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Darkness Leaping out of Light: Anti-Metaphysics and the Paradoxical Negative Affix in *Moby-Dick*

Cover Page Footnote

With immense gratitude for the community that pours so much into me, I'd like to thank my family, friends, and mentors who ceaselessly challenge and inspire me. The publication of this essay would not have been possible without the guidance of Professor Samuel Otter, whose course on Melville inspired me to write this paper, and Professor Dorothy Hale, who encouraged me to submit an essay for the NUCL conference that led to this publication.

Moby-Dick; or, The Whale by Herman Melville is a novel obsessed with exploration. This explorative story of Ahab, his crew, and the whale they are chasing, though only existing within 135 chapters, “willingly incorporates everything” (Said 396). Melville effectively presents not only various psychological, philosophical, and spiritual concepts, but also displays the multitudes of perspectives concerning these topics without ever fully resting upon one for more than a moment. Philosophy in *Moby-Dick* is a well-populated area of academia and the endless philosophical interpretations are a direct result of the novel’s all-encompassing nature. The metaphysical musings of the novel—which are displayed, amongst various other ways, in Ahab’s and Ishmael’s dichotomous philosophical perspectives—exemplify the novel’s diversity and impartiality.¹ However, he also presents the alternative to both positions entirely—the anti-metaphysical. Melville does this by establishing the object of metaphysical pursuit in a paradoxical negative space through the use of the negative affix (a morphological unit which indicates negation; e.g., “un-” or “-less”). Though this construction is not something that Melville invented, and it is a common and arguably unavoidable aspect of the English language, his excessive use of it in times of philosophical ponderance works in conjunction with the narrative to display an inexplicit anti-metaphysical alternative to what the characters utter explicitly.

This subtle presentation that takes place on a linguistic level encourages one to go beyond questioning their metaphysical beliefs to reconsider the validity of the task of metaphysics in the first place. In this perspective, metaphysicians are potentially guilty of their own Ahabian pursuit; just as Ahab chases the elusive manifestation of his metaphysical *pons asinorum*, those who contemplate the unknown unavoidably chase a presupposed, phantom *something* that they have themselves created by out of that nothingness. Irrespective of whether one deems it eventually knowable or not, the nature of the abstract unknown one seeks to understand is compromised by being made a *thing* to be sought in the first place. The questions of metaphysics are not genuine questions at all, but instead heuristic instruments used to exhume information that is already assumed to exist. As Schopenhauer said in “Essays and Aphorisms,” “can [nature’s] failure to reply ever be for any other reason than that we have asked the wrong question, that our question has been based on false presuppositions, that it has even harbored a contradiction” (Schopenhauer 57)? In attempting to contain all in his novel, Melville appears to have also considered and made room for all that *is not*. Though the absence that this concept is derived from is impossible for humans to comprehend (or write about), Melville allows said absence, which has been so violently misconstrued by man, a place in the conversation by demonstrating its distance from its interrogative perpetrator. Melville exposes the paradox of perceiving absence by displaying absence as it stands before man—as a paradoxical, alien, misconstrued placeholder not for that which we cannot comprehend, but for that which is perhaps not a *thing* to be comprehended in the first place. With this, Melville leaves readers room to decide for themselves whether they are an Ahabian idealist, an Ishmaelian realist, or neither at all.

In the novel, “the negative affix is used in approximately 1500 words,” statistically “occurs once in every 170 words,” and, unsurprisingly, occurs most commonly around descriptions of Moby Dick (Nechas 199).² Due to this association, Moby Dick, who acts as the elusive incarnation of the

¹ These philosophical perspectives are presented, most generally, as metaphysical idealism and realism (the belief that reality is constituted by the mind and the belief that an empirical reality exists independently of our minds). The two main characters, Ahab and Ishmael, seem to represent these two perspectives, respectively, through their concern for transcendental versus empirical knowledge.

² The “un” prefix is used most often in the novel and appears in 303 different words. The “in” and “im” prefixes, next in frequency, are used in 116 separate words, and the “ir” and “il” variations are

character's varied pursuits, is understood "only in terms of what it is not" (Nechas 201). Negation, or the denial of a positive assertion, must first bring to mind the positive before negating it. It is a construction that, though used to refer to the negative, is grounded in the positive. According to Laurence R. Horn, "Many philosophers, linguists, and psychologists . . . claim that every negation presupposes a corresponding affirmative" (Horn 2.1).³ This construction serves as a linguistic representation of the cognitive limitation humans face when pondering absence. According to Anna Farennikova in *Seeing Absence*, "absence presents a paradox . . . we never literally perceive absence" and "even the most striking experiences of absence reduce, or phenomenally collapse, into positive observations of objects" (Farennikova 429, 432).⁴ Farennikova uses the example of a "Phantom Limb patient who experiences the amputated leg as still being there" to highlight the absurdity of experiencing something that is absent. In chapter 108, when Ahab suggests that he has feeling where his leg is absent, do we not unquestioningly assert that his experience is non-veridical? The same fallacy occurs when we speak with the negative affix; we enforce positivity upon (and create something out of) nothing because we cannot truly speak in the negative.⁵ At one point, Ahab recognizes the problem perfectly: "There lies [the] puzzle . . . Thou knowest not how came ye, hence callest thyself unbegotten; certainly knowest not thy beginning, hence callest thyself unbegun" (Melville 500). If something does not know where it has come from, calling it "unborn" brings forth baseless assumptions and reduces it to negations of these assumptions.

There is much discourse surrounding the misleading nature of negation. Laurence Horn summarizes that "negation is necessarily 'of a pedagogical and social nature'; for [L.M.] Wood it is 'infected with error and ignorance'. According to Wittgenstein, 'the feeling is as if the negation of a proposition had to make it true in a certain sense in order to negate it' (Horn 1.2). The faulty way humans try to comprehend absence manifests not only in language, but also, as touched on above, in philosophical inclinations. Humans, by virtue of our cognitive limitations, are inclined to believe that "there yet lurks an elusive something" and that although do not know "where lie the nameless things of which the mystic sign gives forth such hints . . . somewhere those things must exist" (Melville 186, 211). In a desperate attempt to understand, and without regard for the counterintuitive consequences, humans forcefully reduce and misconstrue that which is ontologically exterior to them to terms that we can comprehend.

In *Moby-Dick*, further evidence for this fallacious re-construal of absence is found in various instances where the sailors attempt to understand things visually. For example, when the crew comes across a squid, Ishmael describes it as an "unearthly, formless, chance-like apparition of life" (Melville 301). The squid, which they could not make sense of, receives a negative affix ("less") just like Moby Dick and is understood in terms of what it is not. The term "formless" presupposes form and the object is understood through negation of something that it already lacks. To call something that lacks form formless is to hold the thing in contrast to a falsely positive placeholder for itself. It

found in eight different cases. Seen with the least frequency, the "less" suffix is used in 89 individual formulations" (Nechas 199).

³ "The strong asymmetricalist position leads to the 'paradox of negative judgment': if a positive statement refers or corresponds to a positive fact, to what state of affairs does a negative statement refer or correspond?" (Horn 1.2)

⁴ "Imagine an ordinary cafe table: dark, with a slightly scratched surface. Then imagine how the table would look had your computer been stolen from it. These experiences seem visually indistinguishable. Indeed, what more is there to seeing the absence of the laptop than looking at the table and seeing only it?" (Farennikova 432)

⁵ Note that the word "nothing" is even a negation of "thing": "no-thing."

is as if humans can only understand things by comparing and contrasting them, and when there is not an inverse available to compare or contrast something with, we create it; for humans, “there is no quality in this world that is not what it is merely by contrast” (Melville 53). The cognitive processes that humans use to perceive the world around us (comparison and contrast for example) are not necessarily adequate tools for seeing truth or reality. According to Donald Hoffman in *The Case Against Reality*, humans have evolved to be efficient in determining what around us is either beneficial or harmful to our survival. Thus, the human apparatus of perception has not evolved to favor truth, but fitness. Therefore, given that philosophical and abstract questions are likely not a matter of life and death, it makes sense that the human mind is not even capable of perceiving what lies before and beyond said questions. In the chapter “The Whiteness of the Whale,” whiteness is described as “not so much a color as the visible absence of color” (Melville 193). The paradox of the term “visible absence” has already been explained above, but this oxymoronic construction serves as a perfect example of the blatantly illogical nature of the way humans refer to absence. The same applies to “Lipless, unfeatured blank” (Melville 611). Unfortunately, it seems that there is no other way to think effectively about or refer to absences, as the acts of thinking and speaking are positive actions. This positive action is the flawed mechanism that contributes to the fallacy of metaphysics. We cannot think or speak in the negative, so we make the negative a positive in order to interrogate it; we cannot understand darkness alone, only “darkness leaping out of light” (Melville 500).

So then, if the negative affix is paradox and to speak of absence is fallacy, how can one properly refer to this unspeakable absence? Melville does not appear to offer a solution. However, perhaps the solution is to not speak of such things at all. In *Tractatus Logico Philosophicus*, Ludwig Wittgenstein states, “What we cannot think we cannot think, therefore we also cannot say what we cannot think . . . The boundaries of language indicate the boundaries of my world. The metaphysical subject does not belong to the world but is a boundary of the world” (Wittgenstein 18). When dealing with that which seems to exceed the boundaries of the world (and therefore the boundaries of logic) one must recognize that speaking of such things is a logically absurd endeavor. There are certain things (absence for example) that cannot be expressed, and according to Wittgenstein, “What can be said at all can be said clearly; and whereof one cannot speak one must be silent” (Wittgenstein 27). Therefore, there are, logically, words that are “best omitted” (Melville 222). The consequences of ignoring the fallacy and uttering such words are exhibited in Ahab’s pursuit. He creates the monster that he chases: “Moby Dick seeks thee not. It is thou, thou, that madly seekest him” (Melville 619). Ahab’s enemy is only made an enemy through his own frustrated mind. Yet, if one does not create an object of pursuit, and instead remains silent, they can “mutely [watch] the monster die” (Melville 367). Metaphysical pursuit is logical suicide: “As soon as you say *Me*, a *God*, a *Nature*, so soon you jump off from your stool and hang from the beam” (Melville, *Letters* 41). Ahab desperately looks for himself, God, and Nature and dies with a rope around his neck. How perfect then, that after the sound and fury, in the silence that follows his death, Ahab’s monster disappears.

This anti-metaphysical position and suggestion to be silent concerning transcendental outsiders by no means represents Melville’s beliefs. Its subtle inclusion in the novel, however, does represent Melville’s interest in “incorporat[ing] everything” (Said 396). This everything, as mentioned earlier, means his attempted version of the entire spectrum of ideas and perspectives. Melville pushes readers to not rest on assumptions, including metaphysical ones. He encourages his readers to confront their everyday beliefs and rediscover the foundation of their assumptions about the world. The paradox of perceiving absence that is demonstrated through the absurdity of the negative affix exposes the reader to a common assumption about things (and non-things) that is so subtle it is nearly imperceptible. The distinction is difficult to draw because, as stated before, it is impossible to refer to absence in a proper way. Instead, Melville refers to absence in the only way that he can, fallaciously. Yet, he does so incessantly and with such virtuosity that the reader has no

choice but to look more critically at what is being said. Melville presents Ahab and Ishmael as opposing philosophical orientations to the unknown, and behind them, presents the opposition to both pursuits entirely in order to truly “incorporate everything” because, perhaps, the inscrutable unknown is not face-less, but “has no face” to begin with (Melville 377).

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