

Original Paper

## The Ship and the Sky Hawk: The Bird Image in Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*

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### Abstract

A tracing of the bird image in Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* enriches the novel's climactic vortex scene. Melville's coast and ocean birds, their varied kinds and characteristics, and his use of bird as metaphor prepares the perceptive reader for the Pequod's symbolic helmeting with the savage sky hawk.

When the whaling ship sets out from Nantucket, the reader of *Moby Dick*<sup>1</sup> already knows, in legend, of the island's founding: "In olden times an eagle swooped down upon the New England coast, and carried off an infant Indian in his talons." (14: 63-64)

This rapacious bird image immediately gives way to that of the whaleman Nantucketer who is happily, though precariously, cradled like the landless gull and "out of sight of land, furls his sails, and lays him to his rest, while under his very pillow rush herds of walruses and whales." (14: 64) Yet "a screaming gull flew overhead" as the men on the Pequod "gave three heavy-hearted cheers, and blindly plunged like fate into the lone Atlantic." (22: 105)

Throughout Melville's novel, the bird is often presented in art and metaphor. The

narrator speaks of an engraving in which sea fowls sample delicacies which cling to the back of a whale. (56: 266) Vultures that "hover over the banners of marching regiments in the east" are called to mind by sharks swarming "in a prescient way." (135: 566) Ishmael speaks of the "Catskill eagle in some souls," (96: 425) while Pip chortles "...caw! caw! Ain't I a crow?" (99: 434) Even Ahab artistically converts sparks from Perth's forge into petrels, or "Mother Carey's chickens." (113: 487)

Live black or white birds punctuate the Pequod's journey. "Inscrutable sea-ravens" roost on the ship. (51: 234) White birds, "the gentle thoughts of the feminine air," glide far above "the strong, troubled, murderous thinkings of the masculine sea," (132: 681) or later herald the about-to-surface leviathan, the

birds “wheeling round and round, with joyous expectant cries.” (133: 549) And “gay fowl” are seen “softly feathering the sea” or perched on a lance atop the white whale, their “long tail feathers streaming like pennons.” (133: 548) The albatross, “a regal, feathery thing of unspotted whiteness,” at once is phantom, ruler, archangel (42: 190) and serves as name for the first of nine ships which the Pequod meets. (52: 236) Even the Pequod itself is compared to this bird as, equipped with sails, “like the double-jointed wings of an albatross, the Pequod bore down in the leeward wake of Moby Dick.” (133: 552)

The appearance of the savage sea hawk, long prepared for by Melville’s varied bird images, is signal for climactic action. In the first sea hawk scene, the still-questing Ahab met “the long hooked bill at his head: with a scream, the black hawk darted away with his prize.” (130: 539) This daring thievery of Ahab’s hat prefigures closely the second and final appearance of the hawk, introduced when Starbuck shudderingly spots the aggressive bird high on the main masthead. (135: 567) Fearing for the flag and ship, the mate cries: “Where’s the old man now?” Sky hawk and Pequod battle as Melville concludes his story in poetic circlings:

A sky hawk that tauntingly had followed the main-truck downwards from its natural home among the stars, pecking at the flag, and incommoding Tash-tego there; this bird now chanced to intercept its broad fluttering wing between the hammer and the wood; and simultaneously feeling that ethereal thrill, the submerged savage beneath, in his death-gasp, kept his hammer frozen there; and so the bird of heaven, with archangelic shrieks, and his imperial

beak thrust upwards, and 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, and helmeted herself with it.

Now small fowls flew screaming over the yet yawning gulf; a sullen white surf beat against its steep sides; then all collapsed, and the great shroud of the sea rolled on as it rolled five thousand years ago. (135: 572)

The conclusion echoes and integrates the bird images of the novel. From the skeleton of the infant Indian in Nantucket to the “submerged savage” frozen to the Pequod’s mast in the Pacific, man knows the bird of prey. Vulture-like, the sky hawk “tauntingly had followed” the Pequod’s mast, and began “pecking at the flag,” much like the engraver’s sea-sampling fowl. The image of the lance-rider’s “long tail feathers streaming like pennons” is now merged into flag-bird. The hawk is “incommoding Tashtego there,” as earlier whalers and Ahab found the bird “incommodiously close.” The “ethereal thrill,” of “the bird of heaven, with archangelic shrieks, and his imperial beak thrust upwards,” recalls Melville’s note on the albatross, seen “with a hooked, Roman bill sublime. At intervals, it arched forth its vast archangelic wings, as if to embrace some holy ark. Wondrous flutterings and throbbings shook it.” (42: 190) Now ship and sky hawk together are wrapped as the vanquished warrior in his flag. The vanquished enter the hellish and “masculine sea.”

“A screaming gull” accompanied the Pequod’s Christmas departure from Nantucket. “Now small fowls flew screaming” over the vortex created by the White Whale. Ahab had once cried: “Then hail, for ever hail, O

sea, in whose eternal tossings the wild fowl finds his only rest." (116: 497) In *Moby Dick*, man and the sky hawk, whaling ship and the dream of a conquered White Whale forever lie under the "great shroud of the sea."

Besides heightening the bird images in *Moby Dick*, Melville's final passage perfectly merges language and moment. In the poetry of swirling language which brilliantly parallels the whirlpool of drowning creatures and ship, the tragic yet strongly beautiful world of man as "submerged savage" is eulogized. "His hammer frozen there" on the sunken mast suggest the modern mechanization and

monomania of an Ahab who saw in the main-truck of the Pequod only his cross-roads to the White Whale. The entombment passage's elemental metaphors — the earth of the ship, the air of heaven, the fire of "that ethereal thrill" and "imperial beak" as well as the "flag of Ahab," meet in the vortex of the sea.

Then, again the "Pacific," "the sea rolled on as it rolled five thousand years ago." Whaling man is now gone, and Herman Melville's poetic prose gives way to lesser language. Only an Ishmael is alive to see the sea hawks which finally "sailed with sheathed beaks." (Epilogue: 573)

#### References

- 1) Herman Melville. *Moby Dick or The Whale*. Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern University Press and The Newberry Library, 1988. (Chapter and page references to this text follow quotations given.)