



## On Reading with an Equal Eye: *Melville and Pope*

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**M***oby-Dick* summons readers for its tale of tragic obsession. “Loomings” as a first-chapter title serves as augury, but Ishmael’s opening jests on coffins and funerals invite our laughter. The comically inclined might later sense a submergence in a recurring question: “What then remains?” It surfaces at wide intervals, perhaps innocently, perhaps like a gregarious humpback out spy-hopping.

Ishmael asks “What then remains?” in “Cetology” (Ch. 32) and “What then remained?” in “Pitchpoling” (Ch. 84), while Starbuck offers “What, then, remains?” in his “Musket” meditation (Ch. 123) (Longman *MD* 138, 329, 450). The recurrence raises a wonder: Can it possibly hint at a couplet from Canto V of Alexander Pope’s *The Rape of the Lock*?

What then remains but well our Pow’r to use,  
And keep good humor still whate’er we lose? (Pope 238)

The possible stitch of a Pope thread is startling. Maimed, raging Ahab comes first to mind, then former schoolmaster Ishmael, who in his keen transition to kicked-about sailor remained buoyed for a happier end-beginning partly because he kept good humor, taking to the sea as his “substitute for pistol and ball” (Longman *MD* 21). But for this comic view to gain credence, we need proof that Melville, who fancied he had “written a wicked book” (NN *Corres* 212), also knew and used the rhapsode weavings of mock-heroic Pope.

Affirmation comes by way of doubt when, from distant tranquility, Ishmael recalls a little treatise he once composed on eternity; when, “after six cups of hot tea in my thin shingled attic, of an August noon,” he saw in a mirror certain undulations round his heady atmosphere.

And so, through all the thick mists of the dim doubts in my mind, divine intuitions now and then shoot, enkindling my fog with a heavenly ray. And for this I thank God; for all have doubts; many deny; but doubts or denials, few along with them, have intuitions. Doubts of all things earthly, and intuitions of some things heavenly; this combination makes neither believer nor infidel, but makes a man who regards them both with equal eye (Longman *MD* 334).

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*Equal eye.* The misty passage recalls Chapter 81: where Flask's cruel lance bursts the piteous ulcer of a maimed, dying whale; a blind whale with no audible voice, just spouting "affrighted moisture" as it "impotently flapped with his stumped fin, then over and over slowly revolved like a waning world; turned up the white secrets of his belly; lay like a log, and died" (321).

In *An Essay on Man*, Pope writes:

Oh blindness to the future! Kindly giv'n,  
That each may fill the circle mark'd by Heav'n:  
Who sees with equal eye, as God of all,  
A hero perish, or a sparrow fall,  
Atoms or systems into ruin hurl'd,  
And now a bubble burst, and now a world. (Pope 507)

Pope's "equal eye" embraces suffering in all life, and his equal vision also suggests that "levels of life" is a misnomer used by *homo hubris*. Each creature's world is a bubble doomed to burst, a vision transformed by Ishmael: On the first-day's chase he looks on the spewed bodies and snapped wreckage of Ahab's boat. On the waves "helpless Ahab's head was seen, like a tossed bubble which the least chance shock might burst" (Longman MD 482). On the third day, as the Pequod goes down, Ishmael alone escapes the dark descent: "Round and round, then, and ever contracting towards the button-like black bubble at the axis of that slowly wheeling circle, like another Ixion I did revolve. Till, gaining that vital centre, the black bubble upward burst" (500).

Readers of *The Rape of the Lock* will also recall the fifty Sylphs chosen to protect Belinda in Canto 2, which Melville includes in "Extracts" (Longman MD 14), and their dire fate if they should fail their charge, the last verdict most terrible:

Or as *Ixion* fix'd, the Wretch shall feel  
The giddy Motion of the whirling Mill,  
In Fumes of burning Chocolate shall glow,  
And tremble at the sea that froaths below! (Pope 226)

A chance glance at Pope's *Essay on Man* then reveals:

Laugh where we must, be candid where we can;  
But vindicate the ways of God to man (Pope 504).

The couplet transforms Milton's invocation in *Paradise Lost* to "assert Eternal Providence, / And justify the ways of God to men" (PL 1. 25-26; Milton 9)—a theme that weighs heavily on Ahab, more lightly on Ishmael, whose contrary vision recalls the whale's side vision as Ishmael observes in Chapter 74. Human eyes face forward, but the whale's lashless eyes are on either side of the head,

and “you may fancy, for yourself, how it would fare with you, did you sideways survey objects through your ears” (Longman *MD* 297).

Imagine Ahab as left eye: he wants to strike through the mask covering “naught beyond” and “inscrutable malice” (Longman *MD* 159). Ishmael as right eye faces his own vortex of horrors but is more accepting, more reconciled to “the problem of the universe revolving in me” (153). Yet the mystical body of Ahab prevails in the god-bullied *Pequod*: “The crew, man, the crew! Are they not one and all with Ahab, in this matter of the whale? See Stubb! he laughs!” (159). And so the finest eyes on board—the doubloon-claiming captain and the cheerfully spent whaler—plunge like blind fate into the masterless Pacific.

The “equal eye” and Ixion passages confirm Pope’s influence, and the vindicating couplet underscores the lighter vein in Pope’s worldview: tiny drops of the Pierian Spring amid lighter currents and eddies in an otherwise solemn tragedy, where Ahab rants against the once-revered lightning: “Oh! thou clear spirit of clear fire . . . I now know that thy right worship is defiance” (Longman *MD* 443). Ahab’s rage feels more Satanic than serene, recalling the fallen Bringer of Light amid the fiery floods and whirlwinds, claiming it is “Better to reign in hell” (*PL* l. 263; Milton 16). Such defiance cannot be voiced in a “clear spirit,”<sup>1</sup> though the phrase fits Ishmael as he sits becalmed and becharmed amid the Grand Armada, or when galvanized by the cadence of waves from the dreamy mast-head.

Ahab is enraged at having been “dismasted,” but this raging captain, hailed earlier for his humanities (Longman *MD* 87), displays his suffering sympathies most clearly when, late in the chase, he limps aboard the *Enderby* to laugh at himself and Captain Boomer, who also lost a limb to Moby Dick:

“Aye, aye, hearty! let us shake bones together!—an arm and a leg!—an arm that never can shrink, d’ye see; and a leg that never can run. Where did’st thou see the White Whale?—how long ago?” (387)

The questions yank Ahab from his humped-and-bowed humor. Soon off, sundered from Starbuck’s eyes, Ahab is again blinded by longing to strike through Moby Dick’s mask, his resolve heedless of any call for the felicities of the girl-bride he “wedded past fifty” (476, 87).

And so in the cosmic scene—“beholding the white depths of the milky way” (Longman *MD* 184)—the rape of Ahab’s leg seems as trifling as Belinda’s much-loved, much-tendered, vilely dis severed lock of hair: “Oh hadst thou, cruel!” “And Screams of Horror rend th’ affrighted Skies” (Pope 237, 231). If these poetic alarms seem profane beside “the sharp shooting pains in his bleeding stump” (Longman *MD* 87), Ahab’s apostrophe to the corpusants invites it. The maimed orphan cries for answers on his unknown mother: “Oh,

cruel! what has thou done with her!” (444). The losses to Belinda and Ahab are piercing and maddening, yet ultimately comic, though none but “Poetic Eyes” (Pope 241) would launch such sunderings to the starry spheres.

The wary reader must also recall that the “good Humour” preachment gains “no Applause” in Pope’s mock-epic, spoken as it is by a Dame whom another styles a Prude. Melville as artist might see Stubb, who vowed to “go to it laughing” (Longman *MD* 165), keep that vow by gracing a final grin at the grinning whale (498), but he could never reduce the Pequod tragedy to a dismissive couplet. Then again, his good-natured narrator might hide a Pierian joke above the waves, as a whale thrice-breaching in the wide-ranging seas.

### Note

<sup>1</sup>Cf. “Lycidas”: “Fame is the spur that the clear spirit doth raise / (That last infirmity of noble mind)” (ll. 70-71; Milton *Complete Poetry* 103).

### Works Cited

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