Contemporary Aesthetics (Journal Archive)

Volume 4 *Volume 4 (2006)* Article 16

2006

The Color of the Sublime is White

Jeffrey Downard
Northern Arizona University, jeffrey.downard@nau.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.risd.edu/liberalarts_contempaesthetics

Part of the Aesthetics Commons

Recommended Citation

Downard, Jeffrey (2006) "The Color of the Sublime is White," *Contemporary Aesthetics (Journal Archive)*: Vol. 4 , Article 16.
Available at: https://digitalcommons.risd.edu/liberalarts_contempaesthetics/vol4/iss1/16

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Liberal Arts Division at DigitalCommons@RISD. It has been accepted for inclusion in Contemporary Aesthetics (Journal Archive) by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@RISD. For more information, please contact mpompeli@risd.edu.

The Color of the Sublime is White

Jeffrey Downard

Abstract
In this paper, I examine Melville's discussion in *Moby Dick* of the whiteness of the whale from the perspective of a Kantian account of the sublime. My aim, in the first instance, is to see if the comparison helps to shed light on Melville's puzzling discussion of the color white and why this color serves to heighten the feeling of being overwhelmed by terror when confronted with something extremely large or powerful. In turn, I intend to use Melville's discussion of whiteness to put pressure on some of the philosophical assumptions behind a Kantian analysis of the sublime. In particular, I hope to show that Melville's account of the war between Captain Ahab and the great white whale can serve as an aesthetic counterexample to the Kantian claim that both generals and war are sublime-but only if the general possesses civic virtue and the war is conducted in a just manner. I will attempt to use this counterexample to challenge the philosophical assumption that the power of reason is the basis of our nobility in the experience of the sublime, for this assumption is behind those contemporary accounts of the sublime that have been motivated by the Kantian analysis. As a result, the argument of this paper is an attempt to offer philosophical support to the efforts of those contemporary artists who, like Robert Motherwell, draw inspiration from Melville's discussion of the color white.

Key Words
aesthetics, sublime, beauty, reason, imagination, Moby Dick, Melville, Kant, morality, humanity

1. Introduction

In a 1952 essay on the American Action Painters, Harold Rosenberg claims that "the American vanguard painter took to the white expanse of the canvas as Melville's Ishmael took to the sea."[1] One of the reasons *Moby Dick* was important for this generation of artists is that the novel engages in an ongoing debate between artists and philosophers concerning the proper understanding of the aesthetics of those things that seem to make us feel small and powerless. Melville's *Moby Dick* is rife with symbolism designed to evoke the experience of the sublime.[2] For example, there is the endless globe-circling of the whaling voyages, the imperturbable depths of the ocean, and the enormous power of the great white whale. In a central chapter entitled "The Whiteness of the Whale," Ishmael, the narrator of the story, uses examples such as the whiteness of the polar bear, the artic albatross, and the great steed of the prairies to explain why it is the color of the whale that evokes in him feelings of terror. The aim of this paper is to compare Melville's literary discussion of the whiteness of the whale with a philosophical analysis of the sublime.

In making this comparison, I intend to draw on a Kantian account of the sublime, and I have a number of reasons for using this account as a framework for the discussion.[3] First, Kant's aesthetics was enormously influential both in philosophical circles and in literary circles during the period when Melville was working as a writer. Second, Melville makes a number of direct references to the Kantian philosophy-including his aesthetics--over the course of the novel. These facts lead me to believe that Melville's many examples of sublimity, and in particular his discussion of the color of the whale, might profitably be read in light of a Kantian account of the aesthetics of the sublime.

In addition to shedding some light on Melville's rather puzzling chapter, I have an additional motive for comparing the discussion of the whiteness of the whale to Kant's analysis of the sublime. I hope to show that certain features of Melville's discussion can be used to raise a philosophical objection to the Kantian account. In particular, Kant argues that it is our rational humanity that enables us to remain undaunted in the face of those things that threaten to overpower us. In Melville's discussion of the whiteness of the whale, it is the fact that the color white simultaneously stands for what is most noble and pure, and at the same time also stands for what is most deadly that is the source of the special terror that Ishmael claims to experience when confronted with Moby Dick. In this paper, I will attempt to show that Melville's account can be used to put pressure on some of the philosophical assumptions behind Kant's account. In turn, these same considerations should give us reason to rethink some of the terms of the contemporary debate about the aesthetics of the sublime-especially those parts of the contemporary debate that have been shaped by Kantian assumptions.[4]

2. The Whiteness of the Whale

Melville's chapter on the whiteness of the whale directly follows a chapter entitled "Moby Dick." In the earlier chapter, Melville tells the reader what the whale symbolizes to Ahab, the captain of the ship and the primary agent behind the hunt for the great white whale. In the latter chapter, Melville tells the reader what the whale symbolizes to Ishmael, a member of the crew who works before the mast and takes his orders from the captain. In order to understand why it is the whiteness of the whale that causes Ishmael such dread, we should start with a brief account of what the whale means to Ahab.

Captain Ahab tells his crew that he is no stranger to the great white whale. In fact, on a previous voyage, they met in deadly combat, the direct result of which was the loss of his leg. Having suffered such a terrible physical loss, Ahab lay for many weeks in delirium as the ship rounded the Horn and headed for home. The narrator of the story tells us that, as Captain Ahab lay in his bed, his "torn body and gashed soul bled into one another; and so interfusing, made him mad."[5] In time, Ahab's madness became concentrated upon the whale. The result was that Ahab now had a "thousand fold more potency" than before.

One might, like Starbuck, the first mate, think that it is more than just madness to seek revenge against a dumb animal such as a whale. After all, it seems preposterous to suppose that Moby Dick acted out of anything other than blind instinct. In his attempt to bind the crew to his end, Ahab explains his purpose in hunting the whale. On Ahab's view, the whale is more than just a dumb brute. On the contrary, all visible things are "pasteboard masks" from behind which some "unknown but still reasoning thing puts forth his features. . . . " If a man is to land a blow against that unknown thing, he must "strike through the mask." Ahab admits that, at times, he thinks there might not be anything behind the mask. Nevertheless, for Ahab, the great white whale stands for "outrageous strength, with an inscrutable malice sinewing it." And this forms the basis of the pact between Ahab and the rest of the crew. Starbuck thinks it is blasphemy to seek vengeance against one of God's creations. But Ahab could care less about such concerns:

> Talk not to me of blasphemy, man; I'd strike the sun if it insulted me. For could the sun do that, then could I do the other; since there is a sort of fair play herein, jealousy presiding over all creation. But not my master, man, is even that fair play. Who's over me? Truth hath no confines. (ch. 36)

Such is the basis of Ahab's madness. Melville reminds us that there is a fine line between the kind of madness that manifests itself as insanity, and madness that exhibits the special powers of genius. For example, in the *Phaedrus*, Plato draws an analogy between the special form of madness that is exhibited in augury and prophecy, and the inspiration that a poet exhibits when giving a beautiful speech.[6] Melville appears to have a similar idea in mind when he explicitly refers to Plato and then draws an analogy between Ahab's madness and his special genius. Ahab's attempt to seek revenge against the supernatural powers that lie behind the mask is analogous to Prometheus's attempt to seek revenge against Zeus. In defiance of Zeus' command not aid human beings, Prometheus has given human beings fire and many other gifts. In turn, Zeus has decided to punish Prometheus by chaining him to a rock and commanding Moira to peck at his liver-despite the fact that Zeus and the other Olympians were able to overthrow the Titans only with the help of Prometheus' foresight.[7]

What Moby Dick means to Ahab is the personification of the impersonal powers in nature. The purpose in seeking revenge against these unjust powers is to take the case of man to bar. Insofar as Ishmael has, like the rest of the crew, formed a pact with Ahab, he too is committed to the pursuit of the white whale. But what the whale means to Ishmael is something different from what it means to Ahab. In order to explain why it is the whiteness of the whale that he finds so appalling, he begins with a list of examples of the more noble things that white has come to symbolize. Generally speaking, whiteness tends to enhance the beauty of natural objects. For example, the beauty of pearls, marble and japonica is, in each case, enhanced by their white color.

In many different cultures, at many different times, white has been emblematic of nobility. For example, in the sixteenth century the kings in the capital of Burma used the title "Lord of the White Elephants" as a symbol of their royalty, and the modern kings of Siam employed the same animal as their symbol. The flag of the Hanoverian kingdom bears the figure of a snow-white horse, and white was the imperial color of the Austrian empire. It is the color of the innocence of the virgin bride, a symbol of joy for the Romans, of honor for the American natives, and of justice in the legal systems of Europe. The white forked flame was held to be holiest by the Persian fire worshippers, in Greek mythology Jove was made incarnate in the form of a snow-white bull and, in Catholic ritual white robes are worn by priests and given to those who are redeemed.

What Ishmael finds puzzling is that the very same color that evokes such feelings of joy, innocence, holiness, and justice, also serves to heighten the feelings of terror when conjoined with something terrible. Once again, Ishmael starts with a list of examples, including the whiteness of the polar bear and the great white shark. Why, asks Ishmael, does the color of these animals serve to heighten the terror we experience when we imagine confronting such dangerous creatures? There is something about the ghastly color of the bear and the shark that makes them seem more terrible than other dangerous creatures, such as the Bengal tiger. Consider the arctic albatross, made famous in Coleridge's "Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner," or the white steed of the prairies. The former stands to the seafaring man as the latter stands to the plains Indians. For both, they are the object of the highest reverence and awe. In the case of the white steed, the feeling of awe cannot be separated from the fact that the horse appeared to the Indian as a divine creature.

Even in cases where there does not appear to be any sense in which the object is divine, there is something about the color white that heightens the experience of terror. For example, the appearance of an albino man is shocking to the eye. What is more, it is the pallor of the skin of a dead person that we find especially appalling. This feeling of dread is something we attribute to all of our ghosts and phantoms-witness the pale color of the horse that the figure of Death rides in the Apocalypse.

Ishmael asks how we are to account for the fact that the color white serves to intensify the feeling of terror in the experience of those things we find most terrible. Why, he asks, does the passing of a white friar or white nun evoke such dread on the part of an unsophisticated Protestant? Why does the white tower of London affect the imagination more strongly than the Byward tower or even the Bloody tower? Why do the White Mountains of New Hampshire affect our imaginations more strongly than the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia? Ishmael concedes that it may not be possible to analyze the cause of these heightened feelings of terror and dread. Nevertheless, he insists that there is something about the color white that serves to heighten these feelings.

Regardless of the fact that Ishmael thinks it is difficult to provide an analysis of such experiences, I propose to examine his comments about the whiteness of the whale from the perspective of Kant's aesthetics of the sublime. My aim in this next section is to focus on those parts of Kant's analysis that might help to shed light on Melville's discussion of whiteness. After we have managed to put enough of Kant's account on the table before us, I propose to put the Kantian account to work and attempt to see what might be beneath the surface of Melville's discussion of the whiteness of the whale.

3. Kant's Aesthetics of the Sublime

In the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant separates the discussion of the sublime into two parts. In the first part, he gives an account of what he calls the mathematically sublime, and in the second part he gives an account of what he calls the dynamically sublime. The former deals with the type of experience that is occasioned by things that appear to be absolutely large, such as mountains, oceans, and the starry skies. The latter deals with the type of experience that is occasioned by those things that appear to be absolutely powerful, such as large overhanging rocks, lightning and tornados.

The first point Kant makes is that the experience of the sublime is initially painful.[8] Later, he tells us that the basis of the feeling of pain is due to a failure on our part. When we have an aesthetic experience of something that is extremely large, such as the ocean, or very powerful, such as a storm, in which our imagination is under a constraint to bring the manifold of the experience into totality. Reason imposes the demand for totality, but it is up to the imagination to meet that demand in an aesthetic judgment. The problem is that the imagination isn't up to the task. When the imagination attempts to bring the manifold of the presentation of an object, such as the ocean, into totality, it finds that it is unable to meet the demand. The ocean is just too large, and the storm is just too powerful for the imagination to bring the manifold of experience together into unity. In a sense, the ocean appears to be infinitely large, and the storm appears to be infinitely powerful.

Kant maintains that, strictly speaking, it is not the object that is sublime. (pp. 107-113) In the first place, it would be a mistake to say that many of the objects that give rise to an experience of the sublime are infinite in size or power. For example, we can experience the pyramids of ancient Egypt as sublime even though the pyramids are finite in height. In order to experience such an object as sublime, we must view the object from the proper perspective. If we stand too close to the pyramids, we can see only a small part of a single block. If we stand too far away, the pyramids as a whole seem quite small on the horizon. However, when we view them from the proper perspective, the sheer size of the pyramids seems to overwhelm our powers of apprehension.

Objects that appear to be absolutely large, such as the oceans and mountains, make us feel insignificantly small in comparison. As such, the feeling of pain that we experience when we are unable, using our imagination, to take it all in, gives rise to a feeling of insignificance, or despair. Objects that appear to be absolutely powerful, such as a storm or a flash of lightning, make us feel powerless in comparison. It is in the experience of the dynamically sublime that we most often feel fear. In the face of the overwhelming power of the storm, we experience the fear that there is nothing we can do to achieve our human goals. In effect, we seem powerless to accomplish our aims.

Kant is careful to point out that in cases where we are overwhelmed with real fear, such as when we find ourselves caught in the middle of a life threatening storm, it is difficult to experience the storm as sublime. (pp. 119-123) The reason is that our judgment of the power of the storm is made in relation to our real efforts to accomplish our goals, such as the aim of keeping ourselves out of harm's way. In order to preserve the aesthetic effect of such experiences, we must view them from the proper distance. In such cases, we can aesthetically imagine the threat of the powerful storm, but we are not overwhelmed by real fear for life and limb.

If this aspect of the experience were all there was to the sublime, it would be more than just a little puzzling as to why we find ourselves drawn to such aesthetic experiences. Kant's answer is that there is more to such an aesthetic judgment than just a feeling of dissatisfaction with the powers of the imagination. The inability of the imagination to bring the manifold of appearance into totality serves as a reminder that there is something in us that is not overwhelmed. The basis of our ability to remain undaunted in the face of something that appears absolutely large is our own power of theoretical reason and its idea of infinity. Along similar lines, the basis of our ability to remain undaunted in the face of something that appears absolutely powerful is our power of practical reason and the idea of our moral humanity. According to Kant, the idea of the infinite and the idea of our moral humanity are ideas that have their origins in our powers of reasoning. (pp 124-6) In the first case, the idea of the infinite is something that we are able to grasp in virtue of our capacity to construct a mathematical series for which there is no limit. Or, to take the other case, the idea of the infinite worth of our moral humanity is something that we are able to grasp in virtue of our capacity to impose moral principles on our own conduct.

The primary reason we find the experience of the sublime so attractive is that the initial feelings of repulsion lead us to reflect on the infinite character of our own powers of reasoning. As a result, the initial feelings of pain are converted into feelings of pleasure. The pain we feel when we realize that our imagination is unable to bring the experience into totality leads to a feeling of satisfaction in our power of reason. Upon reflection, the imagination seems limited in its powers, but reason has its own aspect of infinitude. As such, we take pleasure in reflecting upon this comparison between imagination and reason. The finitude of the imagination is counterbalanced by the infinitude of our reason. We are aware that this is the proper relation between the two powers because it is our reason, and not the power of the imagination, that is the basis of our true vocation as moral agents.

For Kant, the differences between the experience of beauty and the experience of the sublime leads us to think of nature in very different terms. In the experience of natural beauty, we take pleasure directly in the object. We have a sense that the natural object seems to possess an underlying beauty that is well proportioned to our power of imagination. It sets our imagination into free play. The unity of the natural object is reflected in the harmony between imagination and reason. The experience of the natural beauty leads us to assume that nature as a whole is well suited for us. In effect, we are led to assume that nature is on our side in our attempt to realize our vocation as moral agents.

In the experience of the sublime, the objects of nature initially lead us to feel pain. We have a sense that the natural object is contra-purposive for our power of imagination. Because the object seems to be absolutely large or powerful and our power of imagination is unable to bring the presentation of the object into totality, we initially have a sense that nature threatens to overwhelm us. The finitude of the imagination in the experience of the sublime leads us to reflect on the powers of reason. Because we are aware that reason has its own ideas of the infinite, including the idea of our moral humanity, the experience of the sublime offers a very different moral education. In the experience of the sublime, we are led to assume that nature is not well suited for us but, morally speaking, we are superior to its power. Despite nature's ability to frustrate our attempt to realize any contingent end that we might pursue, the freedom of our will is not diminished.

4. The Transition from Simple Fear to Terror

Ishmael's discussion of whiteness clearly includes examples that fall within Kant's classification of both the mathematically and the dynamically sublime. The central example of the book--that of the great white whale-is an example that fits within both categories of the sublime. The whale is the largest the whaling men of the Pequod have ever seen. What is more, the whale has a reputation as the most powerful beast that any whaler has ever dared to fight.

If we examine Ishmael's discussion of whiteness from the perspective of Kant's aesthetics of the sublime, a number of points come to the fore. The most striking point is that the whiteness of the polar bear, the snow capped mountains, and the combers on the ocean serve, in each case, to transform the natural feelings of fear into an overwhelming feeling of terror. In Melville's own words, the whiteness is the "intensifying agent" in those terrible things that makes them seem infinitely large and infinitely powerful.[9] This aspect of the experience is precisely what is needed, on Kant's account, to transform the feelings of fear into an aesthetic experience of the sublime. The reason is that something gives rise to an experience of the sublime only if we are capable of seeing it as infinitely large or infinitely powerful.

Like Kant, Melville is careful to point out that this is largely a matter of perspective. For some people, especially those who seem to be relatively immune to an active imagination, the white-capped mountains of the Andes are fearful but they are not terrifying. For example, the native Indians of Peru, who happen to live at the base of those very mountains, may acknowledge the fearful character of the inhuman solitude of those peaks but they do not experience dread at the sight of those mountains. Similarly, a sailor who is approaching land might experience fear at the sight of white breakers. Yet the result of that fear is not a feeling of dread but vigilance in sounding the bottom to make sure that the ship does not end up on those rocks. In both cases, the native Indians and the sailors have a healthy fear of those things that might cause them harm but they do not experience terror.

This is very different from the experience of the sailor who is out at sea, far from any shore, who sees a midnight sea of milky whiteness. In such a case, the sailor does experience terror. But it is not clear why the sailor feels such dread. Ishmael's explanation is that the whiteness of the deep sea at night is like a "shrouded phantom" that is as "horrible to him as a real ghost." (ch. 42) Ishmael's contention is that there is something about the whiteness of such objects that transforms our experience into a feeling of terror. My suggestion is that the whiteness of the object activates our imagination and makes it seem as if the object were infinite. Consequently, there is something about the whiteness of the artic albatross, and the whiteness of great steed of the prairies, and the whiteness of Moby Dick that makes them seem infinite and beyond the abilities of our imagination to comprehend.

This is precisely the point the Ishmael makes at the end of the chapter when he tries to answer the question of why the color white serves to intensify such experiences. His initial suggestion is that the indefiniteness of the color serves to shadow forth "the heartless voids and immensities of the universe" (ch. 42). Besides that fact that the Milky Way is white, what is it about the color white that might serve to heighten the feeling of infinity in an experience?

Ishmael considers three possibilities. First, the infinity of the universe is a reminder of our own finitude. As such, it is a constant reminder that, at some point in the future, each and every one of us will suffer annihilation. Second, the color white is, at one and the same time, both the lack of all color and the concrete manifestation of all colors. As a consequence, the color white seems to be a "dumb blankness, full of meaning." Third, he asks us to consider the theory of the natural philosophers, such as Locke and Kant, that all colors are merely secondary properties that do not inhere in substances themselves. On this view, all colors are merely properties that are laid onto the objects of our experience as they appear to us in perception. Consequently, all colors are but "deceits" and "all deified Nature absolutely paints like the harlot." (ch. 42)

Taking these three points together, they make the universe as a whole appear palsied like a leper. We can help to draw out the significance of Ishmael's conclusion if we consider one of the central differences between the beautiful and the sublime. In the experience of the beautiful, it is the underlying unity of the appearance of the object that draws our attention. The beauty of the rose consists in the relation among all of its parts-its petals, stem, leaves, and odor-such that all of the parts come together to form a whole. In an aesthetic evaluation of the beauty of the rose, each of the parts seems to us to be just the way it ought to be in relation to the large whole. The same is true of works of fine art, such as the beauty of a poem or a novel.

The experience of the sublime, on the other hand, is markedly different. In the experience of the overwhelming size of the mountains, or the overwhelming power of a storm, it is not the underlying unity of the objects that comes to mind. Rather, we experience the sublime especially in those things that seem to exhibit a lack of order. According to a Kantian account of the sublime, it is the chaos of the experience that makes it seem like an abyss for our power of imagination. These are the same features that Ishmael tries to focus our attention upon in the conclusion of the chapter. The color white seems to remind us that, despite the beautiful appearances on the outside, there is an underlying lack of order beneath the surface.

5. An Objection to the Kantian Account

In this section, my aim is to use points from Melville's discussion of the whiteness of the whale as a basis for making an objection to the Kantian analysis of the sublime. In order to explain the point of the objection, let us consider two observations that Kant makes about the experience of the sublime. According to Kant, a judgment of sublimity should lead us to attribute a higher rank to the general over the statesman. Unlike the statesman, who stands for the pursuit of political interests and the art of making compromises, the general stands for courage and strength. In a similar fashion, Kant also maintains that a judgment of sublimity should lead us to attribute a higher rank to war than peace. The reason is that war brings out what is most noble in human beings. It forces us to rise up above our personal interests and to fight for a higher cause. Peace, on the other hand, tends to enhance a merely commercial spirit.

It seems clear that Melville's discussion of Captain Ahab is designed to highlight a similar point. Captain Ahab is the general of the ship who is leading his troops into battle against the army of the sperm whale. This army of whales is led by the most powerful of all sperm whales--Moby Dick. Unlike the leaders of commerce back in New Bedford who are primarily concerned about making money, Ahab is committed to a higher purpose. In seeking revenge against the great white whale, his aim is to take the case of man to the bar.

Those who stay on land and those who run from the sea to port seek safety and comfort. But Ishmael maintains that the port is pitiful (ch. 23). Those who retreat to the shore from the howling storm crawl, like worms, back to safety of land. Only those who head out to the open sea are in a position to seek the highest truth, because Ishmael maintains that "all deep earnest thinking is but the intrepid effort of the soul to keep open the independence of her sea, while the wildest winds of heaven and earth conspire to cast her on the treacherous, slavish shore." Ahab exemplifies the difference between these two attitudes when he tells the first mate that he does not care for the riches to be had from a successful whaling voyage. The only thing aim that matters on his voyage is waging war against Moby Dick.

Up to this point, Kant and Melville seem to agree that an evaluation of the sublimity of each case should lead us to rank the general over the statesman and war over peace. At this point, however, the agreements end, because Kant adds two qualifications to his assessment of the general and war. On Kant's account, we can only hold the general in high esteem if he is courageous in battle, and also capable of being civil when in society. The general must constrain his actions by the laws of the land and respect the rights of the people. In a similar vein, Kant maintains that we can only hold war in high esteem if it governed by a just cause. (p. 122)

The qualifications in Kant's estimation of the sublimity of both generals and wars are grounded in philosophical commitments in his underlying analysis. As we have seen, Kant maintains that the basis of our nobility in the face of things that would appear to overwhelm us is our power of reason. In the case of the dynamically sublime, he insists it is our moral humanity that is the root of our nobility. When the whalers of the Pequod go to war against the Moby Dick, they face an enemy that possesses a power that appears to be limitless. In comparison to the power of the whale, the strength of single human being, or even the combined strength of the entire crew, seems miniscule.

According to Ishmael, it is the whiteness of the whale that gives rise to special feelings of terror. More terrible than the size of the whale, and more terrible than its apparent strength, the whiteness of the whale infuses it with aspects of infinitude. Instead of confronting a merely mortal whale, they go to battle against a spiritual power that symbolizes the abyss of death and annihilation. What inspires them to pursue such a formidable enemy is Ahab. As the captain of the ship, it was his intention to pursue the whale, and he was the agent who inspired the members of the crew to form a pact and head into battle.

On the one hand, the commitment of whalers to follow their general into war seems to fit the terms of Kant's analysis quite nicely. After all, they are following a general and not a statesman, and they are leaving the peace and security of land and deliberately choosing to head onto the open sea and to engage in war with Moby Dick. In general terms, the war against the whale clearly symbolizes a presumption that man faces a hostile nature. In this case, the crew of the Pequod is inspired to challenge nature's mastery over us. By engaging the whale in battle, they assert their independence from nature. On the other hand, Ahab is not a model of civic virtue, and the war does not appear to be a model of a just fight. As Starbuck maintains, the decision to purse Moby out of a desire for revenge cannot be justified. When Ahab and Moby Dick engaged in battle some years earlier, the whale took Ahab's leg. However, the whale is nothing more than a dumb brute that acted from natural instincts. It was not a vengeful creature acting from a capricious impulse to harm Ahab. As such, it is blasphemy against nature itself to seek revenge against the whale for the loss of Ahab's leg.

Ahab does not accept Starbuck's argument. What Moby Dick means to Ahab is the personification of the impersonal powers in nature. The purpose in seeking revenge against these unjust powers is to take the case of man to bar. In taking the case of man to the bar, Ahab represents the queenly powers of the individual personality:

> No fearless fool now fronts thee. I own thy speechless, placeless power; but to the last gasp of my earthquake life will dispute its unconditional, unintegral mastery in me. In the midst of the personified impersonal, a personality stands here. Though but a point at best; whencesoe'er I came, wheresoe'er I go; yet while I earthly live, the queenly personality lives in me,

> and feels her royal rights. But war is pain and
> hate is woe.[10]

Ahab is driven by a desire for revenge. But the battle against the whale is a battle against the destructive forces of nature. The point of the battle is that Ahab refuses to be overwhelmed by the apparent magnitude of such forces. The strength of will necessary to challenge the whale is symbolic of the strength necessary to assert the nobility of human beings in the face of the impersonal and destructive powers of nature.

I would like to point out that, according to the narrator, Ahab was shaped by his first encounter with the whale. When Ahab lunged at Moby Dick from his whaling boat with nothing more than a knife in his hand, and the whale tore his leg from his body, it was as if Ahab had been struck by lightning. The marks of this transformation are the shock of white hair that was left on Ahab's head and the white peg leg that was carved from the bone of the whale. The first battle with the whale and the loss of Ahab's leg was an event that transformed Ahab from a mere captain of a whaling ship into a general ready to lead his troops in a prolonged war against Moby Dick. The result is that Ahab himself comes to personify the nobility of human beings in the face of the destructive forces of nature. In effect, he stands for the very thing that, in Melville's opinion, is necessary for us to maintain our strength in the face of what appears sublime.

What is necessary is not moral virtue. That is illustrated by Starbuck's loss of virtue at the end of the novel. As the first mate of the ship, he felt a moral obligation to save the crew from the blasphemy of the captain. At one point, Starbuck had the opportunity to avert disaster by taking a gun from Ahab's quarters and seizing control of the ship. But, in the end, Ahab's will proved to be too strong for Starbuck's virtuous character. Ishmael cautions us against judging Starbuck too harshly for his failure of virtue. Despite the fact that Starbuck is put forward as the very model of virtue and prudence, we should never have expected the moral character of a person such as Starbuck to withstand the strength of will of a person such as Ahab.

One might accept this point and insist--contrary to the reading I am attempting to develop--that I am judging Ahab too harshly when I point to the amorality of his character and actions. It is clear that Ahab challenges the type of Christian morality that for which Starbuck stands as a model. But one might suggest it is quite possible that Ahab stands for a different type of moral commitment.[11] The reason that I reject such a reading is that Ahab himself maintains that his pursuit of the whale is beyond the requirements of morality. For instance, he agrees that "there is a sort of fair play that governs all of creation," but in the same passage he insists that no even that fair play stands over him.

Despite the fact that Ahab is not a model of civic virtue, and despite the fact that his war against the whale is not a model of a just war, I believe that Ahab's and the war both exemplify the experience of the sublime.

What argument do I have against the Kantian assumption? The main argument I have to offer is the following: By the terms of Kant's own analysis, the main proof in such a dispute about the aesthetics of the sublime is the very aesthetic judgments that we make. When I evaluate Captain Ahab and the war against Moby Dick in aesthetic terms, I find them to be sublime-despite Kant's reservations. In turn, I suggest that you judge them for yourself.

6. Melville and Contemporary Art

In this final section, I would like to examine one lesson that we might draw from Melville's account of the whiteness of the whale for contemporary discussions of art. Some contemporary discussions of Melville's literary art reveal a bias towards the Kantian assumptions. For instance, a number of interpreters assume that the figure of Ahab should be used primarily to make a political point. In their eyes, Ahab is an immoral leader who issues commands as a political despot.[12] He is a dictator who rules his ship with an iron fist, never giving a thought to the safety of the crew or even the financial interests of the owner's of the ship. On a Kantian analysis of the sublime, Ahab fails to represent the nobility of human beings because, as a leader, he fails to exhibit the proper civic virtues.

The primary suggestion I want to make for the contemporary discussion of the sublime is that it is a mistake to unduly constrain our aesthetic evaluations by moral or political concerns. The suggestion I am making has implications for the larger debate about the proper relationship between art, on the one hand, and moral and political interests, on the other. Many assume that art fails to serve its proper function if it does not make the proper moral or political point. I believe that such an attitude is grounded on a mistake. Like Kant, I believe that an appreciation of the beauty of both nature and fine art requires that we set aside any interests-including and moral or political interests--that might unduly bias our judgments.

Where I disagree with the Kantian account is in the analysis of the sublime. It is a mistake, I believe, to place undue moral constraints on the experience of the sublime. Like nature, art can give rise to an experience of the sublime even if it represents powers that are wholly destructive and threaten our very existence. Despite what Kant claims, it is not necessary for a work of art, such as a literary depiction of a whaling captain, to portray the characters as having civic virtue in order for us to find the art sublime.

Robert Motherwell, who explicitly cites Moby Dick as a major inspiration for his own painting, states that, like Melville, the painters of his generation express an attitude that is "rebellious, individualistic, unconventional, sensitive, irritable . . . . This attitude arose from a feeling of being ill at ease in the universe. . . . Nothing as drastic an innovation as abstract art could have come into existence, save as consequence of a most profound, relentless, unquenchable need." This feeling is similar to the "damp drizzly November in his soul" that Ishmael describes at the outset of the voyage. In an introduction to a 1950 exhibition, Motherwell describes his art in the following terms.

> The chemistry of pigments is interesting: ivory

> black, like bone black, is made from charred bones or horns, carbon black is the result of burnt gas, and the most common whites . . . are made from lead, and are extremely poisonous on contact with the body. Sometimes I wonder, laying in a great black stripe on the canvas, what animal bones (or horns) are making the qualities as no painter could except in his medium. . . . The black grows deeper and deeper, darker and darker before me. It menaces me like a black gullet. . . . Only love-for painting, in this instance-is able to cover the fearful void. A fresh white canvas is the void, as is the poet's sheet of blank white paper. But look for yourselves, I want to get back to my white washed studio. If the amounts of black and white are right, they will have condensed into quality, into feeling.[13]

The point Motherwell is making is directly analogous to the point Melville makes in his discussion of the whiteness of the whale. The color white serves to heighten the feelings of terror we experience in the face of something that is large and threatening. The color transforms ordinary feelings of fear into the terror that is indicative of the sublime. My suggestion is that, in judging the sublimity of such works of art, we should hesitate before imposing any undue moral or political constraints on our evaluation. After all, the ability of art to help us confront the "fearful void" may depend upon its independence from just such constraints.

Endnotes

[1] Elizabeth Schultz, *Unpainted to the Last: Moby-Dick and Twentieth-Century American Art* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, c1995).

[2] Herman Melville, *Moby Dick; or, The Whale* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

[3] Parenthetical references to Kant's third *Critique* are to the academy pagination. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner Pluhar (Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett Pub. Co., 1987).

[4] See, for example, Jean François Lyotard, *Lessons on the Analytic of the sublime: Kant's Critique of Judgment*, [sections] 23-29 (Stanford, Calif. : Stanford University Press, 1994) and Paul Guyer, *Kant and the Experience of Freedom : essays on aesthetics and morality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

[5] Melville, *Moby Dick*, ch. 41.

[6] Plato, *The Symposium and the Phaedrus* (New York, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993), pp. 85-139.

[7] Melville, *Moby Dick*, ch. 42.

[8] Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, pp. 114-119.

[9] Melville, *Moby Dick*, ch. 42.

[10] Melville, *Moby Dick*, ch. 119.

[11] I would like to thank two referees for pressing the objection that is considered in this paragraph.

[12] See, for example, Christoper Stern, *Sounding the Whale* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1996), and Julian Markels, *Melville and the Politics of Identity* (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois, 1993).

[13] See the helpful discussion of Melville's influence on Motherwell's art in Elizabeth Schultz, *Unpainted to the last*, 129-160.

Jeffrey Downard

Associate Professor

Department of Philosophy

Northern Arizona University

Jeffrey.Downard@nau.edu

Published February 23, 2006