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Ben-Hur and the Spectacle of Empire

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For visitors to Manhattan in the last days of the nineteenth century, there could have been few more spectacular sights than the Dewey Arch. Occupying a prime spot in Madison Square, the eighty-five-foot-tall structure—flanked by six decorated columns and adorned in flamboyant beaux-arts sculpture—had been designed by Charles L. Lamb to commemorate Admiral George Dewey's victory in the Battle of Manila Bay just a few months before. As crowds gathered on September 29, 1899 to witness the parade in Dewey's honor (not far from another and now more famous triumphal arch, this one for George Washington), the symbolism of the Dewey structure could hardly have been more resonant. It had been partly modelled, like Washington's, on the Arch of Titus in Rome; completed in 85CE by the Emperor Domitian to commemorate his brother Titus (and in particular Titus's victory at Jerusalem in 70CE), it was, like most Roman triumphal arches, a confident testament to the irresistible might of Rome's imperial reach. The Dewey Arch, in a similar vein, was built to celebrate a moment of military victory, a battle which had seen U.S. forces destroy the Spanish flotilla and all but secure the Philippines as an overseas territory. It was, in David Brody's words, the "material manifestation of America's newfound interest in displaying the vast possibilities of empire."¹ Much of the violent reality of the battle is naturally enough absent from the arch's jingoistic and idealised sculptural adornments, representing what the National Sculpture Society called the "four patriotic steps": patriotism, war, triumph, and peace.² It is this absence, this imposing statement of apparently benevolent and progressive intervention, which makes the Dewey Arch a pertinent starting point here. By way of overt iconography as well as implied analogy, the arch brought the implications of Roman imperial history into the



Fig. 1. William H. Rau, Dewey Arch, New York City, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, DC.

center of modern America, and yet even as it did so it served to reinforce and perpetuate a long history of imperial denial.

This essay argues that one of the most phenomenally successful and widely-read novels of the nineteenth-century, Lew Wallace's *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ* (1880), acted to naturalize and inscribe in narrative terms something the Dewey Arch was doing monumentally—namely, the role of spectacle in the public life of U.S. imperialism. The novel performs a significant social function, I suggest, not as a self-conscious allegory of imperialism as such but as an index to a recurring pattern of imperial logic, acting to displace the political present into a romance of a geographically-distant ancient past. In this way, *Ben-Hur* not only helped to domesticate an imperial structure of feeling that allied spectacle with denial, but in doing so it allows us to reconstitute the ways in which that structure ordered (or at least attempted to order) the discourses of everyday life. Situating the novel within its own moment whilst bringing to bear the much lon-

ger imperial history it self-consciously engages with, I argue that *Ben-Hur* registers in its spectacular set pieces an abstract notion that is normally much harder to grasp: the ubiquity and invisibility of imperial ideology. What is more, I want to use *Ben-Hur* to raise some broader points about the place of the historical novel and historical analogy in the cultures of U.S. imperialism. The kind of popular romance that Wallace's novel in many ways exemplifies, conventionally excluded from accounts of the period's literary history,³ ask us to look again at our tendency to define the modernity of the Gilded Age as a social and technological transformation or as a decisive turn to a twentieth-century world yet to come. If the novel is "one of the chief cultural means of legitimating imperial practices,"⁴ and if the specifically *historical* novel is, as Lukács claimed, a product of emerging national consciousness in historical terms, then how does *Ben-Hur* legitimate certain philosophies of (expansionist) nationalism in nineteenth-century America through an analogy that opens out to a deeper and longer sense of world-historical continuity?

The example of the Dewey Arch is instructive here because it welds those governing conceptual tropes of spectacle and imperialism to an iconography of ancient Rome. It's an iconography that, as several commentators have pointed out, has an enduring presence in American cultural life, usually acting to either aggrandize American power or, conversely, serve as a ghostly mirror of future decline.⁵ The final decades of the nineteenth century were no exception: the earnest and po-faced neoclassicism of public memorials and civic architecture during the period has been extensively commented on, but American cities were not short of more populist classical allusions as well. One could visit P.T. Barnum's Roman hippodrome at Madison Square Garden—running from the 1870s, it also toured the country and included live chariot racing⁶—or a production of choreographer and showman Imre Kiralfy's ninety-minute music and dance extravaganza, 'Nero, or, The Destruction of Rome'—a show which needed a stage nearly 500-feet wide. (Kiralfy, incidentally, would later ask Wallace for the rights to build a thirty-acre *Ben-Hur* theme park on Staten Island, a request that Wallace refused.)⁷ A commodified Rome, often reduced to an interchangeable set of clichés and stock images and suggesting something quite different from the emulation of classical republicanism found elsewhere in American neoclassicism, proved an enduring draw for a public partaking of commercialized mass culture for the first time.⁸

Perhaps primary among these host of Roman references, however, were those found at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago. Daniel Burnham's "White City" employed the neoclassical flourishes of beaux-arts both to suture American identity into a history of republicanism but also to aesthetically (and politically) import the

grandeur and power of classical empires.⁹ Alan Trachtenberg's canonical reading of the site as "imperial spectacle" still bears fruit in this context, arguing as he does that the socially and racially homogenizing displays at the Fair acted as a spectacular assertion of American national destiny that "proclaimed order, unity, [and] coherence."¹⁰ "Visitors to the Fair," he continues, "found themselves as *spectators*, witnesses to an unanswerable performance which they had no hand in producing or maintaining."¹¹ Timothy Mitchell has similarly shown, in relation to European displays of an orientalised Middle East during this same period, that sites of popular exhibition were a vital mechanism in the acculturation of imperial politics, "symbolic representations of the world's cultural and colonial order."¹² While we should draw a necessary distinction here between European presentations of their acquired colonies and the rather different order that I am going to argue lies at the heart of *Ben-Hur*'s display of the ancient world, the point is that we can usefully connect strategies of imperial power between very different contexts when it comes to the aesthetics of spectacle, and in this way begin to locate and name U.S. imperialism as something bound into conventions of (rather than existing as an exception to) Anglo-European empire.

Although it appears at a point some time before these material sites of Roman allusion, *Ben-Hur* inhabits (and, in fact, comes to exert pressure upon) the same symbolic and political orbit. They act, to put it another way, to bolster and tacitly prop up what numerous historians have come to recognise as America's "imperial denial." Richard Van Alstyne makes a point about the vocabulary of American foreign policy in *The Rising American Empire* (1960) that was later echoed in cultural terms by John Carlos Rowe in *Literary Culture and U.S. Imperialism* (2000): the way in which dominant strains of American self-description have traditionally sidestepped the implications of imperialism through a kind of terminological substitution, focussing instead on "the frontier" and "errands into the wilderness" and "virgin lands" and so on¹³—something Paul Kramer has more recently labelled "adjectival exceptionalisms."¹⁴ Appearing between what are by now the axiomatic (if oversimplified) phases of nineteenth-century U.S. imperialism—antebellum continental expansion and postbellum overseas intervention—*Ben-Hur*'s publication and colossal popularity occurs at a pivotal moment for the consolidation of this obfuscatory rhetoric, and plays an important role in its perpetuation and development. It not only displaces and makes innocuous what Perry Anderson has described as the "*complexio oppositorum* of exceptionalism and universalism,"¹⁵ but is an important instance of such processes precisely because of its extraordinary popularity amongst a wider American public. It develops our understanding of how popular representations of history can

be used to legitimize the political conditions of the present whilst also, as an artefact of print culture in its own right, circulating so widely and with such remarkable reach that it forms an exemplary lesson in the ideological power of popular culture. In a sense, I read *Ben-Hur* in much the same way that Jesse Alemán and Shelly Streeby have contextualized a number of popular sensation fictions from the mid-nineteenth-century period: as a narrative projection of the repressed knowledge of empire, a text that exemplifies in its investment in spectacle as well as in its spectacular success the way in which imperial ideology becomes hidden by its sheer ubiquity.¹⁶ How the novel popularizes an imperial worldview tells us something important about the more general ways in which U.S. imperialism was both naturalized and obscured in the cultural sphere.

Ben-Hur might also be recruited here, however conjectural that recruitment necessarily is, to illustrate the tendency of historical analogies to subsume the present undermotivated versions of the past, and in particular how such processes have helped to reinforce a great deal of imperial apparatus. By suggesting an analogical relationship between ancient Rome and the modern United States,¹⁷ the novel works to veil the latter in the romanticized scenery of the former. If we accept Michael Rogin's claim that "what is displayed and forgotten in imperial spectacle is the historical content of American political demonology,"¹⁸ then how might we read one of nineteenth-century America's most socially penetrative examples of mass culture—a genuine case of a cultural product that both produced public discourse and became a point of shared social experience—as not just occurring within a certain political climate, but actively forming it? How does *Ben-Hur*'s emphatic foregrounding of the ancient past, its piling of period detail upon period detail, make imperial thinking in the present seem already inevitable and historically sanctioned; "insistently represented," to cite Rogin again, and therefore "normalized to invisibility"?¹⁹

Therein lies the wider implications of the argument I use *Ben-Hur* to make. The public spectacles described earlier, and Wallace's novel in a rather more complex way, bring back domestically to the (largely white, largely urban) middle classes the out-of-sight operations of American expansion, but do so in order to mask those operations and transform them into ineluctable historical fate. To evoke ancient Rome in monuments of imperial success is to engage in a paradoxical process of historical analogy (something akin to what Rogin calls "motivated forgetting"²⁰) that situates the United States in a global history alongside other empires, ancient and modern, even as it simultaneously exerts the nation from that history into a timeless space where the grubby business of imperialism is substituted for divine destiny.

Religion, Race, and the Ancient History of U.S. Imperialism

Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ, the second novel by former Civil War general and prominent Indiana politician Lew Wallace, was published by Harper and Brothers in late 1880. It would become what is by any estimation a sensation. Perhaps the biggest selling novel of the nineteenth century (and almost certainly the biggest selling novel in America between *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Gone With the Wind*) it would also become the basis for one of the longest-running and most profitable stage plays in American theatre history. A.L. Erlanger and Marcus Klaw's production of *Ben-Hur* began in 1899 (it had taken a while to convince Wallace to sell the rights) and ran unbroken until April 1920, by which point it had been performed over 6000 times (including tours to England and Australia) and seen by an estimated twenty million people.²¹ *Ben-Hur* mania inspired a nationwide fraternal order that eventually became a multi-million dollar insurance company, and created one of the first truly mass-marketed examples of spin off merchandise—including bicycles, flour, a range of herbs and spices, coffee, household appliances, soap, and whisky. It was also the basis for two major film adaptations including William Wyler's record-breaking 1959 production starring Charlton Heston.²² My interest in this essay is the original novel itself, but the story's enduring cross-media popularity indicates something about its narrative qualities that speak directly to the points I want to make. While some critics have noted how the novel goes to great lengths to imagine the reader as an embodied but always passive spectator,²³ I question just what political conditions this focalization is serving. How does the novel's arrangement as a series of conspicuously theatrical episodes—a kind of spectacular method that has had much to do with its sustained appeal on stage and film²⁴—mediate between the reader and the imperial politics of the time?

Central to my argument is the novel's framing plotline: the birth of Christ and of Christianity. In particular, the presentation of a religion's founding moment seeks to turn readers into the docile but always complicit spectators of Christianity's rise to moral and social hegemony, obscuring the sectional and theological differences of the Gilded Age by presenting the "universally appealing, universally accessible . . . and universally salvific" potential of the Christian church.²⁵ Although Wallace claimed no particular Christian faith during his early life, in "How I Came to Write *Ben-Hur*" (reprinted in his autobiography) he explains how his research into Christ's life and the writing of the novel came to also initiate a personal process of conversion.²⁶ Such a conversion writ large is the broad historical background of the novel's plot: Christianity's inexorable rise to prominence (and Rome's concomitant decline) is mirrored in the Jewish Ben-Hur's awakening to the new faith, an often didactic account that extols the moral and social superiority of Christian-

ity in its most extensive and ecumenical sense. Important here, however, is that these religious motivations and grand narratives emerge within the context of Wallace's own lifelong involvement with the politics and administration of U.S. expansion: he served as a lieutenant in the Indiana Volunteers during the U.S.-Mexican War of 1846–48, and although he did not see much direct action, the experience did underline his belief in the righteousness of American preponderance. He became more seriously involved in politics after the Civil War, especially in his home state of Indiana, and in 1878 President Rutherford Hayes would appoint him Governor of the New Mexico Territory.

Such a combination of ideological and theological commitments seem now to mark Wallace out as a quintessential statesman of his times, and expressions of these beliefs can be found scattered through his numerous writings. His first novel *The Fair God* (subtitled "A Tale of the Conquest of Mexico" and published in 1873) returns to the fall of the Aztecs and pre-empts *Ben-Hur* in its attention to religion, race, and long-past imperial powers, themes that he returned to again (this time in the form of the Ottoman Empire) in his final novel *The Prince of India: Or Why Constantinople Fell* (1893). Most telling in the context of the current argument, however, is his two-volume autobiography published just after his death in 1906. He includes here, for instance, a letter he sent in May 1874 to the chairman of the Indiana Veterans of the Mexican War; invited to a reunion that he couldn't attend, Wallace offered instead a remarkable account of his recent visits to the old sites of the war: "Saltillo is but little less flourishing than Monterey," he declares, referring to the major cities of the former Mexican state of Coahuila y Tejas, now divided between the U.S. and Mexico. "The traces of the conqueror are everywhere. . . . Standing on its superior slopes, one sees . . . the plateau of Buena Vista—a name to stir the American pulse while America lives."²⁷ Such statements typify, as much in their rhetorical grandiosity as in their political sentiment, a certain kind of late nineteenth-century confidence about the essential beneficence of America's expansionist ambitions. Later in the same letter, Wallace recalls visiting the site of the battle, where he sees a group of Mexicans irrigating the land: "I looked at them, and, understanding the moral of the incident, thanked God for the law that makes war possible as a lasting condition."²⁸ Wallace's message to the veterans is not just simple nostalgia, but a shared satisfaction in the legacy the war has wrought. Mexico was redeemed by the civilizing march of the U.S., and Wallace, not unusually for someone of his position addressing a group of veterans, voices an abiding faith in American intervention.

Whatever strident geopolitics or fascination for empire Wallace expressed elsewhere in his writing, it is clear that in *Ben-Hur* these beliefs are refracted through the story

of the birth of Christianity. Religiosity, as we know well enough, frequently acted as a legitimizing fulcrum for antebellum American expansion (and, in some hands, American specialness ever since).²⁹ Anders Stephanson, discussing the decades around the U.S.-Mexican war, summarises the period's political climate: "in short, Christianity, democracy, and Jacksonian America were essentially one and the same thing, the highest stage of history, God's plan incarnate."³⁰ This confluence of religion and imperialism, perhaps *the* fundamental pillars of the philosophy supporting U.S. nationhood at exactly the time Wallace was an active agent in its territorial forging, coincide seamlessly at various moments in *Ben-Hur*. The birth of Christianity is figured not just as spiritual salvation, but as the emergence of an eternal empire of righteousness; religion rather than statehood is the totality that will colonize the future.

Such is the cluster of ideas that Ben-Hur ponders around half way through the novel, when on hearing of the rising interest around the arrival of the King of the Jews he speculates in wonder about the brave new world that lies ahead:

The King implied a kingdom; He was to be a warrior glorious as David; a ruler wise and magnificent as Solomon; the kingdom was to be a power against which Rome was to dash itself to pieces. There was to be colossal war, and the agonies of death and birth—then peace, meaning, of course, Judean dominion for ever.³¹

Violence is a necessary condition of peace, a demonstration of power capable of neutralizing opposition and installing conditions so universally desirable that any eruption of social disquiet can be forcefully rejected as a dangerous aberration. Furthermore, the possibility of this unquestionably utopian 'peace' is one only realizable in domains organized around political systems quite different from democratic republicanism—the monarchical-sounding "kingdom" or the imperially-figured "dominion." How this new order will reconcile the problem of its own imposition of power Ben-Hur himself contemplates, and his mentor Balthasar supplies the answer: the holy "Child Himself" will surmount the human frailty at the heart of empire because he will be "[o]n the earth, yet not of it—not for men, but for their souls" (262). The problem that confronts the kingdom of Christ in the novel is the same one found at the heart of American expansionism: how to be both exceptional and universal. As Stephenson argues, "conviction of the first allowed for belief that the United States could preserve its unique virtues only by remaining a society apart from a fallen world. Commitment to the second authorized a messianic activism by the United States to redeem that world."³² Wallace finds in the supernatural figure of Christ a distilled, symbolic resolution of the moral puzzle facing an American

imperial republic, and in doing so allies religion with politics in a way that makes the two mutually redeeming.

Displacing the political hypocrisy of the contemporary United States into the unimpeachable authority of the Christian faith becomes one of the primary strategies of the novel. We get various assertions of the impending and inevitable march of Christ's ascension—"all people, nations, and languages should serve Him; His dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away" (310) Simonides exclaims confidently at one point—and by the novel's end Ben-Hur, now one of the wealthiest men in the world, becomes an agent of Christianity's rise by building a catacomb in Rome in order to worship in secrecy. The final line rings a sonorous note of imperial destiny: "Out of that vast tomb Christianity issued to supersede the Caesars" (521). In a flourish of bombastic rhetoric, the twin faces of exceptionalist philosophy—social universalism and religious chosenness—come together to form the eternal Christian empire, something that does not supersede Judaism, but supersedes "the Caesars." Christianity is not merely a path of faith, but an organizing principle that seamlessly absorbs historical time and geographical territory; its commensurate rival is not other religions, but other geopolitical powers.

Tacit justification of imperial ambitions through an employment of apparently timeless and righteous religiosity is a familiar enough synthesis to any observer of U.S. nation building. By the time *Ben-Hur* appeared, much of the energy behind the increasingly international outlook of Manifest Destiny came from an insistently Christian identity, perhaps best exemplified by Josiah Strong's *Our Country* (1885). Published five years after *Ben-Hur* had appeared, this classic document of imperial politics marshals Christianity to the cause of American expansion in a way that makes explicit something that Wallace's novel had posited in more coded form. Walter LaFeber characterises Strong's plea for the expansion of Christian missions as having "vital implications for foreign policy": "His goal was a Christianized world," LaFeber states, but it was to be one centered in the bounteous and relatively new spaces of the American west—the spaces, we should remember, where Wallace's political life had found its footing.³³ Like the publication of *Ben-Hur*, Strong is historically placed between two phases of U.S. imperialism and posits a natural continuity between them by combining a profound belief in religious destiny with an assumption of America's coming status as world power.

Ben-Hur doesn't simply imitate the imperial discourses of its own contemporary context, however. It also draws a great deal of its presumptive energy from a longer historiographical sense of Christianity and empire, extending the frame of the novel's imperial logic not only back into a much deeper history but also into a transcontinental sense of empire that unsettles straightforwardly exceptionalist accounts of U.S. expan-

sion. We can be fairly sure that one of Wallace's many sources for the novel (he prided himself on the level of research that went into it) was Edward Gibbons' *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, the first volume of which had been published, in a neat historical coincidence, in the emblematic year of 1776.³⁴ Here we find a classic account of Rome's decline, and one which tells the story in the same language of imperial destiny that Wallace would replicate a hundred years later: "a pure and humble religion," Gibbon famously claimed, "gently insinuated itself into the minds of men . . . derived new vigour from opposition, and finally erected the triumphant banner of the Cross on the ruins of the Capitol."³⁵ Christianity's vanquishing of the Roman world is peaceful and yet marked by militaristic spectacle, much the same as how Gibbon sees its rise to global importance: "[b]y the industry and zeal of the Europeans it has been widely diffused to the most distant shores of Asia and Africa; and by the means of their colonies has been firmly established from Canada to Chile."³⁶ The euphemistic rhetoric here—"industry and zeal" seems bitterly ironic with the benefit of historical hindsight—is hardly surprising when considered in the wider context of late eighteenth-century European imperial discourse, but its metaphoric fabric also finds its way into *Ben-Hur*. Wallace narrates the first seeds of Christian growth in order to proleptically project back, into an originary moment, the underlying justification of the imperial present—but does so not necessarily to secure America as exceptional. The geopolitical ambition of the United States becomes, instead, only a humble agent of a Godly dominion that belongs to the longue durée of Christianity's world-historical triumph.

Amidst these cross-currents of politics and religion, and while Wallace was busy governing the New Mexico Territory in the late 1870s, his wife Susan was publishing articles of travelogue and local observation in Eastern magazines and journals, including *The Atlantic Monthly* (they were collected and published in 1888 under the title *The Land of the Pueblos*). Recounting the long colonial history of the American southwest, Susan acted as a useful propagandist for her husband's more immediate administrative duties by also presenting a remarkably benign picture of the region's recent past. Following the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848 which saw New Mexico become U.S. territory, she writes, "the Pueblos were among the first to give allegiance to our government," and "now number not less than twenty thousand peaceful, contented citizens."³⁷ The "red race" have become happy American subjects, colorful additions with their "primitive customs" and "curious myths," while the course of Christian civilization has also attempted to assimilate them into its family: "[n]ominally Catholic, they are really only baptized heathen."³⁸ The U.S.'s benevolent control of the region represented the natural

progression of a Jeffersonian “empire for liberty,” but the Pueblo could only be brought so far into that empire because their “redness” condemned them to the lowest rungs of civilization’s hierarchy. Sending journalistic missives back to curious readers in the metropolitan East, Susan Wallace’s hopeful and condescending vision of life in New Mexico makes explicit something that more often than not went hand-in-hand with the project of religious conversion: a parallel and mutually-defining vision of race.

Indeed, *Ben-Hur*’s only direct description of Christ himself presents a clearly racialized picture. Ben-Hur, by now a prisoner and a slave for his apparent assassination attempt on a Roman Procurator, lies exhausted in the dust outside of Nazareth as his captors take a rest: “The hand laid kindly upon his shoulder awoke the unfortunate Judah, and, looking up, he saw a face he never forgot—the face of a boy about his own age, shaded by locks of yellowish bright chestnut hair; a face lighted by dark-blue eyes” (121). As Edward Blum and Paul Harvey have demonstrated, the changing depiction of Christ in the nineteenth century served various audiences in various ways, often becoming a focal point for some of the most fervent and politicized racial debate. The Anglo or even Nordic Jesus that Wallace presents us with had come to particular prominence amongst white Americans around the time the novel was written,³⁹ complicating a more anonymously white Jesus that itself did not become a widely disseminated representation until at least the early nineteenth century. The conspicuously racialized depiction of Christ circulated in cheap domestic prints and Sunday School lesson cards in a way that helped to solidify the place of racial whiteness in national expansion: “American imperialism at home and abroad expanded white racism, provided markets for Jesus imagery, and set the stage for Americans to imagine Jesus as a militarized and imperial big brother over people of color.”⁴⁰ Jesus’s physical appearance is fleeting in *Ben-Hur*, but telling nevertheless. Wallace clearly imagined him as a white man: in *The Boyhood of Christ*, written partly to capitalize on the success of *Ben-Hur* (it was published in *Harper’s* as a Christmas special in 1886, and then two years later as a stand-alone volume), the face of Christ is again described as being “oval and delicate” topped with a “mass of projecting sunburnt blonde hair.”⁴¹ Wallace’s Jesus is not only the centre of a religious identity crucial to imperial ideology, but is the racially (and therefore biologically) superior figure who promises an idealized future order freed from the atavism of the ancient world’s heterogeneity.

America’s imperial incorporation seeks (benevolently) to neutralize racial conflict, reconfiguring apparently “natural” differences into social cohesion. *Ben-Hur* absorbs this belief but does so in a way that begins to conflate both Roman and Christian civilization;

"Rome prefigures Christian universalism" argues Kaplan, so that the latter ends up being a morally purified mirror image of the former.⁴² At one point, the vast multicultural crowds gathering for the climactic chariot race give the narrator pause to ponder on the assimilating power of the Roman world: "Of the various missions of the great empire, one seems to have been the fusion of men and the introduction of strangers to each other" (324). The reality of Roman imperialism—forced assimilation and subjugation—is here figured as a benign project, something akin to what Ben-Hur later sees as one of the primary benefits of Christ's founding of a new religious order: a "*power* ample enough to raise and support a Jewish crown over the wrecks of the Italian, more than ample to remodel society" is also, crucially, an ability to "convert mankind into one purified happy family" (473, emphasis in original). "Purification," as the term's long and queasy political history testifies, is very often not simply an eradication of immoral thoughts and acts, but a scouring clean of ethnic and racial multiplicity. The "fact" of Christ's whiteness sanctions the righteousness of the White Man's Burden, so that *Ben-Hur* again originates the teleological future of the U.S.'s imperial mission in a distant, pre-American, past.

The Imperial Gaze

While we can see how *Ben-Hur* foregrounds imperial spectacle in terms of its thematic preoccupations, there are, importantly, ways in which its investment in spectacle come to exert formal and stylistic pressures as well, and do so in a way that enable us to track quite how deeply the imperial gaze colonizes the novel. Part of what makes *Ben-Hur* a hard slog for most modern readers searching for certain kinds of narrative satisfaction is its determinedly episodic structure, its organization around a continual parade of scenes that through their accumulation of archaeological detail assert the meticulous accuracy of the past being laid before us. In this sense Wallace's novel operates within some familiar generic parameters, and here we might turn to Lukács' *The Historical Novel* partly because his location of the "average hero" at the heart of the form is something that, in Fredric Jameson's summary, connects usefully with the current focus on spectacle: "the famous 'average hero' whose presence Lukács posits as a necessary mediation between everyday life and the great historical events is precisely the theatrical spectator, who observes the great episodically and from afar."⁴³ Such could stand as a distillation of *Ben-Hur*'s narrative method, and in Lukács himself, during his discussion of Flaubert's *Salammbô* (1861), we find similarly pertinent remarks: "it becomes a world of historically exact *costumes and decorations*, no more than a pictorial frame within which a purely modern story is unfolded."⁴⁴ Following these critical accounts of the historical novel in

general, *Ben-Hur*'s catalogue of sights (along with Lukács' "pictorial frame," the ocular vocabulary is apt) can be understood as enacting an aesthetic colonization of the past, re-presenting it in the present as so many exotic panoramas that amount not so much to a living reconstruction of the past as to a pastiche of history repurposed through the gaze of modern imperial politics.

The novel's centerpiece spectacle, as any number of adaptations have recognized, is the chariot race between Ben-Hur and his arch-enemy Messala in the colossal circus at Antioch. Such arenas were indeed the dramatic heart of Roman cities, and few locations come as stocked with such spectacular potential. Alison Futrell has argued that they played a crucial organizing role in the Roman Empire, "serv[ing] the purposes of Roman hegemony as a means of bringing together the Roman community to commemorate its shared past and to invoke an ideal of a group future."⁴⁵ Communal sites such as the circus were integral to the imperial reach of Rome, acting to "Romanize" local populations by presenting them with overt demonstrations of the skill and power (not to mention, in the amphitheatre, the propensity for violence) of the metropolis. Nowhere, we might say, is the novel's spectacular aesthetic made more strikingly manifest than when we are placed at the heart of one of Rome's primary scenes of colonial coercion.

The extended episode that unfolds here (some five chapters) maintains an overtly visual emphasis throughout, beginning with the opening lines: "[A]t last, a flourish of trumpets called for silence, and instantly the gaze of over a hundred thousand persons was directed towards a pile forming at the eastern section of the building" (331). Such direct invocations of an embodied viewer continue to mount up, turned back on the reader themselves who is now interpellated as one of those gazing spectators: "Now if the reader, who is still supposed to be seated on the consular tribunal over the Porta Pompei, will look up from the ground arrangement of the interior, the first point to attract his notice will be the marking of the outer boundary-line of the course" (332). Fixing the reader in a situation of spectatorial awe becomes the governing narrative strategy, this time at the start of the race: "Let the reader try to fancy it; let him look down upon the arena, and see it glistening in its frame of dull-grey granite walls, let him . . . see the chariots . . . ornate as paint and burnishing can make them . . . let him see the drivers, erect and statuesque" (341).⁴⁶ And so on. The reader comes to occupy, in other words, exactly the position of the Roman subject themselves, gazing upon a demonstration of total state power whose express purpose is to render them politically inert. In *Ben-Hur* we never actually get to Rome; this scene takes place in one of the Roman Empire's key strategic outposts, Antioch, a city situated on what is today the coastal border between

Turkey and Syria. While the displays at the ancient circus acted to knit such outposts into a web of imperial identity and control, so it acts here in narrative terms to turn the agent of Christ's coming, Ben-Hur, into a heroic victor whose subsequent rise to wealth and power is effectively unquestionable. Endlessly recreated as the spectacular heart of *Ben-Hur* from the early stage productions up through its twentieth-century incarnations on film, the chariot race obscures its political content by turning the episode into a melodrama of inevitable historical ascendancy.

Picking out this scene, well-known as it is, helps to expand a more general point about the various modes of address that the narrative employs, modes that come to figure Christianity itself as something commensurately spectacular. The novel's 500-plus pages are bookended by the primary tableaus of Christ's life: the story opens with the Magi arriving in the desert in time for the birth, and closes soon after the crucifixion with Ben-Hur, a paragon of the Protestant Ethic, now both a prosperous and a converted man. The point is that both scenes use precisely the same kind of theatrical focalization and visual interpellation that Wallace uses to describe the might of the Roman Empire, so that even as the two civilizations are ostensibly figured as morally antithetical they in fact come to inhabit the same aesthetic territory. Christ's birth appears in the novel as pure theatre, the Star of Bethlehem offering up a sight of dazzling spectacle:

[T]he people . . . sat up and looked; then they became wide-awake, though wonder-struck. . . . [S]oon the entire tenantry of the house and court and enclosure were out gazing at the sky.

And this was what they saw. A ray of light . . . its core a roseate electrical splendour . . . so that those upon the roof saw each other's faces, all filled with wonder.

Steadily, through minutes, the ray lingered, and then the wonder changed to awe and fear; the timid trembled, the boldest spoke in whispers. (53–54)

We share, as readers, some of the same supine spectatorial passivity of the onlookers in ancient Jerusalem, but the light's anachronistically "electrical splendour" figures such a scene in language more appropriate to a wonder-struck Gilded Age. A dazzling light is something Wallace clearly felt suited the presence of the divine Christ figure; when it came to Klaw and Erlanger's ambitious stage version, a religiously sensitive Wallace insisted that Christ was only to be represented as a 25,000 candle-power beam of light.⁴⁷

At the other end of the novel, Christ is once again the subject of an awe-inspiring sight. The description of the crucifixion lingers on the image of Christ's suffering body, and the gathered crowds, drawn by "some strange attraction" (510), appear as "the spec-

tacle of a great assemblage of people" where "[a]ll the eyes . . . were [looking forward] fixed upon the Nazarene" (505). Undifferentiated masses are once again held in silent fixity, a scene of Biblical history rendered politically important precisely because it makes the story of Christianity's emergence an unanswerable spectacle. Among an American population allying Christian ascendancy with a sense of geopolitical purpose, the critical moment in their theological narrative—Christ's death—comes before them as a scene of mythological power that relinquishes them of political responsibility: "there were three millions of people waiting awe-struck what should happen next—they were so still!" (513). "Viewed purely and professionally as a climax or catastrophe to be written up to, the final scene of the last act of a tragedy or a tale," Wallace would write later, "what could be more stupendous than the Crucifixion?"⁴⁸ Spectacle offers narrative satisfaction for the historical novel, but it is also deeply marked with contemporary social meaning. The sights of imperial Rome—invested in a covert declaration of unquestionable authority as they are—share in *Ben-Hur* an aesthetic and formal language with the spectacle of Christianity's founding, so that the two achieve a kind of narrative parity, antithetical in overt political terms but tacitly equated in their scopophilic power.

Ben-Hur stands today as something of a literary curiosity, largely unread even by academics and known better as a Hollywood blockbuster. It is also a novel whose once huge appeal seems unfathomable to most contemporary readers; an example, if nothing else, of the unbridgeable strangeness of historical tastes and fashions. Yet at the same time it yields something that feels strikingly at home amidst our concerns over American power, a cultural phenomenon bound up so intimately with a hawkish political scene that it seems to both record and participate not so much in an abstracted notion of foreign or domestic policy, but the social conditions within which policy must be ratified and enacted. In *Ben-Hur* the political and the aesthetic coincide in the form of the spectacle, narrativizing an uncanny pre-emption of popular culture's sometimes propagandistic role in America's more recent imperial misadventures.

Notes

My thanks to Anders Stephanson for his comments on an early version of this essay.

1. David Brody, *Visualizing American Empire: Orientalism and Imperialism in the Philippines* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2010), 129–30.
2. Brody, *Visualizing American Empire*, 133.
3. See Amy Kaplan on this point, and her reading of several (slightly later) historical romances as spectacles of gender performance, in *The Anarchy of Empire in the Making of U.S. Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 2002), 92–120.

4. John Carlos Rowe, *Literary Culture and U.S. Imperialism: From the Revolution to World War II* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2000), 14.
5. Amy Kaplan, "Imperial Melancholy in America," *Raritan* 28, no. 3 (Winter 2009), 13–14.
6. Some speculative biography worth indulging in here is the possibility that Lew Wallace could have seen Barnum's show during its tour. Wallace would have been at home in Crawfordsville, Indiana in the mid-1870s (between his return from activities in Mexico in 1868, and his appointment as Governor of New Mexico Territory in 1878), and the route diary for the 1875 tour of "P.T. Barnum's Great Roman Hippodrome" shows that it came through Indiana on several occasions during the summer, including two nights in Indianapolis (around 50 miles away from Crawfordsville) in late September (<http://www.circushistory.org/Routes/PTB1871.htm#1875>, accessed Jan 7, 2015). Given the show's main attraction—the running of several Roman-style chariot races—and Wallace's inclusion of his own famous chariot race in *Ben-Hur* five years later, it's a tempting connection to make.
7. David Mayer, "Introduction," *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1998), xix.
8. For a thorough account of these and other Roman-themed attractions in nineteenth-century America, see Margaret Malamud, *Ancient Rome and Modern America* (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009).
9. See especially Stanley Appelbaum, *Spectacle in the White City* (Mineola: Calla Editions, 2009).
10. Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), 230.
11. Trachtenberg, *Incorporation of America*, 231, emphasis in original.
12. Timothy Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1988), 7.
13. Rowe, *Literary Culture and U.S. Imperialism*, 4.
14. Paul A. Kramer, "Power and Connection: Imperial Histories of the United States in the World," *American Historical Review* 116, no. 5 (2011), 1357.
15. Perry Anderson, "Imperium," *New Left Review* 83 (September–October 2013), 6.
16. Jesse Alemán and Shelley Streeby, "Introduction," *Empire and the Literature of Sensation: An Anthology of Nineteenth-Century Popular Fiction*, ed. Jesse Alemán and Shelley Streeby (New Brunswick: Rutgers Univ. Press, 2007), xiv. Alemán and Streeby talk more generally about a nineteenth-century imperial history "fraught with amnesia," and see in the numerous dime novels they collect, as I do in *Ben-Hur*, important instances of a cultural testament to the fact that "[t]he history of U.S. empire spans the nineteenth century rather than starts at the end of it" (xiv).
17. Drawing such an analogy in a more direct and conscious way has become a favourite game of contemporary political commentary. Part of its appeal has been its flexibility: Niall Ferguson in *Colossus: The Rise and Fall of the American Empire* (New York: Penguin Books, 2004) and Chalmers Johnson in *Nemesis: The Last Days of the American Republic* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2007) both briefly evoke Rome as a point of comparison for the U.S., although they do so from rather different political standpoints. The desire to test the analogy in comparative terms has led former *Atlantic* editor Cullen Murphy to ask *Are We Rome?* (Boston: Mariner Books, 2007)—a question answered in apparently direct terms, a few years later, in Vaclac Smil's *Why American is Not a New*

- Rome* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2010). Other examples abound. For more discussion of this point, see Kaplan, "Imperial Melancholy."
18. Michael Rogin, "'Make My Day!' Spectacle as Amnesia in Imperial Politics," *Cultures of United States Imperialism*, ed. Amy Kaplan and Donald E. Pease (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1993), 503.
 19. Rogin, "'Make My Day!'" 504.
 20. Ibid, 504.
 21. Robert E. Morsberger and Katherine M. Morsberger, *Lew Wallace: Militant Romantic* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1980), 466.
 22. For an overview of the novel's afterlife in theatre and film, see Howard Miller, "The Charioteer and the Christ: Ben-Hur in America from the Gilded Age to the Culture Wars," *Indiana Magazine of History* 104, no. 2 (June 2008), 153–75.
 23. Blake Allmendinger, "Toga! Toga!" *Over the Edge: Remapping the American West*, ed. Valerie J. Matsumoto and Blake Allmendinger (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1999), 38.
 24. In David Mayer's introduction to the novel, he notes that when Klaw and Erlanger began adapting the story for the stage, "the emphasis was on the spectacular and on the rendering of the extravagant set-piece episodes from the novel" (xx) – in particular the sea battle and the chariot race.
 25. L. Ashley Squires, "The Wealthiest Man in the Empire: *Ben-Hur* as Model of Evangelical Political Engagement," *Arizona Quarterly* 69, no. 1 (Spring 2013), 27.
 26. Lew Wallace, *An Autobiography, Vol. II* (New York: Harper and Bros., 1906), 936.
 27. Ibid., 897.
 28. Ibid., 899.
 29. The lasting power of *Ben-Hur* in this respect is nowhere better illustrated than in Tim LaHaye's extraordinary introduction to the Signet Classics edition of the novel (New York: Signet Classics, 2003). The evangelical minister and prolific co-author of the *Left Behind* series might be accused of overstating the case somewhat when he describes *Ben-Hur* as "one of the finest novels ever written," but his political colors soon become clear when he enlists the story as a classic tale of Christ's ministry that finally proves reading literature can be "time . . . well spent," and admits that it served as inspiration for his own forays into fiction writing. For a detailed reading of the novel that makes some illuminating connections with twenty-first century evangelicism, see Squires, "The Wealthiest Man in the Empire."
 30. Anders Stephanson, *Manifest Destiny: American Expansion and the Empire of Right* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1995), 40.
 31. Lew Wallace, *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ*, ed. David Mayer (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1998), 262. Hereafter cited parenthetically.
 32. Stephanson, *Manifest Destiny*, 8.
 33. Walter LaFeber, *The New Empire: An Interpretation of American Expansion, 1860–1898* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1963), 73–74.
 34. Mayer, "Introduction," xv.
 35. Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, 1776–89, abridged by D.M. Low (London: Chatto and Windus, 1981), 143.

36. Ibid., 143.
37. Susan E. Wallace. *The Land of the Pueblos* (New York: John B. Alden, 1888), 31.
38. Ibid., 32.
39. Edward J. Blum and Paul Harvey, *The Color of Christ: The Son of God and the Saga of Race in America* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2012), 145–6. Blum and Harvey note the enormous popularity in the U.S. of French artist James Tissot's *The Life of Our Saviour Jesus Christ*, a series of hundreds of watercolour paintings depicting a white Jesus that began appearing in 1885. The 1880s and 90s, they go on to demonstrate, saw the widespread acceptance of Jesus's European-looking whiteness amongst the American middle classes.
40. Ibid., 143.
41. Lew Wallace, *The Boyhood of Christ*, 1888 (London: James R. Osgood, McIlvaine and Co., 1892), 98.
42. Kaplan, "Imperial Melancholy," 24.
43. Fredric Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism* (London: Verso, 2013), 268.
44. Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, trans. Hannah and Stanley Mitchell (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962), 225, emphasis in original.
45. Alison Futrell, *Blood in the Arena: The Spectacle of Roman Power* (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1997), 4–5.
46. Joanna Paul, discussing this same scene, points both to its afterlife as a stage and cinema set piece but also sees in its insistent visuality a genealogical connection to classic epics. Wallace's "debt to the epic tradition" and its deep investment in spectacular visual description, Paul claims, is made especially clear when he turns to a brief quote from Alexander Pope's translation of Homer's *Iliad* during the climax of the race. See Paul, *Film and the Classical Epic Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2013), 242.
47. Morsberger and Morsberger, *Lew Wallace*, 457.
48. Wallace, *Autobiography*, 931.