

## CHAPTER 3

# *The American West*

*Nathaniel Lewis*

### 1849: *Mardi*

“West, West! West, West!” Published in the spring of 1849, when seemingly all American eyes were fixed on California and the American West, Herman Melville’s *Mardi* repeatedly invokes the West – as a region of the country and as a utopian direction of travel – with a tone so spirited that it approaches parody. Melville’s prose expands as if in imitation of its subject: “West, West! Whitherward mankind and empires – flocks, caravans, armies, navies; worlds, suns, and stars all wend! – West, West! Oh boundless boundary! Eternal goal!” Beyond the hints here of his idiosyncratic style and penetrating intelligence, Melville was deploying a language entirely familiar to his readers at the time, a nationalist discourse of celebration and promise that had been circulating with a proliferating energy for decades. And more: “Dreams! Dreams! golden dreams: endless and golden, as the flowery prairies, that stretch away from the Rio Sacramento . . . and my dreams herd like buffaloes, browsing on to the horizon, and browsing on round the world.”<sup>1</sup> Melville does not hold back.

Nor did other antebellum authors. Some writers (such as Edgar Allan Poe) took full advantage of the massive wave of western writing that began flooding the eastern literary marketplace in the 1830s, in part to promote their own book and magazine sales; some writers (such as Washington Irving, Francis Parkman and Margaret Fuller) used their own “tours” of the region to compose popular travel and adventure narratives for eastern readers; still other writers (such as Caroline Kirkland and Charles Fenno Hoffman) relied on residency in the West for their observations and social commentaries; and many writers (including Cooper, Emerson, Hawthorne, Longfellow, Whitman and Thoreau) deployed the West as an effective symbol and occasional setting for their own aesthetic and cultural ruminations. The West was an abundant resource for writers of the period,

and they mined the region's symbolic veins with a ceaseless and strategic determination.

Melville was no exception. He read many of the popular accounts by western writers such as James Hall; he toured the Illinois frontier in 1840; he followed the events in Texas and the southwest borderlands, composing a parody in 1847 of Zachary Taylor ("Old Zack") and the war with Mexico; and he frequently referred to Native Americans and popular representations of Indians, often western, in his interrogation of the idea of "savagery." It is no surprise that Melville could reproduce the well-worn trail of comparing the ocean to the prairies, as we can hear in the quoted passages from *Mardi*, a metaphor that appears frequently in *Moby-Dick* (including chapter 79, "The Prairie"). Indeed, William Cullen Bryant had offered the same comparison in reverse in his 1836 poem "The Prairies," describing the area's "unshorn fields, boundless and beautiful" – "As if the ocean, in his gentlest swell, / Stood still." The "golden dreams" he invokes in *Mardi* echo the golden dreams felt throughout American culture in 1849 – though some of those dreams were admittedly nightmares. (In the same year, Poe located "Eldorado" as being "Over the mountains / Of the Moon, / Down the Valley of the Shadow.") In short, images of the West are ubiquitous in Melville's prose, from *Typee* through *The Confidence-Man*, and often extend into his later poetry; and it would not be a stretch to say that he employed no other referent – no other symbol or place or metaphor or image – as frequently and as diversely as he employed the idea of the West. Writing of *Moby-Dick*, Edwin Fussell put it this way: "There are more references to the American West than to Polynesia (or England; or the ancient world; or the Near East; or the history of philosophy; or anything else) . . . There are almost more allusions to the West than to whaling; and the whales themselves, we quickly learn, are as often as not buffaloes."<sup>2</sup>

What the West was to the still-young nation has been more than hinted: scholars have long examined the West's significance in antebellum America culture. The West was not only an effective metaphor for the country's "manifest destiny" but a contested geopolitical battleground in the debates about economic development, the expansion of slavery and the dislocation of indigenous peoples. And yet what the West was to Melville remains largely unsaid. By the time of *Mardi*, Melville was beginning to stretch beyond the period's conventional literary uses of the West, and we find in his work a growing sense that the West as a referent was troubled, unstable and, even, as he puts it in *Mardi*, "unattainable forever." Nina Baym describes the writing of *Mardi* as a turning point for Melville, a "transformation" from "entertainer to truth teller" and identifies *Pierre* as

the site of a second transformation: “from truth teller to truth denier.”<sup>3</sup> Telling the “truth” about a place, very much including the West, became a fascination for Melville, itself part and parcel of the idea of truth-telling in general. True places, Ishmael famously remarked in *Moby-Dick*, are never on any map, which may be the reason that the narrator of *Mardi* “chartless voyaged,” traveling off the map in pursuit of his allegorical destinations. As his career progressed (or digressed or devolved), Melville’s “West” became a diverse, changing and unstable signifier, a place neither entirely true nor entirely false. In other words, like the mighty Leviathan, the West in Melville’s work is surely not without meaning; and yet it remains a loose fish, vast yet elusive, beyond maps and charts and the written word: a Rosetta Stone that is perhaps, finally, unreadable.

This is all to say that thinking of Melville in the context of the American West during his lifetime is not only a literary and historical challenge, but an epistemological one as well. This chapter will attempt to convey a sense of the popular and literary meanings of the West during Melville’s lifetime, with particular attention to the years of novel-writing, 1846–57, recognizing at the start that the West held multiple meanings for all Americans at the time. At once the Great Desert and the nation’s Garden, at once a tabula rasa for the inscriptions of the Euro-American imagination and the site of once-thriving civilizations that would rival Greece and Rome, at once St. Louis and the remote areas of the Far West, “the West” meant many things to the American imagination. For Melville, the instability of the term seemed to suggest at times something more: the instability of American democracy and the instability of meaning itself; and he both reveled in the elasticity of “the West” and, at times, seemed to despair of its unknowability.

### 1839: “The Great Nation of Futurity”

On September 23, 1806, Meriwether Lewis and William Clark arrived in St. Louis – the Corps of Discovery making the return voyage. Only two and a half years earlier, the two men had attended a ceremony in St. Louis to recognize the formal transfer of the Louisiana Territory from France to the United States. And only thirteen years later, on August 1, 1819, Herman Melville was born.

This observation, both banal and startling, is put in full relief by the date of Melville’s death: September 28, 1891, approximately a year after the U.S. Census declared the frontier to be “closed,” and only two years before Frederick Jackson Turner would determine the shape of American

historiography for a century by presenting “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” at the World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago. In other words, Melville’s life spanned a period of enormous change in how the country viewed the region; it was still being “opened” when he was beginning his career and, by his death, it was “closed.” By then, the emblem of the future had become an emblem of the past.

“Fragments from a Writing Desk,” Melville’s first published fiction, appeared in a local Lansingburgh, New York, newspaper in 1839. A year later, likely motivated by a desire to see the frontier culture as well perhaps by his own native restlessness and curiosity, Melville journeyed to the Illinois frontier. He would return to the West on lecture tours in the 1850s and later, but this early trip fired his imagination; as Kevin J. Hayes has written, “Melville’s ever-expansive mind stockpiled images he would use in his writings.”<sup>4</sup> Indeed, acknowledging that Melville’s voyage aboard the whaling ship *Acushnet* to be the primary influence on his writing, Hayes suggests that Melville’s “inland excursion may be the second most important.”<sup>5</sup> Melville’s experiences in the West shaped the undated poem “Trophies of Peace: Illinois 1840,” with its curious mixture of war and agricultural imagery, but it is fair to say that his experiences, which he never recorded in a journal or published essay, influenced virtually all his work. From the beginning, Melville’s writerly imagination looked to the West.

As Melville approached a career in writing in 1839, what did the West look like? In the popular imagination of the day, the West symbolized a new way of understanding both space and time; the West represented not only vast territories of untold natural resources for the young nation, but represented the future itself. In 1839 the influential newspaper editor and columnist John L. O’Sullivan (who was later credited with popularizing the term “manifest destiny”) jingoistically announced that the United States was to be “*the great nation of futurity*.” “We have no interest in the scenes of antiquity . . . The expansive future is our arena, and for our history. We are entering on its untrodden space.” That “untrodden space” – what would also be called “virgin land,” a territory of invented emptiness – was the space of promise, a promise embedded in a national ideology of the future: morning in America. We can hear this cultural optimism in much of Melville’s prose, particularly in his early novels, as in *Mardi*’s celebration of the West as an “eternal goal” or in *White-Jacket*, when Melville writes, echoing Winthrop, Cooper and Emerson: “In the Past is no hope; the Future is both hope and fruition. . . . And we Americans are the peculiar, chosen people. . . . We are the pioneers of the world; the advance-guard,

sent on through the wilderness of untried things, to break a new path in the New World that is ours.”<sup>6</sup>

And yet, already by 1839, there is a quietly growing sense that the West as a “true place” was endangered, already sliding into the past. For one thing, dramatic immigrations into the new territories established new settlements and new transportation routes. Much of the West was hardly “untrodden space” (even overlooking the presence of human cultures throughout the region for millennia) but increasingly traveled and occupied. The overland trail to Oregon was all but completed by then, as in 1839 the Peoria Party of “Oregon Dragoons” successfully made their way to Oregon Country. By then, Caroline Kirkland was not the first to emphasize manners and domestic arrangements on the frontier, which she did in *A New Home, Who'll Follow* (1839). More abstractly, the nineteenth-century cultural logic that insisted on the inevitable triumph of civilization over savagery produced a lingering side effect: an inchoate, spectral sense of loss. The “untrodden space” of the West, its defining characteristic, was doomed to domestication by American progress. William Cullen Bryant ends “The Prairies” by imagining “The sounds of that advancing multitude / Which soon shall fill these deserts:” “the laugh of children, the soft voice / Of maidens, and the sweet and solemn hymn of Sabbath worshippers.” Similarly, less than a decade later, Francis Parkman observed in *The Oregon Trail* that “great changes are at hand” in the West; he lamented that with the “stream of emigration” into the region, “the buffalo will dwindle” and the “Indians will soon be abased by whiskey and overawed by military posts.” And when this happens, the West’s “danger and its charm will have disappeared forever.” More and more, the American West was “imagined and celebrated largely for its status as ‘pre’ – for its position as a pre-lapsarian, pre-social, and pre-modern space.”<sup>7</sup> The West’s reputation as a “true place” increasingly depended on its status as a palimpsest of the past – and on its recreation in fiction.

### 1849: *The California and Oregon Trail*

In the spring of 1848, the discovery of gold in California set off a rush of excitement across the region that soon spread throughout the world. By the next year, the Gold Rush was becoming a fixture in the American literary imagination. Writers and publishers predictably sought to cash in on the wave of popular excitement over the news from the West, and the word “California” in a newspaper headline or a book title was seen as a promise of adventure ahead. Thus, Parkman’s account of his tour of the West,

originally serialized in the *Knickerbocker* from 1847–9 as “The Oregon Trail: A Summer’s Journey Out of Bounds,” was retitled in 1849 for publication in book form as *The California and Oregon Trail*. (Parkman changed it back to *The Oregon Trail* in subsequent editions.)

In March 1849, Melville wrote his only significant essayistic commentary on the West, a review of Parkman’s book in the *Literary World*. Appearing about the same time as *Mardi*, Melville’s review praised Parkman’s narrative as “excellent.” He did, though, find two faults. The second objection, often noted by critics, is that Parkman’s representation of Native Americans is, bluntly, racist. Melville objected to Parkman’s implication “that it is difficult for any white man, after a domestication among the Indians, to hold them much better than brutes.” It is “wholly wrong,” Melville asserts, to “regard them with disdain and contempt.” To be sure, Melville’s attitude toward Native Americans remained rooted in his own culture’s complex perception of ethnicity; arguing that “our own progenitors . . . were savage also,” he concludes, “let us not disdain then, but pity.”<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, his rejection of Parkman’s ugly depictions has caught the attention of literary history.

His first objection, however, is just odd enough to have largely escaped comment. Concluding the short opening paragraph by praising the book for being “obviously truthful,” he begins his second paragraph by somewhat contradictorily remarking, “the title will be apt to mislead.” The problem, as Melville correctly points out, is that “there is nothing about California or Oregon in the book.” Of course, it may well be that Melville objected to the blatant commercialism of the revised title, and yet Melville instead offers a lengthy discourse on linguistics that is both humorous and somewhat eccentric. Essentially, he ponders the relationship between names (signifiers) and both books and places (signifieds). “The christening of books,” he writes, “is very different from the christening of men,” sternly explaining that “the object” of naming a person “is to individualize,” and that object “is gained whatever name you bestow, though it be wholly irrespective of the character of the person named.” Thus, “during this present gold fever, patriotic fathers have a perfect right to christen their offspring ‘Sacramento’, or ‘California’.” But Melville stands opposed to this practice “with books . . . whose names or titles are presumed to express their contents.” Melville then points to the obvious by acknowledging that the title may refer to “the route or ‘trail’ pursued by Mr. Parkman.” But to this too Melville objects, pointing out that the “Pekin and Bombay Trail” would then seem to be “the correct title for a book of travels in a region lying East of the Rocky Mountains.” Melville seems to be having some fun,

and this short essay embodies the playful spirit in which Melville became a “truth teller”; we sense here the teasing interrogation of meaning and language that blossoms two years later in *Moby-Dick*. And yet, as in that novel, Melville here seems to hint at the very serious problem of getting the West right – and to the attendant complexities of the potential duplicities of language and people. Concluding his comments on the inaccuracy of the title, Melville writes that “for the correctness of our judgment,” he would appeal “to any sensible man in the community (provided he has no thought of emigrating to the gold region).”<sup>9</sup>

### 1857: *The Confidence-Man*

In *Israel Potter*, the subtly mischievous pastiche of “true” American history Melville serialized in 1854 and 1855, he describes the Revolutionary War hero Ethan Allen: “Though born in New England, he exhibited no trace of her character. . . . His spirit was essentially western; and herein is his peculiar Americanism; for the western spirit is, or will yet be (for no other is, or can be), the true American one.”<sup>10</sup> Written not long after *Pierre* and around the same time as “Benito Cereno,” *Israel Potter* appeared during Melville’s later phase as a “truth denier.” Though hardly as pessimistic or obscure as many late works, the novel dances with historiographical truth in numerous ways, and the description of Ethan Allen is representative of Melville’s discursive wordplay. After noting the absence of a native New England character in Allen (“no trace”), Melville moves on to playful misdirection: he couples Allen’s “western spirit” (itself a phrase with a spectral touch) with his “peculiar Americanism.” “Peculiar” perhaps because it is so elusive: that western spirit is then divorced from temporal certainty (“is, or will yet be”) and undone by the speculative, disruptive parenthetical qualification, also temporally and grammatically doubled: “no other is, or can be.” The result is that “the true American” spirit is displaced, likely non-existent, defined by absences and at best a future possibility.

That notion of such a future possibility, a tease in *Israel Potter*, is entirely gone in Melville’s extraordinary final novel, *The Confidence-Man* (1857). The setting – the Mississippi River – is an unfixed, liminal space, both West and not West. If, as seems likely, Melville took a Mississippi steamboat trip during his 1840 stay in Illinois, those memories were apparently transformed into the curious and oblique setting of the novel. Like Lewis and Clark’s expedition and Parkman’s tour, *The Confidence-Man* begins in St. Louis. But whereas Lewis and Clark, Parkman and countless others “jumped off” and headed west up the Missouri River, the riverboat *Fidèle*



heads south on the Mississippi River, toward New Orleans, into the heart of democracy's darkness in the late 1850s. Perhaps recalling the cacophony of traders and emigrants that Parkman depicts at the start of his book, Melville describes "the throngs on the decks" with a multicultural abandon, a lengthy list that seems to include every race, every ethnicity, every profession, every religion to be found in America: "in short, a piebald parliament, an Anacharsis Cloots congress of all kinds of that multiform pilgrim species, man." Indeed, Melville launches the *Fidèle's* journey with a familiar tone of optimism, remarking that "these varieties of mortals blended their varieties of visage and garb:" "Here reigned the dashing and all-fusing spirit of the West, whose type is the Mississippi itself, which, uniting the streams of the most distant and opposite zones, pours them along, helter-skelter, in one cosmopolitan and confident tide."<sup>11</sup> Things go downriver from here.

Edwin Fussell is spot-on when he writes of this passage: "Every word is ironic, but readers entrapped in conventional attitudes will miss the point . . . that all this confident fusing and uniting . . . served primarily to conceal the basest ends with the emptiest rhetoric."<sup>12</sup> In part, the "spirit of the West" had become a ghost of the past for Melville, who despaired for the nation's fracturing decline. Yet even putting aside Melville's growing philosophical skepticism about the West and the nation, by the 1850s the West was increasingly seen as past its prime. Melville himself hints at this idea in *Moby-Dick*, suggesting that "so short a period ago . . . the census of the buffalo in Illinois exceeded the census of men now in London;" he looks back on the days "when the far west . . . was a wilderness and a virgin." Thus, *Moby-Dick*, according to Stephanie LeManager, "declares the West essentially 'over' in 1851."<sup>13</sup> Melville was hardly alone. Edward P. Mitchell wrote in the same year as *Israel Potter's* serialization: "In 1820, Missouri was the 'far West' . . . Now, in 1854, there is no 'far West.' . . . Pioneer life and pioneer progress must soon pass away for ever, to be remembered only in story."<sup>14</sup>

At this point in his career, Melville had no interest in writing that story, but of course others would. If we think of "The Great Nation of Futurity" as an emblematic bookend at the start of Melville's career, we can look to San Francisco in 1857 for the other bookend, at least of his major prose fiction: the same year *The Confidence-Man* appeared, Bret Harte published his first fiction, in the *Golden Era*, initiating the great wave of western regional writing that looked backward, not forward. Four years later, with the Civil War dividing the country, Mark Twain left his job piloting steamboats between St. Louis and New Orleans, the *Fidèle's* route, and went



west, discovering a region burdened – comically, as Twain often had it – by its own stories.

### 2016: “Oh Boundless Boundary”

In 1965, Edwin Fussell published *Frontier: American Literature and the American West*. He begins the book this way: “For an understanding of early American literature, the word West, with all its derivatives and variants, is the all but inevitable key.”<sup>15</sup> More than fifty years later, *Frontier* endures as an academic triumph, and when it comes to studying American Renaissance writers and the West, Fussell’s book remains the standard. And yet, unsurprisingly, the terms in his book’s title have undergone dramatic reconsideration in the decades since its publication. Fussell’s model of American literature reflects a mid-twentieth century idea of both “American” and “literature;” although he acknowledges writers such as Caroline Kirkland and Margaret Fuller (though not, for example, John Rollin Ridge or George Copway), his chapters are devoted to the established canon, from Cooper to Whitman. More to the point, Fussell’s notion of the American West is centered on the legacy of Frederick Jackson Turner’s Frontier Thesis, a metanarrative proposing that the nation’s history is best understood as the westward-moving clash of civilization and savagery: the frontier. By the late 1990s, historians had convincingly challenged that discourse, and “frontier,” with its Euro-centric orientation, transitioned to “conquest” – changing the very meaning of the region’s history and identity. Others have subsequently offered further variations on the concept of the “frontier” – as a contact zone, a diverse social space, a postmodern trickster zone – all implying the tensions around transculturation and cultural marginalization.

The results of these and other alterations to our contemporary understanding of regionalism and the West allow us to perceive new Wests in Melville’s writing. And so, one of the great rewards of pondering “Melville in context” is the opportunity to recognize, in the true spirit of Melville, that “context” is not a fixed historical reality but a changing field of perception. Melville’s intuition that the West was an unstable referent and that true places can’t be fixed on any map is borne out in the subsequent histories of reading Melville and reading the West. The ongoing fluidity of “the West” suggests that our contemporary context for understanding the region inevitably alters Melville’s context. For example, ecocriticism now teaches that Melville’s West, in addition to being a geopolitical region,

was a living biota, a complex natural environment. Elizabeth Schultz, for one, argues that from *Mardi* through *Clarel*, “Melville represents the prairie in diverse ways, revealing an environmental consciousness;” his prairie writings, she argues, mark “a significant step toward the beginning of the American environmental movement.”<sup>16</sup>

More broadly, many scholars today insist on understanding the region as always already transnational, a fluid, “rhizomatic” space of dynamic exchange.<sup>17</sup> The West then is “boundless,” not as Bryant would have it in “The Prairies” or O’Sullivan in “The Great Nation of Futurity,” but rather as a geopolitical region inevitably linked to a transnational, global exchange of peoples, goods and ideas. In other words, Melville’s West doesn’t begin at the Mississippi River and end at the Pacific Ocean; and the moving frontier of the West can be understood, now, as imperialist expansion that extended across the Pacific Rim and beyond.

In its own rhizomatic way, literary criticism can debate Melville’s complicity with the nineteenth-century imperialist project so central to the American West’s history, and can trace and retrace his conceptualization of both regional and national territorialism. And yet there’s something perpetually elusive about Melville’s thinking about the West, even at its most grandiloquent. To return to this chapter’s opening, what might at first seem patriotically overheated in *Mardi* – “West, West! Oh boundless boundary!” – can, from a different perspective and in a different context, appear radically postwestern, striking through the pasteboard masks of borders and boundaries. The “boundless boundary” of the West may not be merely a romantic conceit but the recognition of a West already globalized by the 1840s, a crossroads among crossroads, as much Tahiti as Texas. And that always already globalized West is a true place in at least this sense: that Melville’s dreams, like all his imaginative writings, herding like buffaloes, browse on to the horizon and round the world.

### Notes

- 1 *Writings*, vol. iii, 551, 365.
- 2 Edwin Fussell, *Frontier: American Literature and the American West* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965), 259.
- 3 Nina Baym, “Melville’s Quarrel with Fiction,” *PMLA* 94 (1979), 909.
- 4 Kevin J. Hayes, *The Cambridge Introduction to Herman Melville* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 2.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 3.
- 6 *Writings*, vol. v, 151.

- 7 Susan Kollin, "Postwestern Studies, Dead or Alive," in *Postwestern Cultures: Literature, Theory, Space*, ed. Susan Kollin (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007), xiii.
- 8 *Writings*, vol. ix, 231–2.
- 9 *Ibid.*
- 10 *Writings*, vol. viii, 149.
- 11 *Writings*, vol. x, 9.
- 12 Fussell, *Frontier*, 307.
- 13 Stephanie LeMenager, *Manifest and Other Destinies: Territorial Fictions of the Nineteenth-Century United States* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), 109.
- 14 Ralph Roanoke, pseud., "Rambles in the Far West," in *The Knickerbocker Gallery: A Testimonial to the Editor of the Knickerbocker Magazine from Its Contributors* (New York: Samuel Hueston, 1855), 147.
- 15 Fussell, *Frontier*, 3.
- 16 Elizabeth Schultz, "'Sea of Grass' to 'Wire and Rail': Melville's Evolving Perspective on the Prairies," *American Studies* 52 (2012), 31, 44.
- 17 See, for example, Neil Campbell, *The Rhizomatic West: Representing the American West in a Transnational, Global, Media Age* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008).