

# ON HERMAN MELVILLE'S "THE BERG (A DREAM)"

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The Berg  
(*A Dream*)

I saw a Ship of martial build  
(Her standards set, her brave apparel on)  
Directed as by madness mere  
Against a stolid Iceberg steer,  
Nor budge it, though the infatuate Ship went down.  
The impact made huge ice-cubes fall  
Sullen, in tons that crashed the deck;  
But that one avalanche was all —  
No other movement save the foundering wreck.

Along the spurs of ridges pale  
Not any slenderest shaft and frail,  
A prism over glass-green gorges lone,  
Toppled; nor lace of trceries fine,  
Nor pendant drops in grot or mine  
Were jarred, when the stunned Ship went down.

[...]

Seals, dozing sleek on sliddery ledges  
Slipt never, when by loftier edges,  
Through very inertia overthrown,  
The impetuous Ship in bafflement went down.

Hard Berg (methought) so cold, so vast,  
With mortal damps self-overcast;  
Exhaling still thy dankish breath —  
Adrift dissolving, bound for death;  
Though lumpish thou, a lumbering one —  
A lumbering lubbard loitering slow,  
Impingers rue thee and go down,  
Sounding thy precipice below,  
Nor stir the slimy slug that sprawls  
Along thy dense stolidity of walls.

Melville's ship, the protagonist of the poem, is easily recognized as representing more than a mere ship. The first two lines give this away as it recalls the entrance of Dalila in Milton's *Samson Agonistes* (1671): "But who is this, what thing of Sea or Land? / [...] / Comes this way sailing / Like a stately Ship / [...] / With all her bravery on, and tackle trim, / Sails fill'd, and streamers waving" (ll. 710; 713-14; 717-718). This contributes to the fact that, from the start, Melville's ship seems quite doomed. The ship is also consistently humanized through attributions of feelings in almost every stanza. The "martial build," nevertheless, reveals it to be a thing made and designed, following in a tradition of previous generations and recognized as such; it goes out into the world with "its standards set" and its "brave apparel on." The ship is a collective project in many senses, but Melville does not describe it here in that way; we never hear or see the hundreds of men who would have inhabited this ship and simultaneously gone down with it. By neglecting the people behind it—those who made it and then those who work on it—the ship takes on a singular figure: an individual against the world. The tragedy, therefore, is a failure—absolute and devastating—that no one witnesses aside from a few native sea creatures. The pity we feel before the wreck is no doubt tied up with the aesthetic experience Melville creates in the poem. Yet the tragedy depicted is not so much a mirror unto each one of us individually: it is, instead, an illustration of a disaster of a different degree.

In the first stanza, the first five lines describe the action that leads to the sinking of the ship. An impressive man-of-war, complete with all the proper adornments, heads straight into a "stolid Iceberg," "directed as by madness mere." Melville, by using the term "madness" here, sends the poem into thorny territory; it is far too easy to recall one aspect of *Moby-Dick* within this description of going against nature to disastrous results—that is, when one attempts to dominate it or overcome it in some way. The iceberg, however, is no Moby Dick. To illustrate this point, let us first discuss the "nature" problem: it can be argued that humans are nature in the same vein that an iceberg is nature. The sticking point in this universalist argument is the "madness" itself, which reveals a short-circuit of some kind in the reasoning process. This impasse subsequently pulls back the curtain and we face the fork in the road where humankind is sundered from the rest of nature: the thinking thing; consciousness as a light that guides us towards truth; an intelligence that is trained and, through experience, becomes honed. This reasoning is what should assist individuals to evade a failure of the magnitude of Melville's ship. And Melville tells us the same, for the ship moves as though it were mad. The ship is *infatuate*—foolish—and it sinks as a result of this.

Cruelty is also rather ubiquitous in the poem. It can be seen from the perspective of the strength of nature to thwart a plan, or from the perspective of nature being completely indifferent toward its own doings. Melville adds a layer to this cruelty through the description of the architecture of the iceberg: the annihilating impact causes little to no damage to its structure. Superfluous debris in fact makes the greatest noise (the only noticeable sound in the whole of the poem) and is detrimental to the ship as it crashes down upon it. The result is an overpowering stillness that engulfs the "foundering wreck."

The second stanza reinforces the calm. Melville achieves this by showing the lack of reciprocal damage, and he creates an elegant picture of the iceberg's appearance. It becomes a Gothic cathedral as it is beheld by the ship:

Nor lace of traceries fine,  
Nor pendant drops in grot or mine  
Were jarred, when the stunned Ship went down.

The traceries recall the windows of a Gothic cathedral, which the ship cannot see into. It is recast into a locked structure of history, a workshop toward the good, which is nevertheless frozen in place. The pendant of the next line takes us through a homonym, a pivot chord of modulation, that illustrates the pendant drops sculpted into the vaulting of a Gothic cathedral and shines a light into the catacombs when the sacred was hidden from general view. From the ceiling within both images forms a drop of living water that does not waver with the impact. The ship is stunned by all of this: by the fact that it made such a fatal error and by the fact that the ornate architecture of its enemy did not falter after such an assault.

Despite this, about halfway through the poem, Melville reveals that the iceberg is not eternal. Irrespective of the greatness of its structure, time slowly eats away at it. Nature looks on at itself:

Towers undermined by waves—the block  
Atilt impending—kept their place.  
Seals, dozing sleek on sliddery ledges  
Slipt never

The members of the audience to this decay—the seals—are “dozing.” Their drowsy attention suggests the boundless cruelty of nature that does not budge from its position before itself: a desire for survival that lacks the grace and forgiveness that thought can provide or at least strive for. The ship’s sinking becomes a spectacle for nature, even if nature is unmoved by it: the gulls circle above, the haglets skim the floes, and the seals (comical in the alliteration that articulates their presence [seals, sleek, sliddery, slipt never]) lazily watch on. The ship, the last we hear of it, is both impetuous and baffled in its final moments. It is the embodiment of a temperance marked by vehemence and violence but suffers a drastic change of heart at its end: it is completely befuddled by the miscalculation it has made and by the brutality of the nature before it.

Melville addresses the iceberg directly in the final stanza, where the alliteration—continuing down from above—seems to insult the structure for its role in the destruction. A mist surrounds the ice, itself now a living being that exhales a “dankish breath— / adrift dissolving, bound for death.” The affront does not stop here, as the alliteration carries on with a different sound “lumpish; lumbering.” Melville repeats this for another line to strengthen the abuse with vulgar-sounding “L’s”—“lumbering lubbard loitering slow.” The iceberg dies in this clumsy way, unwieldy and dense. Its death is slow, all the while remaining significant as it encounters “impingers” (like the man-of-war of the poem). The foes go down and the iceberg is still relevant for as long as it is seen and felt. The spectacle of the will against nature plays out over and over again until the death of nature itself.

Melville’s transition from describing the iceberg with great lightness and steadfast beauty to an individual suffering a prolonged (and ridiculous) death illustrates the frustration one might have before that which is greater or that which is more impactful than oneself or one’s tradition. To understand this better, we look to the beginning of the poem: the ship collides

with the iceberg, a thing created much like itself—the latter by grace and the former by ingenuity. The trceries of the iceberg mirror the ship's apparel to a certain extent as something that is made, studied, and executed by hand. By the end of the poem, we behold the two styles' collapse—the ship almost immediately while the other decays slowly. In fact, the scope of the poem only imagines the total demise of the iceberg; it is not actually *seen*. Its death will come at a time when it can no longer sink a ship, can no longer obliterate hubris in an instant. The meaning behind its architecture eventually dissipates in the fog, leaving only an unseen opponent to the forward motion of humanity. And grace must be searched for, once again, underground.