“Great Flood-Gates of the Wonder World”: Baptisms of Water and Fire in Melville and Hawthorne

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1. From Destruction to Salvation

1 In “Hawthorne and His Mosses,” Melville writes that “it is hard to be finite upon an infinite subject, and all subjects are infinite” (1170). Melville and Hawthorne are both deeply saturated in religious thought and yet theologically complex, suspicious of dogma even as they are attracted to the potent force of scriptural symbolism. Over the course of their literary careers, they take on subjects of infinitude and read them through elements and reactions essential to both physical and spiritual realms: water and fire. When John the Baptist speaks of baptisms of water and fire in the Gospel of Matthew (3:11), he prefigures quite profoundly the mortal and metaphysical obsessions in which Melville and Hawthorne find themselves immersed.

2 This doctrine of baptism by both water and fire in the New Testament comes in the context of a rebuke that John the Baptist extends to the Pharisees and Sadducees who had come to investigate the baptisms he was performing in Judea. His exhortation to repentance and his warning of a judgment to come colors their meaning. As Daniel McManigal argues in his new book-length study of Matthew 3, the words of John the Baptist imply not just cleansing, purification, and spiritual rebirth, but also an eschatological judgment, and are part of a larger narrative about Israel’s national failure and future. While the baptism of water is accomplished by John and the baptism of fire by Jesus himself, both indicate a need for repentance and renewal, and extend the hope that seemingly inevitable destruction can turn to salvation. For this reason, McManigal suggests that the two baptisms are inseparable, “mutually explanatory,” and “best understood in light of one another” (McManigal 2).
Indeed, baptism functions among Christian believers as the commencement of a journey away from destruction and towards salvation. The theological meaning of these emblems is not lost on Melville and Hawthorne as they seek literary interrogations and fulfillments of these spiritual symbols. In marking his own Bible, Melville seems particularly attentive to Matthew 3:3, where he underlines the description of John as “the voice of one crying in the wilderness,” an indication of his interest in purification as well as prophetic judgment—a dynamic that Dawn Coleman sees played out in his literary work. In Preaching and the Rise of the American Novel (2013), Coleman suggests that Melville and Hawthorne are both playing with the role of the preacher even as they subvert sermonic forms into explications of conscience, an idea she develops further in “Melville and the Unitarian Conscience” in Visionary of the Word: Melville and Religion (2017). Melville also places a vertical line of emphasis next to Matthew 3:4, which presents John through his dress and diet. Hawthorne's interest in the shift from water to fire and from John to Jesus does not come until Matthew 3:11: “I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance, but he that cometh after me is mightier than I, whose shoes I am not worthy to bear: he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost, and with fire.” In the very next verse, after proceeding from a primary baptism to a secondary one, comes the prescient warning that fire may do more than refine: “he will thoroughly purge his floor, and gather his wheat into the garner; but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire” (Matthew 3:12).

In their work, Melville and Hawthorne invoke both the sanctifying and the apocalyptic dimensions of these forces, hinting at cultural failures that cause collective as well as personal destruction, even as they consider the soteriological dimensions of what water and fire can accomplish in society and in the larger natural environment. But a recognition that water and fire can both eradicate and sustain life on the planet requires a serious consideration of the ends to which Melville and Hawthorne subject their treatment of these material elements. Critics such as Bryden and Bidney note that Melville and Hawthorne are invested in both the destructive and the redemptive dimensions of such theological emblems. Is it also possible that these obsessive writers are concerned with how baptisms of water and fire work in concert with one another, not just as two inseparable and mutually explanatory rites, but as immersive, simultaneous forces, both creative and destructive?

2. Creative Destruction and Modernity

As an operating principle of capitalism, the concept of creative destruction is understood by Marx as the accumulation and annihilation of wealth. In War and Capitalism (1913), the German sociologist Werner Sombart gave rise to the term “creative destruction,” which is then used by Joseph Schumpeter in Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy (1942) to predict the eventual demise of capitalism, based on a close reading of Marx. The process of incessantly destroying the old to create the new then becomes known, at least in economics, as “Schumpeter’s gale.” But can Melville and Hawthorne, writing in the advent and aftermath of Marx’s Communist Manifesto (1848), anticipate in cultural terms what Marx will expound in economic ones in the Manifesto and later in the three volumes of Das Kapital (1867-1883)?

In Modernity at Sea, Cesare Casarino suggests that the sea narrative, particularly in the hands of Melville, constitutes a “crucial laboratory for the crisis that goes by the name
of modernity” (1); that modernity is above all a modernity of capital, caught in a
dialectic with labor. The sea narrative, a story told through water, emerges at the
moment when mercantile capitalism and agricultural protectionism are being
decimated in favor of a new laissez-faire industrial capitalism. While old systems burn,
others arise on the crest of new waves. Amid destruction, there is creation, however
unchecked.

Another modernity in the making is the crisis of faith in the face of secular forces. In
Melville’s Wisdom, Damien Schlarb points to the “simultaneous displacement and
affirmation of biblical language and religious culture” (2) prevalent in mid-nineteenth
century American culture. However, Schlarb suggests that such a tension produced the
sustained creation of important literary exegesis by Melville and Hawthorne even as
the authority of scripture was slowly destroyed (5), something I also point to in my
earlier work on Hawthorne in The Book of Esther and the Typology of Female Transfiguration
in American Literature (2018). Hawthorne and Melville both “used literature as an
aperture” to “get at theology” (Schlarb 13), a further probe into the creative-
destructive process which suggests a cyclical relation between the two.

Melville and Hawthorne were aware of the cultural, economic, and religious aspects of
destruction and creation surrounding the development of their work: the rise of
manufacturing aspirations against agrarian ones, the flourishing of print culture that
challenged the literary elite, the persistence of slavery in the face of republican ideals,
and the explosion of scientific understanding amid increased theological debate and
religious heterogeneity. The two writers’ obsessions with water and fire emerge as the
mediums by which they hope to engage with the multi-layered “project of modern
meaning-making” (Schlarb 21), given the propensity of these forms to play so deeply
across the lines of creation and destruction.

3. Baptisms of Water

The better part of Melville’s oeuvre—Typee, Omoo, Redburn, White-Jacket, Moby-Dick, Billy
Budd, Sailor, even Clarel—is baptized in water. Like Ishmael in Moby-Dick, Melville wishes
to “sail forbidden seas, and land on barbarous coasts” (Moby-Dick 8). As Mary Bryden
asserts, “the sea is the fluid medium, the agency, the culture” (107) through which
Melville explores the philosophical depths and searches for elusive truth. For Melville,
the obsession with water reflects a range of spiritual concerns. In Melville’s Use of the
Bible, Nathalia Wright was one of the first to note the “scriptural allusions” that attend
Melville’s “fondness for the sea” (20). She demonstrates that it is the “unceasing and
inconclusive motion of the sea rather than the sea itself which constitutes his symbol
for truth” and notes that such movements in his fiction are usually “violent,” even
catastrophic (Wright 27-28). Though Melville seems to invoke Noah and the Flood more
than John the Baptist, he is nevertheless aware of both the destructive and the
restorative aspects of water.

Indeed, in his sea narratives, Melville betrays astonishment at the capacity of water to
both save and destroy. Ishmael floats on a buoyant trunk after the Pequod is dismantled
by the greatest creature of the sea. Even as the sea binds all elements on earth together,
it emerges as the site of sacrificial death, for Ahab and his crew save Ishmael in Moby-
Dick (1851), but also later in Billy Budd, Sailor, when Edward Vere, the ship’s captain,
refuses to redeem even honest sailors like Billy Budd. Though Budd’s killing of the
master-at-arms, John Claggart, was inadvertent, Vere determines that the laws of mutiny require his hanging death. The larger legal and economic forces represented in the *HMS Bellipotent* have overtaken the *Rights-of-Man*, an older merchant ship which lacks both velocity and force. The mere threat of insubordination or insurrection on deck suggests the deeper cultural fear that the subjects of slave narratives—far more than those of sea narratives—will rise up and demand the value of their labor in the form of capital. Zach Hutchins makes this connection explicit, reading the execution of Billy Budd as a “coded representation of racially motivated lynching” (Hutchins 1173). Melville realizes that maintaining the spirit of unfettered capitalism and maximizing its profit margins requires the decimation of human rights. In *The Prophetic Melville*, Rowland Sherrill suggests more bluntly that Billy, the embodiment of “natural goodness in a fallen world,” cannot be reconciled with the “natural depravity” of Claggart and all those who serve his selfish interests (Sherrill 210).

The sea narrative and slave narrative come together briefly in *White-Jacket* (1850), when the naval officer Purser brings his slave Guinea aboard the USS *Neversink* as a crew member, whose wages Purser then collects for himself. Once back on shore in Boston, Robert Lucas, the historical figure on whom Guinea is based, was able to successfully petition the Massachusetts Superior Court for his freedom, but the court case effectively barred slaves from serving on ships. Slaves could not advance to the position of seamen, even if denied the value of their labor. The practice of flogging, once standard aboard naval ships, was also eradicated when exposed in *White-Jacket*. When Wellington Redburn, a greenhorn aboard the *Highlander*, disembarks at the port in Liverpool, he experiences a freedom apart from his demanding crew role in the open waters, a realm that represents depravity, destruction, and death for Melville. Such a voyage in *Redburn* (1849), completed just before *White-Jacket*, echoes the reverse passage that numerous African Americans were making at the same time, coming from the United States, where slavery was still legal, to England, where it had been outlawed earlier in the century. The arrival in Liverpool, once the largest and most active slave port in the world, is a piece of poetic irony, for it has now come to represent a realm of liberty. Far more than an initiation of innocence into evil, *Redburn* reminds us how much work is required to secure human rights to safety, dignity, and prosperity. That which has been created, whether the life of the forlorn mother with children found in a vault, or the life of fellow sailors like Jackson and Bolton, can easily be destroyed. Perhaps that is why, as he walks among the disabled on the Liverpool docks, Redburn offers up “a prayer, that some angel might descend, and turn the waters of the docks into an elixir, that would heal all their woes” (*Redburn* 208).

Moby-Dick, *Billy Budd*, *White-Jacket*, and *Redburn* suggest some of the economic and social forces of creative destruction at play in these works immersed in water. But what of the cultural and religious dimensions of destructive creation in Melville’s work? Hawthorne famously wrote in his journal of Herman Melville, “He can neither believe, nor be comfortable with unbelief” (qtd. in Thompson 142 ff.). His characters are often caught between a love for the divine and a vengeance against it, a desire to uphold a cosmic or temporal order, however unjust, and a desire to destroy that order in favor of the justice of natural law. Billy Budd’s dying cry, “God bless Captain Vere!” (*Billy Budd* 1426) enshrines that order, almost counter-intuitively, above his own natural rights. White-Jacket is also made to suffer in the face of his own needs when the rationing of tar prevents the novice sailor from waterproofing his eponymous white jacket. Now exposed to the elements, he almost encounters destruction, not once but twice. When
he must cut himself free from the jacket to avoid drowning, his crewmates mistake the jacket for a great white shark—prefiguring the white whale in *Moby-Dick*—and harpoon it to death. The campaign against that which is unknown or unknowable—or, more to the point, against that which cannot be controlled—informs Melville’s work in water.

The forces of modernity cannot be entirely controlled either and they threaten to lay waste to any number of rights: the right to survival, to agency, to peace, and to belief. In the crass modern world of capitalism, annihilation always precedes accumulation. What then is being destroyed and what is being saved in the process? Against scenes of obliteration in water for Ahab, Billy Budd, White-Jacket, and Redburn, Melville maintains at least the illusion of life-giving waters in his early travelogues, particularly *Typee* (1846). In “Melville’s Traveling God,” Jenny Franchot indicates that this mode of “anthropological encounter” in Melville is not entirely distinct from his consideration of “theological quandary” (Franchot 157). Melville sets *Typee*, his first published book, in the seemingly primitive Polynesian realm of Nuku Hiva as a counterpart to the increasingly ruthless world of industrial capital that counted itself as civilized, a civilization that is also implicitly, if not explicitly, Christian. Franchot’s argument is that the “cultural death” of Western religion is translated onto a “new ontological register,” one that embraces literal and literary travel as well as modes of departure and return, even as it willfully “misreads” scripture in favor of artistic license and production (Franchot 157-58). The trope of travel then becomes a “rhetoric of questing, contact with, and meditation upon cultural others and their religions,” leading to a circuit “from belief through disbelief and back again,” a spiritual restlessness that also constitutes a pilgrimage (Franchot 158). This tension between opposed possibilities is particularly apparent in Chapter 4 of *Typee*, when the narrator suggests,

> [h]ow often is the term ‘savages’ incorrectly applied! None really deserving of it were yet discovered by voyagers or by travellers. They have discovered heathens and barbarians, whom by horrible cruelties they have exasperated into savages. It may be asserted without fear of contradiction, that in all cases of outrages committed by Polynesians, Europeans have at some point or another been the aggressors, and that the cruel and bloodthirsty disposition of some of the islanders is mainly to be ascribed to the influence of such examples. (27)

Here, his exploration of the effects of modernity takes yet another turn. Not only has material pursuit compromised the natural rights of individuals in their own societies, but it also threatens to cannibalize those they deem cannibals. The thirst for accumulation demands a cover, a displacement to disguise its own naked aggression. The other becomes a savage to keep the self from the truth of its own barbarity. Melville works to counter such an assessment of native life, attempting a proto-ethnographic account of the beauty and wonder of pre-literate, pre-industrial life in the Pacific, which also functions as a “polemic against Western missionaries and European imperialism” (Bryant xi). As John Bryant suggests, the book is dangerous because it “ridicules missionaries and argues that the Polynesians are more Christian than Christians, more civil than the civilized” (Bryant xi). Here is Melville crafting an “ironic version of missionary outreach,” where his pursuit is not the conversion of others, but a Western spiritual search for itself “through and against” them (Franchot 161).

But in these Pacific waters, Melville falls prey to his own voyeuristic illusions. While he saves the natives from being the scapegoats of capitalistic civilization, he cannot keep himself from indulging in the fantasy of their natural—read “sensual”—lives. Fayaway,
Perhaps the first American literary pin-up girl, is an irresistible manifestation of the overtly feminized natural landscape of Nuku Hiva. For the male protagonist Tommo, these intoxicating island waters are life-giving, indeed. Beyond the affirming fecundity present in *Typee*, Melville presents Polynesia as a comically generative place, also seen in the sequel, *Omoo* (1847). The escapades of the narrator around the island of Tahiti with Doctor Long Ghost are certainly Romantic fiction, but they underscore the vibrancy of life found there, whether in the Church of the Cocoa-Nuts or among the swinging rope-dancers at Loohooloo. Franchot perceptively suggests that this physical fantasia is accompanied by a metaphysical one that aspires to “generate new spiritual worlds” in the domain of the native (Franchot 166). Melville hopes that such waters can advance creation on multiple fronts without a destruction of the attendant cultures.

But by the time Melville completes his composition of *Clarel* (1876), his attempt at a real religious sojourn, he has been dispossessed of many illusions, including the utopian reverie of his early literary adventures. The pilgrimage which he charts in that late epic poem is based on his own voyage by sea to the Holy Land twenty years earlier, when he was already in ill health and on the other side of his success as a novelist. Stopping in Liverpool on his way to Jerusalem, he informed Hawthorne that he had “pretty much made up his mind to be annihilated” (Hawthorne, *Letters* 432-33). He does not necessarily expect to be revived by waters from the Dead Sea, but he is intent on contrasting the “Protestant ’sand sharks’ who remain in ‘shallows worse than any deep,’ and those ‘Whales, mighty whales’ who ‘have felt the wound— / plunged bleeding through the blue profound’” (Reynolds 213). In *Clarel*, Melville takes his characters on an inconclusive journey through the landscape of faith and doubt, where they are given little in the way of solace or confirmation. But he does suggest in his work that the very waters which crucify, destroy, and even annihilate can have a meaningful and even recuperative dimension.

This is perhaps most evident in the presence of the Rachel in *Moby-Dick*. In “The Pequod Meets the Rachel,” Ahab refuses the request of Captain Gardner to help search for his missing son. But the Rachel, so named for the woman in Jeremiah who weeps inconsolably “for her children, because they were not” (Jeremiah 31:15), returns to recover Ishmael when he is left alone, adrift in the ocean. In the final line of the “Epilogue,” Ishmael explains that a “sail drew near, nearer, and picked me up at last. It was the devious-cruising Rachel, that in her retracing search after her missing children, only found another orphan” (*Moby-Dick* 625). The life-giving waters of the female now take on a distinctly maternal dimension.

In “Rachel’s Inconsolable Cry,” the final chapter of *Melville’s Bibles*, Ilana Pardes situates Melville’s work in relation to the rise of nineteenth-century women’s bibles, which focused on female scriptural exegesis. Pardes reads the figure of Rachel, inscribed in the Book of Genesis and then evoked by Jeremiah, as a Hebraic “national mother” (124) who cries over her own descendants and many others, as well as the Christian mother, Mary, who helps her infant boy, Jesus, escape the massacre of Herod in Matthew 2, the chapter preceding John’s call for a baptism of water and fire. When Rachel is recalled in Jeremiah 31, her cry is compounded by the seemingly futile cry of the prophet, as “ephemeral as a trail of tears in the sea” (Pardes 125). Pardes contends that this deliverance through the female at the end of *Moby-Dick* is Melville’s “homage to Hawthorne’s final vision of a redeeming female angel in the closing paragraphs of *The Scarlet Letter*” (136). The healing tears of women may not be able to entirely replace an
ocean of monomaniacal male-centered vengeance or a gale of unchecked economic pursuits, but there can be a recovery of those who reject savage possession and the eradication of their humanity.

4. Baptisms of Fire

Baptisms in water which threaten to destroy or seek to save cannot be separated from the spiritual corollary of baptisms by fire. As John the Baptist taught, both extend the hope that seemingly inevitable destruction can turn eventually to salvation. The obsession Melville has with water is matched in Hawthorne by what Gaston Bachelard calls a “poetics of fire” (Smith 127). Melville appreciated the connection between these baptisms, referring twice to the turbulent seas in Moby-Dick as “white fire” (Williams ix). In a book of the same title, John Williams identifies the influence of Emerson’s lectures on such conceptions in the work of Melville, suggesting that the latter was tinder to Emerson’s spark. The transcendental optimism of Emerson is received more skeptically by Hawthorne, whose work is consumed with fires that burn. The passage from water to fire that Melville implicitly understood was made more explicit, more vivid, and more alarming in the work of Hawthorne.

From Young Goodman Brown and Eleanore Rochcliffe to Dimmesdale and Ethan Brand, characters in Hawthorne’s fiction pass through baptisms of fire, and find themselves changed by its “creative-destructive or euphoric-ominous energy” (Bidney 58). Through raging flames in texts from “Main Street” to The House of the Seven Gables to Septimius Felton, Hawthorne finds the energy for an imaginative human life, for poetic genius and emotional purity, and for intimations of immortality. In “Hawthorne’s American History,” Gillian Brown stresses the value of dreams and the importance of the imagination to Hawthorne’s conception of history, national identity, and character development (Brown 124, 138). In this, Brown is building on the work of Rita Gollin, who suggests that the “dream visions” in Hawthorne’s fiction “force dreamers to confront apparitions of [their] own repressed guilt” (Gollin 18), both personally and collectively. By telling allegorical truths, Hawthorne the writer places himself in the position of a prophet who peers into the past even as he proclaims the future. Like John the Baptist and Jesus, he indicates the need for repentance and renewal, and like Jeremiah, he hopes that his cries will not be futile. He extends the hope in his fiction that seemingly inevitable destruction can turn to salvation, even as he engages fire as “Earth’s Holocaust” to burn whatever will not rise. Even there, the spectacle of art on fire speaks to the aesthetic afterlife of the written word.

In “Young Goodman Brown” (1835) and “Legends of the Province House” (1838), where Lady Eleanore Rochcliffe appears as an outdated emblem of monarchical rule, the blazing is public and outward. At the flame-lit altar of rocks, set in a clearing in the forest, Goodman Brown must confront a hidden truth situated somewhere on the edge of illusion and reality that those around him are not who they appear to be. The communal midnight séance reveals not only an alternate reality, but the rich deceptions with which people willingly live. In the wake of this experience of burning, Brown loses his faith in what he had once believed about himself and others, including his wife, Faith, but his baptism of fire saves him from an unexamined life. While there is no “hopeful verse” (“Young Goodman Brown” 1042) at the end of his life, the fire in the woods spares him from delusion. Here, a baptism of fire separates truth from belief,
even as it signals what Jerome Loving calls a “gradual extinction” (Loving 230). When Hawthorne wrote this tale, he feared that “dreaming might consume him as a writer” (Gollin 20) and confessed to Longfellow a few years later, “I have not lived, but only dreamed of living” (Letters 251). To play with dreams, Hawthorne discovered, was to play with fire, and could lead to difficult consequences, however drawn out.

Sometimes, however, fire has a far more immediate effect. When Hawthorne moves from Puritan New England to the streets of colonial America on the verge of revolt in “Legends of the Province House,” he engages fire explosively as a creative-destructive force, perhaps because his plan here is what Michael Colacurcio calls, in The Province of Piety, the “relentless exposure of illusion and delusion in American history” (Colacurcio 391). The second legend, “Lady Eleanore’s Mantle,” challenges not just the subject of revolution, but its object as well. Lady Eleanore arrives from England wearing a mantle of magical powers and quickly separates herself with a haughty air from the “sympathies of our common nature” (“Lady Eleanore’s Mantle” 974). Possessed of a power more destructive than creative, Eleanore still inspires awe in a young man who worships her with the “awful devotion of a priest doing sacrifice to his idol” (975-76). Her reaction is to refuse his offer of wine and reject communion with others. As her devotee is removed from her presence, the sacramental wine spills upon her mantle, which she then draws over her head, where it assumes another aspect as an emblem of pain and suffering. Inexplicably, the province is covered with a scourge. The pox is traced back to the chambers of Lady Eleanore, who is now the final victim of the pestilence. The burning of her diseased mantle on an effigy in the street confirms her own demise. It is one thing to burn infected clothing, but to burn an effigy suggests a “concentrated and satisfying attack on an object” (Colacurcio 442-43). Eleanore is that object, a representation of female destruction that threatens to dismantle, and therefore must be burned. The patriots’ illusions and delusions may have been exposed, but they eradicate what they do not understand to cling to their conception of themselves and their cause. Eleanore’s connection to both authoritarian rule and infectious disease make her an enemy for those fighting colonial rule, but the immolation of her image in the public square implies that the republican proto-revolutionaries may fear the political and religious power of women more than disease or the dictates of the King.

For Ethan Brand and Arthur Dimmesdale, the attraction to women leads first to the kind of immersion Melville could imagine in Typee, then to fearful private agony akin to a raking over the coals, a slow simmering heat whose intensity may not amount to a public spectacle, but nevertheless becomes an incineration of their own pride. In “Ethan Brand,” printed in 1852 but written before The Scarlet Letter (1850), the moment of revelation comes when the titular character encounters old Humphreys, declaring after his long search that “it is no delusion. There is an Unpardonable Sin” (“Ethan Brand” 1191). Reflecting that evening before the fire, he declares his own culpability: the unpardonable sin was produced by him. He does not find it out in the world; he discovers it within himself, in the psychological experiment that annihilates the soul of a young woman named Esther: “What more have I to seek? What more to achieve? My task is done, and well done” (1194). Male force has crushed the power of women. Unable to abide his own sins, Ethan Brand, branded like Cain, throws himself into the lime-kiln fires he once tended. The flames consume him that night, leaving as remnant only his marble heart. Sharon Cameron sees in this conclusion a turn from Brand to Ahab, who cries in “The Candles” chapter of Moby-Dick, “Oh! Thou clear spirit, of thy
fire thou madest me, and like a true child of fire, I breathe it back to thee... I leap with thee; I burn with thee; would fain be welded to thee” (550-51)—an important confluence of Melville’s baptism of water and Hawthorne’s baptism of fire. Brand’s “expulsion of the heart from the body” (Cameron 191) in the final scene also scrutinizes the hope that seemingly inevitable destruction can eventually turn to salvation.

The violence against the sacredness of the individual in “Ethan Brand” is inflicted in The Scarlet Letter on Dimmesdale, who is weighed down by the sin for which his partner in crime, Hester Prynne, alone is being excoriated. He also suffers insidious abuse at the hands of her actual husband, his feigned counselor, Roger Chillingworth, whose temperament much resembles Ethan Brand’s. The scarlet ‘A’ imposed on the breast of Dimmesdale’s lover finds its private corollary on his own branded chest, burning within him. His only relief is found in following Hester’s exhortation to “Preach! Write! Act!” (Scarlet Letter 202). After refusing the diagnosis and medicine of his pseudo-physician, Chillingworth, he flings his prepared Election Sermon into the fire to write one more true, more filled with ecstasy and inspiration. After its delivery, he moves from the church to the scaffold, where he can at last reveal, through a series of disclosures, the secret shame he has so long hidden, and unite with those he loves before succumbing to death. The revelation of the scarlet letter, though dramatic, is expected; the public confession made by the minister on the scaffold at high noon brings a structural end to the story punctuated by this site. His truthful admission restores his agency and his rightful relation to the law. Hidden secrets can no longer possess Dimmesdale’s mind or heart because he has allowed an honest understanding to prevail. At last, his voice merges with that of the author, “Be true! Be true! Be true! Show freely to the world, if not your worst, yet some trait whereby the worst may be inferred” (Scarlet Letter 238). But Dimmesdale's confession, intended to release him from the incessant burning within his bosom, is in fact his death sentence. As Nina Baym notes in The Shape of Hawthorne’s Career, “by that confession, he executes himself” (Baym 141).

The lime-kiln and the scaffold move private baptisms of fire into the open air, making them truly bonfires of vanities. These ignitions, as combustible as burning effigies, prove that the unpardonable sin of pride, in all its forms, must be destroyed to attain individual and communal salvation. But can such flames—in the woods, in the town square, in the kiln, in the hearth, on the scaffold—also lead to internal combustion, the chemical process by which burning releases energy? Can salvific energy—moral, economic, or aesthetic—come out of destruction? By the time Hawthorne writes The Scarlet Letter, he certainly hopes so, as he seeks to advance a “conception of art, imagination, and the artist” in romance that he had not entirely achieved in his earlier tales (Baym 143). As a young writer, Nathaniel Hawthorne set fire to pages and pages of his own work, dismayed by a lack of response from publishers. In “Earth’s Holocaust” (1844), Hawthorne offers another approach to the nature and purpose of fire in his fiction, depicting and analyzing what Daniel Couch calls “the imaginative elements of book burnings” (Couch). Having summoned a stupendous bonfire of all the world’s “worn-out trumpery” (“Earth’s Holocaust” 381), he reflects on what might be gleaned from such destructive acts. “In response to book burnings of different types—from private burnings of singular manuscripts to public bonfires of texts found in every bookstore—Hawthorne invents scenarios in which texts continue to live long after their so-called ‘death’” (Couch). Even the Bible, which contains the text that prefigures so profoundly his own immersion in baptisms of fire, is “thrown upon the embers of that awful pile” as a “final sacrifice of human error” (“Earth’s Holocaust” 400). The
endurance of that “great old volume” (401) can only be found in the purification of the human heart, a truth with which Brand and Dimmesdale must also reckon.

Couch’s argument is that “burning writing proves to be a spectacular act that unexpectedly results in its survival. The story showcases how creative thought not only propagates despite the destruction of the manuscript, text, or collection of books, it takes on a new kind of aesthetic beauty, temporal prolongation, and textual survival” (Couch). The creative destruction of Goodman Brown’s assumptions, Lady Eleanore’s mantle, Ethan Brand’s ego, Arthur Dimmesdale’s deception, and Hawthorne’s stories cause these very images to take on vivid after-lives that extend beyond extermination. The parable offered in “Earth’s Holocaust” also draws upon—and draws out the meaning of—the Baptist’s conception of fire. The external destruction of the “Book” demonstrates that texts can save and be saved only when their meanings are taken into “that inward sphere” (“Earth’s Holocaust” 400, 404). But Hawthorne is aware that the destructive-creative energies of such a bonfire can burn “the earth itself to a cinder” (403). The journey away from destruction and towards redemption is without merit if the conflagration includes our souls and the planet. The salvation of the “old world” requires a “radiance” that extends from thinking to feeling, a baptism of fire that converts humanity from a “blazing heap of falsehood” (403, 404, 400) to an understanding of how its failures can inform a more honestly enlightened future.

5. Drowning in Flames

These obsessive elemental engagements—whether the white-hot heat of Hawthorne or the watery melancholia of Melville—prove prophetic, not just as literary fulfillments of spiritual symbols, but as precursors to the actual holocaust of the earth, the apocalyptic end times of the Anthropocene, when all life on Earth is threatened by immersion in water and fire. The theme of eschatological judgment in Matthew 3 connects to the latter-day environmental manifestation of drowning and burning on Earth. Where Melville and Hawthorne could imagine and breathe life into the metaphysical possibilities of drowning and burning, those who read their work now must apprehend their oeuvre in the face of actual inundation and possible obliteration. The interplay of these elemental and reactive obsessions in the work of Melville and Hawthorne leads to an investigation of the creative and destructive import of their seemingly infinite imaginations on a present world now drowning in flames. In the last few years alone, there have been devastating floods and wildfires across a wide swath of the globe. From Australia to Argentina, Sudan to South Korea, Pakistan to Portugal, the assault of both inundating waters and spreading flames has engulfed millions of acres and cost countless lives.

The words of John the Baptist imply not just physical and spiritual rebirth, dynamics in play in Melville’s seas and Hawthorne’s flames, but also a judgment which relates to the failure and future of human society. This larger narrative implicit in the baptism of water and fire is particularly relevant to the current reception of both writers. Can their shared obsession for such baptisms by immersion inflect the meaning of their work in our own time? Scholarly work on the environmental dimensions of Melville and Hawthorne, from Hester Blum’s “Melville in the Arctic” to Steven Petersheim’s Rethinking Hawthorne and Nature, have situated climate as an important consideration. But the importance of elemental inundation, whether by water or fire, has not yet been
highlighted, nor have we come to realize the deeply prescient dimension of these anthropocenic obsessions. The catastrophic scope of the current climate crisis provokes us to see the elemental divinations of Melville and Hawthorne as eschatological not just for the environment but also for society at large. The destruction of nature speaks to the disintegration of civilization itself.

In Matthew 3, the concept of baptism by water and fire is framed not only by a warning of judgment, but also by an exhortation to repentance. Can the environmental and social distress represented in the deluge of such forces ever lead to reform and reclamation? Can creative destruction lead to creative salvation? Melville intimates the possibilities of the “blue profound” in *Clarel* and the rescue mission of the *Rachel* at the end of *Moby-Dick*. Hawthorne, too, can perceive the rise of a phoenix out of the ashes of Brown's lost faith, Brand's destroyed pride, Hester's public humiliation, and the pages of his own print. The cleansing power of water and the purifying power of fire are not lost on these antebellum authors. Indeed, it is through these elements that they visit judgment on their characters, most notably Ahab and Dimmesdale, even as they seek to extract refinement from them. Melville and Hawthorne do not just preach, write, and act as prophets on the model of John the Baptist, imagining a punishment to come and exhorting for change; they also claim a higher authority to administer retribution in the hope of inspiring a recovery and redemption.

Amid our own environmental apocalypse, Melville and Hawthorne ask us to evaluate the nature of our response to such existential crises. Can the work of creative destruction and destructive creation in which Melville and Hawthorne engage—whether through baptisms of water or fire—extend the hope that seemingly inevitable destruction can turn finally to salvation? What must modern readers do to transform the violent and volatile energies of these elements into forces of recovery and restoration, such as elixirs, rescue ships, and refining fires? In *Love and Death in the American Novel*, Leslie Fielder notes that Melville and Hawthorne wrestled with these questions even as they were writing about the “obsessive concerns of our national life,” including the “ambiguity of our encounter with nature” (Fiedler 27). The drive in nineteenth-century America for both “economic power” and “cultural autonomy” (32) informed and complicated the fiction produced by both, leading them to castigate their own creations. But even as Melville decried *Moby-Dick* as a “wicked book” and Hawthorne characterized *The Scarlet Letter* as “hell-fired” (Fiedler 27), they embedded alternate possibilities into their prose, suggestive moments which could lead the characters—and by extension the readers—away from obliteration and toward renewal. The obsessive imaginations of Melville and Hawthorne finally indicate that the many crises we face—the forces of modernity, aggression, challenge to human rights, loss of faith, and economic and environmental degradation—can be transformed in strange and surprising ways, even now, from destruction to creation through the form of fiction. The eschatological judgment included in John the Baptist’s invitation points to national failure, ancient and modern, but also extends hope for a future filled with redemptive force. The baptisms of water and fire in which Melville and Hawthorne are immersed deserve consideration as expressions that are not only deeply prophetic, but prescient in terms of what is required to transform catastrophe into deliverance.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


ABSTRACTS

In “Hawthorne and His Mosses,” Melville writes that “it is hard to be finite upon an infinite subject, and all subjects are infinite” (1170). Both Melville and Hawthorne take on subjects of infinitude and read them through elements essential to both spiritual and physical realms: water and fire. When John the Baptist speaks of baptisms of water and fire in the Gospel of Matthew (3:11), he prefigures the mortal and metaphysical obsessions in which Melville and Hawthorne find themselves immersed. The better part of Melville’s oeuvre—Typee, Omoo, Redburn, White-Jacket, Moby-Dick, and Billy Budd, Sailor—is baptized in water. Like Ishmael in Moby-Dick, Melville wishes to “sail forbidden seas, and land on barbarous coasts” (Moby-Dick 8). As Mary Bryden asserts, “the sea is the fluid medium, the agency, the culture” (107) through which Melville explores the philosophical depths and searches for elusive truth. He is astonished at the capacity of water to both save and destroy—Ishmael floats on a buoyant trunk after the Pequod is dismantled by the greatest creature of the sea—even as it binds all elements on earth together.

Melville’s obsession with water is matched in Hawthorne by what Gaston Bachelard calls a “poetics of fire” (Smith 127). From Young Goodman Brown to Oberon, Dimmesdale, and Ethan Brand, characters in his fiction pass through baptisms of fire, and find themselves changed by its “creative-destructive or euphoric-ominous energy” (Bidney 58-9). Through fire in texts from “Main Street” to The House of the Seven Gables to Septimius Felton, Hawthorne finds the energy for an imaginative human life, for poetic genius and emotional purity, and for intimations of immortality, even as he engages this element as “Earth’s Holocaust” to burn whatever will not rise. These obsessive elemental engagements—whether the white-hot heat of Hawthorne or the watery melancholia of Melville—prove prophetic, not just as literary fulfillments of spiritual symbols, but as precursors to the apocalyptic end times of the Anthropocene, when life on earth is threatened by immersion in water and fire. Where Melville and Hawthorne can imagine and
breathe life into the metaphysical possibilities of flooding and burning, those who read their work now must apprehend their oeuvre in the face of a world drowning in flames.

INDEX

**Keywords:** Herman Melville, Nathaniel Hawthorne, baptism of water, baptism of fire, creative-destructive obsessions, environmental elements, Anthropocene

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