similar goal to reestablish Jerusalem. Also like Nehemiah, his character emerges from his

interaction with and perceptions of landscape. Unlike Nehemiah, however, Nathan finds himself negotiating the relationship between his Christian identity and his home in an American wilderness founded on the opposing centrifugal and centripetal forces regulating settler-colonial exile. The compulsion toward an ever receding origin that leads both away from and toward an imagined homeland which increasingly resembles the ruined religious center of a lost Palestine ultimately leads Nathan to convert to Judaism and move to Jerusalem. But this early canto, the longest in the poem and titled “Nathan” after its subject, mostly takes place in the American wilderness. Situated in a poem where the majority of the action occurs in a postbellum Palestine, the canto deliberately links an early American landscape to the action of the pilgrim/tourists wandering in the Palestinian desert, reminding us not only that this is an American epic but also that America’s mythological origins are always already displaced. The American wilderness, which serves as the most recent remapping of an ancient Christian topography, has become internalized and subliminal. By examining the canto about Nathan, we will be able to see how a syncretistic American wilderness confines and even defines this small but climactic moment for Nehemiah occurring much later and at a vast remove from this ulterior place.

Nathan comes from wholly Puritan stock, “austere, ascetical, but free”(1.17.2). The emphasis on freedom, reminiscent of the invocation to Barlow’s *Columbiad*, is reinforced by evocations of the landscape which, by emphasizing the wilderness (1.17.6), the movement westward (1.17.12), and the further “remove” (1.17.13), are much like Mary Rowlandson’s captivity narrative. But as the landscape moves toward a “wild, wild in symmetry of mould” (1.17.20), the American wilderness begins to take on a highly romanticized pastoral ideal that resonate with Milton. At once wild and free, the American wilderness becomes an “Esdraleon” or “nature in her best benign” (1.17. 18-19), the increasing removes returning us to an Edenic notion of the American landscape and eventually its place as a restored Palestine.

In the context of the canto, this *paradiso terrena* does not simply recapitulate a notion of Christian restoration; rather, it mirrors Nathan’s move away from Christian faith toward a renewed religious fervor brought on by his conversion to Judaism. Nathan’s conversion, encoded in the landscape, is paradoxically a move toward spiritual fulfillment by moving back toward a lost origin which nonetheless precludes the Christian promise. Unlike the Puritan tendency to emphasize “the gloom here of from hemlock woods/ Breeding the witchcraft-spell malign” (1.17.24-25)—a characterization that repeats Mather’s idea of the wilderness as “the devil’s territory”—the American wilderness at the beginning of the canto seems much more akin to “groves like isles in Grecian seas” (1.17.26). Besides the obvious opposition here, the shift from a Christian perception to a classical one is significant by retroactively infusing the “hemlock woods” with connotations of Socrates, the great doubter. Not that Nathan can be confused with Socrates, but such an allusion underscores the way Nathan’s doubt is first a type of self-exile from his Puritan ancestry. The allusion to “Grecian seas” recasts Nathan as an outcast by orienting him towards classical origins which forecast Nathan’s tortured transition toward “a thrill/ which heathenized against his will” (1.17.160-70). Moreover, the notion of being “heathenized” anticipates the ideational struggle between the puritan-settlers and the “Indian” or “heathen” that the American wilderness conscripts as part of its mythological significance.

That is not to say Nathan “goes native” but, more ironically, Nathan’s “heathenization” is a means of discovering his Christian roots. Like his puritan fathers, he ardently resists cultural assimilation even as he moves toward the fringes and ultimately outside the Christian community. Nathan’s own father’s extremism takes “the sire of Nathan, wife and son” (1.17.38) beyond the pale and he dies among natives: “[Nathan’s] father’s sylvan grave...lay forever

stilled/ With sachems and mound-builders old” (1.17.167; 1.17.43-44). Again, the images go both ways. His grave is in the wilderness but that wilderness is idealized, described as “sylvan” rather than “heathen,” giving off highly poeticized pastoral connotations. The wilderness is always already settled, colonized, and cultivated. That is, the wild is not to be confused with nativeness even though Nathan’s father’s grave lies among the more ancient Indian mounds:

foes pestilent to God
His fathers old those Indians deemed: Nathan the Arabs here esteemed
the same—slaves meriting the rod... (1.17.306-309)

Nathan’s puritan ancestors’ colonizing indictment of the Indians as “foes pestilent to God,” is an attitude that Nathan will repeat after moving to Jerusalem and having “lodged within the stronghold town/ Of Zion, and his heart exiled” (1.17.300). By reenacting the self-exile of his puritan fathers, Nathan repeats the puritan settlement and similarly reenacts their perceptions of the native population, considering the Hittites “slaves meriting the rod.” However, Nathan’s reenactment is empty because it simultaneously requires him to abandon the American landscape and the Christianity he seeks to fulfill. Moreover, within the postbellum context in which the epic is being told, the reference to the Hittites as “slaves” critiques Nathan’s American settler-colonial identity.

Nathan’s journey from Christian faith to Jewish conversion after detouring through heathen doubt is imagined in decidedly topographical terms. While “the landing patriarchs knew.../a turf divine/Of promise” (1.17.34-36), the “gracious charm” of the prairie also appears “in her swimming swell/of undulation” (1.17.28, 30-31). While the patriarchs come secure in their religious convictions, there is no such resolve offered to Nathan. Right off, the landscape suggests a rise and fall (the entire Christian narrative repeating itself), a foundation that is forever vacillating like the sea. In fact, it is the landscape seduces him into doubt in the first place:

An only child, with her [Nathan kept]
For *her* sake part, the Christian way,
Though frequent in his bosom crept
Precocious doubt unbid. The sway
He felt of his grave life, and power
Of vast space, from the log-house door. (1.17. 50-55)

As the rhyme scheme emphasizes, the “Christian way” which Nathan “kept” gets linked to “precocious doubt” which “crept” into “his bosom.” Doubt’s incursion into “the Christian way” through a linked rhyme causes it to give way to the “sway” of “his grave life.” The power to be swayed, however, comes from the “vast space” seen “from the log-house door.” It is this entry way where “SPACE” that “central fact to man born in America,” as Charles Olson memorably put it, enters the “kept” space of the log-house. What’s more, just as the civilizing effort of the log house is already compromised by the fact that it is hewn from the surrounding wilderness and therefore inextricable from it (again, something the rhyme scheme emphasizes), Nathan, described as a “stripling” (1.17.47), is already heathenized and wavering. By “swaying” him, the “vast space” at once persuades and causes him to waver. He is enrooted but his roots bind him to a landscape which foments doubt and becomes the basis for his “grave life.” Besides suggesting

a kind of moral seriousness, his “grave life” also links him to “his father’s sylvan grave” and whatever that pastoral vision of the American wilderness that portends.

And yet Nathan’s experience of the American landscape will destroy the pastoral promise of the patriarchs. Unlike his father’s “sylvan grave” locked in its romantic pastoral, Nathan’s “grave life” is also grafted to the “Three Indian mounds” that disrupt the romanticized landscape:

Against the horizon’s level bounds
Dim showed across the prairie green
Like dwarfed and blunted mimic shapes
Of Pyramids at distance seen... (1.17.55-60)

As “dwarfed and blunted mimic shapes,” the mounds are described in burlesque even grotesque terms that undo the picturesque “prairie green.” As the line turns, however, the mounds are perceived as Pyramids. The metaphor imposes a spatial distance on temporally distant places of lost origin onto the prairie. But rather than extending the prairie to other places distant in both time and space, the comparison to the “Pyramids” circumscribed by a “level horizon” is a kind of optical illusion that allows for a kind of colonial contact and containment of discursive “heathen” origins (ones important enough to be encoded on the dollar bill in the Masonic pyramid of progress).

Nathan’s contradictory visions of the landscape accrue and mount toward what amounts to a parody of Christian sacrifice:

Lambs had he known by thunder killed
Innocents—and the type of Christ
Betrayed. (1.17.73-75)

Here, the pastoral ideal is taken to an extreme as metaphors crisscross and short-circuit each other. The metaphor of Christ as “innocent lamb” is literalized so that the incidental destruction of a lamb by lightening becomes a kind of natural betrayal that reveals the malign intentions of the landscape and which Nathan interprets, somewhat absurdly, as the false disputation of both the pastoral ideal and the redemptive promise of Christianity.

Such an incident sets the stage for the major catastrophe of the canto and of Nathan’s life. Whatever doubt such accidents create, Nathan’s ultimate disillusionment comes from a landslide that kills his uncle. Again, the landscape magnifies a personal event so that it takes on cultural and religious import with consequences as prophetic as they are ironic:

In prairie twilight, summer’s own,
The last cow milked, and he alone
In barn-yard dreamy by the fence,
Contrasted, came a scene immense... (1.17.78-81)

The storyteller introduces the “scene immense” with a strong contrast, a bucolic summer which carries over the connotations of a pastoral idyll. It is twilight and Nathan stands by a fence, liminal images suggesting a crisis or turning point as well as Nathan’s undulate doubt; he is literally “on the fence” as the day turns to night. At this point, Nathan is “alone” and “dreamy,”

both taking part in an unreal pastoral but also a bit like Nehemiah: isolated, solipsistic, out of touch with reality.

Then the scene shifts to a more ominous description of the White Hills:

The great White Hills, mount flanked by mount,
 The Saco and Ammonoosuc's fount;
 Where, in September's equinox
 Nature hath put such terror on
 That from his mother man would run—
 Our mother, Earth... (1.17.81-87)

The time has changed from summer to the beginning of autumn.¹⁵ It is, in fact, the equinox, which again suggests a moment of crisis. Just like twilight, the equinox adds to the portentousness of the events since it marks the moment where the days shorten and darkness increases; at the same time, the temporal aperture widens as the image moves from a diurnal cycle to an annual one. Additionally, the equinox connotes a kind of paganism that offsets the religious allusions in the lines and anticipates Nathan's impending heathenized "thrill" (1.17.69). But ultimately, the equinox conflates the Christian and the pagan by locating the ensuing events as literally taking place in "the fall." What are taken for natural cycles not only anticipate the fall of the mountains but also precipitate a reenactment of the prelapsarian fall that transforms the landscape from a paradise to a place of penance and purgatory, a cosmic fall that informs Nathan's crisis of faith as it reaches its nadir.

Notably, Nathan's personal fall is recapitulated with a cliché. From nature's "terror" we get a line about "Our mother, Earth," which is supposed to give off a symbolic charge. This emblematic move toward "Earth" is akin to the type of generalization Hawthorne makes much more successfully in "The Minister's Black Veil" ("For the Earth, too, had on her Black Veil"). In both instances, the solipsistically personal quickly becomes almost outlandishly symbolic. Yet the heavy-handedness of the line in *Clarel*, while critics like Robert Penn Warren might be inclined to cite it as an example of Melville not learning his craft, rather captures something about Nathan's thinking. These jarring clichés suggest that there is something formulaic even insincere about Nathan's spiritual crisis. Moreover, making Nathan's personal fate inextricable from natural forces is in keeping with the poem's chiasmic logic where nature is personified (e.g. mountains flanking, the Earth dressed in terror) while Nathan's character is described in topographical terms.

Strangely, Nathan's spiritual crisis and the natural disaster find a common denominator in the desire to "run from... mother." Since "he kept/ for *her* sake part, the Christian way" (1.17.50-51), Nathan's retreat from Christianity is clearly a fleeing from his mother as well. But when the mother is ultimately identified as "our mother, Earth," there is no place to run. So an image that anticipates the types of private neurosis detailed in Freudian psychoanalysis ends up revealing the futility of Nathan's attempt to flee his faith and, later, the American wilderness. By reinforcing the totalizing impulse of the settler-colonial paradigm, the reference to the Earth increases the widening aperture to an all encompassing lens, breaking down whatever tenuous boundaries "the level horizon" maintained. As the second half of the line conveys in an

¹⁵ The canto begins with an allusion to winter. So the progress from winter, then summer, and then fall. The seasons seem chosen for their metaphorical impact, and it is therefore significant that there is no mention of spring, which would connote rebirth, redemption, a rising from the ashes or rubble.

alarming and totalizing way, “Our mother, Earth” is “the founded rocks.” For a moment, the lost origin becomes an everywhere or, conversely, a nowhere as the line completes the temporal move from day (twilight), to year (September’s equinox), and to the epochal rise and fall of both human and divine kingdoms.¹⁶

The syntax and diction of these lines even goes further, turning the impending slide into a cosmic event. By way of an allusion to Psalm 46, the lines intimate the divine purpose behind this natural catastrophe:

We will not fear, though the earth gives way

and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea,
Though its waters roar and foam
and the mountains quake with their surging. Selah.
There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,
the holy place where the Most High dwells.
God is within her, she will not fall;

God will help her at break of day.
Nations are in uproar, kingdoms fall;
he lifts his voice, the earth melts.

Besides reorienting the slide so that it becomes part of a divine plan, the uncanny allusion illuminates Nathan’s impending quest to re-found Jerusalem. Following highly Christian logic, the coming natural disaster will be a fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy, quickening Nathan’s future and now fated expedition to Zion, “the city of God.” While it is now twilight and Nathan is entering the darkness of his crisis, he will inevitably receive God’s help at break of day, as the Psalm suggests, and live to rebuild Jerusalem, “the holy place where the Most High dwells.”

The White Hills rise “mount flanked by mount” (1.17.82) over “the Saco and Ammonoosuc’s fount” (1.17.83). The term “flanked” lines up the mountains like soldiers, giving the sense that the slide is a kind of divine declaration of war. The syntax, on the other hand, looks forward to Nehemiah’s “flinging aside stone after stone” (2.10.189). The scene is at once apocalyptic and absurd, both a natural disaster which takes on cosmic proportions in Nathan’s imagination and an event that stages Nehemiah’s later quixotic search for a foundation in monumental terms. Though it may seem displaced, from the perspective of the poem’s narrative progress, this landslide will bring about the poem’s stone-strewn Palestinian landscape; it is the cataclysmic event that creates the landscape through which the pilgrims wander and with which Nehemiah attempts to rebuild his Jerusalem. But again, how does a landslide in New Hampshire in the 19th Century create a desert landscape that predates it, is more vast, and is elsewhere? Such muddling of cause and effect is in keeping with the poetic logic which insists on dislodging landscape from its actual location and time from its chronological progress. The events become not just metaphorical but transitive, relating to each other not only thematically but in the minds of Nathan and Nehemiah in literal ways. While the degree to which these characters attempt to

¹⁶ The crescendo of images adheres to the two main rhythms of epic that Frye speaks of: “the life and death of the individual, and the slower social rhythm which, in the course of years...brings cities and empires to their rise and fall” (318).

literalize metaphors may seem at times to border on the ridiculous, it is in keeping with their approach to biblical interpretation. The Biblical events are a prototype to which all incidental events on earth relate regardless of when or where they happen. Thus the American wilderness can displace the Palestinian desert via the Christian diaspora and become the New Jerusalem and Melville, using the same logic, can ingeniously reverse the process so that Palestinian desert now replaces the American Wilderness.

As the mountains slide into “the Saco and Ammonoosuc’s fount” the passage takes on further biblical overtones. The use of “fount” casts a mythic patina on these place names. Because “fount” implies a source or an origin, the river flowing through New Hampshire’s White Hills buried under the mud and rocks becomes a timeless reenactment of an Edenic source lost under the ruin of historical events. Again, we have an episode that is taken out of history and becomes legend, a prototypical occurrence that at once recapitulates and anticipates the cyclical catastrophe that is both the casting out of the Garden and the apocalyptic return of Christ at the end of time. So when the landslide actually occurs it is already freighted with enormous eschatological weight:

the founded rocks
 Unstable prove: the Slide! The Slide!
 Again he saw the mountain side
 Sliced open; yet again he stood
 Under its shadow, on the spot—
 Now waste, but once a cultured plot... (1.17.87-92)

The repetition of “slide” conveys the urgency of the moment (much like Bradstreet’s repetition of “fire and “fire” in “On the Burning of Our House”) and the half-line also recapitulates Nathan’s descent into doubt, his constant sliding, and eventual crash that will leave him “alone, and at Doubt’s freezing pole” (1.17.193). But the slide also parodies the Christian notion of the end as both revelatory and annihilating. The slide causes the mountain side to be “sliced open” but this literal “revelation” will do nothing but destroy what was “once a cultured plot.”

After the slide, Nathan seeks “the spot,” a way to reconstruct the pastoral landscape and a means to memorialize his uncle. But there is no marker. Unlike his “father’s sylvan grave” (1.17.167) among “sachems and mound-builders old” (1.17.45), there remains

no mound,
 Since not a trace of him was found,
 So whelmed the havoc from the heaven.
 This reminiscence of dismay,
 These thoughts unhinged him. (1.17.95-98)

The uncle’s unmarked grave exists outside the pastoral dream which memorialized his father. His uncle’s obliteration is even outside the “sachems and mound-builders old” that made “his father’s sylvan grave” simultaneously distinct from and part of an American landscape.¹⁷ Without a “trace,” the landscape becomes a ruin beyond ruin, an incoherent rubble of syncretistic signifiers. The destruction is so total that attempts to memorialize his uncle—“yet again he

¹⁷ This concept of organizing and thereby civilizing the wilderness is tersely recapitulated by Wallace Stevens in “The Jar.”

stood/ under its shadow, on the spot (1.17.90-91)—are ultimately replaced with “this reminiscence of dismay” (1.17.98). He stands beneath the shadow of a mountain that is no longer there, on a spot that is no longer marked. Recollection becomes not a matter of summoning up something forgotten but an evocation of forgetting itself. To say that “not a trace of him was found” is not just to suggest that Nathan’s uncle is lost and that he cannot be recovered, but rather that his irrecoverability is what Nathan finds and is what becomes the foundation for his later “renewed” faith. These are his American roots: the legacy of a rootless American exile.

This oblivion is part and parcel with the landscape. It is the land itself, after all, that makes “waste” of the “cultured plot.”¹⁸ “No mound” opposes the “Three Indian mounds” (1.17.56) that stood “against the horizon’s level bounds (1.17.57) and by contrast defined it, making the horizon into a boundary that is otherwise totally illusory. The lack of the mound levels the landscape so that it becomes indistinguishable from the horizon. Additionally, the disappearance of the mound also erases the associated metaphor to the “three Indian mounds”: “Pyramids at a distance seen” (1.17.60). In keeping with the poetic logic, the destruction of the mounds becomes the destruction of the pyramids, a destruction of civilization at its core, its roots, its origins. Just as with “the Saco and Ammonoosuc’s fount,” sources both mythic and imagined are buried along with actual places. There remains only a no place unhinged from time and its attendant histories.

Without boundaries or demarcations, the “waste” of landscape extends beyond “the horizon’s level bounds” catalyzing the terrestrial into the cosmic “so whelmed the havoc from the heaven.” Yet again, as with the lines about “our mother Earth,” Nathan’s personal fate becomes inextricable from natural forces as the word “whelmed” relates the slide directly to Nathan’s distress and his becoming “unhinged” (1.17.99). Nathan’s unhinging certainly describes his resulting emotional derangement, but Nathan is also literally a door taken off its jam. With Nathan “unhinged,” the “vast space, from the log-house door/Daily beheld” (1.17.55-56), a space organized into a landscape by his gaze, is no longer a fixed location. Leaning in the doorway and looking out, Nathan pivots between the personal space of the cabin and “the vast space” of the wilderness. By burying his uncle and flattening the “cultured plot,” the slide symbolically destroys both the domestic and the vast spaces. In Nathan’s mind, the slide wipes out both sites of his religious fealty: the cabin regulated by his mother and the prairie commanded by his father’s grave.

With these organizing principles wiped out by the slide, Nathan finds himself and the landscape both overwhelmed and in a state of “havoc.” “Havoc” describes the emotional chaos issuing from the slide, but as a term to describe the landscape, it is more concrete. Like the mountain that is “sliced open,” the slide cleaves “havoc” from heaven” which then “whelms” the landscape by literally covering it over with earth. Earth covered by earth. “Havoc,” prominently used in Milton to describe hell, is the seeming opposite of heaven but here turns out to be part of it. Again, earth covered by earth. Havoc comes from heaven; it functions as a scourge: God literally wreaks havoc to make his kingdom manifest. As prescient as it is ironic, the “waste” becomes the divine landscape: the paradise of the American wilderness is a displaceable postlapsarian dystopia. This leaves Nathan totally unmoored, cast out from that which he was already an outcast. With nowhere to turn, he will react by reenacting the Puritan fathers in a painfully and literally unsettling way. Nathan will attempt to fulfill their promise by returning to

¹⁸ The event goes beyond the “heap of broken images” of T.S. Eliot’s *Wasteland*. God’s destructive force wipes the slate clean, incinerating Nathan’s doubt and creating a tabula rasa that can be etched with a restored belief.

the place that they meant to renew and by returning to Jerusalem reestablish its inevitable destruction.

As Hershel Parker reminds us, Melville was fond of literary echoes and here, as I suggested earlier, the use of “havoc” tips us off to the fact that Melville is riffing off *Paradise Lost* Book 10 as he turns an American landscape into an almost perfect manifestation of a Miltonic hell. Milton summary of Book 10 in “The Argument” reveals the dynamics underlying Melville’s improvisation:

Man’s transgressions known...Sin and Death sitting till then at the gates of hell, by wondrous sympathy feeling the success of Satan in this new world, and the sin by man there committed, resolve to sit no longer confined in hell, but to follow Satan their sire up to the place of man: to make the way easier from hell to this world to and fro, they pave a broad highway or bridge over chaos. (306)

As its original context reinforces, “havoc” makes the hellish landscape transferable. The landscape in need of redemption is neither here nor there but becomes, as with Palestinian desert and the American Wilderness, a matter of “to and fro.” Additionally, when applied to the New World, the reference to the “new world” becomes a highly ironic moment of prolepsis as “the success of Satan” precludes the Edenic pastoral first imagined by Nathan’s puritan patriarchs. Similarly, the “highway or bridge over chaos” resembles Nehemiah’s stony highway in the desert. Intended to make way for the Lord, the allusion here preempts such good intentions or, at least, shows where all such well paved roads inevitably lead.

The specific situation in which the word “havoc” appears in Book 10 occurs as God gives an apostrophic description of Sin and Death’s trip to “this new world”:

See with what heat these dogs of hell advance
To waste and havoc yonder world... (10.616-620)

Where Melville keeps the words “waste” and “havoc” a few lines apart, in Milton the words form a dyadic pair. Like Sin and Death or “the knowledge of good and evil,” waste and havoc “as two twins cleaving together leapt forth into the World” (*Areopagitica*). Moreover, the dyad harrows “a yonder world.” The site of conversion—a conversion that can just as easily go from heaven to hell as from hell to heaven—is always a far off and distant elsewhere. Melville applies this archetypal dynamic to actual places, to a literalized Eden (*Esdras*), so that the landscape “so whelmed [by] the havoc from the heaven” requires Nathan—and later Nehemiah—to repair to an actual Jerusalem.

Ominously, Nathan’s response to the “waste” resembles the apprehensions of a wrecked paradise by Sin and Death. Just as the whelmed landscape territorializes Nathan’s spiritual crisis, Sin’s arrival in paradise turns spirit to flesh:

Sin there in power before,
Once actual, now in body, and to dwell
Habitual habitant... (10.586-588)

Similarly, when the slide “so whelmed the havoc from the heaven,” it made manifest “The sway/ [Nathan] *felt* of his grave life, and *power/* Of vast space, from the log-house door” (1.17.53-55,

italics mine). Before the slide, the “power of vast space” incites Nathan’s grave feeling; after the slide, the power he felt gets embodied in the landscape and Nathan’s grave life becomes a literal burial ground, supplanting the nonexistent grave of his uncle. Additionally, the American wilderness becomes for Nathan both a heaven and a hell, just as for Death “Alike is hell, or Paradise, or heaven” (10.597-598). The slide fills in the chasm between heaven and hell, confounding the divine status of the landscape by rubbing out Milton’s fine line between hell and paradise. By privileging the confluences of Satan and his minions over the discernments and parsing of God, Melville cleaves together what Milton tries to cleave apart. In *Clarel*, Milton’s cleaving twins are identical.

In “Milton’s Counterplot,” Geoffery Hartman argues that *Paradise Lost* is comprised of plot and counterplot with the counterplot distinguishing God’s foreknowledge and control: “In this plot counterplot, the hand of Satan is not ultimately distinguishable from the will of God” (114). While this claim may be reassuring in *Paradise Lost*, it gets twisted in *Clarel*, and the fact that Satan and God are indistinguishable becomes less comforting. In *Clarel*, God’s will often resembles “the hand of Satan.” Hartman forcefully concludes that “*Paradise Lost* was written not for the sake of heaven or hell but for the sake of the creation... Whether man can stand though free to fall, whether man and the world can survive their autonomy. The issue may not therefore be determined on the supernatural level by the direct clash of heaven and hell but only by these two arbiters: man’s free will and God’s foreknowledge” (118-9). Yet, in *Clarel* the terms may be reversed. From Nathan’s perspective, the fact that God’s actions resemble Satan’s destructiveness is not so much a sign that Satanic forces are held in check as it is an undoing of God’s redemptive promise. In the face of divine retribution, survival is possible. But redemption? In *Clarel*, the dynamics between God and man that Hartman identifies in *Paradise Lost* are inverted. It is man’s foreknowledge—his acting out of a predetermined Christian narrative—against God’s free will—the arbitrary use of natural forces—that conspire in driving the plot to a predetermined ruin no matter which direction man chooses to wander. And if there is a “supreme arbiter” that “overbalances the balance” and offers a promise of hope, it is not the hand of God intervening in human affairs but the “pristine form” of the verse that serves as assurance of a kind of permanence that can contain or not “turn” these inevitably destructive dynamics.

The logical extreme to which Melville takes the Miltonic landscape is part of Melville’s “conscious reshaping of [epic’s] defining qualities” (McWilliams 4). Unlike Milton’s paradise, the American wilderness cannot be redeemed. For Melville, there is no *Paradise Regained*. Melville’s sense of landscape seems to begin and end with *Paradise Lost*. The “cultured plot” (which is literally a grave without a mound) has been laid waste. In descriptive terms, the American wilderness has become yet another instantiation of Jerusalem’s irreparable ruin. Even though Milton will end the passage with God’s insistence that his “well-pleasing Son... [will] obstruct the mouth of hell/ For ever, and seal up his ravenous jaws” (10.634-637), we must remember that the end of the *Paradise Lost* sheds no such optimistic light. More than God’s promise, Nathan’s situation is in keeping with Adam and Eve’s plight at the end of Milton’s poem:

The world was all before them, where to choose
Their place of rest, and providence their guide:
They hand in hand with wandering steps and slow,
Through Eden took their solitary way. (12.646-649)

At the end of *Paradise Lost*, Adam and Eve find themselves forlorn, wandering, and alone. After the slide, Nathan

An altered earth
 Sullen he tilled, in Adam's frame
 When thrust from Eden out to dearth
 And blest no more, and wise in shame
 The fall! (1.17.138-142)

“Sullen,” with its connotations of sluggishness and its etymological sense of solitariness, casts Nathan in the mold of Adam at that inciting moment when the Edenic landscape gives way to a postlapsarian dearth. The “dearth” reflects his absence of conviction that providentially leads him wandering over the “rough standing-ground (1.17.121) of restless indecision. He eventually arrives “alone, and at Doubt's freezing pole” where “he wrestled with the pristine forms/ like the first man” (1.17.193-195).

After the slide, Nathan imagines himself “in Adam's frame” and “each filial deed/ done for his mother” can no longer “allay/this ill” (1.17.144-145). Just the rhyme scheme constructs irrevocable forms as the “earth” is now “dearth” while “Adam's frame” is “shame.” Nathan, beyond either “deed” or “need,” fits this mold. In some ways, Nathan is far worse off than Adam, since Nathan must not only till the land but identify with it:

But tho' the Deist's sway,
 Broad as the prairie fire, consumed
 Some pansies which before had bloomed
 Within his heart; it did but feed
 To clear the soil for upstart weed... (1.17.145-149)

The “Deist's sway,” which is both Nathan's vacillation and God's persuasion, incinerates the prairie's pastoral paradise, devouring “some pansies” which, from an etymological as well as figurative standpoint, constitute delicate memories. The memories are replaced with “this reminiscence of dismay” (1.17.98) or the wasteland that produces the “upstart weed.” I should note that the lines also strangely figure God as ruminant; the Deist sway feeds on the pansies to clear the land, suggesting a kind of natural cyclicity that adheres to the epic cycle and the “to and fro” of Nathan's desire both which move forward and back, marking progress by returning the prairie to its original state from which something new can grow. It should go without saying, but that something new will, of course, resemble the old. By extension of this cyclical metaphor, doubt becomes the cud of God.

With the destruction of the prairie and in a “replacing mood” (1.17.150), Nathan, in a fantastic act of substitution, reverses the roles of God and man, doing unto God what God did unto him: “The god, expelled from given form/ Went out into the calm and storm” (1.17.151-152).¹⁹ Nathan casts God out, exiling the Deity from His own creation, His own paradise. Like Adam, God “went out into calm” and “storm” (1.17.152). God's exile and the destruction of the Christian pastoral paradise “within his heart” leave Nathan in need of a reconstituting myth. Maintaining his belief in God but now outside a Christian framework, the landscape comes to resemble an earlier pastoral. In its place of paradise, Nathan cultivates a pagan topography:

¹⁹ cf. 1.17.256

Now, ploughing near the isles of wood
 In dream he felt the liveness come,
 In dream regarded there the loam
 Turned first by him. (1.17.153-156)

“An altered earth” (1.17.138) alters again. Still alone and still imagining himself “in Adam’s frame” (1.17.139), Nathan re-tills the land. But the emphasis on “dream” suggests that he is reimagining it as well, that this is also the landscape “within his heart” (1.17.148).

The land “turned first by him” doesn’t just make him Adam all over again but also shows him as his own originator; he remakes the landscape by literally turning it over, a physical reenactment of cyclical return and a physical embodiment of the etymology of “verse.” In the classic connection between culture and cultivation, Nathan attempts a cultural makeover within the “given form” (1.17.151). This imagined beginning starts Nathan’s mental recovery from the trauma of the slide and his effort to reconstitute the religious and cultural myths that the landscape, both real and imagined, once held. Nathan attempts to restore all that was lost in the moundless aftermath from his uncle’s grave to the metaphorical pyramids. Given Nathan’s predilection to go back to the beginning to fulfill the end, the emphasis on “now” seems important, since this is a moment toggling between the before and after of Nathan’s personal crisis and a landscape that is neither here nor there, no longer a fulfillment of the promise nor a restoration of mythic origins. Nathan is still “near,” which is to say he hasn’t yet fled to elsewhere, but is trying to make an elsewhere out of his native soil. The “near” reconstitutes the horizon and implies that “the isles of wood,” like the pyramids, are never quite reached but always at a distance. The loam, as the conflating rhyme implies, is a compost of his “liveness” and his “coming”: Nathan never gets beyond his dream and even when “shot...sheer/ beyond” (1.17.239-240), he never arrives.

His first effort to restore the landscape in a “replacing mood” (1.17.150) exchanges the Christian for the pagan²⁰ but maintains the “given form” from which he “expelled” god (1.17.151):

Such mental food
 Need quicken, and in natural way,
 Each germ of Pantheistic sway... (1.17.156-158)

“The loam/ turned first by him” that is “in dream regarded” (1.17.155-56) germinates and turns the “isles of wood”—already vaguely imagined in the form of Greek islands—into a full-blown vision of “Thracian woodlands.” “The mental food” of his dream replaces what was earlier consumed by “the Deist’s sway” (1.17.145). Following the enjambment, both his hunger and his need quicken as “the Deist’s sway” is replaced with “each germ of Pantheistic sway.” The “Pantheistic sway” anticipates “Ceres swell/ In shooks, with golden tassels gay” (1.17.178), but first it is a form of persuasion:

Whose influence, nor always drear,²¹

²⁰ This move is similar to the earlier move from Esdræon to the Sporades (1.17.18-27), the shift from a Palestinian paradigm to a Greek framework and then back again.

²¹ The word “dreary” comes from the Old English *dreorig*. While the root specifically refers to something “cruel” or “bloody,” it came to mean “sorrowful,” which is its meaning in Edmund Spenser, who coined its abbreviated version

Tenants our maiden hemisphere;
 As if, dislodged long since from cells
 Of Thracian woodlands, hither stole—
 Hither, to renew their old control—
 Pan and the pagan oracles. (1.17.159-164)

As “pantheistic sway” naturalizes god, it also unmoors the landscape as it “tenants our maiden hemisphere.” The American wilderness becomes “dislodged” and portable. On the one hand, the storyteller describes the landscape here as a kind of tenement, crowding a classical Greek landscape as a “tenant” of “our maiden hemisphere” already occupied by a Christian dispensation. Nevertheless, the “Pantheistic sway” taking hold of the land is a preemptive “to renew their old control.” “Pan and the pagan oracles” displace the Christian dispensation that displaced them as if reclaiming and moving back into the tenement that it sublet to the puritan patriarchs.

This second reading jibes with the first but also serves as poetic justice for Nathan who adheres to the “given form” of the puritan patriarchs in order to undo the promise of their promised land. Nathan’s imagined reclamation of a pagan wilderness is a fascinating act of retribution and recapitulation. The pagan landscape “hither stole” is both a stowaway and a thief. Having seemingly been supplanted by Christianity, the pagan landscape sneaks on board the ark of Christian dispensation whose form retains the earlier pagan paradigm. As a thief, the pagan geography dispossesses the landscape from the Christian pastoral which is a double act of poetic justice: it unrightfully takes from the puritans what they unrightfully took and it reinstates what the Christian dispensation eclipsed as a way “to renew old control.” It returns to the “sachems and mound-builders old” what was originally theirs but only under the nomenclature of paganism which relies on Christian hermeneutic for its association with “the heathen.” It is a return with a difference, an attempt to overcome the new with the old.

As the periodic lines arrive at a period, however, it becomes clear that the actual stowaway is not the “Thracian woodlands” itself but “Pan and the pagan oracles.” Pan serves as the vehicle for the landscape’s transformation. As a metonymy for the “Thracian woodlands” from which he is dislodged, Pan by his presence remythologizes the American landscape as he converts the Adamic wilderness into a pagan wood. Moreover, the reference to Pan certainly means to contrast with the typical sense of puritan prudery (after realizing that it is Pan who “tenants our maiden hemisphere,” one may even discern a sexual pun). The reference also coincides with Nathan’s own sexual maturity as he grows from a “hardy and frugal” stripling (1.17.48) to a man overcome by “Love, and his love’s Jerusalem” (1.17.222).

The reference to “Pan and the pagan oracles” also casts the spatial and temporal aspects of the passage into relief. From the “now” of Nathan’s ploughing “near the isles of wood,” the passage moves away to the “long since” and “hither” of “Thracian woodlands.” The landscape is not only made pagan but made ever more distant. The move away and back becomes Nathan’s strategy for fulfilling the “a turf divine/of promise” (1.17.34-35) while, at the same time, his means of preempting it. As such, the passage ends expressing time with a chiasmic paradox. The dislodged landscape allows them

“drear.” The modern sense of the word, and its meaning in *Clarel*, of something “dismal or gloomy” was first recorded in *Paradise Lost*. Moreover its oldest etymological significance comes from (*ge*)dreosan (pp. *droren*), meaning “to fall”; this earlier sense reinforces the thematic emphasis on “the fall” in the Nathan canto.

To renew their old control—
Pan and the pagan oracles. (1.17.163-164)

Delaying the subject of the sentence makes “Pan and the pagan oracles” into a kind of fulfillment, retroactively organizing all that comes before as its agent. The new is the old, but, then, the old is both past and future. The lines going from new to old (Pan being an obsolete god) and then old to new again (the pagan oracles being representatives of the future through prophecy). The lines obviate the here and now; it makes the future—imagined as fulfillment—the sole property of what has been up until now a defunct past.

Nathan going from the postlapsarian landscape to paganism attempts to circumvent his Christian doubt by looking to older foundational forms. But though “he stayed the hoe,” a sign that he has put off for a moment both the puritan work ethic and the Adamic mandate to till the land, and though “leaning, listening, a thrill...heathenized against the will” (1.17.168-170), this imagined pagan landscape in the end “attain[s] not truth” (1.17.171). Nathan’s return to paganism though arduous and deft is not the solution, since it ultimately erases rather than revises the Christian promise.

From here, there is a temporal interlude that speeds up time. It is as if Nathan must muck up the temporal elements that have sedimented into an all encompassing pagan topography that occupies the past, precludes the present, and co-opts the future through oracular prophesy. Nathan will soon find himself right back where he started but not before rehearsing some contradictory notions of time which will eventually offer him other ways of resolving his crisis:

Years sped. But years attain not truth,
Nor length of life avails at all;
But time instead contributes ruth:
His mother—her the garners call:
When sicklemen with sickles go,
The churl of nature reaps her low. (1.17.171-176)

To cast it in epic terms, the stanza begins by moving time forward using a Virgilian notion of *tempus fugit* (time flies). It then goes on to say that “years attain not truth” revising the largely Spenserian notion of *veritas filia temporis* (truth is the daughter of time); truth as “daughter” becomes manifest in the next line as “ruth.” That is to say that time does not reveal “truth” but rather pity and compassion through sorrow and grief. This process is reinforced by a striking visual pun. “Ruth” as “truth” without the “t” suggests the erosion “truth” with time as a means of arriving at a sense of compassion that comes from loss, a process that fits Nathan’s own spiritual journey. Moreover, the sense of “ruth” as daughter comes from a pun on Nathan’s eventual daughter’s name: Ruth becomes the literal “daughter of time,” offering yet another competing temporal notion: that time continues generationally, moving forward and renewing itself through offspring. Then, after the allusion to Ruth’s impending birth, the stanza mentions the death of Nathan’s mother. Euphemistically described as “the garners call,” her death is imagined in terms of landscape and the biblical image of death as a matter of collecting and storing the grain. This image offers another approach to time: saving time for the future. The death of Nathan’s mother is recompensed with the birth of his daughter. However, imagining the death of Nathan’s mother like reaped grain “when sicklemen with sickles go” ends the passage with an Ovidian sense of time as devourer: *tempus edax rerum*.

This congregation of temporal motives sets up a return and a renewal as well as a revision. The narrative sense of time underlying these competing notions, one that anticipates Ruth's birth even as it mentions the death of Nathan's mother, creates a chiastic logic. The lines move from birth to death even as the narrative goes from the mother's death to Ruth's birth. This continued temporal tension maintains the cyclicity that resolves itself in the next stanza beginning with the landscape rejuvenation and a temporary restoration of the "now":

Let now the breasts of Ceres swell—
In shocks, with golden tassels gay,
The Indian corn its trophies ray
About the log-house; is it well
With death's ripe harvest? (1.17.177-181)

Narrative time fasts forwards, but seems to leave us in the same place with another pan-like image of pagan sexual abundance as the lines regenerate the lines before. With Ceres shown as a mother and the mother before as Ceres, it is a deft way to suggest Nathan's mother's rebirth, and it is ironic, too, since Nathan's devoutly Christian mother—keeper of the log house—is being reborn in a pagan guise in the prairie.

The progress of the lines also recapitulates trajectory of life to death by going from "the breasts of Ceres" swelling to "death's ripe harvest."²² Nathan doesn't seem to have made any progress at all. Perhaps this is Nathan's ultimate problem with the pagan paradigm; its cyclicity doesn't square with Nathan's puritan idea of progression toward an end time that fulfills all that is gone before. Also for Nathan, paganism appears too biological. The natural and tragic cycle of sex, birth, death, and rebirth traps him. It justifies the falling mountains without offering any revelation. With no end time to organize the meantime, Nathan comes full circle (twice), arriving back at the "now"—first mentioned when he initially replaced god with a pagan dispensation. From "now" to "now," Nathan exposes a series of events lacking a teleology to organize them. He is truly unmoored.

But the word "ripe" has been planted at the end of the stanza, a word that may help Nathan find another way out of this nightmare of epic return. "Ripe" suggests both a fulfillment and a death, an end that is both revelatory and a beginning of something else. Nathan's cultivation of the pagan may inevitably lead back to his original question and his original doubt, but it does so with a difference:

—To believe,
Belief to win nor more to grieve!
But how? (1.17.181-183)

Nathan continues to recover from the trauma of the slide. He attempts to move beyond grief and in doing so he finally names what needs to ripen in him: belief. Paganism is not the answer; although it has allowed him to recover somewhat, to express his rage at God and salve his

²² A connection is also made between Greek paganism and Indian paganism by connecting the "golden tassels" of Ceres to "The Indian corn." It is worth noting that one way Nathan remains tied to the landscape is by having the arc of his crisis described with grain imagery. From the "monthly grist at mill" (1.17.100), to "Ceres swell" (1.17.177) to "a mart for grain" where he meets Agar (1.17.201). However, having this image intricately tied to his mother (whose Christianity he rejects) and Indians (who his father rejects and Nathan's rejection of the Arabs closely resembles (1.17.306-309) makes this "natural" or pagan view of the landscape untenable and untenable.

Christian doubt. Yet, it does not offer him anything to believe in. Substitution, Nathan discovers, is not re-placement. Nathan must move from negative to positive inquiry by turning doubt into its opposite.

Seeking belief, the pendulum swings back toward the “Deist sway.” Instead of paganism, Nathan goes to the opposite extreme and entertains who are for him the most fringe and fanatical Christian sects. Nathan will soon discover, however, that these Christian sects represent another unacceptable kind of solution to the problem of restoration. He looks to “a [Christian] sect [which] about him stood/ In thin and scattered neighborhood” (1.17.183-4) but contests their contempt:

Nor were all lives of members true
And good. For them who hate and heave
Contempt on rite and creed sublime,
Yet to their own rank fable cleave—
Abject, the latest shame of time... (1.17. 186-190)

Like “pan and the pagan oracles “whose “years attain not truth,” the members of the sect are neither “true” nor “good.” Along with their hypocrisy, Nathan critiques a faith that bases itself on an uncharitable rejection of another. Rather than a rarefied or truer version of the faith, it becomes yet another corrosive aberration. Like a game of telephone, the continuous attempts to rarify Christianity do not clarify but rather distort it and time, the sectarian’s accomplice, does not redeem but rather redacts. Revision, even if it improves, is the opposite of Nathan’s quest to find and restore the lost original.

Imagined as both “abject” (cast out) and with “shame” (to cover over), Nathan associates this sort of tempestivity with Adam “When thrust from Eden out to dearth/ And blest no more, and wise in shame” (1.17.140-141). It is another punishable denial of god, a kind of vain pride in self-knowledge. If pagan time traps Nathan in a vicious circle, then sectarian time repeats the rejection of God’s will in favor of self-knowledge which, after being covered for shame, is punished by being cast out of paradise. The sectarian idea of progress toward fulfillment is literally misleading because, by definition, it goes astray, its redactions, like Adam and Eve’s wanderings, moving forward but away from the promise. It is not a purification but rather a corruption, not a return but a departure which makes fulfillment through recovery of the original ever more distant.

Nathan’s goes from one extreme—paganism—to another—fanatical sectarianism—before returning to his initial doubt. But having already exercised his doubt to undermine “each filial deed/ Done for his mother” (1.17.143-144), now Nathan uses it as a means to fashion belief. Nathan seeks to reconcile his contradictory impulses to first forsake the Christian promise and then to fulfill it by reconciling the redactive linear time of sectarian fanaticism with the repetitive and potentially restorative cyclical time of paganism:

Alone, and at Doubt’s freezing pole
He wrestled with the pristine forms
Like the first man. By inner storms
Held in solution, so his soul
Ripened for hour of such control
As shapes, concretes. The influence came,

And from a source that well might claim
 Surprise. (1.17.193-200).

This turning point, where Nathan attempts to resolve his doubt once and for all, recalls or echoes the beginning of his struggle after the slide. So it repeats even as it revises. He is alone when the slide occurs (1.17.79); then after the slide, “an altered earth/*Sullen* he tilled, in Adam’s frame” (1.17.139-140, italics mine); then turning to paganism “In dream he felt the loneness come” (1.17.155); and now he finds himself “Alone” and “like the first man.” Likewise, the “pristine forms,” not only a grappling with the pure but also the original, recalls “The god, expelled from given form” (1.17.152) and anticipates his desire to “having taken thus the Hebrew bent/Might not abide inactive so/And but the empty forms fulfill” (1.17.158). The first is an emptying out of the form, and then through a series of replacements, will lead to a literal fulfillment.

The forms are related by rhyme to the “inner storms/ held in solution.” Like his doubt and like the verse, the form is at once petrified and roiling. There is a kind of frozen turmoil which is reinforced by the fact that this phrase too recalls how “the god, expelled from given form/Went out into the calm and storm” (1.17.153-153). As a dyad, the calm and storm cancel each other out; but here, “calm” and “storm,” recast as an oxymoron, are brought together, giving off the sense of “inner storms held in solution.” The “inner storms/ held in solution” are also in some way *the* solution, the way to solve his spiritual crisis. Nathan replaces redaction and repetition with ripening: “So his soul/ Ripened for hour of such control.” The line that begins with solution leads to “so” and then “soul” literally ripening toward a “solution. Yet, the ripening itself hearkens back to “death’s ripe harvest” (1.17.181) a few lines earlier. In those lines, which emphasis the rejuvenating power of Ceres by holding an image of birth and death together while at the same time moving linearly from death to birth is interrupted by an injunction: “To believe/ Belief to win no more to grieve!” (1.17.181-182). In form, the lines continue to repeat and redact even as they suggest a way toward belief.

The ripening, in other words, is not an ends in itself. It is not separate from the forms of time Nathan rehearses earlier but leads toward an “hour of such control/ As shapes, concretes.” The “inner storms,” the polarizing pendulous replacements, are “held” together in “solution” which, paradoxically, both freezes them and makes them soluble; nevertheless, the “inner storms held in solution” are given shape and form; even if that form is protean, it is also concrete. The rhyme scheme reinforces this idea, since it too is ever changing but held together by a strong metrical beat and its continuous if continuously changing rhyme-scheme. The ripening of the soul is the process by which Nathan is able to hold these apparently polar opposites together. Still, this isn’t enough to overcome his doubt. Ripeness, too, goeth before the fall.

It is because of this “ripeness” that “the influence came” (1.17.198). But, as with the other lines in this stanza, “the influence” is not beyond influence. The reference to influence traces the line from “the Deist’s sway” (1.17.145) which is replaced by the “Pantheistic sway” (1.17.158) “whose influence” (1.17.159) allows Pan and the pagan oracles “to renew their old control” (1.17.163) and replace the god who has been “expelled” (1.17.151). This influence looks like a repetition of what happened before, just another replacement for Nathan’s doubt. But the “influence” takes a precipitous turn:

The influence came,
 And from a source that well might claim
 Surprise. (1.17.197-199)

Like “the influence,” the “source” and the “claim” maintain the established pattern. Nathan has been in continual search for a source to replace the buried Saco and Ammonoosuc fount as well as the “the founded rocks” which the slide “unstable prove[d]” (1.17.87.88). He continues to wrestle with the “pristine forms,” a grappling for an origin, for something pure. The continuous revising, however, having ripened threatens to lead to yet another fall. This new “source” seems like it will be just the next in line to stake its claim, an image that reverses subject and object by turning Nathan into a landscape and the “source” into a speculator. It is the same thing all over again until the line-break.

The line is not only enjambed but split, suspending a solitary word on its own line: “Surprise.” The notion of surprise, that is something without precedent or expectation, holds out the promise of something beyond influence and heralding, as the word upon which the second half of the line ends, “a lake-port new.” The form enacts this “surprise” by breaking out of the dyadic AABCC rhyme pattern that precedes it. A new pattern (ABAB) will emerge but not before the line break, the narrative break, and the rhetorical break all collude to disrupt and surprise Nathan’s circuitous and replacing logic, interjecting a solution by way of a deft complex of allusions.

Nathan’s conversion, as the word implies, turns him around and puts him in reverse:

If backward still the inquirer goes
 To get behind man’s present lot
 Of crumbling faith; for rear-ward shows
 Far behind Rome and Luther—what?
 The crag of Sinai. Here then plant
 Thyself secure. ‘tis adamant. (1.17.213-218)

Moving from “man’s present lot” to “the crag of Sinai,” Nathan territorializes time, a move, if we agree with Olson, is vintage Melville: “Melville had a way of reaching back through time until he got history pushed back so far he turned time into space” (19). Olson’s observation deftly describes Melville’s general technique for turning history into legend, a prerequisite for making an epic. But in this context, the move back—and then back farther—shows Nathan’s attempt to take the distortions of time’s redactions and undo them. Nathan’s desire to “plant/thyself secure” is future oriented in that he is compelled by a drive toward fulfillment and is attracted to “prophetess-like quality” of Agar, but this drive forward is founded on a retreat to the past, a flinging aside stone after stone until, finding a stone that cannot be overturned, he becomes “adamant.” Nathan takes a “crumbling faith,” which is also the sliding White Hills, and restores it to “the crag of Sinai” where he can “plant thyself secure” but in order to do so he must “tie a knot in time—from which point the action unravels backward and forward to reveal the form and pressure of God’s eternal purposes” (Tayler 60). This prelapsarian return is also an arrival at a port, post-Armageddon.

As the future-seeing witch in *Macbeth*, Hecate, would remind us, however, “security is mortals chieftest enemy” (3.5). Although Nathan may be adamant, his conceptual return to Sinai is hardly founded on solid ground. With “Adam” imbedded in “adamant,” it is hard to feel that his imagined return to Sinai will result in anything less than self-exile. Beyond associating Agar with Miriam, Nathan’s Sinai solution has obvious resemblances to the story of Moses leading his people through “the wilderness of Sinai” (Exodus 19:1). Moses ascends the burning, quaking mount (Exodus 19:18), retrieves the commandments, the original and foundational stone tablets

inscribed with religious law (24:12), only to dash them on the rocks, a heap of stone upon stone, after finding his people worshiping false gods (32:15-19). Moses then goes back up Sinai to see God as Moses stands within a “cleft rock” (33:18-23). Nathan, too, wanders through an American wilderness until his doubt is galvanized by the erupting mountains; Nathan, too, is led toward belief in “false gods”; Nathan, too, finally through the metamorphoses of metaphor makes the rubble of the quake into the rock of Sinai through a conversion to the God of Moses. The resemblances to Nathan’s journey while inexact suggest that he is yet again playing out a version of a prototypical story, bound within a narrative that he can neither escape nor wholly change.

Nathan’s is not the first revision of these stony biblical motives. Nathan’s solution also presents a hugely ironic twist on a foundational moment for the Christian church represented in Matthew 16. In this chapter of the gospel, the Pharisees and Sadducees come to Jesus seeking a sign from heaven and Jesus rebukes them—and later his own disciples—for not being able to see what the obvious signs and properly interpret them: “O ye hypocrites, ye can discern the face of the sky; but can ye not discern the signs of the times?” (16:3). These events ultimately cause Jesus to ask a fairly enigmatic question: “Who do people say that I the Son of man am?” (16:13). After a few feeble stabs at an answer—“Some say that thou art John the Baptist: some, Elias; and others, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets” (16:14)—Simon Peter comes up with the right response: “Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God” (16:16). His proper interpretation leads Jesus to this declaration: “That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it” (16:18). He makes no mention of the gates of heaven.

As with the events in Exodus whereon Moses shatters the stone tablets containing the foundation commandments of the people of God, the foundation of Christianity involves rock but, as in Exodus, the “founded rocks/ unstable prove” (1.17.87-88). As much as Nathan wants to convince himself that he can “plant thyself secure” (1.17.217-218), the original ascent of Sinai ends with Moses “cast[ing] the tables out of his hands, and break[ing] them beneath the mount” (Ex 32:19) turning “the founded rocks” to “waste” (1.17.87, 92). Similarly, Peter, whom Jesus calls “the rock upon which I will build my church,” will almost drown after attempting to walk on water by virtue of faith (Mt. 14:22-33) before going on to deny Jesus three times (Mt. 26:69-75). So, Peter, an interesting if not archetypal example of a person turned into landscape, not establishes a faith not only by first rejecting Judaism but then, strangely enough, by refuting his own faith in Jesus. It would seem that Nathan’s adamant foundations of faith are hewn from the limestone of doubt.

Nathan’s conversion is imperfect but presents us with a fundamental restoration of faith nevertheless. An earlier shift in identification, one that happens during Nathan’s crisis itself, turns Nathan around and redirects him out of his circuitous and self-defeating doubt even if it does not entirely expel it. Despite the fact that “surprise” suggests that this metanoia experience exists beyond intention, logic, or will, an extended allusion superimposed on his Adamic struggle with belief anticipates Nathan’s “true” conversion. It is this transposition of allusion that represents that elicits both surprise and an unprecedented change. “Alone.../ He wrestled with the pristine forms/ Like the first man” clearly continues Nathan’s identification with Adam, but the allusions compound in these critical lines. Insinuated into his struggle to squeeze faith from doubt is also Jacob’s prototypical scuffle with the angel:

And Jacob was left alone; and there wrestled a man with him until the breaking of the day. And when he saw that he prevailed not against him, he touched the hollow of his thigh; and the hollow of Jacob's thigh was out of joint, as he wrestled with him. And he said, Let me go, for the day breaketh. And he said, I will not let thee go, except thou bless me. And he said unto him, What is thy name? And he said, Jacob. And he said, Thy name shall be called no more Jacob, but Israel: for as a prince hast thou power with God and with men, and hast prevailed. (32: 24-28)

Like Jacob, Nathan is alone. Also the passage anticipates “the breaking of the day” as a future moment of restoration similar to the way Nathan does when “greeting his wife at morning ray” (1.17.270) with the declaration “*Next year in Jerusalem!*” (1.17.269). As far as his identity goes, the allusion transposes Nathan’s earlier identification with Adam where he is “thrust...out to dearth/ And blest no more” (1.17.140-41) onto this later Old Testament figure of Jacob who is blessed “blessed” and is renamed “Israel.” In his struggle with “the pristine forms” of doubt, Nathan prevails like Jacob; that is, he does not overcome the pristine forms any more than Jacob beats the angel; rather, prevailing here means calcifying the struggle so that it is “held in solution.” Though Jacob “prevailed not” against the angel, with his name changed to Israel, Jacob becomes a landscape defined by perpetual struggle (Israel translates “he who contends with God”). Like Jacob, Nathan’s “solution” must hold opposites together and fossilize them in the landscape before transferring the paradoxes embedded in a topographical American paradigm back to Jerusalem. In the end, this may be the fullest vision of the fraught, displaced American geography through which the pilgrim will trudge within the poem.

The transposition of allusions reveals the formal network of narratives within which Nathan is confined; for Nathan, however, his identity is transformed and his faith solidified by his conversion to Judaism spawned by his “surprise” love for Agar. Nathan’s own narrative is both disrupted and fulfilled by Agar, “a Jewess who about him threw/ Else than Nerea’s amorous net/ and dubious wile” (1.17.202-204). Agar completes Nathan’s transition from a puritan “stripling” to a lovelorn Jew. As Bezanson’s note tells us, despite the reference to “Nerea’s amorous net,” it is “not sexual wiles, as of this Greek sea-nymph, [that] attracted Nathan, but rather the prophetess-like quality of a Miriam, the sister of Moses and the leader of the women in the wilderness” (735). While Bezanson seems to miss Nathan’s obvious romantic passions, he highlights Nathan’s attraction to Agar’s prophetic qualities. It is the prophet-like quality of Agar that has the potential to reform “the pagan oracles,” giving Nathan a way to fulfill time without “regressing” to a pagan past that Christianity has ostensibly overcome. In the end, Nathan’s amorous pursuits to his religious obsessions are intertwined, since it is Agar’s strangely Pauline—and proleptically hippie—pick up line, “Love is power” (1.17.210) that convinces him to “turn Hebrew” (1.17.212).

Having “caught the gleam” (1.17.220) of “Love, and his love’s Jerusalem” (1.17.222), Nathan is moved, both literally and figuratively, as Agar “dwelt on Zion’s story” (1.17.219) and “chanted David’s songs” (1.17.226). Given the multiple narrative frames—an omniscient narrator relating a story being told by Nehemiah about Nathan—it is notable that the first attraction between Nathan and Agar is born of storytelling and song, since the capacity of story to inhabit character also works on Nehemiah who, by telling Nathan’s story, possesses and is possessed by Nathan’s settler-colonial fantasy of the Holy Land. Nathan’s own “interest in the mitred race” (1.17.223) clearly comes from his obvious need to resolve his Puritan doubt, but his

love for Agar is always also his love for “his love’s Jerusalem,” his marriage to Agar an attempt to “mitre” his American wilderness to that romantic idealization. Nathan wants to resolve his doubts about “the Christian way” (1.17.51) by cleaving together Christianity and Judaism and, to some extent, his sense of Greek paganism.

In this respect, the miter from which the adjective “mitred” comes seems emblematic of Nathan’s and the canto’s struggle for resolution. The ceremonial Jewish headdress worn by high priests is also the liturgical headdress worn by Christian bishops as well as that worn by ancient Greek women (and may be even extended to the headdresses of American natives).²³ Yet as much as the word simultaneously encapsulates and connotes these meanings, it also suggests the way in which Nathan must hinge an erstwhile Christian dispensation to his newfound faith in Judaism. Through Agar and by way of conversion, Jerusalem becomes accessible to Nathan but as a place that is always somewhere else and, even more, someone else’s. As far as Jerusalem holds the promise to resolve the Christian anxieties encoded in the American wilderness, it reconstitutes the settler-colonial condition of the “landing patriarchs” (1.17.34) by positioning himself both as an outsider (convert) and an exile (from elsewhere). The bridge Nathan forges is made of compounding and ultimately uncrossable distances.

Nevertheless, “surprised” by his passion for Agar, Nathan achieves a personal conviction that is in form almost indistinguishable from his doubt. Insufficient in and of itself to handle the psychological or emotional weight of the slide’s aftermath, Nathan’s doubts give way to a faith that does not conflict with his Christian skepticism but somehow offers a purer version of the faith he seeks to redeem²⁴:

‘Twas passion. But the Puritan—
Mixed latent in his blood—a strain
How evident, of Hebrew source;
‘Twas that, diverted here in force,
Which biased—hardly might do less. (1.17.227-231)

Ostensibly, his sudden “passion” for Agar makes him recognize the obvious origin of his puritan blood, its “evident...Hebrew source.” Yet, the puritanical impulses behind his conversion clearly distort his sense of Judaism. In part, this helps to explain Nathan’s strangely anti-Semitic attitudes. Even after converting, Nathan disparagingly compares “the mind infertile of the Jew” (1.17.251) to “his northern nature, full of pith/ [v]igor and enterprise and will” (1.17.252-253). Nathan imagines this hybrid identity “mixed latent in his blood” as “a strain” of Judaism more robust than Judaism itself. This puritanical attitude isn’t peculiar; in fact, it is a rather banal recapitulation of general puritan sentiment. What makes it strange, however, is Nathan’s need to reject Christianity and become Jewish in order to confirm Puritanism’s polemical superiority.

In this light, his “passion” for Agar becomes hugely ironic as the word’s Christian connotations adhering to Christ’s suffering and death begin to percolate. The tortured syntax and

²³ Also, the word “mitred,” especially when coupled with the allusions to Nerea and the revolving rhyme scheme, tips us off that this conversion in set in terms of Milton’s “Lycidas,” which is aptly a pastoral poem dedicated to a drowned man. The allusion will be reversed in the last canto of the poem with “the swimmer rising from the deep.” “Lycidas” also resembles Melville’s constant use of sea metaphors to describe the desert (for examples of desert-sea imagery, look at pages 114,129,150,161,176, 216, 269, 319, 336, 339, 342).

²⁴ I should add that from a psychoanalytic point of view, Nathan clearly transfers his dutiful keeping of the faith for his mother’s sake to Agar, which gets him out of a familial and religious obligation that, up until this point, he can neither fully embrace nor reject.

the enjambed lines also exhibit the “strain” this change put on Nathan. An attempt at fulfillment, The Puritan strain must be “diverted here in force” toward its “Hebrew source.” This forced redirection—this bending toward “the Hebrew bent” (1.17.254)—recalls the interment of “The Saco and Ammonoosuc’s fount,” a buried source that instigated Nathan’s search for a foundation and an origin. Here, that river is being internalized and “diverted” toward “the crag of Sinai” (1.17.217). The metrical stress makes the “here” emphatic, underscoring Nathan’s desire to make manifest this crag which remains distant in both time and space. Like Moses in reverse banging at the rocks to make the water flow out, Nathan attempts to make the river flow backward toward the source. Yet, despite the strained and stressed insistence, Nathan will find at the source, to paraphrase Gertrude Stein, no actual “here” here; there exists “but the empty forms [to] fulfill” (1.17.256).

The lines express Nathan’s desire to redeem the here and now by colonizing a past elsewhere. In doing so, they activate a revision of Genesis, redacting Milton’s version of events in particular:

Hereto append, how earnestness,
Which disbelief for first-fruits bore,
Now, in recoil... (1.17.232-234)

The lines are “append[ed],” and would seem to serve as a final interpolation of events. The fruit of the tree of Nathan’s earnestness is initially his doubt before it is “constrained to faith.” The image of his doubt as “first-fruit” recalls the fruit of temptation hanging from Eden’s tree of knowledge of good and evil. The lines echo the first line of *Paradise Lost* (“Of man’s first disobedience and the fruit”). Yet, here “disobedience” is displaced by “disbelief,” taking on new import. On the one hand, Nathan’s Christian doubt has been thoroughly routed; on the other hand, the loss of the capacity to doubt creates unseen perils. Without it, Nathan loses the ability to ferret out what Milton calls “diabolic power” from the divine

The next line furthers the allusion by casting Nathan’s disbelief in “recoil.” The word compresses the bearing of the fruit of the tree with the agent of temptation, the serpent. It also suggests that Nathan’s doubt like the serpent is “now” in retreat; yet, this uplifting interpretation is tempered by its ability, having recoiled, to strike again and again without notice. In *Paradise Lost* Book 9, “recoil” comes up as Satan speaks of his revenge on “this new favourite/ Of heaven, this man of clay” (175-6): “Revenge, at first though sweet/ Bitter ere long back on itself recoils” (171-2). It is a moralizing line that seems to warn about the self-destructiveness of revenge. Yet, Satan heedlessly pursues his spite despite the fact. Nathan “disbelief” in recoil is akin to Satan’s revenge. Like Satan, Nathan’s fundamental attitude is reckless and destructive. Moreover, like the allusion to Jacob’s struggle and the “inner storms held in solution,” the word “recoil” conjures an image of petrified energy or frozen struggle. There remains the perpetual potential for seduction and fall to repeat even as Nathan struggles toward resolution and apotheosis.

At this critical point, where the Miltonic allusions undercut and qualify Nathan’s basis for conversion, the next lines seem to turn toward a less ambiguous intimation of change:

Now, in recoil, by natural stress
Constrained to faith—to faith in more
Than prior disbelief had spurned... (1.17.232-236)

The lines naturalize and contain Nathan's "strain." The "natural stress" suggests that the linking Nathan's Puritan "strain" to its "Hebrew source" is not forced but "natural." Nathan's disbelief (the byproduct of "the Puritan/ Mixed latent in his blood") is "constrained to faith" which not only links his doubt to belief but also contains the "strain." The "natural stress" redresses the Puritan "strain" by bringing it in line with the natural disaster. The "strain," now encapsulated in "constrained," is not opposed to the slide that "so whelmed the havoc from the heaven (1.17.97) but is buried within it. With "stress" also referring to the rhythms in the metrical line, these transformations "by natural stress" seem to come about through or are at least reinforced by the fixed but flexible form of the verse.

From the waste of Nathan's Puritan doubt now "constrained to faith" comes "faith in more," a fine oxymoron mitred together by a dash at the center of the line. "Constrained to faith—faith in more" defines a doubt-fueled faith by binding together, to borrow the terms of *Paradise Lost*, "the hateful siege/ Of contraries" (9.121-122). Here, "constraint" does not contract but encompasses; it has become an act of containment, a means of maintaining "inner storms/held in solution" (1.17.195-6). As the line turns, the suggestiveness of the oxymoron gives way to a more explicit explanation. Disbelief is constrained to "faith in more/ than prior disbelief had spurned" (1.17.235-6). Nathan's faith is bigger than his disbelief or "beyond" it. But as "spurn" suggests, something that is rejected by being "kicked under heal," the line also evokes the fate of the "wily snake." Disbelief, like Satan's own admonitions about revenge, "back on itself recoils" and becomes its own slayer. The image of the snake being crushed under the Madonna's heel is one of Christianity's quintessential images of faith overcoming all doubt and disbelief. In the end, what "prior disbelief had spurned" becomes enveloped by or "constrained to" faith and that faith is "a faith in more" in that it includes both the prior disbelief and all that it rejected as a means to move beyond the limitations of puritan belief.

The totalizing impulse of this "faith in more" is not without its problems. Even as a "faith in more" compliments and justifies the earlier lines where "Hebrew source/...diverted here in force/...*hardly might do less* (1.17.229-31; italics mine), it also recalls the all encompassing lines about "Our mother, Earth" (1.17.87). The phrase defines the "Hebrew source" as "faith in more" but this source simultaneously obviates the very boundaries Nathan seeks to go beyond:

As if, when he toward credence turned,
Distance therefrom but gave career
For impetus that shot him sheer
Beyond. (1.17.237-240)

Nathan's faith has clearly gone "beyond" his doubt. But Nathan will try and take it further and attempt to move beyond "the horizon's level bounds" (1.17.57). Imagining his newfound faith as a kind of all encompassing constraint that "might yet overpass the limit due" (1.17.242), Nathan "when he toward credence turned" turns away as much as toward. By way of a conversion "that shot him sheer/Beyond," Nathan wants to overpasses the fraught American wilderness and get beyond "a turf divine/of promise" (1.17.35-6).

Nathan's attempt to create "distance therefrom," however, is hugely qualified. First, it hearkens back to the "Pyramids at distance seen" (1.17.60) which were destroyed along with the Indian mounds and everything else in the slide. But even extant, the pyramids are always a few removes from the actual landscape; they conjured a pagan source that was long ago and far away and only existed in the canto by way of metaphor. Second, the lines continue to adumbrate Book

9 of *Paradise Lost*. The Book which address man's "revolt/ And disobedience (9.7-8) reminds us that, from a puritan perspective, Nathan's conversion is a revolt and disobedience toward God. In terms of *Paradise Lost*, through self-exile and a kind of religious hubris, Nathan is "Now alienated [through] distance and distaste/...that brought into this world a world of woe" (9.9,13). Rather than returning to the source of the lost original, Nathan risks repeating the settler-colonial impulse by effecting yet another displacement as an act of replacement.

As the lines serve up a variation on Milton, Nathan's return to Jerusalem becomes full of echoes that enforce irrevocable distances. The "sheer beyond," with its connotations of heaven, becomes an ideal that leaves any notion of a *paradiso terrestre* in the dust. The next lines describing Nathan's relationship with Agar emblemize the destructiveness and impossibility of Nathan's fraught ambitions for fulfillment:

Agar rejoiced; nor knew
How such a nature, charged with zeal
Might yet overpass that limit due
Observed by her. For woe or weal
They wedded, one in heart and creed... (1.17.240-244)

Agar's responses to Nathan's conversion are almost allegorical. Initially, she rejoices, characterizing the primary meaning of her name: "joy." Her joy is rejoined by a prelapsarian echo created by the line break: she "rejoiced; nor knew" which suggests the prelapsarian state before knowledge; Agar is Eve before the eating of the fruit. Imagistically, her response to Nathan's conversion precedes the "first-fruits" and "recoil" of Nathan's disbelief. Yet, despite the hints of a paradise regained through a marriage that "wedded, one in heart and creed," Nathan is intent to "overpass that limit due/Observed by her." For Nathan, Agar's religious observance, one that seems to heed Raphael's admonition to contain "knowledge within bounds" (7.120). is an "empty form" that he intends to fulfill (1.17.256). Distressingly, the lines also suggest Agar's inability to "see" the extent of Nathan's zeal.

Nathan's "natural stress/ constrained to faith" becomes "such a nature, charged with zeal" as Nathan's erstwhile doubt produces a religious fervor that goes beyond "his love's Jerusalem" and that of "zealous Jews on alien soil" who "loyally maintain the dream" of returning there (1.17.265; 267). Motivated by a need to make the promise manifest, Nathan intends to "Up and do!/ With seed and tillage help renew/ Help reinstate the Holy Land" (1.17.262-4). Ironically, this desire not only repeats the work ethic of his puritan patriarchs but is also a postlapsarian image of Adamic toil. His desire to return to Jerusalem destroys the possibility of such a paradise. Nathan's marriage to Agar traps him in a vicious cycle even as it holds out a brief hope for resolution. "For woe or weal/ They wedded" restates the typical marriage vow of "in good times and in bad" in a peculiar way. While it suggests the promise of an everlasting commitment, the phrase carries with it connotations of the wheel of fortune, recapitulating the constant turning of contraries within which Nathan exists.

The phrase also continues to extend the allusion to *Paradise Lost* Book 9 by referring to Satan's tirade against god and his plan for the seduction and misery of man. Satan considers earth "like to heaven, if not preferred/...as built/ with second thoughts, reforming what was old!" (9.99-101). However, Satan finds no "place or refuge" in this "terrestrial heaven" (9.119, 103); rather, the pleasure of this preferred heaven torments him:

For only in destroying I find ease
 To my relentless thoughts; and him destroyed,
 Or won to what may work his utter loss,
 For whom all this was made, all this will soon
 Follow, as to him linked in weal or woe;
 In woe then, that destruction wide may range... (9.129-134)

Satan's conclusion eerily smacks of Nathan's own logic for restating Jerusalem. But even Satan does not "here seek...no nor in heaven/ to dwell" (9.124-5). Nathan desire to dwell in this "terrestrial heaven" by "reforming what was old" transcends even Satan's ambitions. Nevertheless, Nathan's efforts will lead him from weal again back to woe through the turning wheel of contraries. In the end, Nathan will come full circle and his attempt to restore Jerusalem out of the wide ranging destruction of the slide results in "what may work his utter loss."

The fateful move and mutual undoing of Nathan and Agar is augured by the secondary meaning of Agar's name: "field" or "land." Like Nathan, the poem realizes Agar in terms of landscape, but she is colonized by Nathan through marriage:

They wedded, one in heart and creed
 transferring fields with title-deed
 from rustic life he quite withdrew
 Traded, and throve. (1.17.244-257)

The mythical overlay of Genesis imagines Agar as Nathan's Eve which compliments and completes both his Puritan and newfound Jewish identities. Like Eve, Agar's identity is overtaken by Nathan's. She becomes a means to his fulfillment. Like Adam, his courting and marriage of Agar allows Nathan to go from alone to solitary. Their marriage recapitulates Edenic union "one in heart and creed" but then quickly moves from a spiritual union to a merging of "fields with title-deed." Nathan does not dwell on his "Love" but hastily moves on to "his love's Jerusalem" (1.17.222). Agar becomes an agent of transference, allowing Nathan to move from doubt to faith, Christianity to Judaism, New Hampshire to Jerusalem.

The transfer of title-deed is also a move from his own landscape to hers. Nathan also "withdrew" from "rustic life." Not only does he give up the farm but begins to remove himself from the pastoral American wilderness of the puritan patriarchs. Instead of pursuing the dream of "loam/ turned first by him (1.17.55-56), he "traded and throve." Nathan detaches himself from the land and becomes a successful trader. But "traded" also resolves his psychological transfer and withdrawal by suggesting a kind of bait and switch where Nathan swaps one Esdraleon ("the prairie in her swimming swell/of undulation (1.17.30-1) for another ("his love's Jerusalem" (1.17.222). Like Adam, Nathan tragically moves from a steward of Eden to a nomadic wanderer. His weal contains his woe as "throve" holds within it "rove." His thriving strives toward a complete colonization of an elsewhere, a place beyond "the horizon's level bounds" (1.17.57).

In the beginning, however, the marriage is fruitful and they multiply. Nathan and Agar soon have children but even this natural procreative urge sanctioned by both religion and marriage gets perverted by Nathan's zealous need to "help reinstate the Holy Land" (1.17.264):

Two children came
 Sedate his heart, nor sad the dame.

But years subvert; or he outgrew
 (While yet confirmed in all the myth)
 The mind infertile of the Jew. (1.17.247-251)

The lines mute the apparently happy reception of the children by casting their parental joy in negative terms. Nathan's passions are temporarily tranquilized and Agar (again, whose name means joy) is merely "not sad." Even this subdued description of contentment is undercut by the next line where "years subvert" and Nathan "outgrew/ The mind infertile of the Jew." Before, "years sped" (1.17.171) but now "years subvert" (1.17.249). The linear hastening of time gets replaced by a cyclical notion of time.²⁵ Yet, this is not a reversal of time (a return to a lost original) but a subversion of it. This cyclical notion proves more subversive than taking Puritanism back to its Jewish origins: Nathan "outgrew." Because it is children that usually do the outgrowing, there is a perversion of nature here. Nathan has transplanted his kinds, and literally subverted a natural process of regeneration.

The children—"Ruth and a young child" (1.17.288)—resolve the earlier temporal lines by a pun on the girl's name. Before "time instead contributes ruth" (1.17.173), here "Ruth" has been born and borne out. But rather than serve as a comic end and a completion, Nathan can't recognize Agar, Ruth, and his other young child as the manifestation of his Esdraelon. Rather, he leaves them in "Zion's walled recess" (1.17.316) while he remains outside the walls "to abide the worst on Sharon's lea" (1.17.302).²⁶ Nathan's belief that his "mind austere" overpasses "the mind infertile of the Jew" is not only anti-Semitic but savagely ironic, given that Agar, his Jewish wife, has just had his children a few lines before and Nathan flees the "the broad Delta's planted capes/ of vernal grain (1.17.61-2) for "toil severe but vain" (1.17.291) on a "tract secured on Sharon's plain." (1.17.289). Nathan's "subversive" mindset mistakes austerity for fertility, overlooking the promise fulfilled right in front of him.

The lines become even more sinister by insisting on a kind of mind/body split (fertile body, infertile mind) and also a further division between "his love" and "his love's Jerusalem." Even as he distinguishes himself from "the mind infertile," Nathan aligns himself with it by denying his own feelings and ignoring Agar's pleas for him to stay: "tho' his heart could feel/ 'Twas mastered by inveterate zeal" (1.17.327-8). There is something decidedly Matherish in Nathan's logic that helps explain how anti-Semitism can result from his being "confirmed in all the myth." Indeed, Nathan is not returning to Judaism but turning Judaism into a rarefied form of puritan Christianity. By attempting to go beyond the "rank fable" (1.17.189) of that "uncanny sect" by fleeing to Jerusalem, Nathan's merely repeats that of the settler-colonial paradigm of the "landing patriarchs" and destroys whatever brief Edenic fulfillment he may have achieved with Agar. In the end, Nathan cleaves apart what no man should rend asunder. He severs "his Love's Jerusalem" from "his Love," abandoning Agar, his Eve, back within "the stronghold town of Zion."

Despite the apparently hopeful beginnings of the marriage, there persists an agonizing undercurrent auguring a tragic end. Nathan's zealous desire to "overpass" what Agar observes is not just an attempt to go beyond her religious devotion. Despite the initial suggestions that Agar maintains the prophetic capacities of Miriam, Nathan's "inveterate zeal" (1.17.328) goes beyond

²⁵ In terms of genre, Frye would observe that this effort on Nathan's part is an attempt to square the narrative and prosaic notions of time with the poetic and epic cycle where "the rhythm of prose is continuous, not recurrent [*epos* is episodic], and the fact is symbolized by the purely mechanical breaking of prose lines on a printed page" (263).

²⁶ Clarel manages to repeat Nathan's mistake when he also abandons Ruth to wander outside the walls.

what Agar can predict. Moreover, her inability to anticipate the consequences of Nathan's zeal recalls Nathan's own self-imposed blindness as he adheres to a myopic faith that requires the surrender of his own critical capacity for doubt (perhaps Nathan's fatal flaw and the thing that the structure of the epic most virulently opposes). Although Agar represents the potential for Edenic fulfillment, she proves ill equipped to resist Nathan's destructive religious fervor:

Now Nathan turning unto her,
Greeting his wife at morning ray,
Those words breathed on the Passover
But she, who mutely startled lay... (1.17.270-273)

Nathan "turning unto her" is not so much the turning of conversion but turns out to be more like the turning of Orpheus toward Eurydice. Like Eurydice, Nathan's turning exiles Agar and dooms her. Agar is replaced by Nathan's longing and, like Eurydice, Agar is silenced.²⁷ Agar, chanter and enchantress, who initially "rejoiced" at Nathan's conversion is left "mutely startled" (1.17.273) and subdued (1.17.276). The "greeting...at morning ray" connotes a hope and the promise of a new day after the "prairie twilight" (1.17.78), especially since it is on "the Paschal day" (1.17.268). But it proves to be a false dawn. Agar finds Nathan with "no flourish of mere sentiment" and hell bent on overcoming mere ritual observance and instead to "Up and do!" (1.17.262). Nathan's literalizing will make the ritual rehearsal of "the Paschal day" into a "subversive" personal reenactment of "Passover": he will "overpass"; he will be exiled; and, like the death of the firstborn sons, he will witness "the nurslings death ere long" (1.17.329).

Nathan goes from the enchanted to the enchanter and Agar's silent apprehension marks the point where the positions of seduction switch:

But she, who mutely startled lay,
In the old phrase found import new
In the blithe tone a bitter cheer
That did the very speech subdue.
She kenned her husband's mind austere,
Had watched his reveries grave; he meant
No flourish mere of sentiment. (1.17.273-279)

Agar is silenced and petrified when Nathan "breathed" the ritual "salute upon the Paschal day" (1.17.268).²⁸ Agar is unsettled by Nathan's clear intent to actualize a sign of religious fealty and realize what is ritually postponed. Her worry is warranted, since "in the old phrase [she] found import new." The sense of the "new" that accompanied their initial meeting has become terribly bleak. Earlier, "Pan and the pagan oracles" (1.17.164) expelled god "hither, to renew their old control" (1.17.163). This replacement is then replaced by Nathan's conversion to Judaism which begins by his meeting Agar "in a lake-port new" (1.17.200). A particularly sly revision, "lake-

²⁷ The pattern of "turning" in the canto makes this seeming gesture toward Agar—"Now Nathan turning unto her" (270)—both an act of colonizing and of distancing. Earlier, in his flirtation with paganism, Nathan imagines a lost origin as a dream of land "turned first by him." (1.17.156). Later, when Nathan "toward credence turned," this turning toward is shown to be a kind of Orphic turning away: "Distance therefrom but gave career/ For impetus that shot him sheer/ Beyond (2.237-40).

²⁸ The greeting is "*Next year in Jerusalem!*" (1.17.269).

port new” trumps “their old control” before molting into “import new.” Their meeting “in a lake-port new” which at first seems to resolve Nathan’s religious questing now takes on new and ominous meaning. As the rhyme scheme enforces, the “import new” is what “did the very speech subdue”; moreover, it presages the arrival at yet another port: “*Next year in Jerusalem!*” (1.17.269).

In the initial romantic encounter, “a Jewess who about him threw/ Else than Nerea’s amorous net” where “a sibyl *breathed* in Agar’s grace” (1.17.203, 205; italics mine); now “those words *breathed* (1.17.272; italics mine) are Nathan’s. Before it was Nathan’s “receptive heart found place/ When Agar chanted David’s songs” (1.17.225-6); now it is Agar who “kenned her husband’s mind austere.” Before, “he felt her grateful as the rains” (1.17.207); now feeling is replaced with “reveries grave” and “No flourish mere of sentiment.” Before, it was Nathan who was converted by Agar to “turn Hebrew (1.17.212); now Nathan’s oxymoronic “bitter cheer” and “reveries grave”—both expressions of his conflicting efforts to establish a secure foundation for a “grave life” (1.17.53) blooming from “his father’s sylvan grave” (1.17.167)—“convert” Agar, transforming her religious observance into something more austere and her inherent joy into something less than joy.

By hubristically seeking to go beyond, Nathan lays waste to the Edenic promise, overpowering Agar whose “startled” response to Nathan keenly echoes Milton’s solution to the fall:

Then what to do? Or how to stay?
Decry it? That would faith unsay.
Withstand him? But she gently loved.
And so with Agar here it proved
As oft it may, the hardy will
Overpowered the deep monition still. (1.17.280-285)

These lines recall the conclusion to Milton’s “Sonnet 16” where he succinctly expresses the proper response to the postlapsarian condition:

thousands at [God’s] bidding speed,
And post o’er land and ocean without rest;
They also serve who only stand and wait.’

Spoken by “Patience,” the lines hold up those like Agar “who only stand and wait” over those who, like Nathan, “post o’er land and ocean without rest.” Agar’s response implies the kind of patience more overtly declared elsewhere in the poem, such as Derwent’s appeal for patience when told to “Decipher, quick! we’re waiting all.” (2.31.46). Moreover, Agar’s “deep monition,” although it seems capitulatory, passively resists Nathan’s plan. Agar counters Nathan’s exclamatory zeal by turning his emphatic “Up and do!” into a question: “Then what to do?” (1.17.280. It is a question that she extends with more questions: “Or how to stay?/ Decry it?” (1.17.280-281). This is the operative concern for Agar, but she cannot overtly oppose him since to “decry” her husband’s plan would be a sacrilege and “that would faith unsay.” Painfully, “decry” reduces Agar’s joy to weeping, her phrase “faith unsay” predicts her inability to speak up and “withstand him.” She cannot stand with him nor can she contradict his “bitter cheer” or reveries grave” which have infused her identity and her faith with a terrible “import new.”

Nevertheless, though “mutely startled” and with “the hardy will/ overpowered the deep monition still,” Agar does patiently hold to her declaration that “Love is power” and because she “gently loved” counters Nathan’s “inveterate zeal” with a passive resistance.

Her silent protest, though, is ultimately ineffectual. As the Edenic marriage of “one in heart and creed” decomposes, Agar will find herself begging Nathan to “serve God by cleaving to thy wife/ Thy children” (1.17.323-324) as he abandons them “in Zion’s walled recess” (1.17.316) to go and defend “a tract secured on Sharon’s plain” (1.17.290):

Enough; fair fields and household charms
They quit, sell all, and cross the main
With Ruth and a young child in arms
A tract secured on Sharon’s plain,
Some sheds he built, and ground walled in
Defensive; toil severe but vain. (1.17.270-91)

The declarative “Enough” punctuates Nathan’s ceaseless search for “faith in more.” Yet it is not so much a statement of satisfaction as a declaration of Nathan’s agitated impatience. As the line continues, Nathan has clearly had “enough” of the “fair fields and household charms” that all too closely resemble the “sylvan” fields where his father lies buried and the “log-house” where his mother maintained “the Christian way.” Nathan attempts to flee the American landscape of his parents only to repeat the false “promise” in Jerusalem.

The move to Jerusalem forces Nathan to live out his self-exile in a poignant and personal way even as it reverberates with larger mythic and religious overtones. Agar with “Ruth and a young child in arms” get replaced by “[Nathan] and honest servants three/ Armed husbandmen”(1.17.303-304). Nathan swaps wife and children for “husbandmen” and trades “arms” carrying children into for those “armed” with weapons. Nathan—like Clarel and Rolphe—puts himself beyond the wall, beyond the limits of the city, outside the heart of Zion. Despite the wall that pretends to recreate the perimeter of Eden, it is a recreation girded by a Satanic logic. The tract is “defensive,” build against what is already there. It proves to be an anti-paradise where “law was none/ or perjured” (1.17.97-8), a post-apocalyptic wasteland full of “wandering Arabs” who attack the nomadic and exiled Jewish convert. Unlike Agar who mounts a silent if pyrrhic protest, Nathan continuously speaks his mind, expressing his contempt for “the Arabs,” and, not unlike Satan, his contempt “bred hate” (1.17.310). With his wife and children “lodged within the stronghold town/ of Zion, and his heart exiled/ To abide the worst on Sharon’s lea” (1.17.300-302), Nathan again repeats the Adamic exile he has so ardently tried to reverse. The line “of Zion and his heart exiled” is a chiasmic restatement of “his love and his love’s Jerusalem.” Like both Satan, Nathan has perverted that which promised to resolve his spiritual and emotional crisis.

By venturing to Jerusalem, Nathan not only repeats the self-exile of the “landing patriarchs” but reenacts his father’s own decision to take his family beyond the settlements and into the wilderness (1.17.38-42). What Nathan founds and defends on the outskirts of Zion is not so much a reinstated Holy Land as an outcropping of the American wilderness established by his settler-colonial forefathers. Even in Palestine, he finds himself “immersed” in “Pequod wilds” (1.17.305). Moreover, Nathan perceives the native “Hittites” as “foes pestilent to God” just as “his fathers old those Indians deemed” (1.17.306-7). Ultimately, his move to Jerusalem recasts the twin traumas of his own childhood and his Christian doubt.

In a feat of hubristic misinterpretation, Nathan chooses a “wild” desert over “the stronghold town/ of Zion,” a testament to his misunderstanding “Love, and his love’s Jerusalem.” Nathan trades the Edenic promise found in his relationship with Agar for a vision of his own making based on a logic akin to Milton’s Satan:

The mind is its own place, and in itself
Can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven. (*Paradise Lost* 1.254-5)

In his effort to literalize, the libratory “the Paschal day” with its promise of “Next year in Jerusalem” he recreates the Passover’s darker purpose, “the nursling’s death.” And, like Passover, Nathan’s quest promises exile as well as return, a wandering in the desert, a waiting for the Promised Land which Moses never sees. What promises paradise regained tragically repeats paradise lost and, as all tragedies, it ends in death.

The storyteller finishes the canto expostulating about time:

But Time the cruel, whose smooth way
Is feline, patient for the prey
That to this twig of being clings;
And Fate, which from her ambush springs
And drags the loiterer soon or late
Unto a sequel unforeseen... (1.17.331-336)

This last reflection anthropomorphizes Time and Fate, imagining them both as predators that surprise their prey and “drag the loiterer soon or late/ unto a sequel unforeseen.” At this point, even “surprise” has been subsumed by Nathan’s destructive trajectory. The storyteller reveals Time and Fate as the canto’s underlying themes. With particular attention to the function and purpose of the Puritan American wilderness, the canto presents the “general shape of the historical cycle” in microcosm. Nathan’s perplexing and paradoxical conversion adheres to Frye’s notion of epic by almost parodying “the life and death of the individual, and the slower social rhythm which, in the course of years...bring[ing] cities and empires to their rise and fall (318).” Nathan dies in the midst of negotiating the destruction and rebuilding of Jerusalem in an effort to restore nothing less than all of Christendom.

What may be more disquieting than a general adherence to a tragic epic cycle is the way these lines undermine the Miltonic promise represented by Agar. The storyteller takes “patience” and makes it a quality of Time. Rather than becoming a way to “withstand” the test of time, “patience” describes Time’s capacity to outlast and destroy an individual’s attempt to wait it out. In these lines, the impulse to “stand and waite” is not a sign of service but the sign of a “loiterer” who is dragged “soon or late/ unto a sequel unforeseen.” There seems to be something immediately hopeful in the order of “soon or late” since the syntax postpones the imminent death of the loiterer. Yet this hopefulness is simultaneously undercut, since being “late” is the definition of a loiterer. It is also this sense of belatedness that pervades Nathan’s desire for restoration. Neither his drive to “up and do!” nor Agar’s attempts to postpone and wait carry the redemptive promise that Milton holds out even as *Paradise Lost* arrives at its tragic end. Whenever the end arrives in *Clarel*, the “sequel” is “unforeseen.” Besides suggesting the epic’s episodic rather than a plot driven narrative, this line discredits Agar’s capacity to “see” the future and certainly undercuts Nathan’s efforts to make it manifest.

In these last lines about time, the storyteller calls into question the very idea of “a turf divine/ of promise.” Nathan lives out the temporal conundrum experienced by Renaissance writers described by Edward Taylor:

Existing in sixteenth-century England but imaginatively alive in antiquity,
Renaissance writers inherited a feeling for the circular patterns of ancient time
and sought to assimilate them to the basically straight-line configurations of
Scripture. (13)

It is safe to say that in *Clarel*, Melville is imaginatively alive in the Renaissance and so, twice removed, belatedly takes up the temporal problem of grafting epic time to Christian time. But epic time undercuts the “straight-line configurations of Scripture” and, as Nathan’s quest reveals, there is no promised end, just an image of that horror. Repeated. Nathan’s various attempts to alter his postlapsarian Adamic condition by modifying the landscape fail. Throughout the permutations of Nathan’s religious conversions, the adumbrated figure of Adam forced to till the land remains constant. But unlike Adam who leaves Eden with Eve, Nathan severs ties with Agar:

But first was modified the lien
The husband had on Agar’s heart,
And next a prudence slid athwart—
After distrust. But be unsaid
That steep toward which the current led.
Events shall speak. (1.17.336-343)

Nathan and Agar become opposites. Unlike Agar, Nathan is no loiterer and dies soon: “[Time and Fate] doomed him and cut short his date” (1.17.337). These last lines about Nathan and Agar reverse the initial lines about their marriage (“They wedded, one in heart and creed/ transferring fields with title-deed” (1.17.244-45). Agar is imagined here again as real estate but now the marriage becomes a rental agreement gone bad. The “one in heart and creed” is cleft apart and Nathan finds himself dispossessed. He is again exiled but this time with nowhere to return. Agar remains silent and in her stead “events shall speak” as she and Nathan are swept up in currents that bring us back to the initial catastrophe that buried the Saco and Ammonoosuc’s fount.

Even when the canto finally brings us back to the narrative frame, it returns to the beginning of the canto and again recapitulates the Fall:

And now the guide
Who did in sketch this tale begin,
Parted with Clarel at the inn;
And ere long came the eventide. (1.17.343-346)

The guide, Nehemiah, parting with Clarel echoes the split between Nathan and Agar which is also the split between Adam and Eve. Beginning “in prairie twilight...and he alone” (1.17. 78-79), the canto flows toward the false dawn of “greeting his wife at morning ray” (1.17.270). It then ebbs again and “ere long came the eventide” (1.17.346).²⁹ The completion of the diurnal

²⁹ This reverses the progress in *Paradise Lost* where day descends to evening and back to day.

cycle is not only a return but finally a resolution. Even as it brings us back to the “prairie twilight,” the “eventide” puns on tide stopping the ebb and flow of the current running variously throughout the canto. There may be no source but the last word calms the pitch and toss of opposites and balances those “inner storms/ held in solution” (1.17.1915-196). The next canto “Night” can then pick up where this one leaves off. A progression from darkness to darkness.

Nathan embodies the American settler-colonial impatience with the postlapsarian condition. As Obenzinger argues: “While the rhetoric of a ‘city upon a hill’ identified a present by means of a past, it was always through the sense of the promise of a future” (30). Throughout the canto, the storyteller relies on the “now,” one of his signature temporal demarcations throughout the poem, to move the action forward. “Now waste, but once a cultured plot” (1.17.92) links the ruins ensuing from the White Hill’s slide to an idealized civilization that can then be restored. From the “waste” comes harvest: “Let now the breast of Ceres swell” (1.17.177). Yet, the cyclicity of epic time undercuts any sense of progress felt by hopping from “now” to “now.” Yet, Nathan’s attempt to fulfill the future by restoring the past is another way to reconcile McWilliams critique of “America’s oldest epic tradition” where “relentless futurism in a genre once defined by its concern with the distant past has been a distinguishing trait of American epic since Barlow’s *Columbiad*” (239). The compulsion to restore Jerusalem is both a need for a lost origin and a death wish for the Day of Judgment, where, as Tayler says of *Paradise Lost* “the end bears more than casual resemblance to the beginning” (13). Both will return “a cultured plot” to “waste.” The apocalyptic immediacy of the “now” merely masks an incessant cyclicity as a “relentless futurism.” Nathan’s greeting “at morning ray” is a false dawn that recycles the recurring undulant images of the canto that compel Nathan to his destruction and the canto back “ere long” to “the eventide.”

Clarel's Linguistic Landscape and America's Dark Democracy

His terror had to blow itself quite out
 To let him see it; but it was the gale had blown him
 Past the Cape Horn of sensible success
 Which cries: "This rock is Eden. Shipwreck here."

—W.H. Auden, "Herman Melville"

E Pluribus Unum or "A Pocahontas-wedding of Contraries"

By way of resolution, we need to return to Nehemiah who we left flinging aside stones in the desert. Pursuing the fate of Nehemiah will allow us to bring together the discussion of the landscape with the "intensely drawn but narratively aborted characters like Celio and Nathan" (Milder 195). Considering these together will highlight the ways the storyteller, characters, landscape conspire in American epic because the intertwined visions of the characters and landscape are so tangled together by their textuality that they ultimately lead us to a reflection on the nature of the poem itself, both its allusiveness and its narrative structure. Characters intertwined, stories intertwined, landscapes intertwined and conflated: the textuality of the poem not only "weaves" their stories together but exists as the topography they attempt to apprehend and transform.

When Milder argues that "intensely drawn but narratively aborted characters like Celia and Nathan" are, paradoxically, signs that "Clarel is the book in which Melville is most completely the novelist" (195), the comment, given second thought, seems more than paradoxical. Besides the fact that *Clarel* is in verse, leaving crucial characters unrealized would seem pretty clumsy for such a great novelist at the height of his narrative powers. So why are Celio and Nathan "narratively aborted?" The answer: they're not. These characters appear to disappear not because they are aborted but because they are sublimated into the weave of the text. They are cognitively carried by the minds of others—Clarel and Nehemiah respectively—and emerge in their perceptions of and responses to the landscape. It is not a coincidence that the names of Clarel and Celio, Nehemiah and Nathan are alliterative and thematically alike. They serve as doppelgangers who adumbrate the cultural and narrative restrictions within which the characters operate. As critics such as Milder and Delbanco recognize, these characters, despite their disappearance, are crucial for how the epic unfolds.

Nathan is gone by the end of the canto named for him (1.17) and Celio, introduced in canto 12 of Part One, is buried by canto 40. They are gone but not forgotten. Clarel will carry Celio in mind right up until the end, as we will see, while Nathan has always been a story Nehemiah tells, and Nehemiah to some degree is possessed by him. With the feel of the colon that ends the first Canto of Pound's *Cantos*, the canto Nathan lets out into the delta of the "unsaid/ That steep toward which the current led" and where "events shall speak" (1.18. 340-342), leaving everything after it to be embellishment and elaboration.

Nathan's presence continues to be felt in the actions of Nehemiah which show Nathan's exile to be an act of removal more than of restoration. Both are subsumed into the settler-colonial elsewhere made permanent as that undiscovered country from whose bourn no traveler returns.³⁰ Both reenact an endless replication of dispossession. Like Celio, they are buried "far from here"

³⁰ This phrase is from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* 3.1.79

(1.40.45);³¹ Like the landscape, they become unmoored from place in death; as story, they seem bound by the terms of imprecated myths that destroy them even as their redemptive promises are forever deferred.

Nehemiah, “the guide/who did in sketch this tale begin” (1.17.343-344) is not just linked to Nathan through quixotic quests connected by the thread of the allusive archaism “nathless.” Through the course of narrative, Nehemiah inherits the vision and a version of the Palestinian landscape that Nathan epitomizes. The slide in the White Hills precipitates the stony rubble of the Palestinian desert and leads to Nehemiah’s “flinging aside stone after stone” (2.10.190). Even more, the American wilderness “anticipates” the fall of Jerusalem. From a chronological standpoint, such anachronism may at first seem absurd. But, Melville applies a proleptic temporal structure similar to that of *Paradise Lost* to what Obenzinger calls a “prototypical story of spiritual quest across America’s religious landscape, culminating in [an] attempt to reinscribe the colonial covenant at its origins” (84). With reference to *Paradise Lost*, Tayler explains this thorny temporal paradox this way:

The final difficulty with the model of the straight line is that it implies that Moses lived before Christ and that the Second Coming postdates the Incarnation. There is the obvious sense in which these statements are true, but to think exclusively in this way will not help very much in trying to understand the structure of *Paradise Lost*, which moves straight through history in a circle.... Caught in what Milton calls this ‘transient World, the Race of time,’ men observe that Moses precedes Christ, that the succession of events moves from the past to the future; but in Eternity, where “there is no distinction of Tenses,” “what to us is to come, to his Eternitie is present, his whole duration being but one permanent point without succession, parts, flux, or divising. (14)

What Melville does is reveal the landscape to be a representation of this divine “eternitie,” an established set of tropes and signs, a literary more than a literal ground, which promises to play out over and again the ruin of paradise with a devastating determinism. The “now” as all there is or ever will be is a continual expanse of purgatorial desert. And given this postlapsarian condition, what could bring a ruin to ruin? Cut off from the precedent of paradise, what would it mean to restore the ruin to itself? Even the language in its crabbed metrics and jagged syntax is a ruin and the deadening and deadly results of storytelling in the canto “Nathan” are emblematic of the storyteller’s attitude toward *Clarel* as a whole. The poem is a trenchant critique of epic myths and the way they are resourced and redacted through the America’s colonial ambitions and peremptorily reflected in the national implosion of the Civil War.

Even though Bezanson, citing Melville’s Journals, points out that “Melville thought the nineteenth-century Zionist movement ‘preposterous’ and ‘half melancholy, half farcical’” (629), Nathan offers a vision of the Miltonic landscape both literalized and Americanized. It is a fantastic landscape, the wrecked Eden of a Christian imagination, upon which the epic is based and upon which the pilgrims trudge. In Nathan’s displaced attempt to restore what is already a displaced ruin, the events become transferable rather than locatable, leached of their specific historical and geographical references. Attending to the central myth of Christ’s resurrection, they become allusive and elusive symbols and types that are just as much an event occurring in

³¹ This line is uttered by Rolfe about “Poor Ethelward.” Rolphe’s lament reinforces the idea that characters in the poem often exist most profoundly in their absence.

Palestine in the mists of Biblical time as an 18th century occurrence in the temperate, cultivated wilds of New Hampshire. The landscape activates various anachronistic narratives, superimposing them on one another, and giving the palimpsest a mythic patina which will offer up coordinates for a colonizing map of a fallen world.

Within the text there exists a pervasiveness to the landscape that seems to outstrip all borders and horizons, to invade the consciousness of the characters and be carried with them like smallpox wherever they go. However, the storyteller who stands aloof and exits in the “marge” of the text can critique this type of literalization. This is how the narrator introduces Nehemiah as a storyteller:

“Tell, friend,” said Clarel eagerly,
As from the wall of wail they passed;
“Father and daughter? Who may be
That strange pervert?” No willing haste
The mentor showed; awhile he fed
On anxious thoughts.... (1.16.195-200)

And so as Nehemiah contemplates Nathan and the story he will tell, we see that Nathan exists as a story within a story whose memory is conjured up as Clarel and Nehemiah pass “the wall of wail.”

The wall is important because it is the place to mourn the fall of Solomon’s temple. Constructed twice and destroyed twice, the wall reveals such devastation to be an inevitable end. But at least as equally important, the second destruction serves as a sort of beginning, since it corresponds with First Jewish-Roman War (70 C.E.) occurring around the time that the first Gospels are recorded. Melville will eventually extend this connection between Rome and Jerusalem to America, a trio of synoptic empires all brought to ruin. But in this passage, the Wall is both a symbol of Jewish exile, a place for Jews to return and “wail” irreparable loss, and a symbol for the wall surrounding paradise to which Adam and Eve, as figured at the end of *Paradise Lost*, look back and “some natural tears they dropped, but wiped them soon” (12.645). The odd syntax emphasizes the wailing rather than the wall, not the artifact but the condition of exile and loss that it represents and that pervades the poem.

The description of Nehemiah beginning his tale about Nathan goes on to transpose another allusion to *Paradise Lost*. Bringing together references to “Father and daughter” and “that strange pervert,” the passage invokes the moment Satan meets his estranged daughter Sin at the gates of hell as he travels toward “this pendant world” (2.1052). When Satan fails to recognize his daughter, Sin reprimands him by reminding Satan of her birth:

All on a sudden miserable pain
Surprised thee, dim thine eyes, and dizzy swum
In darkness, while thy head flames thick and fast
Threw forth, till on the left side opening wide,
Likest to thee in shape and countenance bring,
Then shining heavenly fair, a goddess armed,
Out of thy head I sprung? Amazement seized
All the host of Heaven; back they recoiled afraid
At first and called me ‘Sin’ and for a sign
Portentous held me... (2.747-761)

Already figuring Nathan and his project to restore paradise in Jerusalem as a misguided Satanic attempt to “make a Heaven of hell, a hell of Heaven (1.255), the allusion brings up the Satanic idea that “the mind is its own place and in itself” (1.254) as Sin leaps forth into the world from Satan’s head. Already we see that Nathan has invaded the head of Nehemiah with “anxious thoughts” and this too will bear “satanic” visions that make “a hell of heaven.”

It is in this literalizing mindset that Nehemiah will relate the story of Nathan:

then grievingly
 The story gave—a tangled thread,
 Which, cleared from snarl and ordered so,
 Follows transferred, with interflow
 Of much Nehemiah scarce might add. (1.16.200-204)

The story, told “grievingly,” is indeed a “tangled thread,” part of a network of stories that binds the characters and binds them together. But more important to notice here is the way in which the story about Nathan ostensibly told by Nehemiah gets transposed into the voice of the storyteller. The transfer implicates Nehemiah in the “tangled thread” he purports to unravel by adding to the “interflow” details Nehemiah “scarce might add.” The oxymoronic phrase “scarce might add,” which recalls other phrases like “ampler dearth,” suggests that there are additions that the characters as part of the story can’t know but will nevertheless play out. As the storyteller declares at the end of the canto, “Events shall speak” (17.342). The mythic landscape that occupies Nathan and compels his exodus from the American wilderness always already infuses the imagination of Nehemiah as a story he tells and as a story within which he is embedded. When Nehemiah begins his quixotic effort to “prepare...the way of the Lord [and] make straight in the desert a highway for our God” (Isaiah 40.3), he not only reenacts an Old Testament but shows in extremity the contours of a cultural mythology that motivates the actions of all the characters in *Clarel* in one way or another.

Nehemiah etherizes Nathan’s vision of the Holy Land into an imagined ideal of Jerusalem as a castle in the air floating above the Dead Sea for which his casting aside stones becomes sort of a negative foundation by establishing the air beneath his utopian edifice:

While every stone that he removed
 Laid bare but more. The student sighed,
 So well he kenned his ways distraught
 At influx of his eldritch tide. (2.10.193-196)

“The biblical Nehemiah,” as Bezanson points out, “rebuilder of the walls of Jerusalem, is perhaps an ironic prototype” (630). As Nehemiah intends “to mend the way...with patient look” (2.10.199), he literally attempts, as Bezanson suggests in his notes, to fulfill Isaiah and “make straight in the desert a highway for our God” (40:3). But, of course, as Tayler points out, “There is...the tendency, evident in Isaiah (40-55) and elsewhere, to envisage the (ideal) future in imagery reminiscent of the original state, to see the end as somehow a return to Eden” (13). This return, though, lands the characters right outside the Edenic wall with no way in. On the one hand, as a “rebuilder of walls,” the actions of Nehemiah ironically reinstate the barrier he wants to break down. On the other hand, Nehemiah’s attempt to “prepare the way of the Lord” by casting aside stones turns out to be an act of incessantly repetitive displacement that can never

rebuild or restore anything but merely serves as yet another act of removal, a casting aside, a rubble.

Reinforcing the unremitting repetition, the adjective “eldritch” recapitulates and revises the “eventide” that ends the canto “Nathan.” As the adjective “eldritch” suggests with its connotations of “foreign” and “strange” and its connotations of something “exilic” or “otherworldly,” this type of religious romanticism and utopian nostalgia is a desire for a home that never was. It is through an idealizing and thus (re)mythologizing of the past that Nehemiah attempts to fulfill the future. In this case, however, Nehemiah’s literal pursuit of this vision will cause him to drown by sleepwalking into the Dead Sea chasing a literal castle in the air. There can be no better image for the type of “restoration” the landscape allows than the city of God rising as an ephemeral cloud forming out of the evaporation from the Dead Sea (2.38.15-18). Even in this timeless desertscape, the wise words of that famous 20th century clairvoyante seem to hold true: “Fear death by water.”³²

The drowning, along with “eldritch tide,” brings us back to the end of the canto “Nathan” by revealing further puns on “eventide.” As we have already seen, the word echoes the “prairie twilight” at the beginning of the canto even as it stops the ebb and flow of the narrative’s “interflow.” Yet while the word itself simply denotes “evening,” considered along with its reference to “twilight,”³³ it can be taken as a kind of kenning: “even-tide.” The word not only anticipates the waters that will eventually drown Nehemiah but also, and more importantly, activates *Paradise Lost* yet again. The idea of evening as twilight is associated both with Satan and with Eve respectively and the way in which Satan will ultimately invade Eve’s consciousness through dream.³⁴ As one of the earliest descriptions of Satan’s fall from grace makes clear—“from morn/to noon he fell, from noon to dewy eve” (1.743)—he is always falling away from heaven and toward Eve. As for Eve—which as an abridgment of evening is both “night” and “hanging in the balance”—she stands between Satan’s “disastrous twilight” (1.597) and Raphael’s revisionary “grateful twilight” (5.645). The twilight or twin-light is both light and dark, and the descent into night is also the promise of morning.

But as we see when Book 5 of *Paradise Lost* begins with “Now morn,” the morning is also the start of the “mourning” because it is the beginning of the end, the moment that makes Eve’s temptation and fall inevitable. It is a sentiment that, as we’ve seen, Melville captures with “the wall of wail” (1.16.196). Indeed, the “morn” in *Paradise Lost* finds the “unawakened Eve” (5.9) fitfully dreaming about being awakened into the night by Satan’s injunction. Intoned in Adam’s “gentle voice” (5.37) with a bit of ventriloquism, “Why sleep’st thou Eve? (5.38) is a question that leads Eve “to the tree/of interdicted knowledge” (5.51-2) where she is incited to eat but wakes before she does “To find this but a dream!” (5.93). Of course we know too well that the dream is never just a dream but an image of that horror where, four books later, “much

³² In the first part of T.S. Eliot’s *The Wasteland*, Madame Sosostris ends her tarot reading with this declaration, adding “I see crowds of people, walking round in a ring,” an uncannily apt description of the action in *Clarel*.

³³ Through the “interflow” of the text, “twilight” also links this passage and the attendant passage about Nehemiah to the canto titled “Twilight” in Part 4 where “legends, floating came that air/ From one invisible in shade/Singing and lightly sauntering on/ Toward the cloisters” (4.24.16-19) describes the Prodigal who passes “as might a wave/Rippling” and leaves Clarel “Unkenned!” by the “tropic song” (4.24.22-26). The lines clearly redact the lines devoted to Nehemiah by reconfiguring the vision to “the wilder legend thrill” where “Dream merged in dream: the city rose—/ Shrouded, it went up from the wave (2.38.4, 15-16) and Clarel’s response to Nehemiah’s quixotic labor: “The student sighed/ So well he kenned his ways distraught” (2.10.194-195).

³⁴ cf. Patricia Parker’s “Eve, Evening, and the Labor of Reading in *Paradise Lost*” for a full discussion of the function of “evening” and “twilight” within Milton’s poem.

deceived, much failing, hapless Eve" (9.404) will capitulate to Satan's cajoling words and "reaching to the fruit, she plucked, she ate" (9.781).

Melville recapitulates Milton's mourning, Satan's psychic invasion, and Eve's dream that becomes a disastrous reality. But where Milton in his use of twilight and evening holds out the promise of "mourning" returning to "morning," Melville elides any such hope. In *Clarel*, Milton's chiasm that takes "day to night" and reverses it to "night to day" is replaced with Melville's static progression from "prairie twilight" to "eventide" into "Night," a pattern that persists and is recapitulated by "Twilight" and "The Night Ride," the only diurnal titles in Part 4. The scene becomes a prototype of the kind of psychological invasion that Nehemiah incurs, where, despite Nathan's Adamic zeal turns out to be a Satanic version of heaven. So as it is in *Paradise Lost*, and as it is with Nathan, too, Nehemiah's dream gives way to a far worse recapitulation as reality.

In the end, despite the immense gravity of the fall in *Paradise Lost*, the seemingly incidental drowning of a minor character in *Clarel* is far worse. In Milton, the dream that leads to the fall still holds out the promise of redemption. In Melville, on the other hand, the promise of redemption becomes merged with the false promise of the fruit from "the tree of interdicted knowledge." As it was with Eve, Nehemiah's "dream merged in dream" (2.38.15) but "in the dream/appeared the New Jerusalem" (2.38.41-42). The temptation is no longer the "interdicted tree" that can be retracted by the Son's sacrifice but rather a nightmare vision of "the earth" when it "shall all be Paradise, far happier place/Than this of Eden" (12.463-465). It is the promised end that "beckoned, beckoned him away" and to which "In sleep he rose" (2.38.48-50). Taking Eve's awakening into a dream to its extreme, Nehemiah dreams into wakefulness and into a hallucination that resembles Raphael's proleptic vision administered in Book 12 of *Paradise Lost*. By rising to pursue that reverie, Nehemiah drowns and "vanished this somnambulist" (2.38.50). The drowning in the desert conjures up the figurative paradox woven throughout *Clarel* of the desert as sea. There is blind optimism born of a landscape that replaces visions with mirages. The real water—much like in Eliot's *Wasteland* or, more aptly, Shelly's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and Milton's *Lycidas*—are all conjured by Rolphe's analogy between Nehemiah and the doomed seafarer (1.37). Nehemiah represents a panoply of figures who are tormented and cannot be redeemed or resurrected.

The story of Nathan is internalized in response to an inherent distrust of language in the canto, one that also seems to underwrite the entire poem. "The apostate's story fresh in mind" (1.18.48) leads to "ties may form where words be not" (1.19.2). Even as the storyteller pledges "interflow/ of much Nehemiah scarce might add" (1.16.203-204), more often he encourages us to "pass the coming canto here" (2.35.41), making us wonder what the storyteller's "scarce" additions ultimately leave out. The linguistic landscape of crabbed metrics like the barren surface of the desert effaces the mythological groundwork buried in the words like empty tombs.

We encounter the landscape the way Bakhtin encounters epic: "absolutely completed and finished...whose constitutive feature is the transferral of the world it describes to an absolute past of national beginnings and peak times" (15). Even the promised end, the events and stories that the pilgrims anticipate as "yet to come" seem to have already taken place. The past offers a vision of the future that makes the present a matter of circuitous wandering. The insistence on the "now"³⁵ in *Clarel* is a vicious reading of the proleptic promise that recovers *Paradise Lost* from its falling trajectory. *Clarel* in a very literally way proves Augustine's suspicion that "the

³⁵ According to *A Concordance to Herman Melville's Clarel* edited by Larry Edward Wegener, there are 355 references to "now" in the poem which is, on average, more than one reference every two pages.

beginning... somehow contains the ending, the ending the beginning” (Tayler13-14) by conceiving of the “now” as a moment when the future reinstates a mythic past. In *Clarel*, although the characters are loath to admit it, the promised end has always already happened. The only thing one can do is tour its ruins or play out a fallen condition, either like Nathan who displaces the landscape onto a sacred elsewhere or Nehemiah “flinging aside stone after stone” (2.10.190). These acts of displacement and removal, deemed futile, hubristic, and even “crazy” by the more philosophical characters in the poem, turn out to be the only logical responses to the conditions that the landscape provides. Conjured from a network of narratives told by an unnamed storyteller, the characters must reenact myths in a failed attempt to revise stories that are “absolutely completed and finished.” The sense of belatedness in the situation puts Emerson’s desire for a new and original work in an ominous light.

Nehemiah may be “nathless” but his action is still channeling a divine command through his compatriot’s memory: “in charge imposed though not unloved” (2.10.192). Along with a connotation enduring suffering, “imposed” carries a sense of fraudulence and being an obstacle to others, both which are apt here. What is more interesting, though, is the word’s use in printing: to impose means “to lay the type in proper order on an imposing stone to print.” Again, Melville indirectly alludes to his own apparently futile efforts to compose “a metrical affair,” to order the words on “stone after stone,” a “crazy” enterprise “eminently adapted for unpopularity.” It is at once the most obvious and most strange thing to say that the landscape through that the characters travel is always already made of words. But words litter the landscape as perplexities etched into caves or obfuscating graffiti scrawled on grotto walls. Conversely, the landscape litters the words as the text summons a setting underpinned by a universalizing Christian mythology that posits paradise as an actual, discoverable place which is, despite attempts to discover and redact, can neither be found nor revised.

But more than a specific terrestrial geography, Jerusalem and its environs resemble Satan’s view “upon the firm opacous globe/ Of this round world” (3.418-419) where he sees “all things transitory and vain” (3.446). It is a version of Satan’s subjectively proleptic vision of the world after the fall that *Clarel* explores with relatively bleak tenacity, plodding through the possibilities for recovering paradise in a postlapsarian world. With wandering steps and slow, the tourists begin a circuit that leads them back in both senses to a Jerusalem whose empty tomb is less of a promise than abandonment, a no place constructed out of a rubble of crabbed metrics that eventually buries the characters in its “vague heap” (4.2.9). Like Adam and Eve, the wall recedes behind them and with it the promise of repairing paradise. The characters remain bound to the landscape as “they rove the storied ground” (1.10.1). The landscape is syncretistic palimpsest that contains their heterogeneous perspectives but eradicates their differences nevertheless. As Rolfe comments when The Elder departs:

The desert, see:
 He and the desert don’t agree,”
 Said Rolfe, “or rather, let me say
 He can’t provoke a quarrel here
 With blank indifference so drear:
 Ever the desert waives dispute,
 Cares not to argue, bides but mute.
 Besides, no topographic cheer... (2.10.133-139)

Like Vine, the desert exists as an effacement of opposition. Where Vine is “silent,” the desert is “mute”; where Vine “brooks argument,” the desert “waves dispute.”³⁶ Much like the characters, the personified landscape erodes the apparent oppositions from which it gains significance; but, instead of creating “a more perfect union,” it silences the characters and establishes a place defined by what isn’t there. Silence is the absent God. The desert is a penitentiary for the perpetually penitent where the dynamic differences of the “intensely drawn” characters tend toward a uniform entropy.

In Part 3 titled “Mar Saba,” the only part not titled demographically but rather named after an ancient, remote monastery, the pilgrims come upon “an *auto*, act, or scene,/or something” (3.18.53-54) in the chapter titled “The Masque.” The canto begins “with silence, save low moan/ Of winds.” An inchoate groan from the landscape supersedes the even the prologue, muffling “the muffled man” even before he speaks. “The muffled man upon a stone,” introduced by “a figure in remove” (3.19.5) as “Cartaphilus, the Jew/ Who wanders ever (3.19.8-9),” begins his soliloquy by addressing Jerusalem:

O city yonder,
Exposed in penalty and wonder,
Again thou seest me! Hither I
Still drawn am by the guilty tie
Between us.(3.19.18-22)

Cartaphilus, the wandering Jew, cleaves to the place from which he is exiled as the landscape’s “wail”—recalling “the wall of wail”—silences the speaker. The city is “yonder,” always at a distance, beyond the horizon, an elsewhere. But Jerusalem is also “exposed” which means both disclosed and, in terms of the desert, left unprotected from the elements. Jerusalem, too, is subject to the terms of the desert’s obviating forces. Moreover, to be exposed is, by etymological association, to be expressed in words through “exposition” which again enforces the textuality of the landscape.

The “penalty” and “wonder” to which Jerusalem is exposed or revealed to be seems like an odd coupling at first, but by combining “forfeiture” with a sense of “estranging doubt,” the hendiadys conveys the empty promise Jerusalem holds out. The phrase again invokes *Paradise Lost* bringing together the penalty for Adam and Eve’s disobedience with the end of Book 1 where we “behold a wonder!” (1.777) as the Satanic hordes shrink and become “like that pygmean race”(1.780). The allusion is itself an allusion to Virgil’s *Aeneid* where in Canto 1 Aeneas beholds the Tyrians “laying courses for walls/ Rolling up stones to build the citadel” (579-80) and declares “How fortunate these are/ Whose city walls are rising here and now!” (595-6). By incanting all these myths, *Clarel* reveals Jerusalem to be like these “vain empires,” a false paradise cobbled together from the stone of foreign myths.

The ever-receding distance is heightened and personalized by the next line where the “I” is by way of enjambment also “hither.” The city and the speaker are caught in a centrifugal force that drives them apart even as it forms a “guilty tie.” The guilt both refers back to “penalty” and exacerbates the pun in the next line. The guilty tie “between us” is at once an uncrossable distance and a secret that makes them codependent and inseparable, not unlike Clarel and Celio. It appears that guilt is the motivation that keeps the speaker bound to seek a place from which he is perpetually exiled.

³⁶ The pun on “wave” here reinforces this sense of erosion by evoking the sea’s “laving” activity.

At the core of the desert is Jerusalem saturated with so many binaries, the stark, contrasting oppositions become a heterogeneous motley of muddled contradictions:

Of what Jerusalem should be,
As that vague heap, whose neutral tones
Blend in with Nature's, helplessly:
Stony metropolis of stones... (4.2.8-11)

Jerusalem is distinguished by an indistinguishable conglomerate, a sheer accretion, an unassailable aggregate of all creeds and philosophies. As the oppositions pile upon each other, the dialogic principle of the poem becomes abstracted and vague. What is meant to clarify as an epiphanic destination³⁷ turns out to be “a stony metropolis of stones,” and rather than synthesizing, the oppositions resolve in “neutral tones,” a homogenization that darkly anticipates the idea of the American “melting pot” where all cultural distinctions are sloughed off and lost.

This is no utopian vision of democratic equality. Rather Jerusalem is the strange hinge in an anachronistic progress from the fall of Rome to America's empire rent asunder by civil war. Bezanson says of the cry “America!” (4.21.140) that “this anomalously isolated exclamation seems best construed as the collective thought of Rolfe, Vine, and Clarel in response to Ungar's tirade” or that “alternatively, the exclamation may be taken as the narrator's reflection” (833). Either way, it seems to come out of the poem's “collective conscience.” It emerges almost as the subtext that is finally named in a climactic renaming of the earlier and similarly derisive references to Rome, “botcher of a crumbling tomb” (2.26.5) and Jerusalem, wherein its obviating trenches “Egyptian, Mede, Greek, Arab, Turk, Roman, and Frank, beleaguering lurk” (3.19.33). It is America that fulfills and brings these capacious and destructive impulses of empire full circle as “new confirmation of the fall/ Of Adam” (4.21.122-123).

But America is not an apotheosis. The storyteller admits that “sequel may ensue,” but it will merely present “myriads playing pygmy parts/debased into equality” (4.21.124-127). America is just the most recent version of Jerusalem's “vague heap” piled on a “stony metropolis of stones” (4.2.9,11). America fulfills the “Dark Ages of Democracy” (4.21.138) built on antecedents of Rome and Jerusalem to which it is bound, all allusive manifestations of Hell's “thick swarmed...pygmean race... that infernal court” (*Paradise Lost* 1.767-792). American democracy is a manifestation of the indifferent equalizing of an exilic hell and to return to Jerusalem, recycles America's already displaced landscape as it becomes the anachronistic source for the place from whence it came. The characters attempts to be released without being exiled, to get free without imposing self-banishment, to discover in Jerusalem as an origin and a home are finally doomed to fail.

Obenzinger argues that Clarel's “unreadability, perhaps paralleling the ‘strange’ illegibility of the Holy Land itself, opens a unique intellectual space”:

Melville pulls apart the coupling of land and text, questions all textual and intellectual authority, and, most devastating of all, fashions a mythic narrative that nullifies America's sense of covenantal settler-colonial destiny for those readers who dare brave the poem's protomodernist difficulties. (59)

³⁷ The title and name Clarel, meaning “the light or “clarity” of God, encourages this expectation.

The “protomodernist difficulties” Obenzinger identifies are an effect of its being an epic, as I will elaborate in the next chapter. But here, I would like to insist that it is not by pulling apart “the coupling of land and text” but by fusing them together in a tangle of myths that “fashions a mythic narrative that nullifies America’s sense of covenantal settler-colonial destiny.” Obenzinger is right to say it offers “the new map of wrecked American memory: a landscape that had finally and bitterly obtained its own Ruins of Empire” (143), but these ruins are replications of ruins that have come before.

In American letters, at least since Emerson, the epic has always been allied with landscape. Emerson’s idea in his essay “The Poet” that “We have yet had no genius in America, with tyrannous eye, which knew the value of our incomparable materials.... Yet America is a poem in our eyes, its ample geography dazzles the imagination, and it will not wait long for metres” (465). Whitman complies to Emerson’s estimation with his famous ejaculation in the preface to *Leaves of Grass* that “The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem” (5). In the next century, Wallace Stevens will declare that “The great poems of heaven and hell have been written and the great poem of the earth remains to be written” (142). Charles Olsen will endorse the importance of the American landscape with equal enthusiasm: “I take SPACE to be the central fact to man born in America, from Folsom cave to now. I spell it large because it comes large here. Large, and without mercy. It is geography at bottom, a hell of wide land from the beginning” (17). So when Helen Vendler notices that in *Clarel*, Melville’s “greater invention” is “the succession of landscapes” (41), she is unintentionally taking note of its epic intention.

As we have seen, the landscape conforms to the Puritan vision of the American wilderness that Slotkin describes: “Natural terrain is suggested in horrific abstractions; the landscape of the Puritan mind replaces the real wilderness” (99). It is a vision that Obenzinger directly attaches to *Clarel*, “Such discursive devices, along with the conventions of identification, conflation, and theatricality, provided the means through which sacred geography could be written as American territory, advancing the imagined colonization of Palestine for the national myth” (58). When the characters step out of the wall or go beyond the boundaries that they find themselves confined by and dependent on culturally bound rituals and myths, then it is the expansive, empty desert that ultimately and ironically confines them. The landscape with its religious sites and barren spaces offers the pilgrims a terrain of oppositions and the promise of a religious epiphany that turns out to be a muddle and a mirage. The landscape exists as a carapace of escape. As such, it threatens to transform real liberty into mere escapism, liberation theology into a religious free-for-all and, the democratic spirit into the sludge of individualistic despotism. If Hamlet housed in a nutshell declares himself king on infinite space, *Clarel* and the other pilgrims, circumambulating an endless desert, find themselves claustrophobically cloistered in a vast expanse (and upon the desert there are plenty of cloisters, chambers, and cells to remind them of their physical, spiritual, and psychological imprisonment). The empty forms, the empty tomb, the emptiness of the desert itself cannot be mistaken for a tabula rasa or a sign of endless possibility. It is out of this exhausted circumambulation through circuitous oppositions that Rolphe utters “And men/ get tired at last of being free” (2.26.123-124). In his realization of *Clarel*, Melville has written the epic that perhaps nobody wanted but everyone, even those nearly a century after him, were waiting for.

The Burning Secret & The Burning Bush: Melville's Transcendent God

In their chagrin over often inscrutable lines of verse, the characters dramatize that nebulous quality of cultural myths upon which *Clarel* in its epic function sets out to both concretize and criticize. In these moments of analytical failure, the characters sense the environment in which they are immersed and from which they are made but from which they can't entirely emerge. Only in the "Epilogue" can Melville find space to assert a bit of hope and attempt to surface "like a swimmer rising from the deep" (4.35.30) from what Bersani calls "the imperialist militancy of the democratic spirit" (211).

As we've seen, Celio's deathbed plea "Let not my memory be drowned" incants "Mnemosyne, the rememberer, . . . the Muse of the epic art among the Greeks" (Benjamin 97). That incantation swells breaking on the shore of its opposite in the next canto "The Wall," sending out ripples which rise and fall throughout the poem from Nehemiah's drowning to the metaphor of the swimmer in the last canto. It is in the last canto where Clarel will resurrect Celio by subtly recalling this line, reconfiguring it as "the swimmer rising" and revealing Celio and the words between them as that "burning secret which doth go/ Even from the bosom that would hoard and keep" (4.25.31-32). While it is a private recollection, the secret attends to the larger themes of the poem. As the kept secret gets expressed (if not told), it counters the kind of narrative internalization that destroys so many of the characters in *Clarel*; as a resurrection, it fulfills a promise that otherwise seems empty; as an act of memory, it resists the obviating forces of the cultural landscape; as a private connection, it restores the individuals to themselves, a means of self-discovery that seems counter to Whitman's brand of identification. Instead of colonizing another with an all-assuming "I," Clarel comes to himself by remembering another who is both stranger and unknowable which, if we can apply the thought of Levinas to the poem, seems to "resist the epistemological violence done to objects by an invasive subject in a cognitive imperialism" (Woods 8).

There is no easy redemption: "The running battle of the star and clod/ Shall run forever— if there be no God" (4.35.16-17). There may be no God but there nevertheless seems to be a restoration of faith. In the image of "the swimmer rising" which counters the myriad drownings that take place, there is the sense of a Peter who may sink under the weight of his doubt but resists drowning and rise to the surface again by *not* giving into uncertainty. After Peter denies Jesus three times, the rock upon which Jesus will build his church, hearing the rooster crow, a harbinger of dawn, goes outside and weeps bitterly. By dint of this allusion, the "guilty tie" and the weeping that figure prominently throughout *Clarel* appear for the first time to hold a redemptive possibility.

The "Epilogue" as a classic *dues ex machina* is where the storyteller steps outside the narrative far enough to comment on his own story in an act of containment and completion.³⁸ But it is not so much his declaration of "victory" that, if not suspect, is at least insufficient in itself to counteract the 18,000 lines that have come before it. Rather, the metrical shift from tetrameter to pentameter offers a possible solution to the dialogic muddle that plagues the poem. While binary oppositions continue in the last canto, the additional iamb breaks the dialogic and helplessly tautological logic of that the tetrameter enforces. Rather than resolve, Melville attempts to overcome the oppositions between "Luther" and "Darwin," "hope" and "fear," "our times" and "the ancient Sphinx," "Despair and Faith," "ape and angel" that, by the end of the poem, are all piled up in a heap like "a stony metropolis of stones."

³⁸ I would liken this gesture to the last movement of Zukofsky's "A" where "Celia's LZ Masque," "as a text unto itself, serves to complete the larger work."

Melville, however, does not offer an “umpire conscience” (PL 3.195) the way Milton does, a type of mediation that reinforces the oppositions and hinges on the dual aspects of a humanity as “ape and angel.” Rather Melville wants to insist that “No umpire she betwixt the chimes and knell” (4.35.15). In a logic that resembles Emily Dickson’s distinction between “syllable” and “sound,”³⁹ Melville tries to interrupt the dichotomies, to fuse the “heart” and “mind” and “astound” even stoics into heaven (4.35.36). The injunction in the end may ring hollow. Perhaps such chimes may not be audible amidst the calamitous landslide of culture that *Clarel* describes. At this point, we know as well as the storyteller that if America is “the light of the world. A city set on a hill [that] cannot be hid” (Mt. 5:14-16) then it is also true that where “The light is greater, hence the shadow more” (4.35.18). Coming to these last lines after the rest of *Clarel*, it is difficult if not impossible to read these effusively poetic and unabashedly hopeful images and keep a sense of irony at bay. At this point, what real possibility for redemption can the epic really offer?

Whatever redemptive possibility exists may be found in Melville’s slight metrical change. The move from tetrameter to pentameter breaks the structure that enforces dichotomous opposition and also suggests a transformation of the verse that may prevent things from merely folding into each other once again. While meter cannot be prescriptive, the constant but adaptive metrical line leads us toward the suggestion that the structures of art, its form, while a purely abstract force, can intervene, vitalize, shape, and create, and perhaps even at times overcome the homogenizing and hegemonic structures that subsume the individual and conscript human possibility. The poem ends with a series of images that, while unremarkable in and of themselves, are notable for the fact that they all seek the surface, suggesting at least that we look to the “crabbed metrics” rather than some deeper thematic meaning. After all, it is the search for deeper meaning that leaves you either upending stone after stone or, worse, drowning. Even if it isn’t enough to transform once and for all the narratives upon which the culture and citizens rely on for meaning, perhaps we can at least recognize that it was Melville’s unremitting faith in the metrical line where he finally found evidence for his transcendent god.

³⁹ cf. Poem 126

“A” As An Epic: Setting a Tone

You must take the whole society to find the whole man.—Emerson, *The American Scholar*

I am a fragment, and this fragment is a fragment of me.—Emerson, *The Poet*

And reason’s endless battle wage,
 Make and remake his verbiage—
 But solve the world! Scarce that he’ll do:
 Too wild it is, too wonderful
 Since *this* world, then, can baffle so—
 Our natural harbor—it were strange
 If *that* alleged, which is afar,
 Should not confound us when we range
 In revery where its problems are.
 —Melville, *Clarel* (4.3.110-118)

What I like about music is its ability of being convincing, of carrying an argument through successfully to the finish, though the terms of this argument remain unknown quantities. What remains is the structure, the architecture of the argument, scene or story. I would like to do this in poetry.—John Ashbery, *The New York Times Magazine*, 23 May 1976

The matter of the epic, people, their actions, implied thoughts about them, held simultaneously in the music.—Louis Zukofsky, “Ezra Pound”

Noisy
 “Zukofsky”
 —Aram Saroyan

Readers of Louis Zukofsky’s poetry know that music exists as a fundamental principle of his poetic practice and an underlying tenet for the structure of his epic “A”: “I’ll tell you./ About my *poetics*—.../ An integral/ Lower limit speech/ Upper limit music// No?” (“A”-12, 138). Thinking of the poem as music may be a good way to set a tone for our discussion of “A” as an epic poem. In “Writing and Authority in Zukofsky’s *Thanks to the Dictionary*,” Peter Quartermain reminds us, “The connection of the poem to music is of course very ancient indeed, as is that between music and mathematics” (155). The idea of the poem as music brings poetry back to its origins, to a notion of a poem as both music and speech or, rather, the music of speech that recalls poetry’s aural tradition, as something heard and spoken more than written and read. The music of poetry creates unity within a poem, especially a poem like “A” where its discursive practices, not to mention its length, seem to resist coherence.

Aram Saroyan’s minimalist poem in the epigraph can be used to elucidate the musical structure of “A” as an epic principle. As with *Clarel’s* “ampler dearth,” Saroyan’s minimalism—two words!—clashes with the hugeness of “A” but effectively captures the kind of

decontextualized and/or recontextualized abstraction that characterizes Zukofsky's general approach to language. Again, the poem:

Noisy
"Zukofsky"

The two words rhyme awkwardly, which draws attention to the sound of the poem but also makes it "noisy." The awkwardness also gives the poem a kind of "accent" that recalls Zukofsky's complex relationship to English. As his second language but his primary one, the "noise" of the poem straddles the line between English and the Yiddish of Zukofsky's youth. The name "Zukofsky" reinforces this sense of "foreignness." In quotation marks, the name is purportedly spoken so that the name itself is "noisy," which is to say "foreign" to the ear of the imagined auditor. The name highlights Zukofsky's cultural position as both exile and citizen, as both native and immigrant. The quotation marks also literally quote "A" by replacing the letter with Zukofsky's name, a name that, as I will discuss later, significantly begins with a "Z."

Because Zukofsky frequently referred to "A" as "the poem of a life," the displacement of the title with his name creates a kind of chiasmus between the man as poem, and the poem as man. Notwithstanding, as a last name, it effaces Zukofsky's individual identity even while it emphasizes the context of his most intimate relationships. On the one hand, "Zukofsky" relates to his immediate family unit—Louis, Celia, Paul (an all important trinity in "A")—who share this name; the name also relates to his patrilineal line—Pinchos, Louis, Paul (another important relational constellation)—which recalls the importance of ancestry often associated with Biblical and epic texts.

The name also intimates the "fugal" arrangement that Zukofsky borrows from Bach to orchestrate the myriad temporalities and voices into one voice, one name.⁴⁰ The quotation marks around the name reinforce the distance between the individual man and the name which recalls the way the name has been destabilized by its being "Americanized."⁴¹ Ultimately, the quotation marks ask us to think of the name more as a category than an identity: "Zukofsky" not only represents multiple selves but even multiple others and exists as cacophonous collocation—that is, a "noise"—of names. "Zukofsky" is *a* man among many or, to borrow a phrase from Heather McHugh, "not one out of many, but one full of many" (97).

Furthermore, quotation calls our attention to the name "Zukofsky" as a material artifact of language as well as a colloquy of sounds. The quotation marks create a rift between the mechanical, musical quality of words and their attenuated denotative meanings.⁴² The notion of "noise," coupled with the name "Zukofsky," serves as counterpoint to the very idea of music as the "upper limit." We might revise Zukofsky's paradigm to say "Lower limit *noise*/ Upper limit music." Of course this distinction, if not entirely arbitrary, is a matter of degree. It might help to think about John Cage's memorable assault on this dichotomy with his now iconic piece *4'33"*. Often misconstrued as four minutes and thirty-three seconds of silence, the piece in fact is full of

⁴⁰ These structures have a literal counterpart as Scroggins notes: "It is for Zukofsky the acknowledgment of bonds of family and of love, bonds cemented in a shared artistic endeavor that includes his own writing, his wife's composing, and his son's violin playing" (244).

⁴¹ Mark Scroggins notes that in *The Poem of A Life*, the name Zukofsky was alternatively spelled "Zukowsky" by some family members (13) and that "the midwife, of questionable literacy, had written his name as 'Sallikowsky' rather than Zukofsky" (11).

⁴² This approach to language is something highlighted throughout "A" but is no more present than in his transliterations of Catullus and Plautus's *Rudens*, both collaborations with his wife and the latter featured in "A"-21.

sound. In the piece, Cage instructs the performer not to play in order to challenge the audience to listen to the ambient sounds in the auditorium not as distraction or “noise” but, rather, as music. Similarly, the various types of discord or “nonsense” presented in “A” alert the reader to possible limitations extant in preconceived ideas of poetry and posit a challenge the reader’s sense of the ways in which language can mean, to the ways in which we listen and read. Just as “4’33” offers ways to imagine a more expansive sense of what sound counts as music, “A” gives us an opportunity to extend our sense of how language can be constituted as poetry. In both cases, the “music” is not so much, as Duchamp put it, “whatever the artists says it is” but more about a way of paying attention or a means of apprehension that is, ultimately, incumbent on the listener/reader. So while “noise” may initially seem to have no form or structure and, further, to have no meaning, the transmogrification of noise into music is a function of listening, a matter of cultivating our ear.

Because the distinction between “noise” and “music” is a subjective one, one that has to do with cultural norms and expectations resulting from conventions and traditions within the genre, this distinction—or better, blurring—gets to the heart of the epic function of “A” and brings to light what Barry Ahearn called the poem’s “necessary difficulties” (“Origins of ‘A’” 173). Considering the difference between “noise” and “music” requires us to raise questions about the function of the reader as well as the function of language (and, by extension, the one writing it). It raises questions about the ways in which we make meaning and, in particular, the way context plays in arriving at meaning. In the specific case of noisy Zukofsky’s “A”, the poem confronts us with the idea of a collective, as opposed to an individuated, context for reading and puts pressure on literary conventions and traditional cultural expectations brought to our sense of poetry. Both of these concerns are central to epic and more generally to the ways in which genre can affect reception and frame our interpretation of a text.

This is not to suggest that the text means whatever the reader wants it to mean (although in a basic way this is always true). Like many poems deemed “experimental,” “A” challenges our expectations as readers and insists that we cultivate new ways of reading, broadening our strategies and approaches to language and the text. Many “experimental” poems employ similar strategies, many in fact do so by following Zukofsky’s example. However, it is unfair to earmark poems as “experimental” simply as a means of lumping together an extraordinary range of discursive practices as outside of or resistant to normative reading strategies. Poems that employ such discursive practices are not “one note” nor are they all doing the same thing in the same way; that is, to tag a poem “experimental” cannot reduce it to a recalcitrant mode whose only purpose is to disorient us over and over until we realize once again that reading can be difficult. So while “noise” attends to the kind of “outsider” quality that “A” might seem to possess, as I’ve tried to demonstrate here, the poem offers us more than that obvious insight. In the specific environment of this poem, the “noise” also relates to the poem’s spontaneity and immediacy, the contingent, impromptu, democratic, and humanizing space crowded with “music, thought, drama, story, poem/ parks’ sunburst—animals, grace notes” (“A”-23, 563). The multiplicity of objects and sounds coming together in words create at times a discordant but always unified, heterogeneous music that, as I will argue, makes the poem an epic and relates it to a tradition of similar poems that “A” doesn’t just quote but resembles and thoroughly revises.

Similar attention can be paid to the title of the poem. Considering the myriad implications of the title can help bring the epic qualities of the text into further focus. Bob Perelman makes the connection to music: “‘A’ is both letter and word, a graphic analytic element and a synthetic constituent of language. It also stands for a musical note—the one orchestras use for tuning up.”

He then goes on to note that “The quotation marks around the letter/word create their own split: they can denote speech, and thus, while not quite implicating ‘historical destiny,’ they do at least suggest a writer speaking, acting in history... as a quoted word, an example of itself... signaling Zukofsky’s resistance to being labeled—objectified—by society” (*Trouble With Genius* 184). Fundamentally, the title “*A*” is at once incidental and essential, the beginning letter of the alphabet from which all words are made and a word in itself that can be excised from that order; as a letter, it represents the start of all potential meaning, and, as a word, its meaning is one of the smallest but most ubiquitous. As letter and word, *a* is a perfect figure for “the two main rhythms” of epic that Northrop Frye elucidates when he eloquently recapitulates Aristotle’s idea of epic cycle as “the life and death of the individual, and the slower social rhythm which, in the course of years... brings cities and empires to their rise and fall” (318). The letter *a* emblemizes the way Zukofsky consistently locates “the slower social rhythm” within “the life and death of the individual.”

In *Prepositions+*, Zukofsky makes the case “for the poet giving some of his life to the use of the words *the* and *a*: both of which are weighted with as much epos and historical destiny as one man can perhaps resolve. Those who do not believe this are too sure that the little words mean nothing among so many other words” (10). Zukofsky emphasizes the importance of the individual—“one man” and “the little words... among so many other words”—but not in the self-aggrandizing way of Pound or Whitman; rather, Zukofsky couples a sense of humility with an historical scope, a paradox encapsulated in the word *a*. As Heather McHugh explains it: “A’s had their own paradoxicality: they were first in a list, best of grades, but they were also the unstable article; they marked one as one among many, and everything hung on the emphasis: IA is primo, first of the first, an honorary *the*; but one *a* is a humble thing” (88). By devoting himself to “the historical destiny” of “little words,” Zukofsky cleaves together the immediate and momentary with the historical and lasting, the “humble” and the “honorary.” As an individual of and among “the masses,” Zukofsky, like the letter *a*, can both contain and be contained by “as much epos and historical destiny as one man can resolve.”

Zukofsky poignantly accentuates this point in *Prepositions+* by finishing the chapter with a personal address to his young son, Paul:

Writing this, Paul, for a time when you can read, I do not presume that you will read “me.” That “me” will be lost today when he says good night on your third birthday, and not missed tomorrow when he says good morning as you begin your fourth year. It took all human time to nurse those greetings, and how else can the poet speak them but as a poet. (11)

Similar to Clarel’s ruminations at the grave of Celio, what could ostensibly be taken for a lyric moment in what Michael Heller calls its “purely private or expressive mode” (67) gets resituated in an epic mode by placing the private moment within the context of “all human time.” Through “a poet’s” sense of greetings like “good night and “good morning,” the intimate moment that motivates the speaking of these “little words” to his son is also recognized as adhering to a larger “epos,” the ritual use of these words throughout the ages. Just as the word *a* is outside the alphabet while the letter remains within it, the diurnal and hopeful space that exists between “good night” and “good morning” also includes years and even generations that simultaneously exist within and beyond its brief temporal borders.

By addressing his son, Zukofsky rehearses the kind of patrilineal acknowledgement familiar to epic in the figures like Odysseus and Telemachus or Aeneas and Ascanius and tropes the larger temporal rhythm set up by such passing of generations.⁴³ Additionally, the ritual sense of Paul's birthday not only attends to an annual event but also exposes the way an epochal shifts occur in an instant through Zukofsky's awareness that the difference between today and tomorrow is the difference between "good night on your third birthday" and "good morning as you begin your fourth year." Here, the epochal is evident on an individual as well as an historical scale. For "the poet [to] speak them but as a poet" is to incant epic's "two main rhythms"—the incidental and the historical—which Zukofsky will most fully express in "*A*."

The dynamics of this scene expressed in microcosm effloresce in "*A*". As "the crisis of his life," to use Frye's pithy definition of epic, "*A*" takes up and resolves in its own way the fundamental dynamics of the genre: the particular function of poetic narrative, peculiar relationship between storyteller and reader, and the proper relationship between the personal and historical. In "*A*", these dynamics are poignantly manifest in critical questions about the relationship between authorial storyteller and autobiographical character as well as the difficulty of reconciling a concept of totality with the indeterminacy of "all human possibility" (Bakhtin 37). Moreover, as we have seen with Melville, epic's capacity to redress these complexities remains squeezed between to diametric modes of critique that often polarize what are often dyadic solutions. The first is a poststructuralist critique that, by taking a decidedly novelistic tack, beautifully unfolds the postmodern strategies of the poem but does so by way of deconstructing the (epic) totality that the poem simultaneously posits. The second is the lyric tendency—best emblemized by the precarious notion of "personal epic"—to dismantle the epic structure by reducing the poem to its autobiographical aspects. Through an examination of the way "*A*" ingeniously adapts totality to a poststructuralist critique and an inspection of the formal structure of "*A*", which includes but ultimately transcends the autobiographical elements in the poem, we can perhaps use epic to bring these two modes together, affording us a fuller appreciation of the poem exigencies and capacities.

As the passage moves from a day (good night) to a year (birthday) to "all human time," the aperture widens and the 'me' is suddenly and irrevocably "lost" in an ever expanding temporal context that fuses the personal and the historical together, showing them to be at very least part of an unbroken continuum. Moreover, the greetings emphasize not the poet as "me" but the poet in relation to another, his son. We can see how the letter *a* represents this decentering of the "I" by again turning to an observation made by Heather McHugh when comparing the difference between *a* and *the*: "'the' presumes something already there; it reacknowledges it. But an 'a' makes its noun crop up on the spot: with an 'a,' the unforeseen (and, by extension, the disappearing) is articulated" (87). In one sense, McHugh's observation reflects the indeterminate aspects of Zukofsky's writing; at the same time, McHugh's description of *a* captures the self-effacement that erodes the lyric "I" in Zukofsky's poem. McHugh continues: "An 'a' is not one only; it is only one" (88). So the title "*A*" simultaneously sets off "the disappearing" of the individual 'I' even as it reconfigures the self as an accumulation of relationships for and among others.

⁴³ Obviously, this alludes to a patriarchal structure but such hegemonic hierarchies are countered in "*A*" by what Barbara Cole sees as "a complex blurring of gender distinctions": "In this seemingly simple strategy, Zukofsky quite intricately disrupts assumptions of binary logic.... [I]n "*A*", on the same page that we read 'The parts of a fugue should behave like reasonable men/in an orderly discussion' we see for the first time Celia's name married acrostically to Bach's ("A"-12, 127)". Again traditional epic tropes are both utilized and critiqued.

In *Poetics of the Limit*, Tim Woods⁴⁴ puts it this way:

The writing of “A”, despite being described as a ‘poem of a life,’ is a continual dissolution of the self. The writer is effaced before the work. Zukofsky becomes absent because he is the narrator. Only the poem, the words, remain. Far from ‘realizing himself,’ Zukofsky writes himself (his self) out of the poem, into a nonidentity that defies the logic of the metaphysical and ontological discourse of being and presence. (8)

While Woods makes an important and perceptive point about the status of the author, he cannot reconcile his reading with the general proposition that “A” is, as Zukofsky insisted, “a poem of a life.” This rebuttal is important to notice because it begins to suggest the critical cost of the type of poststructural critique that Woods wants to put forward.

As Woods continues to develop his astute argument about the ethics of the poem, a dialectic begins to emerge between an autobiographical reading of “A” and a reading founded on principles of deconstruction. Woods brings this up directly when he critiques Barry Ahearn’s *Zukofsky’s “A”: An Introduction* (1982) “where recourse to biographical detail is used to ‘illuminate’ the writing”:

The poem is problematical only until one “knows” Zukofsky’s life, after which all meaning is suddenly clarified. Ahearn’s method argues that the poem directly transfers ‘life,’ the textual process and production of meaning being reduced to a medium in which Zukofsky-the-subject inscribes his already-formulated, private experience. That such a subject is a construct for purely linguistic, legalistic, or conventional purposes, or that language itself might elude the control of the author, is overlooked by such a critical perspective. Furthermore, the fact that the writing of the poem took place over fifty years, and that changes during that time are inscribed into and alter the shape of the text, is ignored. (20)

It is a succinct and accurate critique regarding the problems and limitations of a biographical reading. Yet, in an earlier essay “Origins of “A”: Zukofsky’s Materials for Collage” (1978), Barry Ahearn seems to agree with Woods. In a parenthetical remark, Ahearn states, “I call Zukofsky ‘the main character’ because he should not be confused with Zukofsky the author” (165). It is clear that the poem cannot be “suddenly clarified” by knowing things about “Zukofsky-the-subject” and certainly cannot be reduced to such a reading. Still to reject this type

⁴⁴ Due to the extraordinary similarity of our names, it was suggested to me that my references to Woods may be taken for the kind of self-referential writing prank emerging from the sort of writing practices popularized by experimental writing collectives such as the French avant garde writing group Oulipo. So I should say definitively that Tim Woods is not me (while he may be the whole forest, I am just one tree!). Although a pluralizing of the self in order to establish a self-critical dialectic is in keeping with my claims regarding “A”, the likeness of our names remains merely a coincidence, yet one, I’m sure, that Zukofsky would appreciate.

of reading out of hand, especially when it means refuting the very term Zukofsky used to describe the poem, seems to take the problem of authorial position to the other extreme.⁴⁵

Identifying “*A*” as “postmodern” rightly distinguishes it from other modernist epics,⁴⁶ especially in their inability to find completion. It also accurately portrays the realignment of the reader and what I take to be a transition from a lyric to an epic positioning. The problem with applying the modernist/postmodernist paradigm to “*A*”, though, is that it leans on a poststructuralist critique of totality. Woods, following the argument laid out in Drucilla Cornell’s *Philosophy of the Limit*, adroitly sums up “the ethical action of deconstruction”:

Cornell argues that the attempts to resist totalization in any form, particularly of the conceptual violence perpetrated by the “repressive” aspects of a rationality whose mission is to drive into submission all aspects of otherness, is a mark of the ethical import of these [Adorno, Derrida, Levinas, Lacan] philosophical enterprises. (10)

While employing poststructuralist theory to “*A*” clarifies its poststructuralist critique of totality’s hegemonic function and I think accurately describes the transformation that epic undergoes in “*A*”, it misconstrues the way the genre is employed as a means of mounting such a critique. In framing the critique as “attempts to resist totality,” a poststructuralism must necessarily posit epic as something to be resisted and ultimately rejected; “epic” as a generic instantiation of “totality” becomes a category to be deconstructed rather than employed, revised, and radicalized. As a result, a poststructuralist critique alone may underestimate the radical nature of Zukofsky’s poetic praxis and his transformative use of epic to produce “*A*”. Because a poststructuralist critic “attempts to resist totalization *in any form*” (Woods 10; italics mine), it cannot, as I think the “*A*” does, simultaneously—and I would argue more radically—effectively consider the poem’s attempt to permanently revolutionize the idea of totality itself, an idea that tenaciously persists despite luminous attempts to destroy it.

Woods suggests that “Objectivist poetics disrupts totality as a way of presenting us with a glimpse of what things in their interrelatedness might become if they were allowed to rest in their affinity rather than forever being stuffed into a new system of identification or stifled by an imposed social totality” (Woods 10). “*A*” in no way offers us a poetics of objects “forever being stuffed into a new system of identification,” but the limited and somewhat technical definition of “totality” that Woods presents skews his formulation of the poetics of “*A*” by deemphasizing the very thing he—and more important “*A*”—wants to emphasize: “things in their interrelatedness.” “*A*” posits a different kind of totality, a totality of affinity that I will call here an “indeterminate totality” (as opposed to a “rested totality”). Using the oxymoron suggests a fundamental transformation of “totality” but not necessarily its “disruption.” “*A*” brings disparate things together while maintaining their integrity. It doing so, “*A*” not only avoids using totality to

⁴⁵ One needs only to read Mark Scroggins *The Poem of A Life*, an excellent “autobiographical” approach to “*A*”, to see what such an approach can accomplish.

⁴⁶ I would concur with Woods statement that “Among all the long poems of the twentieth century, Zukofsky’s “*A*” stands as a unique venture, pulling together an immense variety of disparate textual, cultural, scientific, and historical strands over a period of fifty years” (Woods 15). See Burton Hatlen’s “From Modernism to Postmodernism: Zukofsky’s ‘A’-12” for another take on this transition; although I will dispute his claim about closure, Hatlen convincingly details the ways in which “*A*” moves from modernist to postmodernist poetic practices.

replace one hegemonic fiction with another but also exists as a cohesive site that staves of the inevitable fragmentation and incoherence that comes from “disrupting totality” without offering an alternative, unifying form.

Again, thinking about the poem as an epic can help here. The dialectic of the self which displaces an absolute autonomous singular identity by putting it in relationship to other identities may be best understood in terms of the epic’s distinction between “the storyteller” (author) and “the hero” (main character) which otherwise get conflated in modernist epics. Zukofsky-as-storyteller but functions in a similar way to Melville’s “narrator”; yet, Zukofsky-as-subject, insofar as he writes himself into the text, functions the way the Aristotelian hero functions. Unlike Whitman, whose identity and poem become coterminous and indistinguishable, Zukofsky is a character in the essential story around which the epic is organized; however, the character and his story are never identified with an epic whole which “achieves its length by means of [episode]” (Aristotle 30). Therefore, the poem cannot be fully “illuminated” by biographical detail and yet understanding Zukofsky’s presence as a character within the text is also key to understanding, to con John Ciardi’s phrase, how the poem means.⁴⁷

One way to reconcile these two opposing readings is to return to the underlying alphabetical structure of “A” and, by applying this rubric, consider the way in which Zukofsky exists as an omega to the alpha of the title. When thinking about Zukofsky’s role as storyteller, we can start with the philosopher Emile Benveniste’s observation that “language is so organized that it permits each speaker to appropriate to himself an entire language by designating himself as *I*” (qtd. in Heller 68). Zukofsky may take this idea to its extreme by annexing an alphabet and appropriating “an entire language.” That is, he not only makes claim to all the words but the possibility of words not yet uttered or conceived. While this may at first seem hubristically overreaching, the gesture in fact maintains the sense of contingency even as it asserts a kind of totality that keeps it from being, what Zukofsky would call “predatory.” As an epic, “A” will create a teleological structure, albeit one modified by postmodern contingencies, that allows the poem to “resolve” without being closed.

While an *a* alone highlights the contingency and potentiality of the text, *a* to *z* asserts an epic totality that will ingeniously remain indeterminate by aligning epic structure with postmodern linguistic practices. Imagining Zukofsky as the “Z” is akin to the kind of language games that Zukofsky frequently employs in “A” but reveals more than an instance of a “postmodern” poetics. Zukofsky as the omega to “A”’s alpha is intrinsic to the way that the poem establishes an epic structure that then, unlike other modernist’s epic attempts, resolves by indicating “the general shape of the historical cycle” (Frye 319). What is more, imagining the poem’s arch in terms of the alphabet allows us to see more clearly Zukofsky’s dual role as storyteller (author) and character (individual), and the way in which he keeps these identities separate however interrelated they may at times seem. The alphabetical underpinnings of the poem will become important later on when I discuss the “geography” of the poem in terms of its linguistic landscape by helping us to see how Zukofsky uses the paradigm to broach what Bakhtin calls “the entire world of the absolute past” and skirts around Bakhtin’s claim that “One cannot embrace, in a single epic, the entire world of the absolute past (although it is unified from a plot standpoint)—to do so would mean a retelling of the whole of national tradition, and it is sufficiently difficult to embrace even a significant portion of it” (31). Here, however, we can look at how Zukofsky refutes Bakhtin another way by employing an epic structure not to

⁴⁷ Ciardi, John and Miller Williams. *How Does a Poem Mean?* New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1975.

singlehandedly contain “the whole of national tradition” but instead to allow it to contain the individual. It is from this position that Zukofsky can leverage a political—and epic—response.

To understand how an “indeterminate totality” works in the poem, let’s briefly consider the function of “A”-24 and in particular its relationship to “A”-23. Along with the underlying alphabetic structure of “A”, configuring the poem in twenty-four cantos again cleaves the quotidian to the larger historical trajectory. Many critics echo Robert Creeley’s blurb on the back of the Johns Hopkins edition of the poem: “there are 24 [sections] in all, which number echoes for me significantly the human measure of a day.” At the same time, the number obviously resonates with epic’s Homeric prototype, and the half cycles of Virgil, Milton, and Spenser. More important, however, is the teleological status of “A”-24 which, completed before “A”-22 and “A”-23 serves as the poem’s proleptic end: “‘A’-24 was completed and named (by Zukofsky himself) before Zukofsky wrote ‘A’-22 and ‘A’-23, a fact suggesting that the deliberate self-effacement of the poet in this presumably climactic moment could have been part of the plan from relatively early in the process (though this is a remote possibility)” (Hatlen 218). Whenever Zukofsky’s teleological conception of “A” came into play is less important than the recognition that such a structure exists in the poem’s final form. By offering a teleological point that is also open-ended, “A”-24 instantiates what Woods aptly calls a “poetics of the ‘beyond’”: “a powerful utopian and ethical vision...of openness to unimagined possibilities” (10).

Thinking about the poem as “a poetics of the ‘beyond’” directs us toward the status of “A”-23. If “A”-24 exists as “beyond,” then it is “A”-23 that serves as the poem’s “narrative” conclusion. Such a claim becomes more definite once we realize that it is “A”-23 not “A”-24 that brings us to the end of the alphabet. Following the work of Michele Leggott, Marie Parsons explains:

As Leggott indicates... Zukofsky has built an alphabetic game into the last twenty-six lines of “A”-23 (562-3). He has come, then, to the end of the portion of the poem that he will write, as he has come to the end of the alphabet. What remains to be played out lies beyond the end of his alphabet or at the very least in the interstices of alphabets. (232)

Parsons goes on to ask, “What if ‘z’ were a beginning, not an end; how does the alphabet construct language, narrative, and world; how might language meander through a different alphabet?” (232). While the answer to such a question is too complex to pursue here, the question itself seems motivated by a recognition that “A”-24 is perplexingly totalizing and open-ended. Perhaps this is simply a perfect—Zukofsky’s word⁴⁸—rendering of what we mean by “beyond.”

By holding the place of the “beyond,” “A”-24 allows for “A”-23 to present both a closure and a possibility, a dynamic that, like most of “A”, has manifold resonances. Zukofsky-the-subject for the most part terminates his participation at the end of “A”-23 with the words “z-sited path are but us” (“A”-23, 563). The “A” arrives at is “z” and that path “are but us.” The poem closes even as it moves down a path toward a plurality.⁴⁹ Zukofsky’s life as an individual erodes

⁴⁸ cf. “A”-1, 2

⁴⁹ Zukofsky’s use of the plural “are” instead of the more grammatically plausible “is” seems akin to the revision Rimbaud makes of Montaigne when he takes Montaigne’s “Je suis autre” and reconfigures it “Je est un autre.” It is the difference between a subject occupying the other through the implied possessiveness of the singular verb and the subject atomizing into a multiplicity, which accommodates and even eradicates the self/other distinction (an action indicated by the plural).

as his active authorial participation in the poem comes to an end. “A”-24 offers a redemptive continuance by completing the poem and opening it up, containing the individual and going beyond him.

In one respect, “A”-24 exists as a type of living elegy. As a musical composition made out of a composite of Zukofsky’s earlier lines, the movement reads like a proleptic lament after his death done in as well as from his memory.⁵⁰ Additionally, Mark Scroggins writes that Zukofsky “was emotionally far closer to Chana Zukofsky, his mother. That closeness was largely registered as grief at her loss—she would die when Zukofsky was twenty-three” (*A Poem of A Life* 17). Given the fascination Zukofsky had with the almost mystical coincidence of numbers, the finality of “A”-23 marks his mother’s death while “A”-24 offers a very personal metaphysical redemption, a metaphorical afterlife reinforced by the transubstantiation of poetry into music. There is a thematic sense of redemption in a Miltonic sense that pervades the progress of the poem.

But to return to the concept of a totality, “A”-24 can also be seen as a fulfillment, a plenum that not only completes but goes beyond by being transposed into music. It offers a way of realizing, to revise Bakhtin, a “form that he could fill to the very brim,” and even more, allow to “splash over the brim” by giving space for “an unrealized surplus of humanness” (37). If, as Bakhtin says, “there always remains a need for the future, and a place for this future must be found,” then perhaps “A”-24 is the best example of what such a text would look like. By resorting to music, the poem arrives at its “upper limit” and completes its epic cycle. As Marnie Parsons puts it, “Celia Zukofsky has effectively reversed the process of her husband’s writing” (249). The chiasmic move from music to literature and then literature back to music brings the poem full circle and works as a return so that “the end bears more than casual resemblance to the beginning” (Tayler13).⁵¹ Perhaps even more significant is the fact that Celia Zukofsky not Louis Zukofsky authors the end of the poem. As is well known by readers of Zukofsky, “A”-24 is a musical score, the words of Louis Zukofsky arranged by his wife, Celia Zukofsky, to the music of Handel. This decision more than any other creates a text that resolves an epic cycle without cordoning off access by the readers (like the street in “A-7” opened up by animation of the horses’ “—trot—trot—”).

Moreover, the significance of this collaborative act clearly demonstrates why it is important to combine an autobiographical approach with that of postmodern theory: the first focuses on the role and relationship of Celia and Louis—a crucial motif that begins to structure the poem after “A”-9—while the latter offers a substantive framework for understanding the ways in which collaboration destabilizes conventional ideas of authorship. In complex ways, Celia represents the “upper limit” first by embodying the underlying musical structure of “A” as a composer and then by exemplifying the dynamics of self as other. Celia is both as an emblem for the ideal participatory reader as she comes to occupy the role of author as arranger. In doing so, Celia, by reversing the classic epic dynamic between muse and poet, transforms the poem into a reciprocal act of creative reconstruction. But here again, the value of an autobiographical reading is that it reminds us that Celia Zukofsky is more than emblematic. She is a real, flesh and

⁵⁰ Memory as both Bakhtin and Benjamin remind us is crucial to epic (cf. Bakhtin, 15 and Benjamin, 97).

⁵¹ Return is a basic theme in most epics. For example, in the *Iliad* there is the return of Hector’s body; in the *Odyssey*, there is the return of Odysseus to Ithaca; In the *Aeneid*, there is the founding of Rome, which is a proleptic return to the civilization’s origins; In the *Inferno*, there is a return from the underworld; in *Paradise Lost*, there is the triple return of Adam and Eve to the postlapsarian world in anticipation of Christ’s return which will allow for an eventual return to the paradise that they must leave at the end of the poem.

blood individual.⁵² By offering resistance to her symbolic significance, this type of embodiment, it seems to me, is crucial to taking full measure of the political stance posited by the poem.

Adapting Julia Kristeva's term "transposition" (which, as Parsons reminds us, Kristeva "uses...to replace Bakhtin's 'inter-textuality'"), Parsons observes that "in the case of "A"[moving] from a musical score to a written text, and resituating a line of epic poetry into a lyric context, or a lyric into a historical narrative are equally instances of Kristevan transposition" (235).

Zukofsky transposes lyric to epic but in order to resolve the epic discourse must resort to music and enact a further transposition by way of collaboration, a crucial aspect to the way the poem simultaneously closes and points outward toward a "beyond." Like a musical score, the text of "A" serves as the radiant for the words that provide us with coordinates for tracing the contours of a particular individual even as the overarching structure of "A" allows for Zukofsky-as-storyteller to generate an epic structure that, by locating himself within it, is greater than himself.

The difficulty is recognizing at once the totalizing gesture within an open-ended structure. "A" gives us the poet as one among many and even "one full of many" (McHugh 97) and consistently situates incidental—or, in terms of genre, the lyrical—within a larger historical context. Similar to Wordsworth's *Prelude*, "A" implies an opening onto a text whose end will also be a beginning. As only an *a*, the poem as a whole purports to be the mere "prelude" to a larger implied—even totalizing—pattern. Even so, the poem's apparent partiality should not be confused with modernist fragmentation which has its origins in the Romantic personalization—or lyricization—of the epic. As Burton Hatlen observes, "'A'" is 'finished' in a way that *The Cantos* and *Paterson* are not" (217-218). As Hatlen will argue, the structure is "*deliberately* broken, incomplete" and this is best considered as a transition from modernism's "will to closure." The postmodern linguistic strategies of provisionality, indeterminacy, and contingency, as Tim Woods puts it, "sets up a stance to the world that situates the subject/reader in an ethical relation to the world" (5-6).

But this way of thinking about the poem ultimately brings us back to the idea of "A" as "a poem of a life." If we think of the written lines of "A" in terms of a musical score, an idea that is literalized in "A"-24, then we can understand the words and lines written on the page as traces of something that require the reader to "translate" and "play" in order for the poem to come alive. In this respect, "A" maintains continuity between what gets written down and what could have or will be in the future (for example, the kinds of writing that emerge as an act of reading). In so far as the words might correspond to particular incidents in the poet's life or to a conscious apprehension of the world triggered by his imagination, the actual printed words in "A" always adumbrate a larger environment that remains unspoken and perhaps, as the white space surrounding the words always suggests, even forgotten: "If you cannot recall/Forget. ("A"-12, 140). The idea of memory, as Walter Benjamin would remind us, is essential to the poem's epic mode⁵³ and is encouraged, as Tim Woods puts it, "in a writing that is always incisive, pithy, and almost gnomically portentous" (15-16). In so far as Zukofsky's writing is taken as cryptic or obscure, it lends itself both to a feeling that there is more than what is said, making the text feel taciturn of spoken out of a privacy reticent to expose itself. Along with highlighting the way

⁵² There have been complaints—Parsons, Silliman, Cole—that not enough women are involved with scholarship of "A" and that the poem lacks a sustained feminist critique. I think acknowledging Celia's role in the writing and arranging of "A" will go far to remedy this oversight.

⁵³ cf. Benjamin, Walter. "The Storyteller." *Illuminations*. Ed. Hannah Arendt. Trans. Harry Zohn. New York: Schocken, 1968.

memory depends on forgetting as the written simultaneously makes visible the unwritten, it also reinforces the importance of the individual's unassimilability.

Such language is also entropic or determined not so much by an "historical destiny" than by an historical "density" where words are relics of an etymological palimpsest that can be almost endlessly excavated. The poem "A" as artifact intimates a whole without, as Pound might, asserting itself as exempla of *the* whole or a totality that is always already determined and conscripted. The cryptic language resists an appropriative position toward the reader by encouraging the reader to make contact but go his own way down a "z-sited path." So perhaps the emphasis on the phrase "a poem of a life" was always already on the second *a*, which is to say that the poem outstrips whatever autobiographical limits the idea of "a life" might connote to achieve both an historic scope and a fidelity to the particular individual, a dual rhythm which remains fundamental to an epic. We can see how this is done by now moving on to first look at the way Zukofsky's "A" stands in contrast to Pound's *Cantos* before considering more carefully the poem's epic capacities, the function of the storyteller and the position of the reader as well as the way the historical enters the personal through the poem's linguistic landscape.

Ezra Pound and the Limits of Modernism

The immediacy of Pound's epic matter, the form of the *Cantos*, the complete passage through, in and around objects, historical events, the living them at once and not merely as approximation of their statistical historical points of contact is as much a fact as those facts which historians have labeled and disassociated.
—Louis Zukofsky, "Ezra Pound"

Considering Zukofsky as the protégé of Ezra Pound is a critical commonplace in the scholarship addressing "A".⁵⁴ This is something that the correspondence between the poets encourages, since there we find Zukofsky's tendency to address the elder poet as "Papa" and Pound, for his part, calling Zukofsky "Sonny."⁵⁵ Indeed, there seems to be a familial fealty between them strong enough to weather even Pound's most virulent anti-Semitism. Moreover, there are congruities between their epic efforts, the *Cantos* and "A", that may justify the comparison. As Bob Perelman states in *The Trouble With Genius*, "each spent the majority of his writing life on a single poem that, while it may have started as an articulation of history, ended as a specimen of autobiography or at least as needing to be read through the lens of the poet's life" (178). More generally, Mark Scroggins and other critics have considered Zukofsky "the last modernist" (*Poem of a Life*, xi), a title that directly links Zukofsky to Pound. Of course others have used Zukofsky as a wedge to indicate the shift from modernism to postmodernism. Most notably, Burton Hatlen proposes:

Rather than trying to fill this gap with some form of absolute presence, as Eliot and Pound were still trying to do, Zukofsky...accepts it as a given, the condition of our existence; and in this respect Zukofsky has...moved beyond his poetic masters, in a swerve that also carries him beyond modernism itself, into postmodernity. ("From Modernism to Postmodernism" 226)

By hewing Zukofsky from Pound's "modernism," Hatlen identifies something substantively different about Zukofsky's poetic practice that deserves demarcation. Nevertheless, by calling the difference "postmodern," Hatlen uses a temporal or epochal argument—notably based on these poets' epic rather than lyric efforts. By remaining dependent on a modernist paradigm for significance, Hatlen's distinction continues to reify the idea that Zukofsky's "A" belongs in the tradition of modernist epic.

Notwithstanding the obvious similarities between the two poets, the differences are just as great. As noted, Pound was an anti-Semite while Zukofsky was born of Jewish immigrants. Pound adapted Fenollosa's economics to his poetry while Zukofsky used Marx. Pound was a native speaker who chose self-exile in Italy, lading his English verse with various languages while Zukofsky, though born of immigrants, lived on American soil his entire life and, despite first learning Yiddish, wrote only in English, and even acquired a penchant for transposing other

⁵⁴ cf. Hass, 59 and compare to Scroggins discussion in *A Poem of a Life*, 81

⁵⁵ cf. Ahearn, Barry ed. *Pound/Zukofsky: Selected Letters of Ezra Pound and Louis Zukofsky*. New York: New Directions, 1987. Also consider Shoemaker's claim: "The two men, of two different generations and two different ethnic backgrounds, who referred to each other as 'Sonny' and 'Papa' in their correspondence, were caught in a conflict that was at once private and public, intimate and historical" (40).

languages into English. The contrasts are even more striking in the poems themselves and looking at the poems through the lens of epic brings these fundamental poetic differences into high relief.

Because when critics like Don Byrd's in "Getting Ready to Read 'A'" point out that "Zukofsky is neither a modernist nor a romantic" (296), there is a tendency to take this as another way of saying that Zukofsky is "postmodern." But looking at this statement from a genre standpoint, this distinction may have larger consequences. First of all, the statement becomes redundant because, in terms of epic, modernism follows the romantic example set by Wordsworth and later taken up by Whitman. So, yes, Zukofsky is neither modernist nor romantic but, as we will see, thwarts the lyric "I" that seems to plague both versions of epic. Moreover, this distinct break with modernist practices may make Zukofsky feel belated or to be a "last modernist." A postmodern reading assumes that this sense of belatedness is almost solely a result of his being younger than the "high" modernists. However, I would argue that this sense of belatedness has more significance than Zukofsky's relative youth. Zukofsky often insisted that he started "*A*" around the same time as the *Cantos* and at least was not aware of Pound's epic when he conceived of his own project.⁵⁶ Having been born later, Zukofsky of course starts writing later than Pound; but after that, the poetic careers of Pound and Zukofsky almost perfectly overlap. Given that they work on their poems over decades, their epics coincide more than they diverge. I would submit that the belatedness has more to do with the effect of the separate poetic strategies that the poet's develop. Considering Zukofsky's belatedness from the vantage of genre, he appears to come after because he resolves the epic problem that so many—most notably Ezra Pound—fail to figure out.

Like Pound, Zukofsky attempts an epic poem but inverts the basic principles upon which Pound founds his poetic effort. In doing so, Zukofsky solves the fundamental problems with modernist epic and thereby resolves almost a century's worth of poetic effort. By using genre instead of modernism to reconsider differences between the two poems, especially since a modernist paradigm has the tendency to telescope criticism into a discussion to the 20th century, can help put the poems in a context that spans at least two centuries of literary enterprise in America. We can then consider the poems in an even longer tradition that reaches through *Paradise Lost* and the *Inferno* back to the *Aeneid* and then back to the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. This is important because Zukofsky's fundamental differences from Pound constellate around those elements in the poem that also relate to the differences between Melville and Whitman in so far as these poets address and rework received epic paradigms.

As Bob Perelman memorably states, "Zukofsky carries Pound on his back, like Aeneas carrying Anchises out of burning Troy" (np). Along with the epic reference, for a poet who considered Pound a father figure, the paternal reversal is notable here. Perelman suggests rightly that Zukofsky is able to revise poetic practices in "*A*" utilized by Pound and rescue him from the burning Troy that is the *Cantos*. What is more, Zukofsky's solutions will turn out to be more of a recouping of earlier poetic strategies than an Oedipal overthrow of a father.⁵⁷ In *The Poem of A Life*, Mark Scroggins claims that "An epic, as the genre was defined by Homer and Virgil and

⁵⁶ cf. Scroggins, *A Poem of a Life*, 81

⁵⁷ As Mark Scroggins notes: "While Zukofsky was obviously a product of his century, and a product of literary modernism... there is something wonderfully archaic about his art... It hearkens back to the wall mosaics of first-millennium Byzantium, and beyond that to a Homer who composed his works as a collage of found phrases and well-worn metrical units, disposed upon the 'foreseen curve' of a traditional tale every one of his auditors would have already known" (*The Poem of A Life* 425).

extended by such later writers as Tasso and Milton, was also a *public* poem.... The long poem offered the poet a larger canvas than the lyric, a space where he could address the largest of issues. The classical epic was a ‘schoolbook for princes’ (80). To a large extent, Scroggins offers an accurate gloss on epic, but his use of Pound’s modernist definition at the end remains problematic. Not only does Pound’s notion of “a schoolbook for princes” limit the purpose and potentialities of epic, but the definition does not necessarily adhere to all the epic poems to which Scroggins refers. Even more, it again imposes Pound’s own self-serving interpretation of epic to Zukofsky which has the unintended effect of holding up Pound’s *Cantos* as the measure of the 20th century epic.

If we merely use Poundian definitions wholesale as the basis of evaluation for 20th century American epics, we will miss the ways in which Zukofsky undermines Poundian notions of epic by turning them inside out. We will not see the ways in which “Zukofsky carries Pound on his back.” As Scroggins goes on to state:

The long poems produced by modernist poets reflect both their authors’ continuing ambition to produce works on the scale of the major achievements of the past and the modern era’s loss of faith in the traditional structures of narrative, of argumentative unity, of epic memory.... They proceed through juxtaposition, the setting side by side of disparate materials mirroring the increasingly fragmented spectacle of human history and culture in the twentieth century. (5)

This characterization of modernist epics may be generally true; however, with regard to Zukofsky, a poet who opposes just as often as he conforms to modernist poetic praxis, his fealty to narrative, unity, and memory and his ability to combine these things with discursive modernist practice of juxtaposition and collage are the very things that set his epic apart.

A Man Within the Speech of a Nation: The Modernist Storyteller as Epic Hero

One of Pound’s well-known definitions for epic is “the speech of a nation through the mouth of one man.” In defining the epic this way, he imagines the storyteller metonymically and, by way of the Romanticism’s redaction of the epic, conflates the storyteller with the epic hero. While Zukofsky’s poem seems similarly autobiographically driven, he does not follow Pound’s lead but rather maintains a distinction between the storyteller and the poem’s “hero” or main character. In doing so, Zukofsky adheres to Aristotle’s standard for the epic storyteller “to speak in his own person in the poem as little as possible” (44).⁵⁸ In Zukofsky, we see Pound’s epic dictum transmogrify from “the speech of the nation through the mouth of one man” into “a man within the speech of a nation.” This denotative shift encapsulates the basic ways in which Zukofsky’s “postmodern” poetics alters Pound’s modernism. Moreover, it highlights the way Zukofsky remains within an American based language and the culture in a way that Pound does

⁵⁸ As Scroggins observes, referring specifically to “A”-13 through “A”-20: “It is a continuously flowing texture of often oblique syntax, the immediate personal observation shifting to the historical or literary reference, quotations from friends and family members cheek by jowl with quotations from the newspapers and the classics, moods shifting from the somber to the whimsical, all unified by a single controlling consciousness, an ‘arranger’...who occasionally speaks in his own voice, but who is just as comfortable expressing himself through a collage of previous texts (381).

not. Even when “*A*” exceeds America’s spacio-temporal borders, it maintains its identification with place through its language.

As Scroggins will argue in his introduction to *Upper Limit Music*, Zukofsky is “perhaps the most ‘American’ of American poets” (9):

In Zukofsky, the Poundian imperative to ‘make it new’ has a specifically American resonance and speaks to a cultural agenda that harnesses the European past to an American future, without succumbing to a specious or stifling ‘internationalism’ like Pound’s own.(10)

A decidedly American poet in the tradition of Williams and Crane, Zukofsky was distinct from these other writers in the fact that, as Hatlen points out, “Unlike the expatriate Eliot [and Pound], such stay-at-home poets of the 1920s as Hart Crane—and even Williams on occasion—proposed a national absolute: ‘America’ as transmogrified into myth. But Zukofsky knew the cacophonous voices of New York too well to imagine that ‘America’ would ever be a single, unitary thing” (“Art as Labor” 208). Even though Zukofsky’s “cacophonous voices” emerge from a particularly American landscape, it is pretty easy to see how Zukofsky’s “cacophonous voices” along with his use of multiple languages and sources that range over the entire span of human history can get confused with Pound’s “internationalism.” However, as Ira Nadel insists “Zukofsky’s work on the *Index of American Design* is manifold: it immersed him in American history” (115). Nadel continues:

Zukofsky’s fascination with American culture is well known: his 1924 master’s thesis on Henry Adams, his 1930 (or 1931) proposal for a book on the Prose of Thomas Jefferson...., his 1934 collaboration with William Carlos Williams on the abortive opera *George Washington*, his proposal for a book entitled “*About Some Americans*” His experiences in America—from his youth on the Lower East Side, to his uptown education at Columbia, to his teaching at the University of Wisconsin and later jobs in the metropolitan New York area and travel across the country—renewed in him the determination to understand not so much the making of Americans, as Stein phrased it, as the making of America itself. (116)

Zukofsky combines the quotidian and the canonized, the personal and the historical, the local and the national, but directs them all toward a portrait of America, unifying, as the United States does, by oxymoronically forging a heterogeneous whole.

So while Zukofsky resembles Pound in his use of different languages and cultural references that clearly extend beyond the borders of the United States, it is to different ends. Pound’s cosmopolitanism is part of his self-exile, a rejection and attempt to overcome an American isolationism. Zukofsky uses a multiplicity of languages and idioms to stretch the bounds of American English and its capacity to absorb other people and their words. Unlike Pound, Zukofsky’s language has clear cultural borders. It is language that is meant to be spoken but is not necessarily spoken by an individual. As Don Byrd puts it, “The poems are not imitations of speech, but they are written to be spoken.... If the lines were any fuller it would need more than one voice to speak them” (301). It is a cultural language, a representation of an American voice which is necessarily multilingual and cacophonous. In his description of “*A*” as multi-voiced, Byrd also captures the epic essence of Zukofsky’s project: the orally directed poem

that affects a communal rite. Such language necessarily directs the role of the storyteller, as Zukofsky gingerly reconfigures the role as employed by Pound.

As mentioned before, Pound adapts the aggrandized lyric “I” of the “personal epic” proffered by Romanticism to his modernist project. Scroggins offers a pithy recap of the Romantic influence on Anglo-American poetry:

With the Romantics... a new conception of the poet as inspired, *individual* singer became dominant, and with this conception came a devaluing of the poems explicit relationship to earlier works. Quotation, in short, fell out of favor in Anglo-American poetry in the nineteenth century, precisely to the extent to which readers sought to uncover the ‘originality’ of the poet. (417)

Of course, as epics, Pound and Zukofsky both draw copiously on earlier works. This is in fact one of the chief distinctions that Northrop Frye makes between epic and other types of narrative:

The epic differs from the narrative in the encyclopaedic range of its theme, from heaven to the underworld, and over an enormous mass of traditional knowledge. A narrative poet, a Southey or a Lydgate, may write any number of narratives, but an epic poet normally completes only one epic structure, the moment when he decides on his theme being the crisis of his life. (318)

But the function of the storyteller, as we have started to see, will alter the employment of an “encyclopaedic range” as well as the significance of an “epic structure” becoming “the crisis of [a] life.” As a “romanticized” storyteller, Pound marshals an encyclopaedic knowledge to offer exempla of what Bakhtin called “peak times,” using his epic to collate and point to other sources of wisdom. In addition, as “the crisis of his life,” the poem becomes coterminous with the storyteller’s life since there is no distinction between the “tale of the tribe” and the one telling the tale.

Zukofsky, on the other hand, also uses an encyclopaedic range but without identifying the sources. As Scroggins points out, “This sort of quotation, where the reader is at no point informed (by speech tags or quotation marks) that the words he is reading have been quoted, will become the basis of Zukofsky’s later work” (419):

There are no signposts to the sources of the quotations... and often a single word stems from several widely disparate sources... It is theoretically possible to trace the sources for all of the words used... but it’s entirely unclear that such sourcing will in any way ‘unlock’ the poems’ meanings... Zukofsky’s late quotations, in short, have no precedent in modernist poetic practice. In Pound’s later Cantos, every quoted phrase can be traced to a given source and serves as a pointer *to* that source... The quotation embedded in the poem fits the poem into a web of significances in large part borrowed from the quotation’s original context. But it is difficult to apply this principle to Zukofsky. (420)

This type of allusiveness breaks down the distinction between the author and the text, between the past and the present, between reader and writer. It also evaporates the subjectivity of the speaker as the voice becomes—*e pluribus unum*—out of many, one. Zukofsky’s allusive

practices shift the role of the storyteller away from a Poundian spokesperson toward the poet as “an arranger.”⁵⁹ The epic “A” is “the crisis of his life” but that does not mean, as it does with Pound, that it is coterminous with it. As Hatlen explains, “The long poems of Pound and Eliot...while developing a poetics of disjunction, are still haunted by a nostalgia for a unitary ego which can define itself, in a Wordsworthian manner, against a history that no longer promises a movement toward redemption” (“From Modernism to Postmodernism” 214); and as Woods argues, “Imagism posits a master-servant relationship between writer and reader, where meaning is thought to be commanded, not shared” (26).

Woods will go on to resist a one-to-one correspondence between Pound’s imagism and Wordsworth’s romanticism stating that “The homogeneous subject, albeit not the Romantic expressive self, can be traced by the intervention in which images are fixed and the closure of meaning is effected in a series of personal, inner identifications” (26). It is probably a good idea to be wary of making too easy and reductive an equation between Romantic and Modernist notions of subjectivity but the description of Pound’s “series of personal, inner identifications,” if not the same, at least resembles a Romantic position. Pound as storyteller affects a “master-servant relationship” that Zukofsky will undermine as he moves the subject of his epic toward an exploration of “social relations” and the subjectivity of the storyteller away from “the homogeneous subject.”

In *The Trouble With Genius*, Perelman makes a similar point in his effort to reconcile the odd contradiction between modernist writers as both “experts, masters of their craft, geniuses” with their “less complimentary labels: ‘charlatan (Stein); pornographer (Joyce); nonentity (Zukofsky); or madman and traitor (Pound).’” So Perelman observes: “What the split embodies is the final flowering, or failure, of the aesthetic solution to the problem of the social position of the artist acutely dramatized by the Romantics” (15). This failure seems directly relatable to Romanticism’s reification of the lyric “I” and only Zukofsky seems to resolve this problem by overcoming the concomitant poetics of personality that accompany Romanticism’s poetic selfhood. The very fact that his “less complimentary label” is “nonentity” is instructive. In terms of his poetic practice, such a label could also be considered a compliment as Zukofsky manages to dissolve Romantic subjectivity while others like Pound attempt to supersede it by enlarging it.

As Anne Day Dewey notices in *Beyond Maximus*, Zukofsky constructs a self “made from the intersection of collectively constructed place and language” (33). Such a claim is supported by a myriad of observations construed from “A”. For example, Steve Shoemaker points out that Zukofsky’s translation of the modern Yiddish poet Yehoash “substitutes the pronoun ‘we’ for the pronoun ‘I’” (41) and Woods notes that “the subtle shift is the substitution of the word ‘of’ for ‘from’ [in “A”-5, 18], thus altering the previous desire for a single identifiable voice to emerge from a chaotic noise to a desire for some general form that will not obscure particulars, that will preserve a plurality of differences” (58). In their attention to minute shifts in such a capacious text, these two examples alone suggest the degree, intensity, and thoroughness of Zukofsky’s undermining of Pound’s poetic subjectivity through the intentional “slide from one subject position into another, from ‘us’ and ‘we’ to the impersonal ‘voice,’ to ‘he’ and the personal pronoun ‘I’” (Woods 81).

Where Pound makes the poet metonymic, Zukofsky directs metonym toward the language of the poem, a significant redirection of modernist collage strategies. Using language metonymically—“If the lines were any fuller it would need more than one voice to speak them” (Byrd 301)—realigns the storyteller against “those ideas promulgated by Pound, where the

⁵⁹ cf. Scroggins, *A Poem of a Life*, 881; Woods, 155.

privileged author is in control of both reality and language” (Woods 182). Hatlen’s claim that “Zukofsky moved decisively beyond the modernist mode into a poetics of indeterminacy, interruption, and incompleteness that is...distinctively postmodernist” (214) is simply symptomatic of his break with modernism’s fundamentally Romantic identification. Zukofsky, as Scroggins explains, “writes a poetry of *reticence* one in which the poet is a person who writes poems, who crafts careful structures of words; not a culture hero, a Romantic figure to be pitied, lionized, or sympathized with for the struggles he has undergone” (6). If it is true, then it is also true that, as Woods argues, “Zukofsky’s gradual exploration of the metonymic possibilities of utterance implicitly rejects any Poundian repressive circumscription of language” (182). Such an attitude toward language will, as Ming-Quian Ma observes, “destabilizes his own text by calling into question its host status and, in so doing, privileges a postmodernist poetry that is a found text, and ontological entity, a quantitative measure of existence, over a modernist poetry that is a message, a teleological construct” (138-9). It is true that Zukofsky’s “postmodernist poetry” will “destabilize” the text by dehierarchizing—even deauthorizing—and eliding the distinction between the author’s words and “a found text.” This is simply a sign that the storyteller has been repositioned and is no longer the hero of the tale.

As I’ve argued, it is Zukofsky’s genius to combine modernist strategies with classic structures. In fact, in his rejection of Romanticism may be just as much seen as a return to an earlier, atavistic poetry as it can be considered a move toward a *post*-modern future. This is an important point if we are to understand the extent to which Zukofsky transforms modernist innovations. It is not just that he overthrows them in a dialogic fashion but that he transforms them, reincorporates them, and, in the case of his epic, resolves the contingencies that seem to cause the modernist epics to fail. The status of “*A*” as an epic informs the reader’s participation in the meaning of the text in particularly inclusive ways by positioning the reader as “the *citizen* as participant in a collective linguistic and social nexus” (Bernstein 14).

The realignment of the reader, which we will discuss when looking at the end of “*A*”, is of course contingent upon the realignment of the storyteller. In contrast to Pound’s barker, Zukofsky-as-storyteller is an editor: “The transmutation involved endless translation and reworking of verbal material, rewriting and editing instead of writing” (Perelman, “The Trouble With Genius” 192). He is an arranger: “The poet as narrator relates (tells again and connects) *past* events, actions, people, and occurrences. As a ‘re-teller,’ the poet is the mouthpiece of already created narratives; yet as ‘connector,’ the poet *creates* new narratives, piecing together previously unseen relations” (Woods 196). He is a reciter: “Paradoxically, perhaps, the poet is ‘most the poet’ not when he is composing, but when he is most open to the words of others” (Scroggins, *The Poem of A Life* 228). Some critics have even gone as far as to suggest that Zukofsky erases the position of the storyteller altogether. At times when reading “*A*”, Don Byrd comes to feel that it is “a self-interpreting poem. Most lines which need glossing are glossed somewhere in the poem itself” (300).

Such a comment resembles what Erich Auerbach said of Homer in *Mimesis*: “The Homeric poems conceal nothing, they contain no teaching and no secret second meaning. Homer can be analyzed...but he cannot be interpreted” (13). Byrd will even echo Auerbach by stating that “In ‘*A*’ there are no mysteries, only difficulties created by the quantitative demands which Zukofsky makes on the reader’s attention” (300). If in “*A*”, “languages therefore have no speaker, if this means someone who communicates *through* these languages” so that “It is an epic without proper names—at least by comparison to Pound’s *Cantos* or Olson’s *Maximus*, for example” (Byrd 293), then a decided shift from the subject to the object, from the teller to the

told, from the poet to the word would seem to make “A” unique among the epic projects taken up in America during the 20th century. In the end, the position of storyteller, unmoored from the writer, becomes transitive and, even more, becomes the domain of those who, as the poem itself states, “read, not into, it” (“A”-23, 528).

But, it must be emphasized, that this is not to suggest that Zukofsky is not “in” the poem, that the poem is not to some extent “autobiographical.” As Perelman states, “The continual reappearance of minute personal details amid capacious generalities makes “A”—unlike *The Cantos*—narrative, assuming one’s microscope is in focus (*The Trouble With Genius*, 173). In many ways, “A” is more personal than the *Cantos*. As Guy Davenport observes, “There is enough narrative and anecdotal *matter* in ‘A’ to make a shelf of novels” (105). Even a section borne of deep personal crisis such as the “Pisan Cantos” lacks the sense of intimacy that characterize the personal details in “A” in larger part due to the fact that these details in “A” consistently hint at an underlying narrative structure. It is this awareness of narrative, as one of the hallmarks of epic and one of the basic distinctions between it and the lyric, that remains one of the distinguishing aspects of “A”, especially with regard to other modernist epics. So the poem “moves from the public and shared to the private integrity of the individual person” (Byrd 297) in a way the *Cantos* does not even as the *Cantos* seems to collapse and fragment into shards of private declarations. In the end, as Perelman states, “Zukofsky’s work can be read either as a narrative or, as he himself preferred, as a teleological filling out of an organic structure” (“The Trouble With Genius” 174). Both the narrative and the teleological reading are essential to understanding the way the poem works as and reworks epic. Even if what Peter Quartermain says about “Thanks to the Dictionary” also holds true for “A”, that it presents us with “a somewhat puzzling episodic narrative organized according to no immediately discernible principle” (160), the correspondences to epic structure, even if at times puzzling, are undeniably part of what allows Zukofsky’s epic to succeed.

A Poem Included in History: Keeping Epic Time in a Modern Age

Probably Pound’s most famous statement on epic is that it is “a poem including history.” The idea of the epic as an historical poem—and as distinct from the discipline of the historian—has always been a central concept of the genre. As Aristotle remarks, “the historian narrates events that have actually happened, whereas the poet writes about things as they might possibly occur. Poetry, therefore, is philosophical and more significant than history, for poetry is more concerned with the universal, and history more with the individual” (17). In the Renaissance, Spenser distinguishes between the “Poet historical” and the “Historiographer” in his preface to *The Faerie Queene* claiming that “an Historiographer discourseth of affayres orderly as they were donne” while “a Poet thrusteth into the middest” (16). Wordsworth captures the Romantic’s sentiment about the relationship between the poet and the historian in the preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, “there is no object standing between the Poet and the image of things; between this, and the Biographer and Historian, there are a thousand” (454). It is worth noting that these words appear in the preface to Wordsworth’s lyrics because, again, one of Wordsworth’s contributions to the epic is the induction of the lyric “I” into the genre. As we have seen, this subjective position creates a whole new set of problems for epic. But the change may also be taken as an indicator that something happened to history around this time.

Just because history has been a mainstay of epic since Aristotle, the category itself—what constitutes history as a categorical structure of time and place—has not remained the same. It

would seem that history, too, has a history. In Wordsworth, we can already see a shift from comparing poets and historians on equal terms to a privileging the poet who, for Wordsworth, maintains more direct access to “the image of things.” As Woods reminds us, “Foucault has pointed out that history as a discipline, as an empirical methodological approach to an ordering of human existence and time, is relatively new (dating from the late eighteenth century) and another means by which the then-ascendant bourgeois society justified its economic precedence” (197). The advent of “history as a discipline” may be partly to blame for Wordsworth’s shift of tone. But whatever the case may be, a century and a half later, Erich Auerbach, reflecting on the *Odyssey*, will echo Wordsworth when he says that “To write history is so difficult that most historians are forced to make concessions to the technique of legend” (20). In the time that passes between Wordsworth and Auerbach, the distance between history and poetry only seems to widen and this gap obviously poses problems for the epic poem in the 20th century.

Given this chasm, there is no reason why a poem written in the 20th century that deigns to “include history” shouldn’t expect to fail, and it should be no surprise that this remain the general estimation of Pound’s effort to write an epic not only by critics but by even Pound himself. As Bernstein writes, “In 1917, when Ezra Pound began to publish his long modern verse epic, *The Cantos*, he was distinctly nervous about the problematic nature of his undertaking, and in the unrevised version of Canto I, he speculates whether it would not be wiser to ‘sulk and leave the word to novelists’” (4); and as Scroggins writes, “Pound recognized how paradoxical his embarking upon a long poem might seem in the wake of the ultramodern imagist movement, whose poems rarely ran beyond a half page. As he wrote an old teacher in 1922, ‘Having the crust to attempt a poem in 100 or 120 cantos long after all mankind has been commanded never again to attempt a poem of any length, I have to stagger as I can’” (80). Finally, as Pound eulogizes in one of the fragments that end the *Cantos*:

But the beauty is not the madness
Tho’ my errors and wrecks lie about me.
And I am not a demigod,
I cannot make it cohere. (816)

And then:

I have tried to write Paradise
...
Let the Gods forgive what I
 have made
Let those I love try to forgive
 what I have made. (822)

In the last pages of the poem, Pound assumes his failure to “make cohere” and apologizes for the poem that does not quite live up to his expectations “to write Paradise.”

Then there’s the critical response to the poem. As Alec Marsh reckons Pound’s “attempt to be a modern Orpheus”: “Unfortunately, Pound must fail, because the poem is never identical to the history it sings and because the poet himself (unlike Orpheus) is in history, not insulated from it by myth, so he cannot hear the whole song” (98). Indeed, it seems that one affect of modern history, the fissure that begins to widen between Spenser and Wordsworth, is that myth

becomes unavailable to the modern poet and it is this insulation within history that makes the poet unable to sing. As Anne Day Dewey notes, “Pound moves from an idealized European Renaissance...to an ideal or paradisaical natural order outside history.... Rather than reconfiguring his ‘poem including history’ to the usurious social forces he observes in contemporary society, Pound asserts his alternative vision of an order that transcends history” (24). But with the invention of “history as a discipline,” Pound does not seem capable of sustaining this vision of paradise. At any rate, he cannot maintain a unifying narrative nor can he in the end transcend history. As Don Byrd laments, “It was perhaps Pound’s mistake to think that poets who situate themselves in history can, therefore, command history” (293). The desire to “command history” would be one way to characterize Pound’s position as storyteller, but it is also an admission that Pound’s approach to history has somehow become untenable. Bob Perelman states as a matter of fact what Pound may not have been able to acknowledge but what we cannot now but accept as obvious: “The Cantos is a ‘poem including history,’ true enough, but history includes The Cantos as well” (*The Trouble With Genius* 10). It would seem that modernism’s version of history sees no place for “a poem *including* history.”

If Pound’s approach to history is one of the fundamental reasons for the failure of his epic, perhaps then Zukofsky’s alternative stance may be counted as one of the reasons for his success. Following Perelman, we might again give Pound’s dictum a Zukofskian twist and say that “*A*” is “a poem included in history.” Among other things, such a shift brings the aspect of history in line with Zukofsky’s very different sort of storyteller. But it does more than that. By alerting us to the different way that Zukofsky views history, it can help us see the way in which the poem aligns itself with the kinds of temporality inherent in epic structure. One of the most concrete signs of this temporal realignment is Zukofsky’s ability to end the poem. As Burton Hatlen observes:

We get a confident proclamation that there *is* a plan, along with an assumption that we will (or should) recognize the epic precedents lying behind this plan and an absolute confidence on the poet’s part that he *will* carry this plan through to the end (as he did, for “*A*” belongs with *Paradise Lost* among the handful of long poems in English that are actually *finished*). (“From Modernism” 217).

Hatlen’s prescient and perhaps at first glance unlikely connection between “*A*” and *Paradise Lost* is as useful as it is insightful. Not only does *Paradise Lost* represent the last acknowledged epic in English to be officially “completed,” it is a poem, as we will soon see, that shares with “*A*” the same temporal underpinnings that define Zukofsky’s approach to history.

The different approaches to history that the *Cantos* and “*A*” employ have been duly noted in the criticism of “*A*”, and most critics ascribe the difference to Marx. Edward Schelb has pointed out that “The cosmic and political hierarchy of Pound’s mythos is replaced by Zukofsky’s vision of the proletariat as the agent of historical change” (338). Marsh restates and clarifies this position:

Revising his modernist poem ‘*A*’ into a form of social labor by invoking specifically Marxist terms[, Zukofsky’s] poem could then move beyond the ‘poem including history’ that was Pound’s model for the epic (a model to which ‘*A*’ had hitherto been more or less adhering) to become more like *The Communist Manifesto*, a work with both historical and visionary dimensions. (99)

Dewey will also affirm that Marx replaces Pound as an historical and poetic model by arguing that “Zukofsky does not dismiss economic history as a usurious aberration from ideal form as Pound does, but attempts to represent human identity in terms and as a product of such economic conditions” (26). Hatlen, too, identifies Marx as Zukofsky’s historical model:

Zukofsky, grounds his vision of history, not on the farrago of American rural populism, Douglasite economics, and fascist propaganda that we find in Pound, but rather on a careful reading of Henry Adams (on which Zukofsky wrote a master’s thesis for Columbia University) and of Marx. If only because Marxist theory is more rigorous and more fully thought out than anything we can find in Pound, the early sections of “A”, especially “A”-8, display a degree of cogency we rarely find in the historical sections of *The Cantos*. (“From Modernism” 215)

As each critic in his or her own way attributes the different approaches to history taken by Pound and Zukofsky to Zukofsky’s explicit use of Marx, a sense of the historical in “A” begins to emerge. The idea that the individual is beholden to larger social forces rather than powers either mythic or divine not only identifies Zukofsky’s attraction to an historical materialism but also feels like a very modern version of history.

However, Marx cannot offer a viable account of the temporal and historical underpinnings of the entire poem because Zukofsky overtly abandons Marx in “A”-9. It is well documented that Zukofsky shifts his attention from Marx to Spinoza midway through the poem and seems to drop Marx entirely after reading of Edward Gibbon’s *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, a text featured prominently in “A”-15. As Mark Scroggins explains:

Zukofsky seems to have read Gibbon for the first time in 1954, and later he would ascribe his final rejection of Marx to that reading. Zukofsky’s reading of Gibbon could not have persuaded him that Marx’s analysis of the capitalist system—for which Zukofsky never showed any affection—was mistaken. Rather, Gibbon, by showing him how the conditions of the postwar world replicated those of the decaying Roman Empire, confirmed Zukofsky in his sense that Marx’s Hegelian optimism, his hope for an imminent dictatorship of the proletariat to be followed by a classless society, was as much a fable as the golden age in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. Humanity would indeed progress—in science, in technology, in material power—but each new discovery would lead to further opportunities for folly and destruction. (390)

Here, in Scroggins description of Marx as fabulist, we begin to see the possibility of a mythical approach to history. It would seem that Zukofsky’s sense of Marx was not much different than his sense of Ovid. Moreover, according to Scroggins, it is not Marx but Gibbon—along with Spinoza and Henry Adams—that informs Zukofsky’s historical sensibility.

Gibbon brings modern explanations of history in line with earlier mythic explanations by extending Zukofsky’s practice of “recurrence” to historical events. Spinoza and Adams will help reinforce this cyclical and somewhat mythic sense of history. Spinoza offers Zukofsky the idea of a secularized but totalizing force in the concept of love, while Adams will inoculate Zukofsky against a Pound’s notion of history as “a schoolbook for princes” by giving him “a truly comprehensive science of history would render irrelevant the notion of history as a chronicle of

kings and administrators or a succession of heroes” (Scroggins, *The Poem of A Life* 40). It is not because of Marx but because of the influence of Gibbon, Spinoza, and Adams that we find in “A” “recurrences” that present history as a democratic dynamic of “objective” forces rather than, as we have with Pound, a progressive assembly of static exempla that serve to trace the contours of culture.

For Zukofsky, the take away from Gibbon is that history repeats itself. The concept of history seems to be based on a cyclical model of time, a principle Zukofsky reinforces by his fundamental structural principle of “recurrence.” This is not a new idea. It was Marcus Aurelius in the second century who declared that “our children shall see nothing new, just as our fathers likewise saw nothing more than we saw” (qtd. in Tayler 9). It is a statement, moreover, dependent on a notion of cyclical time. Cyclical patterns pervade “A” through Zukofsky’s interest in music, especially musical rounds, his interest in natural or organic processes, later materializing in his interest in botany, his belief in “recurrence,” his key poetic principle, and the cyclic structures within “A” have specific ramifications for the poem. As Barry Ahearn states,

Alert readers will find Zukofsky giving more attention to a cyclic conception of history; one of the themes of the movement is the similarity of events widely spaced in time. Odysseus, we find, is alive today under the name of Jackie.... Paul, flying back from Europe via Iceland, becomes another discoverer of America. ‘Round’ and ‘cycle’ suggest that America has the privilege of continually being discovered. (220, 223)

As an historical principle, the emphasis on cycles undermines a Marxist sense of utopian progress and finds “redemption” in linking the quotidian to the heroic in decidedly epic terms. Zukofsky associates a soldier he reads about in the newspaper with the likeness of Odysseus. He imagines his son by a return flight to the U.S. as “another discoverer of America.” The cyclical pattern makes the poem epic not only by allowing Zukofsky to make incidental connections to Homer and Columbus but also by restaging and contemporizing parts of America’s cultural mythology and showing the motive of that myth to be a democratizing cultural force.

So it would seem that the more things change, the more they stay the same. But such an idea depends on holding two conceptually contradictory ideas together. On the one hand, there is progress and on the other there is repetition. The sense of an ending that Hatlen notices in both *Paradise Lost* and “A” is predicated on these shared temporal structures that make the relationship between the two poems far exceed a brief mention of the former in the latter.⁶⁰ In fact, critics have hovered around this connection in various ways, seeming to sense Zukofsky’s engagement with socio-historical constructs that predate modern historical paradigms. Susan Vanderborg gets “a nostalgic sense” in Zukofsky’s “myth of an incarnational word” (206). Woods admits “certain shaping influences on this project” noting “the Cabbalism of Jewish mysticism as well as a clearly hermeneutical interest in myths and representations of arcane and numerology” (169). Scroggins avers that “Eventually [Zukofsky] would come to see his own marginal status as enabling, as giving him a more intimate acquaintance with ‘myth,’ the primordial word, than that of his more ‘scientific’ contemporaries” (*The Poem of A Life* 129). It would seem that whatever “history” it includes, “A” is strangely “prehistorical.”

⁶⁰ cf. “A”-14, 319

Therefore, we might look to *Paradise Lost* for Zukofsky's Aquinas map.⁶¹ Several critics have remarked on the cyclical patterns of "A",⁶² but none has directly linked this to the basic structuring principle of epic. As Frye memorably puts it, "The convention of beginning the action *in medias res* ties a knot in time, so to speak.... All three epics [Homer, Virgil] begin at a kind of nadir of the total cyclical action.... From there, the action moves both backward and forward far enough to indicate the general shape of the historical cycle" (318-19). Although he doesn't connect it to epic, Woods comes extremely close to Frye's explanation of the temporal structure of epic when discussing "A":

"A" represents history as a set of narrative networks, traces that go backward and forward any coherence in the text lying in a self-replication as well as an appropriation of other texts. Rather than conceiving of time as a series of present moments following in succession from the past to the future in linear fashion, time appears to be conceived of as a series of pretensions and retensions, a whole network of experiences forging forward or 'protending,' and leaving a trail of after-echoes. (190)

The observations that Woods makes about time, however, are more complex and more integrally related to epic than references to the poem's cyclicity allow. Even though Woods argues that the poem does not reveal time "in a succession from the past to the future in linear fashion," he describes "narrative networks" moving "backward and forward" and then ultimately "forging forward or "protending." The movement revolves but it also makes jagged progress, moving forward by fits and starts.

So how to reconcile movements that seem so contradictory? Let's first consider a few further statements by Woods about "this concrete history of estrangement and an utopian possibility of reconciliation" (173): it is "A history of radical contingency... a history that has no origin or any teleological direction other than the pressure exerted by writing or narration" (189); "In a view that seems so much at odds with the earlier Marxist sense of order, history moves without pattern and certainly without any degree of moral or ethical rectitude" (192); "the focus is on the variations and divergences rather than the tradition of orthodox history" (57). In these statements, there seems to be a sense of helpless confusion about the way history works in the poem. Despite the perception of intricate patterns, history ultimately feels aimless. The source of this disorientation possibly emits from the fact that in "A" there seems to exist no origin and no "teleological direction" and therefore no obvious beginning or end. This sense of historical contingency within the poem is accurate enough. However, even though Woods resists notions of "orthodox history," conceptually, his arguments still depends on a linear notion of time. This means that if we are going to make sense of how time and therefore history work in the poem, we are going to need to complicate the notion of cyclicity by reconciling it with its antithetical pattern of a "basically straight-line configuration" (Tayler 13).

In his book *Milton's Poetry: Its Development in Time*, Edward Tayler, with breathtaking economy, takes us through the temporal developments that culminate in Milton's epic and establish the necessary temporal structures for epics thereafter. Ultimately its association with the historical-temporal complex that effloresces in the Renaissance reconciles the notions of time

⁶¹ Ezra Pound complained about the difficulty of writing an epic based on the structure of Dante's *Divine Comedy* by carping "I haven't an Aquinas-map; Aquinas *not* valid now" (qtd. in Scroggins 191).

⁶² Cf. Scroggins, *The Poem of A Life*, 192 and 446; Quartermain, *Only is Order Othered*, 964; Woods, 196.

that gird “*A*” because it is in the Renaissance when “writers inherited a feeling for the circular patterns of ancient time and sought to assimilate them to the basically straight-line configurations of scripture” (Tayler 12-13). Zukofsky’s adulation of Spinoza and penchant for Jewish mysticism on the one hand, and his fealty for Shakespeare and proclivity to Greek myth on the other, condition him to a similar approach to time which Tayler explains this way:

The Hebrews, like the Greeks, were of course aware of the cyclic recurrences in nature, and the Old Testament preserves a number of indications of their interest in seasonal repetitions, from the ‘circuit of the year’ in Exodus 34:22 to the cycle of creation in Jubilees 1:20; but before the transcendent Yahweh these indications of seasonal time recede into the background of the Old Testament. The Jewish view of history must be thought of as essentially a consequence of the Exodus, which served to demonstrate in spectacular fashion the way Yahweh shapes events with respect to those brought up out of Egypt.... It is not too much to say that in a profound sense Yahweh *is* history. (9)

As with Spinoza, Zukofsky adapts this dual sense of history to a modern, secularized culture. Clearly “*A*” incorporates all sorts of “recurrences in nature,” but there is also a sense in Zukofsky’s attention to the ways in which incidental connections repeat previous patterns of a type of teleological force that “shapes events.” But where the Jewish view of history associates this overarching force with Yahweh, Zukofsky identifies it with the dynamics between “incarnational word” and an “upper limit music.”

Tayler explains this dynamic between the “incarnational” and the “upper limit” in the theological terms of history’s interaction with the divine: “for everywhere this signal example of divine intervention in the course of history implies that the God of Israel is God of Time, Lord of History; interpretation of the past derives therefore from the study of Yahweh’s acts in history, and interpretation of the future proceeds from the study of the words of His prophets” (9). This may sound an awful lot like Pound’s notion of historical exempla that inform an “interpretation of the future,” but there is another way to adapt this sense of “divine intervention” to “the cyclic recurrences in nature.” Tayler continues:

The Hebrews located in Adam’s single act of disobedience to a jealous God what may be recognized as a species of instant degeneration; and the possibility of regeneration, no longer cyclical, becomes contingent on the appearance of a king of the House of David, whom Yahweh will endow with wide dominion. (10)

In one respect, such temporal structures allow for Pound’s sense of “the whole of a given human culture as a totality [where] the overall ‘health’ of a culture, then, could be diagnosed from a single manifestation of that culture, a single artifact or act of making” (Scroggins 166). Yet, the Hebraic sense of history does not preclude contingency the way Pound’s approach does. Zukofsky’s use of these temporal structures based on notions of recurrence as an act of intervention is perhaps more subtle and more true to these biblical conceptions of time.

Zukofsky, like Pound, attempts, as Quartermain argues, “to contain the whole of the work in each word” (961). However, Zukofsky does not scour the past for model “acts of history” but rather takes a more dynamic approach, using recurrence to intervene and thereby disrupt historical progress. By making new connections among apparently dissimilar events, Zukofsky

imitates the type of “divine intervention” enacted by the “God of Time, Lord of History.” By way of recurrence, Zukofsky affects historical disruptions in “A” that reveal the way history shapes events and inculcates them with meaning. Moreover, a conception of history based on intervention and recurrence, as Tayler suggests, “becomes contingent on the appearance of a king of the House of David, whom Yahweh will endow with wide dominion” (10). In terms of epic, the historical narrative requires a teleological end that can only be supplied by an instance of *dues ex machina* that at once offers hermeneutic closure and an opening out onto the continuing cycle encapsulated in the idea of eternity.

By eternity, I mean to invoke a distinction Tayler makes between the Platonic concepts of *sempiternitas* or “everlasting succession” and *eternitas* or “that which has neither beginning nor end” (15). “A” does not present us, as some critics intimate, with “everlasting succession” but rather with a construct that has “neither beginning nor end.” Tayler further clarifies the distinction this way: “Although Time and Eternity are everlasting, and although Time imitates Eternity as its ‘moving image,’ there nevertheless exists a radical difference between the two, for Eternity is single and at rest while Time remains in the continual flux that signifies imperfection” (15). Zukofsky’s attention to particulars remain within the flux of time while his defined structure of twenty-four movements presents us with the semblance of a “rested totality.”

Where Pound fails to end his poem because he is “not a demigod,” Celia Zukofsky, as we will further explore in the next chapter, performs a humanized sort of “divine intervention” by conceiving of “A”-24. As a vision of “desire longing for perfection” (“A”-1, 2), the poem seeks to reconcile chance, uncertainty, unpredictability to an idea of redemptive progress, a reconciliation emblemized by the unanticipated intercession of Celia’s “gift” which brings us back to the beginning through an act of redemptive change. By transubstantiating the words into music, Celia answers Louis’s question posed in “A”-6:

Can
The design
Of the fugue
Be transferred
To poetry? (“A”-6, 38)

By using Handel’s *Pieces pour le Clavecin*, Celia does not offer a direct answer. Celia does not give us a fugue but affects Louis’s desire by other means.

We can see how a Christianized sensibility of Hebraic time exists not only in the end but also in the beginning of “A”. In the very first lines, “A” incants Christ’s passion through Bach’s music. Beginning with Christ’s death (and imminent resurrection), the allusion brings the poem in line with the Christian redaction of Hebraic time where “History tends to be regarded as though it were modeled of the straight line, marked at crucial points by divine intervention but bounded in particular by the surety of past fulfillment (Exodus) and the expectation of future fulfillment (the coming of the Messiah)” (Tayler 11). As it is with Christian time, and in *Paradise Lost* in particular, the resurrection “ties a knot in time” by way of being a beginning at a conceptual end, and by proleptically positing a redemptive moment as always already having happened, it provides the assurance of having occurred and the possibility of having yet to

come.⁶³ As Frye says, “the action moves both backward and forward far enough to indicate the general shape of the historical cycle” (318-19).

This is not progress exactly but, rather, what Tayler means by “mov[ing] straight through history in a circle” (14). But as Tayler admonishes: “Christian history is often represented as a straight line proceeding from the Alpha of Creation through Incarnation toward the Omega of the Day of Judgment; but this expedient merely has the effect of making the Christian view of history resemble our own Idea of Progress as though drawn on the horizontal rather than an ascending plane” (11). If anything, “A”, bound up with Marx and older senses of historicity, critiques the American “Idea of Progress” as a destructive utopian fiction. Nevertheless, as we have seen, Zukofsky’s poem makes a deliberate procession from A to Z, from alpha to omega, even as it goes around and around through various types of recurrence. The critical resistance to using teleological paradigms to explain “A” may be a result of current theoretical practices that obscure the fact that, as “A” makes its circuitous advancement toward an end, the epic reconciles the temporal complexities imagined during the Renaissance with those of postmodernity, where time tends to be imagined as an unhinged, temporally relative pastiche .

Just as Tayler describes Christian view of history, “A” does seem to proceed on an “ascending” rather than horizontal plane, considering its continued insistence on upper and lower limits. As Tayler explains:

But then the dream of perfection, idealized in the past as the Golden Age or the Garden of Eden and in Biblical thought transferred to the future when ‘Earth shall all be Paradise,’ became identified with the progressive renovation of society that Herbert Spencer and others were pleased to celebrate so unreservedly. Time, no longer bounded by Creation and Apocalypse, remains a straight line but now rises toward an infinity of technological improvements. (12-13)

As Thomas Merton called Zukofsky’s “A,” it is “a kind of recovery of paradise” (qtd. Scroggins 405). Again, Zukofsky’s idea of perfection, his own sense of paradise as “the progressive renovation of society” through recurrence, the constant revision and reincorporation that many critics have argued is testimony to the poem’s lack of closure, attend to a reconciliation of time that discovers that, in Augustine’s pithy summary, “the beginning... somehow contains the ending, the ending the beginning” (qtd. in Tayler 14).

In “A” as with the epics that have preceded it, this seems to be the case. In his attention to “particulars—historic and contemporary” (*Prepositions*+ 208), Zukofsky imitates the temporal structure of the Christian Renaissance where “the succession of events moves from the past to the future...but the eternal realm of The Ideas remains always at rest (14,15). So it is not exactly true that “The text refuses the position of a rested totality” (Woods 160). Rather, it presents “a succession of events” that exist within history and therefore proceed indeterminately toward an indefinite future; on the other hand, it offers a kind of hermeneutic completion and through the poetic strategies of recurrence, anachronism, and multi-citational quoting a field of ideas that present themselves as “always at rest.” Like the twin notions of Time and Eternity, “A” is both in flux and at rest, a procession of incidental particulars that open to continual recurrences and a hermeneutic whole that contains the text and makes it, in its completion, more

⁶³ Zukofsky establishes twenty-four movements as the terminus of the poem with the belief that “Other movements of “A” were not written in chronological order, trusting the sequence would work out” (qtd. in Scroggins, *The Poem of a Life* 333).

than the sum of its parts. As Tayler reminds us, “It is Eternity that lends significance to an otherwise meaningless succession of moments” (17).

By allowing for a conceptual whole, the application of this temporal structure makes Zukofsky’s poem very different from Pound’s epic. Where Pound offers his series of universal themes by way of cosmopolitan cultural heroes whose words are metonyms for larger cultural truths, in Zukofsky, the historical is manifest in the quotidian so that the idea of “cultural hero” attaches to individuals who are neither famous nor in many times even named. When Zukofsky does use language that has the patina of culturally sanctioned wisdom, he just as often leaves it anonymous, drawing attention to its cultural resonance rather than to the “heroic” figure whose words “transcend” history. As “an epic without proper names” (Byrd 293), “*A*” turns the idea of a cultural hero inside out—a conceptual move that seems copacetic with America’s mythic sense of the heroic as the common man—and levels the notion of “peak times” into an anachronistic collage. “*A*”, in Ira Nadel’s words, offers us a “history, in the form of newspaper accounts, business documents, or occasionally poems, often interrupts the historical narratives to supplement his descriptive surveys” (118). Zukofsky’s particular use of “recurrence” democratizes history by coupling the belletristic with the everyday, a national identity emerging out of public documents of both political and incidental import. Such an assemblage of personal and historical documents disrupts, or at least, complicates sanctioned cultural narratives, levying an implicit critique of the hegemonic mechanisms that canonize history as “another means by which the then-ascendant bourgeois society justified its economic precedence” (Woods 197).

To once again employ the musical trope, the poem is both polyphonic and antiphonal, making “One song/ Of many voices” (“*A*”-5,18) and serves as counterpoint to the kind of “elitism” proffered by Pound and on which Hatlen insists: “Poundian poetics is, let us admit it, an elitist poetics. The collage method implicitly demands an audience of cognoscenti, able to disassemble the collage, to relocate the particulars of which it is made back into their original contexts” (“*Art as Labor*” 233). Perhaps, but Zukofsky uses the Poundian strategies of collage for very different ends. Where Pound may be “elitist,” Zukofsky’s strategies are democratizing. However, Zukofsky’s specific use of modernist collage methods has nevertheless consistently lead to the charge that “*A*” is “unreadable,” “gnomic,” or “hermetic” with the implicit injunction that these are signs of exclusivity. As for the critic who persists in confusing the eremite with the elitist, I would insist that these apparent difficulties apply to all readers of “*A*” in a way that they do not with Pound’s *Cantos*. While “*A*” may at times be inscrutable, it does not establish a group of “cognoscenti” in the way the *Cantos* does. It is not “a schoolbook for princes” because, as Scroggins points out, the quotations don’t ultimately point to a specific source that can be unpacked to reveal a rarefied knowledge.⁶⁴ In “*A*”’s strangely democratic purview, we are all left to our own devices and to “read, not into, the words” (A-22, 528).

Zukofsky’s focus on “anything but particulars—historic and contemporary” (Prepositions+ 208) creates what Shoemaker calls “Zukofsky’s eclectic ‘tradition’ (31). Unlike Pound who posits a series of universal exempla, Zukofsky’s tradition is more personal and more particular; it is *a* not *the* tradition. The history that Zukofsky cobbles together thereby emphasizes individualism and historical contingency. As it is with the poem’s title, “*A*” offers one among many versions of history where an individual as an historical node “within history” serves as a lightning rod. To return to Zukofsky’s statement in “*Recencies*”: “*Impossible to communicate anything but particulars—historic and contemporary—things, human beings as things their instrumentalities of capillaries and vein binding up and bound up with events and*

⁶⁴ cf. *The Poem of A Life*, 419ff.

contingencies. The revolutionary word if it must revolve cannot escape having a reference” (Prepositions+ 208). For Zukofsky, the word, unlike music, is bound up in history because it must always refer to something else and thus another place and another time.

Hatlen picks up on Zukofsky’s statement and reaffirms it when stating that “as the human medium of communication, language is inescapably engaged with history both personal and collective, lived experience” (“From Modernism to Postmodernism” 220). Language, not people, becomes the focus as well as the medium of history. As Schelb claims, “the past’s recovery in a kind of historical misprision is seen as the task of a revolutionary poetics” (338). As used by Zukofsky “a revolutionary poetics” or what he calls “the revolutionary word” is both about change *through* recurrence. The recontextualization and personalization of language offers “an alternate history...through the minor languages of puns, slang and the excesses of rhetoric” (Schelb 338). Zukofsky brings together temporal periods through a mix of dictions without demarcations, leveling the temporal field to a two dimensional plane by leavening the basic ingredient of history: time.

Because Zukofsky equates history with “the revolutionary word” and not with the one who speaks it, he considers “human beings as things” constructed by larger social forces. As such, Zukofsky presents us with a very modern conception of history. As Dewey explains:

Since the nineteenth century, writers have used the scientific model of the force field to describe collective economic, political, and ethnic forces as the dominant agents of history.... This model of social change interpreted history less as the deeds of individuals than as the evolution and interaction of trade networks, monetary systems, and institutions that structure the social environment. (17-18)

This historical model downplays the agency of the individual. Instead, it locates the individual within the surge and ebb of socio-economic forces. History becomes, as Vanderborg describes, “a matrix of exchanges and connections” (194). Zukofsky’s sense of the human being within history reflects a modern sense of history as an amalgam of dispassionate social systems and cultural networks. But even as the individual becomes subjected—or more appropriately “objected”—to the contingencies of “the force field,” “*A*”, in a somewhat paradoxical fashion, recoups individual agency without attempting, as Pound does, to make the individual the master of history or the controller of its attendant forces.

Just as the title “*A*” can represent the entire text and simultaneously be a mere quotation of the first line, the historical quotations within the poem stand within and outside of the text; the poet’s “eclectic tradition” is both less than and more than its historical moment; and the individual is both subject to and the maker of history. These chiasmic relationships are ultimately an effect of the poetic strategies Zukofsky employs. Zukofsky, as Ming-Quan Ma asserts, “destabilizes his own text by calling into question its host status and, in so doing, privileges a postmodernist poetry that is a found text, and ontological entity, a quantitative measure of existence, over a modernist poetry that is a message, a teleological construct” (138-9). That is to say, Zukofsky’s use of quotation is not a byproduct of “a master-servant relationship between writer and reader, where meaning is thought to be commanded” (Woods 26), nor is it a matter of finding exempla as a means exerting dominance over other texts—and thus history—by asserting control over the passages that the poet extracts. Rather, by positing meaning as shared rather than commanded, by submitting the poem to the contingencies of “a matrix of exchanges and connections,” and through the practice of collage techniques that blur beyond distinction the line

between host text and source text, “‘A’ imitates the process by which individuals interact with tradition to produce history” (Dewey 34). In the end, “A” offers a vision of history that ratifies the individual’s participation in its construction even as it locates the individual within its greater socio-historical sweep of time. By assembling and reassembling words and phrases within a network of preconceived narratives, the poet conspires with the impinging forces of history to construct new meaning by finding new recurrences amid the material forces of history.

A Tribe of Exiles: Or, “A” for “America”

By way of conclusion and synthesis, I would like to address and tweak another of Pound’s epic axioms. In *Guide to Kulchur*, Pound, citing Rudyard Kipling, calls the *Cantos* “the tale of the tribe.” According to Michael Bernstein, the term connotes a set of shared values based on the cultural achievements of the past as the basis for a society’s coherence by “articulating the common aspirations, ethical beliefs and unifying myths” (8). What is more, this “permanent record of the group’s decisive achievements” depends on a teller who consolidates in his speech “a storehouse of heroic examples and precepts by which later generations would measure their own conduct and order the social fabric of their lives” (8). While “A” is similar to the *Cantos* in both scope and ambition, the intended effect of the poem is very different. As critics have duly noted, the poem is discursive rather than “unifying,” and as the son of Jewish immigrants, Zukofsky can never really imagine himself as the storyteller for “the tribe.” The poem like Zukofsky himself was never that *at home* in the world.

Instead of “Guide to Kulchur,” Zukofsky attempts, “to uncover new connections within the work itself and new ‘recurrences’ form across the whole ‘graph of culture’” (Scroggins, *The Poem of A Life* 192). Using the mathematical rudiment of a “graph” as a paradigm rather than the directed informational expertise of an escort, Zukofsky offers us an “Aquinas map” but with no specific route to travel. Where Pound seeks “to crystallize history” by “representing a specific occurrence in the world, an occurrence which, by itself, already contains a significant meaning” (Bernstein 9), Zukofsky creates a weave of history by attending to “particulars—historic and contemporary” (*Prepositions+* 208) that accrue meaning by their juxtaposition. Where Pound’s poem “is expressly fashioned to enable readers to search the text for values which they can then apply in the communal world” (Bernstein 9), Zukofsky’s offers readers more latitude in constructing meaning, locating value in the object of the poem itself and the activity of creating it.⁶⁵ Where for Pound “the ideal relationship between history and the tale... is one of perfect interpretation” (Bernstein 9), for Zukofsky, the poem offers *an* interpretation, an “eclectic tradition” (Shoemaker 31) that models an approach to history but not necessarily “a guide.” “A” never gives *exempla*; the examples from culture are always more personal than that and more private. And yet the poem clearly extends outward toward the culture and even goes beyond the cultural limits of the *Cantos* to finally encompass “six-thousand-year timelines” (Scroggins *The Poem of A Life*, 425).

Strangely, this mix of privacy and geographic scope makes “A” more provincial than Pound’s poem and more American. Scroggins is right to suggest that Zukofsky is “perhaps the

⁶⁵ Scroggins reinforces this in his observation about Zukofsky’s *A Test of Poetry*: The anonymous was Zukofsky’s answer to Romanticism’s heroizing of the poet, his assertion that the lasting value of humanity’s makings lay in the care and craft manifested in the made object itself, rather than in the biography of its maker (*The Poem of A Life* 164).

most ‘American’ of American poets” (*Upper Limit Music* 9). But due to the capaciousness and discursiveness of “A”, this may not be immediately obvious when reading the poem. What Scroggins has suggested, as we noted earlier, is that “In Zukofsky, the Poundian imperative to ‘make it new’ has a specifically American resonance and speaks to a cultural agenda that harnesses the European past to an American future, without succumbing to a specious or stifling ‘internationalism’ like Pound’s own” (*Upper Limit Music* 10). In other words, history is also futurity, and time is also place. So while the references in “A” seem both incidental and able to reach beyond the borders of America, 20th century America still serves as a teleological construct that organizes and gives significance to the recurring “particulars.”

As Scroggins notes, “These early movements of “A” aim to embody the United States in the years around the beginning of the Great Depression. . . . By [“A”-8] Zukofsky had begun to believe that contemporary history did not speak for itself, but must be illuminated by the texts of the past” (*The Poem of A Life* 418). In explaining the particularly American landscape and its relationship to “the past,” Woods goes even a bit further: “In focusing on the recurrences in history, Zukofsky’s text is not merely a passive representation of the social and political but becomes an active interrogation of those prevailing forms of life in which the crisis of capitalism and imperialism can produce the degradation of a Great Depression, the exhilaration of a walk on the moon, or the nightmare of a Vietnam” (198). Besides noting the way Zukofsky uses the past to levy a critique of the socio-economic structures of the present, structures that are demographically and culturally American, the examples that Woods cites from the poem, even while progressing from the local, to the international, and then to the cosmic, are all conscripted within American history.

As ironic as it may be, the American-ness of the poem is born of Zukofsky’s exilic position within the culture, a position that stands in direct contrast to Pound. As mentioned earlier, one of the most fascinating and troubling aspects of this relationship is the way in which Zukofsky channels and deflects Pound’s increasingly virulent anti-Semitism. This obvious and ugly polarization, however, if looked at obliquely, can be seen as a symptom of larger and differing stances toward America. Pound is a thoroughly American figure, born in Hailey, Idaho and brought up in Wyncote, Philadelphia, the grandson of the Lieutenant governor of Wisconsin and a distant relation to Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Zukofsky, on the other hand, was the son of first generation Russian Jewish immigrants who grew up in New York where “he would stand on the Lower East Side street and recite Longfellow’s *Hiawatha*—in Yiddish—to stave off gangs of Italian bullies” (Scroggins, *The Poem of A Life* 3). Pound was self-exiled expatriate. As Shoemaker perceptively observes, “the great modernist exiles whom Zukofsky admired—Pound, Joyce, and Eliot—are in the final analysis ‘self-exiled men,’ unequipped to understand the true hardships, and terrors, of the Diaspora” (36). Zukofsky, on the other hand, hardly left America and his travels were much more often tours of America than extended trips abroad.

And yet, it is in America, his birthplace, where Zukofsky is always already exiled. Zukofsky’s identification as a Jewish immigrant and his sense of exile from both those roots and the alien, canonized culture within which he is raised redounds when he becomes a poet. Zukofsky experienced, as Barry Ahearn notes, “double alienation from his own heritage and the world of the Gentiles” (“Origins of ‘A’” 164). Or, as Scroggins imagines it: “As a Jew working his way through a course of Gentile classics, he must forever be Philo to the canon’s Plato—the adaptor who gives a peculiarly Jewish voice to the master’s thought, rather than himself the innovator. And even among his own people, Orthodox community, Zukofsky’s desire to write poetry made him an outcast” (*The Poem of A Life* 57). The position of exile obviously affects

Zukofsky's sense of himself as a poet and by extension the poetry that he writes. This may be one reason for Zukofsky's significant break with Marx and turn to Spinoza in "A"-9: "The young Zukofsky, alienated both from the tradition of Western literature and philosophy he had been taught at Columbia and from the Orthodox faith of his fathers, could take only bitter comfort in the similar situation of the philosopher [Spinoza], expelled from his own community and regarded as a dangerous atheist by the Christian world" (Scroggins, *The Poem of A Life* 256). But whatever the reason, the position as outsider seems to pervade his writing.

As Perelman argues, "Zukofsky...realized from the first that the role of writer was not his natural inheritance (*Trouble With Genius* 208); as a result, "Zukofsky overcomes his alienated social position through the act of writing" (196). For Zukofsky, as Woods notes, writing becomes "an investigation into his cultural identity.... [a] means confronting the historical exile and structural homelessness indigenous to the Jewish culture" (53). Moreover, this exploration gets generalized—depersonalized—and becomes a structural principle of the poem. As Woods further observes: "Subjectivity is construed both as a *process* of moving out to meet an object-other (an exile) and as a *product* of negotiation with the object-other (a homecoming)" (150). The condition of exile pervades the primary structure of the poem and can be seen in the fundamental dynamics that exist between the reader and writer of "A".

Zukofsky's double exile not only affects his writing strategies but offers a critical distance that, despite living at a great remove from his homeland, Pound does not seem to possess. As Elizabeth Grosz suggests, "The marginalized position of the exile, at the very least, provides the exile with the perspectives of an outsider, the kinds of perspective that enable one to see the loopholes and flaws of the system in ways that those inside the system cannot" (qtd. in Woods 9). So instead of a Poundian *exempla* intended as "a storehouse of heroic examples and precepts" (Bernstein 8), Zukofsky's epic of exile serves as a critique of the socio-economic structure and its cultural underpinnings of America, a critique "that challenges and opposes the unifying discourses of the American Protestant hegemonic culture" (Woods 56). Such a critique, as Shoemaker notes, is imbedded in "a dizzying mix of poetic styles" (33). Even more, it is present in the very language and most conspicuously in his peculiar methods of translation. Peter Quartermain points out the Zukofsky's employment of Latin has a weirdly American inflection: "If Zukofsky is trying to bring what he sees as a dead American language to life, there is an astringent irony in his use of Latin—once the language of authority and a language long dead" (975). The "astringent irony" that Quartermain notices can be best explained in terms of the epic critique that the poem levies.

Just as with the long quote from Gibbon about the fall of the Roman Empire, this "recurrence" of Latin that is translated and therefore "recontextualized" as an idiosyncratic and idiomatic "American" English serves first and foremost as a means of admonishment. Linking American English to Roman Latin associates the two through Zukofsky's primary historical medium. However, the translation is not just a subtle way of anticipating the rise and fall of the American empire; rather, it also serves as a means of transformation. If language is history and is also the vehicle for substantive transformation of history, then taking a "dead" language—dead in large part because of the fall of the empire—and reconfiguring it as a living language, a language that is both fungible and elastic, offers a kind of hope, a kind of possibility, a future. Transforming the language—both Latin to English and then English itself into a novel kind of poetic syntax—is tantamount to reconfiguring the country's self-destructive tendencies. In the end, Zukofsky contradicts his earlier Marxist notions that capitalism will move us inevitably toward a utopian ideal. There may linger a feeling of redemptive retribution in Zukofsky's use of

recurrences but nothing in the poem is posited as predestined. There is no predetermined end, although this open structure remains tempered by the fact that an excavation of the past may adumbrate the end in the beginning and, from the vantage of the present, show America to be hurling headlong on an unwavering course of destruction. However, if the outcome of language “dictates” the potential outcomes for the future, then the discursive and idiosyncratic practices of “A” hold up a promise for a better future if one accepts the imaginative redactions of the poem as alternatives to what the dominant culture “prescribes.”

But such an alternative universe is the product of an exilic vision, one that remains unavailable to Pound. For even in exile Pound is more at home than Zukofsky is in the place of his birth. Remember Pound’s editorial reach continues to hold sway in America even from Rapallo while Zukofsky, living in New York, remains sufficiently obscure. As Scroggins points out, “Zukofsky would live most of his life in New York, his birthplace, but at intervals he would speak of the city not as home but as ‘Egypt’—a land of exile” (*The Poem of A Life* 12). Where Pound universalizes his sense of self and culture, Zukofsky takes to particularizing it and insulating himself within his family: “Zukofsky’s conviction that a human being’s happiness, his sense of at-homeness in the world, was bound up with the family relation (*The Poem of A Life* 159). Zukofsky writes a poem *contained by* history where the “domestic idyll of the family” is offered up as “a myth of redemption” or viable if utopian construct already within—and simultaneously insulated from—the larger culture (Hatlen, “From Modernism” 216). As Dan Chiasson notes, “American ancestry, in this poem about perpetually returning to one’s point of departure, is a walk at night with your son.” But, of course, the heritage that Zukofsky passes on is one of dispossession. If Pound offers us “a tale of the tribe” then Zukofsky offers us “a tale of exile”; and yet, the exiles are a tribe in and of themselves which is what makes “A” such an essentially American epic.

**The Epic Problem:
“A Poem of a Life/—And a Time.”**

Louis Zukofsky memorably called “A” “a poem of a life.” The phrase has become an epithet used to highlight the autobiographical intimacy of what can often seem like a depersonalized text due to length, scope, and “objectivist” poetic strategies.⁶⁶ As Zukofsky states in “About the Gas Age”:

Somewhere in the long poem “A” I say—this is sort of part of me—I never
remember my stuff but—

Thinking’s the lowest rung
No one’ll believe I feel this. (*Prepositions*+ 169)

This response to a question at a Q & A reveals Zukofsky’s intimate connection with the text—“this is sort of part of me”—while it raises the problem of memory—“I never remember my stuff.” The poem seems at once part of him and beyond his capacity to recall. Riffing off his integral in “A”-12 (“lower limit speech/ upper limit music”), Zukofsky observes that despite his deep feeling and his intimate connection to his writing, there will be doubt on the part of the reader because “thinking’s the lowest rung,” implying that feeling may be the “upper limit.” Understandably, the private intensity usually associated with lyric may not be as obvious in a culturally expansive epic or, more to the point, such private feeling in a publically directed “historical” poem comes off as “hermetic” or “gnomic,” and often contentiously so.

When he says “this is sort of part of me,” Zukofsky admits to being larger than the poem, to containing it. Yet this is odd, since the poem seems so much more capacious than “a life” or an individual. As with history, the container and contained are constantly confused. Perhaps the sense of disbelief that Zukofsky imagines the reader will have results from this confusion. As “a poem of a life,” “A” tells us something about the capacity of “a life,” its lineaments and exigencies. In the epic, an individual is larger and more multifaceted than we may generally think; however, it is not necessarily because “I contain multitudes,” as Whitman declares, but the opposite: the writing goes beyond the autobiographical and becomes not so much a transcription of identity as a refashioning of self into otherness. It is not just that the self is turned into words, and words coming from a constellation of texts, but that that self is always multiple, so that the words can never be reduced merely to “self-expression” or a singular “I.” Even in its most private moments, “A” is a social poem, a poem about family and, beyond that, about the individual’s place in history.

If we return to the original context of the statement that has been excised and repeated numerous times in the criticism, we find in the forward to the publication of “A” 1-12 in 1967 the following:

“A”
A poem of a life

—and a time. The poem will continue thru 24 movements, its last words still to be lived. (*Prepositions*+ 228)

⁶⁶ cf. Perelman, 182; Woods, 8 and 150; Scroggins, *The Poem of A Life*, 6 for examples of its use.

The poem is not only “a poem of a life” but also “a time.” In this it resembles Frye’s definition of epic as “the life and death of the individual, and the slower social rhythm which, in the course of years...brings cities and empires to their rise and fall” (318). The life is always already deliberately put in the context of a time and a history. The poem is “lived” but it is never coterminous with the specific life of the author (notably Zukofsky “survives” his poem in a way Pound does not).

The description of “a poem of a life” and the idea of “its last words still to be lived” may nevertheless fuel the gripe that John McWilliams has about modern epics: “the genre extends organicism toward shapelessness. The personal epic seems to end only with the death of the poet whose imaginative powers comprise its heroism” (237). This may be true for Pound and Olson, perhaps even for Wordsworth and Whitman; however, as I’ve tried to show, it is different for Zukofsky. The poem has a clear beginning, a capacious middle singularly organized around a break in the middle movement, and a definitive end—“will continue thru 24 movements.” Then the poem stops. Leaving Zukofsky to write another poem, another day.

By simply looking at the beginning, the middle, and the end of the poem, we can get a sense of its epic shape and maybe ferret out and reconcile some of the apparent contradictions that emerge in the criticism and bifurcate into private vs. public, historical vs. personal, self vs. other, open-ended vs. closed. We can begin with Barry Ahearn’s gloss on the overall structure:

These stages can be roughly divided into four sections: movements 1-7, movements 8-12, movements 13-20, and movements 21-24. “A” 1-7 is concerned with the self cut loose from the family circle and an ancient, cohesive culture. The individual under inspection is the one Zukofsky knew best—himself. In “A” 8-12 the poet examines and creates connections between past and present, specifically the relation of himself and his poem to history and literary tradition. As a consequence, this section of “A” is dense with quotation.... “A” 13-20 catalogues mingled disasters and good fortune.... Finally, in “A” 21-24 the poem expands to a comprehensive view of personal, human, and natural history. (xii)

If we consider this in epic terms, we see not only the trajectory from public to private, politics to philosophy, but we also see a breakdown between these very dichotomies so often used to dissect the poem. There may be a move from the public to the private, but it is countered by an historical arc that begins with the contemporary and ends with the “six-thousand-year timelines” (Scroggins 425). Moreover, as the poem progresses from an individual on a New York City street, to landscapes that grow to encompass America, and then farther to an almost borderless geological landscape, the individual multiplies, becoming many selves and, beyond that, many voices.

In The Beginning: Reading “A”-1 as Epic

The very first lines of “A” announce its epic intention:

A

Round of fiddles playing Bach

Come, ye daughters, share my anguish... (“A”-1, 1)

The poem begins with “A,” a singular beginning and a beginning that is quoted by the title. The next word “round” stands as a significant and epic revision of the original lines. As Scroggins explains:

Where the earlier opening had tried to convey the impression of vast orchestral forces—a ‘thousand’ fiddles—the revision pivoted on a pun (“A Round”/ around) that underlines the historical “repeat” that is the subject of the movement: The St. Matthew Passion has indeed “come around” again, almost two hundred years after its premiere. In its first lines, “A” evokes the circularity of history, even as it evokes the feeling of a musical “round” that has often impressed listeners of the opening chorus of the *Passion*. (85)

The revision from “thousand” to “round” is transformatively epic. The “thousand” does capture the sense of a communal poem, a single sound made of multiple instruments or, “One song/ Of many voices” (“A”-5,18). Yet, the revision, as Scroggins suggests, redirects the poem toward history and the poem’s temporal underpinnings which establish an epic foundation.

These first lines can also be taken as an epic invocation. *The Iliad* and *Odyssey*, the *Aeneid* and *Paradise Lost* all begin with the verb “sing.” Zukofsky will make his intention to “sing” explicit a few pages later:

There are different techniques
Men write to be read, or spoken,
Or declaimed, or rhapsodized,
And quite differently to be sung... (“A”-1, 4)

But here, in the first lines, Zukofsky invokes the verb by replacing it with actual singing: “*Come, ye daughters, share my anguish.*” Zukofsky invokes the muses, beckoning to the “daughters” for aid. It is also the first instance of Zukofsky destabilizing his selfhood by expressing a deeply personal feeling in another’s words. Moreover, the words are purported to be the words of Christ, the “personal savior,” the quintessential example of metonymic suffering and empathy. By referencing Christ’s passion, Zukofsky activates the temporal elements that Tayler talks about. Here we have an allusion to Christ’s death which is also his resurrection, the end and the beginning, the end *as* the beginning. In a significant way, Zukofsky begins by fulfilling the moment that Adam and Eve anticipate when leaving Milton’s poem with “wandering steps and slow.”

Zukofsky also performs another kind of resurrection as Anne Day Dewey points out: “‘A’ begins by performing an immediate resurrection in a concert of Bach’s St. Matthew Passion, which then disperses with the crowd into the flow of everyday life” (30). Dewey considers this in opposition to the start of Pound’s *Cantos* which “begin with a descent into the underworld of history in order to ascend to paradise, fusing Odysseus’s *nostos* with this ascent to define divinity as the true ‘home’ of humanity” (30). Dewey, however, overlooks Pound’s use of Dante, in many ways his primary model for the poem. The opening of the *Cantos*, the descent into hell, is also fusion of the *Odyssey* with the *Inferno*. So while Dewey may be right to suggest that “whereas Pound forges historical particulars into an epiphany that transcends them, Zukofsky accentuates the arterial conditions from which the epiphany arises” (30), the contrast is not as stark as she makes it. There is in the beginning of “A” elements of the “transcendent” which are

important to see if we are to avoid reducing the first movements of the epic to a mere reworking of Marxist materialism that is then “replaced” by Spinoza’s idea of love. By failing to mention Dante, Day misses the way in which Zukofsky is not just “different” but revisionary.

Before going on to explain how Zukofsky revises Dante, it should first be noted that Zukofsky also incorporates this moment from the *Odyssey*—having rewritten Pound’s revision of the *Nekuia* for himself—into “A”-12, which is much closer to the original placement of the segment, occurring in Book 11 of the *Odyssey*. As we will see later, the use of the *Nekuia* in “A”-12 signals a significant break—a new beginning and a nadir in the action—very close to what Tayler says about epic structure:

As Homer in the *Odyssey* and Vergil in the *Aeneid* return to the beginning half-way through their epics; and book VII of *Paradise Lost*, ‘half yet remains unsung,’ begins with Creation, ending with the ‘Paradise within’ and ‘eternal Paradise of rest’ when Jesus brings back long-wandered man.... The circular patterns of six books apiece co-exist, as in Vergil, with three movements of four books each. (61)

But it is not this that makes Day’s contrast slightly misleading. Rather, it is the fact that Zukofsky’s initial lines, like Pound’s, are also a descent into hell.⁶⁷ This restates the sense of nadir and return in different mythic terms. Zukofsky’s exit “through ‘Camel’ smoke” (“A”-1, 2) into what Day calls “the flow of everyday life” is, as in Dante, an emergence from the underworld. It is a reconfiguration of the upper class in their “black dresses” as the inhabitants of Dante’s hell, an imagining that brings out the political aspect of Dante’s poem, a feature of the poem that Pound’s use of Dante tends to suppress. The transition from the theater to the street is always jarring, coming from the darkness into the light or from the stifling theater into the open air, but it is too much to say that this transition “dilutes” the vision.

The opening of “A” while quoting Christ does so by referring to Bach who quotes the gospel “according to St. Mathew.” The poem thereby contains the oral utterance within the text while simultaneously taking a particular stance toward history. “A”, like the Gospel, may express the truth, but it is always a truth “according to” a specific author; it is always one version among at least four—if not many others. Moreover, the real and hagiographic fuse together in the book, their reality ultimately textual. Within the poem, the various layers of reality that we often try and separate—myth, fact, performance—cannot in the end really be told apart.⁶⁸ But when told, the speaker sings them in the way that Bach’s *Passion* is sung. As Zukofsky writes:

Men write to be read, or spoken,
Or declaimed, or rhapsodized,
And quite differently to be sung... (“A”-1, 4)

This complex of mythic, religious, historical references conspire to bring the temporal aspects of the beginning to the fore, a time that outstrips the overly simplistic structure of the “circularity of history.” As Scroggins states, “‘A’-1 presents the dilemma of the poet’s task in an unsettled

⁶⁷ cf. Ahearn, 165 ff.

⁶⁸ I intend a pun here which makes the end of the sentence sound vague. What I mean is that these different categories of “reality” cannot be distinguished but also that they cannot be “told” without each other, because to tell one is typically to invoke the others either by connotation or allusion.

time—how to navigate between the demands of an unjust, capitalistic society and the otherworldly perfection offered by art, represented here by Bach’s *St. Matthew Passion*” (82). The first is a matter of political progress, the second an idea of an eternal “perfection” based on a sense of cyclicity.

Beginning with a reprisal of Christ’s passion is not just to, as the Renaissance theologian Peter Sterry states, “opening the beginning in the end, espousing the end to the beginning” (qtd. in Tayler 60) but to start at the nadir of the circle which then, as Tayler elaborating on Frye explains, “ties a knot in time—from which point the action unravels backward and forward to reveal the form and pressure of God’s eternal purposes: ‘Jesus Christ was the *great design*’ of history (60). The performance of this particular “rendering” is itself a resurrection and it is performed on Passover and with Easter four days away, which means it is the Thursday night before good Friday, the “actual” day of Christ’s passion coming in line with the performance. In all probability, this is not a coincidence but rather why *The Passion* was chosen to be performed in the first place. What is more of a coincidence is that it is the night of Passover. In so far as Easter is a redaction of Passover, it is not an accident that the two holidays occur close together. But reenacting the Resurrection on the day of Passover collapses time, enacting the beginning and end of the Christian story in an instant: Passover then Easter. In a very sped up way, we see Easter fulfill the promise that Passover represents. However, within “A”-1, the mention of Easter (which, not incidentally, is also a reference to the first performance of *The Passion* almost two centuries ago) is superseded by a mention of Passover later on (“It was also Passover”). This later reference makes Passover a fulfillment of Easter. In the end, Easter and Passover function in a cyclical pattern of mutual fulfillment, subtly critiquing the idea of a Christian hegemony by obviating the beginnings and endings that lends Easter its imagined precedence.

But the fact that Zukofsky says “It was also Passover” is also a moment of recollection, a statement that requires first the forgetting of what the day is. That is, in an ontological as well as mythic sense, the mention of Passover is a return to both a self identity and cultural origin that thematizes the oldest epic forces: memory and return. This search for a beginning and the temporal layering that confounds commencement recalls the beginning of *Paradise Lost* as well as anticipates the “postmodern” strategies tend to work anachronistically. Suffice it to say that considering the start of “A”, Wittgenstein was right to contend that “Time is a muddle felt as a problem” (qtd. in Tayler 8).

The recollection of Passover signals Zukofsky’s exile status as outside the Christian pageant. It is a status he already makes him uncomfortable at the concert. As Robert Hass delicately describes it, “There the young poet, on high, is sitting in the balcony at a concert, looking down onto the perfection of Bach. Between him and the perfection, rich people in the loges and the orchestra. They are the manifest injustice and vulgarity of an actual world” (64). Yet despite his empathic description of the poet, Hass does not remark on the manifold ironies in the scene. Zukofsky sits above “on high” those that he perceives as the exclusive and exclusionary “upper class.” Moreover, it is not so much the eye that perceives “the perfection of Bach” as it is the ear. The eye “looks down”—both literally and figuratively—at “the manifest injustice” while hearing “perfection” in Bach’s music. These types of binary oppositions continue to play out in rounds, resonating throughout the rest of “A”. Guy Davenport nicely compiles the juxtapositions that Zukofsky puts into play in “A”-1:

The poem begins on Passover 1928 at a performance of the St. Matthew Passion at Carnegie Hall; Easter is four days away. The Banks are soon to close; the

country is deep into the Depression. Women in diamonds have come to hear underpaid musicians. . . . Passover: Easter. Leipzig 1728: New York 1929. Jew: Christian. Christ on the cross: industrial workers crucified on their machines. (Davenport 101-2)

In noting these contrasts, the political significance of the performance as well as the street, of Christian hagiography as well as the Depression become apparent. We might extend these thematic binaries to the author himself. The writer is first presented as an audience member who is enveloped in rather than in control of the political pageantry of the first movement. Yet, by conflating his poetry with the words from the *Passion* (literally, “to suffer”), Zukofsky, sitting above it all, appears in his empathic suffering for the workers almost as a stand in for Christ and his taking on the plight of the “the industrial workers crucified on their machines.”

The poem intends to be vehicle for real social change, remediation, even redemption. In so being, we might agree with Perelman’s assessment:

By defiantly appropriating the central mystery of the dominant (foreign) culture—Christ’s eternally performative ‘This is my body’—Zukofsky is scrambling the elements de Man sees as constituting the sad drama of allegorical lucidity. Rather than realizing his own belatedness vis-à-vis Christ, Zukofsky is asserting that the organic process of his writing. . . . is predicated upon the alienating artificialities of the present. (*Trouble With Genius* 209)

Perhaps this is another way of stating what Dewey was getting at with the idea of the “concert-inspired vision. . . . diluted by subsequent daily events” (30). Be that as it may, it is Zukofsky who shows us the inextricable and potent relationship between the concert and the “Pennsylvania miners” by directly relating the “bediamonded” audience to the coal miners whose grueling work unearths the gem; by further relating the audience listening to the Matthew’s Gospel to “a mass movement” through a pun on both mass and the union organizer’s name, “Carat”; by connecting Bach’s twenty-two children” to “the wives and children” left behind by the miners (“A”-1, 3).

Already Zukofsky begins to bend the progress of time to an idea of recurrence. Already, like Milton, he begins to move “straight through history in a circle” (Tayler 14):

The Passion According to Matthew
Composed seventeen twenty-nine,
Rendered at Carnegie Hall,
Nineteen twenty-eight
Thursday evening, the fifth of April
The autos parked, honking. (A-1, 1)

The procession from “composed” to “rendered” is significant here. Composition highlights the writing and the arranging of material, but it achieves its fullest expression in the idea of “rendering.” The word simply means “to perform,” which is what happens in Carnegie Hall on the fifth of April 1928. But the word also means to return, which highlights the “recurrences” already begun in these first lines and which will continue throughout the poem. More specifically, the idea of rendering as return has a monetary connotation which, as we have seen, has clear connections with the movement. In this respect, we can cite probably the most famous

use of the word “render” in this sense by Jesus in the “Gospel According to Mark”: “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's” (12:17). In these terms, the idea of rendering as a means of reciprocity, an act of “returning in kind,” also underscores Zukofsky’s Marxist notions and the ways in which the poem may stand for a labor theory of value.

”Render” can also mean to translate which Zukofsky does throughout the poem, his translation of Plautus’s *Rudens* in “A”-21 being only the most strident example. From the initial reference to the transubstantiation with the *Passion* to the question “Can/The design/Of the fugue/be transferred/to poetry?” (“A”-6, 38), there is a constant effort to translate between one medium and another. The effort to translate words into music is also a matter of trying to “render” with words the way a musical performance renders or interprets a set score. Like Matthew’s Gospel which gives a hagiographic version of the story of Jesus, one that is at once mythical and historical, subjective and authoritative, definitive and a version, the rendering of the concert synthesizes the contradictions even as it complicates them further. For this is not just “The Gospel According to Matthew” but that gospel transcribed to music and then “rendered” again almost two hundred years after it was written, a recontextualization that affirms and changes its significance. By offering us an “arrangement,” Zukofsky’s position as storyteller keenly resembles that of the orchestra he witnesses in the epic’s first scene. In a final meaning of “render” as “restore,” we can already feel “a grand narrative of historical redemption” (Hatlen, “From Modernism to Postmodernism 215) being brought back and coming into play.

As a progression of linear time, the first movement progresses by means of juxtaposition but these juxtapositions adhere to a hagiographical cyclicity. For example, the progress of years gives way to the recurrent and more intimate time of “Thursday” and “evening.” The evening, in the Miltonic sense, hangs things in the balance and suggests a liminal state, and evening that, as a quality of night, is both a nadir and a promise of the future “light” that emerges in “A” as a significant motif.⁶⁹ But this is countered—or evened out—by the reference to April which, in light of Zukofsky’s explicit assault in “A Poem Beginning The,” may be taken as yet another veiled critique of Eliot’s *The Wasteland*. Or, in ways similar to the way in which he revises Pound as a means to restore Dante, Zukofsky’s reference to April may be a “rendering” of Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, to which the opening of *The Wasteland* alludes and, at least in Zukofsky’s eyes, distorts.

The parked autos “honking” add to this temporal mélange, bringing a sense of “rested totality” into the poem through a quotidian reimagining of the Heisenberg principle. Zukofsky presents us with an object intended for motion but which is sitting in place offering a contrapuntal noise to the music of Bach. On one hand, there is a divide between the cars on the street and the music inside the concert hall; on the other hand, the cars give a sense of insularity akin to the “bediamoned” audience that separates those in the autos from those walking on the street. But where the *Passion* intends to be restorative, even redemptive, the honking evinces a social rage, a hostile stance toward both others and the world.

Scroggins argues that “In ‘A’-1...the poet finds himself torn between his longing for imperishable art and the demands of the immediate political world around him. “A”-2 transposes this dilemma to the realm of poetics” (83). This is a fair rendering of the progress from “A”-1 to “A”-2, but it still a little too neat. These dichotomies between art and life, while they seem to appear, are illusory and evasive. When examined closely, they become chimeras, entanglements of myth, history, text, and speech that cannot be so easily separated but are nevertheless bound

⁶⁹ Of course, Christ, too, is often referred to as “the light.”

together by the intricate weave of the poem. From the get-go, the political nature of the poem is inextricable from other and perhaps older forms of social organization such as religion and myth. The idea that the political can be left behind or that Zukofsky can replace “a mythos of the revolutionary working class” with “A mythos of the family” and thereby “simply substituted one myth of redemption for another” (Hatlen, “From Modernism to Postmodernism” 216) is ultimately faulty. As an epic, the poem binds these things together and makes them indistinguishable, as we know by the cliché, “the personal is political.” So let’s move on to see how in “A” this is so.

The Domestic Epic: A Reconsideration of the Break in “A”-12

Poe,
Gentlemen, don’ chewknow,
But never wrote an epic.
—Louis Zukofsky, “A Poem Beginning ‘The’”

Laced throughout the criticism on Zukofsky are references to “A” as a “domestic” poem. While this seems like an accurate descriptor, left unexplained, the term can easily be confused with the idea of the personal epic. Nevertheless, the domestic, what Hatlen at one point calls “the domestic idyll” (Hatlen, “From Modernism” 216), can be used to distinguish “A” as epic from its erstwhile twin, the personal epic. For one, the terms themselves are clearly different. Where “personal” emphasizes the individual in his or her autonomy, the domestic refers to the privacy generated by a series of intimate relationships (i.e. family). Domestic has the added political meaning of “national” or having to do with one’s country. As we saw by comparison with the *Cantos*, “A” is a decidedly American poem, bound up with the domestic concerns of the country. Finally, the domestic comes from the Latin “domus” which basically means “house” but most often referred to “a house of God.” While the connection is perhaps less obvious, this connotation captures the subdued religious undertones that, though often secularized, shape the ethical, philosophical, and temporal trajectory of the Zukofsky’s epic. Beyond these denotative distinctions, the domestic epic does not deflate the epic project in the way “personal epic” does but rather reminds us, again, the ways in which Zukofsky will use the apparently quotidian and private as a site for extending epic principles of history and culture.

By using the term “domestic” to describe the epic, we can also draw clear contrasts between “A” and Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*. The idea of the domestic directly contradicts Whitman’s “barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world” (89). Whitman’s attempt to overcome what for him would be a confining domestic space in order to utter “the password primeval”⁷⁰ may at first blush seem to represent epic’s expansive scope; yet, the inarticulate “primeval” sound is really just another example of Whitman’s lyric self-inflating, a rarefied identity hovering over the rooftops, exonerated from the culture it purports to represent. Although the space may attend to “the vista,”⁷¹ the utterance itself is not only self-aggrandizing but also alienating, the exact opposite of what Zukofsky establishes in “A”.

In contrast to Whitman assuming “amativeness,” which is based on a sexually possessive love, Zukofsky’s sense of Spinozan love lacks the kind of rapaciousness of Whitman as it posits

⁷⁰ Walt Whitman, 52.

⁷¹ cf. Madoff

“thinking with things as they exist” (*Prepositions+* 194). Still, Zukofsky’s love is no less intimate. I would argue that despite its more reserved expression, it is more so because Zukofsky locates such intricacies of interaction *under* not over “the roofs of the world,” staging the poem within the discrete rooms where daily living happens. Whitman intimacy, while often thrilling, always seems to involve public displays of affection and acts of exhibitionism dramatized by sluicing about naked somewhere out of doors, the doors themselves ripped from their jams. Zukofsky, on the other hand, creates a kind of privacy which intimates rather than demonstrates intense personal interactions of fealty that serve as the foundation for idealized personal interactions.

In “A”, we move from Whitman’s candor to Zukofskian honor⁷² and sincerity. We move from a metonymic identification to a more inclusive representation. We move from a subjective assumption to an objective description. We move away from “myself” toward the sound of “many voices.” In contrast to *Leaves of Grass*, “A” reaches for something less controlling and therefore more discursive, less presumptuous and therefore more intensely private.

Unfortunately, the “domestic” has been almost exclusively used in terms of “A” to identify the significant structural break in the poem that happens at “A”-12 to explain how a poem that starts out politically motivated can suddenly turn personal. To some extent, noting such a break is justified. After “A”-12, as Scroggins writes, “The time had come for Zukofsky to empty his files, to divest himself of his earlier self’s projects” (*The Poem of A Life* 251). This sense of Zukofsky starting over seems thematically reinforced. Barry Ahearn suggests that “A”-12 “consists simply of the ancient tally of four elements: earth, air, fire, and water” (qtd. in Hatlen “From Modernism” 218). Burton Hatlen sees Genesis:

Interwoven with this sequence [“A”-12, 126], the middle lines of this passage also retrace the process of divine creation: first God shapes man out of the earth, or out of a mist arising from the earth; then He breathes life into His creature; and then the creature looks at the world, names the things of the world, and at this moment becomes a living soul. Zukofsky then retraces the same sequence, in terms of the history of written language as it evolved in Mesopotamia: first the visual sign pictures the thing (*glyph*), then it represents the (auditory) syllable, and finally we arrive at the (purely visual) letter, out of which we can make words. (“From Modernism to Postmodernism” 221)

In the sense that Zukofsky returns to various origins, not excluding the ever terrifying blank page, he starts over and begins anew. Even the publishing history supports the idea of a break. As Woods notes: “A’-12 also marks a significant refocusing of the poem’s sense of direction, which conveniently allows one to perceive the text of “A” as two halves, just as it was published” (167). But at the same time, Woods admits that “With a Movement whose *raison d’être* is the textual interrelation of language, labor, love, writing, and perception, it is something of a travesty to separate the poem into manageable sections in a discussion” (104). Scroggins, too, qualifies his observation when he points out that, “In ‘A’-12 quotation is an index not of the originality of the poet’s vision, but of its continuity with past vision” (*The Poem of A Life* 419).

Still, many critics have used “A”-12 as a wedge to separate the two halves of the poem. Perelman, marking the start of the break just after “A”-9, states that “the first ten

⁷² “Honor” carries notions of public renown, personal chastity, and even the financial significance of paying what’s due. The denotations of the word encapsulate the mix of public and private concerns interwoven throughout “A”.

movements...are deeply political while the final fourteen are not" (*Trouble With Genius* 171).⁷³ Dewey insists that "Zukofsky's relativism creates a discontinuity of meaning between the first and second halves of the poem" (26). Hatlen notes the shift as a substitution of "a mythos of the revolutionary working class" to "a mythos of the family" ("From Modernism" 216). Hatlen will go even further in his earlier essay "Art and/as Labor": "From this point ["A"-9] to the end of "A" Zukofsky will show relatively little interest in history...In this hegira from the public to the personal, the political to the domestic, Zukofsky was gain traveling a path traced by many members of his generation" (232). However, Hatlen goes on to conclude that "Here the political voice sings in harmony with—at any rate in counterpoint to—the personal voice...a hymn that recreates—indeed, that *is*—the movement of history itself" (232). Even though he imagines the poem as a "hegira," an escape from the public into the private, Hatlen will nevertheless try to recuperate the "political voice" through a mixed metaphor that imagines the two voices somehow harmonizing. More recently, Schelb offers a kind of critical reprisal of these positions:

No adequate explanation has yet been given for Zukofsky's turn toward domesticity and sentiment. My argument is twofold: instead of being viewed as a nostalgic flight from the disorder of history, Zukofsky's domestic turn should be recognized as a reintegration of repressed emotions *and* a refusal of coercive relations toward nature, language, and history. (Schelb 336)

Fair enough, but I have to question the premise upon which this claim is based. It is not clear to that an explanation is needed or should be forwarded about "Zukofsky's turn toward domesticity." Such an argument depends on a critical tendency to break the poem in half which, if nothing else, distorts the relationship between the public and the private, the political and the personal by relying on a fairly crude sense of the idea of "domesticity."

In "Getting Ready to Read 'A'," written around the same time as Hatlen's "Art and/or Labor," Byrd, noting the poem's resemblance to earlier epics, claims that "as a domestic poem in twenty-four books, it is possibility an analogue to the *Odyssey*" (301). By invoking the *Odyssey*, Byrd comes closest to giving the term "domestic" its due. He reminds us that the enormous, wide-ranging, episodic question of Odysseus is ultimately a search for and return to home. The "political voice" of the poem is always also its "private voice." In "A" such a search, as we have seen, and as Shoemaker reminds us, "dramatizes the conflict of cultural identity faced by the young Zukofsky but stages that conflict on a world historical scale, connecting it to the fate of the Jewish people" (36). The domestic is no less than an integral aspect of the poem as an epic and is best understood in those terms.

The resemblance to the *Odyssey*, around which "A"-12 is organized, reminds us that the domestic scene serves as the teleological climax of what could otherwise be characterized as, to borrow a phrase from Peter Quartermain, "a somewhat puzzling episodic narrative" (160). Moreover, the prototypical domestic scene involves Penelope staving off suitors by weaving and unweaving, while Telemachus vainly tries to oust them as he needfully awaits his father's assistance. It is hardly an accident that Woods, noting passages from "A"-12 (162, 181), cites Penelope as the basis for understanding Zukofsky's poem "as a woven 'text'": "Penelope's work becomes a model, as she, by deception...puts off her suitors by pretending that she cannot marry

⁷³ I consider the two "halves" of "A"-9 as part of this break since the second half of "A"-9 was largely intended to correspond to "A"-12 as a bridge that would create recurrences and make the last twelve movements cohere to the first half of the poem.

until she has finished weaving a shroud for Laertes, Ulysses' father, which she unravels every night, so that the work is in a continual state of incompleteness, or 'becoming'" (200). "A"-12 is a point of dissolution, an unweaving, a return to origins which is both home and a new beginning. Moreover, as we will see later, the reference to Penelope encodes a gender critique that will be fully realized in "A"-24. But in addition to Penelope, Shoemaker notes that "A"-12 is "a movement devoted to family and to tradition. The sequence in question is concerned more particularly with fathers and sons, with the patriarchal line of descent connecting Zukofsky's grandfather, Maishe Afroim, Zukofsky's father, Pinchos, Zukofsky himself, and, finally, his son Paul" (29). Such is Zukofsky's personalized "rendering" of themes revolving around the relationship between Odysseus and Telemachus.

One big reason perhaps that the site of the domestic is misunderstood and simplified into a simple opposition to the political is the lack of feminist critiques of "A". As Barbara Cole admonishes, "What's wrong with Zukofsky scholarship is that there is no—count 'em, no—extended or extensive feminist or gender readings." It is fair to say that politicizing the domestic, although it has really always been a highly politicized space, falls under the purview of feminism. From the vantage of a feminist reading, a vantage that, in terms of "A", epic helps make visible, Zukofsky's effort to create recurrences between the movements, to blur if not erase the type of dichotomies that have calcified around "A"-12, and to locate these dynamics within the domestic space are all part and parcel of the poetic labor, what Cole calls its "protofeminist moves." So instead of contemplating the way the poem breaks at "A"-12, it may be better to consider the congruities of the two halves and the inseparability of the public and private, personal and historical throughout the text. Indeed it is the object of epic to bring such "rhythms" together as Frye once again reminds us: "The cycle has two main rhythms: the life and death of the individual, and the slower social rhythm which, in the course of years...brings cities and empires to their rise and fall" (318).

We can start by returning to Scroggins who offers his own deft critique of such bifurcating:

Literary critics have made much of Zukofsky's turn to—or even 'retreat' to—the domestic in the second half of "A". For some, this emphasis on the family unity served to push the poetry into the realm of the hermetic, of private utterances intended for an audience of two, rather than for a more general readership. Other critics have regretted Zukofsky's 'abandonment' of the explicit political argumentation of much of the first half of "A". But Zukofsky's long poem, from its very inception, was concerned with the family, with the sources of the self. (*The Poem of A Life* 385)

To emphasize Scroggins's point, we need only recall that Zukofsky's first reference to Bach within the very first lines of "A" is as a father of "twenty-two/children!" ("A"-1, 1). And so it goes. But Scroggins's acceptance of the idea that Zukofsky "retreats" to the domestic is still misleading. The corollary to Scroggins's point is also true. Just as the "explicit political argumentation" is everywhere infused with the domestic, the domestic aspect is everywhere political, infused with current events and the valencies of history.

In fact, as critics have consistently observed without seeming to see the contradiction, the grandest historical gestures are reserved for the latter half of "A". As Hatlen asks in the midst of a discussion of the pun on "quire" found in "A"-12: "Why 'three millennia'? Because that's the

period of time that separates us from the beginnings of literate culture, the invention of the book” (“From Modernism to Postmodernism” 224). Or as Quartermain observes, discussing the start of “A”-22: “That neat little Valentine song is an appropriate opening for a pair of poems that tells, in the course of two thousand lines and among many other things, the geological and then the political history of the world—6,000 years of historical record without dates or names” (958). Why appropriate? Because “A” is much more inclined toward bringing together the types of oppositions critics so often cleave apart. To be fair, Scroggins says as much: “For Zukofsky, the domestic was never only domestic, but always opened out upon its broader historical moment, and from there upon the universal. When he wrote, his immediate audience was of course his family, but his ultimate audience was a community of readers across the years” (*The Poem of A Life* 386). And as far as we can consider the political as the recrudescence of history, it operates in similar fashion.

It is the effect of the poem to make us feel the cliché that the personal is always political. As Wood’s notes, “The nation grieving [John Kennedy in “A”-15] is a mark of the way in which the public space invades and orders the private sphere. National grief can only become ‘real’ only if it is constructed along intimate and private relations” (192). The political is dependent on the personal for its reality. History is never separate from the people who live it. As Scroggins states: “The three-person circle of his family was not a cell to which Zukofsky confined himself, but a base from which his imagination could range across the centuries and the continents” (*The Poem of A Life* 386). What is more, the integration of these two aspects of the poem make sense in terms of epic’s structure: they depend on the storyteller who enters but does not ever quite identify with the narrative (a life) that is presented in medias res and is never coterminous with the historical scope (a time) but rather extends episodically. All this said, it is hard to completely deny that a shift occurs with “A”-12. This is the move from Marxism to marriage, from the social landscape to the familial one. It seems unreasonable to simply reject outright an observation that has been approached biographically (the temporal break between the first and second halves), philosophically (move from Marx to Spinoza), and structurally (modernist to postmodernist strategies). However, we can perhaps now consider the break in terms of the dynamics implicit in epic to understand the shift in way that does not necessarily require us to sever the poem into intractable dichotomies.

Before trying to suture the two halves back together, it may help to remind ourselves of what Tayler said in the context of discussing *Paradise Lost*:

As Homer in the *Odyssey* and Vergil in the *Aeneid* return to the beginning half-way through their epics; and book VII of *Paradise Lost*, ‘half yet remains unsung,’ begins with Creation, ending with the ‘Paradise within’ and ‘eternal Paradise of rest’ when Jesus brings back long-wandered man.... The circular patterns of six books apiece co-exist, as in Vergil, with three movements of four books each. (61)

When the critics note that the poem seems to start over, to return to origins, to begin again, this is not necessarily an irrevocable break. Perhaps, as in the tradition of many classic epics, it is the nadir in the cycle, a critical point in “the circular patterns” where “we get a confident proclamation that there *is* a plan, along with an assumption that we will (or should) recognize the epic precedents lying behind this plan and an absolute confidence on the poet’s part that he *will* carry this plan through to the end” (Hatlen, “From Modernism” 217). Or as Zukofsky writes:

I've finished 12 "books"
 So to speak,
 of 24— ("A"-12, 258).

"A"-12 cannily brings together Genesis and the *Odyssey*, "bestowing on the work a dignity and purpose as ancient as Hesiod and the author of Genesis" (Ahearn 213). Each of these sources in its way is an epic of exile and a search for home. Moreover, by juxtaposing the two, Zukofsky ingeniously brings together the two main sources of English epic, sources that are more often considered contradictory than sympathetic. In addition, Zukofsky reverses Homer and, as Scroggins points out, "[A"-12] ends at the beginning of the *Odyssey* itself, with Homer's invocation to the muse" (*The Poem of A Life* 250). Zukofsky literally rewinds the *Odyssey* as a means of return to the beginning of the tradition, beginning of the text, a way of literally clearing the slate. He also emphasizes the cyclic pattern by doing what Penelope does at the end of the poem in order to get back to its beginning. But probably even more important than the reversal itself is the fact that it allows him to end with an invocation. This makes explicit that the end is just a beginning, an invocation, the continuation of "A"'s epic orbit.

The voice of the storyteller, the didactic or "instructional" voice that summarizes the action or describes the form, also emerges in "A"-12. For example, the famous "integral" occurs here ("A"-12, 138). Also, the poem takes a precipitous turn as the poetic structure is re-imagined in terms that fundamentally reverse the epic project:

To begin a song:
 If you cannot recall,
 Forget... ("A"-12, 140)

The idea of forgetting inverts the epic in a way that resonates with the other reversals that occur in the movement. As Walter Benjamin recalls it, "Mnemosyne, the rememberer, was the Muse of the epic art among the Greeks.... For if the record kept by memory—historiography—constitutes the creative matrix of the various epic forms..., its oldest form, the epic, by virtue of being a kind of common denominator includes the story and the novel" (97). As with the reversal of the *Odyssey*, he does so with epic itself, taking memory to its logical conclusion and using this as a point of return to memory's "oldest form."

Because if "*Memory* creates the chain of tradition which passes a happening on from generation to generation" (Benjamin 98) then forgetting is also required in order to find the recurrences. As Zukofsky writes:

Much of it in pencil—blurred—other
 notes written over it
 I can't read back thru the years-
 Is it worth jotting down
 In ink, as sometime
 I may be sorry
 When the sense is entirely destroyed... ("A"-12, 251)

As Scroggins points out, "After he finished 'A'-12, Zukofsky would lay aside his long poem for another nine years, not returning to it until 1960.... Zukofsky knew that another twelve

movements awaited. But he had no desire to hurry them; they could wait until the contingencies of his own life summoned him back to ‘A’” (*The Poem of A Life* 252). Or again Zukofsky:

Each writer writes
 one long work whose beat he cannot
 entirely be aware of. Recurrences
 follow him, crib and drink from a
 well that’s his cadence—after
 he’s gone... (“A”-12, 214)

This may seem like Zukofsky endorses a “poem of a life” as something that you just keep writing day in and day out until you die. However, Zukofsky’s own sense of this “beat” that would “follow him” makes all the work that a poet writes into a whole. “A” as his epic is just part of that “one long work,” albeit the largest part. As an epic, it encompasses “a life” but not necessarily Zukofsky’s own; it transcends the “personal” by paradoxically being less than and therefore more than a rendering of Zukofsky’s own days.

Nevertheless, the sheer duration of the project still gives critics trouble. As Tim Woods concedes:

The fact that the writing of the poem took place over fifty years, and that changes during that time are inscribed into and alter the shape of the text, is ignored. These theoretical shortcomings make it necessary to trace the questions of the interrelation of forms of writing and ideas of culture in Zukofsky’s texts not in terms of an exploration of a content or a set of cultural opinions but in terms of what the writing produces. (20)

Of course, praxis is important. The fact that “‘A’ was proceeding by a mixture of plan and contingency” (Scroggins 333) clearly informs the form of the work. Yet, as Woods suggests, it is still the text, the object—something about which Zukofsky was adamant—that we must look to and take as a whole. But it is rare event to find a text that represents such an expanse artistic practice, and it is no surprise that it thwarts our critical approaches. The impulse to respond its resistance by breaking it down, cannibalizing, or otherwise attempting “to separate the poem into manageable sections” (Woods 104) is understandable, especially if one approaches “A” in the same way as a lyric. Lyric reading strategies are crucial to reading the poem but cannot take the measure of such a project as a whole because ultimately and poem that purports to be “a poem of a life” has to be read as more than “a high energy-construct and, at all points” (Olson 240). Such a conception makes it difficult to consider a hiatus in the writing process as part of the overall rhythm of the poem. As in “a life” there are lulls and pauses of different durations as well as moments of thrills and moments of heightened activity. Unlike a lyric, “a poem of a life” acknowledges breaks in time through forgetting, through recurrences, through disjunctions which are not the same as breaks in poetic form.

The epic, originally sung over days, can help imagine the dormancy of the writing process as part of the poem’s overall form and aid us in finding approaches to the poem that do not require us to single out a break such as the one apparent in “A”-12. While citing such breaks may be critically convenient, it must ultimately lead us to overlook the larger rhythmic patterns of writing and the way in which they in-form the way “A” addresses the public and the private,

memory and forgetting, now and then. An epic, we can suppose, offers us what “a life” means in the long term and what “a time” is when it speaks of, as Zukofsky writes in “I Sent Thee Late,” “futurity no more than duration.” In attempting to keep the whole in mind while we examine the parts (which, at least since Plato, has been an unavoidable critical practice), it may be useful to keep Northrop Frye’s distinction in mind:

The epic differs from the narrative in the encyclopaedic range of its theme, from heaven to the underworld, and over an enormous mass of traditional knowledge. A narrative poet, a Southey or a Lydgate, may write any number of narratives, but an epic poet normally completes only one epic structure, the moment when he decides on his theme being the crisis of his life. (318)

In doing so, we might not be so prone to mistake discursiveness for a lack of unity and open-endedness with endlessness.

Wor(l)d Without End: Epic Closure in “A”-23 and “A”-24

Not to fathom time but literally to sound it as on an instrument and so to hear again as much of what was and is together, as one breathes without pointing to it before and after. The story must exist in each word or it cannot go on. The words written down—or even inferred as written over, crossed out—must live, not seem merely to glance at a watch.—Louis Zukofsky “Forward”

“A”-23 serves as the ostensible conclusion of the poem. I say “ostensible” because the poem clearly has another entire movement to go before it’s over. Nevertheless, “A”-23 is where Zukofsky stops writing. According to Burton Hatlen, “Thus to ‘complete’ his life work, Zukofsky must deliberately decide *not* to complete it—to rely on the kindness, not of a stranger indeed, but of his wife” (218). I will have more to say about this when discussing “A”-24, but suffice it to say here that such a claim gestures toward the sense of closure felt at the end of “A”-23 even as it acknowledges the poem’s continuation. The sense of finality does not just result from its being the last movement that Zukofsky writes but can be ascribed to the formal gestures within the movement as well. “A”-23 simultaneously expands outward toward an enormous historical sweep even as it resolves, in a centripetal movement, back into letters, nearing an alphabetic dissolution.

Along with “A”-22, “A”-23 is one of a pair of thousand line poems which, as Perelman quips “is the epic version of 100” (“Zukofsky at 100” np). As Scroggins observes, “‘A’-23 is a ‘graph of culture,’ a writing of the entire history of human word making” (*The Poem of A Life* 446). “A”-23 seems to move in the opposite direction of the poem’s title in a kind of hermeneutic grasping to encompass the whole. Whereas the title identifies the most miniscule part of the text as the sum total, “A”-23 tries to contain the “the entire history of human word making” within a fraction of the poem. Zukofsky’s attempt to take “a comprehensive view of personal, human, and natural history” (Ahearn, Zukofsky’s “A” xii) not only demonstrates the epic scope of the poem but, more importantly, the way it reconfigures epic contingencies, strategies, and characteristics. “A”-23 is the destination of a trajectory that reaches toward an historical scope and then beyond the historical, ultimately putting this seemingly all-consuming

category within the larger context of geology. This move toward the geological will eventually erode any sense of a hero, leaving language rarified of speakers in its place.

Perhaps the complexities of its trajectory rests on a very simple insight on Zukofsky's part: we know history as we know others, and perhaps even ourselves, by and through language, and language, when not spoken, is largely contained in books. So ultimately history, not to mention ontology, is, in its final estimation, a palimpsest of words. As Nadel declares, "Language, not logic, structures history" (124). As we read "A", we watch Zukofsky "interweaving fragmentary but intense moments of personal experience... with contemporary historical events and materials drawn from the poet's reading" (Hatlen, "From Modernism to Postmodernism 215) and, as the poem progresses, "language begins to displace epistemology as the locus of principal poetic concern" (Woods 100). By the time of "A"-23, language itself is the central concern of the poem.

But this linguistic history that "A"-23 constructs has peculiar features. As Quartermain describes it, "Those archeological strata, eons under eons, are layered in felt time rather than in the seen ground, and the condensation of an era into a minute means that in the very act of writing one word the writer reenacts the whole of human history" ("Only is Order Othered" 964). Zukofsky's attempt "to contain the whole of the work in each word" (Quartermain 961) collapses time and space. It "ties a knot in time—from which point the action unravels backward and forward" (Tayler 60) as the language becomes densely referential and discursive. History emerges from this linguistic interplay as a plane of language that can be constantly worked and reworked. Ultimately, this undermines any chronological sense of time or a systematic narrative based on a chronology of events: "The sequentiality of print has to be subverted so that a new topography for language may emerge: the word may be *layered* rather than sequential" (Woods 62). Even though movement presents events "from pre-3000 BCE to the present... in roughly chronological order" (445), the allusiveness of the words, not to mention the disjunctive syntax, disrupts such tidy progress. If "History is embedded in language," As Quartermain claims, then "punning, whether etymological or cross-linguistic, is one way of discerning it, releasing it, making it present" ("Only is Order Othered" 965). History becomes a distillation of incidents coexisting in an instant of time, emerging out of the connections that words can make between disparate events.

The constant reconfiguration of history through poetic association of words breaks down the given historical connections typically based on context and chronology, generating history anachronistically by way of recurrences found by decontextualizing the words. In so doing, Zukofsky's brand of history disintegrates the boundary between the public and the private, the personal and the epochal. As Quartermain asserts, "A poem which records the history of his own family evokes as part of that history the words of these previous writers... and the alert reader realizes for himself the history that is present in the language ("Only is Order Othered" 965). The connection between events that a conventional history would otherwise make dissimilar reveals that private experience and historical texts not only have common ground but are indistinguishable due to "the history that is present in language." Additionally, and perhaps more importantly, equating the quotidian with the epochal has a democratizing effect that calls into question the structures of history that maintain a disparity between the public and private experience. The poem fundamentally questions what we mean by "historical."

By reconfiguring history as linguistic construction, Zukofsky locates the historical within a consciousness that is at once individualized and objectified. Because it is, as Robert Hass reminds us, "Consciousness, where personal and collective memory reside[,] it's in

consciousness that the quality of perceiving a thing to be ‘immemorial’ occurs, or doesn’t” (62). Through the serendipitous relation of the words, through the connections that the mind makes, the poem—and history—come into being. This is not to say history is “reduced” to the personal but rather that the personal—or the self—emerges out of contact or confrontation with “history” which is, in the end, a network of discursive stories borne within language that implicate us in so far as we use the language to express ourselves.

So as much as Zukofsky’s poetic strategies tend to disorient, destabilize, and seem to thwart traditional narrative structure, “the history that is present in the language” makes the language unobtrusively narrative nevertheless. With “A”, Zukofsky retools the Aristotelian idea of *epos*⁷⁴ as a discreet story extended by episode. Applying the idea of the episodic to the words themselves, Zukofsky covers a totalizing periodicity by squeezing a complex of episodic narratives into a few words through the allusive and kinetic connectivity of language.⁷⁵ As Woods observes, “Words themselves have histories, or narratives in the world, and each linguistic operation draws not only on the narrative context *of* the word but on the narrative *in* the word” (169). This type of narrative while it may occlude the obvious story achieves the metonymic breadth associated with epic. To recall what Aristotle said of epic narrative,

For the purpose of extending its length, epic poetry has a very great capacity that is specifically its own, since it is not possible in tragedy to imitate many simultaneous lines of action but only that performed by the actors on the stage. But because of the narrative quality of epic it is possible to depict many simultaneous lines of action that, if appropriate, become the means of increasing the poem’s scope. This is an advantage...for constructing a diverse sequence of episodes. (43)

Davenport, while shifting the comparison from tragedy to novel, echoes Aristotle when he remarks, “There is enough narrative and anecdotal *matter* in “A” to make a shelf of novels” (105). The distillation historical narratives into the word which then re-radiates them in a set of new discursive patterns or “recurrences” allows Zukofsky a means of engaging, rethinking, reconstructing the content of history and its relation to knowledge.

If historical knowledge tends to calcify connections by sanctioning and then maintaining specific coordinates for a collective world view that informs both the public and the private spheres of experience, then it would be through its reconfiguration of history—its status as an epic—that allows “A” to levy a critique of a hegemonic forces that posit *a* historical narrative as *the* historical narrative. Byrd submits that,

As long as the conventions of a form of life are widely shared, the mechanisms of communication can be unconscious. Language seems natural and its logic necessary. It is possible to propose a metaphysic, a social order, a psychology. The formulae are ritually repeated, enacting the conventions in every sphere of life.... The whole of life becomes a ritual celebration of the social triumph, of the

⁷⁴ cf. Aristotle’s *Poetics*, 30-31 and 42.

⁷⁵ In *The Poem of A Life*, Scroggins gives an excellent example of this in his discussion of Zukofsky’s use of quotation, citing the word “love you” at the end of “A”-13 to demonstrate the ways in which Zukofsky’s allusions defy attribution to a singular source (420 ff.).

triumph of the sentence (as in grammar and in law) over the disruptive name.
(306)

Moreover if “Language, not logic, structures history” (Nadel 124), then the disruption of conventional communicative practices, the reconfiguration of historical events can call into question rather than reinforce the metaphysical, psychological, and social orders that we as participants in a given culture generally take for granted. But as Vanderborg observes, Zukofsky goes beyond a “disruption of conventional communicative practices” and seeks a way to contextualize the activity of history making itself by emphasizing “a collective order within language that is grounded in a material community” (206). Vanderborg continues: “In his myth of an incarnation word, there is a nostalgic sense that if we could go back far enough to an originary language, we might also return to a point before bodies were separated into artificial distinctions of class, religion, or nationality” (206). The poem attempts to avoid merely replacing one historical construct for another by voiding the historical altogether and replacing it with a geological framework.

The geological frame at which “A” arrives subsumes history under the rubric of geography. If the historical is the human process of making the past significant, geography can be considered its larger and more objective model. As Davenport contends, “History and geography are inextricable disciplines” before going on to assert that they are both fundamental to the imagination: “the imagination, like all things in time, is metamorphic. It is also rooted in a ground, a geography” (4). When the imagination manifests itself through language, it also reveals “the history that is present in the language” (Quartermain, “Only is Order Othered” 965). But beyond that, beyond the activity of human activity of making meaning out of a subjective view of past experience, the word may then extend toward a larger objectification that outstrips language’s relation to a speaker. As Woods explains it, “the urge to discover a ‘pure’ musical language in these last two Movements [of “A”] turns history into a linguistic archeology” (208). Language, unmoored from a speaker or a subject, becomes a site, a landscape from which chthonic meanings within words can be unearthed.

By imagining the poem as a linguistic landscape, we can better understand what Woods cites as “one of the most frequently repeated observations about ‘A’: its hermeticism” (169). As Woods retorts, “Indeed, the poem displays a significant preoccupation with concealment and revelation, and Zukofsky persistently explores how words hide other knowledges: Letters and syllables reveal linkages with new words and new experiences through sound formations” (169). Besides the move toward a familial privacy that is so often cited, Zukofsky’s “extremely hermetic poem” is just as much based on an archeological approach to language that arises from a desire to transcend history. As Scroggins asserts, “The movement concerns itself with natural history, with the geological processes and life cycles of growing things within which human culture arose. Human language, and thereby human thought, take form within the context of these vast geological processes” (*The Poem of A Life* 446). By “objectifying” the language, Zukofsky attempts to place human beings and their historical context against the backdrop of geological time.

Getting rid of speakers and replacing them with a conceptual approach to language based on geography obviously has consequences for the notion of an epic hero, or any personage for that matter who may appear in the poem. As the assumed adherent or focal of an epic, the hero is typically where we find the intersection of the two cycles—“the life and death of the individual” and “the course of years [that] brings cities and empires to their rise and fall” (Frye

318). However, “A”-23 presents us with, as Scroggins asserts, “‘histories’ largely devoid of that genre’s proper names” (*The Poem of A Life* 445). In other words, there are no heroes just a vast, depopulated “history.” As Quartermain puts it, “A” 22-23 are, among other things, a geological and political history of the world, but one without names” (“Only is Order Othered” 962). Because “Zukofsky’s transformation of the past centers on language, not on personality” (Woods 194), the poem supplants the place that the hero typically occupies with language itself. Cid Corman makes a perceptive observation in this regard: “As if this were THE hero of the book: language and letter-a-ture AS epic material—as the core of the human fable/parable” (qtd. in Woods 203-4). In a kind of personalized objectification, the language becomes devoid of a speaker as the elements of epic, the hero and the concomitant mythic narrative, get reconfigured and objectified in and through words. The languages, as Byrd states, “have no speaker, if this means someone who communicates *through* these languages” (Byrd 293); rather, Zukofsky attempts to make language speak for itself which will eventually allow the reader to take up the position of the “hero” as the agent who makes the poem mean and cohere.

As Zukofsky said, “Pound said we live with certain landscapes. And because of the eye’s movement, something is imparted to or through the physical movement of your body and you express yourself as a voice” (*Prepositions*+ 231). Nevertheless, in “A” this “voice” is denatured in an attempt to achieve a kind of objectification. But this attempt to objectify history should not be confused with a desire for a singular objective point of view. At this point in the poem, there is no individual to aspire to such as position. There is no one hero. No one storyteller. As Woods argues, “Such a reflexive imagination subverts a recurrent feature of our civilization—the assumption that human beings have access to an absolute objective viewpoint” (69). In fact, the drive toward a perspective that goes beyond history is in effect the opposite of “an absolute objective viewpoint.” It is a critique of this assumption because it shows history, the ultimate human context, to be inevitably subjective even on its largest scale.

In the end, which this is, Zukofsky uses epic not to construct what Bakhtin calls “valorized temporal categories” (15) nor to “take any part and offer it as the whole” (31) but rather to extend the possibilities of epic beyond the lyric subjectivity of its author. As Bakhtin argues, “One cannot embrace, in a single epic, the entire world of the absolute past (although it is unified from a plot standpoint)—to do so would mean a retelling of the whole of national tradition, and it is sufficiently difficult to embrace even a significant portion of it” (Bakhtin 31). Despite Bakhtin’s skepticism, this is what Zukofsky seems to achieve by an attempt to contain history with the very materials from which it is constructed: language. Zukofsky does this by upending Bakhtin’s prescriptions for epic and showing epic to be far from a “fixed pre-existing forms into which one may then pour artistic experience” (3). So Bakhtin’s argument can stand:

An individual cannot be completely incarnated into the flesh of existing sociohistorical categories. There is no mere form that would be able to incarnate once and forever all of his human possibilities and needs, no form in which he could exhaust himself down to the last word, like the tragic or epic hero; no form that he could fill to the very brim, and yet at the same time not splash over the brim. There always remains an unrealized surplus of humanness; there always remains a need for the future, and a place for this future must be found. (37)

Yet in “A”, there is no individual “incarnated into the flesh of existing sociohistorical categories”, no epic hero to exhaust “down to the last word.” The form is filled to the brim in

“A”-23. But then there is “A”-24 where it will “splash over the brim.” Bakhtin is of course right to say that “there always remains an unrealized surplus of humanness” and Zukofsky will ultimately locate the surplus in “A”-24, a movement written by his wife, Celia. If we imagine the end of the poem for all intents and purposes as “A”-23, then it is “A”-24 that clearly extends beyond the author and finds a place for the future. What is true for Bakhtin’s novel is true for Zukofsky’s epic: “it is not inevitable, not arbitrary, it bears within itself other possibilities” (37).

Thus, like the proverbial serpent eating its own “tail,” “A”-23 dissolves back into the alphabet, back into the potential contained in letters. The last twenty-six lines of “A”-23 is, to con Woods’s phrase, “an alphabetic celebration” (212) that wends its way through the alphabet until it finally arrives at a “z-sited path” (“A”-23, 563). It is a movement that is “a path sighted on a letter at once initial and final” as Marnie Parsons suggests: “Such possible conflation of alpha and omega in ‘z’ would have been particularly apt as the final gesture of a poem entitled ‘A’” (231). Of course in epic fashion, this end is also a beginning, an opening as well as a closing. As Parsons goes on to wonder: “What if ‘z’ were a beginning, not an end; how does the alphabet construct language, narrative, and world; how might language meander through a different alphabet?” (232). If “the action of sight is not only an empirical activity but also a means of which the other’s significant ethical and social relation is acknowledged” (Woods 4), then we will have look closely at “A”-24 to see how Zukofsky takes the poem into this “sheer beyond.” As Parsons says, “‘A’-24 bears the burden of such slippage and of all those extracontextual, generic, historical meanings” (243) by, as Scroggins admits, “produce[ing] a plenitude of meaning” (“Introduction,” 18). And this is also what generally makes “A”-24 so damn hard to talk about. So critic be warned!

After The End

Celia's L.Z. "Mask"

"A"-24 often gets short shrift because it presents critics with a couple peculiar and interrelated problems. First, the last movement of the poem is by and large comprised of a musical score and, second, the score is a collage of Zukofsky's words set to Handel arranged not by Louis but by his wife, Celia. As for the first part of the problem, the fact that "A"-24 is a musical score suggests that a critic needs to be able to read and write about music. Zukofsky somewhat caustically anticipates such a critic in "A"-1:

And those who perused the score at the concert,
Patrons of poetry, business devotees of arts and letter,
Cornerstones of waste paper,— ("A"-1, 3)

Such criticism or "waste paper" would seem to require expertise that, as Hatlen said of Pound, "demands an audience of cognoscenti" ("Art as Labor" 233), although it is clear that Zukofsky disdains such an implication. Still, to stare at the score and attempt to read it certainly taxes the limits of a critic's literary imagination. While this may limit the number of attempts to make sense of "A"-24, it nevertheless leads to some ingenious responses to the text.

Marnie Parsons, for example, argues for "vertical reading" since such reading "allows the words to exist as phonic representations, moves them toward expressions of a moment and away from constructions over time" (247). Reading "A"-24 this way allows Parsons to notice how "Celia Zukofsky achieves temporally what her husband achieves spatially" (239). Where Louis attempts "to contain the whole of the work in each word" (Quartermain 961), Celia uses music to convey a way of "assembling and reassembling evidences from the past to construct the permanence of the present" (Woods 155). "Celia's L.Z. Masque" instantiates Byrd's premonition regarding "A"-22 and 23: "The poems are not imitations of speech, but they are written to be spoken.... If the lines were any fuller it would need more than one voice to speak them" (301). The polyphony in the Masque realizes the simultaneity of events described at the beginning of the poem where Bach's *Passion* "rendered" in "Nineteen twenty-eight" is also "seventeen twenty-nine" (as well as c. 33 A.D. and c. 70 A.D.). Such foregrounding and collapsing of time constructs a temporal hagiography that certainly has ontological ramifications on the way the poem asks us to think, feel, experience and understand the self, the other, and the world. But trying to understand those ramifications and put them into words can be elusive.

When attempting to parse or even peruse the score, the text cries out for performance. Similar to the way in which "A" as a whole insists on the sound of words—"not imitations of speech, but...written to be spoken" (Byrd 301)—the score implies music. And even if one can hear the music by reading the score—an equivalent to silent reading—it is probably impossible to hear the music and read all four lines of words simultaneously, which is at the heart of the experience of "A"-24. The movement crescendos and "in the fullness of time" demands "more than one voice." Of course, one could stage or attend a performance of "A"-24, although this is not the easiest thing to do; however, as moving and exhortative as the concert might be, it would not necessarily leave the listener with any more insight into the significance of "A"-24 *within* the

context of the poem as a whole. The problem remains: “A”-24 is a musical score that is part of a written text and as such must be understood within that context if we are to hear how the movement completes the poem. Moreover, a performance of “a ‘masque’ in which four voices speak, contrapuntally or simultaneously, the words of various Zukofsky texts, to the accompaniment of two Handel harpsichord suites” could only serve to confound conventional reading practices.

Guy Davenport, though, eloquently responds to the charge that “A”-24 cannot be understood, putting the responsibility for bafflement squarely with the audience:

We have no more right to complain that we can understand nothing (as indeed we can't) than to complain of Ives's *Putnam's Camp, Redding, Connecticut* that we can't make out what two military bands are playing (separate tunes simultaneously on top of some lovely ragtime and a bit of *Tristan*). The elements exist elsewhere, and can be consulted. This is Celia's Masque for LZ: she knows the parts by heart, and if it pleases her to hear them this way, then that is the symbol, the figure as she makes it out in the carpet. (106)

This is true; “A”-24 is music and should be apprehended as music. However, knowing that “the elements exist elsewhere” does little for a reader's attempt to experience and comprehend “A”-24 as a text in and of itself. As Zukofsky insists, the poem is “an integral,” both music *and* speech (“A”-12, 138). Davenport's rejoinder simply points again to the very difficulties the movement presents to comprehension.

So given the fact that the movement tends to confound critics, I'm not sure the difficulty can so easily be explained away. As Byrd admits, “In passage after passage I stare at the words, wondering how, in the simplest sense, to read them....But we are caught by our knowing.... We simply do not know how to read language ‘too full for talk’” (304). And as Perelman acknowledges:

Unlike, say, Dickens, where criticism disturbs the consumable clarity of the surface to reveal additional meaning beneath, with these four, unreadability is the raw material that is turned into the finished product of significance, which then gives the works their social importance. But it is striking that such critical mediation has to be made on behalf of writers who often made strong claims for the immediacy of their writing. (*Trouble With Genius* 1)

Or as Woods opines, “The complexity of reading Zukofsky's work often makes it comparable to solving a puzzle than pursuing beauty” (118). On the other hand, as these quotes refer to the whole of “A”, the “Masque” may only make obvious and unavoidable problems that persist throughout the entire poem and perhaps elsewhere in Zukofsky's oeuvre. Therefore, to attempt to understand the “Masque” may be nothing more than an effort to understand something essential to the poem as a hermeneutic whole.

The second part of the problem with “A”-24 is that the score was not written by Louis but by Celia Zukofsky. The fact that the end of the poem is “Celia's L.Z. Masque” (“A”-24, 806) gives critics trouble because it destabilizes the authorial position, confusing muse and poet, undermining the rusted dynamic between lover and beloved that inspires the sonneteers, “Immured holluschickies persisting thru polysyllables,” (“A”-1,3). In “A”-24, there is a basic

confusion between the subject and object of desire, the writer with “my one reader/Who types me”(“A”-12, 246). Scroggins reacts to this difficulty when he says “‘A’-24...positions itself as a text whose author we cannot with assurance name” (“Introduction.” 18). Scroggins acknowledges the important way in which the authorial position gets destabilized in “A”-24, but he does so at an enormous price. To say that we cannot name the author is to erase the name of the author inscribed with assurance at the end of the movement: “Celia’s L.Z. Masque” (806). As far as naming goes, it is also interesting to note that that we get Celia’s first name here juxtaposed with Louis’s initials. On the one hand this is another instance of the authorial erasure that “A” performs; on the other hand, it stands as a kind of visual pun on “masque.” As the one who completes “A”, Celia wears an L.Z. mask.

Hatlen falls into a similar critical pitfall when he argues that “Only Celia Zukofsky has the power to harmonize Louis Zukofsky’s various voices, to find the music that plays, tacitly, among all these voices” (“From Modernism to Postmodernism 218). Hatlen positions Celia as Louis’s ideal reader, a position the poem seems to support. As Scroggins affirms: “The ‘L.Z. Masque’ showed that at least one reader—the reader who meant most to him—had been able to see all of his work, verse and prose, fiction and criticism, as a unit, a single system of recurrences” (*The Poem of A Life* 412). This idealization leads Hatlen to conclude “Thus to ‘complete’ his life work, Zukofsky must deliberately decide *not* to complete it—to rely on the kindness, not of a stranger indeed, but of his wife” (“From Modernism to Postmodernism” 218). While misleading, Hatlen’s observation is understandable. Zukofsky does leave off writing at “A”-23 and leave “A”-24 to “the kindness...of his wife.” Hatlen’s apparent surprise that his wife—and “not...a stranger”—would be inclined to be “kind” is a little weird and suggests that Hatlen may underestimate the role Celia plays in the poem. In many ways, the poem is collaborative, and this is yet another way that the poem erodes the position of an individual author. Hatlen’s sense of the poem, however, is based on a fairly petrified notion of singular authorship which does not sit well with “A”. It is not that Zukofsky “must deliberately decide *not* to complete it” but that he completes the poem by other means: through shared authorship.

As much as she is an author, Celia’s familiarity not only with her husband but with “A” makes her an ideal reader as well. She stands as a model for the poem’s ideal reception. Very literally, the relationship between reader and writer is imagined as a marriage and, even more, as reciprocal. She embodies the reader whose interaction with the text is part of the text’s meaning and based on an ethical love that underlies any experience of the poem that is anything more than superficial. Extending the idea of marriage to the poem—and to the reader—is finally to imagine a different kind of relationship not only between “individual[s] in [their] absolute inwardness” but between “citizen[s] as participant[s] in a collective linguistic and social nexus” (Bernstein 14). Reading “A” suggests a radical social transformation of ethical relationship within society.

But such a claim may seem arch when Celia vanishes from the poem. Marnie Parsons offers quite damning critique of the consistent disappearance of Celia amid the criticism of “A”-24:

Many...readers of Zukofsky write with enthusiasm of the complexity and intricacy of “A”-24. But few write of “A”-24 as itself—as “Celia’s L.Z. Masque.” The critical tendency is to footnote (or parenthesize) Celia Zukofsky’s part in the whole, after or during a discussion of how this final movement complements Louis Zukofsky’s poetics. Such discussions are almost always very brief, the

footnotes and parentheses briefer still. To me this continued neglect of Celia Zukofsky's tremendous accomplishment in "A"-24 seems outrageous. (231)

This neglect is certainly due to the lack of "extended or extensive feminist or gender readings" (Cole). But it is redounded by the difficulty of talking about the music. Finding a way to discuss the movement in terms that do not require narrow scholarly expertise or acute musical acumen but rather can be accomplished by an engaged reader is inseparable from the project of acknowledging Celia as author and taking measure of her "tremendous accomplishment." By this I do not mean, as perhaps Parsons does, that Celia needs to be lauded as a composer and author in her own right. While this is certainly her due, to do so within the context of "A" would reify the very thing that erases her. To discuss "A"-24 by itself is to perform the kind of decontextualizing that makes Celia disappear from the text in the first place. Instead, we need to examine the role as collaborator in tandem with Zukofsky in order to appreciate her as his equal.

There may be some initial resistance to this idea, since their roles seem incommensurate when based on the quantity of the poem that each "writes." But such a measure does not take into account the fact that Louis could not have written the majority of the poem without Celia. In fact, as Davenport reports, "He would not talk on the phone if Celia were not there to hear the conversation" (110). Nor does it weigh the extraordinary importance of "A"-24, the movement that manages to end a poem that would most otherwise, like so many other modern epics, remain fragmentary. To imagine Celia as collaborator with Louis is no mean feat and does not mitigate her "accomplishment." To understand Celia's role in "A" is to go way beyond her position of muse and even beyond her role as reader even as it requires us to reassess what role a reader plays in the creation and meaning of the text.

Celia is the ideal reader and a muse but she is more. As Barbara Cole insists, "Of course, the mutually-influencing relationship of Celia and Louis does warrant further attention—as the existing criticism rarely (if ever) moves beyond biographical contextualizing to consider how this collaborative alliance might textually inform Zukofsky's poetics." Celia is an ideal reader as she literally "harmonizes" Louis's words to music. Celia is also a muse in a classical sense, and invoked at various points in the poem by Louis (for one key example, consider the end of A-12). Moreover, she does not write anything and only through her husband's invocation can she, as in Milton said, "sing heavenly muse." As an author, she might only seem, like Anne Bradstreet, to be "a tenth muse." After all, even if she completes the poem, she does so in silence. However, to stop here is to forget the complex role the author plays in an epic and to disregard the role of the storyteller as the assembler and arranger. It is also to ignore the way "A" has complicated even confused the positions between reader and writer throughout. As Ahearn notices, "Zukofsky seems to be a reader and a writer, but not both at once (*Zukofsky's "A"* 216). And as Scroggins reminds us, "Her husband's writing, under one aspect a theoretically endless system of 'recurrences,' drew much of its sustenance and substance from what he had read" (*The Poem of A Life* 467). In a very significant way, the writer is a reader. As Scroggins further insists: "Paradoxically, perhaps, the poet is 'most the poet' not when he is composing, but when he is most open to the words of others" (228). If this is so, then Celia is the quintessential example of the poet.

I would go further and argue that the roles of Celia and Louis are essentially interchangeable in the end. Even though she uses Handel instead of creating her own music—which she certainly could have done—this practice is no different than some of the most lasting

and most innovative strategies Louis employs throughout “A”. So if we imagine him still as an author as he arranges other texts into received forms, then we must imagine Celia in the same way as she helps Louis translate various Latin texts or rearranges his words to fit Handel’s score. As Cole argues, referring to Zukofsky’s “integral” in “A”-12: “This integral becomes additionally significant for considering gender as oftentimes Zukofsky reverses conventional gender hierarchies by ascribing ‘man,’ or masculinity, as lower limit speech while simultaneously assigning ‘woman,’ or femininity, to the position of upper limit music.” While this is a fine start to redressing the lack of “feminist or gender readings” that may “adequately attend to this crucial aspect of Zukofsky’s work” (Cole np), it may be, in the end, too simplistic to explain the role Celia plays in and for “A”. Again, to ascribe music to ‘woman’ and speech to ‘men’, especially in a poem where the two seem to coexist, can just as easily reify ‘woman’ to the musical spheres of the muses as it can acknowledge Celia’s agency. In the end, such a dichotomous paradigm takes speech away from Celia, and I would argue that arranging another’s words is shown throughout the poem to be an important act of speechmaking.

But more than the speech is Celia’s ingenious and critically troubling induction of literal music into the poem. As Parsons argues “Celia Zukofsky has effectively reversed the process of her husband’s writing, expanding his intellectualized condensation...mak[ing] visceral the possibilities for resonance inherent in his dense, distillate work” (249). It’s a resolution as return, as recurrence, as coming full circle, “a de-composition of several of his works but composition nonetheless” (231). The de-composition not only resolves the poem in a way similar to the alphabetic dissolution at the end of “A”-23, but it also recalls the role of Penelope at the end of the *Odyssey*. As with Penelope who serves as a teleological destination for Odysseus, Celia’s Masque completes all that has come before and organizes what would otherwise be an errant journey without end. Perhaps even more importantly, as we see in the *Odyssey*, Celia, like Penelope, is her own agent. Through composing by decomposing, Celia, as it is with Penelope, becomes the author of her—as well as the text’s—destiny.

Celia also brings us back to the beginning as epic endings must. Even if we can’t read music, we can see how Celia physically enacts a kind of epic return. First, as Parsons points out, “Celia Zukofsky has effectively reversed the process of her husband’s writing, expanding his intellectualized condensation” (249). Celia does so by taking Louis’s attempt to transfer “the design/Of the fugue... /To poetry” (“A”-6, 38) and flipping it, realizes the words in music. Second, by staging a concert, Celia brings us back to the scene that unfolds at the beginning with the author sitting listening to Bach at Carnegie Hall. Except this time, the concert is made manifest: we very literally occupy his seat, take up the position of the author at the beginning of the poem. In an incredible trompe l’oeil, Celia brings the poem to life which, at very least, shakes up the initial sense—based on a Marxist reading—that the concert is a pageant, imagined as a mythic hell that gives way to “the real world” as “the usher faded thru ‘Camel’ smoke (“A”-1, 2). By “A”-24, whatever remains of the borders between the concert and the street, between myth and reality, between the text and the “real” space that the reader occupies entirely break down.

In this configuration, we also see how Celia is more of a participant than her husband, the ostensible author. While he remains an audience member, Celia takes up the role of the conductor who “renders” the work. As Celia fulfills the poem by making the beginning contain the ending, the ending the beginning (Tayler13-14), we can at least see that it is a mistake to cordon off “A”-24 and consider it a special case or an exception because it is music or because it is arranged by Celia and not by Louis. In “A”-12, Zukofsky insists,

Not my writing
 The rest I heard I did
 Over a coffee... ("A"-12, 240)

Clearly the idea of the quotidian and the casual intimacy between a speaker and a listener exists here. Importantly, the author is neither the writer nor the speaker but the one who "heard" and then "did." Louis, as we saw in our discussion of the storyteller position, is arranger and inscriber. As such, he is no different than Celia:

A poet is never idle,
 My one reader
 Who types me,
 But I am one of your chores... ("A"-12, 246)

Despite long breaks in the writing of the poem, Zukofsky insists that the poet is always variously involved with the composition of the poem. In these lines, he becomes the object, a "chore," even as he remains the transcriber of the lines. Celia "types me": she is the author who brings Zukofsky's "me" into existence; she is the agent who constructs Zukofsky's objective self. Moreover, the word "chore" carries the connotations of the domestic into the aesthetic process, again revealing the domestic to be a charged political site of artistic activity.

This end is very different from the one Ezra Pound proleptically proposes as "the/ultimate CANTO." In the last "Fragment," he writes of his long-term mistress and accomplished violinist, Olga Rudge:

That her acts
 Olga's acts
 Of beauty
 Be remembered. (824)

While Pound offers tribute to his devoted mistress who, similarly to Celia, would serve as muse and typist, her "acts" unlike Celia's amounted to giving up her musical career. And it goes without saying that her involvement in the *Cantos* went no further than her being named in its final fragment. Celia's participation in "A" cannot be overestimated and has so far been grossly undervalued. As typist, as editor, as proof reader and reader; as composer and decomposer; as organizer and prosthetizer; as indexer, collector, and publicist who continues work on "A" even after Louis's death, one could—and should—argue that Celia is not only the ideal reader but also the ideal author of the epic that Louis had always imagined.

The End is the Beginning of the Muddle: Epic Continuation After "The End"

If the reader completes the poem, then the end of the poem must also be a beginning. As Woods says, "Arrivals at destinations are always merely the commencement of new journeys" (165). So we commence down the "z-sited path" as travelers, perhaps akin to those seekers in *Clarel*. As Byrd writes, "We necessarily begin to believe that whatever unity life or language may exhibit, it is not neatly round. It cannot be composed but only pursued" (305). But this commencement should not be confused with a lack of closure. It is certain that "living, like

speaking, continues until it is interrupted” (303), but by the time we get to “A”, Zukofsky, like Elvis, has left the poem and moved on to other poetic pursuits. “A” is not coterminous with Zukofsky’s life but with “a life” and so the demarcation remains transitive. In other words, the reader, as the imagined futurity, can only “complete” the poem if it is first completed by the author. “A” must first achieve hermeneutic closure if it is to give the reader the room and the agency to “intervene”; otherwise, there is no abdicated authorial position for the reader to take up, since the author’s seat remains occupied and, occupied, the author still meddles, leaving the poem in a state of suspended animation, forever chasing an ever receding dream of completion. The journey must end for Zukofsky before it begins for the reader.

But even so, what does this mean if the common response of readers is, as Davenport contests, “we can understand nothing (as indeed we can’t)?” (106). In “Art as Labor,” Hatlen claims that

Zukofsky has written an overtly Marxist poem, an ‘epic of the class struggle,’ but he has cast his poem in a form that ostentatiously displays its indifference to the ‘common reader’ and that makes no attempt to address on ‘their’ level those workers that “A”-8 celebrates as the agents of history. (233)

There is something totalitarian in this response to the poem. The idea of “the common reader” has a ring of condescension that seems a bit hubristic if not elitist. There is an assumption on Hatlen’s part about what the “common reader” can and cannot read. But Zukofsky makes no such assumption. I would suggest that the idea of a “common reader” hides a critical elitism that is displaced and then transferred onto the poem. As Woods has stringently argued throughout his book *Poetics of the Limit*, Zukofsky’s idea that the poem can be read without critical apparatus is a large part of the poem’s ethical import. There is no denying that the poem is difficult but, as Ahearn points out, all poems are: “The poetry presents necessary difficulties—any poem worth reading does—but some familiarity with the works will show that he cannot be dismissed as an eremite to whom no known paths lead. We can get there, with patience, if we go well armed with wit” (173). Far from being “elitist,” the poem democratizes reading if what we mean by democracy is still more or less “rule by the people,” a community not distinguished by class, and a respect for the individual. This is not the same as kowtowing to the “lower limit” of literacy, though, as some would have it. If we can go further to define nature of the difficulties “A” presents, we might better understand how “A” presents with a fundamentally democratizing text rather than a poem of disregard and indifference.

To begin to understand the way the poem “democratizes” the reading position, we should first remember that the poem presents these “difficulties” to all readers, to the “expert” and the “common reader” alike. As the above quotations from critics demonstrate, it does not offer itself as “a schoolbook for princes.” The storyteller’s instructions do not “explain”; instead, what didacticism exists in the poem, something “deliberately foregrounded in an epic” (Bernstein 14), describes the poem’s structure, giving the reader insight into its form. Byrd goes as far as saying that “‘A’ is a self-interpreting poem. Most lines which need glossing are glossed somewhere in the poem itself” (300). The purview of the author, a position the reader is to take up, is imbedded within the poem. There are no allusions to be exhumed as buried truths for those with “elite” knowledge as in “Pound’s later *Cantos* [where] every quoted phrase can be traced to a given source and serves as a pointer to that source” (Scroggins, *The Poem of A Life* 420); instead where “the sources of these passages remain obdurately buried, the identifications of their original

speakers subsumed in the music of their words” (Scroggins 447), those sources mineralize rather than fossilize. As Scroggins points out, “a single word stems from several widely disparate sources” (420); so the allusions are compounded and composted in the writing, leaving the writing meaning-ful but not distinct from the allusions it has absorbed.

While it presents difficulty for the reader who wants to trace the allusions to “sources,” the compacted allusions in the language of “A” offers us something besides “a pointer” to “a source.” It reminds us how allusive all language is. We might recall, for example, Zukofsky’s insight that with regard to “good night” and “good morning,” “it took all human time to nurse those greetings” (*Prepositions*+ 11). They have been said before and will be said again, and each time they are said recalls all the other occasions of their utterance. Even more, this type of allusiveness suggests a communal speech, a language speaking for itself without an author. The words are a chorus of many utterances, a voice made “of many voices” (“A”-5,18) and the reading can do nothing but “read, not into, the words” (A-22, 528). Yet we quickly realize that when all we have is the words, how dependent we are on context for meaning. Although we often respond to language by associating it with similar phrases we have heard before, we simultaneously keep those instances separate, attending to the particulars of each specific moment in which the utterance is spoken.

If the poem is taken to be “gnomic,” its exclusivity is not so much a sign of elitism—selective, superior, dominating—but its virtual opposite: a kind of hermetic privacy, a reverence for the particular instance of speech. If the poem is “eremite,” it is because it maintains its intimate relationship to language refusing to appropriate or be appropriated by resorting to conventional phrases or syntax that bolsters the illusion of easy understanding: “In being forced to respect the Other *as Other*, [it] delights not in the knowledge of the object but in the *relation* with the object” (Woods 144). This may be another way of saying that the poem resists the potentially appropriative properties of a lyric “I” which assumes that we understand what is being said and why.

If difficulty is not an act of domination or elitism but a resistance to rule, then, contrary to Hatlen’s contention, it is in the essential particularity of a word, the impossibility of generalizing it despite its pervasive and repetitive use, that makes “A” most “overtly a Marxist poem.” As Quartermain writes, “For if the text is to contain the world, then in its quiddity it must, like the world, stubbornly resist the hermeneutic act (“Only is Order Othered” 962). Scroggins will even go as far as to say that “there is a certain liberated exhilaration in being cast upon one’s own resources” as “the reader has become enmeshed in a web of meaningful possibilities (“Introduction” 11, 12). Through the quiddity of the language, reader becomes aware of the privacy of “one’s own resources.” And Parsons will agree:

Reading it not with an eye to finding a single, a tyrannical, sense but rather as a playing over and under and around and with various meanings, various ways of *making* meaning—this at once liberates the reader and sings true with the work itself. (251)

I take this sense of liberation as part of the political stance of the poem because it not only suggests that the reader is “free” to interpret the poem, but it further resonates with America’s fundamental democratic ideal. The poem realigns the reader’s relationship to the text, and this position, because the poem is an epic and therefore overtly directed toward the “reader as

citizen,” can then be extended to a larger political critique of those social forces that seek to interpret the world for you.

Quartermain explains the potential for such a critique by relating the linguistic strategies of Joyce and Zukofsky:

Joyce and Zukofsky each grew up in a culture that perforce expressed itself in a colonial language, and each writer, in his major work, successfully threw off that imperial English language...undermined the sway of the imperious, intellect which, by assigning single meanings and unity to the world and asserting that it is thereby intelligible, concocts formulae for the control and mastery of that world. (“Only is Order Othered” 975)

If the difficulty inherent in such linguistic strategies arises from a need to resist otherwise imperialist impulses, then perhaps we can imagine our struggle as a matter of liberating both self and other from the domination of received cultural meanings: “The radical character of Zukofsky’s work derives from his refusal to observe the philosophic conventions of privacy, which distribute an act of communication between a sender and a receiver, a producer and a consumer” (Byrd 292). Maybe then we can our struggle to comprehend not just in terms of apprehension but as a political act, if we understand that, along with Woods, “politicization is an opening up of the sites of the production of meaning, not a closing of them” (88).

Of course all this assumes that there is a reader to baffle or affront or liberate. But more often than not, texts such as “*A*” expect types of reading that tend to eradicate readership. As Perelman points out, “It is easy to focus on the richness of meaning that the writing provides—as if ambiguities and multiple possibilities automatically accrued in some ideal readerly account—and to forget the other side: the lack of actual readers, the absence of social impact, the obscurity of the language” (*Trouble With Genius* 184). Before we can argue about “the reader,” Perelman suggests, there probably needs to be one to argue about. This returns us to the question of failure that seems to dog the epic.⁷⁶ Perhaps this is to be expected of a poem that intends to resist and critique normative beliefs and habits about what reading is and what constitutes a meaning in language. Or perhaps it is simply an inevitable result of a poem that “made no compromise with the language market, in that it did not accede to the domination of exchange values that permeate language as communication” (Woods 87). But the question itself is a slippery slope. What constitutes sufficient readership? Moreover, it is reasonable to blame the poem for its reception? Can we, in the end, identify the quantity with the quality of readership? Can we even identify such acts of reception directly with the text? This is not to say that reception isn’t important, but I’m not sure it is something that can be answered by direct contact with the poem.

⁷⁶ In a sort of backhanded affirmation of Poe, Guy Davenport notes that “[‘*A*’s] first twelve parts were set in type by Japanese compositors and printed in Kyoto in 1959. The first thirty of Pound’s *Cantos* were set by French, the eighty-fifth through ninety-fifth by Italian compositors; the first half of Olson’s *Maximus* was printed in Germany, the second half in England; Walt Whitman himself set *Leaves of Grass*; Melville paid for the printing of *Clarel* out of his own pocket; The *Columbiad* sold because of its handsome binding and typography and engravings by Robert Fulton” (100). Davenport’s point?: “It cannot be demonstrated that the American public has ever clamored to read a long poem by an American poet” (101). My point?: here’s an American epic tradition of international interest that is defined to a large degree by its domestic unpopularity. That said, I will continue argue, as I have in the introduction, that the contingencies of publishing and critical reception cannot account for the significance of the poem but, while important, must remain external to critical evaluation.

Maybe a more direct, and perhaps more pertinent question, is what kind of reader does the poem, and especially “A”-24, require? Or as Scroggins asks in a slightly different context, “What is a reader (not a scholar) to do?” (*The Poem of A Life* 420). Is describing the plenitude, simultaneity, and illegibility sufficient to understanding “A”-24? How can we incorporate such observations into our experience of the poem, forge ahead, and actually read it? The sense that the privacy of the poem resists immediate apprehension may also be a key to finding a solution to the poem’s resistance. Familiarity, which carries the connotations of intimacy, family, and the domestic, and which suggests a different duration and engagement in the act of reading may serve as a basic approach to the reading of “A”. As Quartermain has said, “The family is, in the middle and late sections of the poem, the center and source of all value” (“Only is Order Othered” 960). As such, the family emblemizes the fundamental reading strategy that the poem requires. In other words, the poem demands the kind of intimacy and fealty in a reader that family implies. In a description of the poem and the reading process sounds a lot like the negotiations within a family Ahearn says that “[the tangled unities of “A”] manage the return of the familiar under different forms. . . . Since the renovations of the familiar cannot be predicted, only detected when they appear, both poet and reader are always striving to adjust to a new constellation (*Zukofsky’s “A”* 229). And as Davenport says with exuberance, “Familiarity is the condition whereby all of Zukofsky’s work renders its goodness up” (106).

As such, the poem questions conventional reading habits and refuses types of passive and privatized reading even as we are made to feel the exoneration of our own personal powers of interpretation. As far as reading practices reflect social and historical mores, the poem defies the reader’s position as a commodified consumer in capitalist structure who reads merely to devour. In order to read the poem, a reader must ultimately attempt to embody the ideals that the “A” prescribes. “A” asks for a communal response. We see this solicitation embodied in the need for audience in “A”-24 and instigated by Zukofsky listening to a concert and walking out onto a crowded street. Perhaps there is no place in “A” for the reader who, like Poe, thinks that “after the lapse of half an hour, at the very utmost, it flags—fails—a revulsion ensues—and then the poem is, in effect, and in fact, no longer such” (88). Our expectations of what reading is, of its duration and demands, cannot be based on the economies of the lyric or the easy accessibility of pulp fiction. If we go along with Frederic Jameson’s formulation of genre as “social contracts between a writer and a specific public” (qtd. in Perelman 4), then the difficulty of the poem can be understood not as elitist poetics but as an effort to democratize reading by breaking the typical contract where the writer authorizes meaning for the reader to passively consumes in exchange for some easy epiphany. Instead, “A” requires a responsibility on the reader’s part to activate and finish the poem, to accrue understanding over time through an increasing familiarization with and pondering of the words. As Ahearn says, “We are all in this together, Zukofsky would say, and anyone who reads ‘A’ has the right to participate in the process of creation and re-creation (*Zukofsky’s “A”*). But such a role is rewarding because it is demanding of us and not otherwise.

So we arrive at the end of “A”-24 and are let out onto what Parsons calls “A”-25 or “the index,” which stands as “a last, witty alphabetic tease on the part of both Zukofskys” (232). The initials just before, “scored” into the text like lovers initials in an oak, initiate us and prompt us to begin (as they not only signify an authorial disappearance but, by way of a pun, the “initials” stand as “the beginning” as “something that exists at the outset”). From here, we enter the index where, as Zukofsky says, “the reader will have to find his own way” (qtd. in Scroggins 449). Because “No// index was whole/so our index/will sometimes lead” (“A”-14), the reader can enter

and follow the cues as an “index” is a “pointer” that also indicates “movements or measurements.” But more than that, it is “a movement from one predetermined position to another.” It is here where we become the author who now moves among the spaces between the “names & objects,” perceiving and ordering them with new acts of recurrence. For this is the final reconfiguration of the hero, not as the storyteller, which leads the modernist epic down a road towards fragmentation and incoherence, but as the reader who by commencing on a journey—on a quest—takes up the shards of words like a shattered chalice and continues on. Such is the role of the epic hero when the reader grabs “*A*”, takes the first step, and begins to read. And as with those heroes that have gone before, whether it is home or Rome, egress from hell or from paradise, the end is always the beginning, and a wandering step, as it has always been, is how the epic both begins and ends.

**Genre's Border Crossings:
The Epic of Inquiry in Lyn Hejinian's *A Border Comedy***

And give new energies to epic song
—Barlow, *Columbiad*

What men say is not—I remember,
I remember, I remember—you have forgot
—H.D., *Triology*

To begin a song:
If you cannot recall,
Forget.
—Zukofsky, “A”-12

It is therefore impossible, in any historical theory, to combine these different levels of organization into *definitive* forms. Their actual combinations are of irreducible historical importance, and must be always empirically recognized. But any *theory* of genre must from the beginning distinguish between them.
—Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature*

The imagination; that is, the way we shape and use the world, indeed the way we *see* the world, has geographical boundaries like islands, continents, and countries. These boundaries can be crossed.—Guy Davenport, *Geography of the Imagination*

To understand the central historical achievement of his own culture, as he conceives it, Herodotus must understand alien cultures. There is in his writing then a continual driving out to the boundaries, an interest in reaching the farthest point to which one can travel—the limit-point of eyewitness—and an interest too in what lies beyond even this boundary, the point at which eyewitness must inevitably give way to hearsay. For by the other he means not only the great historical antagonist of the Greek city-states, the Persian empire, but those who function as the other's other....—Stephen Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World*

Imposing a genre distinction on any work of Lyn Hejinian's might be just that—an imposition. Hejinian's recent publishing project, Atelos, for one, flouts staid genre categories: “All the works published as part of the Atelos project are... involved in some way with crossing traditional genre boundaries, including for example, those that would separate theory from practice, poetry from prose, essay from drama, the visual image from the verbal, the literary from the non-literary, and so forth.” Furthermore, in the introduction to her collected criticism, *The Language of Inquiry*, Hejinian, expanding on the title, insists, “The language of poetry is a language of inquiry, not the language of a genre” (3). *A Border Comedy*, Hejinian's most recent long poem, is no different, also resisting single genre modes and clearly residing at the border of things, “Playing idea against idea, genre against genre” (108). Despite the border crossings,

Hejinian's writing shows a deep fealty for the effects of genre; if poetry is "a language of inquiry" then genre, it seems, is a categorical way to pursue potential answers to the questions poetry poses. And while Hejinian is more interested in the multiplicity of responses, in the breaking down of borders, *A Border Comedy* nevertheless occupies and is occupied by the different genres for no other reason that they remain a formal means of making meaning.

Looking at the ways *A Border Comedy* functions as an epic, what epic forces it marshals, what epic energies it charges is particularly important to work out since the variegated contemporary discourse on epic has had the unfortunate and somewhat ironic effect of making the genre seem unviable and unavailable. While it may be anathema to call the text one genre or another, to not do so in the current poetic climate is to leave all distinction to the a basket of divergent lyric practices. Considering epic in *A Border Comedy* is not to use the term as a means to tame the discursiveness of the text with a totalizing structure, but rather to use epic as a mode of inquiry as opposed to lyric to see how such a mode functions in a hybridized text. This may be considered the nominative afterlife of epic, and a discussion of the genre should also help adumbrate the forces of other genres that come into play.

A Border Comedy uses epic as a way of directly engaging and grappling with the problems of history and memory, allowing the genre to advise the poem at the same time as the poem revises the genre. Often using the opposite of a traditional epic mode as a means of affecting epic ends, within *A Border Comedy*, history is approached as happenstance, completion is achieved through indeterminacy, and memory is produced by forgetting. Despite the plasticity of epic within the borders of the poem, the epic intention is no less recognizable because the poem extends beyond an individual speaker seeking inclusiveness in a community.

There's an emblematic moment in *A Border Comedy* that shows how Hejinian takes epic and affects a "conscious reshaping of its own defining qualities." In an allusion to Goya's painting "Time, Truth, and History," Hejinian engages with a painting produced almost exactly two centuries ago:

But here's an ambitious undertaking
An attempt to account for the twentieth century!
Goya's small unfinished sketch of "Time, Truth, and History"
Was painted two centuries ago at a comparable time (1797). (28)

In and of itself, the sketch is a fitting example of the paradox any contemporary epic confronts: the only legitimate scale an individual might account for a century, not to mention "time," "truth," and/or "history," is by means of a small unfinished sketch. So it is understandable and perhaps right for Bakhtin to claim, "There is no mere form that would be able to incarnate once and forever all of his human possibilities and needs, no form in which he could exhaust himself down to the last word, like the tragic or epic hero" (37). And for Lukács to say, "We have invented the creation of forms: and that is why everything that falls from our weary and despairing hands must always be incomplete" (34). While the title of Goya's "small unfinished sketch" is nothing less than epic, clearly delimiting epic's three main ingredients, "a small unfinished sketch" remains an insufficient figure for such an all-encompassing feat. Although it would be hard to argue that it is an epic in and of itself, its provisionality is in fact the most appropriate form for a "postmodern" epic to take: as a sketch, it instantiates the process of its own making, making it viscerally temporal; as unfinished, it allows for "a surplus of humanness," inviting completion through an imaginative engagement.

Ultimately, however, it is the painting's function in *A Border Comedy* that completes its epic intention. Initially, the attempt to "account for the twentieth century" seems to apply to the ambitions implied by Goya's title. Of course, when we get to the painting's date, it becomes clear that the "ambitious undertaking" refers to *A Border Comedy*. The anachronism creates a temporal break that disrupts time's chronology. It is a moment that makes the painting immanent despite the intervening centuries. The anachronism makes time episodic, organizing it around associative connections and cyclical parallels, parallels that Bakhtin could derisively call "peak times" except that the link here is not between moments of overt cultural importance but rather entirely personal associations. By making a personal connection, Hejinian unmoors this type of episodic cyclicity from Bakhtin's sense of the past as "the world of fathers" (15).

Instead of "canonizing these events, as it were, while they are still current" (Bakhtin 15), Hejinian demonstrates the way in which we participate in the past: "In ancient literature [i.e. epic] it is memory, and not knowledge, that serves as the source and power for the creative impulse" (Bakhtin 15). Motivated by memory rather than knowledge, the anachronism forces our attention to what isn't there, reminding us how integrally related remembering is to what we forget and how much knowledge is dependent upon what we remember. Hejinian flouts Bakhtin's conclusion that by remembering, "it is impossible to change [the past]: the tradition of the past is sacred" (15):

Is the epic then impossible?

No

We have all the feelings with which we've responded to lives

To the completion of lives

And they still shock us...(91)

Through response, the completion of the Goya becomes a kind of opening up, a beginning. Just as memory implies what is forgotten, this type of completion implies a kind of total possibility and inclusiveness, the potential for infinite responses that are neither definitive nor final but complete in themselves.

By completing the Goya, Hejinian approaches the past as provisional and revisable. Bakhtin insists, "The epic, as the specific genre known to us today, has been from the beginning a poem about the past, and the authorial position immanent in the epic and constitutive for it (that is, the position of the one who utters the epic word) is the environment of a man speaking about a past that is to him inaccessible, the reverent point of view of a descendent" (13). By bringing the Goya into the present through revision (that is, through "re-seeing"), Hejinian makes the past accessible, approaching it without the requisite reverence that accords it authority. The connection between the Goya painting and Hejinian's poem is an accident of time's conventional organization. Hejinian's attention is based on happenstance. If the Goya had been painted at another time, Hejinian would have probably overlooked it; or, if another painting had been produced "two centuries ago," then that might have been the object that would get Hejinian's attention. The "account for the twentieth century" begins with how memory emerges out of our conventional orderings of time, and rather than using epic to reify those structures as Bakhtin suggests, Hejinian employs epic's episodic organization to disrupt them.

Hejinian redraws the temporal borders, noting that "A boundary is not that at which something stops but, as the Greeks recognized, that from which something *begins*" (18). Turning Goya's ending into a beginning is something that epic enables by allowing for a temporal

organization that fosters connection. As with traditional epic poems, the episodic arrangement highlights the provisionality of both beginnings and endings because these moments occur *in medias res*. Spenser's elaboration of *in medias res* in his preface to *The Faerie Queene* illustrates the point: "a Poet thrusteth into the middest, euen where it most concerneth him, and there recouring to the thinges forepaste, and diuining of thinges to come, maketh a pleasing Analysis of all." By "thrust[ing] into the middest" and relating events together, the poet intimates a cyclical pattern that highlights recurrence. While responding to "thinges forepaste," the completion anticipates "thinges to come," establishing a whole not as an ends but as a means of interconnecting what would otherwise remain inert. This type of completion begins to break down Bakhtin's notion of an "epic distance [that] separates the epic world from contemporary reality" (13) by writing from the stance of what happens:

And the epic accumulation of good advice called 'Happenstance'
Can tell its own history in its own terms... (90)

What happens becomes happenstance by being memorable, and how those memories connect becomes the terms in which history is articulated. History can not only be revised but produced by the act of connecting and reconnecting what has already happened.

Moreover, by denoting happenstance as "good advice," it becomes a means of instruction, which is basic to the epic genre. As Bernstein has said, "The element of instruction arguably present, if only by implication, in all poetry, is deliberately foregrounded in an epic which offers its audience lessons presumed necessary to their individual and social survival" (14). Similar to Ezra Pound's *Cantos*, to which Bernstein directly refers, *A Border Comedy* instructs by way of example. Unlike the *Cantos*, though, *A Border Comedy* does not offer a series of "exempla" but, more like "A", becomes an example in and of itself. As Bernstein also suggests, "The epic, that is, must contain both clearly recognizable models of 'the good' and an applicable technique, methodology, or behavior pattern by which that good can be concretely realized and imitated" (14). By directly addressing issues of genre as well as explaining the method of its own writing, *A Border Comedy* makes instruction an overt means of poetic inquiry, a mode that, in a poem without a formal sense of epic intention, would come off as mere didacticism.

Not to search for the perfect poem...
But to let the writing of the moment go along its own paths... (187)

Similar to Zukofsky's discursive practices, *A Border Comedy* exemplifies epic by offering the reader a model of receptivity to language. Its plurality and spontaneity, as it is with "A", is foregrounded by being *a* border comedy not *the* border comedy. As with all good instruction, it is a means not an ends.

A major problem for modernist epic, as we have seen, has been that it requires the author to take up the roll of epic hero. As Bakhtin argues, "The new positioning of the author must be considered one of the most important results of surmounting epic (hierarchical) distance" (28). Or as Lukács explains it, citing the problem of the individual or the lyric "I":

The epic hero is, strictly speaking, never an individual. It is traditionally thought that one of the essential characteristics of the epic is the fact that its theme is not a

personal destiny but the destiny of a community.... The omnipotence of ethics, which posits every soul as autonomous and incomparable, is still unknown in such a world. (66)

According to Lukács, the lyric “I” does not have the metonymic authority to be representative: “This is the paradox of the subjectivity of the great epic...: creative subjectivity becomes lyrical” (Lukács 53). The lyric maintains an individual speaking as an individual precluding the possibility of, as Pound put it, “The speech of a nation through the mouth of one man” (qtd. in Froula 2).

As we have seen, epic’s eclipse does seem to correlate in some way with the rise of the Romantic subject. As early as Wordsworth’s *Prelude* there begins to emerge what Karl Kroeber oxymoronically calls “the personal epic.” In this “new kind of epic system,” Wordsworth swaps history for autobiography: “The mighty events of the contemporary history are presented only as they appear to, and exert influence upon, the life of a private individual” (Kroeber 98). While he doesn’t use the term “personal epic,” Michael Bernstein makes a similar assessment of Ezra Pound’s *Cantos*: “I suppose that what distinguishes a *modern* verse epic from its classical predecessors is the necessity, in a society no longer unified by a single, generally accepted code of values, of justifying its argument by the direct appeal of the author’s own experiences and emotions” (180). While these observations stretch the classical definition of epic, we will recall the trenchant arguments against these types of epic formulation by John McWilliams:

Whether one calls these works “personal epics,” “poetical autobiographies,” “tales of the tribe” or “self-generated myths,” they will always remain long, loosely unified works, without narrative, without a culturally accepted hero, and written in a literary form valued by a minuscule fraction of the reading public... the genre extends organicism toward shapelessness. The personal epic seems to end only with the death of the poet whose imaginative powers comprise its heroism. In all these respects, the writing of a personal epic is at variance with the basic connotation of the term *epos*. (237)

This line of criticism moving from revision to rejection seems to confirm epic’s demise, and yet by noting the inherent difficulties in writing epic, McWilliams rehearses a common and now debunked critique against free verse, charting its “organic” beginnings in Romanticism to its culminating “shapelessness” in Modernism. He is right that many epics written at least since Wordsworth never really end: *The Prelude* by definition never really begins, Whitman has stopped somewhere and is waiting, and the *Cantos* dissolves into a smattering of “Drafts and Fragments.” But we have seen how Zukofsky completes his epic and simultaneously shifts the hero from the storyteller to the reader.

This type of completion exemplified by “A” is also evident in *A Border Comedy* as the poem takes the personal epic to its logical extreme. Here, indeterminacy consciously works to include the reader in the poem’s process:

Two hands typing
 Until the novel is no longer possible, having been deprived of plot
 I.e., the tale of one individual’s scattered acts in relation to his or her sense of
 time

And age... (177)

Autobiography transmogrifies into “two hands typing” and the poem deliberately structures the poem around “one individual’s scattered acts”; the poem is not about the author as it is in the *Prelude* nor is it an “accumulation” of exempla that the author seeks to control as it is in the *Cantos*. By emphasizing the act of writing itself, putting herself as “private individual” in relation to “here sense of time/ and age,” Hejinian does not lyricize history but tries to historicize the lyric, putting the poem within its temporal context. As a figure, “Two hands typing,” like the original oral context of epics, turns the poem away from the author or storyteller and toward the reader or hearer.

As we will recall, McWilliams turns to epic’s etymology in order to generalize it: “The word ‘epos’ originally signified only ‘narration’ or ‘discourse.’” While I have argued that epic must be defined more narrowly than simply “narration,” this etymological root of epic can still be effectively applied to *A Border Comedy*; yet, the poem reevaluates the narrative and chronological sequences that the etymology, out of its Aristotelian context, may seem to connote:

Into a perception
 Single but of sequence
 With implied social criticism
 Though in a presentation some people might find “extravagant”
 Exaggerating the temporal process of spotting gradual associations
 On an illimitable sea... (74)

McWilliams might find this type of “sequence” to be “extravagant,” but by considering from what sequences are comprised, *A Border Comedy* enacts a “conscious reshaping of [epic’s] own defining qualities” (McWilliams 4) or, more properly, marshals epic’s classic temporal and poetic structures. Sequence in *A Border Comedy* is not chronological but relational, and it is this shift that undoes a hierarchical form of cause and effect. The sequence does not trudge along linearly from one event to the next but develops by means of “gradual associations/ on an illimitable sea.” The sequence here is made by relation, forged by means of repetition, which is much closer to epic’s conventional structure and one that verse itself reinforces through the breaking of the line.

The repetition stirred to marvelous travel
 From interior to exterior or from monstrous to minute
 With the illusion of sequence... (18)

Ultimately, sequence is an illusion. As one of Aristotle’s other key concepts, mimesis, reminds us, in order to tell any kind of story, something in the chain of events must always be left out or implied. Instead of “a telling of sequential deeds,” *A Border Comedy* shows how the deeds we relate together create sequence. While this is the very stuff of epic, sequence is shown to be an illusion that epic affects in order to create relationships between episodes. Once this structure is exposed, the episodes described can be realigned and reconnected.

The proposed odyssey of *A Border Comedy*, the “continuous narrative,” is one about “the ability to follow a story/ Of travelers whose only homeland was an ethics” (19). The locus of the

journey has been internalized as our “ability to follow the story” becomes the ability to realign the temporal structures that underpin notions of history and truth:

Justice, yes, but there has to be time for it
What use is justice if all the time has gone by... (60)

The poem shows us that “time” is a politically charged concept and justice, too, is affected by our sense of time. Not only must there “be time” for justice but our sense of time “gone by” cannot be seen as synonymous with an irrevocable past. As *A Border Comedy* recognizes, “the laws of time we provide” (70). That is to say that we both create the “laws of time” and adhere to laws hewn from long legal traditions. By acknowledging this, Bakhtin’s seemingly benign notion of epic being demonstrative of an “absolute past” starts to take on tragic political consequences: “the authorial position immanent in the epic and constitutive for it (that is, the position of the one who utters the epic word) is the environment of a man speaking about a past that is to him inaccessible, the reverent point of view of a descendent” (13). However, recalling that Achilles drags Hektor’s body behind his chariot and that Milton revises much of the Biblical text in his own image, it is pretty clear that reverence has never really been a requirement of epic.

It is not “the reverent point of view” that is so much a problem as casting the past as “inaccessible.” To quarantine the past is to lose any sense of its interconnectedness to the present and thus the ability to change it:

I was all wrong about that, by the way—that *time* was the enemy
This is a book of time’s bearing
An account of aftermaths and hints
The wrappings of anaphora are hue and reference
It’s in taking out time that there’s atrocity... (133)

Because epic is, as Pound put it, “a poem including history,” relegating epic to an inaccessible past is tantamount to “taking out time” by attenuating poetry’s most historically potent genre. The past is accessible because we are always living in its aftermath and, what’s more, it “hints” at how the present will be an aftermath of the future. So if “the one who utters the epic word” is a descendant, then she must also be considered an ancestor, since the “anaphora” is a metonymy, the tendency for verse in general and epic specifically to create links through repetition. As the poem’s “hue,” this linking is its form and outcry; as its “reference,” it is its means of relation and connection. Despite what Bakhtin says, epic, by bringing the past into the creative plane of the present, prevents history from becoming irrevocably past and keeps the present within an historical frame of reference, making us responsible for what has happened and aware of our own “time and age” as an historical moment. If the past cannot recur, then we are left merely to repeat it.

As “a book of time’s bearing,” *A Border Comedy* curbs the generic tendency of lyric to dehistoricize events. While lyric is usually considered to be a poem spoken by one person to an implied, often absent audience, in an epic context “two is the minimum required for comedy/ Which commits subjects to each other” (144). As comedy, *A Border Comedy* reinforces epic’s use of time to “commit subjects to each other,” to make them responsible for both what has happened and what will happen. In contrast, it is interesting to think of the sonnet, the most oft used lyric form in English, which generally insists on there being nothing in the world but a lover

and his love and then usually implies the absence or the inaccessibility of the beloved, an absence of commitment.

As both a comedy and an epic, *A Border Comedy* works to overcome solipsism the lyric may affect. Where the lyric leads Orpheus to sing to himself inconsolably about an unrecoverable loss, and Poe to sit self-absorbed with a poem absorbable in one sitting, and Olson to fixate on the patterns of his own breath,

An epic must seem effortless
It finds our way and assumes our deeds and desires
As they transform their objects into surprising shapes
Which we explain in anecdotes... (90)

It is important to notice the pronoun here; not unlike Whitman in his famous opening to *Leaves of Grass*, the poem as an epic “assumes” as a way of becoming inclusive and collective. But unlike Whitman, there remains a tension between the “effortless” assumptions “epic” makes and the “surprising shapes” objects take. The first implies commonality while the other acknowledges an irreducible uniqueness to each particular manifestation of our “deeds and desires.”

The epic mediates this tension with the story. As Lukács argues, “The epic hero, as bearer of his destiny, is not lonely, for this destiny connects him by indissoluble threads to the community whose fate crystallized in his own” (67). When the hero is the poet then the poem becomes the “storyteller,” the receptacle of memory that passes the story from one to another. More importantly, because the poet’s destiny remains an individual, the “indissoluble threads” that links the poet to the community occurs in the reader’s engagement with the text, which, as its etymology implies, “weaves” the reader and writer together. While one might argue that this is the case in any text by virtue of the fact that there always exists a writer and a reader position, the two are not necessarily “crystallized” so that the positions merge. It is the epic effect of *A Border Comedy* that positions the writer as reader of the text and the reader as the writer.

Again, as Walter Benjamin has said, “The storyteller takes what he tells from experience—his own or that reported by others. And he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to the tale” (87). In *A Border Comedy*, Hejinian responds to her own poem as a reader might and in doing so exemplifies how the reader might write the poem. If the ultimate intention of epic is to instruct, it is not to reify the authority of the author but to transfer it; the poem does not offer “good advice” as a set of dictums but rather as a means of giving counsel. “After all,” as Benjamin states, “counsel is less an answer to a question than a proposal concerning the continuation for a story which is just unfolding. To seek this counsel one would first have to be able to tell the story” (86). And as Hejinian writes,

a story
Consisting of ‘separate facts tenuously connected’
And conspired
Story to story
To which everyone should add and be added... (31)

The tenuous connection links “facts” together while keeping us aware that the connections are provisional, a matter of association and happenstance. Always with the possibility for

reconnection, the connections lead to conspiring. While the etymology of conspiring, “breathing together,” merges the positions of reader and writer, its connotation of criminal or subversive plotting suggests the telling of “a story/ Consisting of ‘separate facts tenuously connected’” might overthrow basic expectations and conventions of what stories are. Moreover, as conspirators both writer and reader become culpable and responsible for the ways in which “facts” are put together; both are accountable for what has happened and what is happening. The ability to tell story and the way in which it is told becomes more than just a matter of a literary mode. It becomes a political act.

Throughout *A Border Comedy*, Hejinian reverses the terms of epic in order to affect epic ends. The final and perhaps the most significant reversal and the one that best demonstrates how Hejinian occupies the space that she also reserves for the reader is her use of forgetting to structure the poem. In *A Border Comedy*, forgetting doesn’t oppose memory but is rather a constitutive part of it. To “re-member” is a matter of putting events into new contexts and thereby revising or completing them.

That’s why I’ve kept this writing of fifteen books unfinished
Fifteen underway
I move from one to the next
In the course of many days adding every day
A few lines to a book
Each of which takes a long time and considerable thought
And that passage of time facilitates forgetting
Then forgetting makes what’s been written unfamiliar
As if some other writer had been writing
And each of my returns to each of the books is prompted
To immediates in a sudden present
Only pastness, which provides forgetting, can provide it
And I who am so well-disposed toward you... (151)

As a matter of “a writing in lost contexts” (63), the poem overtly states its original context or intention. Here as elsewhere, Hejinian makes the instructive intention of the poem clear. Still, it’s a poetic moment, which, while breaking down the borders between such distinctions as “showing” and “telling,” the “poetic” and the “prosaic,” also extends the possibilities for poetry so that the poem is not just an instance of writing but becomes a way of being in the world.

The “writing of fifteen books unfinished... adding every day/ A few lines” is a method reminiscent of Goya’s “small unfinished sketch.” The method, in the words of the poem, is “To derive/ Not a long poem but a succession of brief ones” (143). This may seem at first to be a restatement of lyric, and perhaps it is an aspect of the poem’s hybridity as a genre. Yet conceiving of the poem as a series of a succession of “brief” or “small” poems is not necessarily just a lyrical strategy; here it is an indication of the bone and sinew of the poem’s construction—the happenstance, the anecdote, the “separate facts tenuously connected.” On the whole, *A Border Comedy* outstrips a solely lyric intention, as the initial conception of the poem suggests:

I began all this months ago, years maybe—in June, anyway, of 1994
I thought I could, as it were, follow a poem that kept itself apart from me
And from itself

A short lyric of shifts
 A page or two at most
 A poem of metamorphoses, a writing in lost contexts
 I would write a line or two
 No more
 And go away
 And come back another day only to add something that would change everything
 (63)

The “short lyric shifts” become simultaneously part of a larger epic impulse as “a page or two at most” burgeons to a fifteen chapters and the “lyric shifts” get clarified as “a writing in lost contexts.” To say that *A Border Comedy* is a long lyric is to take it piecemeal and miss the epic structure that weaves the separate lyric moments together. The poem’s epic impulse is located in the linkages, which “facilitates forgetting” in order re-member. As “a poem that kept itself apart” becomes a text written “as if some other writer had been writing,” Hejinian is at once a reader and a writer, a self and another, the embodiment of the poem’s epic ends.

Bakhtin claims that “In the comic world there is nothing for memory and tradition to do. One ridicules in order to forget” (23). Forgetting, though, is part of memory and part of what is necessary in order to reconnect what has gone before:

They can lodge themselves in a depth which is no longer that of memory but that
 of coexistence
 Where we become their contemporaries as they become the contemporaries of all
 seasons past and to come... (97)

In *A Border Comedy*, memory ultimately gives way to coexistence. That is, the connections Hejinian makes are not those that are past but those brought into the present by virtue of recalling them. What is remembered in the past, written in the present, and read in the future coexist in the text. For Bakhtin “It is precisely laughter that destroys the epic” because “Everything that makes us laugh is close at hand (23).” In *A Border Comedy*, everything is close at hand because the distinction between past and present breaks down and time becomes a continuous present.

That of forgetting
 About memory and its function in the associative, interpretative linking
 That constitutes what we consider making sense
 Of experience... (199)

“Forgetting/ About memory” enables a different kind of “associative, interpretative linking” and, as a result, leads to new types of experience, new types of relationship. As epic, *A Border Comedy* attempts to reconfigure the temporal structures with which we organize our experience. Epic directly confronts the past “as something incompletely lost” (24) and in *A Border Comedy*, “The story disintegrates and is told anew” (77). The epic cycle of regeneration and its episodic organization based on a telling and retelling exist as the structural basis of the poem, and these epic structures allow *A Border Comedy* to redraw the borders between genres, narrative strategies, historical events, and even categories of time.

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