Melville and the Sublime in Moby-Dick

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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.

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."[1] 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.[2] Burke's exhaustive catalog of "what things they are that cause in us the affections of the sublime and beautiful"[3] is duplicated to an astounding degree in the course of the *Pequod's* voyage.

Burke defines two separate and distinct realms of the sublime and the beautiful. Terror is the ruling principle of the sublime: "Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and

[1] Samuel H. Monk, *The Sublime* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1960), p. 140. I follow throughout Monk's discussion of the eighteenth-century sublime.

[2] Merton M. Sealts, Jr., *Melville's Reading* (Madison, Wisc., 1966), pp. 9, 44.

[3] Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful,* ed. J. T. Boulton (London, 1958), p. 54. Subsequent references are to this edition and are indicated in the text.

danger, . . . whatever is . . . terrible . . . is a source of the sublime" (p. 39). It is productive of the strongest emotions the mind is capable of feeling. The sublime is associated with solitude—"death itself is scarcely an idea of more terror" (p. 43)—and with the most extreme passions and sensory experiences. The beautiful turns on pleasure, and is associated with society, with love and the social affections, with the milder passions and sensory experiences. The power of the sublime is superior to the power of the beautiful, and the beautiful occurs only in the absence of sublimity. Burke says, "There is something so over-ruling in whatever inspires us with awe, in all things which belong ever so remotely to terror, that nothing else can stand in their presence. There lie the qualities of beauty either dead or inoperative" (p. 157). The realms of the beautiful and the sublime are both realms of feeling, but finally the beautiful is associated with the things which belong to the understanding, the sublime with what can only be felt. Beauty resides in smallness; the sublime, in greatness. Beauty belongs to the near; the sublime, to the far. Beauty is associated with what is visible, and clear; the sublime, with what is obscure, and beyond our sight. It is to the realm of the sublime that our studies should lead us, Burke says, in a statement which anticipates the nineteenth-century advocates of a religion of nature. In the realm of the sublime, we may approach the highest Being and power, the Deity whose "first, most natural, and the most striking effect" is terror (p. 70).

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 is in part polished, and partly continues rough" (pp. 176, 171).

Melville makes use of nearly all the causes of the sublime which Burke enumerates in the *Enquiry,* embodying these causes in the very examples Burke cites. Burke's first example of sublimity, the sea, is the world in which almost the entire narrative of *Moby-Dick* is set, and that sea is sublime according to Burke's exact prescriptions: a rugged and broken surface; an apparent infinity in the succession of its waves; a vast extension, particularly in depth; and most of all, a vast disorder, terrible, irresistibly powerful and obscure. The ocean in *Moby-Dick* is associated with solitude and contrasted with the land, which is associated with the affections of society: "The port would fain give succor; the port is pitiful; in the port is safety, comfort, hearthstone, supper, warm blankets, friends, all that's kind to our mortalities. But . . . that ship . . . seeks all the lashed sea's landlessness . . . in landlessness alone resides the highest truth, shoreless, indefinite as God—so, better is it to perish in that howling infinite, than be ingloriously dashed upon the lee, even if that were safety!"[4] Ishmael speaks of the sea as "an everlasting terra incognita . . . a foe to man who is an alien to it. . . . No mercy, no power but its own controls it. Panting and snorting like a mad battle steed that has lost its rider, the masterless ocean overruns the globe." Almost immediately he contrasts it to the verdant land, the "green, gentle, and most docile earth" (LVIII, 235–236). Burke contrasts the sea to a level plain, which in prospect "may be as extensive as a prospect of the ocean; but can it ever fill the mind with any thing so great as the ocean itself?" (pp. 57–58). Melville also contrasts the sea to a plain, invoking the associated ideas of the sublime and beautiful: "Were this world an endless plain . . . then were there promise in the voyage" instead of terror (LII, 204). It is by jumping into the sea from the boat of his fellows that Pip experiences an "intolerable and awful lonesomeness." Therein he "saw God's foot upon the treadle of the loom"; therein he passed beyond the realm of the understanding, never to return (XCIII, 347).

On a sea which is entirely the realm of the sublime, the *Pequod*

[4] Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick,* ed. Harrison Hayford and Hershel Parker (New York, 1967), p. 97. Subsequent references are to this edition and are indicated in the text, preceded by chapter numbers, for example, (XXIII, 97).

and her sailors are contained and isolated, "lost in its unshored, harborless immensities" (XXXII, 116). Whalers are "isolatoes." Among sailors they are "the most directly brought into contact with whatever is appallingly astonishing in the sea" (XLI, 156). The creatures of the sea display the infinite division of things that Burke cites as sublime. Regarded, Melville says, "with emotions unspeakably unsocial and repelling," they incite the terror which Burke always associates with the sublime (LVIII, 235).

Among all creatures, Burke cites leviathan as sublime, and Melville brings the full machinery of Burke's prescriptions for sublimity to the description of whales. Accordingly, Ishmael praises whales as universal, eternal, a source of astonishment, awe, and reverence, to all men in all times. They dwell in solitude, in the inaccessible, unspeakable obscurity of the depths of the sea. In accordance with Burke's notions of sublime depiction in painting, leviathan is, to Ishmael, "that one creature in the world which must remain unpainted to the last" (LV, 228). In an extraordinary series of thirteen digressive chapters, Ishmael eulogizes the sublime whale. He speaks first of the head: "This aspect is sublime. . . . But in the great Sperm Whale, this high and mighty god-like dignity inherent in the brow is so immensely amplified, that in gazing on it, in that full front view, you feel the Deity and the other dread powers more forcibly than in beholding any other object in living nature" (LXXIX, 291–292). In true Burkean fashion, Ishmael says, "There are some enterprises in which a careful disorderliness is the true method. . . . The more I dive into this matter [the more] I am transported" (LXXXII, 304). At the other end—both of the whale, and of the long series of digressions—is a summation of sublimity in his eulogy of the whale's tail: "Out of the bottomless profoundities the gigantic tail seems spasmodically snatching at the highest heaven. So in dreams, have I seen majestic Satan thrusting forth his tormented colossal claw from the flame Baltic of Hell. . . . The more I consider this mighty tail, the more do I deplore my inability to express it. . . . But if I know not even the tail of this whale, how understand his head? much more, how comprehend his face, when face he has none?" (LXXXVI, 317–318).

Burke cites examples from architecture as sublime: the rotunda and dome; the "grand isles" of old Gothic cathedrals (p. 75). This prescription for sublimity also is involved in the depiction of the

whale in *Moby-Dick*. The *Pequod* encounters a "grand armada" of whales, "a great semicircle, embracing one half of the level horizon." A whaleboat advances into the herd, to find itself surrounded by "a living wall, . . . in the distracted distance . . . tumults of the outer concentric circles, . . . successive pods of whales, eight or ten in each, swiftly going round and round" (LXXXVII, 320, 324). This is Burke's rotunda: a succession and uniformity of parts, "whether it be a building or a plantation," in which "you can no where fix a boundary; turn which way you will, the same object still seems to continue, and the imagination has no rest." Also incorporated into Melville's depiction is an immediately following reference by Burke to Addison's analysis of the rotunda, "Mr. Addison in the Spectators concerning the pleasures of the imagination, thinks it is, because in the rotund at one glance you see half the building" (pp. 74–75). In other passages in *Moby-Dick,* the whale is likened to the great dome of St. Peter's; the whale's head, to a rotunda. In several of the most curious digressions, the skeleton of a whale is described as a temple. The whale's ribs are likened to Gothic arches; the vertebrae are "like the great knobbed blocks on a Gothic spire" (CII, CIII, 378).

Moby Dick himself is, of course, the epitome of the sublime leviathan. Melville's depiction of the great white whale turns exactly on the "heightened circumstances" which Burke found in Job's leviathan—his "pernicious" strength, "his freedom, and his setting mankind at defiance" (p. 66). In all his appearances, he is sublime in the highest degree, a monarch and a god, powerful and terrible in his "unexampled intelligent malignity" (XLI, 159). In Moby Dick, the terrors of the invisible are added to the terrors of the visible. He is whiteness wrapped in darkness, like the Deity in Milton's description, whose sublimity is so admiringly asserted by Burke; he is "a magnet" which inexorably draws Ahab and the *Pequod*; a deity invisible, known and found by "his infallible wake" (CXXXV, 460).

Chapter XLII, "The Whiteness of the Whale," is a most Burkean enquiry into the terror of whiteness. Melville states Ishmael's enquiry in a form which duplicates the form of Burke's enquiry into the highest causes of the sublime: What is "this elusive quality . . . which causes the thought of whiteness, when divorced from more kindly associations, and coupled with any object terrible in

itself, to heighten that terror to the furthest bounds?" (XLII, 164). The causes of the terror of whiteness that Ishmael discovers are Burke's. Whiteness in nature terrifies, Ishmael surmises, perhaps by unnatural contrast, by its presentation of extremes. It is associated with death, with ghosts, with solitude; "it shadows forth the heartless voids and immensities of the universe, and thus stabs us from behind with the thought of annihilation" (XLII, 169). Whiteness is spiritual, and clothes the object with which it is coupled with divineness—and that divineness, "though commanding worship, at the same time enforces a certain nameless terror" (XLII, 166). Ultimately, the terror of whiteness resides in instinct, "the instinct of the knowledge of the demonism of the world" (XLII, 169). In a passage most significant to Melville's formulation here, Burke suggests that "it would be absurd . . . to say that all things affect us by association only; since some things must have been originally and naturally agreeable or disagreeable, from which the others derive their associated powers" (pp. 130–131). This primally terrible sublime is invoked by Melville. Whiteness terrorizes Ishmael as "a dumb brute" is terrorized, by an object which "cannot recall to him anything associated with the experience of former perils." He continues, "Though neither knows where lie the nameless things of which the mystic sign gives forth such hints; yet with me, as with the colt, somewhere those things must exist. Though in many of its aspects this visible world seems formed in love, the invisible spheres were formed in fright" (XLII, 169). Here again is the distinction of two realms according to Burke's definition of the sublime and beautiful. Moreover, in his discussion of the terror of the Deity, Burke cites "the common maxim, *primos in orbe deos fecit timor*" (p. 70), a citation which suggests Melville's formulation. Burke associates the maxim with false religions (of which demonism would certainly be one), but he states, nonetheless, that even in true religion the idea of God and fear are inseparable.

Burke's definition of darkness and obscurity as a cause of the sublime is well known; his discussion of light as a cause of the sublime is less often cited. He associated both light and darkness with sublimity as extremes, most affecting in their intense and unalloyed states. The light of the sun and the light which emanates from Milton's Deity are in effect very great species of darkness: extreme light obliterates all objects (pp. 79ff.). Neither light nor darkness are

colors, though all colors depend on light, and blackness is a partial darkness (p. 147). It is in these Burkean terms that whiteness is characterized, in the conclusion of Ishmael's enquiry, as "the visible absence of color, . . . a colorless, all-color of atheism from which we shrink." Ishmael finally refers whiteness to "the great principle of light, [which] for ever remains white or colorless in itself, and if operating without medium upon matter, would touch all objects . . . with its own blank tinge . . . the monumental white shroud" (XLII, 169–170).

In *Moby-Dick* Melville uses not only Burke's prescriptions for the causes of the sublime, but also his discussion of the operation of the sublime. Ahab is possessed by hate, to Burke the most extreme and terrible of passions. Moreover, he is possessed by the object of his hate, "the inscrutable thing" at which he strikes in the white whale (XXXVI, 144). Melville's depiction of the passion of Ahab reflects with great fidelity Burke's discussion in the *Enquiry:* "The passion caused by the great and sublime in *nature,* when those causes operate most powerfully, is Astonishment; and astonishment is that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror. In this case the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other, nor by consequence reason on that object which employs it. Hence arises the great power of the sublime, that far from being produced by them, it anticipates our reasonings, and hurries us on by an irresistible force" (p. 57). It is thus that Ahab is obsessed with the sublime leviathan, thus that his long hunt may be identified as a sublime quest. All his mind is fixed on Moby Dick with a monomaniacal intensity, and he is impelled with irresistible force by his terrible purpose, his obsession with the object of his hunt. He totally lacks "the low enjoying power" which is associated with the beautiful (XXXVII, 147). He worships light that blinds him; his eyes are scorched until he can see nothing but his object. And finally, at the sight of that object, the sight of Moby Dick at the end of the chase, he cannot see at all (CXXXV, 467). His own words on the last day of the chase place him exactly in the context of Burke's highest sublime: "Ahab never thinks; he only feels, feels, feels" (CXXXV, 460).

Ahab is himself a sublime figure, a dark and terrible old man who "stands alone among the millions of the peopled earth, nor gods nor men his neighbors!" (CXXXIII, 452). The "larger, darker,

deeper part" of Ahab dominates Melville's characterization, and "indeed, as touching all Ahab's deeper part, every revelation partook more of significant darkness than of explanatory light" (CVI, 386). He is captain, described in terms of the power of royalty, the "dread majesty" of command that Burke cites as sublime (p. 67). Burke notes that the mind always claims to itself some part of the things it contemplates (pp. 50–51), and so it is to the most extreme degree with Ahab. Before the doubloon that he has nailed to the mast, Ahab muses, "mountaintops and towers, and all other grand and lofty things . . . all are Ahab" (XCIX, 359). He is a hurricane, a volcano, even a ray of the light that obsesses and destroys him. He identifies himself finally with the infinite depth and height of sea and sky: "Nor white whale, nor man, nor fiend, can so much as graze old Ahab in his own proper and inaccessible being. Can any lead touch yonder floor, any mast scrape yonder roof?" (CXXXIV, 458).

The sublime passion of Ahab dominates the entire crew of the *Pequod*. He would "have shocked into them the same fiery emotion . . . of his own magnetic life." He holds "his magnet at Starbuck's brain"; Starbuck says, helpless in the grip of the sublime, "the ineffable thing has tied me to him; tows me with a cable I have no knife to cut" (XXXVI, 146; XXXVIII, 148). Earlier, Ahab has overwhelmed Starbuck with a passionate speech. In an aside, he recognizes his power: "Something shot from my dilated nostrils, he has inhaled it in his lungs. Starbuck now is mine; cannot oppose me now" (XXXVI, 144). In the *Enquiry* Burke discusses exactly such a phenomenon as the operation of the sublime. A speaker calls to his aid "those modes of speech that mark a strong and lively feeling in himself. Then, by the contagion of our passions, we catch a fire already kindled in another" (p. 175). Burke calls this phenomenon, this "ineffable thing," sympathy, and it is thus that Ishmael identifies it: "A wild, mystical, sympathetical feeling was in me; Ahab's quenchless feud seemed mine" (XLI, 155).

There is beauty in the world of *Moby-Dick* as well as sublimity, interludes in which the beautiful seemingly holds sway, providing the brief cessations of tension and fear that Burke recommends—as in Melville's first description of the Pacific (CXI), and his depiction of the "soothing scenes, however temporary" of the land-like fishing waters (CXIV). But the beautiful is deceptive and without power

against the sublime. The "seductive god" of the Pacific is the ambiguous pagan Pan; the "sugary musk of the Bashee isles" that Ahab "unthinkingly snuffed" has no effect on his terrible purpose (CXI, 400). Describing the fishery, Ishmael pointedly reminds the reader that "beholding the tranquil beauty and brilliancy of the ocean's skin, one forgets the tiger heart that pants beneath it; and would not willingly remember, that this velvet paw but conceals a remorseless fang" (CXIV, 405). "The Symphony" (CXXXII) is a last interlude, a last momentary cessation of terror in the long voyage, and a terrifying demonstration of Burke's assertion that the power of the sublime is superior to the power of the beautiful. As Ahab leans over the side of the *Pequod*, seeking still to "pierce the profundity" about him, "the lovely aromas in that enchanted air did at last seem to dispel, for a moment, the cankerous thing in his soul" (CXXXII, 443). He feels Burke's affections of the beautiful precisely in those objects that Burke cites: the human face, the eye; the nearness of his fellow man, and the affections of society (pp. 113ff.). "Close! stand close to me, Starbuck! let me look into a human eye; it is better than to gaze into sea or sky; better than to gaze upon God. By the green land; by the bright hearth-stone! this is the magic glass, man; I see my wife and my child in thine eye" (CXXXII, 444). Starbuck pleads for a return to the land, to Nantucket, but the appeal of beauty is overwhelmed by the power of the sublime. "But Ahab's glance was averted; like a blighted fruit tree he shook, and cast his last, cindered apple to the soil. 'What is it, what nameless, inscrutable, unearthly thing is it . . . commands me; that against all natural lovings and longings, I so keep pushing and crowding, and jamming myself on all the time?' " (CXXXII, 444–445). Even the detail of the cindered apple follows an example of sublimity cited by Burke (p. 85). Ahab's words reflect the passage from the *Enquiry* quoted above; it is the power of Burke's sublime that commands him.

Burke is exhaustive in his cataloging of "those things which cause in us the affections of the sublime and beautiful," extending his *Enquiry* even to the sublime and beautiful in smell and taste and touch. In *Moby-Dick* his prescriptions for sublimity in odor appear in the bitter stenches, the wild and musky perfumes associated with the whale. In the interludes of the beautiful, the mild and lovely odors of the land often figure. The most curious of these interludes

turns on Burke's discussion of sweetness, "the beautiful of the taste," giving pleasure because of its smoothness and softness, like that of oil:

> If you have tried how smooth globular bodies, as the marbles with which boys amuse themselves, have affected the touch when they are rolled backward and forward and over one another, you will easily conceive how sweetness . . . affects; a single globe . . . is nothing near so pleasant to the touch as several globes, where the hand gently rises to one and falls to another; and this pleasure is greatly increased if the globes are in motion, and sliding over one another; for this soft variety [which occurs when the globes of sweetness are dissolved, most preferably in oil] prevents that weariness, which the uniform disposition of the several globes would otherwise produce. (pp. 152–153)

In Chapter XCIV of *Moby-Dick,* Ishmael describes squeezing the sperm of the whale, an oily, lump-filled liquid:

> It was our business to squeeze these lumps back into fluid. A sweet and unctuous duty! . . . as I bathed by hands among those soft, gentle globules . . . as they richly broke to my fingers, and discharged all their opulence, like fully ripe grapes their wine; as I snuffed up that uncontaminated aroma, . . . I forgot all about our horrible oath; in that inexpressible sperm, I washed my hands and heart of it . . . and I found myself unwittingly squeezing my co-laborers' hands in it, mistaking their hands for the gentle globules. Such an abounding, affectionate, friendly, loving feeling did this avocation beget. (XCIV, 348)

The beautiful, in Burke's definition, is associated with love and the social affections. Ishmael's disquisition on the squeezing of the sperm is a disquisition on the beautiful in Burke's own terms, according to Burke's own method. The result is a reductio ad absurdum of the *Enquiry* itself.

While Burke's concern in the *Enquiry* was the neoclassical concern with method, with literary depiction, he sought the sublime not primarily in works of literature but in nature. As Burke's editor, J. T. Boulton, points out, the sublime becomes, with Burke, a mode of experience sought far beyond literature (p. xlvii). As such, the sublime is not only method, but subject matter as well for Melville in *Moby-Dick.*

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 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.

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*.[5] He was reading earlier writers as well,

[5] Merrell R. Davis and William H. Gilman, eds., *The Letters of Herman Melville* (New Haven, Conn., 1960), pp. 78–80; Sealts, pp. 19, 47–48.

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."[6] 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).

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."[7] 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).

[6] Ernest Tuveson, "Space, Deity, and the Natural Sublime," *Modern Language Quarterly,* XII (March, 1951), 22–23. Tuveson notes also Milton's belief that matter is eternal and of God's substance. He comments further, that "the new theories undoubtedly had much to do with causing that absorption of the supernatural into the order of nature which was one of the greatest revolutions in thought that have ever occurred" (p. 31).

[7] Tuveson, p. 31.

Melville was a critical reader of the optimistic advocates of the sublime quest, even as he admired them. He saw in Emerson "a gaping flaw . . . cracked right across the brow."[8] He referred to the English Platonist Browne as a "crack'd archangel."[9] Moreover, Melville also found in these English Platonists, and in Milton, whose *Paradise Lost* he was reading with great admiration during this same period, a traditional theodicy which stood in absolute contradiction to the optimistic theodicy of Emerson and Carlyle. According to this older theodicy, man is separated infinitely from God; his nature is defective, and he cannot bridge that infinite distance by his own efforts. Fully half of creation is given over to the dominion of Satan, a dominion broken only by the intercession of God in Christ. A seventeenth-century writer put the matter succinctly, saying that if Christ's divinity is denied, "the world is given up to the government of the Devil."[10] Burke similarly emphasizes the importance of Christ, implying that the incarnation of the Deity is the distinguishing attribute of the true religion, which must speak of love as well as fear: "Before the christian religion had, as it were, humanized the idea of the divinity, and brought it somewhat nearer to us, there was very little said of the love of God" (p. 70). Despite Burke's assertion elsewhere that the apprehension of the sublime admits us into the counsels of the Almighty, he is clear here that comprehension of the love of God is not accessible in the realm of the sublime. In the earlier writers, and in Burke, evil is very real, and there is much which is concerned with the "demonism of the world." Burke praises the sublime effect of a number of passages which he quotes from Milton's *Paradise Lost,* passages which concern Satan and "the universe of death" which is his dominion. Many of his own specific examples of the sublime belong to the demonic.

In *Moby-Dick* Melville restores 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

[8] Davis and Gilman, p. 79. Melville continues, "It was, the insinuation, that had he lived in those days when the world was made, he might have offered some valuable suggestions." It seems very likely from this that the flaw Melville saw was Emerson's confidence in the god-like, perfectible powers of man. Melville also associates Emerson with Browne: "Lay it down that had not Sir Thomas Browne lived, Emerson would not have mystified" (p. 78).

[9] Sealts, p. 16.

[10] Quoted by Helen P. Trimpi, "Melville's Use of Demonology and Witchcraft in *Moby-Dick*," *Journal of the History of Ideas,* XXX (Oct.–Dec., 1969), 544.

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 powers 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 on the one hand, and with 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 defense for "the hellfire in which the whole book is broiled."[11]

Melville associates the sublime in *Moby-Dick* with all the machinery of demonology and witchcraft.[12] 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 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

[11] Referring to *Moby-Dick* in a letter to Hawthorne, Melville says that it is not yet finished, "though the hell-fire in which the whole book is broiled might not unreasonably have cooked it all ere this. This is the book's motto (the secret one),—Ego non baptiso in nomine—but make out the rest yourself." (Davis and Gilman, p. 133).

[12] Trimpi, pp. 543–562. I follow throughout Trimpi's account of Melville's use of demonology and witchcraft in *Moby-Dick*.

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 théistes,* "Notre religion est aussi ancienne que le monde." Elsewhere he said, "Un déiste est de la religion d'Adam, de Seth, de Noe."[13] 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.

The attributes of Moby Dick, the demonic grand god of Ahab and his crew, are the attributes of the god of the deists. The deist god is the god found in all religions, especially the oldest. Likewise, the whale, Ishmael says, is the god found in all religions, especially the oldest. Moby Dick's whiteness is a "colorless all color of atheism," signal of "the heartless voids and immensities of the universe"—a striking and critical description of the deist god who is uniformitarian, known in nothing but what is known by all men, and who is exclusively the first cause and Being of an infinite universe. Ahab's demonic baptismal formula cites this God of creation only. This "secret motto" of *Moby Dick* appears in fuller form in a sketch labeled "Devil as Quaker" which Melville jotted in a volume of Shakespeare, probably in 1849.[14] The portrayal of Ahab is convincingly of a devil as Quaker; he is implied to be "another phase of Quaker . . . a Quaker with a vengeance" (XVI, 71). The *Pequod* sails from Quaker Nantucket. Historically, the Quakers in America were divided: one party, mystical and pietist; the other, rationalistic and deist. Benjamin Franklin is one who attests to the rationalistic, deistic beliefs which attracted some Quakers, and to the dominance of that party in Nantucket.[15] Ahab may be identified as such a rationalistic, deistic Quaker. The light that obsesses and destroys him, manifest from within, is a rationalistic perversion of the Quaker

[13] Quoted by A. O. Lovejoy, "The Parallel of Deism and Classicism," *Modern Philology,* XXIX (Feb., 1932), 289.

[14] Davis and Gilman, p. 133n.

[15] Woodbridge Riley, *American Philosophy: The Early Schools* (New York, n.d.), pp. 240–245.

inner light. Such a rationalistic religion is criticized by Hawthorne in "The Gentle Boy," a story which might well have suggested to Melville the name of his narrator, Ishmael, and perhaps something of his nature. In a passage that Melville marked in his copy of *Twice-Told Tales,* attention is called to "the outlandish name" of the child victim, who replies, "They call me Ilbrahim."[16]

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 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.' "[17] 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.

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 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 Descartian vortices you hover. And perhaps, at mid-day, in the fairest weather, with one half-throttled shriek you drop

[16] Gerhard Friedrich, *In Pursuit of Moby-Dick* (Wallingford, Penn., 1958), p. 30.
[17] Lovejoy, p. 295.

through that transparent air into the summer sea, no more to rise for ever. 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 nonsense! . . . 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."[18]

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 Descartian vortices which have no power to hold it up, into the terrible space between which Descartes himself had likened to deep waters.

In the closing paragraphs of *Moby-Dick,* Melville recapitulates 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:

[18] Davis and Gilman, pp. 130–131.

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 etherial 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).

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.