

ABSTRACT

of the paper entitled

Cosmic Cosmetics: Coincidental Visions of the Void in Mid-19th Century American and Hungarian Literature

Katalin G. Kállay

Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in Hungary

I wish to focus on the comparison of an excerpt from Chapter 42. of Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*: "The Whiteness of the Whale" and a Hungarian poem, Mihály Vörösmarty's "Prologue". The two works were published in the same year (1851), and obviously the two authors could not have known about each other. However, the idea of the emptiness or void (strangely connected to the color white) in the center of the universe gets manifested in strikingly similar images in the two works. The depiction of nature as an artificial make-up, a „mystical cosmetic” to cover the unknowable void, as well as the metaphor of the "harlot" / "the aging prostitute" concretely appear in both texts. This can be best demonstrated by the following two quotations:

And when we consider [...]that all deified Nature absolutely paints like the harlot, whose allurements cover nothing but the charnel-house within; and when we proceed further, and consider that the mystical cosmetic which produces every one of her hues, the great principle of light, for ever remains white or colorless in itself, [...]: pondering all this, the palsied universe lies before us a leper; and [...] the wretched infidel gazes himself blind at the monumental white shroud that wraps all the prospect around him. (*Moby Dick*)

When spring, the makeup-mistress comes again,
The aged earth may take a periwig
And find a frilly frock of daffodils.
The ice may thaw out on her glassy eyes,
Her perfume-scented, painted-on complexion
Pretending youth and faking happiness;
Ask then the aging, wrinkled prostitute
What has she done to her unhappy sons? (Prologue, Translated by Peter Zollman)

My paper will unfold along the lines of the following questions and points:

1. To what extent might literary coincidences be welcomed, taken seriously or rejected by academic research?
2. Beside the similarities, what are the significant contextual differences between Melville's and Vörösmarty's vision?
3. On the basis of various interpretations of the term "horror vacui", what possible differences are there between the "void" seen through the vision of mid-19th century authors and the emptiness or vacuum disheartening later artists and philosophers?
4. In what contexts can the word "cosmetics", etymologically connected to the word "cosmos" become an aesthetic category and a tool for literary interpretation?