HERMAN MELVILLE’S PIERRE AND THE ALLEGORY OF EMPIRE

Abstract

The article explores Herman Melville’s use of allegory in the critique of American expansionism in his novel Pierre. Allegorical structures encoded in this text are identified through references to Thomas Cole’s cycle of manifestly allegorical paintings entitled The Course of Empire. Melville’s novel and Cole’s pictures reveal meaningful similarities. The writer and the painter both use spatial and temporal constructions as a way of conveying ideological senses. In this respect, of crucial significance is a transition from the pastoral to the urban setting and imagery to be found in the novel and in the paintings. In accordance with the principle of allegory, Melville and Cole employ specific methods of universalizing human experience, although they create markedly different combinations of universality and historicity. Cole dehistoricizes his paintings, at the same time suggesting important historical analogies, whereas Melville evidently puts stress on historical contingency. Ultimately, they both foreground the deterministic dimension of individual and collective existence, thus raising questions about the problematic nature of human agency in an imperial culture.

This article is concerned with the use of allegory in the critique of American expansionist ambitions in Herman Melville’s Pierre (1852). A possible way to identify allegorical constructions and to account for their significance in Melville’s work consists in establishing a connection between the novel and a well-known, manifestly allegorical series of paintings by Thomas Cole entitled The Course of Empire (1833–1836). It is interesting to notice that Cole’s creation of The Course of Empire and Melville’s publication of Pierre coincide roughly with the events symbolically framing a symptomatic stage of the American continental expansion. Cole’s paintings were produced at the time when the U.S. expansionist policy had taken its most aggressive turn,
drastically reflected in the Indian removals. On the other hand, *Pierre* appeared only a few years after a series of territorial acquisitions in the 1840s. One can perhaps risk a thesis that, in both cases, the employment of allegory hints the author’s ambivalence about the course of development that the United States had determined and followed as well as about the prevailing forms of agency that had emerged in the process.

There are several aspects of Melville’s method of allegorization that can be illuminated through references to Cole’s paintings. First, *Pierre* and *The Course of Empire* illustrate the ways of encoding ideological senses in spatial and temporal constructions that are prominent in the overall artistic vision. There is a meaningful correspondence between Cole’s temporal structures and Melville’s uses of space, which has to do with the limitations and advantages of the respective artistic domains represented by the painter and the writer. Thus, what Cole depicts as a change in time finds its equivalent in Melville’s presentation of a movement in space. This parallelism revolves around a shift from the pastoral to the urban imagery that appears in both Melville’s novel and Cole’s paintings. Second, Melville and Cole, in accordance with the basic rules of allegory, employ methods of universalizing human experience. The painter dehistoricizes the scenes evoked in his pictures, whereas the writer, while recognizing the overwhelming influence of society and history upon the individual, shows the protagonist’s predicament as a drama of virtually cosmic dimensions. Third, in both *Pierre* and *The Course of Empire* the allegorical significance seems to be reinforced by the presence of certain allusions or abstractions, which in Cole’s paintings nullify and replace the historical context, and in Melville’s book help to transcend it. Fourth, in both works, allegory contributes to problematizing the notion of agency, albeit in markedly different ways. Cole concentrates on the collective development, achievement and fall, and Melville, conversely, brings to the fore the individual and his ineluctable entanglements with the world at large. Highlighting the critical edge of Melville’s novel, William V. Spanos writes that what “*Moby-Dick* is to the American global imperial project, *Pierre*... is to the American domestic project” (2008: 21).

In the narrative of *Pierre*, Melville has scattered references to certain ideas and images emblematic of the continental expansion to the point that justifies Edwin Fussell’s claim, in his discussion of the topos of the frontier in the novel, that “[b]ehind all the secretive masochism of Melville’s bizarre psychological narrative, the course of empire drags its slow length along” (1965: 282). One of the most meaningful such references is a mention of Pierre’s grandfather’s brutal killing of two Natives: “in a night shuffle in the wilderness before the Revolutionary War, he had annihilated two Indian savages by making reciprocal bludgeons of their heads” ([1852] 1996: 29–30). This brief account of how Pierre’s grandfather killed two Indians is inscribed
in a larger description of the ancestor who was remembered as “the mildest hearted, and most blue-eyed gentleman in the world”, “a forgiver of many injuries; a sweet-hearted, charitable Christian” (30). In this description Melville combines the images of an unrelenting Indian-hater and a benign, religious patriarch and indicates that they do not have to be contradictory. The story about a raging white patriarch who killed two Indians, in a way a tableau of the atrocities sanctioned by the expansionist ideology, is displaced into an earlier, colonial situation and thus functions as a historical analogy, showing the persistence and extremity of Anglo racialism. Elsewhere in the novel, Pierre is described as “a thorough-going Democrat” (13), a very telling political affiliation evoking, in Melville’s time, immediate associations with the expansionist project. As the historian Bradford Perkins demonstrates, the territorial expansion was a political consequence of the rivalry between the Democrats and the Whigs, with the former party aiming to undermine the position of the latter, which was particularly strong in the slave states, by spreading its own influence over the new territories (1993: 178). Having pointed out Pierre’s dedication do the democratic cause, the narrator adds that he may appear to be “a little too Radical” (13). The remark about the character’s radicalism anticipates his subsequent decision to take care of Isabel, an epitome of the underprivileged class, as her self-declared husband who, for her sake, has renounced the great privileges of his own class. His radicalism as a personal attitude is ultimately at odds with his political identification as a “sterling Democrat” (13), the appellation reflecting a primary national tendency.

In one of the chapters describing Pierre’s hopeless conditions of life in New York, the narrator is upset by the possibility that the protagonist, deprived of any existential certainty, will degenerate to a sort of savage state: “Now look around in that most miserable room, and at that most miserable of all the pursuits of a man, and say if here be the place, and this be the trade that God intended for him.... Oh, I hear the leap of a Texan Camanche... and then I look in at Pierre. If physical, practical unreason make the savage, which is he?” (302). This passage ironically echoes the theory of savagism, commonly accepted in Melville’s time and stressing a variety of deficient qualities in the indigene that would eventually lead to their extinction. The references with historical and political meanings, especially with respect to expansionism, establish a historical subtext, counterbalancing the textual methods of universalizing the main character’s plight, and thus infuse the allegorical effect with vital contextual implications. However, such references are far from being unequivocal; it could be said, indeed, that, as signifiers, they often have misleading signifieds within the narrative. All in all, Melville’s historical and political allusions, while establishing an important, recognizable frame, have a dissonant, at times even defamiliarizing, overtone. In
general, such narrative dissonance suggests a critical authorial intention. In particular, it creates in *Pierre* a necessity to reinterpret the context and, in this way, helps to install allegory within the narrative as a clue to reinterpretation.

In her discussion of the social function of allegory, Wai-Chee Dimock argues that it enables, above all, the concealment of conflict or even the presentation of conflict as its opposite, that is as harmony, by way of a specific narrativization. Dimock focuses on Indian extermination and class conflict in antebellum America because they threatened to undermine the national narrative of progress. Thus, within the doctrine of harmony and progress, “polarity is neither eliminated nor even repressed, but simply transposed into a different set of terms, normalized as something analogous yet unrecognizable—something not only congruent with the doctrine of harmony but instrumental for its workings” (1989: 17). Accordingly, polarity came to be represented as “a sequential phenomenon” that explains difference in terms of “the teleology of time” (1989: 17). For example, one of the common antebellum conventions of describing Indians was to emphasize their childlike qualities, which implied that the Natives belonged to an epoch that had preceded the time of the dominance of the Anglo race. An analogous convention underlay the depictions of the working class, often seen as an anarchic force invading the urban environment. The crucial feature that the laborer allegedly shared with the Indian was barbarity. It was the recognition of this dangerous feature and of the necessity to fight it off that justified the extermination of Indians, on the one hand, and fueled various social initiatives to “civilize” the city working class, on the other (Dimock, 1989: 17–19).

As Dimock observes, the history of allegory “is the history of a conjunction between literary representation and political governance” (1989: 23). Importantly, the politicized allegory is indispensable for the kind of rhetoric that emanates from imperial ideologies, as they sustain the belief in the existence of a continuous, if not altogether timeless, order, which they purport to epitomize. Furthermore, this political aspect accounts for the historicity of allegory even in those cases where allegory asserts its detachment from history. Dimock writes that “allegory registers its own historical contingency, its own participation in what we might call a social economy of time and space” (1989: 22). The historical grounding of allegory manifests itself differently in Melville and in Cole. The writer does not even pretend that his text is free from historical contingencies; quite on the contrary, historical and political issues are fundamental for understanding the protagonist’s plight. Allegory functions in *Pierre* in rather subtle ways and it aims to convey ideological meanings in terms that, apparently, are not ideological. Cole, by contrast, quite evidently attempts to evade contextual contingencies by resorting to what Dimock calls “the logic of ‘petrification,’”
which depends on “the conversion of ‘history’ into ‘landscape’” (1989: 22). In his series of paintings, Cole illustrates a kind of universal law that pertains to imperial designs in general. This law has a historical sense insofar as it had been repeatedly concretized in specific circumstances. The point is that, ultimately, decontextualized images invite historical analogies.

Cole’s own statement, in a letter to his patron Luman Reed, illuminates the allegorical meaning of The Course of Empire: “A series of pictures might be painted that should illustrate the history of the natural scene as well as be an epitome of Man, showing the natural changes of landscape, and those affected by man in his progress from barbarism to civilization— to luxury—to the vicious state, or state of destruction—and to the state of ruins and desolation” (qtd. in Noble, [1856] 1964: 129). The titles of the five paintings that make up the cycle adequately speak for the images: The Savage State, The Arcadian or Pastoral State, The Consummation of Empire, The Destruction of Empire, and Desolation. Cole puts a double emphasis on the cyclicity of history: on the one hand, the course of empire is itself a cycle, and its main stages have been named in the titles of the paintings, and on the other, this historical development has been inscribed into the cycle of the day: the empire emerges at dawn, flourishes during the day, and tumbles in the evening. The use of the cycle of the day conveys two important ideas with ideological undertones: the rapidity of growth and the inevitability of decline. There is a double bind between spatialized time and temporalized space. The Course of Empire highlights the repeatability of the historical process and the impermanence of human establishments whose existence marks the successive stages of this process. Alan P. Walach points out the ideological connotations of The Course of Empire: “Cole’s series, with its warning against the effects of wealth and vice, was to be understood as an imaginative paradigm of American history” (1968: 379). Angela Miller writes that the painter repudiated American nationalism and exceptionalism and “remained loyal to an older, eighteenth-century republican mind-set, continuing to believe in the existence of universal truths and historical laws at a time when the young republic was considered exempt from them” (1993: 21–22). She thus describes the effect which Cole’s political convictions had on his allegory of empire:

Cole’s distrust of popular democracy played a central role in shaping his vision of history and in contributing to the social subtext of his art, for one cannot easily separate its allegorical content from his highly colored response to the events of his own time.... Skeptical of party politics, he was Whiggish in political sympathies and strongly anti-Jacksonian.... His cyclical vision of history, his sense of the fragility of self-governed societies, and his insistence that the course of the United States would be shaped by universal rather than exceptionalist historical forces all looked to eighteenth-century republican modes of thought. (1993: 25)
The temporal transition from the dawn to the sunset corresponds to the spatial transition from the rural to the urban imagery. Cole clearly idealizes the pastoral state, which he associates with serenity and equilibrium and which he juxtaposes with the stormy and unsettling savage state. In the second picture, the pastoral notions underlying its meaning are self-evident. In essence, it shows the borderland where the area good for cultivation and habitation lies next to the natural expanses, whose borders are suggested by a line of trees, starting in the foreground, and two mountains in the background. The sense of harmony permeating the second picture in *The Course of Empire* disappears from the third in which a view of urban grandeur emblematically represents the excessive quality of the life therein. There is not any hint of urban corruption here, but it can be surmised, in the context of the whole cycle, that the city has a predictable tendency for corruption, hence, in Cole’s description of the fourth painting the synonym of “destruction” is “vicious state.” The expansive urban development apparently marks the beginning of the phase of the empire’s decline, as if the flourishing anticipated the eclipse. Interestingly, a similar idea appears later in Ralph Waldo Emerson’s *English Traits* where one finds a very ambiguous description of London, a mid-nineteenth-century epitome of the imperial metropolis: the writer observes the signs of an unparalleled growth, at the same time prophesying—or rather confirming the existing prophecies about—the city’s imminent fall: “if we visit London, the present time is the best time, as some signs portend that it has reached its highest point. It is observed that the English interest is a little less within a few years; and hence the impression that the British power has culminated, is in solstice, or already declining” ([1856] 1983: 785).

The transition from the rural to the urban setting constitutes the axis of Melville’s plot. Book I of *Pierre* begins with a depiction of “all Nature” sinking into a “wonderful and indescribable repose” (3). The descriptions of Saddle Meadows, the Glendinning family’s estate, evoke a profound sense of pastoral harmony. Pierre embodies some important features of the pastoral figure: he feels very much at home in the natural surroundings and, at the same time, has very good manners that make him worthy of his class. Interestingly, the images of Saddle Meadows contrast starkly with the view of the area extending beyond the lake which Pierre passes on his way to meet Isabel for the first time:

On both sides, in the remoter distance, and also far beyond the mild lake’s further shore, rose the long, mysterious mountain masses; shaggy with pines and hemlocks, mystical with nameless, vapory exhalations, and in that dim air black with dread and gloom. At their base, profoundest forests lay entranced, and for their far owl-haunted depths of caves and rotted leaves, and unregarded inland overgrowth of decaying wood—for smallest sticks of which, in other climes many
Douglas Robillard argues that, in the descriptions of Saddle Meadows and its surroundings, Melville creates parodies of the visual conventions of the sublime and the picturesque, on the one hand, evoking "the horrific sublime of Burke", and on the other, insisting "upon the sentimental side of romantic art, the portrayal of rusticity and moral beauty." According to the critic, the effect of parody is achieved through overstatement (1997: 108). However, Melville’s parody of the conventions of landscape painting does not diminish the ideological significance of space; if anything, it makes it more conspicuous. Contrary to Cole, who envisages the savage and the pastoral states as different stages in a temporal sequence, Melville sees these states as two adjacent spaces. This helps to highlight the similarity of Saddle Meadows to a frontier settlement, even if the exquisite, aristocratic manners of the Glendinnings suggest that civility reigns in this place. Inventing Saddle Meadows, Melville had a specific actual location in mind: the vicinity of Mount Greylock in Berkshire, the tallest summit in Massachusetts, originally called Saddle Mountain (Rogin 161). Greylock, with "his Imperial Purple Majesty" (1) is named in the novel’s dedication. Even though Saddle Meadows lies away from the Western frontier and does not border on the real wilderness, it borders on the area that can be imagined—and thus perceived—as the wilderness. Michael Paul Rogin writes that "[t]he Glendinnings are in transition from extension in time and space to a withdrawn, pastoral existence" (1983: 162–163). However, this withdrawal does not signify abeyance; quite on the contrary, it signifies stabilization and the conservation of the established order. By stressing the proximity of three spaces: the wild, the pastoral, and the urban, Melville creates an impression of immediacy, and this immediacy necessitates a continuing imperial effort.

Importantly, the presentation of Pierre’s movement from the country to the city relies on the same figurative use of the cycle of the day that so crucially contributes to the meaning of Cole’s The Course of Empire. At the beginning of the novel, Pierre is introduced “issuing from the embowered and high gabled old home of his fathers” (3) on a bright summer morning. Later on, when he, Isabel, and Delly Ulver arrive at the city, it happens on a night with "no moon and few stars" (229). The cycle of the day, as a variety of temporal measure, emphasizes the rapidity of a dramatic change that has occurred in Pierre’s life. The nocturnal images, evoked in the depiction of Pierre’s arrival at the city, have infernal connotations, which is in keeping with the mid-nineteenth-century literary conventions of representing the
urban milieu: “lamps... seemed not so much intended to dispel the general
gloom, as to show some dim path leading through it, into some gloom still
deeper beyond” (229). The infernal connotations are further enhanced by the
descending movement of the carriage upon entering the city, as if it had
reached a place from which there is no way back. In Melville’s description
of the metropolis, the images of urban poverty and crime–epitomized by the
watch-house, an urban microcosm where Pierre encounters “a base
congregation” of “frantic, diseased-looking men and women of all colors,
and in all imaginable flaunting, immodest, grotesque and shattered dresses”
(240)–alternate with the images of urban decadence, epitomized by Glen
Stanly, Pierre’s cousin and would-be successor. However, in his novel,
Melville departs from the conventional depictions of the city by concentrating
on the life of the class that could be called the lumpen intelligentsia to which
Pierre belongs, as do all the residents of the Church of the Apostles.

Nick Yablon demonstrates that “[i]n the middle years of the nineteenth
century New York was radically transformed from a close-knit ‘walking’ city
of merchants and artisans to an industrialized, class-stratified metropolis”
(2010: 109). In the course of this process, many buildings were pulled down so
that room could be made for new buildings, and such a restructuring of the
urban space “generated ruins and vision of ruins” (2010: 109). As a result,
New York came to be associated with the ancient “condemned” and
“apocalyptic” cities, such as Sodom, Gomorrah, and Babylon (2010: 108–
109), all of which underwent ruination as a punishment for the evils that they
had spawned. Yablon shows that the journalists who commented upon the
rapid architectural change in New York came up with ancient analogies with
a surprising frequency. He writes: “Sometimes commentators discerned in
such scenes of construction and demolition the mirror image of more than
one ancient civilization, as if all the ruins of the world had magically
materialized in the modern cosmopolis of Manhattan” (2010: 123). Although
Melville does not write about the ruins amidst the New York landscape, he
does observe the profound change of the urban space; in fact, the Church of
the Apostles, which had lost its original function and been restructured in
such a way as to house a great number of chambers for rent, is a sign of this
change.

Whereas Cole shows the pastoral landscape inevitably transformed into
the urban environment, Melville sees the country and the metropolis as parts
of the same economic universe. This is why, in essence, the painter cherishes
a pastoral fantasy despite realizing the impermanence of the pastoral state,
and the writer stresses the falseness of pastoral imaginings. In Melville’s
novel, the country and the city are bound together by the mechanisms of the
distribution of power, which are rooted in the fundamental, ruthless laws of
economy: loss and gain. It is not incidental that, after moving to the city,
Pierre faces the unpleasant consequences of the decision which he made when he still lived at Saddle Meadows, as if the city taught him a lesson for his misdeed and the resulting disappointment of his mother. Pierre discovers, to his utmost chagrin, that all the good things that, as it seemed, came so naturally to him in his idyllic youth, in particular the recognition of his burgeoning literary talent, depended entirely on the social position which he has lost. By his mother’s side, he played a role which might have appeared spontaneous to him, but which in reality emanated from a larger symbolic structure of authority, the guarantee of his future prominence. Having removed himself from this structure, Pierre leaves a void which Glen readily fills up, becoming the new lawful heir to the Glendinning fortune. What is more, Glen turns out to be so eager to come off well in his new role that he begins to think of marrying Lucy Tartan, Pierre’s rejected fiancée, who has joined Pierre and Isabel at the Church of the Apostles. Glen Stanly and Fred Tartan, Lucy’s brother, visit Pierre in his drab dwelling place and try to persuade him to let the girl go. This happens, presumably, with Mrs. Glendinnigns acceptance. In any case, even though Glen and Mrs. Glendinning never appear together in the book, it is in these two figures that Melville allegorizes the joint effort of the American countryside and the American metropolis to defend the established order in times of crisis. The country and the city depend on each other for mutually sustaining acts of support.

What Pierre and The Course of Empire have in common is that their authors, each in his own way, imply the vulnerability of imperial culture, which has to do with a vision of the empire that tumbles, as in Cole, or stumbles, as in Melville. The painter and the writer seem to converge on a point that the imperial design carries the seeds of its own destruction. In his cycle of paintings, Cole makes an instant shift from The Consummation of Empire to The Destruction of Empire. In the latter picture, what immediately captures the viewer’s attention is a monumental statue of a warrior with a shield, absent from the former work. The figure towering over the scene of destruction perhaps could be identified as the agent of havoc that has been wreaked upon the city, the microcosm of the unnamed empire, hence the figure’s posture indicating dynamic movement. One could speculate that the monument had been erected as an expression of imperial triumphs eventually to become a sign of an overwhelming force that turned the empire into ruins. Interestingly, Desolation, the painting that follows The Destruction of Empire in the cycle, employs a perspective that removes from view the place where the monument stood. Thus, it is possible to imagine the monumental figure still standing there, a headless usher of, to quote Cole, “the funeral knell of departed greatness” (qtd. in Noble, [1856] 1964: 130). Similarly, in Pierre, what interrupts the chain of continuity, so essential for the perpetuation of
expansionist ambitions, is a series of actions undertaken by a person who had once been a stable element of this chain. Pierre is initially replaced by Glen, but when he kills the cousin, this death signifies the end of the Glendinning family, of Saddle Meadows and of the imperial idea epitomized by this estate. The destructive energy comes from within the established order, triggered by a sudden, unpredictable impulse.

Of utmost importance for the construction of allegory in *Pierre* and *The Course of Empire* is the presence of such strategies of representation that universalize the historical experience. Cole dehistoricizes his paintings, leaving the eponymous empire unnamed, although—judging by the architecture depicted in the pictures—there is a strong implication that he treated ancient Rome as a model. He thus envisages the imperial city in his description of *The Consummation of Empire*: “a great city girding the bay, gorgeous piles of architecture, bridge, aqueducts, temples—the port crowded with vessels—splendid processions” (qtd. in Noble, [1856] 1964: 130). The most meaningful architectural element in the paintings showing the urban scenery is, undeniably, the column. In *The Consummation of Empire*, one can see a number of buildings erected upon or decorated with columns. In *The Destruction of Empire*, the only buildings that have not been completely ruined have long rows of columns. Finally, and most significantly, in *Desolation*, a single column, with nothing to support or adorn, dominates the foreground, and in the background there is a row of columns, clearly the only remnant that has been left of a demolished building: “columns standing isolated amid the encroaching waters” (Cole qtd. in Noble, [1856] 1964: 130). Ancient architecture was not unfamiliar to Americans; conversely, it was a great inspiration for American architects especially during the so-called Greek Revival in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century when, as Carl J. Richard somewhat hyperbolically puts it, “the trickle of neoclassical architecture became a raging flood” (2009: xi). In Cole’s cycle, Rome does not function only as a cautionary analogy for the United States, but also as the most spectacular illustration of unchanging historical laws.

In *Pierre*, the universalization of the hero’s plight is accomplished, for example, through a variety of allusions among which those to ancient Rome are prominent, indeed. By far, the most telling such allusion compares Pierre’s decision to take care of Isabel and to leave Saddle Meadows to the crossing of the Rubicon. Book XI of Pierre is, in fact, titled “He crosses the Rubicon.” In this chapter, Pierre informs his mother that he is married and the bride is not Lucy Tartan, to which Mrs. Gledinning responds by disowning her son: “My dark soul prophesied something dark. If already thou hast not found other lodgment, and other table than this house supplies, then seek it straight. Beneath my roof, and at my table, he who was once Pierre Glendinning no more puts himself” (185). A legal decision to disinherit the
son follows this emotional reaction. No less meaningful than the evocation of the Rubicon is the allusion to Palmyra at the beginning of the novel:

In all this, how unadmonished was our Pierre by that foreboding and prophetic lesson taught, not less by Palmyra’s quarries, than by Palmyra’s ruins. Among those ruins is a crumbling, uncompleted shaft, and some leagues off, ages ago left in the quarry, is the crumbling corresponding capital, also incomplete. These Time seized and spoiled; these Time crushed in the egg; and the proud stone that should have stood among the clouds, Time left abased beneath the soil. Oh, what quenchless feud is this, that Time hath with the sons of Men! (8)

Palmyra, an ancient city located in an oasis on the Syrian Desert, had been twice conquered and twice destroyed by the Romans during the first ages after Christ. Before the second Roman conquest, Palmyra had thriven tremendously. It thrived again, rebuilt by the Romans after their second conquest, to finally be destroyed for good by the Arabs in the eighth century A.D. In Melville’s novel, the reference to Palmyra signifies the dramatic changeability of fortune and, accordingly, the fundamental instability of the human situation. In particular, it anticipates Pierre’s fall as well as the decline of Saddle Meadows as a material enterprise and a realization of an expansionist idea.

There are a number of literary allusions in Pierre—most notably to the Bible, Shakespeare, and Dante—and they play an important role in expanding the novel’s allegorical design because they help to transcend the historical situation and shed light on Pierre’s predicament as a cosmic drama. However, this cosmic dimension of the protagonist’s experience is expressed, above all, by the accumulation of abstract notions that underlie the most essential laws of human existence across history. A list of such abstract notions is long and includes, among others: Truth, Grief, Beauty, Faith, Chaos, Doom, Time, Chance, Passion, Fate, Death. At one point, the narrator compares Pierre to Christ: “Thus, in the enthusiast to Duty, the heaven-begotten Christ is born; and will not own a mortal parent, and spurns and rends all mortal bonds” (106). Book V, entitled “Misgivings and Preparations” and covering the time after Pierre’s reading of Isabel’s letter and before his meeting with her, shows him first overwhelmed with doubts and then reaching a resolution, which brings to mind Christ who prayed in the olive orchard soon before his imprisonment. In the end, his own determination empowers him to the point when he states his readiness to reject God, which of course immediately complicates the sense of the possible biblical allusion:

On my strong faith in ye Invisibles, I stake three whole felicities, and three whole lives this day. If ye forsake me now,—farewell to Faith, farewell to Truth, farewell to God; exiled for aye from God and man, I shall declare myself an equal power with both; free to make war on Night and Day, and all thoughts and things of mind and matter, which the upper and the nether firmaments do clasp! (107)
This monologue, which sounds like an imitation of the Shakespearean rhetoric, illustrates the excessive quality of Melville’s narrative discourse in *Pierre*. It is the entire complex framework of allusions—biblical, mythological, literary—that helps to elevate the hero’s plight to a level much above the convention of sentimental fiction, from which the writer draws, too. All in all, the literary tradition constitutes an important domain of allegorization.

The comparison of the protagonist to Christ suggests a powerful agency, culminating in self-renunciation, self-sacrifice, and ultimately death; in other words, there is a kind of contradictory logic behind such a comparison. According to this logic, agency, however strong initially, is bound to appear ineffective or illusory. As a matter of fact, in *Pierre* the whole question of agency is ambivalent from the very beginning, because the character’s plight is consistently presented through references to notions universalizing the individual experience, from among which that of “Fate” emerges as the most crucial. As Michael McLoughlin points out in his discussion of the novel, “‘Fate’ is... the accumulated burden of man’s heritage.” The critic adds: “Even though a man’s emotional reactions to a situation might harm him, he could not necessarily, according to Melville, control his response. He saw many elements as being involved in a final result—elements of which a man was not only unaware, but over which, even if he were aware, he would have little control” (2003: 77). It is not accidental that *Pierre* has often been read as a bitter polemic with Emerson’s conception of self-reliance. Pierre’s decisions and his ensuing actions, defying his mother’s will and authority, entail a recognition of a variety of obstacles which he will have to try to surmount on his own. A great irony of his predicament lies in the fact that, acting according to his principle of self-reliance, he realizes, with an increasing poignancy, the extent of his dependence on other people, on a large environment with its rigid hierarchies.

The very existence within a collective environment must in some way undermine the idea of human agency, which Cole shows, in *The Course of Empire*, quite as sharply as Melville does in *Pierre*. Cole’s cycle as a whole relies on the combination of natural landscape painting and architectural landscape painting, thus putting emphasis on the transformation of space as a consequence of an enormous human effort. The point is that the grand creation totally erases the contribution of an individual, because the creative—and also the destructive—energy, yielding spectacular effects, resides in and emanates from the mass, as shown in *The Consummation of Empire* and *The Destruction of Empire*. Carl Pfluger writes about Cole’s “notorious weakness in handling the human figure”, especially when the painter “just sticks them [human figures] in for more or less obviously arbitrary and symbolic purposes” (1995: 632). In *The Course of Empire*, the representation of human figures, even if it reveals a flaw of the painterly technique, has valid
implications for understanding the nature of human agency. *The Arcadian or Pastoral State*, the second painting in the cycle, depicts several people in very static positions, despite the presence of dancers, only the subsequent two pictures show dynamic activity. It seems, therefore, that man is inactive during the time when the conditions predispose him to shape the surroundings, and then acts frenziedly in the face of an impending catastrophe, when all activity is futile. Symptomatically, both Cole and Melville suggest that the anticipation of doom is a uniquely powerful stimulus for human agency, but it invariably comes too late.

The use of allegory in *Pierre* enhances the deterministic dimension of the hero’s historical and existential situation. Determinism establishes a specific connection between individual psychology and external pressures, and, in a novel so focused on the protagonist as *Pierre*, it vividly foregrounds the factors behind the process of his moral, emotional, and intellectual formation. Pierre is a product of an imperial culture that operates through an “insidiously benign moral discourse” (Spanos, 2008: 27) and, in this way, veils its “nationalist, traditionalist, patriarchal, class structured, racist and expansionist” character (Spanos, 2008: 26). Even after his relegation to the margins of social life, Pierre remains exposed to the encroachments of the hegemonic environment. He is bound to perish; the cause of this is his dissent from the prevailing expansionist standards and sentiments, though Melville prefers to call it “Fate.”

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