

The World of Action: On the Aesthetic Style of Moby-Dick and Melville's Anxiety of Modernity

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Abstract

With its unique "anti-form" aesthetic style, *Moby-Dick* constructs "the world of action." This literary phenomenon is manifested not only in the novel's integration and innovation of diverse genres—scientific knowledge, drama, opera, political critique, and philosophical essay—but also in its demonstration of Melville's profound reflection on the pursuit of certainty through an argument for abundance. The formation of this aesthetic style is rooted in multiple anxieties embedded in the modernization of nineteenth-century America dominated by "action": interpretive anxiety in confrontation with uncertainty; the experiential writing of "a nation of doers" and the historical anxiety of "the disenchantment of the world"; the "anxiety of influence" in constructing an American voice against the background of European literary traditions; and aesthetic anxiety from the perspective of the Other. Elevating the spirit of action in Western literature into a modern philosophy of life, *Moby-Dick* resonates profoundly with thinkers such as Nietzsche, demonstrating its prophetic vision and intellectual depth beyond its era.

Keywords

Abundance, anxiety, the world of action.

1. Introduction

Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* is widely recognized as one of the greatest novels in American literary history. D. H. Lawrence praised it as "the greatest book about the sea" [1]. The pre-eminence of this work lies not merely in its remarkable literary achievements, but also in its subversive stylistic strategy and creative turn. Accordingly, in-depth research on *Moby-Dick* helps us understand its historical context, explore the internal motivation behind Melville's creative transformation, and ultimately reveal its timeless greatness.

2. Anti-form: The Pursuit of Abundance and Certainty

Superficially, *Moby-Dick* tells an ocean adventure driven by the main plot of "revenge," yet it also reads like a popular-science volume. It adopts a prose tone and incorporates taxonomic knowledge of whales, the history and current conditions of international competition in the whaling industry, and the operational logic of industrial capital.

Nevertheless, Melville's ambition goes far beyond cataloguing knowledge. By employing abundant dramatic dialogues and monologues, he externalizes ideological conflicts into vigorous actions. In *The Quest for Certainty*, Dewey criticizes a millennia-old tradition in Western philosophy: there exists an eternal, immutable, perfect, and definite "reality" or "truth," while the real human world is changeable, contingent, imperfect, and uncertain. Human beings can approach or apprehend that definite realm only through contemplation, meditation, and reasoning. Within this tradition, action is regarded as something inferior and mundane that interferes with pure thinking. Dewey thoroughly subverts this view. He holds that uncertainty constitutes a fundamental condition of human existence, and risks, unknowns, and changes

accompany humanity perpetually. The traditional mode of "contemplation" is in fact an evasion of real-world problems and challenges; genuine certainty originates from human action, exploration, and experimentation [2]. Driven by such a pursuit of certainty, unlike his contemporaries including Hawthorne and Edgar Allan Poe, Melville presents a highly action-oriented world through dramatic and declamatory rhetoric.

Chapters 36–40 are entirely composed in play format, with explicit stage directions such as "Enter Ahab; then the rest" and "Ahab waves with his free hand; all depart, and he returns to his cabin" [3], converting fictional scenes into a Shakespearean theatrical stage. Through conversations among characters—fanatically vengeful Ahab, rational and apprehensive Starbuck, cynical Stubb—Melville efficiently depicts personalities and builds internal conflicts. Collective shouts generate chorus-like effects, creating a dynamic, emotionally charged, and almost carnival-like ritual atmosphere.

Such dramatic quality further evolves into linguistic musicality and operatic traits. Melville produces symphonic grandeur by means of rhythm, repetition, alliteration, and magnificent parallelism. Captain Ahab's lines often resemble operatic arias, where repeated key phrases build a compulsive, hypnotic rhythm:

"I'll chase him round Good Hope, and round the Horn, and round the Norway Maelstrom, and round perdition's flames before I give him up. And this is what ye have shipped for, men! to chase that white whale on both sides of land, and over all sides of earth, till he spouts black blood and rolls fin out." [4]

Repetitions of "round" and "sides" function like accelerating drumbeats, depicting an endless pursuit saturated with paranoid madness. When describing ocean scenery, Melville frequently uses alliteration to reinforce musicality, for instance in Chapter 1, "Loomings":

"There is magic in it. Let the most absent-minded of men be plunged in his deepest reveries—stand that man on his legs, set his feet a-going, and he will infallibly lead you to water." [5]

Alliterative sounds of "m" in magic / men and "p" in plunged / reveries create a soft, meditative cadence; successive "s" and "l" sounds in "stand... set... lead" grant the sentences fluidity and dynamism. Another example reads:

"and like a tireless tide that toils through the trackless Tartarus of Hell..." [6]

Dense "t" alliteration imitates pounding tides, conveying the relentlessness and oppression of pursuit. The following excerpt:

"and rows on rows of ocean white-mares dash themselves against the whale-ship's bows; as if countless herds of sea-horses were flocking to the fold of the forecandle..." [7]

"Rows on rows" and "dash" deliver spectacular visual and auditory impacts. The subsequent simile introduced by "as if" employs "f" alliteration in flocking, fold, and forecandle, evoking the neigh of sea-horses and weaving a symphonic poem of the ocean.

Chapter 119, "The Candles," represents the most operatic passage. Amid tempests, St. Elmo's fire glimmers atop the masts. Starbuck interprets it as a divine omen, whereas Ahab construes it as divine provocation. He roars:

"Oh! thou clear spirit of clear fire, whom on these seas I as Persian once did worship, till in the sacramental act so burned by thee, that to this hour I bear the scar; I now know thee, thou clear spirit, and I now know that thy right worship is defiance. To neither love nor reverence, then, but defy, I pour my final breath!" [8]

Adopting apostrophe to address the fire spirit directly, this passage typifies operatic monologue. The repetitive structure "I now know thee... I now know that..." advances emotions and rhythm in a declarative manner until it reaches a tragic climax, amounting to a written aria.

Beneath the heterogeneous formal surface lie weighty political concerns. The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 aggravated social divisions. As microcosms of society, whalemens, though nominally

free, were bound by contracts, implying blurred boundaries between "free labour" and slavery. Veiled protests scattered in the novel constitute Melville's implicit critique of institutions.

Moreover, *Moby-Dick* is widely acknowledged as a profound philosophical essay. Narrator Ishmael frequently breaks away from the narrative flow to share meditations, doubts, and insights directly with readers. The novel reflects mid-nineteenth-century American debates over ideas and empiricism. Melville exhaustively enumerates empirical materials in cetological chapters and conducts profound speculations in sections such as "The Whiteness of the Whale." Nevertheless, all "ideal whales" drawn from more than one hundred Western cultural citations at the opening—including Hobbes's *Leviathan* and the whale swallowing Jonah in the Bible—as well as "empirical whales" accumulated by whaling practices, prove invalid in the face of the real white whale *Moby-Dick*. Melville reveals that the ultimate outcome of pursuing certainty resides in repeatedly demonstrating and presenting the world's abundance.

Integrating prose, science, drama, opera, politics, and philosophy, the novel forms a tragic epic known as "an encyclopaedia of everything." Such generic hybridity challenges European novelistic conventions represented by Flaubert, who pursued objectivity, precision, and formal balance. Instead, it offers experiences inclusive of abundance and diversity. This aesthetic style of Melville echoes descriptions in Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*: American literature is the literature of democratic ages. Unlike aristocratic-era literature preoccupied with order, rules, science, and art, it often neglects, even scorns, formal refinement; its style may appear disorderly, verbose, and rambling [9]. This "anti-form" aesthetic style arises from complicated driving forces.

3. Anxiety of Meaning: Generative Motivations behind the "Anti-form" Aesthetic Style

Apart from its unique aesthetic achievements in content and form, *Moby-Dick* bears an extra interpretive subtitle: *The Whale*. Almost all of Melville's full-length novels carry comparable subtitles, for example *Pierre*; or, *The Ambiguities*, *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade*, *Typee: A Peep at Polynesian Life*, and *Omoo: A Narrative of Adventures in the South Seas*. This phenomenon is by no means incidental. It embodies anxiety about, and resistance to, "semantic indeterminacy."

Melville foresaw that *Moby-Dick* departed from previous sea-voyage writings. He feared readers might misinterpret it or remain confined to surface plots and overlook its deeper implications. Subtitles thus functioned as his preliminary device to circumscribe scope and guide interpretation. But why did he abandon conventional adventure-romance writing and embrace encyclopaedic comprehensiveness?

In early August 1850, American literary circles witnessed a vital debate: could America produce great writers comparable to Shakespeare [10]? Shortly afterwards, Melville discovered the candour he had anticipated in Hawthorne's works. During fifteen months as Hawthorne's neighbour, they engaged in frequent "ontological discourses," which exerted fundamental influences and prompted substantial revisions to *Moby-Dick*. From the abbreviations "Md" (*Moby-Dick*) and "Ad" (Hawthorne), it is not difficult to see Hawthorne's immense impact. Melville was no longer satisfied with merely narrating maritime adventures. He elevated whaling legends into symbolic narratives transcending phenomenal reality. Symbols such as "whiteness" and "coffin" carry rich cultural metaphors. Protagonists are named after archetypes from the Bible: Ishmael and Ahab. The number of crew members aboard the *Pequod* corresponds to the number of American states at that time. Multinational characters board the ship, and the name *Pequod* itself originates from a massacred Native American tribe, rendering the vessel a symbol of America. Melville deployed symbolism not only to depict visible reality but also to remind readers that beneath appearances lie concealed truths.

Historian Daniel J. Boorstin pointed out insightfully in *The Americans: The National Experience* that America had been a "mobile" civilization since its founding, and the habit of "moving away" was deeply embedded in national character [11].

Far more than literary fantasy, the *Pequod* epitomizes mid-nineteenth-century American maritime expansion. Its U-shaped route across the Atlantic, Pacific, and Indian Oceans ostensibly stems from Ahab's hunt for Moby-Dick. From historical-geographical perspectives, however, this navigation coincides exactly with classic sailing routes of modern Western empires for colonial expansion, resource plunder, and trade monopoly. Connecting America, Europe, Africa, Asia, and Oceania, it condenses the colonially remapped world onto one whaling-ship track. Historical statistics show that by the 1850s, the American whaling fleet contained approximately 735 vessels employing over 70,000 sailors, with an annual output value reaching 10 million US dollars, constituting a cornerstone economy for New England [12]. Whaling ships sailed throughout the Atlantic and Pacific, penetrating the Indian Ocean and Arctic Circle. Ports such as Nantucket and New Bedford served as vital global junctions. Melville's youthful seafaring experience rendered him a firsthand witness to this grand historical movement.

The *Pequod*'s global voyage finds its terrestrial counterpart in America's Westward Expansion. According to statistics of the National Park Service, more than 400,000 migrants travelled along the Oregon Trail between 1841 and 1869 [13]. The 1848 California Gold Rush ignited mania: roughly 80,000 "Forty-Niners" poured into California in 1849 [14], venturing into unknown western territories. Such nationwide adventurous spirit shares identical cultural-psychological structures with Ishmael's compulsion "to go to sea" and Ahab's obsessive chase.

Contemporary "action" was further propelled by technological revolutions. In 1817, the world's first steamboat service opened on the Mississippi River. By 1850, America operated more than 700 inland steamboats. In the same year, national railroad mileage exceeded 14,000 kilometres, ranking first worldwide [15]. Transportation revolutions compressed time-space and reshaped imaginations of speed, distance, and possibility. This dynamic world was fraught with risks yet brimming with opportunities, challenging technological limits and witnessing both exaltation and distortion of the human spirit confronting unknowns. Sensitive to American realities, Melville thereby depicted this highly action-oriented world in fiction.

Within such modernizing processes dominated by action, Melville displayed palpable anxieties. Max Weber's sociological concept "the disenchantment of the world" aptly characterizes Melville's age [16]. Mid-nineteenth-century America underwent violent impacts from industrialization. Scientific rationality and technological advances dismantled monopolistic religious-mythic interpretations of existence; meanings dissipated. Nature on land was increasingly objectified and resource-oriented for human conquest and exploitation. Human beings were compressed into one-dimensional economic agents trapped within utilitarian and efficiency-centred rational cages. Melville articulated profound unease and criticism. In his letter to Nathaniel Hawthorne, he wrote: "Dollars damn me... What I feel most moved to write, that is banned,—it will not pay." [17] He foresaw that the pursuit of money and profit in capitalist industrial civilization evolved into oppressive, dehumanizing forces. Read alongside this statement, *Moby-Dick* reveals Melville's worries and solitude amid modernization. The *Pequod* resembles a pre-modern utopia where sailors coexist with oceans relying on traditional experience, collective labour, and fatalism. Nature has not been fully instrumentalized, and human labour retains solemn and tragic dimensions liberated from profit-chasing imperatives. Through narrator Ishmael, Melville repeatedly yearns for pre-modern lifestyles uncorrupted by instrumental rationality. He longs for a world where meanings have not been entirely appropriated by "utility," where direct, profound bonds persist between humans and nature, and between humans and destiny.

Meanwhile, American modernization gave rise to the "anxiety of influence." British critic Sydney Smith claimed in 1820: "In the four quarters of the globe, who reads an American book?" [18] At that time, American literature lingered under shadows of European traditions, lacking cultural self-confidence. While striving to represent emerging national realities, many writers struggled to break free from imitating European literary masters. Melville's fervent appropriations of Shakespeare, the Bible, and Milton betray such anxiety. He realized American writers urgently needed authentic "American voices," yet could not entirely discard pre-modern discursive frameworks. He drew upon canonical traditions to grant gravity to his works, while aspiring to transcend old-world imaginaries and establish a modern American literature. This tension extends to cultural identity. Melville sailed for livelihood in 1839. Forty-five months at sea exposed him to heterogeneous cultural spaces. In Chapter 24, "The Advocate," he states: "A whale-ship was my Yale College and my Harvard." [19] Aboard ships, he encountered non-Western civilizations, multiethnic populations, and value systems alien to terrestrial society. Eurocentrism, anthropocentrism, and cultural monism were challenged. This "America of the Other" profoundly shaped his worldview. Melville's fiction abounds with portrayals of Pacific-island inhabitants, African-American seamen, and Native Americans. He reflects upon non-Western primitive beliefs, homoerotic intimacies, and non-canonical literary forms: are alternative modes of cognition and existence conceivable? Melville implies that American modernity's inherent richness was being obscured by rigid Puritan doctrines and pragmatist ideologies. Complexity and multiplicity could only be rediscovered through perspectives of the Other. Excessive formal polish signified petrified European literary conventions. To articulate distinct national voices, America ought to dismantle preconceptions about "how novels ought to be written," embracing knowledge and experiences excluded from canonical literary orders.

Accordingly, writing *Moby-Dick* constituted Melville's endeavour to cope with semantic anxieties and identity dilemmas. It embodies the plural complexities of his self-identification situated between pre-modernity and modernity, "Americanness" and "otherness." Melville projected personal entanglements between tradition and modernity, native contexts and alterity into this encyclopaedic epic. Transcending pure maritime-adventure narratives, it evolves into an ontological heroic epic.

4. Ontology of "Action": *Moby-Dick* as a Philosophy of Life

Contrasted with the relatively static "ultra-stable structures" of Chinese civilization and static Christian worldviews, *Moby-Dick* inherits and brings together the age-old "spirit of action" within Western literature. It echoes the dynamic maritime wanderings in *The Odyssey*, Don Quixote's ideal-driven expeditions in the Renaissance, and Faust's ceaseless quest for knowledge and desire. This impulse to define selfhood and explore world boundaries through dynamic pursuits lies deep within Western narrative traditions. The novel constructs a world of action, fully manifesting the dynamic collective unconscious in Western culture. Vitality embedded in Greek culture discharges through carnivals and dances. Melville's "world-view of action" similarly depicts existential urgency and life turbulence.

Nevertheless, Melville's greatness consists not merely in inheritance but in unique representation and transcendence. Drawing on Nietzschean ideas, *Moby-Dick* addresses themes comparable to Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents*. After the Enlightenment, increasingly rationalized societies suppressed primordial life energies, preventing the release of the will to power, which generated what Nietzsche criticized in *On the Genealogy of Morals*: the suppression of "master morality" by "slave morality" [20]. Centring on utility, calculation, compassion, and humility, slave morality, advocated in New Testament Christianity, represses vital energies and locks societies within rigid orders.

Moby-Dick responds to modern dilemmas through maritime-adventure narratives. Following rationalization, Christian slave morality and orderly norms gained predominance. Ahab says to Starbuck: "It was Moby-Dick that stove my leg... I'll chase him round Good Hope, and round the Horn, and round perdition's flames! How now? Will you join me?" [21] This speech and the sailors' responses are stirred by primal passions, manifesting instinctive impulses in the collective unconscious and eruptions of life-will, as if Dionysian carnival rituals were re-enacted upon the ocean. Such release of forces essentially rebels against Enlightenment-rational discourses and evokes deep-seated vital impulses. From slave-morality perspectives, Ahab's revenge is utterly "unprofitable." Yet the novel endorses Old Testament morality: "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth." Sailors follow Ahab just as Sancho follows Don Quixote. They gain nothing measured by rational utility, yet life's value surpasses such calculations. Ahab embodies master morality refusing discipline imposed by slave morality. Rejecting pity, forgiveness, and compromise, he manifests transcendent values of life through seemingly irrational revenge.

Melville thereby insinuates that instrumental rationality and utilitarian order glorified by modernity repress primordial vital energies and creative impulses. His nostalgia for pre-modern sublimity resists individual alienation and homogenizing manipulation in American modernization. Melville implicitly poses a question: has Western modernity embarked on a wrong path? History later validated his worries: repressed vital energies erupted tragically through the First and Second World Wars.

Contemporaneously with Melville, three major life philosophers—Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Bergson—reaffirmed vital energies. In this sense, Moby-Dick achieves profound unintended consonance with their philosophies. Captain Ahab's non-utilitarian, destructive hunt serves as a literary precursor to Nietzsche's "will to power": a tragic impulse transcending survival necessities and pursuing maximal affirmation of life-forces. His roars against thunder and divinity constitute the first literary cry of the "Overman" after "God is dead." With literary intuition, Melville captures core modern predicaments later systematically articulated by Nietzsche and other philosophers: within a world where traditional values collapse, human beings must endow existence with weight through extreme self-initiated actions, even if destruction awaits at the end.

Therefore, Melville's "world of action" elevates the age-old Western literary spirit of action into a philosophical allegory of modern human conditions. Through anti-form stylistic strategies, he responds to contemporary American anxieties and accomplishes literary transcendence. Moby-Dick thus stands both as a product of its age and as a work perpetually transcending temporal confines.

Nonetheless, when reconsidering the multiplicity and complexities of American modernity unveiled by Melville's emphasis on abundance, further reflection is required. While fashioning the Pequod as a floating world of action and a pre-modern ideal space, does Melville inadvertently beautify its intricate entanglements with colonial expansion, global capital, and ecological exploitation? While celebrating pure life-will to counter excessive modern rationality and deliver aesthetic redemption, could such celebration slide towards irrational catastrophes?

5. Conclusion

The enduring value of Moby-Dick lies in its courage to embrace abundance. Instead of simplifying or evading contradictions brought by modernity, Melville transforms these contradictions into artistic power through formal innovations. He creates far more than a novel: he builds a symbolic world accommodating polyphonic voices and plural viewpoints. In this respect, Moby-Dick answers nineteenth-century American cultural predicaments and conducts

eternal explorations of literary possibilities. It demonstrates how literature can maintain aesthetic autonomy while profoundly engaging core questions of its times.

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