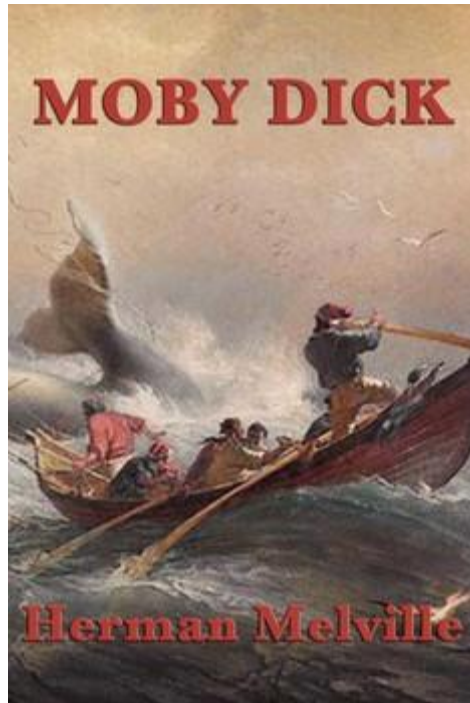


Quest for the Sublime in Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*

R. Dharani and Dr. A. Selvaraj



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Abstract

This paper examines the quest for the sublime in Melville's *Moby-Dick*. The sublime was essential to the romancers of the nineteenth century, and Melville's use of the sublime followed on his conception of *Moby-Dick* as a romance. Moreover, the terrible quest of Ahab and the Pequod for the great white whale, *Moby-Dick*, may be identified with the quest for the sublime that in the nineteenth century had become inextricably entangled with a religion of nature and a secular theodicy enunciated by the most influential of Melville's contemporaries. Melville's depiction of that sublime quest in *Moby-Dick*, informed by a more traditional theodicy that he found in earlier writers, is a judgment and a rejection of the dominant philosophy of his time.

Keywords: Melville, quest, sublime, *Moby-Dick*.

Sublime

Samuel Monk, in his study of the sublime, remarks that by the end of the eighteenth century "the sublime resembles a very full treasure box in which can be found all the paraphernalia of romantic writers." While Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* was by no means the only source and background for Melville's use of the sublime, it was much the most influential and comprehensive statement to emerge from the eighteenth-century occupation with the sublime. We do know that Melville was familiar with Burke; a copy of the *Enquiry* was in his personal library. Burke's exhaustive catalogue of "what things they are that cause in us the affections of the sublime and beautiful" is duplicated to an astounding degree in the course of the *Pequod's* voyage.

Sublime *Moby-Dick*

In *Moby-Dick*, Burke's definition of the sublime and the beautiful is embodied with great fidelity and fullness in structure and rhetoric which reflect his ideas about sublimity in language. The structure of *Moby-Dick*, the loose, episodic, digressive narrative of romance, may be seen, paradoxically, as tightly ordered with respect to Burke's ideas of sublimity. The juxtaposition of extremes of passion, the abrupt cessation of tension and terror for brief interludes, succeeded inexorably by the renewal of tension and fear- these were recommended by Burke. The conventional romance narrator, Ishmael, is equally the narrator recommended by Burke uncultivated, uncritical, admiring more and affected more with what he sees, expressing himself in a warm and passionate manner. Melville's rhetoric also accords with Burke's prescription. In Burke's own words, Melville's language is not "that very polished language . . . praised for superior clearness and perspicuity . . . generally deficient in strength." It has "great force and energy of expression; . . . it is hammered by the Cyclops, it continues rough" (pp. 176, 171).

Quest for the Sublime in Nature

The quest for the sublime in nature became a passionate occupation, a cult if not a religion, in the late eighteenth century. The late eighteenth century sought to experience the sublime for its own sake. But the experience of the sublime had been, in Burke, associated with the Deity, and in the nineteenth century the experience of the sublime became inextricably entangled with a religion of nature. The quest for the sublime in nature became the quest for a God, a Supreme Being whose essence pervaded the natural universe. The concern of the nineteenth-century advocates of the quest for the sublime, different as they might seem from their neoclassical predecessors, is also with method-not, in this case, a method of depiction, but a method by which man might apprehend the natural universe, might approach the highest Being whose creation and garment that universe is, and might do this by his own powers. This too follows Burke, who describes "the mind always claiming to itself some part of the dignity and importance of the things it contemplates." That elevation of the mind admits men, Burke says, "into the counsels of the Almighty" (pp. 50, 53). Wordsworth's well-known description of the descent from Simplon Pass in *The Prelude* is an exemplary expression of the sublime quest; also in *The Prelude*, Wordsworth expresses the optimistic theodicy which informed the quest. He makes use of the Burkean antithesis of the sublime and beautiful, but, contrary to Burke, it is "by love . . . that all grandeur comes." The "principle of pain" upon which the Burkean sublime

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comes." The "principle of pain" upon which the Burkean sublime turns is not denied, but its evil is denied. Evil exists only in ignorance turns is not denied, but its evil is denied. Evil exists only in ignorance and misapprehension, and "the discipline of fear" which is the experience of the sublime in nature draws the mind past apparent evil to love, to the apprehension of the entirely good supreme Being. Burke emphasizes the contemplation of the sublime from a safe distance; he remarks, quite reasonably, that the immediate experience of the terrible sublime may not be sublime, but merely terrible (pp. 40, 46). For Burke, love belongs only to the beautiful; with beauty, it lies dead in the presence of the sublime. The nineteenth-century advocates of the sublime quest resurrect love and associate it with the highest apprehension of the sublime.

Benign Deity

The sublime quest for a benign Deity accessible in nature was confidently advocated by Carlyle and Emerson among Melville's contemporaries. Melville was well read in both as he approached the composition of *Moby-Dick*. He was reading earlier writers as well, among them the English Platonists, in whom he found intimations of a natural religion which anticipated the nineteenth-century religion of nature. Ernest Tuveson, discussing their identification of the Deity with the infinite universe of the new philosophy, remarks that "the presentation of the universe as some kind of real image (not the opposite) of the infinite God helped to promote a 'this worldly' trend in men's thinking . . . The characteristic direction of traditional mystical experience had been upwards-from an evil or defective material world to an ideal realm . . . The tendency in the later Renaissance, on the contrary, was to encourage the knowledge of corporeal things as a spiritual good; the movement of mystical experience came to be outwards." In *Moby-Dick*, Ahab defines the direction of his quest in precisely those terms: "Level by nature to this earth's horizon are the glances of man's eyes; not shot from the crown of his head" (CXVIII, 412).

Infinite Sublime as Reassurance

This experience of the infinite sublime in nature in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was a reassurance, "the guarantee of a divine Mind that sustains order in the frightful multiplicity and impersonality of the cosmos." Although many of Melville's contemporaries persisted in this belief, this optimism of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was shaken for others, including Melville. A world of multiplicity and indifference is depicted in *Moby-Dick* in the appalling variety of the creatures of the sea, in the universal cannibalism of nature which obsesses Ishmael, in the terrible encounter of Ahab with that nature, the first encounter with *Moby-Dick* from which he emerges maimed and obsessed. In *Moby-Dick* the effect of the sublime is terror without divine reassurance. Ahab's definition of his quest is a desperately pessimistic version of the more prevalent nineteenth-century optimistic quest for the Deity in nature. Cruelly taught by nature's "discipline of fear" to which Wordsworth refers so trustingly, he would, by his own powers, "strike through the mask," the visible, unreasoning mask, to the "unknown but still reasoning . . . unscrutable thing" (XXXVI, 144).

Sublime with Terror

In *Moby-Dick*, Melville reinstates to the nineteenth-century definition of the sublime Burke's absolute emphasis on the association of the sublime with terror, and his equally absolute exclusion of love. His depiction of the sublime quest is informed by the traditional theodicy that

he found in the earlier writers that he was reading. Contrary to the confident assertions of some of his contemporaries, he suggests that the sublime quest, undertaken by man's own power in the world of nature, a world without Christ, is doomed. It ends in failure, in isolation in a universe of death. Melville's statement about the sublime quest is complex, his judgment indirect. He associates it with the beliefs of demonic religion the tenets of deism on the other, but he goes no further than association. His concern in *Moby-Dick* is not scholarly; his method is one of ironic juxtaposition and suggestion rather than exposition and argument. He makes no attempt to establish historical or intellectual connections between the deists and their pantheistic successors, nor any defence for "the hellfire in which the whole book is broiled."

Sublime and Demonology

Melville associates the sublime in *Moby-Dick* with all the machinery of demonology and witchcraft. The entire enterprise of the sublime hunt is consecrated to the Devil: Ahab tempers the barbs for his harpoon in blood, howling, "Ego non baptizo te in nomine patris, sed in nomine diaboli!" (CXIII, 404). The sea is "infidel"; the land, "evangelical." At the end of the hunt, the Pequod "like Satan" sinks to hell. *Moby-Dick*, the grand god of the whalers, is a "demon," a "white fiend," possessing the Devil's attributes of "unexampled, intelligent malignity." Ahab's sublimity is wicked; he is possessed by a demonic sublime. He has a "wicked name," the name of the idolator king in the Old Testament; he speaks of himself as damned. Only the sublime is associated with evil and the demonic in *Moby-Dick*; the machinery of the Devil evil and the demonic in *Moby-Dick*; the machinery of the Devil is notably absent in the interludes of the beautiful. This is notably absent in the interludes of the beautiful. This follows Burke, who associates the demonic with the terror of the sublime, but not at all with the pleasure of the beautiful. But Burke's "sublime things" may be either demonic or divine; Melville's depiction of the sublime in *Moby-Dick* is exhaustively and exclusively demonic.

The belief that Ahab and the crew of the Pequod voice in a determined, mechanistic universe is found among the beliefs of demonic religion, and likewise among the tenets of deism. The "grand belief" that Ahab and his crew share is called the oldest religion, the ancient church of which all men are members. The religion of the demonic was often referred to as the old religion; so too, the deists referred to their beliefs. Voltaire, who is mentioned in *Moby-Dick*, asserted in *Profession de foi des theistes*, "Notre religion est aussi ancienne que le monde." Elsewhere he said, "Un deiste est de la religion d'Adam, de Seth, de Noe." It is notable in this connection that none of the numerous references to Scripture in *Moby Dick* are to the New Testament of Christianity; all references are to the Old Testament of Adam, Seth, and Noah.

Deism

Melville's association of deism with the nineteenth-century religion of nature is not arbitrary. Though the natural religion of the deists was in stark contrast to the religion of nature which succeeded it insofar as that earlier religion meant by nature primarily and essentially uniformity, Melville's contemporaries inherited the supreme Being that they sought as well as certain optimistic strands of their theodicy from deism; their sublime quest for a Deity accessible in nature may be traced and related to deistic belief. Moreover, as A. P. Lovejoy notes, the universal approval that was the criterion of true religion for the deists was also the criterion of

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great literature for the neoclassical critics. He quotes a minor contemporary of Burke: "It is this united approbation, in persons of different ages and of various characters and languages, that Longinus has made the true test of the sublime." It is a deceptively short, regressive step from the true religion of the deists, marked by universal approbation, to a true religion of the sublime, marked by universal power. Burke's emphasis on the causes of the sublime, causes which he finds in nature, already points that step to the religion of nature in the nineteenth century. But for Melville, that religion is false, its sublime quest doomed.

Ishmael's Meditation

Perhaps the most quoted passage in *Moby-Dick* is found in Ishmael's meditation in Chapter XXXV, "The Masthead": In this enchanted mood, thy spirit ebbs away to whence it came; becomes diffused through time and space; like Wickliff's sprinkled Pantheistic ashes, forming at last a part of every shore the round globe over. There is no life in thee, now, except that rocking life imparted by a gently rolling ship; by her, borrowed from the sea; by the sea, from the gently rolling ship; by her, borrowed from the sea; by the sea, from the inscrutable tides of God. But while this sleep, this dream is on ye, move your foot or hand an inch; slip your hold at all; and your identity comes back in horror. Over Cartesian vortices you hover. And perhaps, at mid-day, in the fairest weather, with one half-throttled shriek you drop through that transparent air into the summer Heed it well, ye Pantheists! (p. 140)

In this passage is Melville's view of the consequences of the sublime, his demonstration of the inexorable failure of the sublime quest, even as it is defined in the most optimistic formulation of his contemporaries. In a letter to Hawthorne, written "while the Whale was in his flurry," Melville criticizes the pantheistic philosophy, the religion of nature he found in those contemporaries. He refers to a quotation that he almost certainly found in Carlyle: "I came across this, 'Live in the all.' That is to say . . . get out of yourself, spread and expand yourself, and bring to yourself the tinglings of life that are felt in the flowers and the woods, that are felt in the planets Saturn and Venus, and the Fixed Stars. What non- sense! . . . This 'all' feeling, though, there is some truth in.... But what plays the mischief with the truth is that men will insist upon the universal application of a temporary feeling or opinion."

Pantheistic Experience

The pantheistic experience at the masthead is a temporary feeling. Insisting on the constant and continuing truth of that temporary feeling as the sure apprehension of a supreme Being in nature, the advocates of the sublime quest were mischievous indeed. The mind may participate from time to time in the infinite universe, but it is contained in vulnerable, fallible flesh. To forget this, to deny this, is fatal. It is the Cartesian dilemma that Melville formulates in Ishmael's meditation. Faced with the absolute chasm between mind and matter that followed on his own denial of certitude to the material universe, Descartes formulated an elaborate theory of vortices, etheric whirlpools in which all nature was held and ordered. He meant his theory to secure and validate the mind's apprehension of the world outside itself, but its credibility scarcely survived its publication. At the masthead, the mind, seeking to comprehend the infinite natural world, falls through Cartesian vortices which have no power to hold it up, into the terrible space between which Descartes himself had likened to deep waters.

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Ethereal Thrill

In the closing paragraphs of *Moby-Dick*, Melville recapitulates his earlier rejection of the religion of nature in "The Masthead." his earlier rejection of the religion of nature in "The Masthead." His depiction of the sinking of the Pequod is his final statement about the consequences of the sublime quest: And now, concentric circles seized the lone boat itself, and all its crew, and each floating oar, and every lance-pole, and spinning, animate and inanimate, all round and round in one vortex, carried the smallest chip of the Pequod out of sight. But as the last whelmings intermixingly poured themselves over the sunken head of the Indian at the mainmast, . . . a sky-hawk . . . now chanced to intercept its broad fluttering wing between the hammer and the wood; and simultaneously feeling that ethereal thrill, the submerged savage beneath, in his death-grasp, kept his hammer frozen there; and so the bird of heaven, . . . his whole captive form folded in the flag of Ahab, went down with his ship, which, like Satan, would not sink to hell till she had dragged a living part of heaven along with her (CXXXV, 469).

The Eagle

To the nineteenth-century advocates of the sublime quest, the eagle was the emblem of the human mind, soaring by its own powers into the infinite. Earlier in the voyage of the Pequod, Ishmael had invoked that emblematic eagle, asserting the spiritual power of man: "There is a Catskill eagle in some souls that can alike dive down into the blackest gorges, and soar out of them again and become invisible in the sunny spaces" (XCVI, 355). That eagle is the sky-hawk here; its fate is Melville's final judgment on the quest for the sublime. The Pequod with her fragile cargo of flesh is whirled down to hell, as if fallen into a sublime Cartesian vortex, dragging down with her the emblem of the mind.

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