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They that go down to the sea in ships: Richard Henry Dana, Jr.'s Two Years Before the Mast and the sublime

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THEY THAT GO DOWN TO THE SEA IN SHIPS:
RICHARD HENRY DANA, JR.'S *TWO YEARS BEFORE THE MAST*
AND THE SUBLIME

An Abstract of a Thesis
Submitted
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

Laurie Anne Lee
University of Northern Iowa
May, 2018

ABSTRACT

In this thesis I incorporated the use of a two-fold lens to investigate the character development of the author Richard Henry Dana, Jr., who I met in his autobiography and his book *Two Years Before the Mast*, the written record of his 1834-1836 voyage aboard the *Pilgrim* and the *Alert*. In an effort to understand Dana the sailor and Dana the lawyer, I viewed his life and work, in part, through the lens of Edmund Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry into the Sublime and Beautiful*, paying special attention to Burke's definition of the sublime as encompassing pain and suffering. Through Burke's *Enquiry* I took a close-up view of Dana's personal suffering in those years of and immediately preceding the voyage, and I paid close attention to the sufferings in the lives of Dana's closest companions—the sailors. While investigating Dana's life as recorded in his autobiography and *Two Years* through Burke's sublime I felt drawn to view my study through another lens, that of the Old Testament book of Job, noting specific applicable excerpts from chapters 38-42. Through this lens I compared Job's suffering to the suffering that Dana endured, particularly with the intent of discovering correlations between the two, if there were any to be found.

Though I consider the study of suffering and the sublime to be an ongoing investigation in my life, I have nevertheless come to a conclusion to this particular study: it was because of, or through suffering, that Dana became interested in the plight of the downtrodden in his society and in his sphere of influence, especially the plight of those common sailors abused by captains and officers and the fugitive slave suffering under the yoke of the Fugitive Slave Bill. That Dana spent his working life in defense of these two

groups of defenseless sufferers is due in large part, if not in the whole, to the fact that his heart was softened to their plight by not only their personal pain and suffering, but also by his own. Because Burke places so much emphasis on pain, terror, and suffering in his definition of the sublime, I place my emphasis there too and have come to conclude that Dana's survival of his own encounter with the sublime, and his subsequent fruitful life of service to the downtrodden is the victory of the sublime in his life. Ultimately, I conclude that Dana flourished as a lawyer, as a man, and as a citizen not in spite of the sublime but because of it.

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Entitled: They that go down to the sea in ships: Richard Henry Dana, Jr.'s *Two Years Before the Mast* and the Sublime

has been approved as meeting the thesis requirement for the

Degree of Master of Arts

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Date

Dr. Patrick Pease, Interim Dean, Graduate College

DEDICATION

For my mom, Dolly A. Garland, who showed me how to suffer with grace.

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INTRODUCTION

They that go down to the sea in ships, that do business in great waters; these see the works of the Lord and his wonders in the deep.

Psalm 107:23-24

In this thesis I investigate the interaction of the natural and metaphysical sublime with the development of human maturity, most specifically, mental, emotional, and spiritual maturity, in the life of Richard Henry Dana, Jr., author of the memoir *Two Years Before the Mast* (1840). Through the examination of his experience aboard the *Pilgrim* and the *Alert*, encompassing only two of his 66 years, and through the examination of his life leading up to and following that experience, I will argue that: the sublime in Dana's life takes a myriad of forms in nature through threats and dangers of weather and terrain but that its representation is not exhausted with natural occurrences, or as some would term it, "the natural sublime." As we will see, the sublime as manifested in Dana's life also incorporates illness, disease, human cruelty and injustice, and spiritual incidents, which Dana, as a Christian, describes as interactions with God. I will argue that according to Dana the sublime he experienced was God-ordained, and that God was present in the midst of his suffering. I will argue that the sublime that Dana faced while on his merchant voyage led him away from and outside of himself and pushed him towards emotional and spiritual maturity and henceforth, into his God-ordained calling.

When I use the term sublime, I adopt (and adapt) the definition offered by Edmund Burke in his *Enquiry into the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), in which he states: "Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a

manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime” (xv). He uses the term sublime to represent the strongest of human emotions, which “turn chiefly on pain and danger,” both of which we perceive as a threat to life and are therefore to Burke “the most powerful of all the passions” (xv). According to Burke, it is not only the object or circumstance that is sublime, for the object or circumstance may pose little or no threat of danger or pain, and would therefore not be sublime in and of itself. While an object or circumstance may in fact be defined as sublime in and of itself, it is not *only* the object or circumstance that may retain the tendency towards the sublime. In fact, the sublime can be defined as the *effect* the object or circumstance has upon or evokes in the human participant. Paul Guyer, in his introduction in the Oxford edition to Burke’s *Enquiry* explains it thus:

For once [Burke] has explained the experience of the sublime as a heightening of tension in our nervous system, he can classify as sublime whatever produces that kind of tension, even if it does not involve danger: in his words, ‘Having considered as producing an unnatural tension and certain violent emotions of the nerves; it easily follows . . . that whatever is fitted to produce such a tension, must be productive of a passion similar to terror, and consequently must be a source of the sublime, though it should have no idea of danger connected with it. (xxii-iii)

Burke argues that the sublime affects us not only mentally and/or emotionally, but that our response to the terror inherent in the sublime manifests itself bodily, specifically in and through our nervous system, so that what we experience in our minds significantly affects our bodies. Burke argues that the sublime is that which is “productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling” and that these passions ultimately and always revolve around self-preservation (33).

Burke offers the reader a list of terms along with their definitions that represent his concept of the sublime. For ease of reference, I will list some of those terms now to

help us keep in mind Burke's idea of the sources of the sublime. Burke's list of terms includes: pain, sickness, danger, obscurity (the inability to physically see the danger that threatens us), power (as accompanied by pain or violence), privation (including vacuity, darkness, solitude, and silence), vastness ("greatness of dimension . . . extension either in length, height, or depth"), difficulty (in human accomplishment, such as Stonehenge or the Pyramids), light (the sun and lightning, for example), suddenness ("striking of a great clock, a single stroke on a drum, repeated with pauses, successive firing of cannon at a distance"), intermitting (uncertainty), and fear. I do not intend to offer an exhaustive study of each aspect of Burke's sublime; I intend with this thesis to focus on Dana in the context of the following three of Burke's terms: darkness and/or obscurity, pain accompanied by power, and difficulty. In addition, I have added a term which I believe to be in keeping with Burke's idea of the sublime: suffering, in this case the emotional suffering that accompanies physical pain. Perhaps it is helpful here to reiterate Burke's definition of the terror connected with physical pain as understood by Guyer in his introduction of the Oxford edition:

Yet speculative as Burke's physiology might seem, it offers him a way of solving certain problems that might otherwise open up in his theory which could well be compatible with more modern details in neuroscience. For one, as we say, although Burke had initially argued that we experience as sublime what threatens us without actually injuring us, he had gone on to include in his list of properties of the sublime some, such as magnitude and magnificence, that do not physically threaten us in any obvious way. This seemed unjustified, but his physiology can justify it. For once he has explained the experience of the sublime as a heightening of tension in our nervous system, he can classify as sublime whatever produces that kind of tension, even if it does not involve danger: in his words, "Having considered terror as producing an unnatural tension and certain violent emotions of the nerves; it easily follows . . . that whatever is fitted to produce such a tension, must be productive of a passion similar to terror, and consequently

must be a source of the sublime, though it should have no idea of danger connected with it.” (xxii).

All this to say that experiencing flogging and witnessing the flogging of another, experiencing racial prejudice and witnessing racial prejudice, as well as experiencing an unrelenting and non-medicated toothache while battling a life-threatening passage around Cape Horn, are all sublime by definition because they “produce an unnatural tension and certain violent emotions of the nerves,” according to Burke’s definition of the sublime. With all of this in mind then, I will in this essay address four characteristics of the sublime—three offered by Burke and one offered by me—as it relates specifically to how the concept of sublimity is played out in the life of Dana.

In his *Enquiry*, Burke argues that when we contemplate the idea of God, we most often think upon the attributes most easy to embrace, such as love, compassion, mercy, and grace, but that there is another side of Him that we often avoid acknowledging, and it is the sublime side of God, that side of Him represented by the words law, justice, lordship, and power. Burke references God as sublime, highlighting, in particular, His power, which Burke argues is one of the characteristics of the sublime. For instance, Dana, in his autobiography, stated that he believed God to be visiting him in the powerful storm experienced by the crew as they navigated the *Alert* around the treacherous waters of Cape Horn. We will visit this subject later in my thesis.

Burke considers power in its human manifestation, its manifestation in nature, and in its manifestation in God, as a source of the sublime. As such, power is a prevalent theme running through this thesis. Burke writes of God’s *power* as being His most striking attribute:

Now, though in a just idea of the Deity, perhaps none of his attributes are predominant, yet to our imagination, his power is by far the most striking. Some reflection, some comparing is necessary to satisfy us of his wisdom, his justice, and his goodness; to be struck with his power, it is only necessary that we should open our eyes. But whilst we contemplate so vast an object, under the arm, as it were, of almighty power, and invested upon every side with omnipresence, we shrink into the minuteness of our own nature, and are, in a manner, annihilated before him. And though a consideration of his other attributes may relieve in some measure our apprehensions; yet no conviction of the justice with which it is exercised, nor the mercy with which it is tempered, can wholly remove the terror that naturally arises from a force which nothing can withstand. If we rejoice, we rejoice with trembling; and even whilst we are receiving benefits, we cannot but shudder at a power which can confer benefits of such mighty importance. (56)

Burke argues that whenever we contemplate the God of the universe, we think of Him as something powerful. Burke references biblical passages to argue his point when he states: “wherever God is represented as appearing or speaking, every thing terrible in nature is called up to heighten the awe and solemnity of the divine presence. The psalms, and the prophetic books, are crowded with instances of this kind” (57). Burke argues that the dread that accompanies the power with which we are overwhelmed when we contemplate God is an experience that is sublime in nature. Present conceptions of God have lost this sense of sublimity, and as indicated earlier those in religious circles have instead emphasized His more palatable characteristics, such as love, compassion, and mercy. As Burke states in his *Enquiry*:

Before the Christian religion had, as it were, humanized the idea of the divinity, and brought it somewhat nearer to us, there was very little said of the love of God. The followers of Plato have something of it, and only something. The other writers of pagan antiquity, whether poets or philosophers, nothing at all. And they who consider with what infinite attention, by what disregard of every perishable object, through what long habits of piety and contemplation it is, any man is able to attain an entire love and devotion to the Deity, will easily perceive, that it is not the first, the most natural, and the most striking effect which proceeds from that idea. (57)

In keeping with what I believe Burke is saying here, I will argue that “the most natural, and the most striking effect which proceeds from the idea” of God is His sublimity, manifested in Dana’s experience in his battle with the storm around the Cape, among other things.

The reader will recall that earlier in this thesis I added to Burke’s definition of sublimity a term that I believe not only encompasses the idea of sublimity, but does so in relation to Dana’s life and work: it is the term “suffering,” specifically the concept of human suffering. With that in mind, I will, in my first chapter, establish the idea of suffering as sublime. The reader may notice that I discuss this idea, couched as it were, in theological terms. This is intentional, and I believe I stand on firm footing here, as the reader will soon see, because Dana, in his personal testimony, references an event of natural sublimity which he later in life points to as an moment of spiritual awakening. I will cover this in Chapter 2.

CHAPTER 1

SUFFERING AS SUBLIME

In attempting to examine the subject of suffering I admit to undertaking a monumental task. The subject is too broad and deep to attempt in one chapter of a small thesis. I am aware of this difficulty and offer to take only one little bite of the subject—just enough to establish my argument that Dana’s suffering preceding and during his voyage was not only sublime, but also transformational and defining. Because Dana was Christian, my argument uses as its basis evidence from Christian perspectives. But what do I mean by a “Christian” perspective? In his treatise on suffering, *The Problem of Pain* (1962), C. S. Lewis describes one of the tenets of Christianity:

Christianity asserts that God is good; that He made all things good for the sake of their goodness; that one of the good things He made, namely, the free will of rational creatures, by its very nature included the possibility of evil; and that creatures, availing themselves of this possibility, have become evil. (69)

Lewis implies that humans have exercised the blessing of free will often to do good, but also, at times, to do evil. Of the concept of God creating humans with the capacity to exercise our free will to do both good and evil, Lewis argues, “I am going to submit that not even Omnipotence could create a society of free souls without at the same time creating a relatively independent and ‘inexorable’ Nature . . . [The] freedom of a creature must mean freedom to choose: and choice implies the existence of things to choose between,” implying in this instance the freedom to choose between good things and evil things (29). Lewis argues that the reason we experience pain and suffering on our planet is because God created us with the ability to choose to act in certain ways, and that sometimes we make choices that injure other people in small or great ways. Humans also

experience suffering that stems not from human actions but from natural causes. Of this type of suffering Lewis argues that there is a divinely appointed purpose, that God uses our suffering to draw us into closer communion with Himself. He implies also that God ordains our suffering intentionally and specifically for this purpose. It is apparent that Dana to believed in the idea of purpose in suffering. I offer as evidence an excerpt from one of his letters to his son, who was an athlete and while at Harvard participated in intercollegiate rowing competitions, most often against Yale and Wesleyan. In the excerpt that follows Dana wrote to sympathize with his son, whose team had come in third place. We will see from these excerpts that Dana believes in the concept of human free will, and that he believed that God is over the exercise of it and uses it for the good of His followers. Even while he commiserates with his son on the loss, the Dana offers his son a spiritual lesson:

The all but chance result of a close race of many boats is of no real moment. And, perhaps, the effect on *your character* may be better than if you had led the race. And that is the great point with you and me and us all. What will you be when you begin the work of the world? That is the question, in God's sight and in the opinion of men. (476)

And in a subsequent letter pertaining to another lost race, Dana advises:

You know my perverse sentiments about the inter-collegiate regatta system. I do not care which of ten boats is half a length ahead. But I like to have you succeed in what you have spent so much labor and thought upon, and moral force; and my moral sense would be satisfied to see Yale punished for her low tone and cunning and bullying of the last ten years. So, if you succeed, you will find your father greatly pleased and sympathetic; and, if you do not come out first, your father will take it easily, and thank God for your safety, health, moral energy, and character, and feel that a defeat may, in the Providence of God, put you higher in His sight, and even in the things of this world, at thirty years of age than a victory. (481)

The Bible teaches that though God is patient with his followers and graciously gives them ample time to repent, He does not tolerate their disobedience long-term. The Bible teaches that God, in love, addresses the disobedience in His followers by inflicting pain and suffering upon them with the intention of driving the disobedient back to Himself. It is not unlike the approach humans take towards one another. Parents discipline their disobedient children with a spanking or a time out or with the loss of some coveted privilege. This discipline is always painful, and the pain inflicted is intended by the parent to drive the child back into cooperation with the parent. We seldom object to this idea at the human level, especially when we find ourselves in the position of authority dealing with a rebellious person under our supervision. Neither do we mind when law enforcement disciplines a criminal. However, when we contemplate the idea that we ourselves might at some point become the focus of discipline, it does seem to rub the fur the wrong way. It is especially offensive to us to ponder the suggestion that God may at some level find fault with our behavior or attitude, and at these moments we may want to suggest that God keep His nose out of our business. It is at these times when writers, such as Lewis, help us see what we would prefer to ignore. It is times like these when students of the Bible find that the New Testament book of Hebrews comes in handy with an explanation.

Hebrews chapter 12 addresses the subject of God's discipline of his followers, comparing their suffering in discipline to the scourging Christ suffered at the time of His crucifixion. Scourging is another word for whipping, a physical reality, yet the word is used symbolically in Hebrews 12 to represent any kind of suffering inflicted by a parent

upon a child or by God upon one of his followers. The whipping is used to motivate the victim towards obedience to and cooperation with the authority figure under whose direction the whipping is administered. The author of Hebrews tells his audience “it is for discipline that you endure; God deals with you as with sons” and then asks the question, “for what son is there whom his father does not discipline?” The author uses the imagery of the parent/child relationship because it is something everyone understands, and he uses this imagery to illustrate the point that God disciplines his followers in the same way that a father disciplines his son, “for our own good.” The author advises his reader to view God’s discipline correctly to “not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor faint when [they] are reproved by Him; for those whom the Lord loves He disciplines, and He scourges every son whom He receives” (6). This somewhat patriarchal father and son relationship, especially as it pertains to consistent discipline, is something Dana understood, having been reared in a conservative Christian home, as is argued in the Adams biography.

Now to bring the idea of parental discipline into application in Dana’s experience I only need to mention that whipping was used in the navies of many countries and aboard merchant ships during Dana’s lifetime, and Dana was witness to the practice on more than one occasion. Captains and their officers used whipping in the context of maritime life primarily to keep order and to correct infractions aboard ship. They used it because it worked. The practice was also abused at times, and Dana was witness to that abuse on occasion. I will address that subject later. But the point that I make in bringing it up here is that there was a very distinct event in Dana’s life in which he felt God’s

presence in his life in the form of suffering and discipline. I mention the passage in Hebrews to demonstrate that Dana would come to this conclusion most likely through the process of his religious training, and I use Lewis to demonstrate that the idea is prevalent among Christian thinkers.

Earlier I referred to the Hebrews passage to suggest that God uses discipline in the lives of his followers for their good. Watchman Nee, a Christian thinker and writer and a contemporary of Lewis's, offers some ideas on this subject which may serve to clarify my argument. In his book, *What Shall This Man Do?* (1961), Nee's focus on discipline addresses God's use of suffering in leading His followers onto the path of His will for their lives. Nee's aim is to focus the Christian's attention onto becoming aware of and maintaining God's standard of behavior as we make an honest assessment of who we really are: "You advance spiritually by finding out what you really are, not by trying to become what you hope to be . . . The only possibility of spiritual progress lies in our discovering the truth as God sees it" (177). It is in suffering that we come face to face with "what we really are"; and in seeing who we really are, "we discover the truth as God sees it." I believe that it was through personal suffering and through witnessing the suffering of others while aboard the *Pilgrim* and the *Alert* that Dana came to discover the truth about himself. Charles Francis Adams agrees, arguing that the hardships Dana endured on the voyage affected a positive change in him:

Taken abruptly away from books and college and home influence, Dana had passed two years during the most impressionable period of life on the deck and the beach in close, hard contact with nature and man; it was exactly what he needed, and, as a part of his education, was of more value to him than that of any other equal period of his youth. Dana needed coarsening if he was to deal successfully with practical life. (1: 14)

I am suggesting that the “coarsening” that Dana needed “if he was to deal successfully with practical life” was achieved through the sublime “hard contact with nature and man,” possibly brought about by hardships inflicted upon him by His God, who, as Nee suggests, disciplines his followers so that they come face to face with “what they really are.” Nee writes, “God seeks true ministry in His saints. That is why we have such bad times. We must not question if He leads us into the unexpected, for when He does so, we can be sure it is with some definite goal in view” (144). Arguing from this premise, I assert that according to one interpretation of Hebrews 12—and later in this thesis I will argue the same thing from Job—there was a specific purpose in Dana’s afflictions, great and small, and that purpose overall was for his good and for the good of those he subsequently served. Dana did not learn the most important of life’s lessons from school lectures; he learned them through the trials that accompanied his temporary eyestrain and subsequent voyage; he learned them in the school of suffering. Considering that “God’s ways are not our ways, nor His thoughts our thoughts,” (Isaiah 55:8-9) I do not claim to know what God did in Dana’s life and why He did it. I only wish to consider Dana’s testimony in reference to that event. In his autobiography, which I quoted earlier, Dana stated that he believed the storm that occurred at the time the crew traveled around the cape, accompanied by Dana’s excruciating toothache, was God’s last invitation to Dana to commune with Him, and that the trials that revolved around the temporary impairment of Dana’s eyesight opened his eyes to see and pushed, him forward into his calling, a calling that revolved around serving his fellow man. He learned to see these others while voyaging with them, and he recorded the experience in his book. It is time now for us to

look at these specifics in his book. This brings us to a transition into my next chapter, that of a brief analysis of his narrative.

CHAPTER 2

DANA'S BOOK

One of the questions I would like to consider by way of analyzing Dana's text pertains to the purpose of his book: Why did Dana write his narrative, and what does it have to do with suffering? In the preface of his book, Dana states his purpose: "My design is, and it is this which has induced me to publish the book, to present the life of a common sailor at sea as it really is—the light and the dark together" (xvi). From his own description, it sounds like Dana wrote the book for a greater purpose than to simply entertain his reader. If he felt the need to present "the light and the dark together," he must have inferred something from the comparison between the light and the dark. Dana saw a problem in society—the abuse of the common sailor—and he wrote his narrative in an effort to address that problem. Throughout his life, at various junctures of suffering, beginning when he was just a boy of nine years flogged by an over-zealous teacher, his mantra continued to be, "something must be done." This "something" that "must be done" began largely, for the reading public, with his narrative, *Two Years Before the Mast*. In it, Dana shared with his readers two years of his life in the form of a seafaring narrative for the purpose of reforming the existing laws or enacting new laws pertaining to life aboard merchant ships, as is stated by James D. Hart in his foreword to the text. Dana was not alone in his mode of operation for reform. British author Frederick Marryat wrote his satirical narrative, *Mr. Midshipman Easy*, with a similar goal in mind. Marryat used his novel to fight against the verbal abuse of the common sailor by the officers. He

specifically opposed the unnecessary use of profanity as we see here in Marryat's own words:

The greatest error now in our service, is the disregard shown to the feelings of the junior officers in the language of their superiors: that an improvement has taken place I grant, but that it still exists, to a degree injurious to the service, I know too well . . . We are not strait-laced, we care little about an oath as a mere *expletive*; we refer now to swearing at *others*, to insulting their feelings grossly by coarse and intemperate language. We would never interfere with a man for d---g his *own* eyes, but we deny the right of his d---g those of *another*. (225)

In an effort to effect the change he hoped to accomplish, Marryat appealed to the officers' memories of how they themselves were treated as common sailors:

We have arrived to that grade, that, although we have the power to inflict, we are too high to receive insult, but we have not forgotten how our young blood has boiled when wanton, reckless, and cruel torture has been heaped upon our feelings, merely because, as a junior officer, we were not in a position to retaliate, or even to reply. (226)

Marryat argues from his belief that the ill-treatment of the common sailor by his superior officer resulted in insubordination, so that his goals in recommending more respectful treatment of the common sailor by those in authority over him was the improvement of law and order in the British navy and the happiness of its participants. In his own words:

Let it not be supposed that in making these remarks we want to cause litigation, or insubordination. On the contrary, we assert that this error is the cause, and eventually will be much more the cause, of insubordination; for as the junior officers who enter the service are improved, so will they resist it. The complaint here is more against the officers than the captains, whose power has been perhaps already too much curtailed by late regulations: that power must remain, for although there may be some few who are so perverted as to make those whom they command uncomfortable, in justice to the service we are proud to assert, that the majority acknowledge, by their conduct, that the greatest charm attached to power is to be able to make so many people happy. (226-27)

Both Dana and Marryat wrote their texts, as I stated earlier, for the purpose of reform, both communicating the thrust of their argument in first person. Dana was so

committed to the power of first-person writing claiming in a review of Richard J. Cleveland's text, *A Narrative of Voyages and Commercial Enterprises* (1850), "it is an excellent thing in narrative for the reader to be identified as much as possible with the writer. In no way, we believe, can this be more completely done, than when the adventurer tells his own story" (144). Dana, like Marryat, knew what he was doing when he attempted with his narrative to get the public on board with his intentions of bringing reform to sea-faring practices: "if one wishes to interest others in himself or his fortunes, he should tell his own story and that will woo them" (144). He presents in more detail his preference for the personal narrative in effecting change among the reading public:

Let the narrator of his own experience set down, honestly and simply, the very things that most impressed him at the time, whether they afterwards seem to him great or little, and in the same manner in which they then impressed him, using his common sense and whatever he may have of poetic instinct in the selection. . . . Then, if his experience is at all worth the attention of his readers, he will hardly fail of success, and of the best kind of success, the personal sympathy and good-will of those who are thus brought into acquaintance with him. If the adventurer has any thing of the poetic nature, or a feeling heart, all the things he has seen and heard that appeal to either of these qualities, will inevitably have impressed him at the time he met with them, and he will give them out again somewhat as they were felt by him, and thus they will find an answering chord in every imaginative or feeling reader. (145-6)

Though in his review, Dana praises Cleveland for his ability to evoke "the personal sympathy and goodwill of those who are brought into acquaintance with him," he might as well have been writing about himself, for Dana does the same thing in the opening paragraph of his book. Just to prove that his tactic is still at work today, I might as well confess that it was Dana's opening paragraph that hooked me. I knew at that moment that Dana's would be *my* book because he made me sympathize with him for giving up his

studies, and I wanted to know if he recovered from his eye injury, so I had to keep reading the book! Dana opens his text by confiding in his reader that:

I made my appearance on board at twelve o'clock, in full sea-rig, with my chest containing an outfit for a two or three years' voyage, which I had undertaken from a determination to cure, if possible, by an entire change of life, and by a long absence from books, with plenty of hard work, plain food, and open air, a weakness of the eyes, which had obliged me to give up my studies, and which no medical aid seemed likely to remedy. (3)

Following these introductory remarks, Dana goes on in his narrative to describe his physical appearance and the impression he tried to make in casting off “the tight frock-coat, silk cap, and kid gloves of an undergraduate at Harvard,” which he substituted with “the loose duck trousers, checked shirt, and tarpaulin hat of a sailor,” hoping with a change of clothes to make “somewhat of a transformation,” yet admitting that “it is impossible to deceive the practiced eye in these matters” (3). I chuckle even now in reliving my first reading of this humorous description, identifying with the novice in his naïve attempt to deceive the better initiated. As he assumed, he fooled no one. Dana continues his narrative, written in journal-form with dates heading each section. It is in identifying with his reader by writing in a confiding, first-person tone, confessing his failings and rejoicing in his successes, that he invites reader to take his journey with him.

One of the primary considerations in analyzing both the narrative of *Two Years* and the person who wrote the text is the circumstances under which the text came into being in the first place. Following a bout with the measles during the summer preceding his junior year in law school, Dana suffered the consequential impairment of his eyesight. The doctor advised him to rest his eyes for a time, and Dana believed that several months away from his books would do the trick. He was mistaken. After spending approximately

nine months resting, Dana's eyes had not improved, and he came to believe that his recuperation at home was becoming a financial burden to his father. It was common for young men during that time to look to the sea not only for gainful employment but also for adventure and education, so Dana turned to the sea for help with his dilemma. He declined the offer of friends and acquaintances to board a ship as a traveler, knowing that the only distraction to keep him occupied aboard—that of staying in his private cabin reading—was an occupation impossible for him at that time. Instead, Dana boarded a merchant ship hired to gather hides for the leather industry. In volume one of Dana's biography, Adams writes:

Many opportunities for [a voyage in the cabin of some India merchantman were] offered, but Dana was sensible enough to realize that a long cabin voyage with eyes too weak for reading would be intolerably tedious; and so he made up his mind to go before the mast, wisely reasoning that hard work, plain diet, and open-air life would by effecting a gradual change in his whole physical system ultimately restore his eyesight. The experiment was a somewhat daring one, for Dana had not even been brought up as a lad in a seaport town, and accordingly knew nothing of the sea, or of ships. (13)

Dana knew that if he shipped as a hired sailor aboard a merchant ship, he would work hard physically, and he reasoned that if he strengthened the core of his body, he would improve his health overall, which might cure his eyes. And that is exactly what happened.

I place emphasis on Dana's short-lived loss of vision because the impairment changed the course of his life. It is in fact the focus of more than one critic of the author and his text. Hugh Egan, for example, in his article titled "'One of Them': The Voyage of Style in Dana's *Two Years Before the Mast*," focuses on Dana's weakness of the eye. He implies that Dana's infirmity turned the youth into a new man:

Dana the hero *is* transformed from a weak-eyed undergraduate to a sharp-seeing and swarthy deck hand. His initial seasickness guts him of the pastry and sweetmeats of Cambridge; and after he eats the cold salt beef and biscuit of the sailor, the author pronounces himself “a new being.” (178)

We can see the humor here in Egan’s reference to Cambridge’s rich culinary fare of “pastry and sweetmeats,” and yet he is not mistaken in highlighting this point. Dana was a gentleman’s son, the namesake of the poet, critic, and lawyer Richard Henry Dana. Dana, Sr. like his son, was an author, having written *Paul Felton* (1822), a gothic novella, and who in 1817 helped to found the *North American Review*. Like Dana, Sr., Dana’s grandfather, Francis, was a valued member of Boston society who left his grandson an impressive example to follow. The point of all of this historical context is that Dana’s father and grandfather left him the legacy of not only a respectable family reputation but perhaps also the expectation that he would one day become a third-generation lawyer. As is the case in so many families, the expectation to follow in the family business was not quite as warmly embraced by posterity as might have been desired, for Dana confessed to being initially uninterested in a career at the bar. Consequently, the challenge he experienced in relation to his vision impairment was a blessing in disguise in that it gave him an opportunity to explore a possible alternative to his family’s expectations and to catch a glimpse, so to speak, of human life that he never would have encountered otherwise.

Egan is not the only critic to focus on Dana’s eyesight in critiquing his narrative. In his article “Richard Henry Dana, Jr. and *Two Years before the Mast*: Strategies for Objectifying the Subjective Self,” Bryce Conrad argues that Dana’s text “stylistically endeavors to gain perspectives of self in which the ‘I’ is not the agent behind the ‘eye’ as

much as it is the object of the ‘eye’” (292). For Conrad, Dana’s text reveals the author’s identity crisis, one in which he seems to be vacillating between the identity of Dana the lawyer and Dana the sailor. As Conrad notes, Dana

seemed unable to get outside an inherited and unquestionable identity which had defined him all too closely. Yet going to California as an ordinary sailor aboard a merchant vessel promised not only a way to restore his “eye,” but a means to view the habitual world of his “I” from another perspective. The voyage would do more than simply recuperate his physical powers of vision—it would enable Dana to gain a new perspective on the environment he had always known as “home.” In much the same way that removing himself to a distant part of the ship would later provide him with an “objectified” perception of the vessel which had been his temporary “home,” Dana would be able to look upon Boston as “a separate object.” (293)

Dana’s infirmity made it possible for him to see what life might be like for him outside of law school; specifically, it gave him the opportunity to view life from the perspective of a manual laborer working by the sweat of his brow and surviving hand-to-mouth. The fact is, once Dana boarded the ship he was woefully outside of his element; he was, so to speak, at the bottom of his class, and though he entertained hope of regaining the use of his eyes and returning to law school, there was no guarantee this would happen. Conrad notes this fact: “For even though Dana stands on the deck of the departing ship and takes a lingering gaze at Boston ‘to prevent my becoming insensible to the value of what I was leaving’ his actual experience in California [gathering hides] leads him to discover that self and identity are not fixed and inviolable absolutes” (294). When Dana boarded the ship for the first time he acknowledged that an important event was taking place in his life, but he likely did not know that it was only the first in a series of events that would prove crucial to his future.

There were several catalysts for major changes in Dana's life, and they all served to define his future identity. Dana's trip aboard the *Pilgrim* and the *Alert* was formative, and as Dana's trip on the sea was a round trip, so his trip in identity was a round trip too. Dana left Boston as a gentleman's son and a law student; he returned a gentleman's son and a law student, but along the way he acquired another identity, that of sailor and a defender of the downtrodden. He wasn't transformed into something other than himself, but became a better version of what he already was, and every hardship he suffered in the process was part of that maturation.

Dana suffered a loss of identity when he left Harvard, and he suffered the confusion of who he might become if his plan for better health and improved eyesight failed and prevented him from returning to school. He suffered the inconvenience and loneliness of being someone other than a "real" sailor, of being among them but not "one of them," and of being the lowest man of the lowest class aboard ship. Dana says of being a sailor living in the steerage:

You are immediately under the eye of the officers, cannot dance, sing, play, smoke, make a noise, or *growl*, (i.e. complain,) or take any other sailor's pleasure; and you live with the steward, who is usually a go-between; and the crew never feel as though you were *one of them*. But if you live in the forecandle; you . . . are a sailor . . . No man can be a sailor, or know what sailors are, unless he has lived in the forecandle with them—turned in and out with them, eaten of their dish and drank of their cup. (95)

It wasn't until Captain Thompson gave him permission to live in the forecandle with the other sailors that Dana came to think of himself as a real sailor. And that was all he could claim as an identity at that time. Having been stripped of his status as gentleman's son and law school student, Dana believed that if his eyesight did not return, he might have to

become a sailor for life. The reader sees this a real possibility too, and we feel the tug of war between what is and what might be. We feel the pain of his identity crisis as he lets us into his thoughts and feelings as revealed through his narrative, yet it is not until close to the end, when Thompson threatens to keep Dana two more years, and Dana responds by threatening *him* with the powers-that-be at home, that he really comes to face the truth—the deep desire in his heart to become a lawyer. Of that event, when Thompson and two of his colleagues join forces to bully him into two more years gathering hides, Dana says:

No court of Star Chamber could proceed more summarily with a poor devil than this trio was about to do with me; condemning me to a punishment worse than a Botany Bay exile, and to a fate which might alter the whole current of my future life; for two years more in California might have made me a sailor for the rest of my days.

But I am getting ahead of myself. Long before Dana finds himself standing before this tribunal, he faces a different crisis of identity, one that serves to spell out for him the object of his law practice should he eventually decide to pursue his earlier calling: it is the famous flogging scene.

Up until this crucial moment we see a Dana who seems to fully believe that it will be possible for him to leave law school if necessary and become a sailor for life. At this point we see a man still in despair over his loss of usable vision, attempting to make the best of a tragic disappointment in his life and making plans to reroute his life journey. This is a defining moment and a halt in his newly-adapted direction, an event that though he doesn't seem to know it at the time, not only brings him back to himself but pushes him back towards and further into his calling. This flogging incident not only reminds

Dana of who he was born to be, it also shows him the specifics of that calling. This is an event that Dana needed in order to bring him outside of himself, to open his eyes to the needs of the downtrodden and neglected in his society. Egan says:

The flogging scene derives its power from the fact that we see Dana the protagonist coming completely unglued from Dana the narrator. The willed optimism of the narrator no longer serves. This scene, in which no one is killed, is a much deeper tragedy than the loss of the boy overboard [earlier in the narrative] because the assumptions behind Dana's whole experiment at sea are rawly exposed. The two men flogged, backs covered "with stripes and wales in every direction" have undergone an initiation at sea which Dana himself wants no part of. This too, is part of a sailor's existence, but Dana cannot accept it as a sailor must. Instead, he turns philosophical: "I thought of our situation, living under a tyranny; of the character of the country we were in; of the length of the voyage, and of the uncertainty attending our return to America; and then, if we should return, of the prospect of obtaining justice and satisfaction for these poor men; and owned that if God should ever give me the means, I would do something to redress the grievances and relieve the sufferings of that poor class of beings, of whom I then was one." (182)

Egan argues that "the willed optimism of the narrator no longer serves," but I disagree.

Dana was not pessimistic about the future, but sorrowful about the present situation in which he found himself and his companions. In contemplating the future, he was optimistic about improving the lot of the common man, as is apparent considering the focus of much of his life's work, which was that of defending the common sailor against the abuses of tyrannical captains and officers. He was making a commitment to concrete action—a promise to help "these poor men" and others like them, as is obvious considering the role he played in the future in defending the fugitive slave when most of his colleagues would have no part in that kind of work. No, Dana was not philosophizing when he made this vow; he was acknowledging that he had at last found the purpose for his life, and that it was not to be found serving aboard a merchant ship as a sailor.

Instead, Dana the lawyer is reemerging, returning to his roots, returning to himself, and Dana the writer is in the making as well. It is through his dual identity as lawyer and writer that he effects a permanent change in his society to the benefit of the common sailor and the fugitive slave, as we will see. It is a metamorphosis, and until the change is complete he continues to maintain the conviction that he is “one of them.” On this point, we hear again from Egan, who says:

The awkwardness of the final clause underscores the fact that Dana’s rhetorical stance toward his own experience is changing. By making the promise to help this “poor class of beings,” by allowing himself such a perspective, articulating now what before was only implied, Dana the narrator is withdrawing from the opening strategy of initiation and transformation, and is removing his younger self to another class of beings. By his very willingness, in this record of life on a merchantman, to speak the cause of the common sailor, Dana is beginning to demonstrate he is not one. (182)

The fact that Dana finally acknowledges that he is not “one of them” should come as no surprise. After all, he tells us at the beginning of his narrative that he decided to sail in the first place as a potential remedy for his eye ailment. He never claims to board the ship with any serious intentions of becoming a sailor. Later in his narrative, Dana further affirms his suspicions that he is not “one of them” when he finds, after the flogging, a waning desire for companionship among the other sailors and a renewed interest in his former literary pursuits: “I separated myself from the rest, and sat down on a rock,” Dana writes of a stop at San Juan Capistrano, “. . . and I experienced a glow of pleasure at finding that what of poetry and romance I ever had in me, had not been entirely deadened by the laborious and frittering life I had led.” Dana then goes on to describe the pleasure he takes in the new-found knowledge remembering who he really is, as an entity separate from the person he had been on the ship: “Nearly an hour did I sit, almost lost in the

luxury of this entire new scene of the play in which I had so long been acting” (197-8). As Egan says, “Dana is now admittedly an actor playing a part,” but maybe that is what he had been doing all along (183).

To what extent Dana had been an actor playing a part by way of exchanging, for a time, an intellectual life for a life of manual labor is now evident, but to what extent had he been playing a part socially? That is, had he also been playing a part when he attempted to fit into not only the sailors’ labors, but also within with the sailors’ caste? The answer is obviously yes. Dana boarded the ship with the intention of toning and strengthening the core of his physical body for the purpose of healing his eyes. In the process, he had attempted to acclimate himself to the society of the ship for the purpose of becoming a sailor. As his body responded to the hard work that the life of a common sailor entails, his confidence began to return, and when his eyesight returned too, the transformation was complete; Dana had returned to himself. The challenge he faced in temporarily losing his eyesight drew him away from his continual focus upon himself and pushed him towards seeing others more clearly. The flogging incident brought the contrasts between his old priority and his new priority into sharper focus. It would be difficult to overstate the power of this event in changing the course of Dana’s life. Therefore, it is essential for us to take a closer look at its particulars.

The Flogging

The events leading up to the flogging incident are important because they set the stage for the event itself. If the circumstances leading up to the event had not been so severe and unsettling, perhaps the captain and the crew would not have been in such a

desperate state of mind, and the incident might never have taken place. An event of this magnitude made Dana aware of the needs of others. Dana had to witness the event with his own eyes before he could realize the severity of the problem. It's true that this was not the only flogging Dana witnessed, but this *particular* flogging is the one that inspired Dana to write his book, and his book, in turn, was the revelation that unveiled the eyes of the public to let them see more clearly the plight of the common sailor. It was necessary for the public to see the truth of this injustice in all its ramifications before they would be willing to insist upon a change. It was appropriate that it was Dana who experienced and witnessed the plight of the common sailor and who brought these events to life for the common landsman because Dana was a writer, and a thinker, a compassionate man of action. For this reason it was profitable for society that Dana be on the scene to witness the unjust flogging of Sam and John. Some might call it destiny.

A few weeks before the flogging of Sam and John, several important events occurred that caused a great unsettling to take place aboard the *Pilgrim*. One day a man fell overboard, and though the crew attempted his rescue, he was nevertheless lost. The death of their fellow sailor weighed heavily on the crew emotionally because they missed their co-worker, and it weighed heavily upon them physically because they had to take upon themselves his share of the work. In addition to this weight of sorrow and hardship was the uncertainty of the length of the voyage. The captain had promised the crew that it would be a two-year voyage, but it looked as though circumstances might change, that the merchants might require more than the 40,000 hides they had requisitioned in the beginning, that the crew might be strong-armed into working one or two more years. For

some sailors, this would have been little more than a disappointment and an inconvenience, but for Dana it was devastating. He describes the effect it had on the whole crew and specifically upon himself:

Besides, we were not provided for so long a voyage, and clothes and all sailors' necessaries were excessively dear—three or four hundred percent advance upon the Boston prices. This was bad enough for the crew; but still worse was it for me, who did not mean to be a sailor for life, having intended only to be gone eighteen months or two years. Three or four years might make me a sailor in every respect, mind and habits, as well as body, *nolens volens*, and would put all my companions so far ahead of me that a college degree and a profession would be in vain to think of; and I made up my mind that, feel as I might, a sailor I might have to be, and to command a merchant vessel might be the limit of my ambition (94-5).

At this point Dana was in a state of panic about his future. He realized he was at a crossroads; he knew that he would be forced to make a decision between returning to school and becoming a sailor for life, and he feared that he would lose the opportunity to make the decision himself, that his fate would be out of his hands and in the hands of Captain Thompson and the merchants driving him. The entire crew was at the mercy of a tyrannical captain with no hope of defense in an undeveloped Californian coastal town.

Dana described the morale of the crew at that time:

Besides the length of the voyage, and the hard and exposed life, we were in the remote parts of the earth, on an almost desert coast, in a country where there is neither law nor gospel, and where sailors are at their captain's mercy, there being no American consul or any one to whom a complaint could be made. We lost all interest in the voyage, cared nothing about the cargo, which we were only collecting for others, began to patch our clothes, and felt as though our fate was fixed beyond all hope of change. (95)

Thompson's decree that the crew would stay on the job at least another year or two pushed the crew into a desperate and helpless frame of mind. To make matters worse, Captain Thompson replaced the lost man, not with another common sailor who could

relieve the others by taking upon himself a fair share of their duties, but with another officer who would rule over them, driving them and assuming none of their duties:

“instead of shipping some hands to make our work easier, he had put another officer over us, to watch and drive us. We had now four officers, and only six [men] in the fore-castle. This was bringing her too much down by the stern for our comfort” (97-8). Dana writes that as the crew became more discontent, the captain became more severe: a vicious cycle of insubordination and retaliatory discipline ensued and the voyage took a downward turn. An implosion was inevitable:

Severity created discontent, and signs of discontent provoked severity . . . All hands were called to “come up and see it rain,” and kept on deck hour after hour in a drenching rain, standing round the deck so far apart as to prevent our talking with one another, with our tarpaulins and oil-cloth jackets on, picking old rope to pieces, or laying up gaskets and robands. This was often done, too, when we were lying in port with two anchors down, and no necessity for more than one man on deck as a look-out. This is what is called “hazing” a crew, and “working their old iron up.” (96-7)

We see the sublime on display in the series of events that take place at this point in Dana’s narrative. On the heels of these feelings of exhaustion, desperation, and despair on the part of the crew, and following on the heels of the storm, were two altercations, one between the cook and the captain and another between the captain and the first mate. Finally, Captain Thompson, himself desperate and exhausted, abandoned all semblance of self-control and verbally and physically assaulted the crew:

But his displeasure was chiefly turned against a large, heavy-moulded fellow from the Middle States, who was called Sam. This man hesitated in his speech, was rather slow in his motions, and was only a tolerably good sailor, but usually seemed to do his best; yet the captain took a dislike to him, thought he was surly and lazy, and “if you once give a dog a bad name”—as the sailor-phrase is—“he may as well jump overboard” . . . “The more you drive a man, the less he will do,” was as true with us as with any other people (102-3).

The captain argued with Sam, engaging the man in a fist fight and accusing him of impudence and of “giving him jaw,” while Sam stood his ground defending himself, insisting upon his innocence. Finally, when the captain offered to flog Sam, Sam retorted, “I’m no Negro slave,” and that pushed Thompson over the top: “‘Then I’ll make you one,’ said the captain . . . The crew and officers followed the captain up the hatchway; but it was not until after repeated orders that the mate laid hold of Sam, who made no resistance, and carried him to the gangway.” Even the captain’s mate understood the flogging to be unjust, as is evidenced by his reluctance to obey orders in a timely fashion, and the crew knew the flogging to be unjust as is evidenced by John’s question to the captain: “‘What are you to flog that man for, sir?’ said John the Swede, to the captain.” “Upon hearing this, the captain turned upon John,” who, like Sam, made no resistance, and promised him a flogging as well. A description of the event is worth quoting to give us a glimpse into what was going on inside Dana’s head and heart at the time, to help us enter into the sentiments he felt. It will explain how the incident pushed him outside of himself and his identity crisis towards the concerns of others. Here in Dana’s words is his description of the event:

Sam, by this time, was seized up, as it is called; that is, placed against the shrouds, with his wrists made fast to them, his jacket off, and his back exposed. The captain stood on the break of the deck, a few feet from him, and a little raised, so as to have a good swing at him, and held in his hand the end of a thick, strong rope. The officers stood round, and the crew grouped together in the waist. All these preparations made me feel sick and almost faint, angry and excited as I was. A man—a human being, made in God’s likeness—fastened up and flogged like a beast! A man, too, whom I had lived with, eaten with, and stood watch with for months, and knew so well! If a thought of resistance crossed the minds of any of the men, what was to be done? (104)

In addition to this passage is another passage that I would like to quote because I think that this one event pushed Dana towards a future in defense of not only the common sailor but also the fugitive slave. Captain Thompson's wicked actions and prejudiced sentiments were certainly instrumental in Dana's life:

[T]he captain, swelling with rage and with the importance of his achievement, walked the quarter-deck, and at each turn, as he came forward, calling out to us: "You see your condition! You see where I've got you all, and you know what to expect! You've been mistaken in me! You didn't know what I was! Now you know what I am! I'll make you toe the mark, every soul of you, or I'll flog you all, fore and aft, from the boy up! You've got a driver over you! Yes, a slave-driver—a nigger-driver! I'll see who'll tell me he isn't a NIGGER slave! (107)

Compounding the horror of the flogging is the desperation Dana feels at being helpless to render aid to his shipmates, held hostage as he was, along with the rest of the crew, on a ship in the middle of the ocean, under the militant eye of armed officers. Yet the question was brewing in his mind now as it was in his mind as a child when he vowed, "something must be done." This sentiment might easily be considered Dana's mantra:

And then, on the other side, there were (besides the captain) three officers, steward, agent, and clerk, and the cabin supplied with weapons. But besides the numbers, what is there for sailors to do? If they resist, it is mutiny; and if they succeed, and take the vessel, it is piracy. If they ever yield again, their punishment must come; and if they do not yield, what are they to be for the rest of their lives? If a sailor resists his commander, he resists the law, and piracy or submission is his only alternative. Bad as it was, they saw it must be borne. It is what a sailor ships for. (105)

"It is what a sailor ships for" is Dana's courageous response, and it is quite obvious that it is the response of the other sailors too, for no one retaliated. Their reluctance to fight the captain tells of their character under pressure. They were innocent, yet they refused to retaliate, and according to Dana's account, they were respectful in their responses to the

captain, continuing to appropriately address him as “Sir.” Yet Dana was not willing to let the matter rest; instead, he made a commitment to do something about it:

A gloom was over everything . . . I had no real apprehension that the captain would lay a hand on me; but I thought of our situation, living under a tyranny, with an ungoverned, swaggering fellow administering it; of the character of the country we were in; the length of the voyage; the uncertainty attending our return to America; and then, if we should return, the prospect of obtaining justice and satisfaction for these poor men; and I vowed that, if God should ever give me the means, I would do something to redress the grievances and relieve the sufferings of that class of beings with whom my lot had so long been cast. (108)

This statement “something must be done” is repeated over and over again in Dana’s life; it is the motivation behind everything he does, and in this instance, it is the sentiment that determines the course of his life’s work. “Something must be done” in this instance led to Dana’s later writing his famous narrative *Two Years*, and it led to the focus of his subsequent law practice in which he defended the common sailor and fugitive slave, as we will see.

The fact that Dana commits himself to doing something for “these poor men” is an indication that he is finally willing to acknowledge a gap between himself and the rest of the crew, and the gap that he acknowledges pertains to caste or class identity. You will notice in the above excerpt that Dana had no personal fear “that the captain would lay a hand” on *him*. He confesses also to his doubts about “the prospect of obtaining justice and satisfaction for *these poor men*.” Both of these confessions made by Dana, using terms that set him apart from “others” in his life, give us a clue to his state of mind at the time. Obviously, Dana finally came to see himself for who he really was and for who he was not. He was not a sailor; he was a lawyer destined to defend the sailor. And what qualified him to be a lawyer was his upbringing and caste, his education, and his calling.

What qualified him to defend the sailor in particular was his identification with and sympathy for him. Why he was not afraid that Captain Thompson would “lay a hand” on him was more than the fact that he had found safety in obeying all of Thompson’s rules, as we will now see.

Following the flogging, Dana’s eyesight miraculously improved and he began to read voraciously everything he could get his hands on. Allan C. Christensen addresses this turn of events in his article “Textual Voyages of Self-Formation and Liberation”:

In the ‘new scene’ he draws both on stores of poetic vitality recovered within himself and upon books that begin to come to hand. During the week after the floggings, regret about the absence of books rather surprisingly begins to trouble him as a form of thirst . . . The problem with his eyes that has made reading painful is mysteriously cured, and references to reading books on the ship thereafter suggest that the activity becomes habitual . . . The process of his recovery thus resembles the traditional journey through the desert towards some land of promise. That land is Cambridge, the book-filled land from which he has been so eager to escape and for which he now yearns with increasing homesickness. (272)

It was on this trip that he stumbled across Edward Bulwer-Lytton’s *Paul Clifford* (1830), a book that he declared to be “far too good for a sailor” (191) and which later became the subject of his doctoral dissertation. Concerning his reading of Bulwer’s *Paul Clifford*,

Dana says:

I went below again, turned into my hammock, and read until the dog watch. As lights were not allowed after eight o’clock, there was no reading in the night watch. Having light winds and calms, we were three days on the passage, and each watch below, during the daytime, I spent in the same manner, until I had finished my book. I shall never forget the enjoyment I derived from it. To come across anything with the slightest claims to literary merit was so unusual that this was a feast to me. The brilliancy of the book, the succession of capital hits, and the lively and characteristic sketches, kept me in a constant state of pleasing sensations. It was far too good for a sailor. I could not expect such fine times to last long. (191)

The phrase “too good for a sailor” is too important at this point to overlook, for if Dana was a real sailor, he had a lot of nerve reading a book that he considered to be “too good for a sailor.” Yet he was reading—and understanding—the book, the act of which, accompanied by the phrase “too good for a sailor,” set him apart from his companions.

Christensen, in his article comparing Darwin’s *Voyage of the Beagle* and Dana’s *Two Years*, acknowledges:

His mental training entails the application here of critical criteria to literary texts. But although the ship offers at that point an ideal environment for such appreciation of “literary merit”—“a cool breeze . . . the ship under easy way, and everything comfortable”—the book is “too good for a sailor.” The phrase provides one of many indications of his growing dissociation of his “better nature” from the sailor’s nature. It becomes clear that the other sailors too no longer identify him as one of themselves, if indeed they ever have. They recognize, for example, his superior linguistic skills: “As I soon knew more Spanish than any of the crew, (who indeed knew none at all,) and had been at college and knew Latin, I got the name of a great linguist, and was always sent for by the captain and officers to get provisions, or to carry letters and messages.” (273)

The healing of Dana’s eyes was accompanied by a return to reading, indicating not only a return to himself but also an intellectual elevation above his shipmates. But his experience of suffering alongside the other sailors meant that he couldn’t keep exclusively to himself the return of this gift of reading. For, in addition to reading to satisfy his newfound thirst for literature, he began also to read for the benefit of his fellow sailors, some of whom were illiterate and who gathered around him like school children around a teacher. This is how Dana describes his joy in sharing literature with his shipmates:

One man recollected a book he had left in the galley. He went after it, and it proved to be Woodstock. This was a great windfall, and as all could not read it at once, I, being the scholar of the company, was appointed reader. I got a knot of

six or eight about me, and no one could have had a more attentive audience . . . I read nearly all day, until sundown; when, as soon as supper was over, as I had nearly finished, they got a light from the galley. (267)

In this act of paternal friendship we can see that even before he was yet home and had finished school and opened private practice, he was already serving the common sailor in this simple compassionate way. Yet, the mention of it in his book lets us in on his acknowledgment that he was separate from the rest of the crew intellectually. There are some who would find fault with this assertion and would accuse Dana of self-importance. Perhaps one could make a case for this, but I will argue that it would of necessity take an intellectual to become a lawyer in the first place, so it really comes as no surprise that Dana, who was lawyer-in-the-making, would read to the other sailors. I would also defend Dana by saying that while he didn't *become* "just a sailor," neither did he *remain* "just a gentleman's son." He took a turn at the helm, so to speak, and became a sailor for a time, experienced and witnessed first-hand the difficulties and challenges involved in that profession, and then returned to his own realm better equipped to fulfill his calling. Later, after realizing and embracing his calling, Dana admits:

We must come down from our heights, and leave our straight paths for the by-ways and low places of life, if we would learn truths by strong contrasts; and in hovels, in forecastles, and among our own outcasts in foreign lands, see what has been wrought among our fellow-creatures by accident, hardship, or vice. (270)

Dana was led by physical infirmity to "come down from the heights" of Cambridge and spend two years "in hovels and forecastles" to "learn truths by strong contrasts," and it's to the benefit of the common sailor and the fugitive slave that he did.

There is one last event while aboard the merchant ship in which Dana set himself apart from the common sailor by way of caste identity, and it is an event that completes

his transformation from temporary sailor back to lawyer. As previously mentioned, this event took place at the close of the hide-gathering mission, at which time Captain Thompson entered into a discussion with two of his colleagues concerning a likely extension of the voyage. At one point in this scenario, Thompson abruptly broke his conversation asking Dana if he wanted to go home in the ship, and Dana answered that he expected to go home in the ship. Thompson surprised Dana with the demand that he find someone else to take his place on board the *Pilgrim* (282). Dana was caught off-guard with Thompson's unexpected, inappropriate, and unfair response:

As soon as I had got my wits about me, I put on a bold front, and told him plainly that I had a letter in my chest informing me that he had been written to by the owners in Boston to bring me home in the ship; and, moreover, that he had told me that he had such instructions, and that I was to return in the ship.

Thompson was not accustomed to taking no for an answer:

To have this told [Thompson], and to be opposed in such a manner, was more than my lord paramount had been used to. He turned fiercely upon me, and tried to look me down and face me out of my statement; but finding that that wouldn't do, and that I was entering upon my defense in such a way as would show to the other two that he was wrong, he changed his ground, and pointed to the shipping-papers of the *Pilgrim*, from which my name had never been erased and said that there was my name, —that I belonged to her, —that he had an absolute discretionary power—and, in short, that I must be on board the *Pilgrim* by the next morning with my chest and hammock or have some one ready to go in my place, and that he would not hear another word from me. (283)

Dana, seeing that Captain Thompson would not listen to an argument based on facts, chose another tactic; he decided to defend himself by pulling rank, threatening Thompson with powerful people back home, appealing subtly to class rank:

But it would have all availed me nothing, had I been “some poor body” before this absolute, domineering tribunal. But they saw that I would not go, unless “vi et armis,” and they knew that I had friends and interest enough at home to make them suffer for any injustice they might do me. It was probably this that turned

the scale; for the captain changed his tone entirely and asked me if, in case any one went in my place, I would give him the same sum that Stimson gave Harris to exchange with him. I told them that if any one was sent on board the brig I should pity him, and be willing to help him to that, or almost any amount; but would not speak of it as an exchange. (284)

Unfortunately, this was not the end of the battle, for Dana then had to face his shipmates who resented him for the power he could wield based upon lineage and class standing:

“Oh, yes!” said the crew; “the captain has let you off because you are a gentleman’s son, and taken Ben because he is poor, and has got nobody to say a word for him.” I knew that this was too true to be answered, but I excused myself from any blame, and told them that I had a right to go home, at all events. This pacified them a little, but Jack [generic for “sailor”] had got a notion that a poor lad was to be imposed upon, and did not distinguish very clearly . . . The notion that I was not “one of them” which, by a participation in all their labour and hardships, and having no favour shown me, and never asserting myself among them, had been laid asleep, was beginning to revive . . . I knew, too, that the two captains had agreed together to get some one, and that unless I could prevail upon somebody to go voluntarily, there would be no help for Ben. From this consideration, though I had said that I would have nothing to do with an exchange, I did my best to get some one to go voluntarily. (284-5)

This incident set Dana further apart from the rest of the crew, but it was a separation that worked for their good in the end. For, it is because he was *not* “one of them” that he could rise to his calling to defend them. And it is because he *was* “one of them” that he attained the understanding and compassion, sympathy and empathy, which enabled him later to spend his life in their defense.

Though many readers consider the flogging scene to be the most important incident in Dana’s narrative—and it is to that event that his contemporaries most often referred when fighting for sailors’ rights—it is not the final crucial event in his story. There is one event yet to consider as we contemplate that which was formative in Dana’s

young life, and it is the crew's experience navigating around Cape Horn on their return trip to Boston while aboard the *Alert*. Let us turn to that subject now.

Navigating the Cape

Following Dana's confrontation with Captain Thompson, in which he was threatened with additional cruise time, Dana boarded the *Alert* under the leadership of Captain Wilson. In addition to the myriad challenges the sailors faced navigating a ship heavily laden with 40,000 hides, they had yet to look forward to a trip around the Cape on their return home. It is in this scene that the natural sublime merges with the spiritual sublime, for it is in the trip around the Cape that Dana is struck with a debilitating toothache that rendered him helpless and useless to the voyage and confined him to his berth.

As Burke argues, words have an advantage over the visual arts in communicating the idea of the sublime. For each written or verbal description, there are an infinite number of interpretations, all based on each participant's imagination and experiences. Furthermore, by dwelling on a verbal or written description, the receivers can and do amplify upon the words they hear, either minimizing or maximizing the effect produced by the words themselves. Suffice it to say that a visual artist's rendition of a storm at sea is limited to what he can produce on the canvas, but a writer's description of the same storm gives the reader the potential of endless possibilities of interpretation, and therein is the strength of words over paint. Dana's account of his trip around the Cape is a case in point. Read it, and see if you do not enter into an imaginative experience with the sublime vicariously with Dana:

And there lay, floating in the ocean, several miles off, an immense irregular mass, its top and points covered with snow, its centre a deep indigo. This was an iceberg, and of the largest size. As far as the eye could reach, the sea in every direction was of a deep blue colour, the waves running high and fresh, and sparkling in the light; and in the midst lay this immense mountain-island, its cavities and valleys thrown into deep shade, and its points and pinnacles glittering in the sun. But no description can give any idea of the strangeness, splendour, and, really, the sublimity of the sight. Its great size—for it must have been two or three miles in circumference, and several hundred feet in height; its slow motion, as its base rose and sank in the water and its points nodded against the clouds; the high dashing of the waves upon it, which, breaking high with foam, lined its base with a white crust; and the thundering sound of the cracking of the mass, and the breaking and tumbling down of huge pieces; together with its nearness and approach, which added a slight element of fear—all combined to give it the character of true sublimity. (320)

This example of natural sublimity in the form of an iceberg is an instance of sublimity outside the realm of the human body, and into the experience is interjected an experience of sublimity within the realm of the human body in the form of pain, and that stemming from an excruciating toothache. The reader will remember that I addressed the subject pain and its affect on the nervous system, per Burke, earlier in this thesis. We can compare the pain Dana endures at this juncture of his narrative with the pain Sam and John endured when Captain Thompson flogged them. In the latter instance, pain upon the human frame came from outside the tormented bodies, while in the former example, pain came from within the sufferer's own body, the only distinction being, for my purposes in my essay, the *source* of the pain. Burke makes no distinction between the two sources as instances that produce the effects of terror, the main characteristic of the sublime, and he argues that pain evokes the same bodily response as that of fear or terror:

I say a man in great pain has his teeth set, his eye-brows are violently contracted, his forehead is wrinkled, his eyes are dragged inwards, and rolled with great vehemence, his hair stands on end, the voice is forced out in short shrieks and groans, and the whole fabric totters. Fear or terror, which is an apprehension of

pain or death, exhibits exactly the same effects, approaching in violence to those just mentioned in proportion to the nearness of the cause, and the weakness of the subject. (105)

Burke goes on to compare the similarity in the results of pain and terror upon the human frame:

The only difference between pain and terror, is, that things which cause pain operate on the mind, by the intervention of the body; whereas things that cause terror generally affect the bodily organs by the operation of the mind suggesting the danger; but both agreeing, either primarily, or secondarily, in producing a tension, contraction, or violent emotion of the nerves, they agree likewise in everything else. (106)

Comparing Burke's statements with Dana's experience at this juncture of the narrative, it is clear to me that Dana was in the midst of a sublime experience during the passage around the Cape: he was suffering the sublime in the form of bodily pain, and he was suffering sublime in the form of terror as he felt his life threatened by the storm that ensued at the time when the crew attempted to navigate the Cape. Not that storms are unusual in this region; they are quite common. On this occasion, the captain called all hands on deck, and Dana dutifully responded, toothache notwithstanding. Unfortunately, there was no medication available to him to help him cope with the pain, and the scanty store of laudanum on hand was reserved for emergencies. I think a description of the event in Dana's own words is necessary in helping us understand this desperateness of his situation:

At the end of the third day, the ice was very thick; a complete fogbank covered the ship. It blew a tremendous gale from the eastward, with sleet and snow, and there was every promise of a dangerous and fatiguing night. At dark, the captain called the hands aft, and told them that not a man was to leave the deck that night; that the ship was in the greatest danger; any cake of ice might knock a hole in her, or she might run on an island and go to pieces. The look-outs were then set and every man was put in his station. When I heard what was the state of things, I

began to put on my things, to stand it out with the rest of them, when the mate came below, and looking at my face ordered me back to my berth, saying if we went down we should all go down together, but if I went on deck I might lay myself up for life. In obedience to the mate's orders, I went back to my berth; but a more miserable night I never wish to spend. (327)

As D.H. Lawrence notes in his article on the text, Dana's is the story of the strength of man pitted against the elements. Lawrence's language representing the natural sublime suggests the sublimity of the eternal God, whose attributes are exemplified by the very sea that He made. Notice Lawrence's terminology:

It is a story of a man pitted in conflict against the sea, the vast, almost *omnipotent* element. In contest with this *cosmic* enemy, man finds his further ratification, his further ideal vindication. He comes out victorious, but not till the sea has tortured his living, integral body, and made him pay something for his triumph in consciousness. (184, emphasis mine)

This trip around the Cape is more than a physical battle; it involves Dana's mind as well, in a kind of spiritual battle, and through the experience of facing and surviving the sublime he comes to a certain knowledge, as Lawrence himself intimates:

The horrific struggle round Cape Horn, homewards, is the crisis of the Dana history. It is an entry into chaos, a heaven of sleet and black ice-rain, a sea of ice and iron-like water. Man fights the element in all its roused, mystic hostility to conscious life. This fight is the inward crisis and triumph of Dana's soul. He goes through it all consciously, enduring, *knowing*. It is not a mere overcoming of obstacles. It is a pitting of the deliberate consciousness against all the roused, hostile, anti-life waters of the Pole. (184)

Lawrence concludes his assessment by arguing that Dana's victory over the passage around the Cape is a success not only of the body but also of the mind, which intersects with my own argument as well. A battle with the sublime leaves the victor better informed and more confident to face the future. It infuses him with knowledge that he may have not acquired any other way. Lawrence views it as a defining moment:

After this fight, Dana has achieved his success. He knows. He knows what the sea is. He knows what Cape Horn is. He knows what work is, work before the mast. He knows, he knows a great deal. He has carried his consciousness open-eyed through it all. He has won through . . . And from his book, we know too. He has lived this great experience for us, we owe him homage. (185)

And it is critical homage that I offer Dana with this thesis. I agree with Lawrence's summary of this argument, yet I don't think he goes far enough for he does not answer the question why or how Dana was successful. Was it luck—or providence—that brought him through his ordeal? Dana himself would seem to argue for providence, as I will now illustrate.

For Dana, the storm that tormented the crew in their passage around the Cape was not exclusively a battle against the natural sublime but also a personal battle between Dana and his sublime God, as he indicates in his autobiography. I argue this point further with my interpretation of another man's battle against the sublime. The biblical narrative of Job, a story that depicts God appearing to Job in the whirlwind, mirrors to a certain extent God "speaking" to Dana in the stormy passage around the Cape. Though Job's experience is arguably more intense than Dana's, the correlation is there: both men are brought to the end of themselves through a series of human challenges, both suffer bodily, and both face their God in the encounter with a storm. In an effort to substantiate my claim, and in answer to any of my readers who might question the correlation between the experience of a Biblical character and a 19th century author, I offer the following excerpt from Dana's autobiography. It is quite lengthy, but it serves the purpose of substantiating my argument and of setting to rest, perhaps, the qualms of my reader:

While on my California voyage I had fallen into all the bad habits of sailors, and profanity among the rest. At first I did not, and it was not until from the length of the voyage I gave up all hope of returning to cultivated society and supposed I was made a sailor for life, that I fell into their ways. When I did, I was as bad as any of them. Not a man in my ship was more guilty in God's sight than myself. *During this voyage, I had but one time of serious Impressions, and that was when lying sick in my berth, off Cape Horn, amidst the ice, and in momentary danger of death.* I knew that the very next wave might send the vessel against ice, which the fog head from us, and which might destroy us in an instant. I lay, too, in my berth in the forecastle just where the vessel would strike, if at all. In this state, I prayed and vowed to God, but it was strange and did not go to the root of the evil; and the next day I forgot it, and cast-off fear and disdain and prayer before God. (72)

Such was my religious State, when the event befell me to which I have alluded. Soon after my return I heard of the death of a young lady whom I had known a year or two before I went to sea, and with whom I had been quite intimate, and whose simple purity of heart, kindness and religious faith and practice, I sincerely respected; yet whom I had no reason to suppose particularly attached to me. When I heard of her death, which happened during my absence, a few days before my return (September 3, 1836) it was with very little emotion, and being occupied with other things, and looking upon her only as an acquaintance who had died and gone with the pure in heart to see God. I wrote a formal letter of condolence to her friends to which I received one in reply. This told me that which stirred my soul to its center. She had been interested with the rest in my voyage, and the only thing they observed was that she never mentioned my name. Her last sickness was attended with delirium. In this delirium she spoke only of me. She prayed for me; for my safety from suffering and death, and above all for my eternal salvation, and said she feared I had not made my peace with God. In recovering from the delirium, she asked her mother privately whether she had spoken of me, and being told that she had, and how, she opened her whole heart to her mother. Among other things she said that if the spirits of those in the other world attended upon and watched over those in this, and God would permit it for her, her prayer would be that she might watch over me, keeping me from sin, and influencing me toward God and holy things. And her very last moments she prayed fervently and passionately for me, and the last words that fell from her lips were "Prepare for him for a seat at Thy right hand" (73)

Poor, poor ----, if God has granted your prayer, what perseverance, what insensibility, what wickedness have you been obliged to see! Yet you have seen me brought by your own words to a sense of sin, led to seek God, to profess him before men, and to hope in him for eternity (74).

My high blown pride broke under me. I felt, too, as I never had before, the glory and purity of God, of Heaven, of angels and spirits made perfect, and the vileness

of my own nature. For several days I could find no relief but in solitude and in tears. I was prostrate in the earth. I felt, too, that God had nicely attuned this last call to all my feelings, that I had resisted before, and became certain that if I resisted this I never should have another so complete and likely to be efficacious. In time I bowed to God. I gave myself up to him, and sought pardon through Christ as the appointed way, and by uniting myself with the visible church, and partaking of his ordinances, and seeking knowledge of eternal things, began, I trust, that religious life which I have since followed. God knows and my own soul knows how lamely, miserably and sinfully, but yet I trust with the hope of heaven and of seeing and enjoying God hereafter (75).

According to Dana's assessment, as viewed in the above excerpts, God was in the storm that tormented the crew in their passage around the Cape; it was not for Dana merely a battle against the natural sublime but also a personal battle against God, who in this instance manifested Himself in the sublime. With that in mind I would now like to invite my reader to think about storms, not storms in the general sense as in storms in the lives of universal humankind, but storms that are specific to the lives of God's followers. The source for this portion of my argument is anchored in the book of Job, a book of biblical poetry found in the Old Testament. I will cite examples found in the closing chapters of Job as interpreted by commentators David Atkinson and John E. Hartley to suggest that just as Job claimed to see his God in the whirlwind, Dana also claimed to see his God in the storm around the Cape.

Job's Storm/Dana's Storm

Assuming my reader is familiar with the details of the story of Job, including his sufferings, the interview between God and Satan, the accusations of Job's friends, and Job's self-defense and ultimate confrontation with his God, I will pick up my argument in defense of the sublimity of God in Dana's storm with Job chapter 38. It is in this chapter that God finally addresses Job's questions and concerns "out of the whirlwind."

That which strikes me most dramatically is the idea that God spoke to Job “out of the whirlwind.” Comparing Job’s experience to Dana’s, notice that according to Dana’s testimony, one of God’s most dramatic overtures to him occurred in a storm as well—the storm that took place during his passage around Cape Horn. Literarily at least, storms are intimidating. To both Job and Dana, these two storms are big, loud, threatening, deadly, and terrifying; they are *sublime*. But most importantly, God Himself is in these storms, which means that to these two men, God Himself is also sublime. David Atkinson, in his commentary on the book of Job, argues that “elsewhere in the Bible, the storm is the appropriate context for a theophany—that is, a disclosure of God’s presence” and then offers an example from Exodus 19:16-19:

On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, with thick cloud over the mountain, and a very loud trumpet blast . . . Then Moses led the people out of the camp to meet with God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain. Mount Sinai was covered with smoke, because the LORD descended on it in fire. The smoke billowed up from it like smoke from a furnace, the whole mountain trembled violently, and the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder. Then Moses spoke and the voice of God answered him. (138-9)

In his autobiography, Dana wrote that this God did come in the storm around the Cape through the deathbed prayers of a friend back home: “Her last sickness was attended with delirium. In this delirium she spoke only of me. She prayed for me; for my safety from suffering and death, and above all for my eternal salvation, and said she feared I had not made my peace with God” (74).

I think that at the time of the storm Dana was in the dark, not realizing that the storm, the toothache, and his friend’s deathbed prayers on his behalf were all part of

God's visitation upon him. Job was in the dark during his trial too, never guessing that his trials were the result of a contest of sorts between Satan and God. As Atkinson argues:

Job's worst fears were that God had abandoned him . . . Of course God's withdrawal was all part of the story, for Job's pilgrimage of faith was precisely *not* a pilgrimage of sight. It is crucial to the story that Job should be in the dark. So he stands as a representative of, and an example for, all those of us who try to keep trusting in the dark. For all those of us whose faith is tested by the darkness and the apparent absence of God, the great reassurance of Job 38 is that God speaks. The Lord does come! (140)

There is no denying that Job was in rare form at this point in his life. Up until this time of trial Job had the world by the tail. This is not to say that he wasn't a man of faith, just as God suggests to Satan, but to all outward appearances, he had good reason to be faithful to a God who blessed his every venture. But at this point, this time of intense trial, Job had to live by faith in exclusively because all of his props had been pulled out from under him. In this scenario, Job learned to trust God in the darkest time of his life. Dana's book is something like Job's book; it is his personal record of the most trying time in his life, the time when he was walking in the dark. His vision impairment was real, but it was also symbolic; Dana couldn't see well enough to read, so he had to leave school; he couldn't see clearly enough to plan adequately for his future; he had to wait on God's leading, and he waited in the dark. So did Job. Little did Job know that God and Satan were engaged in a battle over the genuineness of Job's faith. This fact was hidden from him.

Like Job, Dana could not see ahead of where he was at the time of his trial. He did not know what his future held, what he would do for a living, and this was disconcerting. But it was also necessary, I think. To be in the dark means being open to possibilities,

open to a change of plans. If Dana had not been “in the dark,” suffering from a temporary impairment of vision, there would never have been a reason for him to board the ship; he would never have seen his fellow sailors flogged and heard his God blasphemed, he would never have experienced a life-threatening storm around the Cape and heard the voice of God in the storm. All of these events worked together to round out his education, to make him, as he himself would have believed, into the lawyer that God intended for him to become.

According to the Biblical account, God spoke to Job in the whirlwind, and by the end of the story Job not only confesses to hearing God but also to seeing Him (Job 42:5). According to Dana’s narrative, God worked in the storm as the final overture to bring him into communion with Himself. In these two stories, it is in the storm that God seems to speak His loudest; it is in the storm that His followers not only hear God, but it is there that they also see Him. The Apostle Paul also seems to imply that God manifests Himself to His servants audibly through spoken words, “So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God” (Romans 10:17). In Job’s narrative, God is *heard* through His word, and *seen* in the storm. In Dana’s narrative, he confesses to experiencing “serious Impressions,” a term which it is safe to assume is in reference to a visitation from his God, sent to him through the prayers of his dying friend back home in Boston. Both Job’s and Dana’s stories seem to demonstrate that God comes to His followers in the sublime experiences of their lives. Job’s ordeal of sublimity in suffering was a test of his faith; God’s manifestation in the whirlwind was confirmation of His presence.

Later in his narrative, Dana acknowledged God's presence in the passage around the Cape, referring to the experience as "serious impressions" and this event, though quite different from the flogging event, is yet one more example of Dana's belief in a supernatural working in his life. If I am interpreting both Job and Dana correctly, then both Job and Dana acknowledge God as the author of their ordeals. If I am interpreting Burke correctly, then their ordeals of pain and terror are sublime; and if I both men are honest in stating that they believed God came to them in their sublime ordeals, then God Himself is sublime.

CHAPTER 3

THE VICTORY OF THE SUBLIME: DANA'S LIFE FOLLOWING THE VOYAGE

Dana shipped out of Boston on August 14, 1834, infirmed and discouraged, and he returned to Boston on September 22, 1836, a transformed and improved human being, whole in body and spirit: "He went away a town-nurtured, college stripling of nineteen; he returned a robust man of twenty-one. The heroic treatment to which he had recourse settled the difficulty with his eyes; thereafter they gave him no more trouble" (Adams 1: 14). Dana passed the test of the natural sublime brought upon him by nature; he passed the test of the spiritual sublime in the same venue. He had "gone down to the sea in ships and done business in great waters"; he had "seen the works of the Lord, and His wonders in the deep." Just as Job, that Old Testament paragon of steadfastness, passed his sublime test and said, "But He knows the way that I take; when He has tried me, I shall come forth as gold" (Job 23:10), so Dana had been tried and come forth victorious. He had faced and successfully navigated the sublime. After receiving the education that he could only receive "by doing business in great waters," Dana was equipped to take the next step in preparation for his calling; that of completing his academic education to obtain the credential that society recognized as qualification for a career at the bar.

Dana's career began in earnest not upon graduation from Harvard and passing the bar, but with his doctoral dissertation on the works of Bulwer. For it was in studying the works of Bulwer after his eyesight healed and while still on his voyage that Dana was impressed with the idea of "unveiling" the true plight of the common sailor. Dana's eyesight returned very soon after the infamous flogging of Sam and John, which so

moved Dana. It was at this point that Dana began to return to his true self, thirsting once again for the knowledge he might glean from books. Among the various pieces of literature he discovered was Bulwer's *Paul Clifford*.

Perhaps Dana did not know at the time that he would revisit Bulwer's text in the writing of his doctoral dissertation, yet it is obvious that the work made a lasting impression upon him. Christensen addressed this subject in his article, saying of Dana's dissertation: "The academic exercise, which earned the Bowdoin prize for 'dissertations in English' at Harvard in 1837, may be considered the first literary product of Dana's voyage. It prefigured in preparatory respects the literary masterpiece, *Two Years Before the Mast*, on which he would soon thereafter begin to work" (290). Indeed, it is fair to say that Dana's interpretation of Bulwer's works became the model for his own book, *Two Years*, in that in it he found the impetus to "lift the veil" on the true condition of the common sailor at sea just as Bulwer strived to lift the veil on the immorality in society in writing *Paul Clifford*. Dana wrote: "The novels of Bulwer have served then to 'lift' a 'veil which ought to be lifted' and to show the darkness. Bulwer 'has made a disclosure, he has recalled the world to a sense of what sin & misery there is in the very midst of it'" (qtd. in Christensen 290). That which most impressed Dana about Bulwer's work was the author's obvious attempt to reveal what Christensen calls "a region up till now hidden from . . . polite society" (293). Comparing Dana's statement about Bulwer's works with his statement from the preface of *Two Years* we can see where he got the idea of lifting the veil on the ills in his own society:

[Of Bulwer] It was felt that the world was *not* that flower garden in which we had nothing to do but to prune the defects & rear up & train the virtues; but that there

were deserts, & forests with their beasts of prey – that birds of prey were in the air, & that every green thing might be the covert of a venomous reptile . . . At this time Bulwer appeared with his first novels, whose scenes are laid in the extremes of high & low life. That he is a man without principle appears upon the face of his writings, yet his disclosures are like the confessions of an accomplice who has turned State's evidence . . . He is the first, we believe, who has introduced these characters with their shocking & revolting habits, & peculiar dialect, into the literary world. It is like a glimpse at the infernal regions . . . It breaks in upon the still industry of the school room, & the quiet tones of those who would represent the world as being all that it should be, & who teach the all-sufficiency of human reason, like the sound of distant thunder. We feel that a veil has been lifted from before our eyes; & a veil which ought to be lifted. (qtd. in Christensen 295)

Bulwer's willingness to be the first to confront the immorality in his society gave Dana the courage to be the first to confront the injustices occurring aboard the merchant and navy ships of his day. Notice the words Dana offers in description of his own book, *Two Years Before the Mast*:

During the two last years that I was in the Law School I was engaged in writing out the journal of my voyage . . . [and was] advised [to pursue] its publication. This I determined upon, not because I supposed the book could be of much benefit to me in a literary or pecuniary point of view, but because I thought it would be of some use to me in Boston in securing to me a share of maritime business, in insurance and other maritime cases, and because I believed it would also do something to enlighten the public as to the real situation of common seamen in the merchant service. (*Autobiographical Sketch* 87-8)

The following statement from Dana's dissertation serves to summarize the goal of both Bulwer's and Dana's work:

As it is better to go to the house of mourning than to the house of feasting; so a book which shall show us the vanity & corruption of the high, & the degradation & misery of the low – which shall convince us that the world is full of sin & suffering, which is near us, even at our doors; may do more to give us a right knowledge of human nature & to make us truly wise, than one which shall please & instruct, but leave us satisfied & complacent. (qtd. in Christensen 296).

And so it was the primary goal of Dana, writing both during and subsequent to his college experience, to reveal to the reading public the darkness hidden beneath "the veil,"

and to take up arms against the darkness, fighting within the perimeters of his gifts and expertise, that is, within the confines of the law.

In this endeavor Dana left us a legacy of compassion and justice which we can consider in three remarkable scenarios, all flowing from his calling as a lawyer: One, he defended the common sailor against the accusations of powerful captains and officers, receiving for his trouble a paltry remuneration. Two, he stood against the tide of public sentiment in defending the fugitive slave, spoke out against the Fugitive Slave Bill, and fought in favor of the Free Soil Movement. And three, he did these things willingly and energetically though it meant sacrificing societal status and political ambitions. J.L.

Amestoy, in his article about Dana and the Prize Cases, wrote:

No lawyer of equivalent standing had done as much on behalf of fugitive slaves—or paid a higher price. Dana had been socially ostracized, economically boycotted, and physically assaulted for his defense of fugitive slaves and their ‘rescuers.’ Dana had taken the cases without fee when Boston’s other prominent attorneys, Rufus Choate and Charles Sumner among them, had refused. Dana’s unwavering commitment to the unpopular side . . . kept the rich clients from his office. He was the counsel of the sailor and the slave—persistent, courageous, hard fighting, and skillful but still the advocate of the poor and unpopular. In the mind of wealthy and respectable Boston almost anyone was to be preferred to him. (16)

Dana practiced law at the time in American history immediately preceding the Civil War. There was then a large population of free blacks living peacefully in Boston, where for the most part they were treated with respect and dignity. Adams, in his biography of Dana, says that before the passing of the Fugitive Slave Bill, these free blacks were safe. The Bill made life as a free black very tenuous because, among other things, it gave white people the right to honestly or falsely accuse a black man, woman, or child of illegally running away from the slave states. At the time Dana began his law

practice, there was no one to defend these accused against their accusers, and those found guilty were summarily sent “down the river” where they were sold back into slavery.

When Dana came on the scene, suddenly these victims of oppression had an advocate, and though Dana did not win every case he defended, he did at least take the task upon himself, which was something none of his colleagues in the field of law was willing to do. This was the major reason why Dana, though he ran for political office several times, never attained a post because there was never any man in a position of power willing to endorse him. This is the price he paid for doing the right thing. In *Speeches in Stirring Times*, edited by Dana’s son, Dana III says:

As to his professional career, it is told in the Life [the Adams biography] how successful Mr. Dana was as to the number of cases he tried in court, and the proportion of verdicts he obtained; and from the point of view of income how frequently, though not always, he was on the side of the poor man, the sailor, or the fugitive slave, and how his attitude on the slave question, though he was not an extremist, not an Abolitionist, prevented his having many rich and influential clients; how, for example, an article had appeared in the papers urging Boston merchants not to retain him [because he not only defended the fugitive but also spoke out in favor of the cessation of slavery]. (55)

Because of his commitment to defend the fugitive against a cruel and unjust law, Dana sacrificed the societal prestige that lawyers generally come to expect in this line of work.

This fact is emphasized in the foreword of his book:

He opposed the Fugitive Slave Law . . . The case was defeated, but the mere championing of the fugitive slave caused Dana to lose his social position. Dana, the man of excessive refinement, was socially ostracized and, as if he were still carrying hides at Monterey, he set about hardening himself to the unexpected position in which he was cast. He yearned for the social status which would place him above all such limitations, but he chastened his longings with the grim self-discipline his father had taught him. (xi)

The loss of social prestige was not the only sacrifice Dana made for his cause. Adams claims that Dana's mode of action, that of selflessly fighting for the oppressed and downtrodden, likely cost him some lucrative business. But just as he didn't write his book for money, he didn't practice law for money either. He was a man who lived by his principles, not his pocketbook: "But to Dana the amount [of money] involved never seemed material, for he had the faculty of losing himself in his cause, and he would apparently work as hard to secure a verdict where a few hundred dollars were at issue as he could have worked had the matter been really worth contending over" (*Biography 2*: 134). In fact, there is evidence that Dana never accepted as much as one penny from the fugitive slaves he defended, though the family and friends of the defendants always took up a collection and offered it to him. Ultimately realizing that he would never accept payment for the services he rendered in their defense, a segment of the black population in Boston paid to have a placard made in his honor, and this he graciously accepted. Dana III, in *Speeches*, said: "Dana's connection with the fugitive slave cases was referred to as the 'one great act of his life;' and the strong expression was then ventured, that 'the man who holds that record in his hand may stand with head erect at the bar of final judgment itself'" (295). Dana III then honors his father's memory with a quote from Matthew 25: 31 and 40, which reads: "But when the Son of man shall come in his glory, and all the angels with him, then shall he sit on the throne of his glory . . . And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you. Inasmuch as ye did it unto one of these my brethren, even these least, ye did it unto me" (*Speeches 295*).

Of Dana's view on slavery and fugitives, Dana III tells us that "Mr. Dana had a vision of manhood freedom, but he was not an Abolitionist. He had no visionary plans of arming the negro slaves, of opposition to the Constitution, that 'compact with the devil,' as some extremists called it, nor of secession from the slave states" (61). Perhaps it would be best to say that he was a moderate, but a moderate unwaveringly committed to the law. Though he stood vehemently against slavery and the Fugitive Slave Law, he was not in favor of sudden, universal emancipation of millions of slaves, which threatened to leave people suddenly homeless, unemployed, and destitute. Instead, he favored a gradual emancipation. Dana III had so much faith in his father's views that he believed if Dana's views would have prevailed, the nation might have avoided the Civil War:

Had Mr. Dana's views more generally prevailed in the forties and fifties, we should have avoided the Civil War and the evils of sudden emancipation of the whole five millions of an enslaved race without preparation for freedom. Just as the Civil War was pending, he urged every reasonable conciliation with the South, but not submission to the claims of slavery extension. (*Speeches* 42)

As his son says, "Dana was a Free Soiler, not an Abolitionist":

He opposed extension of slavery to new states and territories theretofore free. He preferred Washington's and Lincoln's ideas of gradual emancipation to sudden abolition of existing slavery. He felt that the preservation of the union and the Constitution were matters too important to risk by agitation for extreme measure. He opposed the Fugitive Slave Law, not because it was improper to return fugitive slaves as the Constitution then was, but on account of the drastic and unjust provision of that law itself. (*Speeches* 41)

Dana was a legalist in the purest sense of the word. He believed in the law, which is why he wrote his book: to unveil the evils of a system designed to keep the power in the hands of captains and officers to the detriment of the common sailor, to unveil the evils resulting from those laws in order to correct the injustice, not by mutiny, as was

often attempted and found wanting, but by motivating the enactment of new laws. As to the country's laws about slaves and fugitive slaves, Dana again chose not what he considered to be the extreme response of abolition accompanied by violence, but chose instead to fight the law by promoting the enacting of new laws. In this regard, as in regard to sailors' rights, Dana led by example; as he defended the common sailor on evidence gained by personal experience, so he led the way in fighting for justice for the fugitive slave by personally defending the fugitive slave, to the point of great personal sacrifice. Dana obeyed the law, and when he found the law wanting, he did everything in his power to change it. One law he sought to change was the Fugitive Slave Law. On one occasion a fugitive slave escaped from his trial, and Dana was on hand to witness the event. A peaceful crowd of free blacks living in Boston accomplished Shadrach's escape. I say "peaceful crowd" because the group quietly surrounded the defendant and peaceably exited the courtroom and hurried down the street, all in broad daylight, and no one was hurt. Indeed, no one knew what happened until they looked around the courtroom and couldn't find Shadrach. It was more like a miracle, really. Here is Dana's response to the incident as he focuses on the injustice of the Fugitive Slave Law:

How can any right-minded man do else but rejoice at the rescue of a man from the hopeless, endless slavery to which a recovered fugitive is always doomed. If the law were constitutional, which I firmly believe it is not, it would be the duty of a citizen not to resist it by force, unless he was prepared for revolution and civil war; but we rejoice in the escape of a victim of an unjust law, as we would in the escape of an ill-treated captive deer or bird. (*Biography 1*: 183).

One of the most difficult things to do is to "love our neighbor as ourselves," and to "bear one another's burdens," but that is what Dana did. His intellect, family heritage, and social standing all paved the way for him to be great in his world. He could have

become a famous and wealthy lawyer; if only he had bowed to society's demands to "keep under" the lower classes, he could have been "great." But Dana didn't do that. Instead, he "counted others as more significant than himself."

Dana worked for the cause of the underdog in his day, but that dedication to justice came with a price in his professional life: he never attained a position in politics, though he strived more than once to attain a post. His son records evidence that attests to this claim in the collection of his father's speeches. There were at the time conflicting opinions as to why Dana never attained a political post:

Notwithstanding Mr. Dana's natural ability, careful preparation, sound sense, eloquence, and hard work, he did not achieve the high political career for which he was undoubtedly ambitious. His friend, Judge Hoar, thought his "Episcopalianism" stood in his way . . . Some of his friends thought him at times too "aristocratic." To this, his near-sightedness, inability to recognize faces quickly, a certain dignity of bearing, and his highmindedness lent force; though, in so far as it existed, it was strangely inconsistent with his thorough democracy concerning human rights, his siding with the oppressed with such ardor and courage, and his condemnation and even ridicule of aristocratic tendencies or reliance on family name and prestige in a country like ours. (48)

Dana himself had a different opinion concerning his failure to obtain a post, an opinion also recorded in Dana III's *Speeches*:

It may be interesting to know what Mr. Dana himself regarded as the chief stumbling-block to his public career. He believed it was the existence of the "spoils" system in American politics. He could not reconcile himself to the idea of securing personal success in politics by the use of public patronage, nor could he acquiesce in indirect participation of this breach of trust by others. (49)

As to Dana's response to his multiple disappointments in attempting to attain political positions, Dana models choosing the high road and trusting in God's will for his life rather than becoming embittered. In a letter to his son, in which he bemoans yet another loss in a political race, he says:

I should have liked the rest, leisure, and dignity of the post, and the chance it would have given me to study international law, and the change of life for me and your mother. “But a Disposer whose power we are little able to resist, and whose wisdom it behooves us not at all to dispute, has ordained in another manner, and whatever our querulous weakness may suggest, a far better.” (499)

Just as Dana’s dedication to justice and uprightness before God and man, and his stalwart grasp of honor according to his own definition cost him a coveted political post, these attitudes also cost him his health. Dana damaged his body by working ceaselessly on behalf of not only the poor and defenseless but also by a determination to give his all to even the smallest, seemingly trivial cases. Adams, Dana’s biographer and law assistant, watched the man at work every day and attests to this fact:

Dana’s life, in short, through all these years was one of drudgery; cheerful drudgery it is true, for he was always interested in his work, and he wore himself out uncomplainingly and even willingly,—almost as a matter of course. Nonetheless he did wear himself out; and the saddest feature of the process was that he did so, not battling over great principles in supreme tribunals, but fighting petty causes in inferior courts. (2: 135)

As we can see, Dana was a man of character, never neglecting even the smallest of jobs, but always giving his all for every piece of work that found its way onto his desk.

Dana did not make politics his god, nor did he bend the knee to mammon, a fact to which I alluded earlier. Adams states that just as Dana neglected to save for himself monetarily he also neglected to save himself physically. To this unfortunate end, Dana failed to appropriately utilize to the fullest capacity those who faithfully walked beside him and who could have assisted him in his labors. Adams tells us that Dana didn’t trust anyone but himself in preparing and arguing his cases, and he was not one to take advice. This also was to his own detriment:

He was a courageous man, and anxiety did not prey upon him; nevertheless, if there was anywhere a weak link in the chain, a constant, heavy strain like this was sure find it out. The cruel part of it was also, though no one seemed to realize it at the time, that there was a man of the rarest mental equipment using himself up mercilessly for no adequate result. Out of his profession he scarcely made a living; and certainly, though his habits and his household were simple, and economy was always kept in view, he succeeded in laying up but little. His methods of working were for himself the most costly possible, for the reason already referred to, that he seemed to have no faculty of making others do his work for him; though the amount of personal labor and study he would put into a case was none the less most wearing to those in his office. He was fond of working his mind clear by talking his cases over; but he did all the talking himself. (2: 137)

In describing Dana's greatest strength as a lawyer, Adams says that "It was not his grasp of legal principles, though in this regard he was not wanting; it was not his command of authorities, for that he did not have; it was his combined courage and tenacity, and his faculty of seeing things clearly himself, and then making others see them as he saw them" (2: 138). And in describing one particular case that Dana engaged, Adams says:

This was the best instance of what may not unfairly be called desperate jury fighting in which I ever saw Dana engaged, and I imagine the most desperate in which he ever was engaged. In it he showed throughout that he possessed in very high degree all the qualities—courage, alertness, control of temper and command of resources—which make the successful jury lawyer. But more and most of all, though I did not then realize it, he displayed in a high degree that great equality of physical and mental nerve which afterwards in other fields and amid different scenes I grew to prize so much in others, and which has always been a noticeable characteristic of great commanders. Never flustered even when taken unawares, Dana invariably rose to an equality with the occasion. As new difficulties presented themselves and the danger increased he seemed to grow cooler and more formidable; what excited others only toned him up to the proper key, and thus it was in the moment of greatest peril that he appeared in most complete control of all his faculties. (2: 143)

Maybe Dana's ability "to grow cooler and more formidable" was a quality he achieved through his youthful battle against the sublime, and perhaps his victory there made all future challenges seem easy. Would Dana have been so successful a lawyer, demanding

the respect and admiration of those closest to him if he had not been trained in the furnace of affliction through the trials of his voyage? Would he have developed a heart of compassion for the underdog had he not faced the unjust flogging of Sam and John and helplessness in the face of insurmountable injustice in the form of a tyrannical captain? How much of his manhood was built in his face-to-face encounter with the natural sublime of the sea and its unexpected storms; in the depravity of the sailor's wayward lifestyle; in the battle against the injustice of Captain Thompson, the leader he should have been able to trust; in the torment of his own spiritual wandering? How much of his greatness as lived out following law school and recorded for all posterity can be attributed to the sublime encounters during his two years before the mast? And how much of our own virtues can we attribute to the trials which suddenly and violently attempt to drown us and which we nevertheless weather and survive, wounded and scarred, more sensitive and tender, yet stronger than before? Adams describes just such a strength as Dana possessed:

It was in fact this nerve force in reserve which enabled Dana to lead so long as he did the life I have described. To a certain extent this was to him what an easy-going, placid temperament is to many, both men and women. He did not get over-excited, and lie awake worrying and tossing in his bed as those hours which precede the dawn wore themselves wearily away. On the contrary, in his times of severest labor and excessive strain he went forth and came in, got up and lay down, with that unconscious composure which comes from self-confidence and courage,—a composure which few possess and no one can cultivate,—the composure of a really strong man. (2: 144)

Dana developed “the composure of a really strong man,” and he achieved this development through his earlier, youthful confrontation with the sublime. That is the way it is for us too, for it is not the beautiful but the sublime experiences of our lives that build

within us the character and strength worthy of emulation and admiration. For Dana it was the two years before the mast that made him into a man who could agree with Paul in saying, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing" (II Timothy 4:7-8 KJV).

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